

JACK VANCE

THE GRAY PRINCE

Jack Vance was born in 1916 and studied mining engineering, physics and journalism at the University of California. During World War II he served in the merchant navy and was torpedoed twice. He started contributing stories to the pulp magazines in the mid-1940s; his first book, *The Dying Earth*, was published in 1950. Among his best-known books are *To Live Forever*, *The Dragon Masters*—for which he won his first Hugo—*The Blue World*, *Emphyrio*, *The Anome*, and the *Lyonessese* sequence.

THE JACK VANCE COLLECTION

The Dragon Masters

Maske: Thaery

The Gray Prince

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Prologue

The space age is thirty thousand years old. Men have moved from star to star in search of wealth and

glory; the Gaeon Reach encompasses a perceptible fraction of the galaxy. Trade routes thread space like capillaries in living tissue; thousands of worlds have been colonized, each different from every other, each working its specific change upon those men who live there. Never has the human race been less homogenous.

The outward surge has been anything but regular or even. Men have come and gone in waves and fluctuations, responding to wars, to religious impetus, to compulsions totally mysterious.

The world Koryphon is typical only in the diversity of its inhabitants. On the continent Uaia, the Uldras inhabit that wide band along the southern littoral known as the Alouan, while to the north the Wind-runners sail their two- and three-masted wagons across the Palga plateau. Both are restless nomadic peoples; in almost every other respect they differ. South across the Persimmon Sea the equatorial continent Szintarre is inhabited by a cosmopolitan population of Outkers, *distinguished from both Uldras and Wind-runners by several orders of sociological magnitude.

Considered indigenous to Koryphon are a pair of quasi-intelligent races: the erjins and the morphotes. The Wind-runners domesticate and offer for sale erjins of a particularly massive and docile variety, or perhaps they breed and train ordinary erjins to such characteristics. The Wind-runners are secretive in this regard, inasmuch as the trade provides them wheels, bearings and rigging for their wind-wagons. Certain Uldras of the Alouan capture, mount and ride wild erjins, controlling their ferocity with electric curbs. Both domesticated and wild erjins have telepathic capacity by which they communicate with each other and with a few Wind-runner adepts. Unrelated to the erjins are the morphotes, a malicious, perverse and unpredictable race, esteemed only for their weird beauty. At Olanje on Szintarre the Outkers have gone so far as to form morphote-viewing clubs, a recreation all the more titillating for the macabre habits of the morphotes.

Two hundred years ago a group of off-planet freebooters dropped down upon Uaia, surprised and captured a conclave of Uldra chieftains and compelled cession of title to certain tribal lands: the notorious Submission Treaties. In such a fashion each member of the company acquired a vast tract ranging from twenty thousand to sixty thousand square miles. In due course these tracts became the great 'domains' of the Alouan, upon which the 'land-barons' and their descendants lived large and expansive lives in mansions built on a scale to match the holdings.

The tribes signatory to the Submission Treaties found their lives affected to no great extent: if anything, improved. The new dams, ponds and canals provided dependable sources of water; intertribal warfare was proscribed and the domain clinics provided at least a modicum of medical care. A few Uldras attended domain schools and trained to become clerks, storekeepers and domestic servants; others took jobs as ranch-hands.

In spite of such improvement, many Uldras resented the simple fact of inferior status. On a subconscious and unacknowledged level but perhaps a source of equal exacerbation was the land-barons' disinclination for the Uldra females. A certain amount of rape or seduction, while resented, might have been accepted as

a sordid but inevitable adjunct to the conquest. In point of fact, while the Uldra men, with their tall nervous physiques, gray skins dyed ultramarine blue and aquiline features, were in general personable, the same could not be said for the women. The girls, squat and fat, with their scalps shaved bald against the onslaught of vermin, lacked charm. As they matured, they retained their heavy hips and short legs, but elongated their torsos, arms and faces. The typically long Uldra nose became a drooping icicle; the gray skins became muddy; the hair, verminous or not, was allowed to grow into a heavy orange nimbus. Toward these Uldra girls and women the Outker land-barons maintained a scrupulously correct indifference, which eventually, by a paradoxical reverse effect, came to be regarded by the Uldras as a humiliation and an insult.

South across the Persimmon Sea lay the long narrow island Szintarre and its pleasant capital Olanje, a fashionable resort for out-worlders. These folk, sophisticated, urbane, articulate, had little in common with the land-barons whom they regarded as pompous martinets, without style, grace or humor.

At Olanje in an eccentric old edifice known as Holrude House sat Koryphon's single organ of government: the Mull, a council of thirteen notables. The Mull's charter asserted control across Szintarre and Uaia alike, but in practice it avoided any interest in Uaian affairs. The land-barons considered the Mull an organ for the production of inconsequential sophistry; the Treaty Uldras were apathetic; the Retent Uldras rejected even the theory of centralized authority; the Wind-runners were ignorant of the Mull's very existence.

The cosmopolitan population of Olanje generated for itself an almost hyperactive intellectualism. Social activity was incessant; committees and societies existed to accommodate almost any special interest: a yacht club; several artists' associations; the Morphote-Watchers; the Szintarre Hussade Association; the Library of Gaeen Musical Archives; an association to sponsor the annual fête: Parilia; a college of the dramatic arts; Dionys: that organization dedicated to hyperaesthesia. Other groups were philanthropic or altruistic, such as the Ecological Foundation, which enjoined the importation of alien flora and fauna, no matter how economically useful or aesthetically gratifying. The Redemptionist Alliance crusaded against the Submission Treaties; they advocated dissolution of the Uaian domains and return of the lands to the Treaty tribes. The Society for the Emancipation of the Erjin, or SEE, asserted that erjins were intelligent beings and might not legally be enslaved. The SEE was possibly the most controversial organization of Olanje, inasmuch as an increasing number of erjins were being imported from the Palga for domestic service, farm labor, garbage pick-up and the like. Other less disputatious groups sponsored education and employment for Uldras immigrant to Szintarre from Uaia. These Uldras, derived in about equal proportion from Retent and Treaty tribes, tended to excoriate the land-barons. Often their grievances were real; often they complained from sheer petulance. The Redemptionists sometimes brought Uldra immigrants before the Mull, the better to prod that often discursive, airy, didactic and capricious group into action. With practiced skill the Mull fended off such importunities or appointed a study commission, which invariably reported the Treaty lands to be havens of peace compared to the Retent, where the independent tribes conducted feuds, raids, assassinations, retaliations, outrages, massacres, atrocities and ambushes. The Redemptionists declared such considerations to be irrelevant. The Treaty tribes, so they pointed out, had been deprived of their ancestral lands through violence and deceit. The perpetuation of such a condition was intolerable, nor could the passage of two hundred years legitimize an originally

wrongful situation. Most residents of Szintarre tended generally to endorse the Redemptionist doctrine.

Chapter 1

In the foyer at the Olanje space port Schaine Madduc and her brother Kelse examined each other with affectionate curiosity. Schaine had expected changes in Kelse; changes there were indeed—five years' worth and more. She had left him a bedridden cripple, pallid and desperate; he now seemed strong and well, if a trifle gaunt. His artificial leg carried him with only the suggestion of a limp; he worked his left arm as capably as he did his right, although he disdained simulated flesh and kept the metal hand encased in a black glove. He had grown taller: this she had expected, but not the change in his face which had lengthened and hardened and taken on an acerb refinement. His cheekbones had become prominent; his jaw was a jut; his eyes were narrow, and he had acquired a habit of glancing sidewise in a wary or suspicious or challenging squint: a signal, thought Schaine, of the true changes in Kelse: the alteration from a trusting generous boy to this austere man who looked ten years older than his age.

Kelse had been reflecting along similar lines. "You're different," he said. "Somehow I was expecting the merry, frivolous, silly old Schaine."

"Both of us are different."

Kelse glanced contemptuously down at his arm and leg. "Quite a bit different. You never saw these before."

"Are they easy to use?"

Kelse shrugged. "The left hand is stronger than the right. I can crack nuts in my fingers and do all sorts of interesting jobs. Otherwise I'm much the same."

Schaine could not restrain the question: "Have I changed so very much?"

Kelse looked at her dubiously. "Well, you're five years older. You're not quite so skinny. Your clothes are very nice; you look quite smart. You always were pretty, even as a ragtag tomboy."

"'Ragtag tomboy' indeed!" Schaine's voice was soft with melancholy. As they walked across the depot memories and images flooded her mind. The girl they spoke about was distant by not five but by five hundred years; she had inhabited a different world, where evil and woe were unknown. The verities were simple and obvious to all. Morningswake Manor was no more and no less than the center of the universe; each of those who lived there had a predestined role to fulfill. Uther Madduc was the font of authority. His decisions, sometimes benign, sometimes mysterious, sometimes awful, were as definite as the motion of the sun. Concentric to Uther Madduc had been herself and Kelse; in an orbit less stable, sometimes near, sometimes far, was Muffin. In general the roles were uncomplicated, except again in the case of

Muffin whose status was often ambiguous. Schaine had been the ‘ragtag tomboy’, nonetheless charming and pretty—so much went without saying—just as Kelse had always been proud and handsome and Muffin always dashing and brave and gay. Such attributes were implicit in the very fabric of existence, just as the sun Methuen was unalterably pink and the sky immutably ultramarine. Looking back across the years she saw herself against a backdrop of Morningswake: a girl of medium height, neither tall nor short, engagingly lanky but durable, as if she were good at swimming and running and climbing, which of course she had been and still was. Her skin shone tawny-gold from the sunlight; her dark hair was a loose curly tangle. She was the girl with the sweet wide mouth and the alert marveling expression, as if each successive instant brought some new wonder. She had loved with innocence and hated without calculation; she had been mercurial, gentle with small creatures, quick with gleeful gibes... Now she was five years older and five years wiser, or so she hoped.

Kelse and Schaine walked out into the soft Szintarre morning. The air smelled as Schaine remembered: fragrant with the essence of leaves and flowers. Down from the dark green juba trees hung strands of scarlet blossoms; sunlight seeped through the foliage to spatter patterns of pink and black on Kharanotis Avenue.

“We’re staying at the Seascap,” Kelse told her. “There’s a party at Aunt Val’s this afternoon, ostensibly to welcome you home. We could have stayed at Mirasol, of course, but...” His voice trailed off. Schaine recalled that Kelse had never been overfond of their Aunt Val. He asked: “Shall I call a cab?”

“Let’s walk. Everything looks so beautiful. I’ve been cooped up aboard the Niamatic for a week.” She drew a deep breath. “It’s wonderful to be back. I feel like I’m home already.”

Kelse gave a sour grunt. “Why did you wait so long?”

“Oh—various reasons.” Schaine made a flippant gesture. “Obstinacy. Willfulness. Father.”

“You’re still obstinate and willful—so I presume. Father is still Father. If you think he’s changed, you’re in for a shock.”

“I’m under no illusions. Someone has to give in, and I can do it as easily as anyone. Tell me about Father. What has he been doing?”

Kelse considered before answering: a trait Schaine could not recall from five years ago. Kelse’s youth had passed all too swiftly, she thought. “Father is by and large the same. Since you’ve been gone there’s been a lot of new pressure, and—well, you’ve heard of the Redemptionist Alliance.”

“I suppose so. I don’t remember much about it.”

“It’s a society based here in Olanje. They want us to tear up the Submission Treaties and leave Uaia. Nothing new, of course; but now it’s a fashionable cause, and in the ‘Gray Prince’, as he calls himself,

they have a fashionable figurehead.”

“‘Gray Prince’? Who is he?”

Kelse’s mouth twitched in a crooked grin. “Well—he’s a young Uldra, a Garganche, with some education; he’s voluble, quaint and vivacious—in fact, he’s the darling of all Olanje. No doubt he’ll be at Aunt Val’s party this evening.”

They passed an expanse of blue-green sward, extending from the avenue up the slope to a tall mansion with five gables, towers to right and left, a façade of mustard-yellow tiles relieved by slabs of glossy black skeel: a structure conceived in eclectic caprice, yet impressive by virtue of sheer size and a certain careless magnificence. This was Holrude House, seat of the Mull. Kelse gave his head a gloomy shake. “The Redemptionists are up there now, trying to indoctrinate the Mull...I speak figuratively of course. I don’t know that they’re in Holrude at this specific instant. Father is pessimistic; he thinks the Mull will eventually issue an edict against us. I got a letter from him this morning.” He reached into his pocket. “No, I left it at the hotel. He’s planning to meet us at Galigong.”

Schaine asked in perplexity: “Why Galigong? He could as easily meet us here.”

“He won’t come to Olanje. I don’t think he wants to see Aunt Valtrina; she might make him come to a party. That’s what she did last year.”

“It wouldn’t hurt him. Aunt Val’s parties were always fun. At least I liked them.”

“Gerd Jemasze is coming with us; in fact we flew here in his Apex, and he’ll take us across to Galigong.”

Schaine made a sour face; she had never liked Gerd Jemasze, whom she considered surly.

A pair of columns marked the entrance to the Seascape. Schaine and Kelse rode a slideway down the vestibule. Kelse arranged for the transfer of Schaine’s luggage from the space port, then they sauntered out upon the terrace close beside the Persimmon Sea and refreshed themselves with goblets of pale green cloudberry juice, glinting with ice crystals. Schaine said: “Tell me what’s been happening at Morningswake.”

“Ordinary routine for the most part. We stocked Fairy Lake with a new mix of fish. I went prospecting south of the Burrens and found an ancient kachemba.*”

“Did you go in?”

Kelse shook his head. “Those places give me cold chills. I told Kurgech about it; he said it was probably Jirwantian.”

“Jirwantian?”

“They occupied South Morningswake for five hundred years, before the Hunge annihilated them. Then the Aos drove out the Hunge.”

“How are all the Aos? Is Zamina still matriarch?”

“Yes, she’s still alive. Last week they shifted camp into Dead Rat Gulch. Kurgech dropped by the manor and I told him you were coming home. He said you’d get in less trouble on Tanquil.”

“Wretched old creature! What did he mean by that?”

“I don’t believe he meant anything. He was merely ‘tasting the future’.”

Schaine sipped the fruit juice and looked out over the sea. “Kurgech is a mountebank. He can’t foresee or draw fates or cold-eye or transmit thoughts any better than I can.”

“Not true. Kurgech has some amazing skills...Ao or not, he’s Father’s closest friend.”

Schaine snorted. “Father is too much of a tyrant to be good friends with anyone—most especially an Ao.”

Kelse gave his head a sad shake. “You just don’t understand him. You never have.”

“I understand him as well as you do.”

“That may well be true. He’s a hard man to know. Kurgech provides him exactly the right kind of companionship.”

Schaine snorted again. “He’s undemanding, loyal and knows his place—like a dog.”

“Absolutely wrong. Kurgech is an Uldra, Father is an Outker. Neither wants it any different.”

With an extravagant flourish Schaine drained the goblet. “I certainly don’t intend to debate anything whatever with either you or Father.” She rose to her feet. “Let’s walk over to the river. Is the morphote fence still up?”

“So far as I know. I haven’t been here since you left for Tanquil.”

“A melancholy occasion which I’d just as soon forget. Let’s go find a twelve-spine devil-chaser with triple fans and a purple lattice.”*

A hundred yards along the beach a path led inland to the swamp at the mouth of the Viridian River and ended beside a tall fence of steel mesh. A sign read:

CAUTION

MORPHOTES ARE DANGEROUS AND CUNNING! CONSIDER NONE OF THEIR PROFFERS; ACCEPT NONE OF THEIR GIFTS! MORPHOTES COME TO THIS FENCE WITH A SINGLE PURPOSE IN MIND: TO MUTILATE, INSULT, OR FRIGHTEN THOSE GAEANS WHO COME TO VIEW THEM.

TAKE WARNING!

MORPHOTES HAVE INJURED MANY PERSONS; THEY MAY KILL YOU.

NEVERTHELESS, WANTON MOLESTATION OF THE MORPHOTES IS ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN.

Kelse said, "A month ago some tourists from Alcide came to view morphotes. While the mother and father joked with a beautiful red-ringed bottle-face at the fence, another tied a butterfly on a string and lured away the three-year-old child. When Mama and Daddy looked around, Baby was gone."

"Disgusting beasts. There should be controls on morphote viewing."

"I think the Mull is considering along those lines."

Ten minutes passed and no morphotes came up from the swamp to make horrifying proposals. Schaine and Kelse returned to the hotel, descended to the submarine restaurant and lunched on a ragout of crayfish, pepper-pods and wild onion, a salad of chilled cress and flat-bread baked from the flour of wild brown ferris. Luminous blue-green space surrounded them; at their very elbows swam, grew or drifted the flora and fauna of the Persimmon Sea: white eels and electric blue scissor-fish darting through the thickets of water-weed; schools of blood-red spark-fish, green serpents, yellow twitters, twinkling and darting, the myriads occasionally sifting through each other in a pointillistic confusion, finally to emerge as before. On three occasions purple and silver spangs, ten feet of prongs, barbs, hooks and fangs, came to grind against the crystal in an attempt to seize one of the folk who lunched in the half-light; once the dire bulk of a black matador slid past; once off in the distance appeared the jerking form of a swimming morphote.

A man two or three years older than Kelse approached the table. "Hello, Schaine."

"Hello, Gerd." Schaine's greeting was cool; all her life she had disliked Gerd Jemasze, for reasons she could never quite define to herself. His conduct was reserved, his manner polite, his features

undistinguished: blunt at the cheekbones, flat in the cheeks, with short thick black hair above a low broad forehead. His clothes—a dark gray blouse and blue trousers—seemed, in the context of Olanje where everyone wore gay colors and exaggerated fashions, almost ostentatiously severe. Schaine suddenly understood why he repelled her: he totally lacked the idiosyncrasies and easy little vices which endowed all her other acquaintances with charm. Gerd Jemasze’s physique was not noticeably large or heavy, but when he moved, the clothes tightened to the twist of his muscles; in just such a fashion, thought Schaine, did his quiet appearance mask an innate arrogance. She knew why her father and Kelse liked Gerd Jemasze; he outdid them both in rigidity and resistance to change; his opinions, once formed, became impervious as stone.

Gerd Jemasze took a seat at their table. Schaine asked politely, “And how goes life at Suaniset?”

“Very quietly.”

“Nothing ever happens out in the domains,” said Kelse.

Schaine looked from one to the other. “You two are teasing me.”

Gerd Jemasze displayed a twitch of a smile. “Not altogether. Whatever happens usually goes on out of sight.”

“What’s happening out of sight, then?”

“Well—wittols*out of the Retent have been skulking through the domains talking coalition of all Uldras under the Gray Prince, presumably to chase us into the sea. There’s been a lot of sky-shark*attacks on air traffic—just last week Ariel Farlock of Carmione was shot down.”

“For a fact there’s a strange mood over Uaia,” said Kelse somberly. “Everybody feels it.”

“Even Father,” said Schaine, “rejoicing over his wonderful joke. Have you any idea what he finds so funny?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” said Gerd Jemasze.

“I had a letter from Father,” Kelse explained. “I told you that he’d gone up on the Palga. Well, the trip seems to have exceeded his expectations.” Kelse brought forth the letter and read: “I’ve had some remarkable adventures and I have a wonderful story to tell you, a most wonderful joke, a most prodigious and extraordinary joke, which has put ten years on my life.” Kelse skipped down across a line or two. “Then he says: ‘I’ll meet you at Galigong. I don’t dare come to Olanje, which would mean suffering through one of Valtrina’s awful parties, complete with all the pussy-footers, logic-choppers, aesthetes, four-flushers, sybarites and sycophants in Szintarre. Make sure Gerd comes back to Morningswake with us; he, no less than you, will appreciate this situation, and express to Schaine my great pleasure at having

her home once again...’

There’s more along this line but that’s the gist of it.”

“Very mysterious,” said Gerd Jemasze.

“Yes, that’s how I feel. What is there up on the Palga to cause Father such merriment? He’s not famous for his humor.”

“Well—tomorrow we’ll know.” Gerd rose to his feet. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a few errands to do.” He bowed with rather cursory politeness to Schaine.

Kelse asked: “You’re coming to the party at Aunt Valtrina’s?”

Gerd Jemasze shook his head. “It’s not really my kind of affair.”

“Oh come along,” said Kelse. “You might have a chance to meet the Gray Prince—among other local notables.”

Gerd Jemasze reflected a moment or two as if Kelse had scored a point in a profound and complicated argument. “Very well. I’ll come. What time and where?”

“Four o’clock at Villa Mirasol.”

Chapter 2

The road to Villa Mirasol, departing Kharanotis Avenue, wound back and forth up the side of Panorama Mountain under stands of gonaive, native teak, langtang and mace. Passing under an arch, the road circled a wide lawn and ended at the villa: an elegant construction of glass, fluted posts, white walls, a roof of many angles and levels, designed in a light and easy spirit of rococo decadence.

Valtrina Darabesq, maternal great-aunt to Schaine and Kelse, welcomed both with an enthusiasm none the less real for its impersonal facility. Schaine had always marveled at her energy and her remarkable gregariousness; Kelse considered her a bit over-stylish, though he could not help but approve her expansive generosity. Both were prepared for her insistence that they transfer from the Seascape to Villa Mirasol and stay a week, two weeks, a month. “I’ve seen neither of you for so long. Schaine, it’s been at least—how many years?”

“Five.”

“So long? How time goes! I never really understood why you went flouncing off to Tanquil. Your father

is a dinosaur, of course, but he's a dear for all that, even if he refuses to come across to Olanje. What can he find to amuse him in Uaia? A wilderness, a dreadful emptiness!"

"Come now, Aunt Val, it's not that bad! In fact Uaia is full of magnificent scenery."

"Perhaps so, but why Uther and the others insist on living out where they're not wanted, I'll never understand. Morningswake is like a border fortress."

"Someday you should come pay us a visit," said Kelse.

Valtrina gave her head a decisive shake. "I haven't been to Morningswake since I was a girl. Your grandfather Norius was a gentleman of style for all of being a land-baron. He hosted several parties—rather stuffy occasions, to be absolutely candid, and took us for a picnic to an enormous pillar of red rock; what's it called?"

"The Skaw."

"The Skaw, of course. And when the tribesmen came past and looked at us, the aliens who had taken their land, I felt frightened and oppressed, for all the space. It was as if we were besieged!"

"Our Aos have never given us trouble," said Kelse patiently. "We help them and they help us. Neither resents the other."

Valtrina gave her head a smiling shake. "My dear boy, you can't possibly divine what goes on in an Uldra mind. Of course they resent your presence, even though they show you blank faces. I know, because I have Uldra friends! But I shouldn't remonstrate with you; you're just a boy. Come along then, I'll introduce you to my friends. Or perhaps you'd prefer just to wander about?"

"We'd rather just wander," said Kelse.

"Just as you like. Have Alger fix you drinks. Kelse, please don't draw a gun and shoot my erjins; their names are Sim and Slim and they're extremely expensive. We'll have a good chat later on this evening." Valtrina moved off to welcome a new group of guests; Kelse took Schaine's arm and led her to the buffet where Alger the steward dispensed refreshment, using formulas older than memory. Kelse and Schaine accepted goblets of punch, and paused to take their bearings. Schaine saw no one she knew among the guests. Half a dozen Uldras were present: tall, thin, long-nosed bravos, their slate-gray skin dyed ultramarine, their wads of pale russet hair confined within the tall spikes of a fillet.

Kelse muttered to Schaine: "Trust Aunt Val to be fashionable; in Olanje no party is complete without an Uldra or two."

Schaine retorted: "Why shouldn't Uldras be invited to parties? They're human."

“Approximately human. Their weldewiste*is alien to ours. They’ve drifted quite a distance on the evolutionary floe.”

Schaine sighed and turned to inspect the Uldras. “Is one of them the Gray Prince?”

“No.”

Valtrina approached with a handsome man in his middle maturity: a person of obvious distinction, wearing a dark gray suit embroidered with pale gray arabesques. She brought her companion to a halt. “Erris, my niece and nephew Schaine and Kelse Madduc. Schaine is just home from Tanquil, where she’s been at school. Schaine, Kelse, this is Erris Sammatzen, who sits on the Mull: a man of great importance.” She added with perhaps a hint of malice: “Schaine and Kelse live on Morningswake Domain in the Alouan, which they claim to be the single habitable area of Koryphon.”

“Perhaps they know more than we do.”

Schaine asked, “Are you native to Olanje, Dm.*Sammatzen?”

“No, I’m an Outker like almost everyone else. I came here twelve years ago to rest, but who can rest when Valtrina and a dozen like her insist on keeping me alert? This is the most intellectually alive community I’ve ever known. Really, it’s most exhausting.”

Valtrina beckoned to a tall woman with long blonde ringlets. Her over-large features were exaggerated by cosmetics into a clown’s mask; Schaine wondered if she mocked the world or herself. Valtrina spoke in her hoarsest contralto: “This is Glinth Isbane, one of our celebrities: she taught three morphotes to play desisto and won all kinds of strange booty. She’s secretary of SFS and far more profound than she likes to appear.”

“What’s SFS?” asked Schaine. “Excuse me, I’m just back on Koryphon.”

“SFS means ‘Society for a Free Szintarre’.”

Schaine laughed incredulously. “Isn’t Szintarre free now?”

“Not altogether,” said Glinth Isbane in a cool voice. “No one wants—I should say, no one admits that he wants—to exploit toil or discomfort for gain, but everyone knows that this is often the case. Workers therefore have banded into guilds to protect themselves. And now, who wields more raw power than the Director of the Associated Guilds? I need not remind you of the abuses from this direction. The SFS has therefore organized a force which we hope will exactly counter-balance the excesses of the guilds.”

Another person had joined the group: a tall young man with guileless gray eyes, soft blond hair, pleasant half-humorous features which instantly appealed to Schaine. He remarked: “Both groups—the SFS and the Associated Guilds—support my particular organization. Hence, both must be sound, and your conflicts are pettifoggery.”

Glinth Isbane laughed. “Both groups endorse SEE, but for quite different reasons. Our reasons are the decent ones.”

Schaine said to Valtrina, “I’m confused by all these organizations. What is SEE?”

Valtrina, rather than explaining, brought forward the blond young man. “Elvo, meet my charming niece, just arrived from Tanquil.”

“With great pleasure.”

“Schaine Madduc; Elvo Glissam. Now Elvo, explain the meaning of SEE, but don’t mention me or my expensive footmen or I’ll have them fling you out into the street.”

“SEE is Society for Emancipation of the Erjins,” said Elvo Glissam. “Please don’t think us maudlin; we’re truly attacking a serious injustice: the enslavement of intelligent beings. Valtrina, with her erjin servants, is one of our prime targets, and we’ll have her behind bars yet. Unless she displays remorse and frees her slaves.”

“Ha! First demonstrate two things—no, three. Prove to me that Sim and Slim are intelligent beings rather than domestic animals. Then prove that they would prefer to be emancipated. Then find me two other domestics with as much docility, style and dependability as my black-and-mustard beauties. In fact, I intend to buy three or four more and train them as gardeners.”

One of the erjin footmen had just entered the chamber, rolling a service wagon. Looking over her shoulder Schaine cringed away. “Don’t they frighten you? The buck that chewed up Kelse wasn’t much bigger, if at all.”

“If I were running things,” said Kelse, “I’d shoot them all.”

Glinth Isbane’s voice took on an edge. “If they’re intelligent, it’s murder. If they’re not, it’s brutality.”

Kelse shrugged and turned aside. A few minutes previously Gerd Jemasze had appeared on the scene; now he said: “We fear our erjins; you don’t. Incidentally, I don’t notice any societies which advocate taking erjin mounts away from the Uldras.”

“Why don’t you form one?” snapped Glinth Isbane.

Erris Sammatzen chuckled. “As for the erjins and Vv. Glissam’s SEE, the labor guilds are understandably anxious: the erjins represent cheap labor. Vv. Glissam is presumably motivated by other concerns.”

“Naturally. The Gaeon Charter prohibits slavery, and the erjins are enslaved: benignly here at Olanje, not so benignly in Uaia. And the Wind-runners, whose role everyone ignores, are slavers, pure and simple.”

“Or domesticators—if they conceive the erjins to be no more than clever beasts.”

Schaine said: “I can’t understand how erjins can be tamed; in fact, I can’t believe it! An erjin is ferocious; it hates men!”

“Sim and Slim are quite docile,” said Valtrina. “As to how and why: I can’t even guess.”

Sim the erjin footman once again passed by, splendid in its livery. Meeting the opaque orange gaze from among the black optical tufts, Schaine received the uncomfortable impression that it understood all which transpired. “Perhaps it would prefer not being gelded or altered or brainwashed—whatever the Wind-runners do to it.”

“Ask it,” Valtrina suggested agreeably.

“I don’t know how.”

Valtrina’s contralto voice became lofty and careless. “So why worry? They’re free to leave whenever they like. I don’t keep them in chains. Do you know why they work here? Because they prefer Villa Mirasol to the deserts of Uaia. No one complains except the Association of Labor Guilds which feels a threat to its absurdly high wage structure.” Valtrina gave her head a lordly jerk and stalked across the room to where a pair of Uldras formed the nucleus of another group.

Gerd Jemasze spoke to no one in particular: “I won’t say that all this talk is a waste of time, because people seem to enjoy it.”

In a frigid voice Glinth Isbane said: “Words are the vehicle of ideas. Ideas are the components of intellectualization, which distinguished men from animals. If you object to the exchange of ideas, then—in essence—you reject civilization.”

Jemasze grinned. “Not such a bad idea as you might think.”

Glinth Isbane turned away and went off to join Valtrina. Jemasze and Kelse sauntered to the buffet where Alger supplied them refreshment. Schaine went to inspect a pair of Uldra lamps, carved from blocks of red chert in the distinctive Uldra style of reckless asymmetry. Elvo Glissam came to join her. “Do you like these lamps?”

“They’re interesting to look at,” said Schaine. “Personally, I wouldn’t care to own them.”

“Oh? They seem very dashing and adventurous.”

Schaine gave a grudging nod. “I suppose it’s a prejudice left over from my childhood, when everything Uldra was supposed to be erratic and uneven and wild. I realize now that the Uldras consider uniformity a kind of slavishness; they express their individualism in irregularity.”

“Perhaps they try to suggest regularity by presenting something else: a very sophisticated technique.”

Schaine pursed her lips. “I doubt if the Uldras would reason so methodically. They’re extremely proud and truculent, especially the Retent Uldras, and I suspect that their art-work reflects as much. It’s just as if the lamp-maker were saying: ‘This is how I choose to make this lamp; this is my caprice; if you don’t like it, seek elsewhere for light.’”

“That’s the effect produced, certainly. At best: magnificence. At worst: a kind of strident peevishness.”

“Which, in fact, expresses the Uldra temperament.”

Elvo Glissam looked across the room toward the two Uldras. Schaine studied him from the corner of her eye. She liked him, so she decided; he seemed gentle and humorous and subtle in his perceptions. Additionally, he was nice to look at, with his soft blond hair and pleasantly regular features. He stood perhaps an inch taller than the average; he appeared athletic, in an easy loose-limbed fashion... He turned to find her eyes on him and responded with a self-conscious smile. Schaine said rather hurriedly: “You’re not a native to Szintarre?”

“I’m from Jennet on Diamantha. A dreary city on an unexciting world. My father publishes a pharmaceutical journal; right now I’d probably be writing an article on the latest foot powders if my grandfather hadn’t given me a lottery ticket for my birthday.”

“The ticket paid off?”

“A hundred thousand SLU*.”

“What did you do with it?”

Elvo Glissam made a casual, or perhaps modest, gesture. “Nothing remarkable. I paid off the family debts, bought my sister a Cloud-hopper and put the rest out at interest. So here I am, living on a modest but adequate income.”

“And what do you do besides just live?”

“Well, I’ve got two or three things going on. I work for SEE, as you know, and I’m putting together a collection of Uldra war songs. They’re natural musicians and produce the most wonderful songs which don’t get half the attention they deserve.”

“I grew up with those songs,” said Schaine. “In fact, I could sing a few blood-curdlers right now, if I were in the right mood.”

“Some other time.”

Schaine laughed. “I’m seldom anxious to burn my enemies, one by one, ‘with six thousand fires and six thousand pangs’.”

“The Gray Prince, incidentally, is supposed to be here tonight.”

“The Gray Prince—isn’t he the Uldra messiah, or rabble-rouser, or some such special agent?”

“So I’m told. He advocates what he calls ‘Pan-Uldra’—an association of the Retent tribes, which then will absorb the Treaty tribes and ultimately eject the land-barons from Uaia. Over here he’s sponsored by the Redemptionists, which means almost everyone in Szintarre.”

“Including yourself?”

“Well—I don’t like to admit it to the daughter of a land-baron.”

Schaine sighed. “I don’t really mind. I’m going back to live at Morningswake, and I’ve determined not to quarrel with my father.”

“Aren’t you putting yourself in a very awkward position? I feel in you a certain awareness of justice and fair play—”

“In other words, am I a Redemptionist? I hardly know what to say. Morningswake is my home, so I’ve been brought up to believe. But what if I really didn’t have any right to be there, would I still want to keep it? To be candid, I’m glad that my opinion carries absolutely no weight, so that I can enjoy going home without suffering pangs of conscience.”

Elvo Glissam laughed. “At least you’re honest. If I were you I might feel the same way. Kelse is your brother? Who is the grim dark-haired fellow with the stomach-ache?”

“That’s Gerd Jemasze of Suaniset, the domain next east to ours. He’s always been lofty and saturnine, ever since I can remember.”

“I think someone said—probably Valtrina—that an erjin attacked Kelse.”

“Yes, it was absolutely horrible, and erjins terrify me to this day. I can’t believe those great beasts are tame.”

“There are many different kinds of human beings; maybe there are different kinds of erjins.”

“Perhaps... When I see those great maws and awful arms, I think of poor little Kelse, all chewed and ripped.”

“It’s a miracle he’s alive.”

“He’d be dead except for an Uldra boy we called Muffin, who came with a gun and blew the erjin’s head off. Poor Kelse. Poor Muffin, for that matter.”

“What happened to Muffin?”

“It’s a long sordid story. I don’t want to talk about it.”

For a moment the two stood in silence. Elvo Glissam said: “Let’s go out on the terrace and look over the sea—where you’ll be flying tomorrow.”

Schaine thought this was a pleasant idea, and they walked out into the warm night. Through the campander fronds the lights of Olanje were scattered in a long irregular crescent; overhead hung the stars of the Gaean Reach, many seeming to shimmer with an extra significance for the populated worlds surrounding.*

Elvo Glissam said: “An hour ago you were not even a name, and now Schaine Madduc is you, and I’ll be sorry to see you leave. Are you sure you prefer Uaia to Olanje?”

“I can hardly wait to get home.”

“Isn’t it bleak and drab and depressing?”

“Of course not! Where have you heard such nonsense? Uaia is magnificent! The sky is so wide, the horizons are so far, that mountains, valleys, forests and lakes are lost in the landscape. Everything swims in light and air; I can’t describe the effect except to say that Uaia does something to your soul. I’ve missed Morningswake terribly these last five years.”

“You make Uaia sound interesting.”

“Oh, it’s interesting, but it’s not a soft place. Uaia is often cruel—more often than not. If you saw the wild erjins destroying our cattle, you might not be so pro-erjin.”

“See? You completely misunderstand me! I’m not pro-erjin! I’m anti-slavery, and erjins are slaves.”

“Not the wild erjins! Better if they were.”

Elvo Glissam gave an indifferent shrug. “I’ve never seen a wild erjin, and I’m not likely to have the opportunity. They’re quite extinct in Szintarre.”

“Come out to Morningswake; you’ll see wild erjins, as many as you like.”

Elvo Glissam said rather wistfully: “I’d accept the invitation if I thought you were serious.”

Schaine hesitated barely an instant, although her invitation had been intended in general rather than specific terms. “Yes, I’m serious.”

“What of Kelse? What of your father?”

“Why should they mind? Guests are always welcome at Morningswake.”

Elvo Glissam reflected a moment. “When do you leave?”

“First thing in the morning. We fly with Gerd Jemasze to Galigong, at the edge of the Retent; there my father meets us. Tomorrow at sunset we’ll be at Morningswake.”

“Your brother might consider me forward.”

“Of course not! Why should he?”

“Very well then. I’ll be more than happy to accept. In fact I’m tremendously excited.” Elvo Glissam straightened up from the balustrade. “In which case I’ll now have to leave this party, to pack some clothes and change some arrangements. And I’ll meet you at your hotel early tomorrow morning.”

Schaine held out her hand. “Goodby till then.”

Elvo Glissam bent his head and kissed her fingers. “Good night.” He turned and walked away. Schaine watched him go with a half-smile on her face and a soft warm pressure in her throat.

She followed Elvo inside and wandered from room to room until, in that chamber which Valtrina called the kachemba, after the sacred places of the Uldras, she found Kelse and Gerd Jemasze debating the

authenticity of Valtrina's antique fetishes.

Kelse picked up a blasphemy mask*and raised it to his face. "I can smell gabbhout smoke, and there's a smear of what looks like dilf by the nostril holes."

Schaine chuckled. "I wonder how many masks in how many kachembas look like you two."

"No doubt several of both," said Gerd. "Our Faz aren't as docile as your Aos. Last year on the Kaneel Broads I looked into a kachemba. Sure enough, they built it to represent Suaniset."

"What about masks?"

"Just two: me and my father. My father's mask wore a red cap. Mission accomplished."

Two years before a letter from Kelse had apprised Schaine of the murder of Palo Jemasze, Gerd's father, through the instrumentality of an Uldra sky-shark.

"The tutelar in this case flying a sky-shark," Kelse observed.

Jemasze gave a curt nod. "Once or twice a week I take up my Dacy and go hunting. No luck, so far."

Schaine decided to change the subject. "Kelse, I've invited Elvo Glissam to Morningswake."

"Elvo Glissam? The SEE advocate?"

"Yes. He's never seen a wild erjin. I told him we'd find one for him. Do you mind?"

"Why should I mind? He seems decent enough."

The three returned to the main salon. Glancing across the room Schaine noticed a tall young Uldra in the robes of an Alouan chieftain, though the robes, rather than red or rose or pink, were unrelieved gray. He was a man remarkably handsome, with a skin blue as the sea and hair bleached glistening white. Schaine stared in shock and wonder, then turned wide-eyed to Kelse. "What is he doing here?"

"That's the Gray Prince," said Kelse. "He's seen everywhere around Olanje."

"But how—why—"

"In some fashion," said Kelse, "he was encouraged to become the savior of his race."

Gerd Jemasze gave a snort of sardonic amusement, and Schaine became furiously angry with both. Gerd

was innately a boor; Kelse had become as crabbed and obstinate as her father...She took command of herself. Kelse, after all, had suffered the loss of a leg and an arm. Her own loss—if ‘loss’ were the appropriate word—was trivial in comparison...The Gray Prince, swinging his gaze around the room, saw Schaine. He tilted his head forward, then jerked it back in a motion of glad surprise. He strode across the room to stand in front of Schaine.

Kelse said in a bored voice, “Hello, Muffin. What brings you here?”

The Gray Prince, throwing up his head, laughed. “‘Muffin’ no more! I must reckon with my public image.” A trace of Uldra accent gave his voice a gay and urgent quality. “To the friends of my childhood I am ‘Jorjol’, or if you insist upon formality: ‘Prince Jorjol’.”

“I hardly think we’ll insist upon formality,” said Kelse. “You probably remember Gerd Jemasze from Suaniset.”

“I remember him most distinctly.” Jorjol took Schaine’s hand, bent his head and kissed it. “You can still call me ‘Muffin’ if you like but—” he looked around the room; his gaze, slipping past Kelse and Gerd, relegated them to the background “—I’d prefer not here. Where have you been? Has it been five years?”

“Quite five years.”

“It seems forever. So much has changed.”

“You seem to have done very well for yourself. You’re the talk of Olanje, so I understand—although I wasn’t aware that the Gray Prince was Muffin.”

“Yes, Muffin has come a vast distance, and I intend to go as far again—even at the risk of inconveniencing my old friends.” His glance now included Kelse and Gerd; then he turned back to Schaine. “And what will you do now?”

“I’m returning to Morningswake tomorrow. We meet Father in Galigong and fly home from there.”

“As an ‘intransigent’?”

“What’s an ‘intransigent’?”

Kelse said in a bored voice: “The opposite of ‘Redemptionist’, or so I suppose.”

Schaine said: “I’m going as myself, nothing more, and I intend to quarrel with no one.”

“You might find it more difficult than you think.”

Schaine smilingly shook her head. “Father and I can accommodate to each other. He’s neither cruel nor unreasonable, as you well know.”

“He’s a force of nature! Storms, lightning, torrents—they’re not cruel or unreasonable either, but they cannot be defeated by kindness and rationality.”

Schaine laughed sadly. “And you intend to defeat my poor father?”

“I must. I am a Redemptionist. I intend to win back for my people the lands they lost to the violence of your people.”

Gerd looked up toward the ceiling and turned half away. Kelse said: “Speaking of my father, I had a letter from him today: a most curious letter. He mentions you as well. Listen. ‘You might be seeing that scamp Jorjol. If so, try to bring him to his senses, for his own sake. Perhaps the prospect of a career at Morningswake no longer appeals to him; tell him nevertheless that when his bubble breaks he is always welcome here, for reasons of which we are all aware.’

“‘I have just returned from the Volwodes and I can’t wait to see you. I’ve had some remarkable adventures and I have a wonderful story to tell you, a most wonderful joke, a most prodigious and extraordinary joke which has put ten years on my life, and which might well amuse and edify Jorjol...’ That’s about all here to interest you.”

Jorjol raised his bleached white eyebrows. “What kind of joke? I am not interested in jokes.”

“I don’t know what his joke might be; I’m anxious to find out.”

Jorjol pulled at his long nose, which apparently had been surgically cropped of its drooping Uldra tip. “Uther Madduc was never a great humorist, to my recollection.”

“True,” said Kelse. “Still, he’s a more complex person than you might think.”

Jorjol reflected a minute. “I remember your father principally as a man dominated by the strictures of etiquette. Who knows what sort of person he really is?”

“External events have shaped us all,” said Kelse.

Jorjol grinned, showing teeth whiter than his hair, in gleaming contrast to his blue skin. “Never! I am I, because I have willed myself thus!”

Schaine could not restrain a nervous laugh. “Heavens, Muffin—Jorjol—Gray Prince—whatever your name is—your intensity startles us all!”

Jorjol's grin diminished somewhat. "You know me for an intense person." From across the room Valtrina called him; he bowed, and with a final quick glance at Schaine took his leave.

Schaine heaved a sigh. "Quite true; he's always been intense."

Erris Sammatzen came to join them. "You seem to know the Gray Prince intimately."

"Yes, that's Muffin," said Kelse. "Father found him out at the edge of the Retent when he was little: he'd been abandoned. Father brought him home and put him into the care of an Ao bailiff, and we all grew up together."

"Father always had a soft spot for Muffin," mused Schaine. "When we were caught in some really flagrant mischief, Kelse and I would get a whack or two, but Muffin always got off with a lecture."

"Actually," said Kelse, "that's not so much forbearance as the etiquette we just heard about. One never strikes a Blue."

Sammatzen glanced across the room to the group of Uldras. "They look pretty formidable. I don't think I'd want to strike one."

"He'd kill you with a knife, but he wouldn't strike back. Among the Uldras only women fight barehanded; woman-fights are a popular spectacle."

Sammatzen looked curiously at Kelse. "You don't like the Uldras very much."

"I like some of them. Our Aos are well-behaved. Kurgech the shaman is one of Father's cronies. We've put a stop to the woman-fights and a few other unpleasant customs. They still work sorcery which we can't stop."

"It would seem that Jorjol wasn't brought up as an Uldra."

"He wasn't brought up as anything. He lived with the Ao bailiff, but he took lessons with us and played with us and wore Gaean clothes. We really never thought of him as a Blue."

"I used to adore him," said Schaine, "especially after he saved Kelse from the erjin."

"Indeed! This was the erjin that took your arm and leg?"

Kelse gave a curt nod and would have changed the subject but Schaine said: "It happened only two miles south of the house. An erjin came around the Skaw and proceeded to tear Kelse to bits. Jorjol ran up to the beast and blew its head off with a gun, and just in time or Kelse wouldn't be here now. Father wanted

to do something wonderful for Jorjol...” Schaine paused, thinking back across scenes five years old. “But there were emotional problems. Jorjol wentaurau*. He ran away and we never saw him again, although we learned from Kurgech that he’d crossed into the Retent and joined the Garganche. He was originally Garganche—we knew that from his birth tattoo—so there was no question about their ‘land-scouring’ him.”

“‘Land-scouring’ is what the Blues do to enemy tribesmen,” remarked Kelse. “One of the things, I should say.”

Schaine glanced across the room toward Jorjol. “And tonight we find him here at Villa Mirasol. We expected him to make a career for himself, but nothing like this.”

Kelse said dryly, “Father had in mind head stockman, or bailiff.”

“You’ll have to agree,” Sammatzen observed, “that for an ambitious Uldra very little opportunity exists to better himself.”

Gerd Jemasze snorted in sour amusement. “The ambitious Blue wants to raid or ransom or steal enough money to buy a sky-shark. He doesn’t want to be a teacher or an engineer—any more than you want to ride an erjin.”

“That’s a yearning I’m able to control.”

“Reflect a moment,” Kelse told him. “The Blues can come to Szintarre whenever they want; they can attend school at Olanje and learn a profession. How many do so? Few, if any. All the Blues in Olanje are agitators and Redemptionist house pets; they exist only to get the land-barons out of the Treaty Lands.”

“They seem to feel that the land is theirs,” remarked Sammatzen.

“It’s theirs if they can force us off it,” said Kelse. “If they can’t, it’s ours.”

Sammatzen shrugged and turned away. Kelse said to Schaine, “We’d better be leaving; we’ve got a long day tomorrow.”

Schaine made no protest. With Gerd Jemasze they bade farewell to Valtrina and departed Villa Mirasol.

The hour was late. Schaine was restless. She stepped out on her balcony and stood under the stars. The sea was quiet; the town had gone to sleep; a few lights twinkled up and down the shore and through the foliage of the hillside. No sound could be heard but the sigh of the surf...An eventful day. Kelse, Gerd

Jemasze, Aunt Val, Muffin (the Gray Prince!)—all components of her childhood, all now with their elemental natures refined and intensified. The tranquility she had come home to find seemed forever lost and gone. She brought faces into her mind. Kelse: more terse and cynical than she could have expected. Kelse had aged very quickly; all his boyish grace had departed...Gerd Jemasze: a hard harsh man with a soul of stone...Muffin, or Jorjol as now he must be called: as gallant and clever as ever. How fateful that the agency which had given him sustenance, education, even life itself—namely Morningswake—should now be the target of Redemptionist attack!...Elvo Glissam! Schaine felt a warm flush, a pulse of eagerness. She hoped that he would stay weeks, months, at Morningswake. She would take him up to the Opal Pits, to the Lake of the Veils, to Sanhredin Glade, to the Magic Forest and the lodge on Mount May; she would ask Kurgech to organize a Grand Karoo*. Elvo Glissam would bring fun to Morningswake where none had existed for five years: five bitter, wasted years.

Chapter 3

Across the Persimmon Sea flew the Suaniset utility vehicle, an ungainly Apex A-15, lacking all style or flair and Schaine suspected that Gerd Jemasze intended nothing less than a demonstration of contempt for the fads of Olanje. She remarked: “All this is very luxurious, but where’s the Hybro Saloon?”

Gerd Jemasze fixed the auto-pilot upon Galigong and swung around in his seat. “The Hybro is in the shop. I’m waiting for new dexodes.”

Schaine remembered the Suaniset Hybro from her childhood. She asked Kelse: “I suppose Father is still flying our dilapidated Sturdevant with the broken window?”

“Yes, it’s ageless. I fixed the window last year.”

Schaine informed Elvo Glissam: “Out on the domains life flows at a serene pace. Our ancestors were wise and industrious; what’s good enough for them is good enough for us.”

“We’re not altogether torpid,” said Kelse. “Twelve years ago we planted two hundred acres to vines and next year we’ll start producing wine.”

“That sounds interesting,” said Schaine. “We should be able to undersell the imports; we might end up as tycoons of the wine trade.”

Elvo Glissam said: “I thought you were all rich, with so much land and mountains and streams and minerals.”

Kelse gave a wry chuckle. “We’re subsistence farmers. We don’t see much cash.”

“Perhaps you can advise us on the lottery,” suggested Schaine.

“Gladly,” said Elvo Glissam. “Invest your money elsewhere. For instance, a resort marina on one of those beautiful islands down there, for the convenience of yachtsmen.”

“Cruising the Persimmon Sea is a chancy business,” said Kelse. “Sometimes morphotes climb aboard and kill everybody and sail the yacht away.”

“That must be quite a sight,” said Gerd Jemasze.

Elvo Glissam grimaced. “Koryphon is a cruel world.”

“Suaniset is peaceful enough,” said Gerd Jemasze.

“So is Morningswake,” said Kelse. “Jorjol tries to tell our Aos how bad things are and they don’t know what he’s talking about. So now Jorjol does his talking in Olanje.”

“Jorjol hardly seems a classical reformer,” said Elvo Glissam. “He’s really a most perplexing individual. What could be his motives? After all, your father was his benefactor.”

Schaine sat silent. Gerd Jemasze scowled down at the Mermione Islands. Kelse said: “There’s really no great mystery. Father has a most rigid set of values. It might seem that Jorjol and Schaine and I grew up as playmates and equals, but there was never any attempt to gloss over the real situation. We were Outkers; Jorjol was a Blue. He never took a meal in the Great Hall; instead he ate in the kitchen, which I suppose rankled much more than he cared to admit. Then summers, when we visited Aunt Val in Olanje, Jorjol was sent out to learn ranch business, because Father intended Jorjol to become head stockman.”

Elvo Glissam nodded soberly and asked no more questions.

The pink sun floated up the sky; the Apex broke through a shoal of cumulus to discover the loom of Uaia across the northern horizon. Details appeared through the haze: bluffs, beaches, promontories; colors gradually clarified to pale dun, ocher, black, white-buff and brown. The shore approached; a peninsula detached itself from the hulk of the continent to enclose a long narrow bight. At the tip clustered a half-dozen warehouses, a few rows of huts and cabins, a rickety hotel of white-painted timber built half over the water on a pier of a hundred crooked stilts. “Galigong,” said Kelse. “The chief seaport of the Retent.”

“And how far to Morningswake?”

“About eight hundred miles.” Kelse studied the landscape through binoculars. “I don’t see the Sturdevant, but we’re a bit early. The Hilgads are having a karoo at their shore camp. I think there’s a woman-fight in progress.” He offered the binoculars to Elvo Glissam, who was just as pleased to see only a confused

surge of tall blue-faced forms in white, pink and buff robes.

The sky-car landed; the four stepped out upon the chalky soil of Uaia and hurried across the crackling pink glare to the shelter of the hotel. They entered a dim tavern, illuminated only by a row of green glass bull's-eyes. The inn-keeper came forward: a short fat Outker with a few whorls of brown hair, a splayed nubbin of a nose, melancholy brown eyes drooping at the outer corners.

Kelse asked: "Are there messages from Morningswake?"

"No sir, not a word."

Kelse looked down at his watch. "I suppose we're still a bit early." He went to the door, looked around the sky and returned. "We'll take lunch. What can you provide us?"

The inn-keeper dolefully shook his head. "Very little, I fear. I might fry up a bit of spernum. There's a jar or two of preserved polyps, and I can send the boy out for a salad of rockwort. You can have that sugar tart yonder in the case, although I can't overly vouch for it."

"Well, do the best you can. Meanwhile bring us jars of cold ale."

"As cold as may be, sir."

The lunch appeared: a meal somewhat less makeshift than the landlord's diffidence had suggested. The four sat out on the pier in the shade of the hotel, facing north across the water to the Hilgad camp. The landlord confirmed that a karoo was in progress. "But don't be tempted by curiosity; they're drunk on raki; they'd treat you very unfairly if you ventured near. Already this morning there's been three woman-fights and eight rascolades, and tonight they'll throw from the wheel." He made a sign of caution and returned into the hotel.

"These terms are all mysterious," said Elvo Glissam. "None sound appealing."

"Your instincts are accurate," said Kelse. He pointed to the sunburnt hillside. "Can you make out those little cages and hutches? That's where captives wait for ransom. After a year or two, if ransom isn't paid, the captive is brought out to run down a course. After him come warriors on erjins, armed with lances. If he reaches the other end of the course he's set free. That's rascolade. The wheel—see that tall structure with the counterweight? The counterweight is hoisted; the captive is tied to the wheel. The counterweight is cut loose; the wheel spins. At a certain point the captive is cut loose and thrown toward that jut of rock you see offshore. Sometimes he lands in the water and the morphotes get him. The fun goes on until they run out of captives. Meanwhile they're all eating barbecued morphote and drinking skull-buster and plotting where to get more captives."

Schaine was displeased by the flavor of the conversation; she did not want Kelse and Gerd Jemasze

impinging their prejudices upon Elvo Glissam's still open mind. She said: "The Hilgad aren't representative Uldras; in fact they're pariahs."

Gerd Jemasze said: "They're pariahs because they lack traditional lands and kachembas, not because their customs are unusual."

Schaine started to point out that the remark applied only to the Retent tribes, that Treaty Uldras, such as the Morningswake Aos, were considerably less savage and ruthless; then noticing the sardonic gleam in Gerd Jemasze's eyes, she held her tongue.

The hours passed. At mid-afternoon Kelse telephoned Morningswake; on the dusty insect-spotted screen in the corner of the tavern appeared the image of Reyona Werlas-Madduc, housekeeper at Morningswake and third cousin to Schaine and Kelse. Her image flared and wavered; her voice vibrated through the antique filaments. "He's not yet at Galigong? Stars, he should be there by now; he left this morning."

"Well, he's not here. Did he mention another destination, or an errand somewhere along the way?"

"He said nothing to me. Is Schaine there? Let me say a word to dear little Schaine."

Schaine came forward and exchanged greetings with Reyona; then Kelse returned to the telephone. "If Father calls, explain that we're waiting at Galigong Hotel."

"He should be there any minute... Might he have stopped off at Trillium to take a glass or two with Dm. Hugo?"

"Hardly likely," said Kelse. "We'll just have to wait until he arrives."

The afternoon passed; the sun sank into the Persimmon Sea among flaring clouds and darting rays. Schaine, Kelse, Elvo Glissam and Gerd Jemasze sat out on the dock, facing westward over the placid water. Worry now hung in the air.

"He wouldn't be this late unless he ran into trouble," Kelse declared. "It's almost certain that he's been forced down along the way. And two-thirds of the route is over Retent land: Garganche and Hunge and Kyan."

"Why wouldn't he radio for help?" Schaine asked.

"A dozen things might have happened," said Gerd Jemasze. "We'll surely find him somewhere along the route between here and Morningswake."

Kelse cursed under his breath. “We can’t find him in the dark; we’ll have to wait for morning.” He went off to arrange for accommodations and returned more disconsolate than ever. “The landlord has two rooms with beds, and he’ll hang up a pair of hammocks. But he doesn’t know whether he’ll be able to feed us supper.”

Supper nonetheless consisted of an adequate platter of sand-creepers poached in sea-water, with a garnish of soursops and fried kale. After the meal the four went once more to sit out on the pier. In a spasm of zeal the inn-keeper threw a cloth over his bait table and served a dessert of biscuits and dried fruit, with a pot of verbena tea.

Conversation among the four dwindled. For a period the Hilgad fires burned high, then subsided to quivering red sparks. Languid swells surging under the pier made soft sad sounds; in the sky constellations began to appear: the magnificent Griffides, Orpheus with his lute of eight blue stars, Miraldra the Enchantress with blazing Fenim for her diadem, and low in the southeast the star-veils of Alastor Cluster. How pleasant this evening might have been, thought Schaine, had circumstances been different! She felt depressed, a mood distinct from her worry in regard to Uther Madduc. Lovely old Morningswake had become a vortex of ugly emotions, and she was uncertain as to her ultimate sympathies. Not, she suspected, with her father, although it made no difference; she loved him anyway. Why then, she wondered, did she detest Gerd Jemasze so intensely? His opinions were identical to those of her father; he was no less resourceful and self-sufficient. She looked toward the rail where Elvo Glissam and Gerd Jemasze spoke together. Both were about the same age; both were physically personable; both were individuals with pride in their own identities. Elvo was warm-hearted, impulsive and happy; he was sympathetic and idealistic; he concerned himself with moral ultimates. In contrast Gerd Jemasze guarded his feelings behind a cool mask; his humor was sardonic; his code of ethics—if such it could be called—was based upon a self-serving pragmatism... Their conversation drifted across the night; they spoke of morphotes and erjins. Schaine listened.

“—somewhat peculiar,” Gerd was saying. “The palaeontologists find a fossil record of morphote evolution, all the way up from a creature similar to the creeper we ate for supper. The erjins have left no fossils. Their skeletal substance disintegrates over just a few years so that the evolutionary sequence isn’t at all clear; no one even knows how they breed.”

“Except the Wind-runners,” said Kelse.

“How do the Wind-runners domesticate erjins? Do they capture cubs? Or work with adults?”

“Uther Madduc can tell you more than I can; he’s just come down from the Palga.”

“Maybe that’s his ‘wonderful joke’,” suggested Kelse.

Gerd Jemasze shrugged. “So far as I know, the Wind-runners hatch out erjin eggs and train the cubs. Wild erjins are telepathic; maybe the Wind-runners block off the faculty. How? I’ve no more idea than you.”

Kelse and Gerd Jemasze elected to sleep on the ample settees of the Apex and presently took themselves off to bed. Elvo and Schaine walked out to the end of the pier, where they sat on an overturned skiff. Stars reflected along the dark water. The Hilgad fires had guttered low; from somewhere along the shore came music: quavering wails accented by plangent bass outcries. Elvo Glissam listened. “What dire sounds!”

“Blue music is never cheerful,” said Schaine. “The Blues, on the other hand, consider all our music insipid tinkling.”

The Hilgad music dwindled off into silence. The two sat listening to the wash of the waves through the piers. Schaine said: “For you this can’t be a very exciting occasion. Naturally we didn’t plan so much inconvenience.”

“Don’t speak of it! I only hope it’s just inconvenience.”

“I hope so too. As Gerd says, Father carries weapons, and even if his car has gone down we’ll find him tomorrow.”

“Not that I’m pessimistic,” said Elvo, “but how can you be so sure? It’s a long way to Morningswake. There’s a great deal of territory he might have flown over.”

“We always fly by auto-pilot, from destination to destination, just in case our air-cars do come down. It’s an elementary safety precaution. Tomorrow we’ll fly back along the flight line, and unless Father deviated from course we’re certain to find him.” She rose to her feet. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

Elvo stood up and kissed her forehead. “Sleep well and don’t worry—about anything.”

Chapter 4

Under the gray and rose-pink sky of dawn, the sea lay motionless. From the Hilgad camp smoke drifted across the inlet, carrying a pleasant spicy reek.

Within the tavern the landlord, grumbling and yawning, set forth a breakfast of boiled clams, porridge and tea over which the four wasted little time. Kelse paid the score; a few minutes later the Apex rose into the sky. Jemasze set the auto-pilot to the referents of Morningswake; the Apex slid off to the northwest: across the inlet, over the Hilgad camp. Warriors ran forth, leapt on their erjin mounts, stung them into action with electric prods. Hopping, bounding, running on hind legs, massive heads thrust forward, the erjins followed below, the warriors screaming insane imprecations.

The Hilgad were left behind. The sky-car rose to clear the stony coastal slopes, then flew to an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, to allow maximum visibility right and left across that band of territory over which Uther Madduc would have passed. The Alouan spread away past the range of vision: a rolling plain splotted with clumps of gray thorn, bottle-bush, an occasional thick-trunked hag-tree with branches that seemed to claw at the air. The Apex flew slowly, the four within scanning every square foot of ground.

Miles went past, and hours; the plain sagged and became a basin swimming with heat haze and pocked with salt sinks. Ahead rose the white cliffs of the Lucimer Mountains. "Not very inviting territory," Elvo Glissam remarked, "which probably explains why it's still Retent."

Kelse grinned. "It suits the Kyan well enough. So everybody's satisfied."

"They must have simple tastes," said Elvo Glissam. "I don't see how a lizard could survive down there."

"This is dry season. The Kyan are off in those mountains there to the west. During the rains they'll migrate down into the limestone hills yonder, where they maintain their kachembas."

"Have you ever explored a kachemba?"

Kelse shook his head. "Never. They'd kill me."

"How would they know?"

"They'd know."

Schaine said: "Since we don't invite them into our drawing rooms, they don't ask us into their kachembas."

"Tit for tat, so to speak."

"And again," said Kelse, "everyone is well pleased."

"Except Jorjol," said Schaine.

Flying over the Lucimer Range Jemasze reduced speed, the better to examine slopes and gullies. Nowhere could be found a trace of Uther Madduc's Sturdevant air-car.

Beyond the Lucimers lay a rolling savanna watered by a dozen streams which merged to become the Lela River. A swampy thicket grew alongside the river; Jemasze slowed the Apex until it barely moved, but the Sturdevant had not come down in the swamp.

Elvo Glissam asked: "This land is still Retent?"

"Still Retent: Hunge territory. A hundred miles east is Trillium. Morningswake is still four hundred miles north."

The landscape slid below; the savanna became a dry plain covered with smokeweed. Along the horizon hulked a dozen buttes like a group of monstrous gray animals. Jemasze took the Apex higher to gain a wider vantage, but to no immediate avail.

Below passed the buttes; the countryside became a broken wasteland of dry water-courses and rocky knolls, given contrast and color by clumps of tangle-tree and jossamer and isolated ibix trees with black trunks and flapping mustard-colored foliage: a tract of land known as the Dramalfo.

Two hours after noon, close upon the edge of the Retent with Morningswake Manor still a hundred miles north, they discovered the Sturdevant. It appeared to be wrecked, as if it had fallen from a height. No sign of life was evident. Jemasze hovered over the broken black car and scanned the ground through binoculars. "There's something strange about all this." Looking westward he halted the sweep of the binoculars. "Blues—about thirty. They're riding this way."

He lowered the Apex to the wreck while Kelse studied the riders. "They're coming fast, as if they know what they'll find."

"Loot."

"Which means they know the wreck is here."

"And that means—" Jemasze looked around the sky. He jerked at the controls. "Sky-shark!"

Not fast enough. An explosion: metal cracked and groaned; the Apex shuddered and sagged by the stern. Down to the side swooped the sky-shark—a narrow platform with a curved windshield and a long concave bow-cone, which functioned both as gun and lance on those occasions when the pilot might wish to dart low and spit an enemy.

The sky-shark swerved, rolled and went streaking high. The Apex hung dangerously down by the stern. Jemasze manipulated the controls and managed to control the rate of descent. Down swung the sky-shark; the Apex shuddered to another impact. Jemasze cursed under his breath. The ground came up to meet them; Jemasze used every ounce of thrust remaining to break the fall, almost toppling the Apex over on its back.

The Apex settled upon the flinty soil. Jemasze seized a gun from a locker and jumped to the ground but the sky-shark, fleeting into the west, had disappeared.

Kelse staggered to the radio and attempted a call. “Nothing. No power.”

Jemasze said, “He shot away our rear pods—to bring us down, not to kill us.”

“Rather sinister,” said Kelse. “We might learn more about rascolade than we want to know.”

“Get the guns from the locker,” said Jemasze. “There should be a grenade tube there as well.”

Schaine, Elvo and Kelse joined Jemasze on the ground. Kelse went over to the wrecked Sturdevant and peered within. He returned with a grim face. “He’s there. Dead.”

Elvo Glissam looked in bewilderment from wrecked Sturdevant to wrecked Apex to Kelse. He started to speak, then held his tongue. Schaine blinked back tears. Five years wasted on Tanquil; five years gone because of arrogance and pride and reckless emotions—and now she’d never see her father again.

Gerd Jemasze asked Kelse: “Did you identify the Blues?”

“Most likely Hunge. They’re certainly not Ao. The erjins show a white ruff, so they’re not Garganche.”

“You three take shelter behind the Apex,” said Jemasze. “If they come around from the north, open fire. I’m going out yonder to intercept them, and maybe reduce the odds a bit.”

Kelse went behind the Apex; Schaine followed and Elvo more slowly, looking doubtfully after Jemasze who was trotting off in a half-crouch toward a knoll of compacted sand a quarter-mile west. “Why is he going out there?”

“To kill some Blues,” said Kelse. “Do you know how to use this gun?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“It’s quite simple. Fix that yellow dot on your target and touch this button. Trajectory is automatically computed. You’re shooting OB-16 explosive pellets which should take out a Blue and an erjin together.”

Elvo Glissam scowled down at the gun. “Are you sure they’re hostile?”

“If they’re Hunge, they’re hostile. They’ve got no business here on the Dramalfo; this is Garganche territory. Even if they’re Garganche they’re hostile, unless they keep clear of us. They know the rules.”

“If there are thirty of them, I wouldn’t think we have much chance. Shouldn’t we try to parley with them?”

“Pointless. As for the odds, Gerd went out to even things up a bit.”

Reaching the knoll, Jemasze scrambled up to a clump of dwarf ibix on the crest. The Uldras, still a mile distant, came bounding forward at full speed, flourishing their ancient Two Star thio-manuals. Jemasze scanned the sky. No sign of the sky-shark; perhaps it hung somewhere up against the sun, unseen in the pink dazzle.

The Uldras approached and Jemasze saw that they were Hunge indeed. They came directly toward him, apparently ignoring the possibility of ambush, which suited Jemasze very well. He settled himself comfortably, arranged the grenade tube to the side, and thrust his gun forward. The Hunge bounded close; he could hear the panting cries of the erjins. Jemasze selected the leader: a tall man in flapping gray and yellow robes, with a headdress fashioned from a human skull. He touched the trigger button, then immediately aimed and fired again, and again and again. At the explosions, the erjins squealed in outrage and halted, digging talons into the soil. Jemasze discharged the grenade launcher at the knot of riders: a shattering blast and the survivors wheeled their mounts to the side. Jemasze rose to his feet and fired after the scattering Uldras... On the ground erjins lay kicking and roaring. A wounded Uldra groped for his gun and fired at Jemasze; the pellet whistled close past Jemasze's head. He lobbed across a second grenade and all motion ceased.

From above came the shock of a concussion; Jemasze knew what had occurred before he turned to look. The sky-shark had swung down from out of the sun; anticipating such a move, Kelse had fired on the sky-shark. Jemasze looked up, and as he had expected, the sky-shark was swerving and jerking, apparently out of control. Jemasze aimed and fired, without effect; the pilot applied thrust and sent the sky-shark limping into the west.

Jemasze approached the dead bodies. He counted fourteen Blue corpses; about as many had escaped. He gathered the guns, stacked them in a pile and destroyed them with a grenade, then returned to his knoll. Two miles away the surviving Hunge had halted to take counsel. The range was extreme, but Jemasze aimed his gun, and allowing a trifle for the breeze, fired, but the pellet fell short.

Jemasze returned to the wrecked air-car. Kelse, Schaine and Elvo Glissam already were digging a grave in the sandy soil, using sticks to loosen the dirt. Kelse and Jemasze dragged the body of Uther Madduc forth and lowered it into the grave. Schaine looked off into the sky, while Elvo Glissam stood uncertainly to the side. Kelse and Gerd Jemasze filled the grave and covered it with stones. Whatever the wonderful joke, they would never hear it now from Uther Madduc.

Gerd Jemasze and Kelse sought through both the Sturdevant and the Apex, bringing forth Uther Madduc's weapons and the contents of the water tank: about three gallons. The Apex yielded a map, a compass, binoculars, several packets of emergency rations and another four gallons of water. “We've got about a hundred miles to go; four or five days cross-country,” said Jemasze. “We're not in bad shape—if the Blues don't come back. I fear they will. Keep your eyes open for dust or movement along the skyline.”

Elvo Glissam asked: “We can’t call for help by radio?”

“No chance whatever,” said Jemasze. “Our power-banks are gone. The attacker apparently wanted to take us alive.”

Kelse shouldered his pack. “The sooner we start, the sooner we arrive.”

Schaine looked him over dubiously. “Will your leg hold up?”

“I hope so.”

The four set off to the north and had proceeded only a mile when the Hunge reappeared on the skyline. They ranged themselves into a line: sixteen silhouettes on restive erjins, arms groping forward, great bearded heads outthrust, and above, straddling sling-saddles, the Hunge warriors. They looked across the plain without display or gesture in a silence more sinister than cries and whoops. Elvo Glissam asked uncertainly: “If they attack—what are we supposed to do?”

“They won’t attack,” said Kelse shortly. “Not here; their old Two Stars don’t have the range. They’ll wait for an ambush, or they might try to take us by night.”

Jemasze pointed ahead to a set of grotesque sandstone pinnacles carved by the wind. “And there’s good ambush country.”

“I make it about ten miles,” said Kelse. “Say three hours, or an hour before sunset.”

The four trudged onward across the waste. The Uldras watched for two minutes, then swung their mounts about and riding northward disappeared behind the skyline.

Schaine spoke to Elvo Glissam: “You’ll long remember your visit to Uaia.”

“If I live to think about it.”

“Oh, you’ll live. Gerd Jemasze will see to that. His self-esteem would suffer if anything happened to us.”

Elvo Glissam glanced at her sidewise but made no comment.

As they walked Kelse and Gerd Jemasze exchanged muttered comments and occasionally indicated one or another aspect of the landscape. In the shade of a sprawling hag-tree they halted to rest. Kelse said to Elvo Glissam and Schaine: “We’ve got to keep clear of those buttes ahead, because the Blues could get up within range of us. The butte on the far right is somewhat safer, with open ground to the side. We’ll pass around it to the east.”

The four trudged onward through the hot afternoon. Schaine noticed that Kelse's limp was becoming more pronounced... They came to a dry watercourse a hundred yards across, with a sandy bed and banks supporting a growth of poison cassander and junkberry bushes. Jemasze signaled a halt and drew the group into the shade of the purple cassander foliage. "They might have ridden ahead of us and crossed the gully. If so they're waiting behind the far bank, to get us as we cross... We'd better continue along this side for a mile or two."

"Then what?" demanded Elvo Glissam.

"Then we'll see how the land lies."

They continued, wary and uneasy. A half-mile along, Jemasze pointed to tracks on the sand of the riverbed. "There's where they crossed. They're over there now, waiting for us." He reflected a moment. "You three continue along the bank, as far as that big jossamer tree."

The three set off. Jemasze crouched low and slid away to where he could not be seen from the opposite bank, then loped back the way they had come. He went three hundred yards, then cautiously returned to the top of the bank. He looked behind him, then scanned the opposite bank. He saw no movement; he felt no tension of danger. He waited another minute, then slid down into the watercourse and ran crouching across the pink sand and quartz pebbles toward the opposite side, every instant expecting the impact of a bullet, although both his reason and his instinct assured him that the Hunge had left no one to guard this area of the watercourse. Without molestation he made it to the far bank and gratefully climbed into the cover of the junkberry bushes. Gaining the top of the bank he looked north and, as he expected, discovered the party of Hunge approximately opposite the big jossamer tree where Kelse, Schaine and Elvo Glissam waited. Jemasze returned to the riverbed and keeping close under the shrubbery, ran north a hundred yards, then made another reconnaissance. Still too far. He returned to the riverbed and ran crouching another hundred yards. Now when he clambered up through the vegetation the Hunge were barely a hundred yards distant.

He watched a moment, selecting the rider who now seemed to be the leader. He aimed his gun and without further ado opened fire. Three Blues fell sprawling to the soil; erjins screamed in fury and shock. The survivors jerked instantly into flight. They crashed down through the shrubbery into the riverbed and charged at a zig-zag toward the jossamer tree, shooting as they rode.

Kelse instantly opened fire. He looked toward Elvo Glissam who lay looking in numb fascination toward the charging Hunge.

"Shoot, man, shoot!"

Elvo Glissam shook his head in distress, then gritting his teeth fired the gun.

Pellets sang over their heads; the riverbed seemed littered with flapping erjins and dying Blues. Five still

survived and clambered up through the shrubbery. Schaine and Kelse fired at point-blank range; three neared the top of the bank. Elvo Glissam, motivated by a complex mixture of outrage, humiliation, fear and fury, gave an inarticulate yell of passion and hurled himself upon the back of one of the Blues and tore him down from his mount. The two thrashed among the junkberries; the erjin, roaring and hissing, stamped upon them both, then bounded down into the watercourse and away on enormous exultant strides. The Blue drew his dagger and slashed at Elvo's arm which encircled his neck. Jemasze, arriving on the scene, clubbed the Blue with the butt of his gun, and the Blue sprawled back into the bushes.

Silence, except for panting and the sounds of riderless erjins trying to dislodge their fang-guards and electric gyves against the rocks. Elvo Glissam sat staring at the blood flowing from his forearm. Schaine uttered an exclamation and went to help him. Kelse produced a flask of all-purpose medicament and sprayed the wounds, which almost instantly stopped bleeding. When the protective membrane had formed, Schaine poured water over Elvo's arms and washed away the blood. In a shaky voice he said: "Sorry to be so bemused; I'm afraid I've led a sheltered life."

"Shock has nothing to do with a sheltered life," said Schaine. "It can happen to anyone. You're very brave."

Jemasze went back for his pack; the party once more set out toward the north, leaving behind the dry watercourse and the Blue corpses.

Methuen sank behind the far Lucimers; the four made camp on the slope of a butte. To avoid attracting the attention of such Uldras as might still be near, they built no fire, and supped on emergency rations and water. The sky faded through phases of vermilion, scarlet, ruby and purple; dusk fell across the landscape. Schaine went to sit by Elvo Glissam. "How is your arm?"

Elvo looked down at the gash. "It aches a bit, but it could be far worse. I also resent that erjin kicking me in the ribs."

Schaine said gloomily: "I wonder if you'll ever forgive me for inviting you to Morningswake."

Elvo Glissam replied and in so doing initiated a conversation which, when later he consulted his recollections, seemed more unreal and incongruous than any other aspect of the adventure.

"I forgive you right now," said Elvo Glissam. "If nothing else, the trip is an education. I see myself from a new perspective."

Schaine objected vigorously. "Not at all. The surroundings have changed. You're the same!"

"It amounts to the same thing. Delicate sensibilities are of small assistance when a person is fighting for his life."

Schaine glanced from Kelse, propped against a tree trunk with what she suspected to be a half-smile on his face, to Gerd Jemasze who sat on a flat rock, arms around knees brooding across the twilight; and she felt impelled to put Elvo Glissam's self-deprecation into proper perspective. "In civilized surroundings it's not necessary to fight for your life."

Kelse chuckled mirthlessly. Schaine looked at him coldly. "Did I say something foolish?"

"A fire department isn't necessary except when there's a fire."

"Civilization is a very normal ordinary condition," said Schaine. "Civilized people don't need to fight for their lives."

"Not often," said Kelse laconically. "But you can't kill a Blue by invoking an abstraction."

"Did I suggest as much?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I agree that I must be confused, since I have no such recollection."

Kelse shrugged and raised his eyes to the sky, as if to indicate that he did not care to pursue the topic any further. But he said, "You used the word 'civilization', which means a set of abstractions, symbols, conventions. Experience tends to be vicarious; emotions are predigested and electrical; ideas become more real than things."

Schaine was taken somewhat aback. She said: "That's rather all-inclusive."

"I don't think so," said Kelse mildly.

Elvo Glissam said, "I can't understand your objection to ideas."

"I can't either," said Schaine. "I think Kelse is indulging in whimsey."

"Not altogether," said Kelse. "Urban folk, dealing as they do in ideas and abstractions, become conditioned to unreality. Then, wherever the fabric of civilization breaks, these people are as helpless as fish out of water."

Elvo Glissam heaved a sigh. "What could be more unreal than sitting out here in the wilderness discussing civilization? I can't believe it. In passing, I might point out that Kelse's remarks indicate considerable skill in urbane and civilized abstraction."

Kelse laughed. “Also in passing, I might mention that urbane folk make up the membership of the Redemptionist Alliance, the Vitatis Cult, the Cosmic Peace Movement, Panortheism, a dozen more: all motivated by abstractions four or five or six times removed from reality.”

“Reality, so-called, is itself an abstraction,” Elvo Glissam remarked.

“It’s an abstraction with a difference, because it can hurt, as when your sky-car comes down in the wilderness with a hundred miles to walk. That’s real. Aunt Val’s chamber of winds at Villa Mirasol isn’t real.”

Schaine said: “You’re simply beating a horse to death. Because a person can deal with ideas doesn’t signify that, ergo, he’s helpless.”

“In an urban environment he’s quite safe; in fact, he prospers. But such environments are fragile as cobwebs, and when they break—chaos!”

Gerd Jemasze joined the conversation. “Reflect on human history.”

“I’ve done so,” said Kelse. “History describes the destruction of a long series of urban civilizations because the citizens preferred intellectualism and abstraction to competence in basic skills, such as self-defense. Or attack, for that matter.”

Schaine said in disgust: “You’ve become awfully crabbed and illiberal, Kelse. Father certainly stamped his opinions upon you.”

“Your theory has its obverse,” said Elvo Glissam. “From this viewpoint, history becomes a succession of cases in which barbarians, renouncing crassness, develop a brilliant civilization.”

“Usually destroying older civilizations in the process,” remarked Kelse.

“Or exploiting other less capable barbarians. Uaia is a case in point. Here a group of civilized men attacked and plundered the barbarians. The barbarians were helpless in the face of energy weapons and sky-cars—all contrived through the use of abstractions, and, incidentally, built by urbanites.”

Gerd Jemasze chuckled, a sound which annoyed Schaine. She said: “These are merely facts.”

“But not all the facts. The barbarians weren’t plundered; they use their lands as freely as before. I must concede that torture and slavery have been discouraged.”

“Very well then,” said Elvo Glissam. “Imagine yourself an Uldra: disenfranchised and subject to alien law. What would you do?”

Gerd Jemasze pondered a moment or two. “I suppose it would depend on what I wanted. What I wanted I’d try to get.”

Before dawn the party was astir and away. A great reef of clouds obscured the east and the party walked in maroon gloom. At noon lightning began to strike down at the buttes, now lonely shapes in the southern distance, and draughts of dank air blew north across the plain. Halfway into the afternoon a rain squall raced past, drenching the group to the skin and laying the dust; shortly after, the sun found gaps in the clouds and sent remarkable pink rays slanting down at the ground. Jemasze led the way, accommodating his pace to that of Kelse, whose limp had become somewhat more noticeable. Schaine and Elvo Glissam sauntered along to the rear. Had the circumstances been different, had her father been alive and Kelse not so obviously contriving each separate step by an effort of will, she might almost have enjoyed the adventure.

The land sloped down into a sink paved with pale hardpan. At the far verge stood a cluster of sandstone pinnacles and beyond, an irregular scarp of pink, mauve and russet sandstone. Schaine called ahead to Kelse: “There’s Bottom Edge!”

“Almost like home,” said Kelse.

Schaine excitedly told Elvo Glissam: “Morningswake starts at the brink of the cliff. Beyond is our land—all the way north to the Volwodes.”

Elvo Glissam shook his head in sad disapproval, and Schaine looked at him wonderingly. She thought a moment, reflecting upon what she had said, then laughed but made no comment. Clearly she was not a Redemptionist by instinct, or by innate conviction...How to reconcile her love for Morningswake with the guilty suspicion that she had no right to the property? Kelse and Gerd Jemasze had no such qualms. On an impulse she asked Elvo Glissam: “Suppose you owned Morningswake: what would you do?”

Elvo Glissam smiled and shook his head. “It’s always easier to relinquish somebody else’s property...I’d like to believe that my principles would dominate my avarice.”

“So you’d give up Morningswake?”

“I honestly don’t know. I hope that’s what I’d do.”

Schaine pointed toward a cluster of tung-beetle mounds about a hundred yards west. “Look: in the shadow to the right! You wanted to see a wild erjin—there it is!”

The erjin stood seven feet tall, with massive arms banded with stripes of black and yellow fur. Tufts of stiff golden fiber stood above the head; folds of gunmetal cartilage almost concealed the four small eyes

in the neck under the jutting frontal bone. The creature stood negligently, showing neither fear nor hostility. Gerd Jemasze and Kelse became aware of the beast. Kelse stared in fascination, and slowly brought forth his gun.

Elvo asked in dismay: “Is he going to shoot it? It’s such a magnificent creature!”

“He’s always hated erjins—worse since he lost his arm and leg.”

“But this one isn’t threatening us. It’s almost murder.”

Gerd Jemasze suddenly turned and fired to the east at a pair of erjins lunging forward from a thicket of greasebush. One sprawled forward and fell only four feet from Schaine and Elvo Glissam, to lie with great six-fingered hands twitching; the other jerked up into a grotesque backward somersault and fell with a thump. The first erjin, who had acted as a decoy, slipped behind the tung mounds before Kelse could aim his gun. Jemasze ran off to the side to get another shooting angle, but the creature had disappeared.

Elvo Glissam stood looking down at the quivering hulk of the near erjin. He noticed the hand-palps, as sensitive as human fingers, and the talons which extended themselves when the erjin made a fist. He examined the tuft of bronze bristles on the scalp, which some authorities declared to be telepathy receptors. Another bound and the creature would have been at his throat. In a subdued voice he said to Gerd Jemasze, “That was a close call...Do the erjins often use tricks like that?”

Jemasze nodded curtly. “They’re intelligent brutes, and unforgiving. How they can be domesticated is a mystery to me.”

“Maybe the secret was Uther Madduc’s ‘wonderful joke’.”

“I don’t know. I plan to find out.”

Kelse asked: “How do you propose to do that?”

“As soon as we get to Morningswake we’ll fly back to the Sturdevant and rescue the log,” said Gerd Jemasze. “Then we’ll have an idea where he went.”

The afternoon waned. At sunset the party camped among the sandstone pinnacles, with the southern edge of Morningswake Domain still three miles to the north. Jemasze stalked, killed and cleaned a ten-pound bustard, the wild descendant of fowl imported from beyond the stars. Schaine and Elvo Glissam gathered fuel and built a fire, and the four toasted chunks of the bird on twigs.

“Tomorrow we’ll find water,” said Gerd. “Three or four streams cross South Morningswake, so I recall.”

“It’s about ten miles to South Station,” said Kelse. “There’s a windmill and maybe a few stores there. But

no radio, worse luck.”

“Where are the Aos?”

“They might be anywhere, but I suspect they’re moving north. No help for it; we’ve still got sixty miles to go.”

“How’s your leg holding up?”

“Not too good. But I’ll get there.”

Elvo Glissam leaned back and lay staring up at the stars. His own life, he thought, seemed relatively simple compared to that of a land-baron...Schaine! What went on in her mind? One moment she seemed intensely subtle and sympathetic, then naïve, then caught up in some emotion beyond his knowing. Beyond question she was brave and kind and cheerful. He could well imagine passing the rest of his life in her company...At Morningswake? He was not so sure. Would she agree to live elsewhere? He was not sure of this either...Three days more of this arduous marching. He wished he could in some manner help Kelse. Perhaps in the morning he’d inconspicuously take part of Kelse’s backpack and hang it on his own.

In the morning Elvo Glissam put his plan into effect. Kelse noticed and protested, but Elvo Glissam said: “This is just simple common sense. You’re already working twice as hard as I am, and it’s in everybody’s interest that you stay healthy.”

Gerd Jemasze said, “Glissam’s right, Kelse. I’d rather carry your pack than carry you.”

Kelse said no more; the group set forth and an hour later reached the base of the South Rim. By a dry gulch they ascended five hundred feet, then toiled another hundred feet up a face of rotting conglomerate and finally stood at the lip. Behind spread the Retent, melting into the southern haze; ahead the ground fell away to a pleasant valley grown with green-gum, dragon-eye, slender black-green gadroon, and copses of orange vandalia. A mile to the north the sunlight glinted on a shallow pond. “Morningswake!” cried Schaine huskily. “We’re home.”

“With about sixty miles to go,” said Kelse.

Jemasze looked back over the Retent. “We’re past the worst of it. The going should be easier.”

There was a day of silent trudging across the south prairie; another day was spent toiling up and down the

Tourmaline Hills. Kelse now moved in awkward hops and lurches. There was a long sweaty morning in the marsh north of Skyflower Lake. At noon the party struggled through a thicket of coarse vines to reach solid terrain. They halted to rest. Kelse looked ahead. "Fourteen more miles... We'll never make it tonight. Perhaps you'd better go on to the house and send a wagon back for me."

"I'll wait here with you," said Schaine. "It's a good idea."

Gerd Jemasze said: "It would be a good idea—except that we're being kept under observation." He pointed toward the sky. "Three times in the last two days I've seen a sky-shark hanging in the clouds."

All stared toward the sky. "I don't see anything," said Schaine.

"Right now he's in the fold of that cumulus cloud."

"But what could he want? If he's hostile, why doesn't he try to shoot us?"

"I would guess that he wants to take us alive. Or some of us alive. If we separated, the chances would be much improved. There might even be another party of Hunge on the way to intercept us before we reach Morningswake."

Schaine said in a hushed voice: "Would they dare come in so far from the Retent? Our Aos would kill them."

"The sky-shark would observe the Aos and provide warning."

Elvo Glissam licked his lips. "I wouldn't care to be captured now. Or even killed."

Kelse struggled to his feet. "Let's get started."

Twenty minutes later Gerd Jemasze once more searched the landscape. Looking to the northwest he became still. He lowered the binoculars and pointed. "Uldras. About twenty."

Schaine peered wearily through the pink dust-haze. More fighting, more killing; and in this region of thickets and clumps of vandalia there was small hope—in fact, no hope—of beating off an attack. Fourteen miles to Morningswake. So near and so far.

Elvo Glissam had arrived at the same conclusion. His face became pinched and gray; a husky sound forced its way up his throat.

Gerd Jemasze looked through the binoculars again. "They're riding criptids."

Schaine released her pent breath. “They’re Aos!”

Gerd Jemasze nodded. “I can make out their headdress. White plumes. They’re Ao.”

Schaine’s breath came in a rasping guttural sob. Elvo Glissam asked in a soft strained voice: “Are they hostile?”

“No,” said Kelse shortly.

The riders approached, raising a trail of dust behind them. Gerd Jemasze studied the sky through his binoculars. “There he goes!” He pointed to a minute mark among the clouds, which drifted slowly west, then picked up speed and presently disappeared.

The Aos rode in a ritual circle around the group, the soft-footed criptids*running easily and low to the ground. They halted; an old man, somewhat shorter and more sturdy than the ordinary Uldra, dismounted and came forward. Schaine took his hand. “Kurgech! I’ve come home to Morningswake.”

Kurgech touched the top of her head, a gesture half caress, half formal salute. “It gives us pleasure to see you home, Mistress.”

Kelse said: “Uther Madduc is dead. He was shot down over the Dramalfo by a sky-shark.”

Kurgech’s gray face—he wore no azure oil—showed no twitch of emotion, and Schaine surmised that the information had already reached his mind. She asked: “Do you know who killed my father?”

“The knowledge has not come to me.”

Kelse, hobbling forward, said hoarsely: “Search for the knowledge, Kurgech. When it comes—tell me.”

Kurgech gave a curt nod which might have meant anything, then turned and signaled to four of the tribesmen, who dismounted and brought their mounts forward. Gerd Jemasze half-lifted Kelse into the saddle. Schaine told Elvo Glissam: “Just sit quietly and hang on; it doesn’t need guidance.”

She herself mounted, as did Gerd Jemasze, and the four Aos mounted double. The party rode north toward Morningswake.

Two hours later, past the Skaw and across the South Savanna, Schaine saw her home. She blinked back tears, unable to restrain her pent-up emotion any longer. She looked at Kelse, who rode beside her. His face was strained with pain and as gray as Kurgech’s; his eyes also glinted with tears. Gerd Jemasze’s dark face was unreadable; who could fathom this man? Elvo Glissam, far too polite to betray any excess of relief, rode in grave silence. Schaine watched him covertly. For all his lack of wilderness craft, he had

by no means disgraced himself. Kelse clearly liked him and even Gerd Jemasze treated him with civility. When he left Uaia and returned to Olanje, he would have memories to last him a lifetime.

And there ahead: Morningswake, serene among tall frail green-gums and lordly transtellar oaks, with the brimming Chip-chap flowing to the side: the landscape of a dear reverie; a place forever precious; and tears once more flooded Schaine's eyes.

Chapter 5

Across two hundred years Morningswake had been built and rebuilt, extended, remodeled, subjected to a dozen modifications and improvements as each land-baron in turn attempted to impinge some trace of his identity upon the hereditary manse. Morningswake therefore lacked a definable style and showed a different aspect from each perspective. The roof of the central structure stood tall and steep, with a dozen high-pitched dormers, a curious little observation deck overlooking Wild Crake Pond, and along the high central ridge a line of black iron ghost-chasers in the shape of trefoils. From either flank extended a rambling two-story wing with verandahs at each level; the double colonnades were overgrown with arabella vine. The framing timbers were gadroon from Fairy Forest; the exterior clapboards were green-gum, equally durable; the interior stairs, balusters, floors, moldings and wainscotings were ironwood, pearl sachuli, verbane, Szintarre teak. The chandeliers, furniture and rugs had been imported, not from Olanje (the products of which were considered cheap and unsubstantial), but from one of the far Old Worlds.

The central structure enclosed the Great Hall which was the heart of Morningswake, where the family celebrated important occasions, entertained guests and took its evening meal in an atmosphere which Schaine remembered as portentously formal. Everyone dressed for dinner; the table was laid with fine porcelain, silver and crystal; the conversation was confined to dignified subjects and lapses of decorum were not tolerated. As a child Schaine had found these dinners tedious and she could never understand why Muffin was not allowed to dine in the Great Hall where his fancies and drolleries would certainly have enlivened matters. But Muffin was excluded; he dined alone in the kitchen.

When Schaine was eleven her mother drowned in a boating accident on Shadow Lake. Dinners in the Great Hall became subdued rather than merely decorous, and Uther Madduc inexplicably—to Schaine—turned gruff and unreasonable; frequently she had been aroused to anger and even rebellion. Not that she did not love her father; Schaine was too warm not to love everything connected with her life; still Schaine had decided that her father must be taught a lesson on how to get along with people and how not to be so arrogant with the Uldras, specifically poor Muffin.

Uther Madduc at this time had been a man of remarkable appearance, straight and tall, with thick gray hair worn in a style of elegant simplicity, clear gray eyes, features of classical regularity. He had been neither easy nor gregarious. Schaine remembered him as a man of brooding imagination and sudden impulses, simultaneously calm and restless, lacking all talent or taste for frivolity. His rare angers were cold and controlled, and diminished without perceptible aftermath; neither Schaine nor Kelse had ever

incurred punishment at his hands except possibly on that last climactic night—if being sent to an expensive boarding school on Tanquil could be reckoned as punishment. Really, thought Schaine, I was an arrogant feckless self-important little wretch...And yet, and yet...

Kelse and Gerd Jemasze had flown south in the Morningswake cargo carrier to salvage the Apex and the Sturdevant. With them flew two of Gerd Jemasze's cousins and a pair of Ao ranch-hands. An automatic cannon had been mounted on the cargo deck, to fend off sky-shark attacks. Elvo Glissam had not been invited to join the party, and he had not volunteered his services; instead he and Schaine enjoyed a leisurely breakfast under the green-gums. Elvo Glissam told Schaine: "By no means feel that you must entertain me; I know you have a hundred things on your mind."

Schaine grinned. "I'm not worried about entertaining you. I've already shown you a wild erjin, as I said I'd do—and whatever the hundred affairs on my mind, I don't intend to consider them for several days, if ever. In fact, I may very well decide to do nothing at all for the next month or two."

"When I think back now," said Elvo Glissam, "I can't believe it all happened. And yet it did."

"It's certainly one way of getting acquainted," said Schaine. "On a five-day march, a certain intimacy is almost unavoidable."

"Yes. At least with you, and with Kelse. Gerd Jemasze—I don't know. He puzzles me."

"Me no less, and I've known him all my life."

"I'd swear that he enjoys killing Uldras," said Elvo Glissam. "It seems churlish to cavil at his motives. He brought us home alive—as you predicted."

"He's not bloodthirsty," said Schaine. "He just doesn't consider the Hunge human beings, especially when they're attacking us."

"He amazes me," said Elvo Glissam thoughtfully. "Killing just isn't one of my skills."

"You did yourself credit," said Schaine. "Kelse and Gerd both respect you, and I do too, so don't go agonizing over imaginary deficiencies."

"Oh, I'm not agonizing. Still, I can't believe I did anything noteworthy."

"You made no complaints. You did your share and usually more of whatever work was needful; you were always cheerful. I think that's all very commendable."

Elvo Glissam made a careless gesture. "Inconsequentialities. I'm back in an environment I prefer, and whatever good qualities I possess will go back into hiding."

Schaine looked off across the South Savanna. “Do you really like it here at Morningswake?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And you’re not bored?”

“Not with you here.” Elvo Glissam’s glance was unmistakably ardent.

Schaine smiled absently off across the distance. “It’s been very quiet at Morningswake since my mother died. Before, there were parties every week. We always had guests, from other domains, from Olanje, or even off-planet. Several times a year the Aos would organize a karoo. Often we’d go up to Twin Lake Lodge, or Snowflower Lodge in the Suaniset Crag. There was always excitement and fun—before my mother died. You mustn’t think we live like hermits.”

“And then?”

“Father became—well, ‘recluse’ is too strong a word. Then I went off to Tanquil, and for the last five years Morningswake has been very quiet. Kelse says Father’s closest friend has been Kurgech!”

“And now?”

“I’d like Morningswake to be a happy place again.”

“Yes. That would be pleasant. Except...” Elvo Glissam paused.

“Except what?”

“I suspect that the days of the great domains are numbered.”

Schaine grimaced. “What a dismal thought.”

Kelse and Gerd Jemasze returned to Morningswake towing the hulks of the Apex and the Sturdevant on float pods. A coffin of white glass contained the body of Uther Madduc, and Kelse carried a notebook which he had found in a locker.

Two days later a funeral took place, and Uther Madduc was buried in the family graveyard, across the Chip-chap River in the park beside the Fairy Forest. Two hundred family friends, relatives and folk from neighboring domains came to pay their last respects to Uther Madduc.

Elvo Glissam watched in fascination, marveling at the conduct of these folk so different from himself. The men, he thought, were a matter-of-fact lot, while the women lacked a certain quality he could not quite define. Frivolity? Mischief? Artfulness? Even Schaine seemed rather more direct than he might have preferred, leaving small scope for teasing or flirtation or any of the subtle games which made urban society so amusing. Worse? Better? Adaptation to the environment? Elvo Glissam only knew for certain that he found Schaine as beautiful as some magnificent natural process, like a sunrise, or a surge of breaking surf, or stars in the midnight sky.

He met dozens of folk: cousins, aunts, uncles, with their sons and daughters, and fathers and mothers, and cousins, aunts and uncles, none of whom he remembered. He saw no evidence of grief, nor even fury against the assassin; the prevailing mood seemed, rather, a grim smoulder which in Elvo Glissam's opinion boded ill for any accommodation with the Redemptionists.

He listened to a conversation between Kelse Madduc and Lilo Stenbaren of Doradus Domain. Kelse was speaking: “—not a random act. There was planning involved, and precise calculation. First Uther Madduc and then ourselves.”

“What of the ‘wonderful joke’ of the letter? Is there some connection?”

“Impossible to say. We’ve taken the auto-pilot from the Sturdevant and we’ll trace my father’s route, and perhaps join him in his ‘wonderful joke’ yet.”

Kelse brought Elvo Glissam forward and performed an introduction. “I’m sorry to say that Elvo Glissam, without shame, admits himself a Redemptionist.”

Dm. Stenbaren laughed. “Forty years ago I remember a ‘Society for Uaian Justice’, ten years later a ‘League Against the Land-looters’, and sometime afterward a group which simply called itself ‘Apotheosis’. And now of course the Redemptionists.”

“All of which reflect a deep and lasting concern,” remarked Elvo Glissam. “‘Decency’, ‘security against pillage’, ‘justice’, ‘restoration of sequestered property’ are timeless concepts.”

“Concepts don’t bother us,” said Dm. Stenbaren. “So far as I am concerned, you may continue to harbor them.”

On the morning after the funeral a sparkling blue Hermes sky-boat, with silver flare-bars and a jaunty four-foot probe, swooped out of the sky and, ignoring the landing area to the side, came down on the promenade directly before Morningswake Manor.

Schaine, looking forth from the library, noticed the sky-boat on the neatly dressed gravel and reflected that Kelse would be irritated, especially since the occupant was Jorjol, who should have known better.

Jorjol jumped to the ground and stood a moment surveying Morningswake with the air of a person contemplating purchase. He wore a pale leather split-skirt, hide sandals, a rock-crystal sphere on his right big toe, the 'revelry-bonnet' of a Garganche bravo: an intricate contrivance of silver rods on which Jorjol's white-bleached hair was tied and twined and tasseled. Fresh azure oil had been applied to his face; his skin shone as blue as the enamel of his Hermes.

Schaine shook her head in amused vexation for Jorjol's bravado. She went out on the front piazza to meet him. He came forward, took her hands, bent forward and kissed her forehead. "I learned of your father's death, and felt that I must come to express my sentiments."

"Thank you, Jorjol. But yesterday was the funeral."

"Pshaw. I would have found you occupied with dozens of the dullest people imaginable. I wished to express myself to you."

Schaine laughed tolerantly. "Very well, express yourself."

Jorjol cocked his head and inspected Schaine sharply. "In reference to your father, condolence is of course in order. He was a strong man, and a man to be respected—even though, as you know, I stand opposite to his views."

Schaine nodded. "Do you know, he died before I had a chance to speak to him. I came home hoping to find him a softer easier man."

"Softer? Easier? More reasonable? More just? Hah!" Jorjol threw his fine head back as if in defiance. "I think not. I doubt if Kelse intends to alter by so much as a whit. Where is Kelse?"

"He's in the office, going over accounts."

Jorjol looked up and down the quaint old façade of Morningswake. "The house is as pleasant and inviting as ever. I wonder if you know how lucky you are."

"Oh yes indeed."

"And I am committed to bringing this era to an end."

"Come now, Jorjol, you can't deceive me. You're just Muffin in fancy clothes."

Jorjol chuckled. "I must admit that I came half to express sympathy and half—rather more than half—to see you. To touch you." He took a step forward. Schaine retreated.

"You mustn't be impulsive, Jorjol."

"Aha! but I'm not impulsive! I'm determined and wise, and you know how I feel about you."

"I know how you felt about me," said Schaine, "but that was five years ago. Let me go tell Kelse you're here. He'll want to see you."

Jorjol reached out, took her hand. "No. Let Kelse drudge among the accounts. I came to see you. Let's walk by the river where we can be alone."

Schaine glanced down at the long blue hand, with the long fingers and black fingernails. "It's almost lunch-time, Jorjol. Perhaps after lunch. You'll stay, won't you?"

"I will be happy to lunch with you."

"I'll go find Kelse. And here's Elvo Glissam, whom you met at Aunt Val's. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Schaine went to the office. Kelse looked up from the calculator. "Jorjol is here."

Kelse nodded shortly. "What does he want?"

"He made a nice speech in regard to Father. I've invited him to lunch."

Into their field of vision came Jorjol and Elvo Glissam on the lawn under the clump of parasol trees. Kelse grunted, rose to his feet.

"I'll come out and talk to him. We'll take lunch on the east terrace."

"Wait, Kelse. Let's be nice to Jorjol. He deserves to be treated like any other guest. It's a warm day and the Hall would be perfectly suitable."

Kelse said patiently: "In two hundred years no Uldra has entered our Great Hall. I don't care to break this tradition. Not even for Jorjol."

"But it's a cruel tradition and not worth keeping. We're not bigots, you and I—even if Father was. Let's live our lives more reasonably."

“I am not a bigot; I am very reasonable indeed. In fact, I realize that Jorjol cunningly chose this time—today—to try to force a submission upon us. He won’t succeed.”

“I can’t understand you!” cried Schaine in a passion. “We’ve known Jorjol since we were little. He saved your life at risk of his own and it’s absolutely absurd that he can’t have lunch with us as any ordinary person might.”

With raised eyebrows Kelse looked Schaine up and down. “I’m surprised that you don’t understand the significance of all this. We hold Morningswake not through the forbearance of others, but because we are strong enough to protect what is ours.”

Schaine said in disgust: “You’ve been talking to Gerd Jemasze. He’s worse even than Father.”

“Schaine, my naïve little sister, you simply don’t understand what’s going on.”

Schaine controlled her exasperation. “I know this: Jorjol the Gray Prince is welcome anywhere in Olanje; it seems strange that he can’t be treated equally well here, where he grew up.”

“Circumstances are different,” said Kelse patiently. “In Olanje there’s nothing to lose; the folk can afford the luxury of abstract principles. We’re Outkers in the middle of the Alouan; if we falter, we’re done.”

“What’s that got to do with treating Jorjol in a civilized manner?”

“Because he’s not here in a civilized manner! He’s here as a Blue of the Retent. If he came here in Outker clothes, using Outker manners and not reeking of azure oil—in other words, if he came here as an Outker, then I would treat him as an Outker. But he doesn’t do this. He comes flaunting his Uldra clothes, his blue skin, his Redemptionist bias—in short, he challenges me. I react. If he wants to enjoy Outker privileges, such as dining in our Great Hall, then he must make himself respectable by my standards. It’s as simple as that.”

Schaine could think of nothing to say. She turned away. Kelse said to her back: “Go talk to Kurgech; ask his opinion. In fact, we’ll ask Kurgech to join us for lunch.”

“Now you’re really trying to offend Jorjol.”

Kelse uttered a wild bitter laugh. “You want it both ways! We mustn’t invite one Uldra because that would offend another.”

“You don’t reckon with Jorjol’s opinion of himself—his self-image.”

“And he intends to make me accept this self-image. I won’t do it. I didn’t invite him here; since he comes of his own volition, then he must adapt himself to us, not we to him.”

Schaine stalked from the room and returned to the front piazza. “Kelse is up to his ears in the accounts,” she told Jorjol. “He sends his apologies and he looks forward to seeing you at lunch...Let’s all walk out to the river.”

Jorjol’s face twitched. “Certainly; just as you like. In fact, I’ll enjoy revisiting the scenes of my most happy childhood.”

The three wandered up the river to Shadow Lake where Uther Madduc had built a boathouse to house three skimmer sailboats. Elvo Glissam was his usual self; Jorjol’s mood altered each minute. At times he prattled nonsense, as light-hearted and charming as Elvo Glissam, then he would sigh and become melancholy over some reminiscence of his childhood, only to turn on Elvo Glissam to argue some minor point with fierce intensity. Schaine watched him in fascination, wondering at the emotions which surged through the proud narrow skull. She would not have wished to walk out alone with Jorjol; he would certainly have become ardent.

Jorjol resented Elvo Glissam’s presence and disguised the fact with obvious effort. Once or twice Schaine thought he was on the verge of asking Elvo Glissam to leave, at which times she quickly intervened.

Jorjol at last resigned himself to the circumstance and began to exhibit a new set of moods: mocking, self-pitying, sentimental, as surroundings called to mind this or that incident of his childhood. Schaine began to feel a nervous embarrassment; Jorjol was so clearly striking poses. She wanted to tease him and perhaps deflate him a bit, but in doing so she might wound him and perhaps provoke a new and more passionate drama. So she held her tongue. Elvo Glissam, wearing a bland expression, kept the conversation almost foolishly impersonal and elicited glares of contempt from Jorjol.

Meanwhile Schaine had been wondering how to announce that lunch was not to be served in the Great Hall. The problem solved itself; as they returned around the house, the buffet table on the eastern lawn was plain to see, and Kelse stood nearby, in conversation not only with Kurgech but with Julio Tanch the head stockman. Both Julio and Kurgech wore Outker garments: twill trousers, boots and a loose white shirt; neither had oiled his skin.

Jorjol stopped short, staring at the three men. Slowly he moved forward. Kelse raised his hand in a polite salute. “Jorjol, you’ll remember Kurgech and Julio.”

Jorjol gave a curt nod of recognition. “I remember both well. Much water has flowed down Chip-chap River since last we met.” He drew himself to his full height. “Changes have occurred. There are more to come.”

Kelse’s eyes glittered. “We’re going to stop assassinations from the Retent. That’s one change. You

might find the Retent gone and Treaty Lands all along the Alouan. That's another."

Schaine cried out, "Please, let's all eat our lunch."

Jorjol stood rigid. "I do not care to eat out in the open like a servant. I prefer to take my meal in the Great Hall."

"I'm afraid that this is impossible," said Kelse politely. "None of us are dressed for the occasion."

Schaine laid her hand on Jorjol's arm. "Muffin, please don't be difficult. None of us are servants; we're eating outside by preference."

"This is not the point! I am a man of character and reputation; I am as good as any Outker, and I wish to be treated with dignity!"

Kelse replied in a neutral voice: "When you come here in Outker costume, when you show respect for our institutions and our sensibilities, the situation might change."

"Aha, well then—what of Kurgech and Julio? They meet these standards; take them into the Great Hall and feed them and I will eat alone out here."

"At an appropriate occasion, this might occur, but not today."

"In that case," said Jorjol, "I find that I cannot take lunch with you, and I will now be away and about my business."

"As you wish."

Schaine walked with Jorjol to the Hermes. She spoke in a subdued voice: "I'm sorry things turned out so badly. But really, Jorjol, you need not have been so irascible."

"Bah! Kelse is an ingrate and a fool. Does he think his great army can frighten me? He will learn one day how things go!" He seized her shoulders. "You are my sweet Schaine. Come with me now! Jump into the sky-boat and we'll leave them all behind."

"Muffin, don't be silly. I wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"One time you did!"

"Long long ago." She drew back as Jorjol attempted to kiss her. "Muffin, please stop."

Jorjol stood stiff with emotion, gripping her shoulders so tightly that she cringed in pain. A sound: Jorjol looked wildly toward the house, to see Kurgech sauntering forward, apparently lost in thought. Schaine jerked herself free.

Jorjol jumped into the Hermes like a man bereft and shot off into the sky. Schaine and Kurgech watched the aircraft disappear into the west. Schaine turned and looked up into the seamed gray face. "What has come over Jorjol? He's become so wild, so outrageous!" Even as she spoke she recollected that Jorjol had always been wild and outrageous.

Kurgech said: "He smells of doom; he carries disaster on his back as an animal carries its cub."

"Changes are in the air," said Schaine. "I feel them; they press on us all. Tell me: what do the Aos feel? Do they want us to leave Morningswake?"

Kurgech looked south, across the landscape which for thousands of years had been Ao land. "Certain young men have listened to the wittols; they model themselves upon the Gray Prince and call themselves the Vanguard of the Uldra Nation. Others feel that the Alouan is too large to be affected by words. If the Outkers claim the land: well and good; let them do so. The accommodation costs us little and we gain advantages. Then the Vanguard cries out: 'What of the future, when hundreds of new manses are built, and we are forced out into the desert? This is our land of which we were plundered and we must regain control now!' And the other group says: 'These hundreds of new manses are not in evidence; is there not enough trouble in the world without anticipating more?' And so the argument goes."

"And what of today, when Jorjol wanted to take his lunch in the Great Hall?"

"Jorjol attempted too much."

"What of yourself? Do you want to sit in the Great Hall?"

"If I were invited I would feel honored to accept. The Great Hall is a sanctuary which no one should violate. Uther Madduc knew the location of our kachembas; many times he could have violated them, but never did so. Had he undergone certain rites, and worn ceremonial clothing, and come in the proper frame of mind, he could have visited any of our sacred places, except those concerned with himself, and then only for his own safety. Certainly he would have lent me Outker garments and taken me into his Great Hall had I asked him to do so."

Schaine pursed her lips dubiously. "Father was a strict man."

"Someday perhaps you will learn the truth."

Schaine was startled. "The truth about what?"

“In due course you will know.”

Lunch was served by Wonalduna and Saravan, two of the constantly shifting succession of Ao girls who chose to work a year or two at the great house. The cook at Morningswake was Hermina Lingolet, a second cousin to Kelse and Schaine, who, like Reyona Werlas-Madduc the housekeeper, considered herself a member of the family rather than a servant. For lunch she had prepared a pepperyhalash, or stew in the Ao style, with a garnish of wild parsley, a platter of steamed barley, a salad of fresh herbs from the kitchen garden. Jorjol's going had left a constraint on the company. Only when Elvo Glissam mentioned erjins and their intelligence did the conversation move. Kurgech had anecdotes to tell: of four erjins, communicating telepathically, attempting to trick a party of Somajji outriders into an ambush; of battle between erjins and morphotes; of meeting an erjin face to face on a mountain trail.

So went the lunch. Without perceptible signal Julio and Kurgech simultaneously rose to their feet, expressed polite gratitude and took their leave. Kelse, Elvo Glissam and Schaine remained in the pleasant coolness under the green-gums. Schaine said: “Well, lunch is over and once again Muffin has been barred from the Great Hall. I wonder what's going on in his mind.”

“Devil take Muffin—Jorjol—Gray Prince, whatever he calls himself,” declared Kelse irritably. “I wish he'd go back to Olanje and take up residence. He can go to as many Outker parties as he likes.”

Elvo Glissam said cautiously: “He's a spirited fellow, to say the least.”

“He's insane,” growled Kelse. “Megalomania, delusion, hysteria—he's afflicted with everything.”

Schaine looked off over the savanna. “What could he mean ‘the great army’ that you are raising?”

Kelse grinned sourly. “His spies tell him more than we know ourselves. The ‘great army’ is nothing more than a few marks on a paper. Gerd and I have been working on a scheme we'd hoped to keep quiet for at least a few weeks longer.”

“I'm not really interested in your secrets.”

“It's not really a secret; in fact it's an obvious step we should have taken years ago: political organization. Gerd and I have worked out a tentative charter of federation.”

“This is quite an undertaking,” said Elvo Glissam. “You two have been busy.”

“Someone had to get in motion. We've telephoned all the domains; without exception every one favors political unity. Jorjol naturally has heard the news and assumes that we're organizing for military purposes.”

“No doubt true,” said Schaine.

Kelse nodded. “We plan to protect ourselves.”

Elvo asked tentatively: “What of the Mull? Doesn’t it control the Treaty Lands?”

“In theory, yes. In actuality, no. If the Mull minds its own business, we’ll mind ours.”

Elvo Glissam sat silent. Schaine heaved a mournful sigh. “Everything seems so fragile and uncertain. If only we could feel that Morningswake was truly ours.”

“It’s ours until we let someone take it away from us. And that’s not going to happen.”

Chapter 6

Schaine and Elvo went out riding on a pair of criptids. Kelse insisted that they carry guns and that two of the ranch-hands accompany them, to Schaine’s annoyance. But as they rode south toward the Skaws she conceded that the precaution was probably well taken. She told Elvo Glissam: “We’re not all that far from the Retent and, as you know, wicked things can happen.”

“I’m not complaining.”

They halted in the shadow of the Great Skaw: a spire of sandstone two hundred feet tall, stratified beige, buff, pink and gray. Morningswake Manor could hardly be seen under the pale green-gums and the darker transtellar oaks. Beyond, the yet darker line of Fairy Forest lay along the horizon. To the west the Chip-chap wandered back and forth and disappeared into the southwest, eventually to flow into Massacre Lake. “When we were little,” said Schaine, “we often came out here on picnics and to look for tourmalines; there’s a pegmatite dike over yonder... This is where the erjin attacked Kelse, incidentally.”

Elvo appraised the surroundings. “Right here?”

“I was over on the pegmatite; Kelse and Muffin were climbing the pinnacle. The erjin came out of that cleft and scrambled up after the boys. It caught Kelse and pulled him down; I heard the noise and ran around to help, but Muffin had shot the erjin, and it was flailing around right where you’re standing. Kurgech arrived and tied up Kelse’s arm and leg and carried him home, and Muffin became the big hero. For about a week.”

“Then what happened?”

“Oh—there was a big quarrel. I flounced off to Tanquil. Then Muffin took himself off to the Retent and

now he's the Gray Prince." Schaine looked around the area. "I guess I don't really like it here after all...Poor Kelse."

Elvo looked uneasily over his shoulder. "Do erjins come here often?"

"Once in a while they'll come to look over the cattle, but our Aos are marvellous trackers; they'll follow a trail which you can't even see. The erjins have learned this and generally they keep to the far wilderness."

Returning to Morningswake Manor, they found Gerd Jemasze's battered old Dacy sky-boat on the landing area. Kelse and Gerd were busy in the library and failed to appear until dinner was served in the Great Hall. In accordance with Morningswake custom all had dressed in formal evening wear—Gerd Jemasze and Elvo Glissam in costumes maintained for the use of casual guests. No question, thought Schaine, but what the ritual enhanced the occasion; casual clothes and casual manners would have gone incongruously with the high-backed chairs, the enormous old umberwood table, the chandelier imported from the Zitz Glass Works at Gilhaux on Darybant, and the heirloom dinnerware. Tonight Schaine had taken unusual pains with her appearance. She wore a simple dark green gown and had piled her hair on top of her head after the fashion of Pharistane water nymphs, with an emerald starburst at her forehead.

Reyona Werlas-Madduc had already taken her meal with Hermina Lingolet; four persons only sat at the umberwood table in the Great Hall: those four who had shared the march across a hundred miles of wasteland. As they sipped wine, Schaine leaned back and looked at the men through half-closed eyelids, pretending they were strangers so that she might appraise them objectively. Kelse, she thought, looked older than his relatively few years. He could never be a man as imposing as his father. His face was thin and keen; ridges of assertion clamped his mouth. In contrast Elvo Glissam looked easy and light-hearted, without a care in the world. Gerd Jemasze, to Schaine's detached view, looked surprisingly elegant. He turned his head and their glances met. Schaine, as usual, felt a small pulse of antagonism or challenge or some other such emotion. Gerd Jemasze dropped his gaze to the goblet of wine; Schaine was both amused and amazed to discover that he had become aware of her presence; through all the years of her life he had ignored her.

"The charter is now circulating around the domains," said Kelse. "If we get general approval, and I believe we shall, then, ipso facto, we become a political unit."

"What if you don't get general approval?" Schaine asked.

"Unlikely. We've taken up the matter with everyone."

"What if they don't like the structure of your charter and insist on changes?"

"The charter has no structure. It's merely a statement of common cause, an agreement to agree, a pledge to abide by the will of the majority. This is the basic first step which must be taken; then we'll approve a

more detailed document.”

“So now you must wait. How long?”

“A week or two. Perhaps three.”

“Long enough,” said Gerd Jemasze, “to discover the humor in Uther Madduc’s ‘wonderful joke’.”

Elvo Glissam was immediately interested. “And how do you do this?”

“Follow his route. Somewhere along the way I’ll discover what he considered so funny.”

“And what was his route?” asked Schaine.

“From Morningswake he flew three hundred and twelve miles north, seventeen miles northeast—in other words, to the No. 2 Palga Depot. There he landed.” Gerd Jemasze brought out Uther Madduc’s notebook. “Listen to this: ‘No man dares fly the skies above the Palga. Astonishing paradox! The Wind-runners, so meek, so vague, become demons of ferocity at the sight of an aircraft. Out come the ancient light-cannons; the aircraft is exploded into shreds and shards. I put the question to Filisent: “Why do you shoot sky-craft?”’

““Because,” said he, “they are likely to be Blue raiders.” “Oh?” said I. “When have the Uldra raided last?” “Not in my memory, nor in my father’s memory,” said he. “Nevertheless that is how things must be; we will have no flyers in our air.” He gave me leave to examine his cannon: a marvellous implement, and I wondered who had crafted so fine a weapon. Filisent could tell me little. The weapon, with its intricate scrolling and amazing engravements, was an heirloom, reached down father to son over years beyond memory; it might well have arrived with that long forgotten first exploration of Koryphon; who knows?””

Gerd Jemasze looked up. “He wrote this, so it appears, a few days after landing at No. 2 Depot. Unfortunately there’s not much more. He says: ‘The Palga is a most remarkable land and Filisent is a most remarkable fellow. Like all Wind-runners he is a deft and enthusiastic thief unless dissuaded by fiap or vigilance. Otherwise he is quite a good chap. He owns a barkentine and thirty-seven separate plots of ground which he cultivates along the passage. How closely these people are meshed with wind and sun, cloud and weather! To see them at the steering rod, with the sails billowing above them and great wheels trundling, is to see men rapt in a religious rite. And yet, ask them does three twos equal six and they respond with a blank stare. Ask them of erjins, who trains them and how? and the stare becomes a look of bewilderment. Ask them how they pay for their fine wheels and sailcloth and metal fittings and they gape as if they suspect you to be lacking in reason.’”

Gerd Jemasze turned a page. “Here’s a section which he calls ‘Notes for a treatise’:

“Srenki: that amazing and awesome caste, or is it a cult? The knowledge comes to the child through recurrent dreams. He becomes pale and thin and troubled, and eventually wanders away from his wagon. Presently he performs his first wanton deed; and thereafter, in this strange placid land, he concentrates within himself and dissipates the elemental turpitude of all the others, who respond to this now-creature of horror with pity and forbearance. The Srenki are few; in all the Palga they number perhaps only twenty; it can be well understood how ghastly and deep within them runs the cloacal seep.”

Silence; no one spoke.

Gerd Jemasze turned the page. “Here’s about the last of it. He says: ‘The man’s name is Poliamides. I have swindled him with Kurgech’s trick, and he admits he has seen the erjin training center. “Then take me there!” He demurs. I twirl the prism and my voice comes to him from the sky within his brain. “Take me there!”—the voice of a sun-eyed god! Poliamides accepts the inevitable though he knows he is churning a million destinies into a kind of chaotic soup. “Where and how far?” I ask. “Yonder and at some good distance,” is his reply; and so we will see.’” Gerd Jemasze turned a page. “Next a list of numbers I can’t interpret, and that’s about all. Except for this last page. First two words: ‘Splendor! Marvel!’ and then: ‘Of bittersweet ironies this is the prime. How slow tolls the chime of the centuries! How plangent and sweet is the justice of the tones!’ And then a final paragraph: ‘The situation is so clear that a demonstration is hardly necessary; still this wonderful demonstration now exists, and if any dare to question our right and our justice, I can and I will pin him to the wall of his own doctrinaire absurdity.’”

Gerd Jemasze closed the notebook and tossed it on the table. “That’s all of it. He returned to the Sturdevant. The auto-pilot shows that he flew directly back to Morningswake. Two days later he was dead over the Dramalfo.”

Elvo Glissam said: “I’m puzzled why he went up to the Palga in the first place. To trade?”

“Oddly enough,” said Kelse, “on a mission dear to your heart. Last spring he visited Olanje and took note of Aunt Val’s erjins. No one seemed to know how the erjins were trained so Father went up on the Palga to find out.”

“And did he find out? Is this his ‘wonderful joke’?”

Kelse shrugged. “We don’t know.”

“The Palga must be a remarkable place.”

Schaine said: “I remember all kinds of strange tales—half of them false, no doubt. Babies are traded between wagons, on the theory that a child raised by its own parents becomes overindulged.”

Kelse said, “Remember our old nurse Jamia? She’d scare us silly with bedtime stories about the Srenki.”

“I remember Jamia very well,” said Schaine. “Once she told us how the Wind-runners hang up their corpses in trees, to keep them safe from the wild dogs, so that when you’d walk through a forest, every tree had a skeleton grinning down at you.”

“And not just corpses do they hang up in the trees,” said Jemasze. “The ailing old grandparents, it’s up the tree with them, to save the trouble of returning to the grove later.”

“Charming people,” said Elvo Glissam. “So what do you plan to do?”

“I’ll fly up to No. 2 Depot and pick up Uther Madduc’s trail, by one means or another.”

Kelse shook his head. “The trail’s too old; you’ll never find it.”

“I won’t, but Kurgech will.”

“Kurgech?”

“He wants to come along. He’s never been up on the Palga and he wants to see the wind-wagons.”

Elvo Glissam said expansively: “I’d like to go along myself, if I could be at all useful.”

Schaine clamped her mouth shut; impossible to protest or mention hardship and danger without embarrassing Elvo, nor could she gracefully point out that Elvo had consumed several goblets of heady amber wine.

Gerd Jemasze’s face twitched so slightly that perhaps only Schaine noticed, and her always smouldering dislike of Jemasze flared; again she restrained herself from speaking. Jemasze said politely: “Your company of course is welcome—still we’ll be gone for a week or more, perhaps under rough conditions.”

Elvo Glissam laughed. “It couldn’t be any worse than the trip up from the Dramalfo.”

“I hope not.”

“Well, I’m not exactly frail, and I have a particular interest in the matter.”

Kelse spoke in the most sober of voices, further infuriating Schaine: “Elvo wants to look into the enslavement of erjins at first hand.”

Elvo grinned, showing no embarrassment. “Quite true.”

Without enthusiasm Gerd Jemasze said: “I imagine Kelse can fit you out with boots and a few oddments

of gear.”

“No trouble as to that,” said Kelse.

“Very well then; we’ll leave tomorrow morning, if I can find Kurgech.”

“He’ll be up at the old Apple Orchard with his tribe.”

For a reckless instant Schaine thought herself to join the venture, then reluctantly put the idea by. It wouldn’t be fair to Kelse to fly off to the Palga and leave him alone.

Chapter 7

The sky-car flew north across a land of low hills, wide valleys, winding streams, forests of gadroon, flame-tree, mangoneel, an occasional giant Uaian jinko. Elvo Glissam rode with a feeling of unreality, already dubious in regard to his bravado of the night before. He glanced back the way they had come...By no means, he told himself firmly; he had joined himself to the expedition for good and sufficient reasons: to examine the basic facts of erjin enslavement, a course of action to which he was impelled by moral commitment. And another more visceral reason. What Gerd Jemasze could do, he could do.

Elvo Glissam looked across the car. He was perhaps an inch taller than Gerd Jemasze. Gerd was broader in the shoulders, heavier in the chest, decisive, definite and efficient in his movements; he used no unnecessary flourishes nor any of those idiosyncratic gestures which gave flavor to a personality. In fact, at first impression, and perhaps second and third, Gerd Jemasze’s personality was spare, drab, grim and colorless; he evinced neither dash nor flair nor pungency. Elvo Glissam’s own attitude toward the world was optimistic, positive, constructive: Koryphon, indeed the whole of the Gaeon Reach, needed improvement and only through the efforts of well-meaning folk could these changes be effected.

Gerd Jemasze, while sufficiently courteous and considerate, could never be called a sympathetic individual and he certainly viewed the cosmos through a lens of egocentricity. By this same token, Gerd Jemasze was superbly self-assured; the possibility of failure in any undertaking whatever obviously had never crossed his mind, and Elvo felt a twinge of envy or irritation, or even a faint sense of dislike—which he instantly realized to be petty and unworthy. If only Gerd were less arrogant in his unconscious assumptions, less innocent—for Gerd Jemasze’s impervious self-confidence after all could be nothing less than naïveté. In hundreds of capabilities he would show to poor advantage indeed. He knew next to nothing of human achievement in the realms of music, mathematics, literature, optics, philosophy. By any ordinary consideration, Gerd Jemasze should feel uneasy and resentful in regard to Elvo Glissam, not the reverse. Elvo Glissam managed a sour chuckle. The situation was as it was, for better or worse.

Once again he looked down at the terrain passing below. They would still take him back, if he so requested, perhaps pleading illness. Gerd Jemasze's reaction would be only mild puzzlement; he wouldn't care enough one way or the other to feel disgust...Elvo scowled. Enough of all this self-pity and hand-wringing. He'd do his best to be a competent companion; if he failed, he failed, and that was that; he refused to think any more about it.

Gerd Jemasze pointed down to where three enormous gray beasts wallowed in a mudhole. One stood erect and shambled ashore, to stare vacuously up at the sky-car.

"Armored sloths," said Gerd Jemasze. "Close cousins to the morphotes. Evolution left them far behind."

"But no relation to the erjins."

"None whatever. Some people say the erjins developed from the mountain gergoid: half-rat half-scorpion; other people say no. Erjins don't leave fossils."

The sky-car slid north. Ahead loomed the Palga, with the Volwodes stabbing the sky to the west. Gerd Jemasze took the sky-car higher, to fly just below the vast cumulus pillars which basked in the sunlight. The ground below heaved and rolled as if under pressure, then suddenly thrust up three thousand feet, the face of the scarp eroded into thousands of spurs and ravines. Beyond, far off and away across sunny distances, extended the Palga.

Close by the brink of the escarpment clustered a dozen whitewashed buildings with black-brown roofs. "No. 2 Depot," said Gerd Jemasze succinctly. "You'll probably see some export erjins...It won't help to express your outrage."

Elvo managed a good-natured laugh. "I'm here as an observer only." He now reflected that he had never heard Gerd Jemasze voice an opinion one way or another on the matter of erjin enslavement. "What of yourself? What do you feel about the business?"

Gerd Jemasze considered a moment or two. "Personally, I wouldn't care to be a slave." He stopped talking and after a moment Elvo saw that he intended to express no further opinion—perhaps because he had formed none. Then, frowning at his own insensitivity, Elvo corrected this thinking. Gerd Jemasze had a subtle way of implying his point of view, and it would appear that he had expressed something like: "Offhand, the situation seems dirty and disreputable, but since we know so little about the total picture, I am reserving final judgment. As for the anguish of the Olanje Labor Guilds and the hurt feelings of the Society for the Emancipation of the Erjins, I can hardly take them seriously." Elvo grinned. Such, translated into the language of Villa Mirasol, were Gerd Jemasze's opinions.

The sky-car settled into the central compound at No. 2 Depot. To the left rambled a long low irregular structure of cemented soil, whitewashed, with a roof of haphazard angles and slopes supported by heavy poles: evidently an inn. Ahead, along the western edge of the compound, stood three barn-like structures

with tall doors open at front and rear to reveal a number of vehicles in the process of construction. A rack supported a dozen large light pneumatic wheels, as high as a man or higher; beyond and through the construction sheds could be glimpsed other vehicles incongruously equipped with masts, yards, booms, sprits and rigging. To the right, along the northern edge of the compound, was ranged another complex of open sheds; some containing empty cages, others fitted with screened enclosures from which a dozen erjins looked stolidly forth.

In the construction shops the workmen had halted their activity. A half-dozen came out into the compound and approached the sky-car: sturdy brown men of no great stature. Several wore what Elvo considered absolutely preposterous headgear: horizontal disks of wood four feet in diameter and an inch thick secured to an iron casque strapped under the chin and around the nape of the neck. How could anyone work in such ungainly contraptions?

Gerd Jemasze now performed a most curious act. As the workmen came closer, he picked up a small stick and scratched a circle in the dirt of the compound to enclose the sky-car. The workmen halted, then came forward more slowly, to stop at the circumference of the circle. They were the first Wind-runners Elvo had seen: representatives of a race totally different from the Uldras. Their pale brown skin seemed colored by an innate pigment, rather than by exposure to the sun, and evinced the peculiar property of showing neither shadows nor highlights. Some wore cloth caps, others disks of wood and iron casques; where hair could be seen, it showed as a tousel of pale brown curls and was worn without evident attention to style. Their features were small and blunt except for rather heavy jaws; their eyes showed a haunting pale buff color. Certain of the men wore small mustaches; several had plucked away their eyebrows to give themselves a bland and quizzical expression. All wore short trousers of pale blue, gray or pale green, with loose shirts of similar material; all wore in their hair or on their caps what appeared to be ornaments of glass blown into intricate shapes and tied with colored ribbons.

Gerd Jemasze spoke: "Good luck; fair wind to all."

The workers mumbled a responsive benediction. One asked: "Do you trade or do you buy?"

"My business has not yet been made clear to me. It will come in a dream."

The workmen nodded in comprehension and muttered to each other. Elvo gaped in surprise; he had expected no such flights of fancy from the matter-of-fact Jemasze, who now indicated the circle. "Observe this fiap. It is enforced not by Ahariszeio, but by ourselves, our fists and the sting of our guns. Is this clearly understood?"

The workmen shrugged, shuffled their feet and craned their necks to examine the sky-car and its contents.

Jemasze asked: "Where is the priest?"

"Yonder, in his compartments, beyond the inn."

Jemasze looked around at Kurgech, who leaned against the sky-car, a handgun significantly displayed. Jemasze turned back to the Wind-runners. "You can depart without regret; our property is neither loose nor free, but carefully guarded."

The workers made polite signs and returned to the sheds. Elvo asked in bewilderment: "What is the meaning of all that?"

"The Wind-runners steal anything they can lay their hands on," said Gerd Jemasze. "The protective signs, or talismans, are called fiaps; you'll see them everywhere. The Wind-runners wear them in their hair."

"Why do they wear those wooden disks?"

"They've violated some sort of religious ordinance. There's no authority up here but the priesthood."

Elvo grunted. "It gives me a headache just to think about it."

"Sometimes the disks are four inches thick, or even six inches. The culprit in such a case usually dies in a week or two, unless someone takes care of him."

"What does he do to earn a disk?"

Gerd Jemasze shrugged. "Spitting against the wind. Talking in his sleep. I'm not all that familiar with Wind-runner law. Come along; we'll go find the priest and get ourselves some fiaps."

The priest wore a white gown; his hair, dyed stark black, hung to his shoulders and terminated in small onyx balls. His round face was bare of hair and he had painted black circles around his eyes, giving himself an expression of owlish intensity. He showed no surprise at the sight of Gerd Jemasze and Elvo Glissam, though he had been asleep on his couch when they entered the compartment.

Gerd Jemasze now began a conversation which once again left Elvo Glissam wilted with astonishment: "Good winds to you, priest. We require a set of fiaps, covering all phases of life."

"Indeed, indeed," said the priest. "You intend to trade? You will not need so many fiaps."

"We are not traders; we come to the Palga for pleasure and novelty."

"Hi-ho! You must be easy men to please then. We offer neither carnivals nor melodious girls nor banquets of fat flesh. For a fact, we see very few if any of your ilk."

"My friend Uther Madduc passed this way recently," said Gerd Jemasze. "He tells me that you provided him fiaps and gave him counsel."

“Not I, not I. Poliamides then held tenure. I am Moffamides.”

“In that case we will pay our respects to Poliamides.”

Moffamides’ eyes became round and brilliant; he pursed his mouth and gave his head a shake of disapprobation. “Poliamides has proved inconstant; he has abandoned the priesthood and gone out across the sarai*. Perhaps he was unduly responsive to your friend Uther Madduc.”

“In the name of Ahariszeio then, provide us fiaps; and make them strong.”

The priest went to look into a black leather case lined with pink felt, where rested a dozen rock-crystal spheres. He touched them, rearranged them, and jerked back with a small exclamation of surprise. “The portents are unfavorable! You must return to the Alouan.”

Gerd Jemasze said brusquely: “You have misused the spheres; the portents are favorable.”

Moffamides turned him a sharp sidelong look, the agate beads in his black hair clicking and softly clattering. “How can you say so? Are you priests?”

Jemasze gave his head a curt shake. “Uther Madduc is dead, as you know.”

Moffamides’ eyes bulged in apparently genuine surprise. “How should I know?”

“Through telepathy, which is one of your priestly skills, so I am told.”

“In certain circumstances only, and never as to events on the Alouan, where I know no more than you of the Palga.”

“Uther Madduc’s ghost has laid a charge on us. He and Poliamides became companions and each for assurance allowed the other a taste of his soul.”

Elvo Glissam listened in awe. And he had considered Gerd Jemasze dull and stolid!

Moffamides sat with owl eyes now half-closed and thoughtful. “I have heard nothing of this.”

“You have so been told, and if we must return to the Alouan without Uther Madduc’s soul, I will ask you to return with us and console his ghost.”

“Utterly impossible,” declared the priest. “I dare not leave the Palga.”

“In that case we must have a few words with Poliamides.”

Moffamides nodded slowly, thoughtfully, his eyes unfocused.

“First,” said Gerd Jemasze, “you must provide us fiaps.”

Moffamides once more became alert. “Fiaps of what nature?”

“Contrive us a fiap so that we may fly our sky-car across the Palga.”

Moffamides drew down the corners of his mouth and held up his forefinger. “Belches of gas and whines of energy on the excellent winds of Ahariszeio? Unthinkable! Nor will I work you a fiap of fair venture because I am aware of bodes and umbras, and all may not go well. At best I can contrive a general talisman commending you to the mercy of Ahariszeio.”

“Very good; we will accept this fiap with gratitude. Additionally, the sky-car must be protected against every manner of damage, nuisance and misfortune, including pilferage, destruction, curiosity, tampering, vandalism, defilement, removal or concealment. I want fiaps for myself and my companions, guarding us against molestation, harm, magic, beguilement, exploitation, capture or immobility, and the various stages and conditions of death. We will also need a suitable set of fiaps for our vehicle, assuring us of good winds, smooth turf, stability and fair destiny.”

“You require a great deal.”

“For a priest as close to Ahariszeio as yourself, our requirements are small. We could ask more.”

“It is quite enough. You must pay a fee.”

“We will discuss the fee on our return, after the fiaps have been proved.”

Moffamides opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. “How far do you fare?”

“As far as necessary. Where is Poliamides?”

“Not close at hand.”

“You must then direct us to him.”

Moffamides nodded thoughtfully. “Yes. I will give you direction and I will provide fiaps. They must be strong; and their power must not fade. Tomorrow they will be charged with force.”

Gerd Jemasze gave a curt nod. "Give us now a temporary fiap to secure the sky-car, and others to guard ourselves and our belongings overnight."

"Take your sky-car behind the wagon shops. I will bring the fiaps."

Gerd Jemasze returned to the sky-car, floated it over the wagon shops to the indicated area: a storage lot for dozens of vehicles, of various styles and sizes, old and new, from a three-masted cargo schooner on eight ten-foot wheels, to a three-wheeled skimmer with a single unstayed mast. Attached to each was a confection of twisted glass bulbs and rods of various colors from which depended ribbons long enough to drop past the side of the wagon.

Moffamides awaited them with a basket. "These are fiaps of general potency." He brought the objects forth. "This red and green fiap is standard and will guard your sky-car indefinitely. These blue and whites will secure your belongings so long as you remain at the inn. The black, green and white fiap will guard this Uldra against vengeance, malice and ghost-clutch. The two black, blue and yellow fiaps will suffice for you Outkers."

Jemasze attached the red and green fiap to the sky-car, distributed the others among Elvo, Kurgech and himself. "Quite correct," said Moffamides, and without further ceremony departed the yard.

Jemasze regarded the fiaps dubiously. "Hopefully they're operative and not just junk."

"They are good fiaps," said Kurgech. "They carry magic."

"I don't notice anything," said Elvo in a subdued voice. "I suppose my sensibilities are atrophied."

Jemasze went to inspect a tall-masted sloop on four six-foot wheels with a wicker deck and a small cabin. "All my life I've wanted to sail one of these wagons...This is probably too light and too small. That ketch yonder would be more suitable."

The three repaired to the inn and entered a foyer, separated by a chest-high bar of scrubbed pale wood from the kitchen, where a stocky brown man, naked to the waist and glistening with sweat, tended a row of iron pots which bubbled and seethed on a great iron range. The three waited; the cook darted them a severe glance and seizing a cutlass began to dice a parsnip.

Into the chamber came a young woman, tall and slender, with a face impassive as that of a somnambulist. Elvo, always on the alert for odd human variants, was instantly fascinated. With any degree of animation this young woman might have manifested a most unusual beauty, comprising the languor of a nenuphar and the elegance of some swift white winter beast. But her face was still and the beauty was absent. Or almost absent, thought Elvo; perhaps it was there, stranger than ever, by implication. Her ivory skin was paler than that of the ordinary Wind-runner and showed a most subtle luster or bloom of an indefinable color: blue? blue-green? green-violet? Her hair, dark brown, hung to her shoulders and was contained at

the forehead by a black fillet with a purple, black and scarlet fiap at the back.

In a soft voice the woman asked their needs and Gerd Jemasze rather brusquely spoke for three beds, supper and breakfast, and Elvo wondered at his indelicacy. The woman stepped back, as graceful and easy as a retreating wave and signaled to them; the three men followed her into a cavernous common room, dim and moving with mysterious shadows. Slabs of dark gray stone paved the floor; posts of smoke-stained timber supported the ceiling rafters, from which depended hundreds of barely visible fiaps. A long clerestory of a hundred purple and brown panes admitted a warm umbrous light which enhanced the quality of posts, beams and panels, enriched the dark red cloth which covered the tables, and as if by purposeful chiaroscuro dramatized the features of the other persons in the room. These were five men who sat gambling at a table, pounding with heavy fists and cursing for emphasis, while a pot-boy in a white apron served mugs of beer.

The young woman led the way across the common room, through a short passage and out upon a balcony which seemed to overlook nothing but sky. Elvo looked over the rail. The inn had been built on the very brink of the escarpment; the balcony hung out over emptiness. Between wall and posts were strung a number of hammocks, any of which, so the woman indicated, were at the disposal of the travelers. A walkway supported by long spider-leg stilts extended over the chasm; at the far end was the privy, consisting of a bar hanging over the windy emptiness and a pipe trickling cold water. Far below could be seen the twinkle of running water, which Elvo hoped was not the source of the Chip-chap.

The three men brought mugs of beer out upon the balcony: a soft pale brew fragrant of Palga sunshine and wortleberries. They sat drinking while Methuen the sun went down in a cataclysm of scarlet, rose, pink and red, like a king advancing to his doom.

Silence on the balcony. The tall woman came forth with new mugs of beer, then stood a moment staring at the sunset as if never in her life had she witnessed a sight so remarkable; after a moment she stirred and returned into the common room.

Elvo Glissam, half-intoxicated from the beer and the sunset, lost his misgivings; here, beyond question, was the richest moment of his life—and yet in such bizarre surroundings, with such inexplicable companions! Questions thronged his mind. He spoke to Kurgech: “The fiaps: do they actually control the Wind-runners?”

“They know no other control.”

“What would happen if a person disobeyed a fiap?”

Kurgech made a small motion, implying that the question hardly need be asked. “The offenders suffer, and often die.”

“How did you know that the priest’s fiaps held magic?”

Kurgech merely shrugged.

Jemasze said, “If you live where magic is unknown, you’ll never recognize it.”

Elvo looked out over the sky. “I’ve had no experience with magic...until now.”

Dusk began to blur the panorama; the woman made a stately appearance to announce that supper had been laid out. The three men followed her into the common room and dined on saltbread, broad beans and sausage, a pickle of unknown ingredients, a salad of sweet grasses. The gamblers ignored all but their game, which was played with four-inch rods of polished wood, tipped at each end with daubs of bright color, usually, but not always, different end from end. Each player in turn took a rod from a receptacle, concealing the tips from the sight of the opposing players until, usually after deliberation, he displayed one or the other end in his rack. After each draw a discard might or might not be made into the center of the table, usually with a curse or an exclamation. The game occasioned considerable tension, with glances of surprise and frowns of calculation being exchanged among the players.

Jemasze and Kurgech presently went out to their hammocks. Elvo sat watching the game, which he found to be more complicated than first appearances suggested. The hundred and five rods were divided into twenty-one sorts, ringing the combinations of red, black, orange, white, blue, green. To start a game the rods were placed in the receptacle, which was then agitated until a rod fell horizontally down a slot which concealed both ends. The player took the rod, examined it surreptitiously then thrust one end up through a hole in the rack on the table before him. Each player drew in turn, holding or discarding until each player had five rods protruding from his rack, these displaying a variation of colors, with another variation of colors concealed and known only to the player holding the rack. The players bet after each round of draws, meeting or raising the bets or dropping from the game as they deemed their chances warranted. Each player then drew another rod and either discarded it or thrust it up into his rack, usually discarding one of the rods he previously held; and so on until all the rods had been drawn, selected or discarded. The players now considered the discards, the colors displayed above the boxes, and with this information each attempted to calculate the colors hidden by the racks of his opponents: all of which served as a basis for a final round of bets. The players then displayed the concealed ends of their rods. The high-ranking set of rods took the accumulation of bets. Elvo, somewhat intimidated by the visceral grunts of emotion, let diffidence be the better part of curiosity and kept a respectful distance from the game; he was therefore unable to learn the hierarchy of combinations.

The young woman came forward once again to serve a mug of unrequested beer, which Elvo was pleased to accept. He tried to catch the woman’s eye so that he might have a friendly word with her when into the room came a man of most extraordinary appearance and mien. His face exhibited a range of mismatched over-large features: an odd wide jaw, sunken cheeks, heavy cheekbones, a splayed nose, a tall round forehead, a wide flexible slit of a mouth twisted in a mindless grin. His eyes, round and pale buff, blinked and winced as if the light were uncomfortable. Long heavy arms dangled from burly shoulders; his torso

was knotted and knobbed with bone and muscle; his long legs terminated in massive feet. He looked, thought Elvo, both imbecilic and cunning; simple yet rich in fancy.

The gamblers saw him with little side-flicks of vision but paid him no heed; the pot-boy ignored him as if he had not existed. He approached the woman and spoke to her; then, with a soft sad grin on his face, struck her an open-handed blow on the side of the head, creating a sound which caused Elvo's stomach to churn. The woman fell to the floor; the man kicked her in the neck.

An instantaneous image struck into Elvo's mind which never would leave him: the pale young woman on the floor, blood oozing from her mouth, face placid, eyes staring; the man looking down in proud delight, heavy foot raised to kick again, like a man performing a grotesque jig; the players at the table showing glittering side-glances but indifferent and remote; himself, Elvo Glissam of Olanje, sitting astounded and horrified. To his amazement he saw himself reach out, catch the foot and pull, so that the man fell sprawling, only to leap up with incredible lightness, and still smiling his soft sad smile, aim a kick for Elvo's head. Never in his life had Elvo fought with his hands; he hardly knew what to do except jerk back, so that the force of the kick thrust air against his face. In desperation he seized the foot and ran forward. The man, face suddenly contorted in dismay, hopped back with lurching foolish hops, out the door, out across the balcony, over the rail, out into the void.

With nothing better to do, Elvo tottered back to his seat. He sat panting and presently he drank from the mug of beer. The players occupied themselves with their game. The woman hobbled away. The room was quiet except for the sounds at the gaming table. Elvo rubbed his forehead and stared down into the beer. The episode evidently had been a hallucination...For several minutes Elvo sat immobile. An odd thought occurred to him: the man had worn no fiaps, no talismans of protection. Elvo thoughtfully finished the mug of beer, then rose to his feet and went out to his hammock.

Chapter 8

In the morning no reference was made to the episode. The inn-keeper served a breakfast of bread, tea and cold meat, and took coins from Gerd Jemasze in settlement of the account. The three departed Sailmaker's Inn, crossed the compound to the area behind the workshops. The sky-car rested as they had left it. Jemasze turned his attention to the sail-wagons. At a big eight-wheeled beer-cart, with three masts, a multiplicity of yards, shrouds, sprits and halyards, he merely glanced; the six-wheeled and four-wheeled house-wagons he gave more consideration. Their pneumatic wheels stood eight feet tall; the house hung on spring suspensions with less than two feet of ground clearance; most were rigged as schooners or two-masted brigantines; like the cargo-wagons, they seemed more adapted to passages down the monsoon winds than to speed or maneuverability.

Jemasze turned his attention to a land-yawl about thirty feet long, with four independently sprung wheels, a flat bed with a pair of cuddies fore and aft. The shop foreman had been unobtrusively watching; now he came forward to ascertain Jemasze's requirements, and the two engaged in negotiations which occupied the better part of an hour. Jemasze finally obtained a rental rate for the land-yawl at a figure he

considered tolerable, and the shop foreman went off to find sails for the craft. Jemasze and Kurgech returned to the inn to buy provisions, while Elvo transferred luggage and personal belongings from the sky-car to the land-yawl.

Moffamides the priest sauntered across the yard. "You have selected a good wagon for your journey," he told Elvo. "Sound and stiff, fast and easy."

Elvo Glissam politely acquiesced in the priest's judgment. "What kind of sail-wagon did Uther Madduc use?"

Moffamides' eyes went blank. "A wagon somewhat similar, so I would suppose."

Several men came forth from the shop with sails which they proceeded to bind to the masts. Moffamides watched with an air of benign approval. Elvo wondered whether he should refer to the events of the night before, which now seemed totally unreal. Some kind of conversation seemed in order. He counterfeited a tone of ease and lightness. "My home is in Szintarre; at Olanje, actually. I've become interested in the erjins. How in the world do you tame such creatures?"

Moffamides slowly turned his head and inspected Elvo through heavy-lidded eyes. "The process is complicated... We start with erjin cubs and train them to our commands."

"I assumed as much, but how can a ferocious beast become a semi-intelligent domestic servant?"

"Ha ha! The ferocious beasts are semi-intelligent at the start! We convince them that they live better as Uldra mounts than as starvelings running naked across the desert, and better still as Outker house servants."

"Then you communicate with them?"

Moffamides raised his eyes to the sky. "To some extent."

"Telepathically?"

Moffamides frowned. "We are not truly adept."

"Hmm. In Olanje an important society intends to stop the enslavement of erjins. What do you think of this?"

"Foolishness. The erjins are otherwise wasted and we are supplied good wheels and bearings and metal parts for our sail-wagons. The commerce is profitable."

“Don’t you consider the commerce immoral?”

Moffamides looked at Elvo in what seemed mild perplexity. “It is work approved by Ahariszeio.”

“I would like to visit the laboratories, or camps, whatever they are called. Could such a visit be arranged?”

Moffamides gave a curt laugh. “Impossible. Here are your friends.”

Jemasze and Kurgech returned to the land-yawl. Moffamides gave them a sedate greeting. “Your craft is eager and yearns for the sarai. A fair wind offers; it is time you were away.”

“All very well,” said Jemasze, “but how do we find Poliamides?”

“You would do best to forget Poliamides. He is far away. Like all Outkers you brood too much upon the evanescent.”

“I concede the fault; where is Poliamides?”

Moffamides made an easy gesture. “I cannot say; I do not know.”

Kurgech leaned forward to stare into the priest’s pale buff eyes. Moffamides’ face went lax. Kurgech said softly: “You are lying.”

Moffamides became angry. “Practice none of your Blue magic here on the Palga! We are not without defenses!” He recovered his poise almost instantly. “I only try to protect you. The omens are bad. Uther Madduc came to grief, and now you go forth to repeat his mistake. Is it any wonder that I perceive false winds?”

“Uther Madduc was killed by a Blue,” said Gerd Jemasze. “So far as I know, there was no connection between his death and his trip across the Palga.”

Moffamides smiled. “Perhaps you are wrong.”

“Perhaps. Do you intend to help us or hinder us?”

“I help you best by urging your return to the Alouan.”

“What danger would we encounter? The Palga is famous for its tranquility.”

“Never thwart the Srenki,” said Moffamides. “They work their tragic deeds and so protect us all.”

Enlightenment came to Elvo; the terrible man of the night before had been one of them. Was Moffamides now conveying an oblique warning or reproach?

“They bear their unhappy lot with pain,” intoned Moffamides. “If one is mishandled, the others exact an exaggerated retribution.”

“This is nothing to us,” said Jemasze. “Inform us as to Poliamides and we will be on our way.”

Elvo Glissam frowned off into the sky. Moffamides said: “Fare northeast on a broad reach. Turn into the third track which you will discover on the third day. Follow the track four days to the Aluban, which is a great forest, and at the white pillar ask for Poliamides.”

“Very good. You have prepared our fiaps?”

Moffamides stood silent a moment; then he turned and walked away. Five minutes later he returned with a wicker box. “Here are potent fiaps. The green-yellow guards your land-yawl. The orange-black-whites provide for your personal protection. I wish you the joy of whatever fair winds Ahariszeio sees fit to send you.”

Moffamides stalked from the yard.

Elvo, Kurgech and Gerd Jemasze climbed aboard the land-yawl; Jemasze activated the auxiliary motor and the yawl rolled out upon the sarai. From the south blew the monsoon breeze. Elvo took the wheel while Kurgech and Jemasze hoisted jib, mainsail and mizzen; off across the resilient soum*rolled the land-yawl. Elvo leaned back in the seat, looked up at the sky, surveyed the landscape, where the only contrast came from moving cloud-shadows, and glanced astern at the diminishing No. 2 Depot. Freedom! Out upon the windy sarai with only space around him! Oh for the life of a Wind-runner!

Jemasze trimmed the sails; the land-yawl jerked forward and gained a speed which Elvo estimated to be quite thirty miles an hour.

The yawl needed little attention at the helm; Elvo used a claw-shaped device to engage the wheel and rose to his feet to revel in the motion. Kurgech and Gerd Jemasze were similarly affected. Kurgech stood by the mainmast, the wind ruffling his sparse amber curls; Jemasze stretched out in the cockpit and broached one of the casks of beer with which he had provisioned the yawl. “No question but what there are worse ways to live,” he said.

Methuen rose up the sky. No. 2 Depot had disappeared astern. The sarai looked as before: a dun flatland, relieved here and there by wisps of crisp yellow straw and an occasional low flat flower. Cloud shadows

coursed across the soum; the air was fresh, neither cool nor warm, and smelled faintly of straw and a more subtle fragrance from the lichen. There was nothing to be seen, yet Elvo found the landscape anything but monotonous; it changed constantly in a manner he could not easily define: perhaps through clouds and shadows. The wheels, whispering with speed, left a dark track across the soum; occasionally other traces indicated that at some time in the past other sail-wagons had come this way.

Elvo noticed Kurgech and Jemasze talking together and staring astern. Elvo rose to his feet and scanned the southern horizon. He saw nothing and resumed his seat. Since neither Kurgech nor Jemasze saw fit to enlighten him, he asked no questions.

Halfway through the afternoon a group of small humps marked the horizon, which as they approached proved to be sizable hillocks flanked by fields of growing stuff: grain, melons, fruit trees, bread-and-butter plant, pepper plants, elixir vines. The plots were each about an acre in extent; each was watered by a system of tubes radiating from a pond, and each was guarded by a conspicuous fiap.

The time was now late afternoon, and with the pond affording a pleasant place to bathe, Jemasze elected to camp. Elvo looked at the fruit trees, but Jemasze indicated the fiaps. "Beware!"

"The fruit is ripe! In fact some is rotting, going to waste!"

"I advise you to leave it alone."

"Hmmf. What would happen if I ate, say, one of those tangerines?"

"I only know that your madness or death would inconvenience us all, so please control your appetite."

"Certainly," said Elvo stiffly. "By all means."

The three lowered sails, blocked the wheels, bathed in the pond, prepared a meal over a small campfire, then sat back over cups of tea and watched another magnificent sunset.

Twilight became night; the sky shone with stars beyond number. The constellation Gyrgus looped across the zenith; to the southwest shone the Pentadex; in the east rose the blazing miracle which was Alastor Cluster. The men put down pads loose-packed with aerospore on the deck of the yawl and lay down to sleep.

At midnight Elvo half-awoke and lay drowsily musing over the episode of the night before. Reality? Hallucination?...Out on the Palga sounded a soft eery whistle, followed a few minutes later by another such whistle from a different direction. Elvo quietly rose to his feet and went to stand by the mast. A man loomed above him in the starlight. Elvo's heart jumped up in his throat; he gave a croak of dismay. The man turned and made a gesture of annoyance; Elvo recognized Kurgech. He whispered: "Did you hear the whistles?"

“Insects.”

“Then why are you standing here?”

“The insects whistle when they are disturbed—perhaps by a night-hawk or a walkinger.”

From a distance of no more than ten yards sounded a clear fluting warble. “Gerd Jemasze is down there,” muttered Kurgech. “He watches against the skyline.”

“For what?”

“For whatever has been following us.”

The two stood quiet in the starlight. Half an hour passed. The yawl quivered; Gerd Jemasze spoke in a soft voice. “Nothing.”

“I felt nothing,” said Kurgech.

“I should have brought a set of sensors,” grumbled Jemasze. “Then we could sleep in peace.”

“The bugle-bugs serve us as well.”

Elvo said: “I thought the Wind-runners molested no one.”

“The Srenki molest as they see fit.”

Jemasze and Kurgech returned to their pads; Elvo Glissam presently followed.

Dawn flooded the east with pink-crimson light. Clouds burned red, and the sun appeared. No breath of air fluttered the silk whisks on the yawl’s shrouds, and the three made no haste over breakfast.

With the wagon becalmed Elvo climbed to the summit of a nearby hill and descended the opposite side, where he discovered a copse of wild pawpaws, apparently unguarded by fiap. The fruit appeared ripe and succulent: round red globes with orange stars at the ends, surrounded by black voluted foliage. Elvo nonetheless eyed the fruit askance and passed it by.

Returning around the base of the hill he met Kurgech with a sack of crayfish he had taken from an irrigation ditch. Elvo mentioned the pawpaws and Kurgech agreed that a good lunch could be made of boiled crayfish and fruit; the two returned to the copse. Kurgech searched for fiaps and found none; the two men picked as much fruit as they could carry and returned around the hill.

Arriving at the land-yawl, they found it looted of all portable gear, equipment and provisions. Gerd Jemasze, coming from a morning plunge in the pond, joined them a moment after they discovered the loss.

Kurgech uttered a set of sibilant Uldra curses directed at Moffamides. “His fiaps were as weak as water; he sent us forth naked.”

Gerd Jemasze gave his characteristic curt nod. “Nothing unexpected, of course. What do you see for tracks?”

Kurgech examined the soum. His nose twitched; he leaned closer to the ground and sighted along the surface. “A single man came and went.” He moved off twenty yards. “Here he climbed on his vehicle and departed yonder.” Kurgech pointed west, around the base of the hills.

Jemasze considered. “There’s still only a trace of wind. He can’t move at any speed—if he’s in a sail-wagon.” He squinted along the trail of the vehicle, a pair of dark marks on the soum. “The trail curves; he’s sailing around the hill. You follow the track; I’ll cut across the hill; we’ll catch him on the other side. Elvo, you stay and guard the yawl before someone steals the whole affair.”

The two men set off, Kurgech trotting after the tracks; Jemasze scrambling up the hillside.

Kurgech came in sight of the thief-wagon first: a small tall-masted skimmer with three spindly wheels and slatting sails, moving no faster than a walk. At the sight of Kurgech the occupant trimmed his sail, scanned the sky and looked around the circle of the horizon, but saw nothing except Gerd Jemasze approaching from the direction in which he was headed.

Jemasze reached the craft first and held up his hand. “Stop.”

The occupant, a middle-aged man of no great stature, turned pale buff eyes up and down Jemasze’s frame, luffed his sail and applied the brake. “Why do you hinder my passage?”

“Because you have stolen our belongings. Turn around.”

The Wind-runner’s face became mulish. “I took only what was available.”

“Did you not see our fiaps?”

“The fiap is dead; it spent its magic last year. You have no right to transfer fiaps; such an act is the paltry play of children.”

“Last year’s fiaps, eh?” mused Jemasze. “How do you know?”

“Isn’t it evident? Do you not see the pink strand on the orange? Stand aside; I am not a man for idle conversation.”

“Nor are we,” said Jemasze. “Turn your craft and sail back to our yawl.”

“By no means. I do as I please and you cannot protest; my fiap is fresh and strong.”

Jemasze approached the hull of the skimmer. He pointed to the hillside. “See those stones yonder? What if we pile them in front of you and astern? Will your fiap carry you over two piles of rocks?”

“I will sail on before you pile the rocks.”

“Then you will sail over my body.”

“What of that? Your personal fiap is a joke. Who do you think to befuddle? The fiap was hung on a beer vat to guard the malt from going sour.”

Jemasze laughed and pulling the fiap from his head threw it to the ground. “Kurgech, bring stones. We’ll wall in this thief so that he’ll never depart.”

The Wind-runner gave a passionate cry of outrage. “You are morphotes in disguise! Must I always lose my gains to plunderers? Is justice gone from the Palga?”

“We will talk philosophy after we regain our belongings.”

Cursing and muttering, the Wind-runner came about and sailed back the way he had come, with Kurgech and Jemasze walking behind. Halting beside the land-yawl the Wind-runner ill-naturedly passed across the goods he had taken.

Jemasze asked: “Where are you bound?”

“To the depot; where else?”

“Seek out Moffamides the priest; tell him you have met us; tell him what occurred, and tell him that if the fiaps guarding the sky-car are as false as those he gave us, we’ll take him down to the Alouan and lock him in a cage forever. He’ll never escape us; we’ll follow his track wherever he goes. Take him that message, and be certain that he hears you out!”

The Wind-runner, clench-mouthed with rage, tacked off into the south on a freshening breeze.

Elvo and Jemasze loaded the yawl while Kurgech boiled the crayfish for lunch to be consumed on the

way. The sails were hoisted; the yawl rolled briskly into the northeast.

At noon Kurgech pointed across the bow to the sails of three lofty brigantines bellying in the wind. “The first of the tracks.”

“If Moffamides gave us proper directions.”

“He gave us proper directions; I read at least this much truth in his mind. I read mischief as well, and this has been demonstrated.”

“I understand now why Outkers seldom visit the Palga,” said Elvo glumly.

“They are not welcomed; this is true.”

The brigantines passed in front of the yawl: three beer-wagons, each loaded with three enormous hogsheads. The crews watched the yawl incuriously and ignored Elvo Glissam’s wave.

The yawl crossed the track—an avenue of compressed soum—and pointed once more across the open sarai.

An hour later they sailed past another set of irrigated tracts. Wind-runner families worked at the plots: tilling, pulling weeds, harvesting legumes, plucking fruit; their sail-wagons standing nearby. At mid-afternoon the yawl overtook just such a wagon: a six-wheeled schooner with a pair of high masts, three jibs and topsails. Two men leaned on the after rail; children played on the deck; a woman peered through the casements of the aft cabin as the yawl approached. Elvo steered to pass downwind, which he deemed to be the courteous tactic. The Wind-runners however failed to recognize the nicety and gave no acknowledgment to Elvo’s cheerful wave. Peculiar people, thought Elvo glumly. Shortly after, the schooner changed course and trundled off to the north, to become a far white spot, then disappear.

The wind had become gusty; to the south a scurf of black clouds rose up into the sky. Jemasze and Kurgech reefed the mainsail, lowered the mizzen and took in the jib; still the yawl bowled across the soum on hissing wheels.

The clouds raced overhead; rain began to fall. The three men hauled down all sails, braked and blocked the wheels, tossed to the ground a heavy metal chain connected through the shrouds to the lightning rod, then took refuge in the aft cuddy. For two hours lightning clawed at the sarai, generating an almost continuous reverberation of thunder; then the storm drifted north; the rain stopped; the wind died, leaving behind an uncanny silence.

The three men crawled forth from the cuddy to find the sun setting through a confused storm-wrack and the sky an inverted carpet of flaring purple-red. While Gerd Jemasze and Elvo put the yawl to rights, Kurgech boiled up a soup in the forward cuddy, and the three men took a supper of pawpaws, soup and

hard-bread.

A slow and easy breeze came to blow the remaining storm clouds north; the sky was clear and effulgent with stars. The sarai seemed utterly vacant and lonely, and Elvo was surprised to find Kurgech in a state of obvious uneasiness. After a few minutes Elvo became infected with nervousness and asked: "What's the trouble?"

"Something is drawing upon us."

Jemasze raised his hand to feel the wind. "Shall we sail for an hour or two? There's nothing we can run into."

Kurgech readily agreed. "I will be happy to move."

The sails were hoisted; the yawl swerved around and bore off on a quartering reach into the northeast at an easy ten miles an hour. Kurgech steered by Koryphon's North Star Tethanor, the Toe of the Basilisk.

Four hours they sailed, until midnight, when Kurgech declared: "The imminence is gone. I no longer feel pressure."

"In that case, it is time to stop," said Jemasze. The sails were dropped; the brakes were set; the three laid out their beds and slept.

At dawn they hoisted sail in preparation for the morning wind, which once more came tardily, and the three men sat silently waiting. At last the monsoon arrived and the yawl slid off into the northeast.

After an hour of sailing they crossed the second track, though no sails were visible save a tall narrow triangle far astern.

The sarai began to rise and fall, at first almost imperceptibly, then in long wide hills and dales. Ledges of black trap slanted up from the soum, and for the first time navigation demanded a degree of foresight and strategy. The easiest route most usually lay along the ridges, where the wind blew most freshly and where the ground lay generally flat. Often these ridges ran in inconvenient directions; then the helmsman must direct the craft down one slope and up the one opposite, and often the auxiliary motor was needed to propel the yawl the last fifty or hundred feet to the ridge.

A river meandered across the countryside, at the bottom of a steep-sided terraced valley where the land-yawl could not go, and for several miles they sailed along the brink of the valley, until the river once more swung north.

The tall-sailed wagon they had noticed previously had gained appreciably upon them. Jemasze took binoculars and inspected the craft, then handed the glasses to Kurgech who looked and uttered a soft

Uldra curse.

Taking the binoculars, Elvo saw a long black articulated wagon of three segments, each with a notably tall mast and narrow sail: a vehicle intended for high speed and high capability into the wind. Five men rode the deck, hanging to the shrouds or crouched in the cockpit. They wore loose black pantaloons; their torsos were naked and showed the typical cream-brown Wind-runner color. Several wore red scarves to bind their hair. As they moved about the deck they displayed a peculiar jerking agility, which by some trick of association recalled to Elvo the fearsome man who had entered the inn three nights previously. So then: these were Srenki, men whose virtue was the excess of vice, who with leaden zest performed quintessential evil and so redeemed their fellows from turpitude. Elvo's stomach felt cold and heavy. He looked toward Gerd Jemasze, who seemed interested only in the terrain ahead. Kurgech stood by the mast, looking vaguely off into the sky. Elvo began to feel a sweaty desperation; he had come on this trip for complicated reasons, but certainly not in search of death. With loose knees he crossed the cockpit to where Gerd Jemasze stood by the wheel. "Those are Srenki."

"I supposed as much."

"What are you going to do?"

Jemasze glanced over his shoulder at the racing black schooner. "Nothing, unless they molest us."

"Isn't that what they plan?" cried Elvo, his voice rather more shrill than he had intended.

"It looks that way." Jemasze looked up at the sail. "We could probably outrun them straight downwind; their sails tend to blanket each other."

"Then why don't we sail downwind?"

"Because the river valley lies yonder."

Through the binoculars Elvo inspected the black wagon. "They're carrying guns—long rifles."

"Hence I don't shoot at them. They'd shoot back. Apparently they want to take us alive."

Again Elvo studied the onrushing black schooner, until the gestures and grimaces of the Srenki affected him with nausea. In a stifled voice he asked: "What will they do with us?"

Jemasze shrugged. "They're wearing red, which means they've taken vows of revenge. Somehow we've offended them, though I can't imagine how or where or when."

Elvo Glissam scanned the downwind terrain through the binoculars. He called out to Jemasze: "There's a hill ahead! It's too steep to cross and it slopes down into the river valley; we'll have to come about!"

Jemasze demurred. “They’d have us in twenty seconds.”

“But—what can we do?”

“Sail. You stand by the reef-roller and make ready to shorten sail when I give you the signal.”

Elvo stared numbly at Jemasze. “Shorten sail?”

“Not until I give you the signal.”

Elvo hunched to the mast and stood by the reefing gear. The Srenki had narrowed the gap to a hundred yards; the three tall sails seemed to overhang the yawl. To Elvo’s amazement Jemasze slackened the sheets to slow the yawl and to allow the schooner to gain even more swiftly. The Srenki could now be perceived in detail. Three stood on the foredeck straining forward, their gaunt faces shadowed under the vertical pink sunlight... To Elvo’s consternation, Jemasze once again eased the sheets, allowing the Srenki to gain at an even faster rate. Elvo opened his mouth to scream a protest, then in blind desperation clamped his teeth together and turned away.

Ahead the ground began to slope down toward the river gorge on one hand, up to a round-topped bluff on the other; the yawl heeled and skidded. Behind, the black schooner came rushing, so close that Elvo could hear the hoarse calls of the crew. The slope steepened; the yawl tilted precariously; Elvo, peering over the gunwale, looked a sickening distance down, down, down into the river gorge; he squeezed shut his eyes and clung to the mast. The wind swept down the hillside; the yawl bounced crab-wise down-slope.

“Reef!” called Jemasze. Elvo cast a wild glance astern. The schooner, careening along the slope, was closing in fast; a Srenki on the foredeck hefted a grapnel, preparing to throw it into the cockpit of the yawl. “Reef!” Jemasze called in a voice of brass.

With numb fingers Elvo turned the handle and the mainsail rolled down the mast. A gust hit the yawl; the weather wheels lifted. Elvo’s stomach lifted with vertigo; he scrambled for the high side of the deck. The same gust struck the tall sails of the schooner and applied an inexorable leverage. As the weather wheels left the ground, the helmsman put down the helm to prevent a capsized; the schooner trundled wildly down-slope, out of control. The wheels bounded off rocks and bumps; the tall masts jerked and shivered; the sails bulged and flapped. On one of the wilder lurches the mizzen jibed, the helmsman spun the wheel; the schooner bounced off a boulder, flew off a ledge and toppled upside down into the river.

“Reef down!” bawled Jemasze. Elvo cranked the sail almost to invisibility. Jemasze cut on the auxiliary motor. At a careful pace the yawl negotiated the slope of the hill and reached the flatland beyond. Jemasze set the course into the northeast as before.

The yawl sailed across the deserted sarai, through an afternoon so peaceful that Elvo began to doubt the

accuracy of his recollection; had the Srenki existed? Surreptitiously he studied Kurgech and Gerd Jemasze, one hardly more cryptic than the other.

The sun sank in a clear sky. The sails were lowered, the wheels locked, and camp made for the night out in the middle of the trackless sarai.

After a supper of potted meat, biscuit and Depot beer, the three men sat on the foredeck, leaning against the cuddy. Elvo could not restrain a question to Gerd Jemasze: “Did you plan that the Srenki schooner should be wrecked?”

Jemasze nodded. “I claim no great wisdom. With their narrow beam and three tall masts they obviously couldn’t reach along much of a slope. So I thought to tease them until they sailed themselves down to the river.”

Elvo gave a shaky chuckle. “Suppose they didn’t go over?”

“We’d have set them back some other way,” said Jemasze indifferently.

Elvo fell silent, reflecting that Jemasze’s confidence, while reassuring, perfectly typified that quality which Elvo found so exasperating... Elvo managed a sad chuckle. Jemasze felt competent to meet any challenge. He, Elvo, did not, and in consequence felt resentful: there was the truth of the matter. Elvo assuaged his abraded self-esteem with the reflection that here, at least, was a faculty in which he excelled Gerd Jemasze: he was capable of self-analysis. Gerd Jemasze had obviously never troubled to ponder his own psyche.

He turned to Kurgech and asked a question he never could have asked two weeks previously: “Is anyone on our trail now?”

Kurgech stared off across the twilight. “I feel no near threat. A dark mist hangs around the horizon, far away. Tonight we are safe.”

Chapter 9

Morning brought a brisk cool breeze and with all sail set, the yawl bowled across the gently heaving sarai: a landscape, thought Elvo, fresh and sweet as springtime. Bustards flew up from under the singing wheels; patches of pink and black periwinkles splotched the otherwise dun soum.

Halfway through the morning they sighted a fleet of brigantines sailing northward, sails straining to the wind: a signal that they had arrived at the third trail, as stipulated by Moffamides. A few minutes later they reached the trail itself, which to Elvo’s puzzlement led not north but definitely into the northwest. “We’ve come a hundred miles or more out of the way,” he complained to Jemasze. “If we had sailed

north out from the Depot instead of northeast we might have saved ourselves a day's sail."

Jemasze gave somber agreement. "Moffamides evidently preferred that we come this route."

The yawl overtook the house-wagons. Tousle-headed children hung on the rail and pointed; men stood up from the cockpit to stare; women came forth from the cabins, their expressions neither affable nor hostile. As usual Elvo essayed a friendly salute, which the Wind-runners ignored.

The trail descended from a region of great heaves and swales upon a flat plain reaching north beyond the horizon. At intervals sink-holes brimming with clear water irrigated fields and plots where grew melons, pulses, sweet vetch and cereals, each area guarded by its fiap.

Northwest across the plain sailed the yawl, sometimes in company with Wind-runner brigantines, more often alone. Long sunny days alternated with nights glittering with stars. Elvo often reflected that here was a life to be envied, a life without circumscription and no routine other than that imposed by the winds and the seasons. Perhaps the Wind-runners were the most sensible folk of all Koryphon, scudding as they did across the open places, with great clouds towering above and glorious sunsets to mark the end of each day.

On the fourth afternoon along the northwest trail, a dark smudge appeared on the horizon, which the binoculars revealed to be a forest of massive dark trees of a species Elvo had never seen before. "This must be Aluban forest," said Jemasze. "We now proceed to a white pillar."

Presently the pillar appeared—an object thirty feet high, constructed of a white lumpy stucco-like substance. At the base of the pillar an old man in a white cassock worked a pestle in a large iron mortar. The yawl coasted to a halt beside the pillar; the old man rose to his feet and, showing the clenched glare of a zealot, backed protectively against the white pillar. "Take care with your vehicle; this is the Great Bone; steer aside."

Jemasze performed a courteous gesture to which the old man made no response. "We seek a certain Poliamides," said Jemasze. "Can you direct us?"

Before the old man deigned to answer he dipped a brush in the mortar and applied a white wash to the pillar. Then he pointed the brush toward the forest and spoke in a harsh croaking voice: "Follow the trail; inquire at the hexagon."

Jemasze released the brake; the yawl sailed past the Great Bone toward the Aluban.

At the forest's edge Jemasze halted the wagon; the three men descended warily to the ground. The trees were the most ponderous growths Elvo had yet observed on Uaia: great twisted baulks the color and apparent density of black iron, with sprawling heavy branches and masses of pale gray and gray-green foliage. For several silent moments the three men stood peering into the forest, where the trail wound

away among slanting sun-rays and black shadows. Listening, they heard only a dank stillness.

Kurgech said in a heavy voice: "We are expected."

Elvo suddenly became aware that by some tacit understanding leadership of the group had transferred to Kurgech, who now muttered to Jemasze: "Let Elvo stay with the wagon; you and I will go forward."

Elvo attempted an uneasy protest, but the words stuck in his throat. In an awkward attempt at facetiousness he said: "If you run into trouble, call out for help."

Kurgech said: "There will be no trouble. No hot blood spills in this sacred forest."

Jemasze said softly: "I fear Moffamides has played us a sour joke."

"So much was clear from the first," said Kurgech. "Still, it is better to play the game out, and to act in certitude."

The two set off into the forest and immediately foliage closed out the sky; the trail became narrow and wound back and forth, past banks of moss and clusters of pale star-flowers; in and out of small glades, along dim aisles with pink rays slanting across the vistas. Kurgech moved with a peculiar delicacy, striding on the balls of his feet, turning his head first one way, then the other. Jemasze felt only stillness and peace; he apprehended no danger, nor did Kurgech's attitude suggest more than wariness in the proximity of the unknown.

A glade carpeted with purple sedum opened before them; here stood a hexagonal structure of white stone, twice as tall as a man, open on all sides to the slow airs of the forest. In front of the structure a priest in a white cassock awaited them: a man frail and cold-faced. "Outkers," said the priest, "you have come far, and you are welcome to share the peace of our forest Aluban."

"We have come far indeed," said Jemasze. "As you know we have come in search of Poliamides. Will you take us to him?"

"Certainly, if this is your wish. Come then." The priest set off through the forest; Jemasze and Kurgech followed. The sun was low; the forest had become dim and dark. Looking up, Jemasze stopped short at the sight of a white object: a skeleton in the crotch of the tree. The priest said: "There sits Windmaster Boras Mael, who suspires his soul through the leaves, and who has given his right toe to the Great Bone." He signaled them forward.

Jemasze looking aloft saw skeletons in many of the trees.

The priest, halting once more, spoke in a plangent voice: "Here all weary or troubled souls make their peace with Ahariszeio. Their transitory flesh is buried; their bones embrace the tree; the soul is absorbed

and purified and suspired into the holy air of the Palga, to ride the blissful clouds.”

“And Poliamides?”

The priest pointed aloft. “There sits Poliamides.”

Jemasze and Kurgech studied the skeleton for a moment. Jemasze asked: “How did he die?”

“He went into an introspection so earnest that he neglected to eat or drink, and presently his condition became indistinguishable from death. The errors of his gross vitality are now forgotten and his soul breathes out from the leaves.”

With an edge in his voice, Jemasze asked: “Moffamides told you of our coming?”

Kurgech spoke in a low profound voice: “Speak truth!”

The priest replied: “Moffamides explained your presence, as was his duty.”

“Moffamides has used us poorly,” said Jemasze. “He has wantonly dealt us deceit. We have quite a score to settle with him.”

“Patience, my friends, patience and forbearance! Go back now to your Outker lands in humility rather than anger.”

“First we will deal with Moffamides.”

“Surely you have no grievance with Moffamides,” declared the priest. “You required the presence of Poliamides and behold! you have been vouchsafed your desire.”

“So we are sent forth on a week’s journey with useless fiaps to look at a set of bones? Moffamides will not long enjoy his triumph.”

The priest spoke gravely: “It might be wise to moderate your anger. Moffamides truly did you a beneficial service. If you take his intimations to heart, you will apprehend the sorry consequences of ignoble curiosity. Such knowledge is beyond value. Poliamides, for instance, so far overlooked propriety as to accept an Outker’s bribe. When he recognized his fault, he suffered a pang of guilt and became moribund.”

“I feel that you exaggerate the benign effects of Moffamides’ treachery,” said Jemasze. “He will not soon again deceive trusting strangers, I assure you of this.”

“The Palga is vast,” murmured the priest.

“The spot on which Moffamides stands is small,” said Jemasze. “We can discover this spot through Blue magic. As for now, we have seen sufficient of Poliamides.”

The priest turned wordlessly and led the way back through the forest to the hexagon. Mounting the white stone porch, he stood smiling impassively. Kurgech stared up at him. Slowly Kurgech raised his right hand. The priest’s eyes followed the movement. Kurgech raised his left hand, and the priest smiling a now strained smile seemed to watch both hands separately, an eye for each. From Kurgech’s left palm came a sudden shattering blast of white light. Kurgech called out in a deep calm voice: “Speak what is in your mind!”

Thrusting through the priest’s lips, as if of their own volition, came words: “You will never live to see Outker land, poor fools!”

“Who will kill us?”

The priest had recovered his poise. “You have seen Poliamides,” he said shortly. “Now go your way.”

Jemasze and Kurgech returned by the now nearly invisible track to the edge of Aluban the sacred forest.

Elvo, standing against the stern of the yawl, was a forlorn and worried figure; at the sight of Gerd Jemasze and Kurgech, he came forward in obvious relief. “You’ve been gone so long; I began to wonder what had happened to you.”

“We found Poliamides,” said Jemasze. “His right toe is part of the Great Bone. In short—he is a dead skeleton.”

Elvo stared toward the forest indignantly. “Why did Moffamides send us here?”

“This is as good a place as any to hang up our bones.”

Elvo stared at Jemasze as if doubting his seriousness, then turned and looked dubiously into the Aluban. “What does he gain?”

“I guess they don’t want Outkers investigating the erjin trade—especially members of the SEE.”

Elvo grinned wanly at the pleasantry. Jemasze held up his hand to a faint cool breeze seeping down from the north. “Hardly enough to move us.”

“This is not a good place,” said Kurgech. “We should depart.”

Jemasze and Elvo Glissam hoisted the sails. The yawl responded sluggishly and rolled south along the edge of the forest.

The breeze died; with limp sails the yawl coasted to a stop, only fifty feet distant from the loom of the trees. "It appears that we camp here," said Jemasze.

Kurgech looked toward the forest but said nothing.

Jemasze lowered the sails and blocked the wheels; Kurgech rummaged among the stores in the forward cuddy; Elvo gingerly approached the edge of the forest and returned with an armful of fuel. Jemasze grunted with something like disapproval but made no protest as Elvo kindled a fire beside the yawl.

For supper they ate bread and dry meat, a few morsels of dried fruit and drank the last of the Depot beer. Elvo discovered himself to be neither hungry nor thirsty; he felt rather a strong lassitude and could think only of stretching himself out beside the fire and drowsing away...What a curious fire, thought Elvo. The flames seemed to be made not of hot leaping gases, but syrup or jelly; they moved sluggishly, like the petals of a monstrous red flower blowing in a warm wind. Elvo looked languidly toward Gerd Jemasze to see whether or not he had noted this odd phenomenon...Jemasze conversed with Kurgech; Elvo heard what they were saying:

"—strong and near."

"Can you break it?"

"Yes. Bring wood from the forest—and six long poles."

Jemasze spoke to Elvo. "Wake up. You're being hypnotized. Help me bring wood."

Numbly Elvo lurched to his feet and followed Jemasze to the forest. He now felt alert and awake, and burning with rage. Jemasze's arrogance for a fact knew no bounds; an outrage the way he presumed to give orders! Well then, what of this heavy gnarled branch? An excellent club.

"Elvo!" rasped Jemasze. "Wake up!"

"I am awake," muttered Elvo.

"Well then, carry wood to the fire."

Elvo blinked, yawned, rubbed his eyes. He had been asleep. Sleepwalking, thinking terrible thoughts. He dragged dead branches to the fire. Kurgech cut six crooked poles and planted them into the ground to form a hexagon twelve feet in diameter, and connected the top ends with lengths of cord. Between the

poles he built six small fires and on the cords he hung small trifles of equipment: clothes, binoculars, handguns: all articles imported to the Palga.

“Stay inside the ring of fires,” said Kurgech. “We have made this alien land; they must now put forth great force to reach us.”

Elvo said plaintively: “I don’t understand anything of what’s happening.”

“The priests are using mind-magic against us,” said Kurgech. “They use their holy objects and ancient instruments, and they can exert great power.”

“Don’t allow yourself to daydream or go drowsy,” Jemasze told him. “Keep the fires alight.”

Elvo said shortly, “I’ll do my best.”

Minutes passed: ten, fifteen, twenty. Peculiar, thought Elvo, how the fires tended to smoulder rather than burn. The flames guttered and recoiled in smoky red wallows of flame. Out in the darkness he sensed squat shapes watching him with eyes like puddles of ink.

Jemasze said: “Don’t panic; just ignore them.”

Elvo laughed hoarsely. “I’m sweating; I’m panting; my teeth are chattering. I’m not about to panic, but the fires are going out.”

“I guess it’s time I used some Outker magic,” said Jemasze. He spoke to Kurgech: “Ask how they’d like a forest fire.”

A queer stillness gripped the air. Jemasze picked up a flaming brand from the central fire and took a step toward the Aluban.

Tension broke like a snapping twig. The fires blazed normally; Elvo saw no more crouching shapes: only the starlit landscape. Gerd Jemasze dropped the brand back in the fire and stood watching the forest in that pose of negligent disdain which Elvo had so often found irritating. He felt for breeze; the night was dead calm; they lacked the option to move away, out upon the wholesome sarai.

Kurgech remarked: “Rage and fear hang in the air. They may attempt more ordinary work.”

Suddenly in a mood of urgency, Jemasze said: “To the forest then, where at least we are safe from ambush.”

The three men climbed into trees and became invisible in the deep gloom under the foliage. Twenty yards

away, out on the sarai, the land-yawl stood alone in the firelight. For the hundredth time, Elvo reflected that if by some lucky chance he eventually were restored to the security of Olanje, he would have memories to color the remainder of his lifetime. He doubted if ever again he would undertake a journey across the Palga...He strained his ears. Silence. He could see neither Kurgech nor Jemasze who had ensconced themselves somewhere off to his left. Elvo gave a sad humorless chuckle. The whole affair seemed absurd and melodramatic—until he remembered how the landscape surrounding the yawl had constricted and pressed in upon him.

Time passed. Elvo began to feel uncomfortable. The time must be midnight. He wondered how long Jemasze proposed to stay in the tree. Surely not till dawn! In another five or ten minutes either Jemasze or Kurgech must certainly decide that the threat had diminished, that it was time to get some rest.

Ten minutes went by, and fifteen, then half an hour. Elvo took a breath in preparation for calling cautiously across the dark to find how much longer they meant to perch in the trees. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Jemasze might disapprove of such a call. He had not expressly commanded silence, but Elvo could see that silence might be considered an integral adjunct to the circumstances. He decided to hold his tongue. Kurgech and Jemasze no doubt were also uncomfortable; if they could endure the inconvenience, he could do so as well. To ease his cramped legs Elvo cautiously rose to a standing position. His head bumped on a branch which swung away and scraped his cheek. Elvo leaned back to see silhouetted against the sky, not a branch, but a skeleton, the bones wired together. Beside his face dangled the right foot. Heart pumping, Elvo quickly returned to his former position.

A sound, a thud, muffled noises, a thrashing among the dry leaves. Elvo jumped to the ground, to find Jemasze and Kurgech looking down at the hulk of a man prone on the ground. Elvo started to speak: Jemasze signaled him to silence...No sound. A minute passed. The man at their feet began to stir. Jemasze and Kurgech dragged him toward the yawl. Elvo picked up a long metal object and followed; he discovered the object to be a Wind-runner rifle. Jemasze and Kurgech dropped the man into the glow of the firelight. Elvo uttered an ejaculation of surprise. "Moffamides!"

Moffamides stared into the fire with eyes like cusps of polished flint. He made no move when Kurgech bound his ankles and wrists, then with Jemasze's help tossed him up onto the deck of the yawl like a sack of beans.

Jemasze hoisted the sail, which bellied to a cold night breeze Elvo had not even noticed. The yawl rolled away to the southeast, leaving the sacred forest Aluban astern.

Chapter 10

Dawn flooded the sarai with wan pink illumination. Clouds to south and west glowed crimson and rose; Methuen climbed into the sky.

At an oasis surrounded by feathery Uaian acacia the yawl made a breakfast halt. Moffamides had not yet

spoken a word.

Beside the pond were neglected plots where fruit and berries grew wild. The fiaps were weathered and inoperative, and Elvo went off with a bucket to harvest whatever he found ripe.

When he returned he found Kurgech busy at the construction of a most peculiar device. From acacia withes he built a cubical frame two feet on the side, lashing the corners with twine. He cut up an old blanket and attached it to the frame to make a rude box. Across one side of the box he attached a board through which he bored a hole half an inch in diameter.

The work was being accomplished out of Moffamides' range of vision. Elvo could no longer contain his curiosity; he asked Jemasze: "What is Kurgech making?"

"The Uldras call it a 'crazy-box'."

Jemasze spoke so shortly that Elvo, sensitive to real or imagined slights, forbore to ask any further questions. He watched in fascination as Kurgech cut a circle of fiberboard about six inches in diameter and painted it with a pair of black and white spirals. Elvo marveled to watch the deftness of his touch. Suddenly he saw Kurgech in a new light: not the semi-barbarian with peculiar customs and odd garments, but a proud man of many talents. With embarrassment Elvo recalled his previously half-condescending attitude toward Kurgech—and this in spite of the fact that he was a member of the Redemptionist League!

Kurgech's work was now more intricate, and an hour passed before he was satisfied with his contraption. The disk now turned on the inside of the box and was connected by a shaft to a small wind-powered propeller.

Elvo decided that he did not entirely approve of the device and what he divined to be its purpose; he watched in a mixture of repugnance and fascination as Kurgech, intent and earnest, completed his 'crazy-box'. In a somewhat sardonic voice Elvo asked: "Will it work?"

Kurgech turned him a cool clear glance and asked softly: "Would you care to test it?"

"No."

Meanwhile Moffamides had sat propped on the deck of the yawl, in the full glare of Methuen, with neither food nor drink. Kurgech went to the forward cuddy and from his case of effects brought forth a vial of dark liquid. He poured water into a mug, mixed in a small quantity of the liquid and brought it to Moffamides.

"Drink."

Without words Moffamides drank. Kurgech applied a blindfold to the priest's eyes, then went to sit on the

foredeck. Jemasze meanwhile bathed in the pond.

Half an hour passed. Kurgech rose to his feet. He cut a pair of slits at right angles to each other in the cloth covering the bottom of the box, and a circular hole at the top. He now took up the box and placed it over Moffamides' head and arranged a pair of sticks across the priest's shoulders to support the device. After assuring himself that the propeller turned freely in the wind, Kurgech reached inside the box and removed the blindfold.

Elvo started to speak; Gerd Jemasze, returning from his bath, sternly signaled him to silence.

Ten minutes passed. Kurgech went to crouch beside Moffamides. He began to chant in a soft voice: "Peace; you rest at ease; sleep is sweet, when troubles dissolve and fear is gone. Sleep is sweet; tranquility is near. It is good to ease yourself; to rest and forget."

The propeller slowed as the wind eased; Kurgech flicked it with his finger to keep it turning and inside the box the spiral-painted disk turned in front of Moffamides' eyes.

"The spiral turns," crooned Kurgech. "It brings out to in. It also brings you yourself from out to in, and you rest at ease. From out to in, from out to in, and I say to you: how pleasant to relax where nothing can hurt you. Can anyone or anything hurt you?"

From within the box came Moffamides' voice: "Nothing."

"Nothing can hurt you unless I command, and now there is nothing but peace and rest and the ease of helping your friends. Whom do you wish to help?"

"My friends."

"Your friends are here. The people here are your friends, and only these people here. Notice, they cut your bonds and make you comfortable." Kurgech released the cords binding Moffamides' arms and legs. "How pleasant to be happy and comfortable with your friends. Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am happy."

"The spiral has wound your attention into your brain and the only outside channel is my voice. You must now be deaf to other thoughts and the complaints of others. Only your friends, who give you peace and ease deserve your loyalty. Whom do you trust, whom do you wish to help?"

"My friends."

"And where are they?"

“They are here.”

“Yes, of course. I will now take the box from your head and you will see your friends. Once, long ago, there were some trivial differences, but no one cares anymore about these matters. Your friends are here; nothing else is important.”

Kurgech lifted the box from Moffamides’ head. “Breathe the fresh air and look at your friends.”

Moffamides drew a deep breath and looked from face to face. His eyes were glazed; the pupils had constricted, perhaps under the influence of Kurgech’s drug.

Kurgech asked: “Do you see your friends?”

“Yes, they are here.”

“Of course! You are now one with your friends, and you want to help them in everything they do. The old ways were bad; your friends want to learn about the old ways so that you can rest at ease. There are no secrets among friends. What is your cult name?”

“Inver Elgol.”

“And your private name, known only to yourself, which knowledge you now want to provide your friends?”

“Totulis Amedio Falle.”

“How pleasant to share secrets with friends. It eases the soul. Where did Poliamides take the Outker?”

“To the Place of Rose-and-Gold.”

“Ah, indeed! And what is this ‘Place of Rose-and-Gold’?”

“It is where the erjins are trained.”

“It must be an interesting place to visit. Where is it?”

“At Al Fador in the mountains west of Depot No. 2.”

“And this is where Poliamides took the Outker Uther Madduc?”

“Yes.”

“Is there danger there?”

“Yes, much danger.”

“How could we go and be safe?”

“We could not go safely to Al Fador.”

“Uther Madduc and Poliamides went to Al Fador and returned safely. Could we not do the same?”

“They saw Al Fador but made no close approach.”

“We will do the same, if it is still safe to do so. How shall we steer?”

“Southwest, hard on the wind.”

The land-yawl careened across the sarai. Moffamides sat hunched in a corner of the cockpit, apathetic, morose, silent. Elvo watched him in fascination. What went on in the priest’s mind? Elvo attempted conversation to no avail; Moffamides merely stared at him.

Five days the yawl sailed, from dawn until dark, and later yet when the sarai lay flat and the stars provided guidance for the helmsman. The two trails were crossed; the yawl sailed a region to the north of the hill where they had made their first camp, then entered a hot and dreary tract where dust lay on the soum and lifted under the wheels as they passed. The Volwodes came into view: a far shadow across the south which became a cluster of steel-gray crags high against the sky.

Elvo was now as apathetic as Moffamides. He had lost all interest in the enslavement of the erjins, which at any rate could most expeditiously be attacked from the forums of Olanje. Only a day’s run to the south lay No. 2 Depot but he dared not suggest any truncation of the journey. As always, he found Gerd Jemasze’s moods impenetrable. As for Kurgech, Elvo had reverted to his earlier opinions. The man was cunning and wise, competent in his own milieu, which was not necessarily the environment where Elvo himself cared to excel. All things considered, he would be pleased to return to Olanje. Schaine Madduc? A girl delicious to look at, with a head full of charming notions: by now she also must be bored with Uaia and might well choose to accompany him back to Szintarre.

If he survived the visit to Al Fador...Elvo examined Moffamides, wondering as to his mental condition. Hypnotic suggestion, so he had been given to understand, could not be relied upon to persist. A clever ill-intentioned man like Moffamides might feign subservience, the more effectively to work an act of treachery. He voiced none of his suspicions to Jemasze or Kurgech who presumably knew as much about

the matter as he did.

The Volwodes reached high into the pink-blue sky: barren crags marked with black thorn-bush and a few stunted sere-trees. When the yawl halted for the night, an erjin came to watch from a distance of about fifty yards. It slowly raised its massive arms and extended its talons to attack position; the ruff at its neck began to bristle. Jemasze brought forth his gun, but the erjin suddenly abandoned its aggressive posture. Its ruff subsided and after watching another minute it trotted off to the west.

“Curious conduct,” mused Jemasze. Through his binoculars he watched the creature lope away. Elvo turned to find Moffamides staring after the erjin, and his posture was not that of a man dazed and subservient.

A few minutes later Elvo voiced his apprehensions to Gerd Jemasze.

“So far he’s still under control,” said Jemasze. “Kurgech has tested him. What may happen I don’t know. If he wants to live he won’t betray us.”

“What of erjins? Won’t they attack us tonight?”

“Erjins don’t see well in the dark. They’re not likely to attack by night.”

Elvo nevertheless went to his bed in a state of uneasiness. Far into the night he lay awake listening to the sounds of the sarai: a low moaning from the direction of the foothills which presently faded into silence; a chittering close at hand; an angry whirring at various pitches; from far away a throbbing gong-like sound so exquisite that something strange rose up within Elvo’s mind to terrify him. Kurgech had tied a steel cord from Moffamides’ ankle to his own, then had rubbed it with a dry rag until it squeaked and set Elvo’s nerves on edge; whether for this reason or from the effect of the crazy-box, Moffamides lay inert the whole of the night.

Elvo awoke to find dawn-light burning the upper crags of the Volwodes.

Breakfast was brief and meager. Moffamides seemed more glum than ever and sat to the edge of the deck staring north, away from the mountains.

Jemasze went to squat beside him. “How far now to the training area?”

Moffamides looked up with a start, and the expressions of his face underwent a set of quicksilver changes: from abstraction to surly contempt, to affability and candor, to something swift and wild, like desperation. Elvo, watching, suspected that Kurgech’s suggestions had ceased to exert an absolute influence over Moffamides.

Jemasze patiently repeated his question. Moffamides rose to his feet and pointed. "It lies somewhere beyond that ridge, toward the grim Volwodes. I have never been there. I can guide you no further."

Kurgech spoke in a mild voice: "I notice tracks yonder: perhaps they were laid by Uther Madduc."

Jemasze asked Moffamides, "Is this the case?"

"I suppose it is possible."

Hard on a breeze from the west, the yawl followed the tracks presumably laid by Uther Madduc's skimmer. A second set of tracks joined those which guided them, to Elvo's mystification. "It looks as if Uther Madduc had been followed!"

"More probably they are the tracks of Uther Madduc coming and Uther Madduc going," said Jemasze.

"I suppose you're right."

Below a bluff of red and gray sandstone Uther Madduc's trail came to an end. Jemasze dropped the sails and secured the brakes. Moffamides climbed laboriously to the ground and stood with shoulders hunched. "You need me no more," said Moffamides. "I have done my best for you; I will now take my leave."

"Here?" asked Jemasze. "In the wilderness? How will you survive?"

"I can reach the Depot in three or four days. There is food and water to be had along the way."

"What of the erjins? They infest the region."

"I fear no erjins; I am a priest of Ahariszeio."

Kurgech came forward and touched Moffamides on the shoulder; Moffamides leaned away quivering but seemed unable to detach himself. Kurgech said: "Totulis Amedio Falle, you may now forget your worries; you are with your friends whom you wish to help and protect."

The priest's head jerked back; his eyes took on a flinty glaze. "You are my friends," he declared without conviction. "This I know; hence, by corollary, I would grieve to see your corpses. So I must state that even now an erjin prince watches you. He has been talking to my mind; he wonders if he should attack."

"Tell him no," said Kurgech. "Explain that we are your friends."

"Yes, I have already done so, although my thoughts are somewhat confused."

Jemasze asked, "Where is the erjin?"

"He stands among the rocks."

"Invite him to come forth," said Jemasze. "I prefer erjins in full view to those skulking among the rocks."

"He is fearful of your guns."

"We will do him no harm if he restrains his own hostility."

Moffamides looked toward the rocks, and the erjin came forward: a magnificent creature as large as any Jemasze had ever seen; mustard-yellow on chest and belly, brown-black on back and legs. A russet ruff, starting between the ridges of cartilage shielding the optical processes, hung down across the bone-plated shoulders. It approached without haste, apparently neither fearful nor hostile, and halted at a distance of fifty feet.

Moffamides spoke to Jemasze: "It wants to know why we are here, instead of elsewhere."

"Explain that we are travelers from the Alouan, interested in the scenery."

Facing the erjin, Moffamides flourished his arms and uttered a set of hissing vocables. The erjin stood immobile except for a jerking of its ruff.

Kurgech instructed the priest: "Inquire the easiest route to the training station."

Moffamides performed new flourishes and uttered another set of sounds. The erjin responded as a man might, by turning and raising one of its massive arms, to indicate the southwest.

"Ask how far," said Jemasze.

Moffamides put the question; the erjin responded with a set of soft sibilants. "No great distance," said Moffamides. "Two hours more or less."

Jemasze looked skeptically sidewise at the erjin. "Why is it here to meet us?"

Kurgech interposed a gentle remark: "Perhaps our friend Moffamides sent a mind-message ahead."

Moffamides said weakly: "Sheer chance, undoubtedly."

"Does it plan to attack us?"

“I can declare nothing with assurance.”

Jemasze grunted. “I have never before seen a wild erjin so mild.”

“The Volwode erjin is different from the wild erjin of the Alouan,” said Moffamides. “It is a different race, so to speak.”

Kurgech walked off in the direction the erjin had indicated and scrutinized the ground. He called back to Jemasze: “The trail is here.”

Jemasze looked at the yawl, then glanced at Elvo, who divined that Jemasze was about to require that he remain to guard the vehicle. Jemasze however turned to Moffamides. “We need a fiap to guard the wagon: of better quality than you provided before.”

“The vehicle is safe,” said Moffamides bluffly, “unless a band of Srenki pass by, which is hardly likely.”

“Nevertheless, I would prefer to hang a strong fiap on the yawl.”

With poor grace Moffamides took bangles and ribbons from the previous fiaps and contrived a new device. “It lacks magic; it is only an admonitory fiap but it will serve adequately.”

The four men set forth up a barren gully, with Kurgech leading the way. Moffamides walked second, then Elvo, and Gerd Jemasze brought up the rear. The erjin followed at a discreet distance.

The way became steep; the gully caught and reflected the sun’s pink heat; when the group reached the ridge they stood panting and sweating. The erjin came up to join them, standing so close to Elvo that his skin prickled. From the corner of his eye he glanced along the creature’s arm, with its curious black talons and the finger-like palps sprouting from the base of the talons. With a single quick motion, thought Elvo, the erjin could rip him to ribbons. Elvo gingerly sidled two or three steps away. He asked Moffamides: “Why is this creature so different from the Alouan erjins?”

Moffamides showed no interest in the subject. “There is no great difference.”

“I notice considerable difference,” said Elvo. “This creature is docile. Has it been tamed or trained?”

Moffamides put a question to the erjin, then replied to Elvo: “Kurgech is what it calls the ‘ancient enemy’ who displays a ‘green soul’ and hence the erjin’s kill-fury* <<Kill-fury: a weak rendering of a word signifying the explosive release of a vast pent quantity of emotion, like the breaking of a dam or throwing wide a gate.>> is not aroused. You and Gerd Jemasze are Outkers, and inconsequential.”

Jemasze asked: “So why does it follow us?”

Moffamides replied in a dispirited voice: "It has nothing better to do; perhaps it intends to be of help."

Jemasze gave a snort of skepticism and studied the landscape through binoculars, while Kurgech cast about the wind-scoured barrens for the trail of Uther Madduc, without immediate success.

The erjin moved forward past Elvo to attract the attention of Moffamides; a half-telepathic colloquy ensued. Moffamides called to Jemasze: "It says Uther Madduc crossed the plateau and traversed that middle ridge."

The erjin loped across the flat and stood waiting; when the men failed to respond briskly, it made urgent signals.

Kurgech went to investigate; the others followed more slowly. Kurgech scanned the seared rubble and somewhere saw signs to reassure him. "This is the trail."

The erjin led the way up a tumble of granite boulders, jumping from surface to surface without effort. At the ridge it paused and seemed almost to strike a conscious pose.

The men reached the ridge and again halted to rest. Beyond, a slope supporting a sparse growth of brown scutch and wire-weed descended to the lip of a great gorge. The erjin started off again, on a long slantwise course, across a field of loose pebbles.

Elvo marveled at the trust Jemasze and Kurgech allowed the creature, which must by any sane reckoning be considered baleful. He put a tentative question to Jemasze: "Where do you think it's taking us?"

"Along Uther Madduc's trail."

"Aren't you suspicious of its good intentions? Suppose it's taking us on a wild goose chase?"

"Kurgech isn't worried. He's the tracker."

Elvo went to walk beside Kurgech. "Is this the way Uther Madduc came?"

Kurgech signified assent.

"How can you be sure? These rocks don't take tracks."

"The trail is evident. Notice: there a pebble has been disturbed. It shows a side which is not sunburned. See there: the web of dust has been broken. The erjin leads us accurately."

For a period the course led down-slope; then, where a gully seemed to afford a route to the bottom of the

gorge, the erjin veered away. Kurgech stopped short. Jemasze asked: "What's the trouble?"

"Madduc and Poliamides went down that gully. The trail does not go where he wants to lead us."

They looked after the erjin, who had paused to make urgent signals. Moffamides said uneasily: "It takes you the way your friends came."

"Their trail leads down into the gorge."

"The erjin gives me information. The way is difficult here, but easier ahead."

Jemasze stood looking first one way, then the other. Elvo thought that he had never before seen Jemasze indecisive. Finally, without enthusiasm, Jemasze said: "Very well, we'll see where he takes us."

The erjin took them along a laborious route indeed: up a steep bank of crumbling conglomerate, across a tumble of boulders where small blue lizards basked and glided, up to a ridge and down the slope opposite. The erjin ran at an easy lope; the men strained and panted to maintain the pace. Sunlight glared from the rocks and shimmered in the air across the gorge; the erjin danced ahead like a fire demon.

The erjin halted as if in sudden doubt as to its destination; Jemasze spoke tersely over his shoulder to Moffamides: "Find out where it's taking us."

"Where the other Outker went," said Moffamides hurriedly. "This way is easier than clambering down a cliff. You can see for yourself!" He indicated the terrain ahead, where the walls of the gorge relaxed and fell back. The erjin once more loped ahead, and led the way down to the floor of the valley, a place in dramatic contrast to the stark upper slopes. The air was cool and shadowed; a slow full stream welled quietly from pool to pool under copses of pink and purple fern-trees and dark Uaian cypress.

Kurgech studied the pale sand beside the stream and gave a grunt of grudging surprise: "The creature has not misled us. There are tracks; for a fact, Uther Madduc and Poliamides came this way."

The erjin moved off down the valley and signaled again, as urgent and impatient as before. The men followed more deliberately than it thought appropriate; it ran ahead, halted to look back, signaled and ran forward again. Kurgech, however, stopped short and bent his head over the tracks. "There is something peculiar here."

Jemasze bent over the tracks; Elvo looked from the side, while Moffamides stood fretting and nervous. Kurgech pointed down at the sand. "This is the track left by Poliamides. He wears the flat-toed Wind-runner sandal. This, with the hard heel-mark, is the track of Uther Madduc. Before Poliamides walked first; he led the way with a nervous step, as might be expected. Here Uther Madduc walks first; he strides in excitement and haste. Poliamides comes behind, and notice where he pauses to look behind him. They are not approaching their goal; they are leaving, in stealth and haste."

All turned to look back up the valley, except Moffamides who watched the other three men and made small nervous gestures. The erjin whistled and fluted. Moffamides said fretfully: "Let us not delay; the erjin is becoming captious and may refuse to assist us."

"We need no more assistance," said Jemasze. "We're going back up the valley."

"Why go to the trouble?" cried Moffamides. "The tracks lead downstream!"

"Nevertheless, this is where we wish to go. Inform the erjin that we no longer need its help."

Moffamides transmitted the message; the erjin gave a rumble of displeasure. Moffamides turned once more to Jemasze: "There is no need to go into the canyon!" But Jemasze had already started along Uther Madduc's trail. The erjin approached on long silky strides, then uttered an appalling scream and bounded forward with arms extended and talons spread. Elvo stood paralyzed; Moffamides cowered; Kurgech jerked aside; Jemasze aimed his hand-gun and destroyed the creature as it sprang through the air.

The four men stood motionless, staring at the corpse. Moffamides began to moan softly under his breath.

"Quiet!" growled Kurgech. Jemasze thrust the gun back into his waistband, then turned and continued up the canyon, the others following. Moffamides came at the rear, walking lethargically. He began to lag behind; Kurgech fixed him with a glare, and Moffamides obediently hurried his steps.

The valley walls, gradually steepening, became sheer precipices, reaching from the valley floor to the brink. In the soil grew copses of trees: jinkos, banglefruit, Uaian willow, blue-baise. Presently patches of cultivation became evident: yams, pulse, yellow-pod, tall white stalks of cereal molk, red pongee bushes burdened with purple-black berries. Here was a secret Arcadia, thought Elvo, still and quiet and solemn. He found himself walking with soft steps and holding his breath to listen. The trail became a narrow road; apparently they were close upon habitation.

The four men went forward even more warily, using the trees for cover, keeping to the shadow of the steep south walls. Underfoot the ground suddenly became a pavement of pink marble, cracked and discolored. A great grotto opened into the side of the cliff, sheltering what appeared to be a temple of most intricate construction fabricated from rose quartz and gold.

Entranced, the four men approached the shrine, if such it were, and saw, to their stupefaction, that the entire edifice had been carved from a single mass of pink quartz, heavily shot with gold. The front façade, forty feet high, was disposed into seven tiers, each showing eleven niches. The quartz everywhere glowed with sheets and filaments of gold; with consummate craft the artisans had worked their scenes to the shape of the natural metal, and the carving of each niche seemed immanent to the rock itself, as if it had always existed, as if the scenes and subjects of the carvings were possessed of natural truth.

The subject matter of the carvings was battle, between stylized erjins and morphotes, both caparisoned in a strange and particular kind of armor or battle dress, using what appeared to be energy weapons of sophisticated design.

Elvo, in a rapturous daze, touched a carving, and where his fingertips removed a film of dust the rose quartz glowed with a light so vital that it seemed to pulse like blood.

In the bottom tier, or gallery, six openings penetrated the shrine. Elvo entered the aperture farthest left and found himself in a tall narrow hall curving so as to emerge at the aperture farthest right. The light in the passage, filtered through several panes and screens of rose quartz, seemed almost palpably dark rose-red, heavy as old wine. Every square inch had been carved with microscopic precision; gold shone bright, and every detail was evident. In awe Elvo walked the length of the hall. Emerging, he re-entered the shrine, using the next aperture toward the center; here the light was livelier and rose-coral, like the flesh of a canchineel plum. This passage was two-thirds the length of the first. Upon his exit he turned into the central passage, where the light glowed ardent pink, and the gold plaques and filaments glistened against the outside light.

Returning to the front he stood contemplating the seven-tiered façade. A treasure, he thought, to amaze the world, and worlds beyond, and the entire Gaeon Reach! He approached and studied the detail. The stylistic conventions were almost incomprehensible; the organization of the various segments could not at once be grasped. It seemed that erjins battled morphotes, each group almost unrecognizable for its grotesque accoutrements; erjins flew through the air in vehicles like none seen across the Gaeon Reach; erjins stood triumphant above corpses of what seemed to be men. An insight came to Elvo; he turned in excitement to Gerd Jemasze: "This must be a memorial, or an historical record! In the passages are detail; the exterior niches are like a table of contents."

"As good a guess as any."

Kurgech had gone off to cast for tracks; he now returned and indicated a ravine choked with blue jinkos, with a dozen pink parasol trees tilting crazily above. "Up on the brink we discovered Uther Madduc's tracks. They led down yonder gulch. Poliamides brought him here, then took him up the valley."

Elvo pondered the seven-tiered shrine of rose quartz and gold. He asked: "Is this Uther Madduc's wonderful joke? Why should he laugh at this?"

"There is more to see," said Jemasze. "Let's go on up the valley."

"Caution," said Kurgech. "Uther Madduc returned much faster than he went."

For a quarter-mile the track led beside the river, then into a copse of solemn black-gums which choked the valley floor.

Kurgech led the way, step by silent step. Methuen hung directly above; pink glimmer from ahead seeped through the forest, where the shadows were velvety black.

The path left the forest. Standing in concealment, the four men looked out at the compound from which erjins were sent forth to servitude.

Elvo's first emotion was deflation. Had he come so far, endured so much only to look at a few nondescript stone buildings around a dusty compound? He could sense that neither Jemasze nor Kurgech intended to make any closer investigation, and Moffamides displayed anxiety tantamount to sheer funk.

Moffamides tugged at Jemasze's arm. "Let us go at once. We stand here in peril of our lives!"

"Strange! You gave us no such previous warning."

"Why should I?" Moffamides spoke in spiteful desperation. "The erjin intended to take you to Tanglin Falls. By now you would be far away and gone."

"There's little to see," said Jemasze. "Where is the danger?"

"It is not for you to ask."

"Then we will wait and see for ourselves."

Into the compound came a dozen erjins, to stand in a desultory group. Four men in priestly white gowns emerged from one of the stone buildings; from another came two more erjins and another man, also dressed as a priest. Without warning, Moffamides lunged forward from the forest and ran yelling toward the compound. Jemasze cursed under his breath and snatched out his gun; he aimed, then made an exasperated sound and held his fire. Elvo, watching in horror, felt a surge of gratitude toward Jemasze: unjust to kill the miserable Moffamides, who owed them no loyalty.

"We'd better leave," said Jemasze, "and quick. We'll go up the gulch where Madduc came down; that should be the shortest route back to the wagon."

They ran through the forest, along the trail beside the cultivation. They forded the river and made for the wooded ravine opposite the shrine.

From the forest burst a group of erjins. They saw the three men and veered in pursuit. Jemasze fired his handgun; one of the erjins, pierced by a needle of dexax, collapsed in a broken heap; the others fell flat and brought forth long Wind-runner guns. Jemasze, Kurgech and Elvo scrambled for the shelter of the trees at the mouth of the gully, and the pellets passed harmlessly by.

Jemasze aimed the gun carefully and killed another erjin, but behind came a dozen more, and Elvo cried

out in frustration: “Run! It’s our only chance! Run!”

Jemasze and Kurgech ignored him. Elvo looked frantically around the landscape, hoping for some miraculous succor. The sun had passed to the side; pink light suffused the gorge, and the seven-tiered shrine gave back an eery beauty. Even in his terror Elvo wondered who had built it. Erjins, undoubtedly. How long ago? Under what circumstances?

Jemasze and Kurgech fired again and again at the erjins, who retreated into the forest. “They’ll be climbing up from the valley and shooting down on us,” said Jemasze. “We’ve got to reach the top first!”

Up the gully they climbed, hearts pounding in their chests, lungs aching for air. The sky began to open out; the rim of the tableland hung close above. From below came desultory shots, striking and exploding much too close for comfort; glancing back, Elvo saw erjins running easily after them up the trail.

They gained the rim of the tableland to stand sobbing for breath. Elvo dropped to his hands and knees, breath rasping in his throat, only to hear Jemasze’s remark: “There they come. Let’s get going!”

Elvo staggered to his feet and saw a dozen erjins at the edge of the plateau a quarter-mile to the north. Jemasze took a moment to scan the landscape. Due east, beyond a succession of descending ridges, slopes and gullies, the land-yawl awaited them. If they attempted to flee in this direction they would present targets to the long rifles of the erjins and soon be killed. A hundred yards south rose a broken pyramid of rotten gneiss: a natural redoubt which offered at least temporary protection. The three men scrambled up the loose scree to the top, finding an almost flat area fifty feet in diameter. Jemasze and Kurgech immediately threw themselves flat and crawling to the edge began to shoot at the erjins on the plateau below. Elvo crouched low and, bringing forth his own weapon, aimed it but could not bring himself to fire. Who was right and who was wrong? The men had come as interlopers; did they have the right to punish those whose rights they had invaded?

Jemasze noted Elvo’s indecision. “What’s wrong with your gun?”

“Nothing. Just futility. That’s all that’s wrong. We’re trapped up here; we can’t escape. What’s one dead erjin more or less?”

“If thirty erjins attack and we kill thirty, then we go free,” explained Jemasze. “If we only kill twenty-five, then we are, as you point out, trapped.”

“We can’t hope to kill all thirty,” Elvo muttered.

“I hope to do so.”

“Suppose there are more than thirty?”

“I’m not interested in hypotheses,” said Jemasze. “I merely want to survive.” Meanwhile he aimed and fired his gun to such good effect that the erjins retreated.

Kurgech made a survey to the south. “We’re surrounded.”

Elvo went to sit on a ledge of rock. The sun, halfway down the western sky, threw his shadow across the barren surface. No water, thought Elvo. In three or four days they would be dead. He sat torpid, elbows on knees, head hanging low. Jemasze and Kurgech muttered together for a period, then Kurgech went off to sit where he could overlook the eastern horizon. Elvo looked at him in wonder: the eastern side of the crag was the least vulnerable to assault...He took a deep breath and tried to pull himself together. He was about to die but he’d face the unpleasant process as gracefully as possible. He rose to his feet and walked across the flat. At the sound of his footsteps, Jemasze turned his head. His face became instantly harsh. “Get down, you fool!”

A pellet sang through the air. Elvo jerked to a cruel enormous blow. He fell to the ground and lay staring up at the sky.

Chapter 11

At Morningswake the days passed, one much like the next. Schaine and Kelse examined the casual and often enigmatic records left by Uther Madduc and instituted a new system to facilitate management of the domain.

Each morning the two conferred over breakfast, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in a state of contention. Schaine was forced to admit that, despite her natural affection for Kelse, she often did not like him very much. Kelse had become crabbed, rigid and humorless, for reasons beyond her understanding. Certainly Kelse had suffered greatly; still his loss of arm and leg inconvenienced him little. In his place, she would never allow herself to brood! Another thought occurred to her. Perhaps Kelse loved someone who had rejected him because of his handicap.

The idea fascinated her. Who could it be?

Social life back and forth across the domains was gay; there were house parties, balls, fiestas, ‘karoos’: these latter pale imitations of the Uldra carnivals of lust, gluttony and psychological catharsis. Kelse agreed that he seldom attended such functions, so when from Ellora Domain arrived an invitation to an all-day picnic in the wonderful Ellora Garden, Schaine accepted for both herself and Kelse.

The picnic was a most delightful affair. Two hundred guests roamed the fifty-acre park which the Lilliet family had now maintained for two hundred years, each generation augmenting and improving the work of those before. Schaine enjoyed herself immensely and meanwhile kept an interested eye upon Kelse. As she had expected he made no attempt to mingle with younger folk—after all, he was only two years her

senior—but kept to the company of those land-barons present.

Schaine renewed many old acquaintances and learned that, as she suspected, Kelse was considered shy and abrupt by the girls.

Schaine sought Kelse out and said, “You’ve just had some dazzling compliments. I probably shouldn’t explain, because you might become vain.”

“Small chance of that,” grumbled Kelse, which Schaine took as an invitation to proceed.

“I’ve been talking to Zia Forres; she considers you most attractive, but she’s afraid to talk to you for fear you might destroy her.”

“I’m not all that irascible; and certainly not vain. Zia Forres can talk to me anytime she likes.”

“You don’t seem elevated by the compliment.”

Kelse gave her a sickly grin. “It startles me.”

“Well then—look pleasantly startled at least, not as if someone had dropped a rock on your foot.”

“Which foot?”

“On your head then.”

“To be quite honest my mind is on other things. There’s been news from Olanje. The Redemptionists have finally persuaded the Mull to issue a definitive mandate—directed against us, naturally.”

Schaine began to feel despondent. If only these discouraging problems would go away, or at least be forgotten, just for today! In a resigned voice she asked: “What kind of mandate?”

“The land-barons are ordered to meet with a council of tribal hetmen. We must abandon all pretense to legal title; said title must be affirmed to reside with the tribes traditionally resident on the domains. We retain the manors and ten acres surrounding, and at the pleasure and discretion of the tribal councils, may apply for leaseholds not to exceed terms of ten years on other lands, and not to exceed one thousand acres per domain.”

Schaine said flippantly, “It could be worse. They could sequester title to the houses as well.”

“They’ve sequestered nothing as yet. A manifesto is words. We hold the land and we’ll continue to hold it.”

“That’s not realistic, Kelse.”

“It seems realistic to me. We’ve declared ourselves a political entity independent of the Mull; they no longer exert authority over us—if ever they did.”

“Realism is this: Szintarre has a population of millions. The political entity you speak of has a population of a few thousand. The Mull exerts much more power. We’ve got to obey.”

“Don’t equate power with population,” said Kelse. “Especially urban population. But there’s no immediate worry—not from our side at least. We won’t kill any Redemptionists unless they come here to kill us. I hope they think better of it.”

Schaine turned away, furiously angry with Kelse and in the mood to do something wild and outrageous. She restrained herself and went to visit with her old friends, but the day had lost its zest.

Returning to Morningswake, Kelse and Schaine were surprised to find six Ao elders encamped on the lawn in front of the house, in a manner which Schaine thought portentous and somber. Kelse muttered, “Now what’s the emergency?”

Schaine said: “They’ve also had the news from Olanje. They’re here to get your signature on the lease.”

“Not likely.” Kelse nonetheless hesitated before he went to investigate. “You’d better wait in the house—just in case.” And so Schaine, standing in the grand front parlor, watched through the window as Kelse crossed the lawn to where the Aos waited.

Kelse returned to the house faster than he had departed. Schaine ran out into the hall to meet him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to take the Standard north. Zagwitz has had a message from Kurgech. A mind-message, needless to say, the substance of which is trouble.”

Schaine’s heart went up in her throat. “Do they know how, or why, or where?”

“I’m not sure what they know. They want me to take them up into the Volwodes.”

“What about Gerd and Elvo?”

“They’ve nothing to say.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No. There’s danger. I’ll keep in touch with you by radio.”

At midnight the sky-car returned, with Kurgech, Gerd Jemasze, and Elvo Glissam barely conscious on an improvised stretcher. Kelse had already administered an all-purpose disinfectant and pain-suppressant from the sky-car’s emergency kit. Gerd and Kurgech carried the stretcher into the sick-bay where Cosmo Brasbane the domain medic removed Elvo’s clothes and gave him further medical attention.

Kurgech started to leave the house; Gerd called him back. “Where are you going?”

Kurgech said soberly: “This is Morningswake Manor and the traditions of your people are strong.”

Gerd said, “You and I have been through too much together; if it weren’t for you we’d all be dead. What’s good enough for me is good enough for you.”

Schaine, looking at Gerd Jemasze, felt an almost overwhelming suffusion of warmth; she wanted to laugh and she wanted to cry. Of course, of course! She loved Gerd Jemasze! Through prejudice and incomprehension she had not allowed herself to recognize the fact. Gerd Jemasze was a man of the Alouan; she was Schaine Madduc of Morningswake. Elvo Glissam? No.

Kelse said gruffly, and perhaps only Schaine apprehended the nearly imperceptible reluctance: “Gerd is quite right; formality can’t apply to situations like this.”

Kurgech shook his head and half-smiling, took a step backward. “The expedition is over; conditions are once more as before. Our lives go differently, and this is as it should be.”

Schaine ran forward. “Kurgech, don’t be so solemn and fateful; I want you to stay with us. I’m sure you’re hungry and I’m having a meal laid out.”

Kurgech went to the door. “Thank you, Lady Schaine, but you are Outker, I am Uldra. Tonight I will be more comfortable with my own people.” He departed.

In the morning Elvo Glissam, his shoulder bandaged and his left arm in a sling, limped down to the breakfast table to find the others there before him, and all talking. Everyone felt at the same time emotionally flat but superficially stimulated and almost euphoric, so that all kinds of remarks and opinions came forth that might not have been broached under different circumstances.

The talk went quickly and lightly, glancing on many subjects. In a weak but marveling voice, like a man describing a nightmare, Elvo Glissam recounted his version of the events of the past two weeks which

provided Schaine and Kelse a more particularized and personal account than that which they had gleaned from Gerd Jemasze.

Schaine asked in bewilderment: “But where is the ‘wonderful joke’? I haven’t heard anything even remotely funny.”

“Father had an odd sense of humor,” said Kelse, “if any.”

“He must have had a sense of humor,” declared Elvo. “From all I’ve heard of him he was a remarkable man.”

“Well then,” Schaine challenged him, “where is the great joke?”

“It’s too subtle for me.”

Glancing sidewise at Gerd Jemasze, Schaine thought to detect a half-smile. “Gerd! You know!”

“Only a guess.”

“Tell me! Please!”

“Let me think about it; I don’t know whether it’s a joke or a tragedy.”

“Tell us! Let us all judge!”

Gerd Jemasze started to speak but hesitated too long, and Elvo, almost intoxicated from relief of tension, spoke first. “Joke or no joke, the shrine is a remarkable discovery. Morningswake will soon be a name as familiar as Gomaz and Sadhara! There’ll be guided tours flying out from Olanje!”

“We could put up a hotel and make a fortune,” Schaine suggested.

“What would we do with a fortune?” growled Kelse. “We have all the money we need.”

“If we’re allowed to keep Morningswake.”

“Bah. Who’s to stop us? Don’t say the Mull.”

“The Mull.”

“Once again—bah.”

“I’ll take the fortune. We need another big saloon,” said Schaine. “Remember, the Sturdevant is wrecked. I say, let’s buy another Sturdevant.”

Kelse threw up his hands. “How will we pay for it? Do you know how much a sound saloon car costs?”

“What’s money? We’ll run our own guided tours out to this wonderful exhibit. And don’t forget: the hotel!”

Elvo asked: “Is that valley the Palga or the Retent or what?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” said Gerd Jemasze. “The gorge runs west and south out of the Volwodes. That’s Ao country and Morningswake domain.”

“No problem then,” declared Elvo. “You own a magnificent historical monument, and you have every right to build a hotel!”

“Not so fast,” said Kelse. “The Mull and the Redemptionists say we own no more than the clothes on our back; who is right?”

“I agree the matter must be adjudicated,” said Elvo. “Still, Redemptionist though I am, I wish the best for my friends here at Morningswake.”

“Strange that the Aos know nothing about the shrine,” said Gerd Jemasze. “I’ve checked the map; it’s on Ao tribal land.”

“It’s also next to the Retent,” said Kelse. “The Garganche might know about it.”

“Aha!” cried Schaine. “All is clear. Jorjol has learned of the shrine; he wants to build a hotel; and that’s why he wants to kick us out of Morningswake!”

“I wouldn’t put anything past Jorjol,” said Kelse.

“You wrong poor Muffin,” said Schaine. “He’s really very simple, very straightforward, very open. I understand him completely.”

“Then you’re the only one,” said Kelse.

“I also disagree,” said Elvo. “Jorjol is a very complex person. He has no choice. Let’s view him from the standpoint of the psychologist. He’s an Outker and an Uldra at the same time: two sets of ideas work in his one brain. He can’t have a thought without finding an instant contradiction. It’s a wonder he’s as effective as he is!”

“No puzzle there,” said Kelse. “Outker or Uldra, first and last, backward and forward, Jorjol is an egotist. He switches back and forth between roles as it suits him. At this moment he’s a Garganche bucko: the swashbuckling Gray Prince. Do you know, it’s quite likely that he drove the sky-shark that shot down Father, and the Apex as well!”

Schaine produced an indignant refutation. “What utter nonsense! You know Jorjol better than that! He’s proud and gallant! A ruthless assassin? Never!”

Kelse was not convinced. “By Garganche theories, ruthless assassination is equivalent to pride and gallantry.”

“You’re not at all fair to Jorjol,” said Schaine. “His ‘pride and gallantry’, or however you want to put it, saved your life. He deserves at least credit for bravery.”

“I’ll concede him that,” said Kelse. “Still, I don’t think much of his loyalty.”

Schaine laughed. “Loyalty to whom? To what? I never had reason to complain.”

“Naturally not; you were in love with him.”

Schaine heaved a patient sigh. “I’d prefer to call it infatuation.”

“Father, it would seem, is now vindicated.”

With an effort Schaine decided not to quarrel with Kelse. She responded quietly and, she hoped, rationally. “Father meant well. He gave Muffin a great deal, up to a carefully defined limit. Muffin naturally resented the limit more than he appreciated the generosity. And why not? Put yourself in his place: half part of the family, half a Blue ragamuffin who ate his meals in the kitchen. He was allowed to look at the cake and even taste it, but never eat any of it.”

Elvo Glissam ventured a facetious quip: “And you were the cake?—I hope not!”

Schaine raised her eyebrows and looked away with pointed coolness. The remark seemed in poor taste—especially in view of the fact that immediately following Jorjol’s rescue of Kelse, she had allowed Jorjol considerably more than a taste. The discovery of the affair had provoked a wrathful explosion in Uther Madduc, which had sent Jorjol flying in one direction and Schaine thirty-two light years in another.

Schaine said evenly: “Those times are quite remote.” She rose to her feet. “The conversation is becoming dull.”

Chapter 12

Gerd Jemasze, with his younger brother Adare, two cousins and a nephew, flew the Standard utility up to the Palga across to where the sarai broke against the Volwode foothills. They found the land-yawl undisturbed. Gerd and Adare Jemasze and the nephew sailed the yawl east, while the cousins flew overhead in the sky-car.

A day's brisk sail brought them to No. 2 Depot. Jemasze paid rent for the use of the land-yawl and examined the Dacy sky-boat, which Moffamides' fiaps had kept inviolate. A new priest was on hand, a thin young man with burning eyes and a thin quivering mouth, who watched intently but spoke not a word. Jemasze wondered if Moffamides had gone to sit high in the Aluban, but forbore to question the young priest, who stood glowering at them from across the compound.

No sooner had Gerd Jemasze returned to Suaniset than news arrived from Morningswake of an extraordinary incursion from the Retent. The raiders numbered over four hundred elite warriors, mixed Hunge, Garganche, Aulk and Zeffir: an amazing circumstance in itself to discover traditional enemies acting in concert. A few Ao scouts skirmished with the outriders, then fell back before the main force, which proceeded to Lake Dor where three Ao kachembas were discovered and defiled.

Kelse immediately broadcast a call for assistance, and the Order of Uaia found itself required to fight before it had fully defined itself as an entity. A heterogeneous and rather casual assortment of utility flyers, passenger saloons, sky-cars, runabouts and inspection drifters, to the number of sixty, each with a complement of from two to eight armed men, assembled at Morningswake, then flew down to Lake Dor, to discover that the Uldra raiders were already retreating across the rocky barrens west of the lake. The aircraft from the domains attacked with guns and energy-projectors; the Uldras dispersed in all directions. On their lunging mounts they made the poorest of targets and the punitive fleet inflicted minimal damage...A score of sky-sharks dropped from the upper atmosphere and in the twinkling of an eye a dozen aircraft were disabled and sent plunging to the ground. Then, before adequate retaliation could be effected, the sky-sharks dashed away to the west.

In a dour mood the land-barons rescued those who had been shot down and returned to their domains. The foray had been ineffectual; they had been defeated by tactics more clever than their own.

A number of land-barons gathered at Morningswake to discuss the cheerless events of the day. They had ventured forth overconfidently; they had been tricked; they had paid the price of vanity.

Dm. Ervan Collode, a portly and rather bombastic man whom Schaine had always disliked, was one of those who had been shot down by the sky-sharks. He had escaped with a severe jolting and various bruises, but the experience had stimulated him to a vindictive rage. "We'll never have peace until we absolutely break the Retent tribes. We must put them in such fear that they'll never again attack us!"

Dm. Joris made a wry observation: "I fear that we lack capacity to cow them. For thousands of years they've been cutting up each other, and it only whets their appetite for more."

“They don’t go far enough,” declared Dm. Collode. “They never press to a decision! If we destroy their herds, poison their water, we’ll force their submission.”

Dm. Joris demurred. “I don’t believe such tactics would work; they live too easily off the land, and we’d simply have our trouble for nothing.”

“There is an important first step we should undertake,” said Jemasze. “The Retent tribes are theoretically wards of the Mull, and we should demand that the Mull assert control.”

Dm. Collode blew through his teeth. “What good will that do? The Mull is dominated by Redemptionists! Have you forgotten their manifesto?”

Kelse likewise took exception to the proposal. “We can’t declare ourselves independent, then in the next breath appeal for help.”

“I suggest no appeal, but a formal notice, from one sovereign entity to another,” said Jemasze. “I would notify them that the Retent Uldras are molesting not only us but the tribes under our protection; that we plan decisive action which might include seizure and permanent control of the Retent, unless they take steps to restrain their wards. Then, if the Mull doesn’t act, and we do, they can’t say that they haven’t been warned. If finally we’re forced to subdue the Garganche, we at least have a basis of legality.”

“What good is legality to the Garganche?” grumbled Dm. Collode. “To an Uldra, might is right.”

Schaine could not restrain a sardonic chuckle. “To avoid making fools of yourselves, I suggest that you forgo hypocrisy. For two hundred years the land-barons have asserted the right of might, so now, when the shoe is on the other foot, don’t look askance at the maxim.”

“Hypocrisy isn’t an issue,” Jemasze responded. “Whenever there’s conflict the weaker side loses; and all else being equal, it’s better to win than to lose.”

“It depends on the company you keep,” said Schaine, darting a glance toward Dm. Collode.

Dm. Joris said: “Undoubtedly Gerd Jemasze is right. To prepare a position, we first must notify the Mull.”

Dm. Thanet of Balabar said, “Let us do so at this very moment. We are not precisely an official body, but surely we can function as an instrument to this particular end.”

The group moved into the study. Kelse telephoned Holrude House in Olanje. The face of a secretary appeared on the screen. Kelse identified himself. “I am Dm. Kelse Madduc, and I represent the provisional executive committee of the Uaian Order. I have an important message to transmit to the

Chairman of the Mull.”

“The Chairman, Dm. Madduc, is currently Dm. Erris Sammatzen, and it so happens that he is at hand.”

Erris Sammatzen’s face appeared on the screen. “Kelse Madduc? We have met, at Villa Mirasol.”

“Quite true. My purpose in calling you, however, is not social, but official. I speak for the provisional executive committee of the Uaian Order, and I inform you that a large group of Uldras from the Retent, nominally wards of the Mull, yesterday invaded our lands, specifically Morningswake Domain, and there committed acts of murder and vandalism. We have driven them back into the Retent and we now look to you to prevent any further incursions.”

Erris Sammatzen reflected a moment. “Such raids, if they have in fact occurred, are a serious matter, and certainly cannot be condoned.”

“‘If’ they have occurred?” cried Kelse angrily. “Of course they have occurred! I just now told you about them!”

Erris Sammatzen said, “Please, Dm. Madduc, don’t take offense. As a private individual, of course I believe you. As Chairman of the Mull, I must take a more measured approach.”

“I don’t follow your distinctions,” said Kelse. “The Order of Uaia notifies you, through me, that these raids have occurred, and requires that you ensure their permanent cessation; otherwise we must protect ourselves.”

Erris Sammatzen spoke in a ponderous voice: “I must put certain matters into perspective. I remind you that the Mull is the organ of all the folk of Koryphon and must act in the best interests of all the folk. The land-barons of the Alouan are a minority even upon the so-called ‘domains’; they therefore can claim neither autonomy nor any wide representative function. I also remind you of the recent ordinance proclaimed by the Mull which reconstructs the so-called Domains of Koryphon, regarding which we have received no acknowledgment.”

Dm. Joris, perceiving that Kelse was about to make an immoderate reply, stepped forward. “The points you raise are at issue. We hope they may be resolved in a reasonable manner. Your remarks, however, are not responsive to the notification just made to you by Dm. Kelse Madduc.”

“They are not responsive,” said Erris Sammatzen, “because the Mull does not recognize the premises upon which they are based. Further, we have received information which contradicts your assertions. I therefore order you to desist from any further acts hostile to tribes of the Retent.”

Kelse made a strangled sound of astonishment and displeasure. “Do you suggest that I have made a false report to you?”

“I state only that contradictory information has been put before the Mull.”

Dm. Joris once more interposed himself. “In that case, we suggest that you come here to Morningswake and make your own investigations. Then, should you discover, as you surely will, that we have reported the facts accurately, you can make appropriate representation to the Retent tribes.”

Erris Sammatzen reflected thirty seconds. Then he said: “I will do as you suggest, in company with other members of the Mull. In the meantime I ask that you refrain from any further attacks or reprisals, and I will transmit similar instructions to the other parties at contention.”

Dm. Joris smiled a cool thin smile. “We will be most happy to meet with the Mull and work out a mutual accommodation: from our point of view the sooner the better. In the meantime, while we do not concede your authority either to instruct or to advise us, we intend to refrain from attacking the tribes of the Retent, except in defense of our sovereign territory.”

Kelse asked: “When may we expect you at Morningswake?”

“The day after tomorrow will be convenient.”

Chapter 13

The land-barons, all except Gerd Jemasze, had returned to their respective domains, and night had fallen over the Alouan. Schaine went to sit on the front lawn overlooking the starlit landscape. The knots in her mind began to unravel, and her conflicts resolved themselves in the simplest possible manner.

She loved Morningswake: this was the elemental fact; nothing was more real. Morningswake, with its history and traditions, breathed a life of its own; Morningswake was an entity yearning for survival. If she intended to live at Morningswake, then she must protect it. If she felt that she must advance a hostile cause, then she must leave and go elsewhere, which of course was unthinkable.

She thought of Elvo Glissam and smiled. Today, after the land-barons had gone off to punish the Uldras, Elvo had urged that he and she return to Olanje and there espouse each other, to which suggestion Schaine had given an offhand, almost absentminded, refusal. Elvo had accepted her decision without surprise and had voiced his intention of returning to Olanje as soon as possible. Ah well, thought Schaine, life went on.

She went back into the house. In the study lights still glowed; Gerd Jemasze and Kelse conferred late. Schaine went upstairs to her bedroom on the west verandah.

Schaine awoke. The night was dark, and all was quiet. Yet something had aroused her.

A softtap tapat the door.

Schaine climbed drowsily from bed, stumbled to the door and slid it ajar. On the verandah a tall shape darker than the shadows awaited her. Recognition came instantly, and she was no longer half-asleep. She turned on the lights in her room. “Jorjol! What in the world are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

Schaine peered in bewilderment up the dark verandah. “Who let you in?”

“No one.” Jorjol gave a soft chuckle. “I arrived by the old route—up the corner column.”

“Sheer insanity, Jorjol! What could you have in mind?”

“Need you ask that?” Jorjol leaned forward as if to enter the room but Schaine slipped past and stepped out upon the verandah.

The night was absolutely still. The arabella vine climbing the columns to the roof hung in festoons, and the white blossoms gave off a sweet perfume.

Jorjol stepped a trifle closer; Schaine went to the balustrade and looked out over the landscape, which was dark except for a few glints of starlight reflected from Wild Crake Pond. Jorjol put his arm around her waist and lowered his head to kiss her. Schaine turned away. “Stop it, Jorjol, I’m not at all interested. I haven’t the faintest notion why you’re here, and, really, you’d better go.”

“Come now, don’t be prim,” whispered Jorjol. “You love me and I love you; it’s been that way all our lives, and now more than ever!”

“No, Jorjol, not at all. I’m not the person I was five years ago, and you’re not either.”

“Quite true! I’m a man, a person of consequence! For five years I’ve burned for you, and longed for you, and since I saw you at Olanje I’ve thought of nothing else.”

Schaine laughed uneasily. “Please be sensible, Jorjol! Go away and call tomorrow morning.”

“Hah! I don’t dare! I’m now the enemy; have you forgotten?”

“Well then, you’d better mend your ways and behave yourself. Now good night! I’m going back to bed.”

“No!” Jorjol spoke with great earnestness. “Listen, Schaine! Come away with me! My dear girl Schaine! You’re not one of these pompous tyrants who calls himself a land-baron! You’re a free soul, so come

with me now and be free! We will live as happy as birds, with the best of everything the world affords! You don't belong here; you know that as well as I do!"

"You're totally and absolutely wrong, Jorjol! This is my home and I love it dearly!"

"But you love me more! Tell me so, my dearest Schaine!"

"I don't love you, not in the slightest. In fact, I love someone else."

"Who? Elvo Glissam?"

"Of course not!"

"Then it must be Gerd Jemasze! Tell me! Is it he?"

"Isn't this a personal matter, Muffin?"

"Don't call me Muffin!" Jorjol's voice rose in pitch and intensity. "And it's not private because I want you for myself. You haven't denied it! So your new lover is Gerd Jemasze!"

"He's not my lover, Jorjol, new or old. And please take your hands off of me." For Jorjol, in his excitement, had clenched his fingers upon her two arms.

He whispered huskily: "Please, darling Schaine, tell me it isn't true; that you love me!"

"I'm sorry, Jorjol, it is true, and I don't love you. And now, good night. I'm going back to bed."

Jorjol gave a small ugly laugh. "Do you think I so easily accept defeat? You know me better! I came to get you and you're coming away with me. Very soon you'll learn to love me. I warn you, don't try to fight me!"

Schaine shrank back appalled, as Jorjol's fingers gripped her arms like steel tongs. She drew in her breath to scream; with one long-fingered hand, Jorjol seized her throat; with his other fist he struck her in the side at the bottom of the rib-cage in a clever way to cause an agony of pain, and Schaine's knees sagged...The porch lights went on; she felt a confused scuffle, saw a blur of movement, heard a grunt of shock and dismay.

Schaine staggered to the wall. Jorjol lay crumpled, half against the balustrade. A knife hung in a scabbard against his leg; in his sash gleamed the ivory handle of a pistol. His hands twitched, then jerked for the pistol. Gerd Jemasze stepped forward, struck down at Jorjol's arm, and the pistol went clattering across the floor. Schaine swiftly stooped and picked it up, even while she tingled with embarrassment. How

much had Gerd Jemasze heard?"

The three stood motionless: Jorjol pale, blasted by emotion; Jemasze somber and brooding; Schaine tense with a not unpleasant excitement. Jorjol turned to Schaine and in the wild staring face she thought once more to see the face of Muffin the boy.

"Schaine, dear Schaine—will you come with me?"

"No, Jorjol, of course not! It's really absurd to think I might. I'm not an Uldra; I'd be miserable out there on the Retent."

Jorjol gave a poignant throbbing call, a cry from the heart. "You're like all the other Outkers."

"I hope not. I'm really just myself."

Jorjol drew himself stiffly erect. "I implore you, by your brother's life which I gave to him! This is a blood debt and cannot be denied!"

Gerd Jemasze made an odd sound: a choking gasping stammer as words rose too thickly in his throat to be enunciated. He finally spoke. "Shall I tell the truth?"

Jorjol blinked and cocked his head sidewise. "What truth?"

"You'd best apologize to Lady Schaine and assure her that no obligation exists and then go your way."

Jorjol spoke in a stony voice: "The debt exists, and I demand that she give me my due."

"The debt does not exist and never existed. When the erjin attacked Kelse, you climbed a rock and watched while the creature tore Kelse to pieces. When you saw Schaine come running, you carefully shot the beast from the top of the rock, then jumped down and pretended to be in the middle of the fight, and you even rubbed Kelse's blood on yourself. You did not try to save Kelse. You allowed him to be mutilated!"

Jorjol whispered: "You lie! You were not there."

Jemasze's voice was cold as fate. "Kurgech was there. He saw the whole thing."

Jorjol gave a sudden cry of despair: an oddly sweet contralto sound. He ran to the corner of the verandah, swung over the balustrade and was gone.

Schaine turned to Gerd Jemasze and spoke in a voice of horror. "Is this true?"

“It’s true.”

“It can’t be true,” muttered Schaine, looking back down the years. “It’s too awful to be true.” It seemed as natural as the wind and the movement of the stars across the sky to find herself sobbing against Gerd Jemasze’s chest, his arms around her.

“It’s true,” said Kelse. He came slowly out on the verandah. “I heard what you told him. I’ve suspected it for five years. All his life he’s hated us. Someday I’ll kill him.”

Chapter 14

To Morningswake in a black-and-silver Ellux saloon came a delegation from the Mull: Erris Sammatzen and six others. On hand to greet them was the Directive Committee of the Uaian Order: nine land-barons selected and given legitimacy by a hasty telephonic referendum across the Treaty Lands.

Dm. Joris made a rather dry and formal welcoming statement, his purpose being to establish at the outset an official tone to the meeting. In keeping with this concern, the land-barons wore formal dress and each wore his heraldic cap. In contrast, the members of the Mull were almost ostentatiously casual. “The Order of Uaia welcomes you to Morningswake,” said Dm. Joris. “We earnestly desire that this conference will reduce the misunderstandings which trouble our two polities. We hope that you will approach the discussions constructively and realistically, and for our part we intend that our relations with Szintarre shall continue to be friendly and intimate.”

Sammatzen laughed. “Dm. Joris, thank you for your welcome. As you’re well aware, I can’t accept, or even take seriously, your other remarks. We have come here to acquaint ourselves with local conditions, so that we can administrate the area in the best interests of the majority of its inhabitants; and hopefully to the ultimate satisfaction, or at least acceptance, of everyone.”

“Our differences may or may not be irreconcilable,” said Dm. Joris without emotion. “If you please, Dm. Madduc has provided refreshment for us; and then, when you are of a mind, we can resume our discussions in the Great Hall.”

For half an hour the groups engaged in cautious pleasantries on the west lawn, then repaired to the Great Hall. The formal attire of the Directive Committee accorded with the nobility of the room, the grandeur of its proportions, the richness of the old wood. Kelse seated the Mull on one side of the table, the Directive Committee on the other.

Erris Sammatzen briskly assumed control of the meeting. “I won’t pretend that our purpose here is anything other than what it is. The Mull is the single administrative body of Koryphon. We directly represent the population of Szintarre; we provide a forum for the inhabitants of Uaia. Over the Uldra we exercise a benevolent protectorate. The domains of the land-barons are included under our control, by

protocols both formal and informal; they also have rights of petition and protest.

“As you know we have felt obliged to issue an edict, the articles of which are now familiar to you.” Erris Sammatzen spoke now in a slow and meaningful voice. “We cannot and will not tolerate the recalcitrance of a few hundred stubborn men and women who wish to retain aristocratic perquisites to which they are not entitled. A more natural and equitable system is long overdue, and I remind you that the absolute authority of the land-barons across vast domains, achieved through violence and compulsion, is now terminated. Title is reinvested in those tribes which have traditional and legitimate ownership of the land. We intend to inflict hardship on no one, and will assist in the orderly transfer of authority.”

Dm. Joris replied, again without heat: “We reject your edict. It obviously derives from altruism and in this sense does you credit, but it makes a number of doctrinaire assumptions. I point out that the option of self-determination is the inherent right of any community, no matter how small, provided that it conforms to the basic charter of the Gaeon Reach. We adhere to these principles, and we claim this right. I now wish to anticipate your claim that the rights of the domain tribes are curtailed. To the contrary. The factors which contribute to what they consider an optimum life have never been more favorable. Our dams and flood-control projects guarantee them year-round water for themselves and their herds. When they need money to buy imported articles, they are able to take temporary or permanent employment, as they wish. Their freedom of movement is absolute, except upon the few acres immediately contiguous to the domain halls, so that in effect, there is dual occupancy of the land, to our mutual satisfaction and benefit. We exploit no one; we exert authority only in a protective sense. We provide medical assistance; we occasionally exert police powers, though not often, inasmuch as the tribes usually administer their own justice. We feel that you of the Mull have been stampeded into reckless decisions by the zealous and articulate group known as the Redemptionists, who deal in abstractions and not in facts.

“I ask: what is accomplished by your edict? Nothing. What would the Uldras have which they do not have now? Nothing. They would lose, and we would lose. Your edicts only bring mischief to all of us—assuming that we agreed to them, which we do not.”

Dm. Joris was answered by Adelys Lam, a thin nervous woman with a bony face and restless eyes. She spoke in an urgent voice and punctuated her words with jabbing motions of her forefinger.

“I intend to speak of law and its innate nature. Dm. Joris, you have used the words ‘doctrinaire’ and ‘abstraction’ in a pejorative sense, and I must point out that all law, all ethical systems, all morality, are based upon doctrines and abstract principles by which we test specific cases. If we adopt a pragmatic attitude, we are lost and civilization is lost; morality becomes a matter of expedience or brute force. The edicts of the Mull therefore rest not so much upon exigencies of the moment as upon fundamental theorems. One of these is that title to pre-empted, stolen or sequestered property never becomes valid, whether the lapse of time be two minutes or two hundred years. The flaw in title remains, and reparation, no matter how dilatory, must be made. Again, you scorn the Redemptionists; as for me, I rejoice that the Redemptionists are sufficiently idealistic and sufficiently motivated that they have urged this sometimes sluggish Mull to decisive action.”

Gerd Jemasze responded in a cold voice. “Your ideas might carry more weight were you not hypocrites and persons with an infinite capacity for—”

“‘Hypocrites’?” flared Adelys Lam. “Dm. Jemasze, I am astounded by your use of the word!”

Erris Sammatzen said reproachfully: “I had hoped our discussions might proceed without fulmination, threats or invective. I am sorry to see that Dm. Jemasze has become intemperate.”

“Let him call us names,” Adelys Lam cried angrily. “Our consciences are clear, which is more than he can say for his own.”

Jemasze listened imperturbably. “My remarks were not invective,” he said. “I refer to demonstrable fact. You legislate against our imaginary crimes, and meanwhile you tolerate in Szintarre and across the Retent an offense proscribed everywhere in the Gaeen Reach: slavery. In fact, I suspect that at least several of you are slave-keepers.”

Sammatzen pursed his lips. “You refer to the erjins, no doubt. The facts of the matter are unclear.”

Adelys Lam declared: “The erjins are not intelligent beings, by the legal definition of the term or by any other. They are clever animals, no more.”

“We can demonstrate the opposite, beyond any argument,” said Gerd Jemasze. “Before you reproach us for abstract transgressions, you should abate your own very real offenses.”

Erris Sammatzen said uncomfortably: “You make a cogent point; I can’t argue with you. However, I doubt that you can make so positive a demonstration.”

Adelys Lam protested. “Surely we are being diverted from our principal task?”

“Our schedule is flexible,” said Sammatzen. “I’m willing to clarify this other matter.”

Another Mull member, the crusty Thaddios Tarr, said: “We can’t avoid doing so and retain our credibility as an impartial administrative body.”

Gerd Jemasze rose to his feet. “I think we’ll be able to surprise you.”

Erris Sammatzen cautiously asked: “How?”

“Uther Madduc called it his ‘wonderful joke’. But I doubt if you’ll laugh.”

Schaine, listening from the side of the Great Hall, said to Elvo Glissam: “I don’t understand why anyone

should laugh. Do you understand this ‘wonderful joke’?”

Elvo shook his head. “It escapes me completely.”

The members of the Mull boarded the black-and-silver Ellux saloon. Gerd Jemasze went to the controls and took the craft aloft. Behind came a convoy of ten well-armed sky-cars. Gerd Jemasze set a course to the northwest, across the most beautiful region of Morningswake: a land of magnificent vistas and far perspectives.

The scarp which delineated the Palga loomed in the distance; the Volwodes rose into the sky; the land became bleak and broken. At the bottom of a wide valley flowed a glistening river: the Mellorus. Jemasze altered course and descended into the valley, to fly only a hundred yards above the river.

The valley walls grew steep and high and obscured part of the sky; a few moments later they passed over cultivated plots and irrigated orchards which Jemasze recognized. He slowed the Ellux until it barely drifted up the gorge, then turned to the members of the Mull. “What I’m about to show you has been seen by very few men indeed. Most of these have been Wind-runners—because we’re close on the station where erjins are bred, trained and marshalled for export. There is definitely an element of danger in this demonstration, but when I am done you will agree that I am justified in bringing you here. In any case our assembled firepower provides protection, and the hull of this Ellux should be tough enough to turn back bullets from the Palga long-rifles.”

“I hope,” said Julias Metheyr, “that you intend to show us something more than erjins marching in formation or learning to put on their trousers.”

Adelys Lam said crossly: “I personally don’t care to be killed or even wounded for your personal gratification.”

Gerd Jemasze made no response. He set the Ellux saloon down in front of the rose-quartz and gold shrine. He activated doors and descensor; the Mull trooped out upon the pink marble floor.

“What is it?” asked Julias Metheyr in awe.

“It appears to be a temple or historical monument constructed long before the first men arrived on Koryphon. The detail chronicles an erjin civilization.”

“‘Civilization’?” asked Adelys Lam.

“You can decide for yourself. Erjins are depicted riding in what appear to be spaceships. You’ll see them fighting morphotes, who also use weapons and other adjuncts of a technical society; so the morphotes

also have contrived a civilization in their time. Finally, the erjins record a war with men.”

Erris Sammatzen strode forward to examine the seven-tiered fane; the others followed, muttering in amazement as they studied the intricate carving. One by one the escort sky-craft dropped down into the gorge and landed, and the occupants came forth to marvel at the shrine in company with the others.

Erris Sammatzen approached Jemasze. “And this is Uther Madduc’s ‘wonderful joke’?”

“So I believe.”

“But what’s funny?”

“The magnificent ability of the human race to delude itself.”

“That’s bathos, not humor,” said Sammatzen shortly. “The joke, at least, is a hoax.”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Jemasze.

Sammatzen ignored him. “The Wind-runner training station is nearby?”

“About half a mile up the gorge.”

“Is there any reason why we should not go there now, and put a stop to the traffic?”

Jemasze shrugged. “I couldn’t guarantee your safety. But I believe that we mount enough firepower to protect ourselves if the need arose.”

“What do you know concerning this operation?”

“No more than you. I saw it for the first time a week or so ago.”

Sammatzen rubbed his chin. “It occurs to me that the tribes of the Retent will resent the loss of their mounts. What is your opinion on this?”

Jemasze grinned. “They can buy criptids from the domains.”

Erris Sammatzen went to confer with the other members of the Mull; they argued ten minutes, then Sammatzen approached Jemasze. “We want to examine the training station if it can be accomplished safely.”

“We’ll do our best.”

The compound and the long buildings were as Jemasze remembered them, and even more somnolent than before. A pair of Wind-runners squatted beside one of the walls. At the sight of the descending sky-craft, they slowly rose to their feet and stood in postures of uncertainty, debating whether or not to take to their heels.

Jemasze dropped the Ellux to the ground directly before the largest of the stone structures. He opened the door, extended the descensor and alighted, followed by Sammatzen and more cautiously by the other members of the Mull.

Jemasze signaled to the Wind-runners; they approached without enthusiasm. Jemasze asked: "Where is the director of the agency?"

The Wind-runners looked bewildered. "Director?"

"The individual in authority."

The Wind-runners muttered together, then one asked: "Might you be referring to the Old Erjin? If so, there he stands."

Out of the interior of the stone building, like a fish rising from dark water, came an exceedingly large erjin; a creature bald, with neither ruff nor facial tufts, its skin a curious snake-belly white. Never had Gerd Jemasze seen an erjin of such proportions or such presence. It glanced aside; one of the Wind-runners stiffened as if by electric shock, then moved forward to stand beside the erjin, where he served as translator, converting telepathic messages into words. The erjin asked: "What do you want here?"

Sammatzen said: "We are the Mull, the primary administrative organ of Koryphon."

"Of Szintarre," said Jemasze.

Sammatzen continued. "The enslavement of intelligent beings is an illegal act, on Szintarre and throughout the Gaeen Reach. We find that erjins are being enslaved as mounts for the Uldra tribes and as servants and workers on Szintarre."

"They are not slaves," the Old Erjin stated, through the agency of the Wind-runner.

"They are slaves by our definition, and we are here to stop the practice. No more erjins may be sold either to Uldras or to the Gaeans of Szintarre, and those already enslaved will be freed."

"They are not slaves," stated the Old Erjin.

“If they are not slaves—what are they?”

The Old Erjin transmitted his message. “I knew you were coming. You and your fleet of sky-ships were watched as you entered the valley of the monument; you have been expected.”

Sammatzen said dryly: “For a fact there seems little activity around here.”

“The activity is elsewhere. We sold no slaves; we sent forth warriors. The signal has been broadcast. This world is ours and we are now resuming control.”

The men listened gape-mouthed.

The Old Erjin controlled the voice of the Wind-runner: “The signal has gone forth. At this instant, erjins destroy the Uldras who thought to master them. Those erjins whom you considered servants now dominate the city Olanje and all Szintarre.”

Sammatzen stared toward Joris and Jemasze, his face contorted in disbelief and anguish. “Is the creature telling the truth?”

“I don’t know,” said Jemasze. “Call Olanje by radio and find out.”

Sammatzen ran heavy-footed to the saloon. Jemasze watched the Old Erjin reflectively a moment or two, then asked: “Are you planning violence upon us, here and now?”

“Not unless you initiate such violence, inasmuch as you have a clear preponderance of force. So leave here as you came.”

Jemasze and Joris retreated to the Ellux saloon, to find Sammatzen turning away from the radio. His face was pale; sweat beaded his forehead. “Erjins are running rampant in Olanje; the city is a madhouse!”

Jemasze went to the controls. “We’re leaving, and fast, before the Old Erjin changes its mind.”

“Can’t we persuade it to call off its warriors?” cried Adelys Lam. “They’re killing, destroying, burning! Nothing but bloodshed! Let me out! I will entreat the Old Erjin to peace!”

Jemasze thrust her back. “We can’t entreat it to anything. If it were rational it wouldn’t have launched the attack to begin with. Let’s leave here before the rest of us are dead.”

Chapter 15

The erjin uprising achieved its most striking successes in Olanje, where fewer than a thousand erjins cowed and dominated the entire city. The residents hysterically submitted to slaughter, or fled pell-mell. Some hid in the jungles; some retreated to their villas in the Carnelian Mountains; a few boarded their yachts or the yachts of their friends; others flew aircraft to the Persimmon Islands or Uaia. Only the most negligible resistance was offered, and later, when historians and sociologists studied the episode, and the question was put: "Why did you not fight in defense of your homes?" the responses were generally similar: "We were not organized; we had no leadership; we did not know what to do." "I am not accustomed to the use of weapons; I have always been a peaceful person and I never thought that I might be required to defend myself."

The land-barons of the Uaian domains assembled an expeditionary force of three thousand men, including contingents from the Uldra tribes of the Treaty Lands. In two weeks of cautious probing, fusillades from the air and assaults in improvised armored cars, the erjins were blasted out of the once beautiful city and sent fleeing in bedraggled bands across the countryside. For another two weeks sky-ships and mobile patrols pursued and destroyed the fugitives*; then without formality the expeditionary force returned to Uaia, and the folk of Szintarre ruefully addressed themselves to the task of reconstruction.

The Uldras of the Retent, no less than the Outkers of Szintarre, suffered from the insurrection. Immediately upon receipt of the telepathic notice, the erstwhile mounts, ignoring pinch-snaffles and electric curbs, reared over backwards to throw their riders, then proceeded to rend them into fragments. Those in pens broke or climbed fences, disconnected electric circuitry and attacked members of the tribe. After recovering from the initial shock the Uldras fought back with a vindictiveness equal to that of the erjins and successfully defended themselves. Primitive and remote tribes such as Cuttacks and the Nose-talkers suffered the most severely, while the Garganche, the Blue Knights, the Hunge and the Noal took relatively few casualties.

Two weeks later the Gray Prince called a grand karoo of the Garganche, Hunge, the Long-lips, and several other tribes; in passionate terms he labeled the erjin insurrection a plot of the Treaty Land Outkers, and he performed the chilling howl of hate by which an Uldra warrior swore vengeance upon his enemies. Intoxicated with rage and xheng*, the tribesmen echoed his howl, and on the following day an Uldra horde marched off to the east, intending to purge the Alouan of Outkers.

Kurgech brought news of the imminent invasion to Kelse, who at once notified the Uaian Order War Council. For a second time the sky-army was mobilized and dispatched to the Manganese Cliffs, a great scarp of glossy black schist overlooking the Plain of Walking Bones, where a party of a hundred Aos mounted on criptids were conducting a cautious holding operation against the xheng-crazed warriors of the Retent. As the flotilla approached, sky-sharks plunged out of the clouds; but today they were anticipated and demolished by radar-aimed guns. The Retent Uldras, despite their fanaticism, scattered and retreated across the Plain of Walking Bones, and ultimately took cover in a forest of black jinkos on the slopes of the Gildred Mountains.

Kelse was on hand in the Morningswake utility vehicle which had been converted into a gunship, with a

crew of twelve—seven of his cousins and four Ao ranch-hands. During the first few minutes of the encounter a Garganche pellet exploded against an interior bulkhead, breaking and lacerating the shoulder of Ernshalt Madduc. There was no longer any semblance of a battle; Kelse communicated with the flotilla commander and received permission to return to Morningswake with the wounded man.

As Kelse flew north, his attention was attracted by a plume of smoke on the horizon which aroused him to instant alarm. He radioed Morningswake Manor but made no contact, and his foreboding was intensified. He strained the sky-car to its utmost speed, and presently Morningswake appeared ahead.

Smoke arose from a field of dry grain across Wild Crake Pond; also ablaze was the little clapboard schoolhouse where those Ao children who so desired were educated. Morningswake Manor appeared undamaged; but looking through binoculars Kelse saw a sky-blue Hermes Cloudswift on the lawn before the house.

Kelse dropped the sky-car to the lawn. Eleven men jumped to the ground and with weapons ready ran to the house. In the Great Hall they found five Uldra nobles drinking the finest wines Morningswake cellars afforded. Jorjol sat in the place of the land-baron, his feet on the table. The appearance of Kelse took him by surprise; he gasped in wonder. Kelse loped across the room and struck him sprawling to the floor. The four other Uldras vented oaths and jumped to their feet to stand petrified at the sight of the drawn weapons.

“Where is Schaine?” demanded Kelse.

Jorjol picked himself up from the floor and mustered what dignity he was able. He jerked his thumb toward the study. His voice was blurred by wine. “She chose to lock herself away. She would have come forth when we fired the manor.” He lurched a step closer to Kelse and stood looking down his long drooping nose. “How I hate you,” he said softly. “If hate were stone I could build a tower into the clouds. I have always hated you. The joy I felt when the erjin tore you apart was like rain on the hot desert and caused me as much pleasure as the attention I gave your sister. My life has not been good, except for those two moments and now I will add a third, for I mean to kill you. If I do nothing else, I will take the life from your wicked Outker body.”

A long blade appeared in his hand, thrust forward from his sleeve by a spring. He lunged; Kelse jerked away from the stroke and caught Jorjol’s wrist with his right hand; with his steel left hand he caught Jorjol’s throat; with his steel arm he lifted him into the air and staggering to the door threw him out into the yard. He moved forward, and as Jorjol rose to his feet, seized him again and shook him like a rag. Jorjol’s eyes bulged; his tongue lolled from his mouth. In Kelse’s ears came a screaming: the voice of Schaine. “Kelse, Kelse, please don’t! Don’t, Kelse! We are land-barons; he is an Uldra!”

Kelse relaxed his grip; Jorjol sagged gasping to the ground.

Jorjol and his henchmen were locked in a cattle-shed and a pair of guards placed over them. During the

night they dug under the back wall, garrotted the guards and escaped.

Chapter 16

The world Koryphon was at peace: a surly, roiling peace of unresolved hatreds and unpleasant insights. In Olanje the physical damage done by the erjins had been repaired; the city seemed as gay and insouciant as ever. Valtrina Darabesq opened Villa Mirasol to three parties in rapid succession to demonstrate that the erjin uprising had left her undaunted. Across the Persimmon Sea the tribes of the Retent sullenly sat in their camps nursing grievances and planning murders, raids and tortures for the future, though without any great zest. On the Palga the Wind-runners eyed the empty slave pens and wondered how they would buy wheels, bearings and hardware for their sail-wagons. Meanwhile, under the Volwode peaks in the gorge of the river Mellorus, groups of marveling scholars had already begun to examine the rose-quartz and gold fane. The Old Erjin and his associates had departed into regions even more remote than the Volwodes. Jorjol the Gray Prince, however, had not been rendered apathetic by his reverses. The fervor of his emotions had no upper limit; rather than waning with time they had condensed and thickened and become more pungent.

About a month after the expulsion of the erjins from Olanje the Mull sat in formal session at Holrude House. Tuning in the broadcast of the proceedings, Kelse Madduc heard a familiar voice and saw the splendid figure of Jorjol the Gray Prince standing at that rostrum provided for petitioners, claimants and witnesses. Kelse summoned Schaine and Gerd Jemasze: "Listen to this."

"—this opinion I hold to be defeatist, vague and unprincipled," Jorjol was saying. "Certain conditions have changed, as agreed—but not those conditions under discussion, by no whit! Do ethical principles fluctuate overnight? Does good become bad? Does a wise decision become a trifle merely because a set of unrelated events have occurred? Certainly not!

"In its wisdom the Mull issued a manifesto terminating the control of the land-barons over domains illegally seized and maintained. The land-barons have defied the lawful commands of the Mull. I speak with the voice of public opinion when I call for enforcement of the Mull's edict. What then is your response?"

Erris Sammatzen, the current chairman, said: "Your remarks, on their face, are reasonable. The Mull indeed issued an edict which the land-barons have ignored, and intervening circumstances are not germane to the affair."

"In that case," stated Jorjol, "the Mull must compel obedience!"

"There," said Sammatzen, "is the difficulty, and it illustrates the fallacy of issuing large commands which we can't enforce."

“Let us examine the matter as reasonable men,” said Jorjol. “The edict is just; we are agreed as to this. Very well! If you cannot enforce this edict, then obviously an organ of enforcement is needed; otherwise, your role in the world becomes no more than advisory.”

Sammatzen gave a dubious shrug. “What you say may be true; still, I don’t feel that we are ready to make such large readjustments.”

“The process is not all that difficult,” said Jorjol. “In fact I will now volunteer to organize this compulsive force! I will work diligently to strengthen the Mull! Give me authority; give me funds. I will recruit able men; I will procure powerful weapons; I will ensure that the law of the Mull is no longer ignored.”

Sammatzen frowned and leaned back in his chair. “This is obviously a very large decision, and at first glance it seems over-responsive.”

“Perhaps because you are reconciled to a Mull weak and toothless.”

“No, not necessarily. But—” Sammatzen hesitated.

“Do you or do you not intend to enforce your edicts upon all the folk of Koryphon, high and low, without fear or favoritism?” asked Jorjol.

Sammatzen spoke in an easy voice: “We certainly intend justice and equity. Before we decide how to achieve these fugitive ideals, we must decide what kind of an agency we are, how powerful a mandate our people have given us, and whether we really want to expand our responsibilities.”

“Agreed in all respects!” Jorjol declared. “The Mull must come to grips with reality and establish once and for all the nature of its role.”

“We’ll hardly achieve this task tonight,” said Sammatzen dryly, “and in fact it’s time to adjourn until tomorrow.”

Kelse, Schaine and Gerd Jemasze watched while the members of the Mull slowly made their way to the retiring chambers. Schaine said in a voice half-amused, half-horrified: “In addition to his other talents, Muffin turns out to be a demagogue.”

“Muffin is a dangerous man,” said Kelse somberly.

“I think,” said Gerd Jemasze, “that I would like to be on hand for tomorrow’s session of the Mull.”

“I want to be there too,” said Kelse. “I think it’s time to amuse the Mull with Father’s wonderful joke.”

“I’ll come too,” said Schaine. “Why should I miss the fun?”

The Mull convened at its appointed time in a chamber crowded to capacity by folk who scented momentous, or at least stimulating, events. Erris Sammatzen performed the usual convocation ceremonies and indicated that the business of the day might proceed.

Jorjol the Gray Prince immediately stepped forward. He bowed to the Mull: “Honorable persons! To reintroduce my proposals of yesterday, I call the attention of the Mull to the fact that, in defiance of the Mull’s edict, the land-barons of Uaia retain control over lands seized by violence from my people. I request that the Mull implement their edict—by coercion, if necessary.”

“The edict has indeed been issued,” said Erris Sammatzen, “and to this date has met no compliance, and in fact—” He stopped short as he noticed Gerd Jemasze and Kelse Madduc who had come to stand before the railing which separated the Mull from the audience. “I see before me two land-barons of Uaia,” said Sammatzen. “Perhaps they bring us notice in regard to the edict.”

“We do indeed,” said Gerd Jemasze. “Your edict is absurd, and you had best retract it.”

Sammatzen raised his eyebrows, and the other members of the Mull stared down in displeasure. Jorjol stood stiff and alert, his head thrust forward.

Sammatzen spoke politely: “We are a sober honest group; we try our best but we are not infallible and sometimes make mistakes. But ‘absurd’? I think you have selected an unsuitable adjective.”

Gerd Jemasze responded no less equably. “In the light of recent events, the word does not appear too strong.”

Sammatzen’s voice became heavy. “Do you refer to the erjin insurrection? Ah, but we have learned a lesson indeed, and the Gray Prince, whom you see before you, has suggested a method to repair our weakness.”

“You intend to recruit a mercenary army of barbarians? Is that your intent? Do you recall a hundred thousand historical parallels?”

Sammatzen started to speak, then checked himself. “The matter has by no means been decided,” he said at last. “We have, however, issued a judgment that the land-barons must cease to assert title to the Treaty lands; and arguments to the effect that time lapse has sanctified title will not be considered.”

Jemasze grinned at the Mull. “This then is your considered opinion?”

“It is indeed.”

“Then, by precisely the same reasoning, Uldra tribes of the Retent must yield the territories they now control to the tribes from whom they seized them. These tribes in turn must yield to the tribes which claimed the land before themselves. Ultimately—and here is the idea which Uther Madduc found so amusing—all must yield to the prior habitancy of the erjins, from whom men originally seized the land. Indeed we have only just crushed their very reasonable and quite legitimate effort to regain these lost territories.”

The Mull stared at Jemasze in bemusement. Sammatzen said in a tentative voice: “This is a facet of the case we had not considered. I agree that it is most challenging.”

Jorjol strode forward. “Very well, do as he suggests! The Uldras support the concept! Give all Uaia back to the erjins; let them take ownership! We will roam the wild lands as before; only destroy the grotesque halls of the Outker land-barons! Break their fences and dams and canals! Expunge every suppurating vestige of the Outker presence! By all means deed the land to the erjins!”

“Not so fast,” said Kelse. “There is more to come: the second part of my father’s joke.” He spoke to Sammatzen. “Do you recall the erjin shrine, or monument—whatever may be its function?”

“Naturally.”

“This was the ‘recent event’ to which Dm. Jemasze referred a few moments ago—not to the erjin insurrection as you supposed. Perhaps you noticed that the erjins are depicted riding in what apparently are spaceships? You know that fossil traces of proto-erjins have never been found on Koryphon? The conclusion is clear. The erjins are invaders. They arrived from space; they conquered the morphote civilization. The morphotes are true indigenes; the fossil record is clear on this point. So the chain of conquest has yet another link. The erjins have no better title than the Uldras.”

“Yes,” admitted Erris Sammatzen, “this is very likely true.”

Jorjol emitted a wild yell of laughter. “Now you award Uaia to the morphotes! Then be sure to give them Szintarre as well, and the villas of Olanje, and the luxurious hotels and all the property you believe yourselves to own!”

Kelse gave a sardonic nod. “This is the third part of my father’s joke. You of the Mull, and all the Redemptionists, found it easy enough to give our land away, by reason of your ethical doctrine; now demonstrate your integrity and give away your own property.”

Sammatzen showed him a sad twisted smile. “Today? At this instant?”

“Anytime you like, or not at all, so long as you rescind your edict in regard to us.”

Voices called out from every corner in the chamber: protesting, jeering, applauding. Sammatzen at last restored order. For a period the Mull conferred in soft mutters but obviously came to no concerted opinion. Sammatzen turned back to Gerd Jemasze and Kelse. "I feel that somehow you are using casuistry to confuse us but for the life of me I can't define it."

Adelys Lam cried out bitterly: "It is clear to me that the land-barons not only profess a creed of violence, but that they also warp their creed into a travesty of an ethical system."

"Not at all," said Gerd Jemasze. "The travesty exists only because reliance upon abstraction has made reality incomprehensible to you. These issues aren't merely local; they extend across the Gaeen Reach. Except for a few special cases title to every parcel of real property derives from an act of violence, more or less remote, and ownership is only as valid as the strength and will required to maintain it. This is the lesson of history, whether you like it or not."

"The mourning of defeated peoples, while pathetic and tragic, is usually futile," said Kelse.

Sammatzen shook his head in dismay. "I find such a doctrine repellent. The enjoyment of human rights should rest upon a base more noble than brute force."

Jorjol gave another caw of laughter. "You and your sheep-brained Mull: why don't you pass an edict to this effect?"

Kelse said: "When the galaxy is ruled by a single law, these ideals may have substance. Until then, that which a man, a tribe, a nation or a world, or the entire Gaeen Reach possesses, it must be prepared to defend."

Sammatzen threw up his hands. "I move to rescind the edict dissolving the domains of Uaia. Who dissents?"

"I do," declared Adelys Lam. "I am yet a Redemptionist; I will never be anything else."

"Who assents?...I count eleven votes, including my own. The edict is canceled; and we now adjourn for the day."

Jorjol strode from the chamber, robes flapping about his long legs. Kelse, Gerd Jemasze and Schaine followed. Out upon the avenue Jorjol halted to look first one way then the other. To his left the way led across the Persimmon Sea, to Uaia and the lands of the Retent; to his right, only a hundred yards along Kharanotis Avenue, the space depot offered transit to other worlds.

"How he hates us!" mused Schaine. "And think! We nurtured this hate by our own deeds. We were so vain and proud that we refused to admit an Uldra waif into our Great Hall; think of the tragedy it brought

to all of us! I wonder: have we learned our lesson?"

Kelse was silent for a moment. Then he said: "This is the language of Olanje and not the reality of Uaia. It contains bright glimmers of truth but not all the truth."

Jemasze said: "There are as many realities as there are people. At Suaniset any gentleman may dine at our table, no matter what clothes he wears."

Kelse gave a sour chuckle. "And at Morningswake as well. Uther Madduc fostered his private reality perhaps too rigidly."

"There goes Jorjol!" said Gerd Jemasze, "off to inflict himself upon another world." For Jorjol had chosen to turn right, toward the spaceport.

The three strolled along Kharanotis Avenue toward the Seascape Hotel. A tall mesh fence separated the road from the swamp, and a gap in the foliage afforded a view across the swamp, down to the slow water of the Viridian River. A morphote, resting on a log, made an incomprehensible gesture and slipped off into the undergrowth.