

The Thousand Worlds

By George R.R. Martin

Part 2

16. The Way of Cross and Dragon	2
17. Dying of the Light	
Prologue	22
Chapter 1	24
Chapter 2	33
Chapter 3	49
Chapter 4	61
Chapter 5	78
Chapter 6	93
Chapter 7	108
Chapter 8	124
Chapter 9	141
Chapter 10	156
Chapter 11	170
Chapter 12	181
Chapter 13	194
Chapter 14	204
Chapter 15	216
Epilogue	223
Dying of the Light Glossary	226
18. The Glass Flower	235
19. The Stone City	265
The Corpse Handlers	
20. Nobody Leaves New Pittsburg	288
21. Override	298
22. Meathouse Man	318
23. Sandkings	337
24. A Song for Lya	368
25. Warship	411
26. The Runners	415
27. With Morning Comes Mistfall	420

The Way of Cross and Dragon

“Heresy,” he told me. The brackish waters of his pool sloshed gently.

“Another one?” I said wearily. “There are so many these days.”

My Lord Commander was displeased by that comment. He shifted position heavily, sending ripples up and down the pool. One broke over the side, and a sheet of water slid across the tiles of the receiving chamber. My boots were soaked yet again. I accepted that philosophically. I had worn my worst boots, well aware that wet feet are among the inescapable consequences of paying a call on Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn, elder of the ka-Thane people, and also Archbishop of Vess, Most Holy Father of the Four Vows, Grand Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ, and counselor to His Holiness, Pope Daryn XXI of New Rome.

“Be there as many heresies as stars in the sky, each single one is no less dangerous, Father,” the Archbishop said solemnly. “As Knights of Christ, it is our ordained task to fight them one and all. And I must add that this new heresy is particularly foul.”

“Yes, my Lord Commander,” I replied. “I did not intend to make light of it. You have my apologies. The mission to Finnegan was most taxing. I had hoped to ask you for a leave of absence from my duties. I need rest, a time for thought and restoration.”

“Rest?” The Archbishop moved again in his pool; only a slight shift of his immense bulk, but it was enough to send a fresh sheet of water across the floor. His black, pupilless eyes blinked at me. “No Father, I am afraid that is out of the question. Your skills and your experience are vital to this new mission.” His bass tones seemed then to soften somewhat. “I have not had time to go over your reports of Finnegan,” he said. “How did your work go?”

“Badly,” I told him, “though I think that ultimately we will prevail. The Church is strong on Finnegan. When our attempts at reconciliation were rebuffed, I put some standards into the right hands, and we were able to shut down the heretics’ newspaper and broadcast facilities. Our friends also saw to it that their legal actions came to nothing.”

“That is not *badly*,” the Archbishop said. “You won a considerable victory for the Lord.”

“There were riots, my Lord Commander,” I said. “More than a hundred of the heretics were killed, and a dozen of our own people. I fear there will be more violence before the matter is finished. Our priests are attacked if they so much as enter the city where the heresy has taken root. Their leaders risk their lives if they leave that city. I had hoped to avoid such hatreds, such bloodshed.”

“Commendable, but not realistic,” said Archbishop Torgathon. He blinked at me again, and I remembered that among people of his race that was a sign of impatience. “The blood of martyrs must sometime be spilled, and the blood of heretics as well. What matters it if a being surrenders his life, so long as his soul is saved?”

“Indeed,” I agreed. Despite his impatience, Torgathon would lecture me for another hour if given a chance. That prospect dismayed me. The receiving chamber was not designed for human comfort, and

I did not wish to remain any longer than necessary. The walls were damp and moldy, the air hot and humid and thick with the rancid-butter smell characteristic of the ka-Thane. My collar was chafing my neck raw, I was sweating beneath my cassock, my feet were thoroughly soaked, and my stomach was beginning to churn. I pushed ahead to the business at hand. “You say this new heresy is unusually foul, my Lord Commander?”

“It is,” he said.

“Where has it started?”

“On Arion, a world some three weeks’ distance from Vess. A human world entirely. I cannot understand why you humans are so easily corrupted. Once a ka-Thane has found the faith, he would scarcely abandon it.”

“That is well known,” I said politely. I did not mention that the number of ka-Thane to find the faith was vanishingly small. They were a slow, ponderous people, and most of their vast millions showed no interest in learning any ways other than their own, nor in following any creed but their own ancient religion. Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn was an anomaly. He had been among the first converts almost two centuries ago, when Pope Vidas L had ruled that nonhumans might serve as clergy. Given his great lifespan and the iron certainty of his belief, it was no wonder that Torgathon had risen as far as he had, despite the fact that less than a thousand of his race had followed him into the Church. He had at least a century of life remaining to him. No doubt he would someday be Torgathon Cardinal Tûn, should he squelch enough heresies. The times are like that.

“We have little influence on Arion,” the Archbishop was saying. His arms moved as he spoke, four ponderous clubs of mottled green-gray flesh churning the water, and the dirty white cilia around his breathing hole trembled with each word. “A few priests, a few churches, and some believers, but no power to speak of. The heretics already outnumber us on this world. I rely on your intellect, your shrewdness. Turn this calamity into an opportunity. This heresy is so spurious that you can easily disprove it. Perhaps some of the deluded will turn to the true way.”

“Certainly,” I said. “And the nature of this heresy? What must I disprove?” It is a sad indication of my own troubled faith to add that I did not really care. I have dealt with too many heretics. Their beliefs and their questionings echo in my head and trouble my dreams at night. How can I be sure of my own faith? The very edict that had admitted Torgathon into the clergy had caused a half-dozen worlds to repudiate the Bishop of New Rome, and those who had followed that path would find a particularly ugly heresy in the massive naked (save for a damp Roman collar) alien who floated before me and wielded the authority of the Church in four great webbed hands. Christianity is the greatest single human religion, but that means little. The non-Christians outnumber us five-to-one, and there are well over seven hundred Christian sects, some almost as large as the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds. Even Daryn XXI, powerful as he is, is only one of seven to claim the title of Pope. My own belief was once strong, but I have moved too long among heretics and nonbelievers. Now even my prayers do not make the doubts go away. So it was that I felt no horror—only a sudden intellectual interest—when the Archbishop told me the nature of the heresy on Arion.

“They have made a saint,” he said, “out of Judas Iscariot.”

As a senior in the Knights Inquisitor, I command my own starship, which it pleases me to call the *Truth of Christ*. Before the craft was assigned to me, it was named the *Saint Thomas*, after the apostle,

but I did not consider a saint notorious for doubting to be an appropriate patron for a ship enlisted in the fight against heresy.

I have no duties aboard the *Truth*, which is crewed by six brothers and sisters of the Order of Saint Christopher the Far-Traveling, and captained by a young woman I hired away from a merchant trader. I was therefore able to devote the entire three-week voyage from Vess to Arion to a study of the heretical Bible, a copy of which had been given to me by the Archbishop's administrative assistant. It was a thick, heavy, handsome book, bound in dark leather, its pages tipped with gold leaf, with many splendid interior illustrations in full color with holographic enhancement. Remarkable work, clearly done by someone who loved the all-but-forgotten art of bookmaking. The paintings reproduced inside—the originals, I gathered, were to be found on the walls of the House of Saint Judas on Arion—were masterful, if blasphemous, as much high art as the Tammerwens and RoHallidays that adorn the Great Cathedral of Saint John on New Rome.

Inside, the book bore an imprimatur indicating that it had been approved by Lukyan Judasson, First Scholar of the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot.

It was called *The Way of Cross and Dragon*.

I read it as the *Truth of Christ* slid between the stars, at first taking copious notes to better understand the heresy I must fight, but later simply absorbed by the strange, convoluted, grotesque story it told. The words of text had passion and power and poetry.

Thus it was that I first encountered the striking figure of Saint Judas Iscariot, a complex, ambitious, contradictory, and altogether extraordinary human being.

He was born of a whore in the fabled ancient city-state of Babylon on the same day that the savior was born in Bethlehem, and he spent his childhood in the alleys and gutters, selling his own body when he had to, pimping when he was older. As a youth he began to experiment with the dark arts, and before the age of twenty he was a skilled necromancer. That was when he became Judas the Dragon-Tamer, the first and only man to bend to his will the most fearsome of God's creatures, the great winged fire-lizards of Old Earth. The book held a marvelous painting of Judas in some great dank cavern, his eyes aflame as he wields a glowing lash to keep a mountainous green-gold dragon at bay. Beneath his arm is a woven basket, its lid slightly ajar, and the tiny-scaled heads of three dragon chicks are peering from within. A fourth infant dragon is crawling up his sleeve. That was in the first chapter of his life.

In the second, he was Judas the Conqueror, Judas the Dragon-King, Judas of Babylon, the Great Usurper. Astride the greatest of his dragons, with an iron crown on his head and a sword in his hand, he made Babylon the capital of the greatest empire Old Earth had ever known, a realm that stretched from Spain to India. He reigned from a dragon throne amid the Hanging Gardens he had caused to be constructed, and it was there he sat when he tried Jesus of Nazareth, the troublemaking prophet who had been dragged before him bound and bleeding. Judas was not a patient man, and he made Christ bleed still more before he was through with Him. And when Jesus would not answer his questions, Judas contemptuously had Him cast back out into the streets. But first, he ordered his guards to cut off Christ's legs. "Healer," he said, "heal thyself."

Then came the Repentance, the vision in the night, and Judas Iscariot gave up his crown, his dark arts, and his riches to follow the man he had crippled. Despised and taunted by those he had tyrannized, Judas became the Legs of the Lord, and for a year carried Jesus on his back to the far corners of the realm he once ruled. When Jesus did finally heal Himself, then Judas walked at His side, and from that time forth he was Jesus' trusted friend and counselor, the first and foremost of the Twelve. Finally,

Jesus gave Judas the gift of tongues, recalled and sanctified the dragons that Judas had sent away, and sent His disciple forth on a solitary ministry across the oceans, “to spread My Word where I cannot go.”

There came a day when the sun went dark at noon and the ground trembled, and Judas swung his dragon around on ponderous wings and flew back across the raging seas. But when he reached the city of Jerusalem, he found Christ dead on the cross.

In that moment his faith faltered, and for the next three days the Great Wrath of Judas was like a storm across the ancient world. His dragons razed the Temple in Jerusalem, drove the people forth from the city, and struck as well at the great seats of power in Rome and Babylon. And when he found the others of the Twelve and questioned them and learned of how the one named Simon-called-Peter had three times betrayed the Lord, he strangled Peter with his own hands and fed the corpse to his dragons. Then he sent those dragons forth to start fires throughout the world, funeral pyres for Jesus of Nazareth.

And Jesus rose on the third day, and Judas wept, but his tears could not turn Christ’s anger, for in his wrath he had betrayed all of Christ’s teachings.

So Jesus called back the dragons, and they came, and everywhere the fires went out. And from their bellies He called forth Peter and made him whole again, and gave him dominion over the Church.

Then the dragons died, and so too did all dragons everywhere, for they were the living sigil of the power and wisdom of Judas Iscariot, who had sinned greatly. And He took from Judas the gift of tongues and the power of healing He had given, and even his eyesight, for Judas had acted as a blind man (there was a fine painting of the blinded Judas weeping over the bodies of his dragons). And He told Judas that for long ages he would be remembered only as Betrayer, and people would curse his name, and all that he had been and done would be forgotten.

But then, because Judas had loved Him so, Christ gave him a boon: an extended life, during which he might travel and think on his sins and finally come to forgiveness. Only then might he die.

And that was the beginning of the last chapter in the life of Judas Iscariot. But it was a very long chapter indeed. Once dragon-king, once the friend of Christ, now he was only a blind traveler, outcast and friendless, wandering all the cold roads of the Earth, living still when all the cities and people and things he had known were dead. Peter, the first Pope and ever his enemy, spread far and wide the tale of how Judas had sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, until Judas dared not even use his true name. For a time he called himself just Wandering Ju’, and afterward many other names. He lived more than a thousand years and became a preacher, a healer, and a lover of animals, and was hunted and persecuted when the Church that Peter had founded became bloated and corrupt. But he had a great deal of time, and at last he found wisdom and a sense of peace, and finally, Jesus came to him on a long-postponed deathbed and they were reconciled, and Judas wept once again. Before he died, Christ promised that he would permit a few to remember who and what Judas had been, and that with the passage of centuries the news would spread, until finally Peter’s Lie was displaced and forgotten.

Such was the life of Saint Judas Iscariot, as related in *The Way of Cross and Dragon*. His teachings were there as well, and the apocryphal books he had allegedly written.

When I had finished the volume, I lent it to Arla-k-Bau, the captain of the *Truth of Christ*. Arla was a gaunt, pragmatic woman of no particular faith, but I valued her opinion. The others of my crew, the

good sisters and brothers of Saint Christopher, would only have echoed the Archbishop's religious horror.

"Interesting," Arla said when she returned the book to me.

I chuckled. "Is that all?"

She shrugged. "It makes a nice story. An easier read than your Bible, Damien, and more dramatic as well."

"True," I admitted. "But it's absurd. An unbelievable tangle of doctrine, apocrypha, mythology, and superstition. Entertaining, yes, certainly. Imaginative, even daring. But ridiculous, don't you think? How can you credit dragons? A legless Christ? Peter being pieced together after being devoured by four monsters?"

Arla's grin was taunting. "Is that any sillier than water changing into wine, or Christ walking on the waves, or a man living in the belly of a fish?" Arla-k-Bau liked to jab at me. It had been a scandal when I selected a nonbeliever as my captain, but she was very good at her job, and I liked her around to keep me sharp. She had a good mind, Arla did, and I valued that more than blind obedience. Perhaps that was a sin in me.

"There is a difference," I said.

"Is there?" she snapped back. Her eyes saw through any masks. "Ah, Damien, admit it. You rather liked this book."

I cleared my throat. "It piqued my interest," I acknowledged. I had to justify myself. "You know the kind of matter I deal with ordinarily. Dreary little doctrinal deviations; obscure quibblings on theology somehow blown all out of proportion; bald-faced political maneuverings designed to set some ambitious planetary bishop up as a new pope, or wrest some concession or other from New Rome or Vess. The war is endless, but the battles are dull and dirty. They exhaust me spiritually, emotionally, physically. Afterward I feel drained and guilty." I tapped the book's leather cover. "This is different. The heresy must be crushed, of course, but I admit that I am anxious to meet this Lukyan Judasson."

"The artwork is lovely as well," Arla said, flipping through the pages of *The Way of Cross and Dragon* and stopping to study one especially striking plate—Judas weeping over his dragons, I think. I smiled to see that it had affected her as much as me. Then I frowned.

That was the first inkling I had of the difficulties ahead.

So it was that the *Truth of Christ* came to the porcelain City Ammadon on the world of Arion, where the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot kept its House.

Arion was a pleasant, gentle world, inhabited for these past three centuries. Its population was under nine million; Ammadon, the only real city, was home to two of those millions. The technological level was medium high, but chiefly imported. Arion had little industry and was not an innovative world, except perhaps artistically. The arts were quite important here, flourishing and vital. Religious freedom was a basic tenet of the society, but Arion was not a religious world either, and the majority of the populace lived devoutly secular lives. The most popular religion was Aestheticism, which hardly counts as a religion at all. There were also Taoists, Erikaners, Old True Christers, and Children of the Dreamer, plus adherents of a dozen lesser sects.

And finally there were nine churches of the One True Interstellar Catholic faith. There had been twelve. The other three were now houses of Arion's fastest-growing faith, the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot, which also had a dozen newly-built churches of its own.

The Bishop of Arion was a dark, severe man with close-cropped black hair who was not at all happy to see me. "Damien Har Veris!" he exclaimed with some wonderment when I called on him at his residence. "We have heard of you, of course, but I never thought to meet or host you. Our numbers here are small."

"And growing smaller," I said, "a matter of some concern to my Lord Commander, Archbishop Torgathon. Apparently you are less troubled, Excellency, since you did not see fit to report the activities of this sect of Judas worshippers."

He looked briefly angry at the rebuke, but quickly swallowed his temper. Even a bishop can fear a Knight Inquisitor. "We are concerned, of course," he said. "We do all we can to combat the heresy. If you have advice that will help us, I will be glad to listen."

"I am an Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ," I said bluntly. "I do not give advice, Excellency. I take action. To that end I was sent to Arion, and that is what I shall do. Now, tell me what you know about this heresy, and this First Scholar, this Lukyan Judasson."

"Of course, Father Damien," the Bishop began. He signaled for a servant to bring us a tray of wine and cheese, and began to summarize the short but explosive history of the Judas cult. I listened, polishing my nails on the crimson lapel of my jacket until the black paint gleamed brilliantly, interrupting from time to time with a question. Before he had half finished, I was determined to visit Lukyan personally. It seemed the best course of action.

And I had wanted to do so all along.

Appearances were important on Arion, I gathered, and I deemed it necessary to impress Lukyan with myself and my station. I wore my best boots—sleek, dark handmade boots of Roman leather that had never seen the inside of Torgathon's receiving chamber—and a severe black suit with deep burgundy lapels and stiff collar. Around my neck was a splendid crucifix of pure gold; my collar pin was a matching golden sword, the sigil of the Knights Inquisitor. Brother Denis carefully painted my nails, all black as ebon, and darkened my eyes as well, and used a fine white powder on my face. When I glanced in the mirror, I frightened even myself. I smiled, but only briefly. It ruined the effect.

I walked to the House of Saint Judas Iscariot. The streets of Ammadon were wide and spacious and golden, lined by scarlet trees called whisperwinds, whose long, drooping tendrils did indeed seem to whisper secrets to the gentle breeze. Sister Judith came with me. She is a small woman, slight of build even in the cowed coveralls of the Order of Saint Christopher. Her face is meek and kind, her eyes wide and youthful and innocent. I find her useful. Four times now she has killed those who attempted to assault me.

The House itself was newly built. Rambling and stately, it rose from amid gardens of small bright flowers and seas of golden grass; the gardens were surrounded by a high wall. Murals covered both the outer wall around the property and the exterior of the building itself. I recognized a few of them from *The Way of Cross and Dragon*, and stopped briefly to admire them before walking through the main gate. No one tried to stop us. There were no guards, not even a receptionist. Within the walls, men and

women strolled languidly through the flowers, or sat on benches beneath silverwoods and whisperwinds.

Sister Judith and I paused, then made our way directly to the House itself.

We had just started up the steps when a man appeared from within, and stood waiting in the doorway. He was blond and fat, with a great wiry beard that framed a slow smile, and he wore a flimsy robe that fell to his sandaled feet. On the robe were dragons, dragons bearing the silhouette of a man holding a cross.

When I reached the top of the steps, he bowed to me. "Father Damien Har Veris of the Knights Inquisitor," he said. His smile widened. "I greet you in the name of Jesus, and in the name of Saint Judas. I am Lukyan."

I made a note to myself to find out which of the Bishop's staff was feeding information to the Judas cult, but my composure did not break. I have been a Knight Inquisitor for a long, long time. "Father Lukyan Mo," I said, taking his hand. "I have questions to ask of you." I did not smile.

He did. "I thought you might," he said.

Lukyan's office was large but spartan. Heretics often have a simplicity that the officers of the true Church seem to have lost. He did have one indulgence, however. Dominating the wall behind his desk console was the painting I had already fallen in love with: the blinded Judas weeping over his dragons.

Lukyan sat down heavily and motioned me to a second chair. We had left Sister Judith outside in the waiting chamber. "I prefer to stand, Father Lukyan," I said, knowing it gave me an advantage.

"Just Lukyan," he said. "Or Luke, if you prefer. We have little use for hierarchy here."

"You are Father Lukyan Mo, born here on Arion, educated in the seminary on Cathaday, a former priest of the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds," I said. "I will address you as befits your station, Father. I expect you to reciprocate. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes," he said amiably.

"I am empowered to strip you of your right to perform the sacraments, to order you shunned and excommunicated for this heresy you have formulated. On certain worlds I could even order your death."

"But not on Arion," Lukyan said quickly. "We're very tolerant here. Besides, we outnumber you." He smiled. "As for the rest, well, I don't perform those sacraments much anyway, you know. Not for years. I'm First Scholar now. A teacher, a thinker. I show others the way, help them find the faith. Excommunicate me if it will make you happy, Father Damien. Happiness is what all of us seek."

"You have given up the faith, then, Father Lukyan," I said. I deposited my copy of *The Way of Cross and Dragon* on his desk. "But I see you have found a new one." Now I did smile, but it was all ice, all menace, all mockery. "A more ridiculous creed I have yet to encounter. I suppose you will tell me that you have spoken to God, that He trusted you with this new revelation, so that you might clear the good name, such that it is, of Holy Judas?"

Now Lukyan's smile was very broad indeed. He picked up the book and beamed at me. "Oh, no," he said. "No, I made it all up."

That stopped me. “What?”

“I made it all up,” he repeated. He hefted the book fondly. “I drew on many sources, of course, especially the Bible, but I do think of *Cross and Dragon* as mostly my own work. It’s rather good, don’t you agree? Of course, I could hardly put my name on it, proud as I am of it, but I did include my imprimatur. Did you notice that? It was the closest I dared come to a byline.”

I was speechless only for a moment. Then I grimaced. “You startle me,” I admitted. “I expected to find an inventive madman, some poor self-deluded fool, firm in his belief that he had spoken to God. I’ve dealt with such fanatics before. Instead I find a cheerful cynic who has invented a religion for his own profit. I think I prefer the fanatics. You are beneath contempt, Father Lukyan. You will burn in hell for eternity.”

“I doubt it,” Lukyan said, “but you do mistake me, Father Damien. I am no cynic, nor do I profit from my dear Saint Judas. Truthfully, I lived more comfortably as a priest of your own Church. I do this because it is my vocation.”

I sat down. “You confuse me,” I said. “Explain.”

“Now I am going to tell you the truth,” he said. He said it in an odd way, almost as a chant. “I am a Liar,” he added.

“You want to confuse me with a child’s paradoxes,” I snapped.

“No, no.” He smiled. “A *Liar*. With a capital. It is an organization, Father Damien. A religion, you might call it. A great and powerful faith. And I am the smallest part of it.”

“I know of no such church,” I said.

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t. It’s secret. It has to be. You can understand that, can’t you? People don’t like being lied to.”

“I do not like being lied to,” I said.

Lukyan looked wounded. “I told you this would be the truth, didn’t I? When a Liar says that, you can believe him. How else could we trust each other?”

“There are many of you?” I asked. I was starting to think that Lukyan was a madman after all, as fanatical as any heretic, but in a more complex way. Here was a heresy within a heresy, but I recognized my duty: to find the truth of things, and set them right.

“Many of us,” Lukyan said, smiling. “You would be surprised, Father Damien, really you would. But there are some things I dare not tell you.”

“Tell me what you dare, then.”

“Happily,” said Lukyan Judasson. “We Liars, like those of all other religions, have several truths we take on faith. Faith is always required. There are some things that cannot be proven. We believe that life is worth living. That is an article of faith. The purpose of life is to live, to resist death, perhaps to defy entropy.”

“Go on,” I said, interested despite myself.

“We also believe that happiness is a good, something to be sought after.”

“The Church does not oppose happiness,” I said drily.

“I wonder,” Lukyan said. “But let us not quibble. Whatever the Church’s position on happiness, it does preach belief in an afterlife, in a supreme being and a complex moral code.”

“True.”

“The Liars believe in no afterlife, no God. We see the universe as it *is*, Father Damien, and these naked truths are cruel ones. We who believe in life, and treasure it, will die. Afterward there will be nothing, eternal emptiness, blackness, nonexistence. In our living there has been no purpose, no poetry, no meaning. Nor do our deaths possess these qualities. When we are gone, the universe will not long remember us, and shortly it will be as if we had never lived at all. Our worlds and our universe will not long outlive us. Ultimately, entropy will consume all, and our puny efforts cannot stay that awful end. It will be gone. It has never been. It has never mattered. The universe itself is doomed, transient, uncaring.”

I slid back in my chair, and a shiver went through me as I listened to poor Lukyan’s dark words. I found myself fingering my crucifix. “A bleak philosophy,” I said, “as well as a false one. I have had that fearful vision myself. I think all of us do, at some point. But it is not so, Father. My faith sustains me against such nihilism. It is a shield against despair.”

“Oh, I know that, my friend, my Knight Inquisitor,” Lukyan said. “I’m glad to see you understand so well. You are almost one of us already.”

I frowned.

“You’ve touched the heart of it,” Lukyan continued. “The truths, the great truths—and most of the lesser ones as well—they are unbearable for most men. We find our shield in faith. Your faith, my faith, any faith. It doesn’t matter, so long as we *believe*, really and truly believe, in whatever lie we cling to.” He fingered the ragged edges of his great blond beard. “Our psychs have always told us that believers are the happy ones, you know. They may believe in Christ or Buddha or Erika Stormjones, in reincarnation or immortality or nature, in the power of love or the platform of a political faction, but it all comes to the same thing. They believe. They are happy. It is the ones who have seen truth who despair, and kill themselves. The truths are so vast, the faiths so little, so poorly made, so riddled with error and contradiction that we see around them and through them, and then we feel the weight of darkness upon us, and can no longer be happy.”

I am not a slow man. I knew, by then, where Lukyan Judasson was going. “Your Liars invent faiths.”

He smiled. “Of all sorts. Not only religious. Think of it. We know truth for the cruel instrument it is. Beauty is infinitely preferable to truth. We invent beauty. Faiths, political movements, high ideals, belief in love and fellowship. All of them are lies. We tell those lies, among others, endless others. We improve on history and myth and religion, make each more beautiful, better, easier to believe in. Our lies are not perfect, of course. The truths are too big. But perhaps someday we will find one great lie that all humanity can use. Until then, a thousand small lies will do.”

“I think I do not care for your Liars very much,” I said with a cold, even fervor. “My whole life has been a quest for truth.”

Lukyan was indulgent. “Father Damien Har Veris, Knight Inquisitor, I know you better than that. You are a Liar yourself. You do good work. You ship from world to world, and on each you destroy the foolish, the rebels, the questioners who would bring down the edifice of the vast lie that you serve.”

“If my lie is so admirable,” I said, “then why have you abandoned it?”

“A religion must fit its culture and society, work with them, not against them. If there is conflict, contradiction, then the lie breaks down, and the faith falters. Your Church is good for many worlds, Father, but not for Arion. Life is too kind here, and your faith is stern. Here we love beauty, and your faith offers too little. So we have improved it. We studied this world for a long time. We know its psychological profile. Saint Judas will thrive here. He offers drama, and color, and much beauty—the aesthetics are admirable. His is a tragedy with a happy ending, and Arion dotes on such stories. And the dragons are a nice touch. I think your own Church ought to find a way to work in dragons. They are marvelous creatures.”

“Mythical,” I said.

“Hardly,” he replied. “Look it up.” He grinned at me. “You see, really, it all comes back to faith. Can you really know what happened three thousand years ago? You have one Judas, I have another. Both of us have books. Is yours true? Can you really believe that? I have been admitted only to the first circle of the order of Liars, so I do not know all our secrets, but I know that we are very old. It would not surprise me to learn that the gospels were written by men very much like me. Perhaps there never was a Judas at all. Or a Jesus.”

“I have faith that that is not so,” I said.

“There are a hundred people in this building who have a deep and very real faith in Saint Judas, and the way of cross and dragon,” Lukyan said. “Faith is a very good thing. Do you know that the suicide rate on Arion has decreased by almost a third since the Order of Saint Judas was founded?”

I remember rising slowly from my chair. “You are as fanatical as any heretic I have ever met, Lukyan Judasson,” I told him. “I pity you the loss of your faith.”

Lukyan rose with me. “Pity yourself, Damien Har Veris,” he said. “I have found a new faith and a new cause, and I am a happy man. You, my dear friend, are tortured and miserable.”

“That is a lie!” I am afraid I screamed.

“Come with me,” Lukyan said. He touched a panel on his wall, and the great painting of Judas weeping over his dragons slid up out of sight. There was a stairway leading down into the ground. “Follow me,” he said.

In the cellar was a great glass vat full of pale green fluid, and in it a thing was floating, a thing very like an ancient embryo, aged and infantile at the same time, naked, with a huge head and a tiny atrophied body. Tubes ran from its arms and legs and genitals, connecting it to the machinery that kept it alive.

When Lukyan turned on the lights, it opened its eyes. They were large and dark and they looked into my soul.

“This is my colleague,” Lukyan said, patting the side of the vat, “Jon Azure Cross, a Liar of the fourth circle.”

“And a telepath,” I said with a sick certainty. I had led pogroms against other telepaths, children mostly, on other worlds. The Church teaches that the psionic powers are one of Satan’s traps. They are not mentioned in the Bible. I have never felt good about those killings.

“The moment you entered the compound, Jon read you and notified me,” Lukyan said. “Only a few of us know that he is here. He helps us lie most efficiently. He knows when faith is true, and when it is

feigned. I have an implant in my skull. Jon can talk to me at all times. It was he who initially recruited me into the Liars. He knew my faith was hollow. He felt the depth of my despair.”

Then the thing in the tank spoke, its metallic voice coming from a speaker-grille in the base of the machine that nurtured it. *“And I feel yours, Damien Har Veris, empty priest. Inquisitor, you have asked too many questions. You are sick at heart, and tired, and you do not believe. Join us, Damien. You have been a Liar for a long, long time!”*

For a moment I hesitated, looking deep into myself, wondering what it was I *did* believe. I searched for my faith—the fire that had once sustained me, the certainty in the teachings of the Church, the presence of Christ within me. I found none of it, none. I was empty inside, burned out, full of questions and pain. But as I was about to answer Jon Azure Cross and the smiling Lukyan Judasson, I found something else, something I *did* believe in, had always believed in.

Truth.

I believed in truth, even when it hurt.

“He is lost to us,” said the telepath with the mocking name of Cross. Lukyan’s smile faded. “Oh, really? I had hoped you would be one of us, Damien. You seemed ready.”

I was suddenly afraid, and I considered sprinting up the stairs to Sister Judith. Lukyan had told me so very much, and now I had rejected them.

The telepath felt my fear. *“You cannot hurt us, Damien,”* it said. *“Go in peace. Lukyan has told you nothing.”*

Lukyan was frowning. “I told him a good deal, Jon,” he said.

“Yes. But can he trust the words of such a Liar as you?” The small misshapen mouth of the thing in the vat twitched in a smile, and its great eyes closed, and Lukyan Judasson sighed and led me up the stairs.

It was not until some years later that I realized it was Jon Azure Cross who was lying, and the victim of his lie was Lukyan. I *could* hurt them. I did.

It was almost simple. The Bishop had friends in government and media. With some money in the right places, I made some friends of my own. Then I exposed Cross in his cellar, charging that he had used his psionic powers to tamper with the minds of Lukyan’s followers. My friends were receptive to the charges. The guardians conducted a raid, took the telepath Cross into custody, and later tried him.

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But it had never been my intention to convict him. The charge was enough. The cracks began to show in the lie that he and Lukyan had built together. Faith is hard to come by, and easy to lose. The merest doubt can begin to erode even the strongest foundation of belief.

The Bishop and I labored together to sow further doubts. It was not as easy as I might have thought. The Liars had done their work well. Ammadon, like most civilized cities, had a great pool of

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The heresy never died completely, of course. There are always those who believe no matter what. And so to this day *The Way of Cross and Dragon* is read on Arion, in the porcelain city Ammadon, amid murmuring whisperwinds.

Arla-k-Bau and the *Truth of Christ* carried me back to Vess a year after my departure, and Archbishop Torgathon finally gave me the rest I had asked for, before sending me out to fight still other heresies. So I had my victory, and the Church continued on much as before, and the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot was crushed and diminished. The telepath Jon Azure Cross had been wrong, I thought then. He had sadly underestimated the power of a Knight Inquisitor.

Later, though, I remembered his words.

You cannot hurt us, Damien.

Us?

The Order of Saint Judas? Or the Liars?

He lied, I think, deliberately, knowing I would go forth and destroy the way of cross and dragon, knowing too that I could not touch the Liars, would not even dare mention them. How could I? Who would believe it? A grand star-spanning conspiracy as old as history? It reeks of paranoia, and I had no proof at all.

The telepath lied for Lukyan’s benefit, so that he would let me go. I am certain of that now. Cross risked much to snare me. Failing, he was willing to sacrifice Lukyan Judasson and his lie, pawns in some greater game.

So I left, and carried within me the knowledge that I was empty of faith but for a blind faith in truth, a truth I could no longer find in my Church. I grew certain of that in my year of rest, which I spent reading and studying on Vess and Cathaday and Celia’s World. Finally I returned to the Archbishop’s receiving room, and stood again before Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn in my very worst pair of boots. “My Lord Commander,” I said to him, “I can accept no further assignments. I ask that I be retired from active service.”

“For what cause?” Torgathon rumbled, splashing feebly.

“I have lost the faith,” I said to him, simply.

He regarded me for a long time, his pupilless eyes blinking. At last he said, "Your faith is a matter between you and your confessor. I care only about your results. You have done good work, Damien. You may not retire, and we will not allow you to resign."

The truth will set us free.

But freedom is cold and empty and frightening, and lies can often be warm and beautiful.

Last year the Church finally granted me a new and better ship. I named this one *Dragon*.

**

So it was that the *Truth of Christ* came to the porcelain City Ammadon on the world of Arion, where the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot kept its House.

Arion was a pleasant, gentle world, inhabited for these past three centuries. Its population was under nine million; Ammadon, the only real city, was home to two of those millions. The technological level was medium high, but chiefly imported. Arion had little industry and was not an innovative world, except perhaps artistically. The arts were quite important here, flourishing and vital. Religious freedom was a basic tenet of the society, but Arion was not a religious world either, and the majority of the populace lived devoutly secular lives. The most popular religion was Aestheticism, which hardly counts as a religion at all. There were also Taoists, Erikaners, Old True Christers, and Children of the Dreamer, plus adherents of a dozen lesser sects.

And finally there were nine churches of the One True Interstellar Catholic faith. There had been twelve. The other three were now houses of Arion's fastest-growing faith, the Order of Saint Judas Iscariot, which also had a dozen newly-built churches of its own.

The Bishop of Arion was a dark, severe man with close-cropped black hair who was not at all happy to see me. "Damien Har Veris!" he exclaimed with some wonderment when I called on him at his residence. "We have heard of you, of course, but I never thought to meet or host you. Our numbers here are small."

"And growing smaller," I said, "a matter of some concern to my Lord Commander, Archbishop Torgathon. Apparently you are less troubled, Excellency, since you did not see fit to report the activities of this sect of Judas worshippers."

He looked briefly angry at the rebuke, but quickly swallowed his temper. Even a bishop can fear a Knight Inquisitor. "We are concerned, of course," he said. "We do all we can to combat the heresy. If you have advice that will help us, I will be glad to listen."

"I am an Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ," I said bluntly. "I do not give advice, Excellency. I take action. To that end I was sent to Arion, and that is what I shall do. Now, tell me what you know about this heresy, and this First Scholar, this Lukyan Judasson."

"Of course, Father Damien," the Bishop began. He signaled for a servant to bring us a tray of wine and cheese, and began to summarize the short but explosive history of the Judas cult. I listened, polishing my nails on the crimson lapel of my jacket until the black paint gleamed brilliantly, interrupting from time to time with a question. Before he had half finished, I was determined to visit Lukyan personally. It seemed the best course of action.

And I had wanted to do so all along.

Appearances were important on Arion, I gathered, and I deemed it necessary to impress Lukyan with myself and my station. I wore my best boots—sleek, dark handmade boots of Roman leather that had never seen the inside of Torgathon’s receiving chamber—and a severe black suit with deep burgundy lapels and stiff collar. Around my neck was a splendid crucifix of pure gold; my collar pin was a matching golden sword, the sigil of the Knights Inquisitor. Brother Denis carefully painted my nails, all black as ebon, and darkened my eyes as well, and used a fine white powder on my face. When I glanced in the mirror, I frightened even myself. I smiled, but only briefly. It ruined the effect.

I walked to the House of Saint Judas Iscariot. The streets of Ammadon were wide and spacious and golden, lined by scarlet trees called whisperwinds, whose long, drooping tendrils did indeed seem to whisper secrets to the gentle breeze. Sister Judith came with me. She is a small woman, slight of build even in the cowed coveralls of the Order of Saint Christopher. Her face is meek and kind, her eyes wide and youthful and innocent. I find her useful. Four times now she has killed those who attempted to assault me.

The House itself was newly built. Rambling and stately, it rose from amid gardens of small bright flowers and seas of golden grass; the gardens were surrounded by a high wall. Murals covered both the outer wall around the property and the exterior of the building itself. I recognized a few of them from *The Way of Cross and Dragon*, and stopped briefly to admire them before walking through the main gate. No one tried to stop us. There were no guards, not even a receptionist. Within the walls, men and women strolled languidly through the flowers, or sat on benches beneath silverwoods and whisperwinds.

Sister Judith and I paused, then made our way directly to the House itself.

We had just started up the steps when a man appeared from within, and stood waiting in the doorway. He was blond and fat, with a great wiry beard that framed a slow smile, and he wore a flimsy robe that fell to his sandaled feet. On the robe were dragons, dragons bearing the silhouette of a man holding a cross.

When I reached the top of the steps, he bowed to me. “Father Damien Har Veris of the Knights Inquisitor,” he said. His smile widened. “I greet you in the name of Jesus, and in the name of Saint Judas. I am Lukyan.”

I made a note to myself to find out which of the Bishop’s staff was feeding information to the Judas cult, but my composure did not break. I have been a Knight Inquisitor for a long, long time. “Father Lukyan Mo,” I said, taking his hand. “I have questions to ask of you.” I did not smile.

He did. “I thought you might,” he said.

Lukyan’s office was large but spartan. Heretics often have a simplicity that the officers of the true Church seem to have lost. He did have one indulgence, however. Dominating the wall behind his desk console was the painting I had already fallen in love with: the blinded Judas weeping over his dragons.

Lukyan sat down heavily and motioned me to a second chair. We had left Sister Judith outside in the waiting chamber. “I prefer to stand, Father Lukyan,” I said, knowing it gave me an advantage.

“Just Lukyan,” he said. “Or Luke, if you prefer. We have little use for hierarchy here.”

“You are Father Lukyan Mo, born here on Arion, educated in the seminary on Cathaday, a former priest of the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds,” I said. “I will address you as befits your station, Father. I expect you to reciprocate. Is that understood?”

“Oh, yes,” he said amiably.

“I am empowered to strip you of your right to perform the sacraments, to order you shunned and excommunicated for this heresy you have formulated. On certain worlds I could even order your death.”

“But not on Arion,” Lukyan said quickly. “We’re very tolerant here. Besides, we outnumber you.” He smiled. “As for the rest, well, I don’t perform those sacraments much anyway, you know. Not for years. I’m First Scholar now. A teacher, a thinker. I show others the way, help them find the faith. Excommunicate me if it will make you happy, Father Damien. Happiness is what all of us seek.”

“You have given up the faith, then, Father Lukyan,” I said. I deposited my copy of *The Way of Cross and Dragon* on his desk. “But I see you have found a new one.” Now I did smile, but it was all ice, all menace, all mockery. “A more ridiculous creed I have yet to encounter. I suppose you will tell me that you have spoken to God, that He trusted you with this new revelation, so that you might clear the good name, such that it is, of Holy Judas?”

Now Lukyan’s smile was very broad indeed. He picked up the book and beamed at me. “Oh, no,” he said. “No, I made it all up.”

That stopped me. “What?”

“I made it all up,” he repeated. He hefted the book fondly. “I drew on many sources, of course, especially the Bible, but I do think of *Cross and Dragon* as mostly my own work. It’s rather good, don’t you agree? Of course, I could hardly put my name on it, proud as I am of it, but I did include my imprimatur. Did you notice that? It was the closest I dared come to a byline.”

I was speechless only for a moment. Then I grimaced. “You startle me,” I admitted. “I expected to find an inventive madman, some poor self-deluded fool, firm in his belief that he had spoken to God. I’ve dealt with such fanatics before. Instead I find a cheerful cynic who has invented a religion for his own profit. I think I prefer the fanatics. You are beneath contempt, Father Lukyan. You will burn in hell for eternity.”

“I doubt it,” Lukyan said, “but you do mistake me, Father Damien. I am no cynic, nor do I profit from my dear Saint Judas. Truthfully, I lived more comfortably as a priest of your own Church. I do this because it is my vocation.”

I sat down. “You confuse me,” I said. “Explain.”

“Now I am going to tell you the truth,” he said. He said it in an odd way, almost as a chant. “I am a Liar,” he added.

“You want to confuse me with a child’s paradoxes,” I snapped.

“No, no.” He smiled. “A *Liar*. With a capital. It is an organization, Father Damien. A religion, you might call it. A great and powerful faith. And I am the smallest part of it.”

“I know of no such church,” I said.

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t. It’s secret. It has to be. You can understand that, can’t you? People don’t like being lied to.”

“I do not like being lied to,” I said.

Lukyan looked wounded. “I told you this would be the truth, didn’t I? When a Liar says that, you can believe him. How else could we trust each other?”

“There are many of you?” I asked. I was starting to think that Lukyan was a madman after all, as fanatical as any heretic, but in a more complex way. Here was a heresy within a heresy, but I recognized my duty: to find the truth of things, and set them right.

“Many of us,” Lukyan said, smiling. “You would be surprised, Father Damien, really you would. But there are some things I dare not tell you.”

“Tell me what you dare, then.”

“Happily,” said Lukyan Judasson. “We Liars, like those of all other religions, have several truths we take on faith. Faith is always required. There are some things that cannot be proven. We believe that life is worth living. That is an article of faith. The purpose of life is to live, to resist death, perhaps to defy entropy.”

“Go on,” I said, interested despite myself.

“We also believe that happiness is a good, something to be sought after.”

“The Church does not oppose happiness,” I said drily.

“I wonder,” Lukyan said. “But let us not quibble. Whatever the Church’s position on happiness, it does preach belief in an afterlife, in a supreme being and a complex moral code.”

“True.”

“The Liars believe in no afterlife, no God. We see the universe as it *is*, Father Damien, and these naked truths are cruel ones. We who believe in life, and treasure it, will die. Afterward there will be nothing, eternal emptiness, blackness, nonexistence. In our living there has been no purpose, no poetry, no meaning. Nor do our deaths possess these qualities. When we are gone, the universe will not long remember us, and shortly it will be as if we had never lived at all. Our worlds and our universe will not long outlive us. Ultimately, entropy will consume all, and our puny efforts cannot stay that awful end. It will be gone. It has never been. It has never mattered. The universe itself is doomed, transient, uncaring.”

I slid back in my chair, and a shiver went through me as I listened to poor Lukyan’s dark words. I found myself fingering my crucifix. “A bleak philosophy,” I said, “as well as a false one. I have had that fearful vision myself. I think all of us do, at some point. But it is not so, Father. My faith sustains me against such nihilism. It is a shield against despair.”

“Oh, I know that, my friend, my Knight Inquisitor,” Lukyan said. “I’m glad to see you understand so well. You are almost one of us already.”

I frowned.

“You’ve touched the heart of it,” Lukyan continued. “The truths, the great truths—and most of the lesser ones as well—they are unbearable for most men. We find our shield in faith. Your faith, my faith, any faith. It doesn’t matter, so long as we *believe*, really and truly believe, in whatever lie we

cling to.” He fingered the ragged edges of his great blond beard. “Our psychs have always told us that believers are the happy ones, you know. They may believe in Christ or Buddha or Erika Stormjones, in reincarnation or immortality or nature, in the power of love or the platform of a political faction, but it all comes to the same thing. They believe. They are happy. It is the ones who have seen truth who despair, and kill themselves. The truths are so vast, the faiths so little, so poorly made, so riddled with error and contradiction that we see around them and through them, and then we feel the weight of darkness upon us, and can no longer be happy.”

I am not a slow man. I knew, by then, where Lukyan Judasson was going. “Your Liars invent faiths.”

He smiled. “Of all sorts. Not only religious. Think of it. We know truth for the cruel instrument it is. Beauty is infinitely preferable to truth. We invent beauty. Faiths, political movements, high ideals, belief in love and fellowship. All of them are lies. We tell those lies, among others, endless others. We improve on history and myth and religion, make each more beautiful, better, easier to believe in. Our lies are not perfect, of course. The truths are too big. But perhaps someday we will find one great lie that all humanity can use. Until then, a thousand small lies will do.”

“I think I do not care for your Liars very much,” I said with a cold, even fervor. “My whole life has been a quest for truth.”

Lukyan was indulgent. “Father Damien Har Veris, Knight Inquisitor, I know you better than that. You are a Liar yourself. You do good work. You ship from world to world, and on each you destroy the foolish, the rebels, the questioners who would bring down the edifice of the vast lie that you serve.”

“If my lie is so admirable,” I said, “then why have you abandoned it?”

“A religion must fit its culture and society, work with them, not against them. If there is conflict, contradiction, then the lie breaks down, and the faith falters. Your Church is good for many worlds, Father, but not for Arion. Life is too kind here, and your faith is stern. Here we love beauty, and your faith offers too little. So we have improved it. We studied this world for a long time. We know its psychological profile. Saint Judas will thrive here. He offers drama, and color, and much beauty—the aesthetics are admirable. His is a tragedy with a happy ending, and Arion dotes on such stories. And the dragons are a nice touch. I think your own Church ought to find a way to work in dragons. They are marvelous creatures.”

“Mythical,” I said.

“Hardly,” he replied. “Look it up.” He grinned at me. “You see, really, it all comes back to faith. Can you really know what happened three thousand years ago? You have one Judas, I have another. Both of us have books. Is yours true? Can you really believe that? I have been admitted only to the first circle of the order of Liars, so I do not know all our secrets, but I know that we are very old. It would not surprise me to learn that the gospels were written by men very much like me. Perhaps there never was a Judas at all. Or a Jesus.”

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He lied, I think, deliberately, knowing I would go forth and destroy the way of cross and dragon, knowing too that I could not touch the Liars, would not even dare mention them. How could I? Who would believe it? A grand star-spanning conspiracy as old as history? It reeks of paranoia, and I had no proof at all.

The telepath lied for Lukyan's benefit, so that he would let me go. I am certain of that now. Cross risked much to snare me. Failing, he was willing to sacrifice Lukyan Judasson and his lie, pawns in some greater game.

So I left, and carried within me the knowledge that I was empty of faith but for a blind faith in truth, a truth I could no longer find in my Church. I grew certain of that in my year of rest, which I spent reading and studying on Vess and Cathaday and Celia's World. Finally I returned to the Archbishop's receiving room, and stood again before Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn in my very worst pair of boots. "My Lord Commander," I said to him, "I can accept no further assignments. I ask that I be retired from active service."

"For what cause?" Torgathon rumbled, splashing feebly.

"I have lost the faith," I said to him, simply.

He regarded me for a long time, his pupilless eyes blinking. At last he said, "Your faith is a matter between you and your confessor. I care only about your results. You have done good work, Damien. You may not retire, and we will not allow you to resign."

The truth will set us free.

But freedom is cold and empty and frightening, and lies can often be warm and beautiful.

Last year the Church finally granted me a new and better ship. I named this one *Dragon*.

Dying of the Light

PROLOGUE

A rogue, an aimless wanderer, creation's castaway; this world was all those things.

For uncounted centuries it had been falling, alone, without purpose, falling through the cold lonely places between the suns. Generations of stars had succeeded each other in stately sweeps across its barren skies. It belonged to none of them. It was a world in and of itself, entire. In a sense it was not even part of the galaxy; its tumbling path cut through the galactic plane like a nail driven through a round wooden tabletop. It was part of nothing.

And nothing was very close at hand. In the dawn of human history, the rogue world pierced a curtain of interstellar dust that covered a trifling small area near the up-edge of the galaxy's great lens. A handful of stars lay beyond-thirty or so, a mere handful. Then emptiness, a night greater than any the wandering world had known.

There, falling through that shadowed border region, it met the shattered people.

The Earth Imperials found it first, at the height of their giddy, drunken expansion, when the Federal Empire of Old Earth was still trying to rule all the worlds of humanity across immense impossible gulfs. A warship named the Mao Tse-tung, crippled during a raid on the Hrangans, its crew dead at their stations, its engines alternately shifting into drive and out again, became the first ship of the manrealm to drift beyond the Tempter's Veil. The Mao was a derelict, airless and full of grotesque corpses that bobbed aimlessly through its corridors and brushed against its bulkheads every century or so; but its computers still functioned, cycling blindly through their rituals, scanning well enough to note the nameless rogue planet on their charts when the ghost ship emerged from drive within a few light-minutes of it. Almost seven centuries later a trader out of Tober stumbled on the Mao Tse-tung, and that notation.

By then it was no news; the world had been found again.

Celia Marcyan was the second discoverer. Her Shadow Chaser circled the dark planet for a standard day, during the generation of interregnum that followed the Collapse. But the rogue had nothing for Celia, only rock and ice and never-ending night, so it was not long until she went on her way. She was a namer, however, and before she left she gave the world a name. Worlorn she called it, and never said why or what it meant, and Worlorn it was. And Celia moved on to other worlds and other stories.

Kleronomas was the next visitor, in ai-46. His survey ship made a few brief passes and mapped the wastes. The planet yielded up its secrets to his sensors; it was larger and richer than most, he discovered, with frozen oceans and frozen atmosphere, waiting for release.

Some say that Tomo and Walberg were the first to land on Worlorn, in ai-97, on their madman's quest to cross the galaxy. True? Probably not. Every world in the manrealm has a story of Tomo and Walberg, but the Dreaming Whore never returned, so who can know where it landed?

The later sightings had more of fact about them and less of legend. Starless and useless and only marginally interesting, Worlorn became a common notation on the starcharts of the Fringe, that scattering of thinly settled worlds between the smoke-dark gases of the Tempter's Veil and the Great Black Sea itself.

Then, in ai-446, an astronomer on Wolfheim made Worlorn the subject of his studies, and for the very first time someone bothered to string all the coordinates together. That was when things changed. The name of the Wolfman astronomer was Ingo Haapala, and he emerged from his computer room wildly excited, the way Wolfmen often get. For Worlorn was to have a day-a long bright day.

The constellation called the Wheel of Fire burned in every outworld sky; the wonder of it was notorious as far inward as Old Earth. The center of the formation was the red supergiant, the Hub, the Helleye, Fat Satan-it had a dozen names. In orbit around it, equidistant, arrayed neatly like six marbles of yellow flame rolling around a single groove, were the others: the Trojan Suns, Satan's Children, the Hellcrown. The names did not matter. What mattered was the Wheel itself, six medium-sized yellow stars doing homage to their vast red master, at once the most unlikely and stable multiple-star system yet discovered. The Wheel was a seven-day sensation, a new mystery for a humanity jaded on the old mysteries. On the more civilized worlds, scientists put forth theories to explain it; beyond the Tempter's Veil, a cult grew up around it, and men and women spoke of a vanished race of stellar engineers who had moved whole suns to build themselves a monument. Scientific speculation and superstitious worship both waxed feverish for a few decades and then began to wane; very shortly the matter was forgotten.

The Wolfman Haapala announced that Worlorn would sweep around the Wheel of Fire once, in a wide slow hyperbola, never entering the system proper but coming close enough. Fifty standard years of sunlight; then out again into the darkness of the Fringe, past the

Last Stars, into the Great Black Sea of intergalactic emptiness.

Those were the restless centuries, when High Kavalaan and the other outworlds were tasting their first pride and growing anxious to find a place in the shattered histories of humanity. And everyone knows what happened. The Wheel of Fire had always been the glory of the outworlds, but it had been a planetless glory, until now.

There was a century of storms as Worlorn neared the light: years of melting ice and volcanic activity and earthquakes. A frozen atmosphere came, bit by bit, to life, and hideous winds howled like monster infants. All this the outworlders faced and fought.

The terraformers came from Tober-in-the-Veil, the weather wardens from Darkdawn, and there were other teams from Wolfheim and Kimdiss and ai-Emer-el and the World of the Blackwine Ocean. The men of High Kavalaan supervised it all, since High Kavalaan claimed the rogue. The struggle took more than a century, and those who died are still half-myth to the children of the Fringe. But at last Worlorn was gentled. Then cities rose, and strange forests flowered beneath the light of the Wheel, and animals were set loose to give the planet life.

In ai-589 the Festival of the Fringe opened, with Fat Satan filling a quarter of the sky and his children bright around him. On that first day the Toberians let their stratoshield shimmer, so the clouds and the sunlight ran and swirled in kaleidoscope patterns. Other days followed, and the ships came. From all the outworlds, and from worlds beyond, from Tara and Daronne on the other side of the Veil, from Avalon and Jamison's World, from places as distant as New-holme and Old Poseidon and even Old Earth itself. For five standard years Worlorn moved toward perihelion; for five it moved away. In ai-599 the Festival closed.

Worlorn entered twilight, and fell toward night.

Chapter 1

Beyond the window, water slapped against the pilings of the wooden sidewalk along the canal. Dirk t'Larien looked up and saw a low black barge drift slowly past in the moonlight. A solitary figure stood at the stern, leaning on a thin dark pole. Everything was etched quite clearly, for Braque's moon was riding overhead, big as a fist and very bright.

Behind it was a stillness and a smoky darkness, an unmoving curtain that hid the farther stars. A cloud of dust and gas, he thought. The Tempter's Veil.

The beginning came long after the end: a whisperjewel.

It was wrapped in layers of silver foil and soft dark velvet, just as he had given it to her years before. He undid its package that night, sitting by the window of his room that overlooked the wide scummy canal where merchants poled fruit barges endlessly up and down. The gem was just as Dirk recalled it: a deep red, laced with thin black lines, shaped like a tear. He remembered the day the esper had cut it for them, back on Avalon.

After a long time he touched it.

It was smooth and very cold against the tip of his finger, and deep within his brain it whispered. Memories and promises that he had not forgotten.

He was here on Braque for no particular reason, and he never knew how they found him. But they did, and Dirk t'Larien got his jewel back.

"Gwen," he said quietly, all to himself, just to shape the word again and feel the familiar warmth on his tongue. His Jenny, his Guinevere, mistress of abandoned dreams.

It had been seven standard years, he thought, while his finger stroked the cold, cold jewel. But it felt like seven lifetimes. And everything was over. What could she want of him now? The man who had loved her, that other Dirk t'Larien, that maker-of-promises and giver-of-jewels was a dead man.

Dirk lifted his hand to brush a spray of gray-brown hair back out of his eyes. And suddenly, not meaning to, he remembered how Gwen would brush his hair away whenever she meant to kiss him.

He felt very tired then, and very lost. His carefully nurtured cynicism trembled, and a weight fell upon his shoulders, a ghost weight, the heaviness of the person he had been once and no longer was. He had indeed changed over the years, and he had called it growing wise, but now all that wisdom abruptly seemed to sour. His wandering thoughts lingered on all the promises he had broken, the dreams he had postponed and then mislaid, the ideals compromised, the shining future lost to tedium and rot.

Why did she make him remember? Too much time had passed, too much had happened to him-probably to both of them. Besides, he had never really meant for her to use the whisperjewel. It had been a stupid gesture, the adolescent posturing of a young romantic. No reasonable adult would hold him to such an absurd pledge. He could not go, of course. He had hardly had time to see Braque yet, he had his own life, he had important things to do. After all this time,

Gwen could not possibly expect him to ship off to the outworlds.

Resentful, he reached out and took the jewel in his palm, and his fist closed hard around the smallness of it. He would toss it through the window, he decided, out into the dark waters of the canal, out and away with everything that it meant. But once within his fist, the gem was an ice inferno, and the memories were knives.

. . . because she needs you, the jewel whispered. Because you promised.

His hand did not move. His fist stayed closed. The cold against his palm passed beyond pain, into numbness.

That other Dirk, the younger one, Gwen's Dirk. He had promised. But so had she, he remembered. Long ago on Avalon. The old esper, a wizened Emereli with a very minor Talent and red-gold hair, had cut two jewels. He had read Dirk t'Larien, had felt all the love Dirk had for his Jenny, and then had put as much of that into the gem as his poor psionic powers allowed him to. Later, he had done the same for Gwen. Then they had traded jewels.

It had been his idea. It may not always be so, he had told her, quoting an ancient poem. So they had promised, both of them: Send this memory, and I will come. No matter where I am, or when, or what has passed between us. I will come, and there will be no questions.

But it was a shattered promise. Six months after she had left him, Dirk had sent her the jewel. She had not come. After that, he could never have expected her to invoke his promise. Yet now she had.

Did she really expect him to come?

And he knew, with sadness, that the man he had been back then, that man would come to her, no matter what, no matter how much he might hate her -or love her. But that fool was long buried. Time and Gwen had killed him.

But he still listened to the jewel and felt his old feelings and his new weariness. And finally he looked up and thought, Well, perhaps it is not too late after all.

There are many ways to move between the stars, and some of them are faster than light and some are not, and all of them are slow. It takes most of a man's lifetime to ship from one end of the manrealm to the

other, and the manrealm—the scattered worlds of humanity and the greater emptiness in between—is the very smallest part of the galaxy. But Braque was close to the Veil, and the outworlds beyond, and there was some trade back and forth, so Dirk could find a ship.

It was named the Shuddering of Forgotten Enemies, and it went from Braque to Tara and then through the Veil to Wolfheim and then to Kimdiss and finally to Worlorn, and the voyage, even by ftl drive, took more than three months standard. After Worlorn, Dirk knew, the Shuddering would move on, to High Kavalaan and ai-Emerel and the Last Stars, before it turned and began to retrace its tedious route.

The spacefield had been built to handle twenty ships a day; now it handled perhaps one a month. The greater part of it was shut, dark, abandoned. The Shuddering set down in the middle of a small portion that still functioned, dwarfing a nearby cluster of private ships and a partially dismantled Toberian freighter.

A section of the vast terminal, automated and yet lifeless, was still brightly lit, but Dirk moved through it quickly, out into the night, an empty outworld night that cried for want of stars. They were there, waiting for him, just beyond the main doors, more or less as he had expected. The captain of the Shuddering had lasered on ahead as soon as the ship emerged from drive into normal space.

Gwen Delvano had come to meet him, then, as he had asked her to. But she had not come alone. Gwen and the man she had brought with her were talking to each other in low, careful voices when he emerged from the terminal.

Dirk stopped just past the door, smiled as easily as he could manage, and dropped the single light bag he carried. "Hey," he said softly. "I hear there's a Festival going on."

She had turned at the sound of his voice, and now she laughed, a so-well-remembered laugh. "No," she said. "You're about ten years too late."

Dirk scowled and shook his head. "Hell," he said. Then he smiled again, and she came to him, and they embraced. The other man, the stranger, stood and watched without a trace of self-consciousness.

It was a short hug. No sooner had Dirk wrapped his arms about her than Gwen pulled back. After the break they stood very close, and each looked to see what the years had done.

She was older but much the same, and what changes he saw were probably only defects in his memory. Her wide green eyes were not quite as wide or green as he remembered them, and she was a little taller than he recalled and perhaps a bit heavier. But she was close enough; she smiled the same way, and her hair was the same, fine and dark, falling past her shoulders in a shimmering stream blacker than an outworld night. She wore a white turtleneck pullover and belted pants of sturdy chameleon cloth, faded to night-black now, and a thick headband, as she had liked to dress on Avalon. Now she wore a bracelet too, and that was new. Or perhaps the proper word was armllet. It was a massive thing, cool silver set with jade, that covered half her left forearm. The sleeve of her pullover was rolled back to display it.

"You're thinner, Dirk," she said.

He shrugged and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. "Yes," he said. In truth, he was almost gaunt, though still a little round-shouldered from slouching too much. The years had aged him in other ways as

well; now his hair had more gray than brown, when once it had been the other way around, and he wore it nearly as long as Gwen, though his was a mass of curls and tangles.

"A long time," Gwen said.

"Seven years, standard," he replied nodding. "I didn't think that.. ."

The other man, the waiting stranger, coughed then, as if to "remind them that they were not alone. Dirk glanced up, and Gwen turned. The man came forward and bowed politely. Short and chubby and very blond-his hair looked almost white-he wore a brightly colored silken suit, all green and yellow, and a tiny black knit cap that stayed in place despite his bow.

"Arkin Ruark," he said to Dirk.

"Dirk t'Larien."

"Arkin is working with me on the project," Gwen said.

"Project?"

She blinked. "Don't you even know why I'm here?"

He didn't. The whisperjewel had been sent from Worlorn, so he had known not much else than where to find her. "You're an ecologist," he said. "On Avalon..."

"Yes. At the Institute. A long time ago. I finished there, got my credentials, and I've been on High Kavalaan since. Until I was sent here."

"Gwen is with the Ironjade Gathering," Ruark said. He had a small, tight smile on his face. "Me, I'm representing Impril City Academy. Kimdiss. You know?"

Dirk nodded. Ruark was a Kimdissi then, an out-worlder, from one of their universities.

"Impril and Ironjade, well, after the same thing, you know? Research on ecological interaction on Worlorn. Never really done properly during the Festival, the outworlds not being so strong on ecology, none of them. A science ai-forgotten, as the Emereli say. But that's the project. Gwen and I knew each other from before, so we thought, well, here for the same reason, so it is good sense to work together and learn what we can learn."

"I suppose," Dirk said. He was not really overly interested in the project just then. He wanted to talk to Gwen. He looked at her. "You'll have to tell me all about it later. When we talk. I imagine you want to talk."

She gave him an odd look. "Yes, of course. We do have a lot to talk about."

He picked up his bag. "Where to?" he asked. "I could probably do with a bath and some food."

Gwen exchanged glances with Ruark. "Arkin and I were just talking about that. He can put you up. We're in the same building. Only a few floors apart."

Ruark nodded. "Gladly, gladly. Pleasure in doing for friends, and both of us are friend to Gwen, are we not?"

"Uh," said Dirk. "I thought, somehow, that I would stay with you, Gwen."

She could not look at him for a time. She looked at Ruark, at the ground, at the black night sky, before her eyes finally found his. "Perhaps," she said, not smiling now, her voice careful. "But not right now. I don't think it would be best, not immediately. But we'll go home, of course. We have a car."

"This way," Ruark put in, before Dirk could frame his words. Something was very strange. He had played through the reunion scene a hundred times on board the Shuddering during the months of his voyage, and sometimes he had imagined it tender and loving, and sometimes it had been an angry confrontation, and often it had been tearful-but it had never been quite like this, awkward and at odd angles, with a stranger present throughout it all. He began to wonder exactly who Arkin Ruark was, and whether his relationship with Gwen was quite what they said it was. But then, they had hardly said anything. Without knowing what to say or to think, he shrugged and followed as they led him to their aircar.

The walk was quite short. The car, when they reached it, took Dirk aback. He had seen a lot of different types of aircars in his travels, but none quite like this one; huge and steel-gray, with curved and muscled triangular wings, it looked almost alive, like a great aerial manta ray fashioned in metal. A small cockpit with four seats was set between the wings, and beneath the wingtips he glimpsed ominous rods.

He looked at Gwen and pointed. "Are those lasers?"

She nodded, smiling just a little.

"What the hell are you flying?" Dirk asked. "It looks like a war machine. Are we going to be assaulted by Hrangans? I haven't seen anything like that since we toured the Institute museums back on Avalon."

Gwen laughed, took his bag from him, and tossed it into the back seat. "Get in," she told him. "It is a perfectly fine aircar of High Kavalaan manufacture. They've only recently started turning out their own. It's supposed to look like an animal, the black banshee. A flying predator, also the brother-beast of the Ironjade Gathering. Very big in their folklore, sort of a totem."

She climbed in, behind the stick, and Ruark followed a bit awkwardly, vaulting over the armored wing into the back. Dirk did not move. "But it has lasers!" he insisted.

Gwen sighed. "They're not charged, and never have been. Every car built on High Kavalaan has weapons of some sort. The culture demands it. And I don't mean just Ironjade's. Redsteel, Braith, and the Shanagate Holding are all the same."

Dirk walked around the car and climbed in next to Gwen, but his face was blank. "What?"

"Those are the four Kavalar holdfast-coalitions," she explained. "Think of them as small nations, or big families. They're a little of both."

"But why the lasers?"

"High Kavalaan is a violent planet," Gwen replied.

Ruark gave a snort of laughter. "Ah, Gwen," he said. "That is utter wrong, utter!"

"Wrong?" she snapped.

"Very," Ruark said. "Yes, utter, because you are close to truth, half and not everything, worst lie of all."

Dirk turned in his seat to look back at the chubby blond Kimdissi. "What?"

"High Kavalaan was a violent planet, truth. But now, truth is, the violence is the Kavalars. Hostile folk, each and every among them, xenophobes often, racists. Proud and jealous. With their highwars and their code duello, yes, and that is why Kavalars have guns. To fight with, in the air! I warn you, t'Larien-"

"Arkin!" Gwen said between her teeth, and Dirk started at the edged malice in her tone. She threw on the gravity grid suddenly, touched the stick, and the aircar wrenched forward and left the ground with a whine of protest, rising rapidly. The port below them was bright with light where the Shuddering of Forgotten Enemies stood among the lesser starships, shadowy everywhere else. Around it was darkness to the unseen horizon where black ground blended with blacker sky. Only a thin powder of stars lit the night above. This was the Fringe, with intergalactic space above and the dusky curtain of the Tempter's Veil below, and the world seemed lonelier than Dirk had ever imagined.

Ruark had subsided, muttering, and a heavy silence lay over the car for a long moment.

"Arkin is from Kimdiss," Gwen said finally, and she forced a chuckle. Dirk remembered her too well to be fooled, however; she was not one bit less tense than when she had snapped at Ruark a moment before.

"I don't understand," Dirk said, feeling quite stupid, since everyone seemed to think he should.

"You are no outworlder," Ruark said. "Avalon, Baldur, whatever world, it doesn't matter. Your people inside the Veil don't know Kavalars."

"Or Kimdissi," Gwen said, a little more calmly.

Ruark grunted. "A sarcasm," he told Dirk. "Kimdissi and Kavalars, well, we don't get on, you know? So Gwen is telling you I'm all prejudiced and not to believe me."

"Yes, Arkin," she said. "Dirk, he doesn't know High Kavalaan, doesn't understand the culture or the people. Like all Kimdissi, he'll tell you only the worst, but everything is more complex than he would credit. So remember that when this glib scoundrel starts working on you. It should be easy. In the old days, you were always telling me that every question has thirty sides."

Dirk laughed. "Fair enough," he said, "and true. Although these last few years I've begun to think that thirty is a bit low. I still don't understand what this is all about, however. Take the car-does it come with your job? Or do you have to fly something like this just because you work for the Ironjade Gathering?"

"Ah," Ruark said loudly. "You do not work for the Ironjade Gathering, Dirk. No, you are of them, you are not-two choices only. You are not of Ironjade, you do not work for Ironjade!"

"Yes," said Gwen, the edge returning to her voice. "And I am of Ironjade. I wish you'd remember that, Arkin. Sometimes you begin to annoy me."

"Gwen, Gwen," Ruark said, sounding very flustered. "You are a friend, a soulmate, very. We have tussled great problems, us two. I would never offend, do not mean to. You are not a Kavalair though, never. For one, you are too much a woman, a true woman, not merely an eyn-kethi nor a betheyn."

"No? I'm not? I wear the bond of jade-and-silver, though." She glanced toward Dirk and lowered her voice. "For Jaan," she said. "This is really his car, and that's why I fly it, to answer your original question. For Jaan."

Silence. The wind was the only noise, moving around them as they fell upward into blackness, tossing Gwen's long straight hair and Dirk's tangles. It knifed right through his thin Braqui clothing. He wondered briefly why the aircar had no bubble canopy, only a thin windscreen that was hardly any use at all.

Then he folded his arms tight against his chest, and slid down into the seat. "Jaan?" he asked quietly. A question. The answer would come, he knew, and he dreaded it, just from the way that Gwen had spoken the name, with a sort of strange defiance.

"He doesn't know," Ruark said.

Gwen sighed, and Dirk could see her tense. "I'm sorry, Dirk. I thought you would know. It has been a long time. I thought, well, one of the people we both knew back on Avalon, one of them surely has told you."

"I never see anyone anymore," Dirk said carefully. "That we knew, together. You know. I travel a lot. Braque, Prometheus, Jamison's World." His voice rang hollow and mane in his ears. He paused and swallowed. "Who is Jaan?"

"Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade Vikary," Ruark said.

"Jaan is my . . ." She hesitated. "It is not easy to explain. I am betheyn to Jaan, cro-betheyn to his teyn Garse." She looked over, a brief glance away from the aircar instruments, then back again. There was no comprehension on Dirk's face.

"Husband," she said then, shrugging. "I'm sorry, Dirk. That's not quite right, but it is the closest I can come in a single word. Jaan is my husband."

Dirk, huddled low in his seat with his arms folded, said nothing. He was cold, and he hurt, and he wondered why he was there. He remembered the whisperjewel, and he still wondered. She had some reason for sending for him, surely, and in time she would tell him. And really, he could hardly have expected that she would be alone. At the port he had even thought, quite briefly, that perhaps Ruark . . . and that hadn't bothered him.

When he had been silent for too long, Gwen looked over once again. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "Dirk. Really. You should never have come."

And he thought, She's right.

The three of them flew on without speaking. Words had been said, and not the words that Dirk had wanted, but words that had changed nothing. He was here on Worlorn, and Gwen was still beside him,

though suddenly a stranger. They were both strangers. He sat slumped in his seat, alone with his thoughts, while a cold wind stroked his face.

On Braque, somehow, he had thought that the whisperjewel meant she was calling him back, that she wanted him again. The only question that concerned him was whether he would go, whether he could return to her, whether Dirk t'Larien still could love and be loved. That had not been it at all, he knew now.

Send this memory, and I will come, and there will be no questions. That was the promise, the only promise. Nothing more.

He became angry. Why was she doing this to him? She had held the jewel and felt his feelings. She could have guessed. No need of hers could be worth the price of this remembering.

Then, finally, calm came back to Dirk t'Larien. With his eyes tight shut, he could see the canal on Braque again, and the lone black barge that had seemed so briefly important. And he remembered his resolve, to try again, to be as he had been, to come to her and give whatever he could give, whatever she might need for himself, as well as for her.

He straightened with an effort, unfolded his arms, opened his eyes, and sat up into the biting wind. Then, deliberately, he looked at Gwen and smiled his old shy smile for her. "Ah, Jenny," he said, "I'm sorry too. But it doesn't matter. I didn't know, but that doesn't matter. I'm glad I came, and you should be glad too. Seven years is too long, right?"

She glanced at him, then back at her instruments, and licked her lips nervously. "Yes. Seven years is too long, Dirk."

"Will I meet Jaan?"

She nodded. "And Garse too, his teyn."

Below, somewhere, he heard water, a river lost in the darkness. It was gone quickly; they were moving quite fast. Dirk peered over the side of the aircar, down past the wings into the rushing black, then up. "You need more stars," he said thoughtfully. "I feel as though I'm going blind."

"I know what you mean," Gwen said. She smiled, and quite suddenly Dirk felt better than he had for a long time.

"Remember the sky on Avalon?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course."

"Lots of stars there. It was a beautiful world."

"Worlorn has a beauty too," she said. "How much do you know of it?"

"A little," Dirk replied, still looking at her. "I know about the Festival, and that the planet is a rogue, and not much else. A woman on the ship told me that Tomo and Walberg discovered the place on their jaunt to the end of the galaxy."

"Not quite," said Gwen. "But the story has a certain charm to it. Anyway, everything you'll see is part of the Festival. The whole planet is. All the worlds of the Fringe took part, and the culture of each is reflected here in one of the cities. There are fourteen cities, for the fourteen worlds of the Fringe. In between you've got the spacefield and the Common, which is sort of a park. We're flying over it now. The Common is not very interesting, even by day. They had fairs and games there in the years of the Festival."

"Where is your project?"

"The wilderness," Ruark said. "Beyond the cities, beyond the mountainwall."

Gwen said, "Look."

Dirk looked. At the horizon he could vaguely make out a row of mountains, a jagged black barrier that climbed out of the Common to eclipse the lower stars. A spark of bloody light sat high upon one peak, and it grew as they drew near. Taller and higher it became, though not more brilliant; the color stayed a murky, threatening red that reminded Dirk somehow of the whisperjewel.

"Home," Gwen announced as the light swelled. "The city Larteyn. Lar is Old Kavalair for sky. This is the city of High Kavalaan. Some people call it the Firefort."

He could see why at a glance. Built into the shoulder of the mountain, rock beneath it and rock to its back, the Kavalair city was also a fortress-square and thick, massively walled, with narrow slit windows. Even the towers that rose behind the city walls were heavy and solid. And short; the Mountain loomed above them, its dark stone stained bloody by reflected light. But the lights of the city itself were not reflected; the walls and streets of Larteyn burned with a dull glowering fire of their own.

"Glowstone," Gwen told him in answer to his unvoiced question. "It absorbs light during the day and gives it back at night. On High Kavalaan, it was used mostly for jewelry, but they quarried it by the ton and shipped it off to Worlorn for the Festival."

"Baroque impressive," Ruark said. "Kavalair impressive." Dirk only nodded.

"You should have seen it in the old days," Gwen said. "Larteyn drank from the seven suns by day and lit the range by night. Like a dagger of fire. The stones are fading now-the Wheel grows more distant every hour. In another decade the city will go dark as a burnt-out ember."

"It doesn't look very big," Dirk said. "How many people did it hold?"

"A million, once. You're just seeing the tip of the iceberg. The city is built into the mountain."

"Very Kavalair," Ruark said. "A deep holding, a fastness in stone. But empty now. Twenty people, last count, us including."

The aircar passed over the outer wall, set flush to the cliff on the edge of the wide mountain ledge, to make one long straight drop past rock and glowstone. Below them Dirk saw wide walkways, and rows of slowly stirring pennants, and great carved gargoyles with burning glowstone eyes. The buildings were white stone and ebon wood, and on their flanks the rock fires were reflected in long red streaks, like open

wounds on some hulking dark beast. They flew over towers and domes and streets, twisting alleys and wide boulevards, open courtyards and a huge many-tiered outdoor theater.

Empty, all empty. Not a figure moved in the red-drenched ways of Larteyn.

Gwen spiraled down to the roof of a square black tower. As she hovered and slowly faded the gravity grid to bring them in, Dirk noted two other cars in the airtel beneath them: a sleek yellow teardrop and a formidable old military flyer with the look of century-old war surplus. It was olive-green, square and sheathed in armor, with lasercannon on the forward hood and pulse-tubes on the rear.

She put their metal manta down between the two cars, and they vaulted out onto the roof. When they reached the bank of elevators, Gwen turned to face him, her face flushed and strange in the brooding reddish light. "It is late," she said. "We had all better rest."

Dirk did not question the dismissal. "Jaan?" he said.

"You'll meet him tomorrow," she replied. "I need a chance to talk to him first."

"Why?" he asked, but Gwen had already turned and started toward the stairs. Then the tube arrived and Ruark put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him inside.

They rode downward, to sleep and to dreams.

Chapter 2

He got very little rest that night. Each time he started off to sleep, his dreams would wake him: fitful visions laced with poison and only half remembered when he woke, as he did, time and time again throughout the night. Finally he gave up. Instead, he began to rummage through his belongings until he found the jewel in its wrappings of silver and velvet, and he sat with it in the darkness and drank from its cold promises.

Hours passed. Then Dirk rose and dressed, slid the jewel into his pocket, and went outside alone to watch the Wheel come up. Ruark was sound asleep, but he had the door coded for Dirk, so there was no problem getting in or out. He took the tubes back up to the roof and waited through the last dregs of night, sitting on the cold metal wing of the gray aircar.

It was a strange dawn, dim and dangerous, and the day it birthed was murky. First only a vague cloudy glow suffused the horizon, a red-black smear that faintly echoed the glowstones of the city. Then the first sun came up: a tiny ball of yellow that Dirk watched with naked eyes. Minutes later, a second appeared, a little larger and brighter, on another part of the horizon. But the two of them, though recognizably more than stars, still cast less light than Braque's fat moon.

A short time later the Hub began to climb above the Common. It was a line of dim red at first, lost in the ordinary light of dawn, but it grew steadily brighter until at last Dirk saw that it was no reflection, but the crown of a vast red sun. The world turned crimson as it rose.

He looked down into the streets below. The stones of Larteyn had all faded now; only where the shadows fell could the glow still be seen, and there only dimly. Gloom had settled over the city like a grayish pall tinged slightly with washed-out red. In the cool weak light the nightflames all had died, and the silent streets echoed death and desolation.

Worlorn's day. Yet it was twilight.

"It was brighter last year," said a voice behind him. "Now each day is darker, cooler. Of the six stars in the Hellcrown, two are hidden now behind Fat Satan, and are of no use at all. The others grow small and distant. Satan himself still looks down on Worlorn, but his light is very red and growing feeble. So Worlorn lives in slow-declining sunset. A few more years and the seven suns will shrink to seven stars, and the ice will come again."

The speaker stood very still as he regarded the dawn, his boots slightly apart and his hands on his hips. He was a tall man, lean and well muscled, bare-chested even in the chill morning. His red-bronze skin was made even redder by the light of Fat Satan. He had high angular cheekbones, a heavy square jaw, and receding shoulder-length hair as black as Gwen's. And on his forearms-his dark forearms matted with fine black hair-he wore two bracelets, equally massive. Jade and silver on his left arm, black iron and red glowstone on his right.

Dirk did not stir from the wing of the manta. The man looked down at him. "You are Dirk t'Larien, and once you were Gwen's lover."

"And you are Jaan."

"Jaan Vikary, of the Ironjade Gathering," the other said. He stepped forward and raised his hands, palms outward and empty.

Dirk knew the gesture from somewhere. He stood and pressed his own palms against the Kavalars'. As he did, he noticed something else. Jaan wore a belt of black oiled metal, and a laser pistol was at his side.

Vikary caught his look and smiled. "All Kavalars go armed. It is a custom-one we value. I hope you are not as shocked and biased as Gwen's friend, the Kimdissi. If so, that is your failure, not ours. Larteyn is part of High Kavalaan, and you cannot expect our culture to conform to yours."

Dirk sat down again. "No. I should have expected it, perhaps, from what I heard last night. I do find it strange. Is there a war on somewhere?"

Vikary smiled very thinly-an even, deliberate baring of teeth. "There is always a war somewhere, t'Larien. Life itself is a war." He paused. "Your name: t'Larien. Unusual. I have not heard its like before, nor has my teyn Garse. Where is your homeworld?"

"Baldur. A long way off, on the other side of Old Earth. But I scarcely remember it. My parents came to Avalon when I was very young."

Vikary nodded. "And you have traveled, Gwen has told me. Which worlds have you seen?"

Dirk shrugged. "Prometheus, Rhiannon. Thisrock, Jamison's World, among others. Avalon, of course. A dozen altogether, mostly places more primitive than Avalon, where my knowledge is in demand. It's usually easy to find work if you've been to the Institute, even if you're not especially skilled or talented. Fine with me. I like traveling."

"Yet you have never been beyond the Tempter's Veil until now. Only in the jambles, and never to the outworlds. You will find things different here, t'Larien."

Dirk frowned. "What was that word you used? Jambles?"

"The jambles," Vikary repeated. "Ah. Wolfman slang. The jumbled worlds, the jumbled worlds, what you will. A phrase that I acquired from several Wolf-men who were among my friends during my studies on Avalon. It refers to the star sphere between the outworlds and the first- and second-generation colonies near Old Earth. It was the jambles where the Hrangans saturated the stars and ruled their slaveworlds and fought the Earth Imperials. Most of the planets you named were known then, and they were touched hard by the ancient war and jumbled by the collapse. Avalon itself is a second-generation colony, once a sector capital. That is some distinction, do you think, for a world so very far in these centuries ai-shattered?"

Dirk nodded agreement. "Yes. I know the history, a little. You seem to know a lot of it."

"I am a historian," Vikary said. "Most of my work has been devoted to making history out of the myths of my own world, High Kavalaan. Ironjade sent me to Avalon at great expense to search the data banks of the old computers for just that purpose. Yet I spent two years of study there, had much free time, and developed an interest in the broader history of man."

Dirk said nothing but only looked out again toward the dawn. The red disc of Fat Satan was half risen now, and a third yellow star could be seen. It was slightly to the north of the others, and it was only a star. "The red star is a supergiant," Dirk mused, "but up there it seems only a bit larger than Avalon's sun. It must be pretty far away. It should be colder, the ice should be here now. But it's only chilly."

"That is our doing," Vikary told him with some pride. "Not High Kavalaan, in truth, yet outworld work nonetheless. Tober preserved much of the lost force-field technology of the Earth Imperials during the collapse, and the Toberians have added to it in the centuries since then. Without their shield no Festival could ever have been held. At perihelion, the heat of the Hellcrown and Fat Satan would have burned off Worlorn's atmosphere and boiled its sea, but the Toberian shield blocked off that fury and we had a long bright summer. Now, in like manner, it helps to hold in the heat. Yet it has its limits, as does everything. The cold will come."

"I did not think we'd meet like this," Dirk said. "Why did you come up here?"

"A chance. Long years ago Gwen told me that you liked to watch the dawn. And other things as well, Dirk t'Larien. I know far more of you than you of me."

Dirk laughed. "Well, that's true. I never knew you existed until last night."

Jaan Vikary's face was hard and serious. "But I do exist. Remember that, and we can be friends. I hoped to find you alone and tell you this before the others woke. This is not Avalon now, t'Larien, and today is not yesterday. It is a dying Festival world, a world without a code, so each of us must cling tightly to

whatever codes we bring with us. Do not test mine. Since my years on Avalon, I have tried to think of myself as Jaan Vikary, but I am still a Kavalari. Do not force me to be Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade Vikary."

Dirk stood up. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said. "But I think I can be cordial enough. I certainly have nothing against you, Jaan."

That seemed to be enough to satisfy Vikary. He nodded slowly, and reached into the pocket of his trousers. "An emblem of my friendship and concern for you," he said. In his hand was a black metal collar pin, a tiny manta. "Will you wear it during your time here?"

Dirk took it from his hand. "If you want me to," he said, smiling at the other's formality. He fixed it to his collar. "Dawn is gloomy here," Vikary said, "and day is not much better. Come down to our quarters. I will rouse the others, and we can eat."

The apartment that Gwen shared with the two Kavalari was immense. The high-ceilinged living room was dominated by a fireplace two meters high and twice as long, and above was a slate-gray mantel where glowering gargoyles perched to guard the ashes. Vikary led Dirk past them, over an expanse of deep black carpet, into a dining chamber that was nearly as large. Dirk sat in a high-backed wooden chair, one of twelve along the great table, while his host went to fetch food and company.

He returned shortly, bearing a platter of thinly sliced brown meat and a basket of cold biscuits. He set them in front of Dirk, then turned and left again.

No sooner had he gone than another door opened and Gwen entered, smiling sleepily. She wore an old headband, faded trousers, and a shapeless green top with wide sleeves. He could see the glint of her heavy jade-and-silver bracelet, tight on her left arm. With her, a step behind, came another man, nearly as tall as Vikary but several years younger and much more slender, clad in a short-sleeved jumpsuit of brown-red chameleon cloth. He glanced at Dirk out of intense blue eyes, the bluest eyes that Dirk had ever seen, set in a gaunt hatchet face above a full red beard.

Gwen sat down. The red beard paused in front of Dirk's chair. "I am Garse Ironjade Janacek," he said. He offered his palms. Dirk rose to press them.

Garse Ironjade Janacek, Dirk noted, wore a laser pistol at his waist, slung in a leather holster on a silvery mesh-steel belt. Around his right forearm was a black bracelet, twin to Vikary's-iron and what looked to be glowstone.

"You probably know who I am," Dirk said.

"Indeed," Janacek replied. He had a rather malicious grin. Both of them sat down.

Gwen was already munching on a biscuit. When Dirk resumed his seat, she reached out across the table and fingered the little manta pin on his collar, smiling at some secret amusement. "I see that you and Jaan found each other," she said.

"More or less," Dirk replied, and just then Vikary returned, with his right hand wrapped awkwardly around the handles of four pewter mugs, and his left hand holding a pitcher of dark beer. He deposited it

all in the center of the table, then made one last trip to the kitchen for plates and ironware and a glazed jar of sweet yellow paste that he told them to spread on the biscuits.

While he was gone, Janacek pushed the mugs across the table at Gwen. "Pour," he said to her, in a rather peremptory tone, before turning his attention back to Dirk. "I am told you were the first man she knew," he said while Gwen was pouring. "You left her with an imposing number of vile habits," he said, smiling coolly. "I am tempted to take insult and call you out for satisfaction."

Dirk looked baffled.

Gwen had filled three of the four mugs with beer and foam. She set one in front of Vikary's place, the second by Dirk, and took a long draft from the third. Then she wiped her lips with the back of her hand, smiled at Janacek, and handed him the empty mug. "If you're going to threaten poor Dirk because of my habits," she said, "then I suppose I must challenge Jaan for all the years I've had to suffer yours."

Janacek turned the empty beer mug in his hands and scowled. "Betheyn-bitch," he said in an easy conversational voice. He poured his own beer.

Vikary was back an instant later. He sat down, took a swipe from his own mug, and they began to eat. Dirk discovered very soon that he liked having beer for breakfast. The biscuits, smeared over with a thick coating of the sweet paste, were also excellent. The meat was rather dry.

Janacek and Vikary questioned him throughout the meal, while Gwen sat back and looked bemused, saying very little. The two Kavalars were a study in

contrasts. Jaan Vikary leaned forward as he spoke (he was still bare-chested, and every so often he yawned and scratched himself absently) and maintained a tone of general friendly interest, smiling frequently, seemingly much more at ease than he had been up on the roof. Yet he struck Dirk as somehow deliberate, a tight man who was making a conscious effort to loosen; even his informalities—the smiles, the scratching—seemed studied and formal. Garse Janacek, while he sat more erect than Vikary and never scratched and had all the formal Kavalars' mannerisms of speech, nevertheless seemed more genuinely relaxed, like a man who enjoyed the restrictions his society had laid on him and would not even think of trying to break free. His speech was animated and abrasive; he tossed off insults like a flywheel tossing sparks, most of them directed at Gwen. She tossed a few back, but feebly; Janacek played the game much better than she did. A lot of it gave the appearance of casual, affectionate give-and-take, but several times Dirk thought he caught a hint of real hostility. Vikary tended to frown at every exchange.

When Dirk happened to mention his year on Prometheus, Janacek quickly seized on it. "Tell me, t'Larien," he said, "do you consider the Altered Men human?"

"Of course," Dirk said. "They are. Settled by the Earth Imperials way back during the war. The modern Prometheans are only the descendants of the old Ecological Warfare Corps."

"In truth," Janacek said, "yet I would disagree with your conclusion. They have manipulated their own genes to such a degree that they have lost the right to call themselves men at all, in my opinion. Dragonfly men, undersea men, men who breathe poison, men who see in the dark like Hruun, men with four arms,

hermaphrodites, soldiers without stomachs, breeding sows without sentience-these creatures are not men. Or not-men, more precisely."

"No," Dirk said. "I've heard the term not-man. It's

common parlance on a lot of worlds, but it means human stock that's been mutated so it can no longer interbreed with the basic. The Prometheans have been careful to avoid that. The leaders-they're fairly normal themselves, you know, only minor alterations for longevity and such-well, the leaders regularly swoop down on Rhiannon and Thisrock, raiding, you know. For ordinary Earth-normal humans-

"Yet even Earth is less than Earth-normal these past few centuries," Janacek interrupted. Then he shrugged. "I should not break in, should I? Old Earth is too far away, in any event. We only hear century-old rumors. Continue."

"I made my point," Dirk said. "The Altered Men are still human. Even the low castes, the most grotesque, the failed experiments discarded by the surgeons-all of them can interbreed. That's why they sterilize them, they're afraid of offspring."

Janacek took a swallow of beer and regarded him with those intense blue eyes. "They do interbreed, then?" He smiled. "Tell me, t'Larien, during your year on that world did you ever have occasion to test this personally?"

Dirk flushed and found himself glancing toward Gwen, as if it were somehow all her fault. "I haven't been celibate these past seven years, if that's what you mean," he snapped.

Janacek rewarded his answer with a grin, and looked at Gwen. "Interesting," he said to her. "The man spends several years in your bed and then immediately turns to bestiality."

Anger flashed across her face; Dirk still knew her well enough to recognize that. Jaan Vikary looked none too pleased either. "Garse," he said warningly.

Janacek deferred to him. "My apologies, Gwen," he said. "No insult was intended. T'Larien no doubt acquired a taste for mermaids and mayfly women quite independently of you."

"Will you be going out into the wild, t'Larien?"

Vikary asked loudly, deliberately wrenching the conversation away from the other Kavalars.

"I don't know," Dirk said, sipping his beer. "Should I?"

"I'd never forgive you if you didn't," Gwen said, smiling.

"Then I'll go. What's so interesting?"

"The ecosystem-it's forming and dying, all at the same time. Ecology was a forgotten science in the Fringe for a long time. Even now the outworlds boast less than a dozen trained eco-engineers between them. When the Festival came, Worlorn was seeded with life forms from fourteen different worlds with almost no thought as to the interaction. Actually more than fourteen worlds were involved, if you want to

count multiple transplants-animals brought from Earth to Newholme to Avalon to Wolfheim, and thence to Worlorn, that sort of thing.

"What Arkin and I are doing is a study of how things have worked out. We've been at it a couple years already, and there's enough work to keep us busy for a decade more. The results should be of particular interest to farmers on all the outworlds. They'll know which Fringe flora and fauna they can safely introduce to their homeworlds, and under what conditions, and which are poison to an ecosystem."

"The animals from Kimdiss are proving particularly poisonous," Janacek growled. "Much like the manipulators themselves."

Gwen grinned at him. "Garse is annoyed because it looks as though the black banshee is heading toward extinction," she told Dirk. "It's a shame, really. On High Kavalaan itself they've been hunted to the point where the species is clearly endangered, and it had been hoped that the specimens turned loose here twenty years ago would establish themselves and multiply, so they could be recaptured and taken back to High Kavalaan before the cold came. It hasn't worked out that way. The banshee is a fearful predator, but at home it can't compete with man, and on Worlorn it has had its niche appropriated by an infestation of tree-spooks from Kimdiss."

"Most Kavalars think of the banshee only as a plague and a menace," Jaan Vikary explained. "In its natural habitat it is a frequent man-killer, and the hunters of Braith and Redsteel and the Shanagate Holding think of banshee as the ultimate game, with a single exception. Ironjade has always been different. There is an ancient myth, of the time Kay Iron-Smith and his teyn Roland Wolf-Jade were fighting alone against an army of demons in the Lameraan Hills. Kay had fallen, and Roland, standing over him, was weakening by the moment, when from over the hills the banshees came, many of them flying together, black and thick enough to block out the sun. They fell hungrily onto the demon army and consumed them, one and all, leaving Kay and Roland alive. Later, when that teyn-and-teyn found their cave of women and established the first Ironjade holdfast, the banshee became their brother-beast and sigil. No Ironjade has ever killed a banshee, and legend says that whenever a man of Ironjade is in danger of his life, a banshee will appear to guide and protect him."

"A pretty story," Dirk said.

"It is more than a story," Janacek said. "There is a bond between Ironjade and banshee, t'Larien. Perhaps it is psionic, perhaps the things are sentient, perhaps it is all instinct. I do not pretend to know. Yet the bond exists."

"Superstition," Gwen said. "You really must not think too badly of Garse. It's not his fault that he never got much of an education."

Dirk spread paste across a biscuit and looked at Janacek. "Jaan mentioned that he was a historian, and I know what Gwen does," he said. "What about you? What do you do?"

The blue eyes stared coldly. Janacek said nothing.

"I get the impression," Dirk said, continuing, "that you are not an ecologist."

Gwen laughed.

"That impression is uncannily correct, t'Larien," Janacek said.

"What are you doing on Worlorn, then? For that matter"-he shifted his gaze to Jaan Vikary-"what does a historian find to do in a place like this?"

Vikary cradled his beer mug between two large hands and drank from it thoughtfully. "That is simple enough," he said. "I am a highbond Kavalat of the Ironjade Gathering, bonded to Gwen Delvano by jade-and-silver. My betheyn was sent to Worlorn by vote of the highbond council, so it is natural that I am here too, and my teyn. Do you understand?"

"I suppose. You keep Gwen company, then?"

Janacek appeared very hostile. "We protect Gwen," he said icily. "Usually from her own folly. She should not be here at all, yet she is, so we must be here as well. As to your earlier question, t'Larien, I am an Ironjade, teyn to Jaantony high-Ironjade. I can do anything that my holdfast might require of me: hunt or farm, duel, make highwar against our enemies, make babies in the bellies of our eyn-kethi. That is what I do. What I am you already know. I have told you my name."

Vikary glanced at him and bid him silent with a short chopping motion of his right hand. "Think of us as late tourists," he told Dirk. "We study and we wander, we drift through the forests and the dead cities, we amuse ourselves. We would cage banshees so they might be brought back to High Kavalaan, except that we have not been able to find any banshees." He rose, draining his mug as he did so. "The day ages and we sit," he said after he had set it back on the table. "If you would go off to the wild, you should do it soon. It will take time to cross the mountains, even by aircar, and it is not wise to stay out after dark."

"Oh?" Dirk finished his own beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Napkins did not seem to be part of a Kavalat table setting.

"The banshees were never the only predator on Worlorn," Vikary said. "There are slayers and stalkers from fourteen worlds in the forests, and they are the least of it. The humans are the worst. Worlorn is an easy, empty world today, and its shadows and its barrens are full of strangeness."

"You would do best to go armed," Janacek said. "Or better still, Jaan and I should go with you, for the sake of your safety."

But Vikary shook his head. "No, Garse. They must go alone, and talk. It is better that way, do you understand? It is my wish." Then he picked up an armful of plates and walked toward the kitchen. But near the door he paused and glanced back over his shoulder, and briefly his eyes met Dirk's.

And Dirk remembered his words, out on the rooftop at dawn. I do exist, Jaan had said. Remember that.

"How long since you rode a sky-scoot?" Gwen asked him a short time later when they met on the roof. She had changed into a one-piece chameleon cloth coverall, a belted garment that covered her from boots to neck in dusky grayish red. The headband that held her black hair in place was the same fabric.

"Not since I was a child," Dirk said. His own clothing was twin to hers; she'd given it to him so they could blend into the forest. "Since Avalon. But I'm willing to try. I used to be pretty good."

"You're on, then," Gwen said. "We won't be able to go very far or very fast, but that shouldn't matter." She opened the storage trunk on the gray manta-shaped aircar and took out two small silvery packages and two pairs of boots.

Dirk sat on the aircar wing again while he changed into the new boots and laced them up. Gwen unfolded the scoots, two small platforms of soft tissue-thin metal barely large enough to stand upon. When she spread them on the ground, Dirk could trace the crosshatched wires of the gravity grids built into their undersides. He stepped on one, positioning his feet carefully, and the metal soles of his boots locked tightly in place as the platform went rigid. Gwen handed him the control device and he strapped it around his wrist so that it flipped out into the palm of his hand.

"Arkin and I use the scoots to get around the forests," Gwen told him while she knelt to lace up her own boots. "An aircar has ten times the speed, of course, but it isn't always easy to find a clearing big enough to land. The scoots are good for close-in detail work, as long as we don't try to carry too much equipment or get in too much of a hurry. Garse says they're toys, but . . ." She stood up, stepped onto her platform, and smiled. "Ready?"

"You bet," Dirk said, and his finger brushed the silver wafer in the palm of his right hand. Just a little too hard. The scoot shot up and out, dragging his feet with it and whipping him upside down when the rest of him lagged behind. He barely missed cracking his head on the roof as he flipped, and ascended into the sky laughing wildly and dangling from underneath his platform.

Gwen came after him, standing on her platform and climbing up the twilight wind with skill born of long practice, like some outworld djinn riding a silver carpet remnant. By the time she reached Dirk, he had played with the controls long enough to right himself, though he was still flailing back and forth in a wild effort to keep his balance. Unlike arrears, sky-scoots had no gyros.

"Wheeee," he shouted as she closed. Laughing, Gwen moved in behind him and slapped him heartily on the back. That was all he needed to flip over again, and he began careening through the sky above Larteyn in a mad cartwheel.

Gwen was behind him, shouting something. Dirk blinked and noticed that he was about to crash into the side of a tall ebony tower. He played with his controls and shot straight up, still fighting to steady himself.

He was high above the city and standing upright when she caught him. "Stay away," he warned with a grin, feeling stupid and clumsy and playful. "Knock me over again and I'll get the flying tank and laser you out of the sky, woman!" He tilted to one side, caught himself, then overcompensated and swung to the other side yelping.

"You're drunk," Gwen shouted at him through the keening wind. "Too much beer for breakfast." She was above him now, arms folded against her chest, watching his struggles with mock disapproval.

"These things seem much more stable when you hang from them upside down," Dirk said. He had finally achieved a semblance of balance, although the way he held his arms out to either side made it clear that he was dubious about maintaining it.

Gwen settled down to his level and moved in beside him, sure-footed and confident, her dark hair streaming behind her like a wild black banner. "How you doing?" she yelled as they flew side by side.

"I think I've got it!" Dirk announced. He was still upright.

"Good. Look down!"

He looked down, past the meager security of the platform under his feet. Larteyn with its dark towers and faded glowstone streets was no longer beneath him. Instead there was a long long drop through an empty twilight sky to the Common far below. He glimpsed a river down there, a thread of wandering dark water in the dim-lit greenery. Then his head swam dizzily, his hands tightened, and he flipped over again.

This time Gwen dipped underneath him as he hung upside down. She crossed her arms again and smirked up at him. "You sure are a dumbshit, t'Larien," she told him. "Why don't you fly right side up?"

He growled at her, or tried to growl, but the wind took away his breath and he could only make faces. Then he turned himself over. His legs were getting sore from all of this. "There!" he shouted, and looked down defiantly to prove that the height would not spook him a second time.

Gwen was beside him again. She looked him over and nodded. "You are a disgrace to the children of Avalon, and sky-scooters everywhere," she said. "But you'll probably survive. Now, do you want to see the wild?"

"Lead me, Jenny!"

"Then turn. We're going the wrong way. We have to clear the mountains." She held out her free hand and took his and together they swung around in a wide spiral, up and back, to face Larteyn and the mountain-wall. The city looked gray and washed-out from a distance, its proud glowstones a sun-doused black. The mountains were a looming darkness.

They rode toward them together, gaining altitude steadily until they were far over the Firefort, high enough to clear the peaks. That was about top altitude for the sky-scoots; an aircar, of course, could ascend much higher. But it was high enough for Dirk. The chameleon cloth coveralls they wore had gone all gray and white, and he was thankful for their warmth; the wind was chill and the dubious day of Worlorn not much hotter than its night.

Holding hands and shouting infrequent comments, leaning this way and that into the wind, Gwen and Dirk rode up over one mountain and down its far slope into a shadowed rocky valley, then up and down another and still another, past dagger-sharp outcroppings of green and black rock, past high narrow waterfalls and higher precipices. At one point Gwen challenged him to race, and he shouted his acceptance, and then they streaked forward as fast as the scoots and their skill could take them until finally Gwen took pity on him and came back to take his hand again.

The range dropped off as suddenly to the west as it had risen in the east, throwing up a tall barrier to shield the wild from the light of the still-climbing Wheel. "Down," Gwen said, and he nodded, and they began a slow descent toward the jumbled dark greenery below. By then they had been up for more than an hour; Dirk was half numb from the bite of the Worlorn wind, and most of his body was protesting this maltreatment.

They landed well inside the forest, beside a lake they had seen as they came down. Gwen swooped down gracefully in a gentle curve that left her standing on a mossy beach beside the water's edge. Dirk, afraid of smashing into the ground and breaking a leg, flicked off his grid a moment too soon and fell the last meter.

Gwen helped him detach his boots from the sky-scoot, and together they brushed damp sand and moss from his clothes and from his hair. Then she sat down beside him and smiled. He smiled back and kissed her.

Or tried to. As he reached and put his arm around her, she pulled away, and he remembered. His hands fell, and the shadows swept across his face. "I'm sorry," he said, mumbling. He looked away from her, toward the lake. The water was an oily green, and islands of violet fungus dotted the still surface. The only motion was the half-seen stirrings of insects skimming the shallows nearby. The forest was even darker than the city, for the mountains still hid most of Fat Satan's disc.

Gwen reached out and touched him on the shoulder. "No," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I forgot too. It was almost like Avalon."

He looked at her and forced a faint smile, feeling lost. "Yes. Almost. I've missed you, Gwen, despite it all. Or should I be saying that?"

"Probably not," she said. Her eyes avoided his again and went wandering from him, out across the lake. The far side was lost in haze. She gazed into the distance for a long time, not moving except once, when she shivered briefly from the cold. Dirk watched her clothing slowly fade to a mottled off-white and green to match the shade of the ground she sat upon.

Finally he reached to touch her, his hand unsure. She shrugged it away. "No," she said.

Dirk sighed and picked up a handful of cool sand, running it through his fingers as he thought. "Gwen." He hesitated. "Jenny, I don't know . . ."

She glanced at him and frowned. "That's not my name, Dirk. It never was. No one ever called me that except you."

He winced, hurt. "But why-"

"Because it isn't me!"

"No one else," he said. "It just came to me, back on Avalon, and it fit you and I called you that. I thought you liked it."

She shook her head. "Once. You don't understand. You never understand. It came to mean more to me than it did at first, Dirk. More and more and more, and the things that name meant to me were not good things. I tried to tell you, even then. But that was a long time ago. I was younger, a child. I didn't have the words."

"And now?" His voice was edged with overtones of anger. "Do you have the words now, Gwen?"

"Yes. For you, Dirk. More words than I can use." She smiled at some secret joke and shook her head so her hair tossed in the wind. "Listen, private names are fine. They can be a special sharing. With Jaan it is like that. The highbonds have long names because they fill many roles. He can be Jaan Vikary to a Wolfman friend on Avalon, and high-Ironjade in the councils of Gathering, and still Riv in worship and Wolf in high-war and yet another name in bed, a private name. And there is a rightness to it, because all those names are him. I recognize that. I like some of him better than other parts, like Jaan more than Wolf or high-Ironjade, but they are all true for him. The Kavalars have a saying, that a man is the sum of all his names. Names are very important on High Kavalaan. Names are very important everywhere, but the Kavalars know that truth better than most. A thing without a name has no substance. If it existed, it would have a name. And, likewise, if you give a thing a name, somewhere, on some level, the thing named will exist, will come to be. That's another Kavalars saying. Do you understand, Dirk?"

"No."

She laughed. "You're as muddled as ever. Listen, when Jaan came to Avalon he was Jaantony Ironjade Vikary. That was his name, his whole name. The most important part of it was the first two words- Jaantony is his true name, his birth name, and Ironjade is his holdfast and his alliance. Vikary is a made-up name he took at puberty. All of the Kavalars take such names, usually the names of highbonds they admire, or mythic figures, or personal heroes. A lot of Old Earth surnames have survived that way. The thought is that by taking the name of a hero the boy will gain some of the man's qualities. On High Kavalaan it actually seems to work.☺

"Jaan's chosen name, Vikary, is a bit unusual in several respects. It sounds like an Old Earth hand-me-down, but it isn't. From all accounts Jaan was an odd child-dreamy, very moody, much too introspective. He liked to listen to the eyn-kethi sing and tell stories when he was very little, which is bad for a Kavalars boy. The eyn-kethi are the breeding women, the perpetual mothers of the holdfast, and a normal child is not supposed to associate with them any more than he has to. When Jaan was older he spent all his time alone, exploring caves and abandoned mines in the mountains. Safely away from his holdfast-brothers. I don't blame him. He was always an object of torment, essentially friendless, until he met Garse. Who is notably younger, but still wound up as Jaan's protector through the later stages of his childhood. Eventually that all changed. When Jaan approached the age when he would be subject to the code duello, he turned his attention to weaponry and mastered it very quickly. He is really a fantastic study; today he is terribly fast and considered deadly, better even than Garse, whose skill is mainly instinctual.

"It wasn't always like that, however. Anyway, when it came time for Jaantony to choose a name, he had two great heroes, but he did not dare name either one to the highbonds. Neither of them were Ironjades, and worse, both were semi-pariahs, villains of Kavalars history, charismatic leaders whose causes had lost and then been subjected to generations of oral abuse. So Jaan sort of shoved their names together and juggled the sounds around until the product looked like an old family name imported from Earth. The highbonds accepted it without a thought. It was only his chosen name, the least important part of his identity. It's the part that comes last, after all."

She frowned. "Which is the point of this whole story. Jaantony Ironjade Vikary came to Avalon, and he was mostly Jaantony Ironjade. Except that Avalon is a surname-conscious world, and there he found that he was mostly Vikary. The Academy registered him under that name, and his instructors called him Vikary, and it was a name he had to live by for two years. Pretty soon he became Jaan Vikary, in addition

to being Jaantony Ironjade. I think he rather liked it. He's always tried to stay Jaan Vikary ever since, although it was not easy after we returned to High.Kavalaan. To the Kavalars he'll always be Jaantony."

"Where did he get all the other names?" Dirk found himself asking, despite himself. Her story fascinated him and seemed to offer new insights into what Jaan Vikary had said that dawn, up on the roof.

"When we were married, he brought me back to Ironjade with him and became a highbond, automatically a member of the highbond council," she said. "That put a 'high' in his name, and gave him the right to own private property independent of the holdfast, and to make religious sacrifices, and to lead his kethi, his holdfast-brothers, in war. So he got a war name, sort of a rank, and a religious name. Once those kinds of names were very important. Not so much anymore, but the customs linger."

"I see," Dirk said, although he didn't, not completely. The Kavalars seemed to set unusually great store on marriage. "What has this got to do with us?"

"A lot," Gwen said, becoming very serious again. "When Jaan reached Avalon and people started calling him Vikary, he changed. He became Vikary, a hybrid of his own iconoclastic idols. That's what names can do, Dirk. And that was our downfall. I loved you, yes. Much. I loved you, and you loved Jenny."

"You were Jenny!"

"Yes, no. Your Jenny, your Guinevere. You said that, over and over again. You called me those names as often as you called me Gwen, but you were right. They were your names. Yes, I liked it. What did I know of names or naming? Jenny is pretty enough, and Guinevere has the glow of legend. What did I know?"

"But I learned, even if I never had the words for it. The problem was that you loved Jenny-only Jenny wasn't me. Based on me, perhaps, but mostly she was a phantom, a wish, a dream you'd fashioned all on your own. You fastened her on me and loved us both, and in time I found myself becoming Jenny. Give a thing a name and it will somehow come to be. All truth is in naming, and all lies as well, for nothing distorts like a false name can, a false name that changes the reality as well as the seeming.

"I wanted you to love me, not her. I was Gwen Delvano, and I wanted to be the best Gwen Delvano I could be, but still myself. I fought being Jenny, and you fought to keep her, and never understood. And that was why I left you." She finished in a cool, even voice, her face a mask, and then she looked away from him again.

And he did understand, at last. For seven years he never had, but now, briefly, he grasped it. This then, he thought, was why she sent the whisperjewel. Not to call him back, no, not that. But to tell him, finally, why she had sent him away. And there was a sense to it. His anger had suddenly faded into weary melancholy. Sand ran cold and unheeded through his fingers.

She saw his face, and her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Dirk," she said. "But you called me Jenny again. And I had to tell you the truth. I have never forgotten, and I can't imagine you have, and I've thought of it over the years. It was so good, when it was good, I kept thinking. How could it go wrong? It scared me, Dirk.

It really scared me. I thought, If we could go wrong, Dirk and I, then nothing is sure, nothing can be counted on. That fear crippled me for two years. But finally, with Jaan, I understood. And now it came out, the answer I found. I'm sorry if it is a painful answer for you. But you had to know."

"I had hoped . . ."

"Don't," she warned. "Don't start it, Dirk. Not again. Don't even try. We're over. Recognize that. We'll kill ourselves if we try."

He sighed, blocked at every turn. Through all the long conversation, he had never even touched her. He felt helpless. "I take it that Jaan doesn't call you Jenny?" he asked finally with a bitter smile.

Gwen laughed. "No. As a Kavalar, I have a secret name, and he calls me that. But I've taken the name, so there's no problem. It is my name."

He only shrugged. "You're happy, then?"

Gwen rose and brushed loose sand from her legs. "Jaan and I-well, there is a lot that is hard to explain. You were a friend once, Dirk, and maybe my best friend. But you've been gone a long time. Don't press too hard. Right now I need a friend. I talk to Arkin, and he listens and tries, but he can't help much. He's too involved, too blind about Kavalars and their culture. Jaan and Garse and I have problems, yes, if that's what you're asking. But it's hard to speak of them. Give me time. Wait, if you will, and be my friend again."

The lake was very still in the perpetual red-gray sunset. He watched the water, thick with its spreading scabs of fungus, and he flashed back to the canal on Braque. Then she did need him, he thought. Perhaps it was not as he had hoped, but there was still something he could give her. He clung to that tightly; he wanted to give, he had to give. "Whatever," he said as he rose. "There's a lot I don't understand, Gwen. Too much. I keep thinking that half the conversation of the past day has gone past me, and I don't even know the right questions to ask. But I can try. I owe you, I guess. I owe you for something or other."

"You'll wait?"

"And listen, when the time comes."

"Then I'm glad you've come," she said. "I needed someone, an outsider. You're well timed, Dirk. A luck."

How strange, he thought, to send off for a luck. But he said nothing. "Now what?"

"Now let me show you the forest. That was why we came here, after all."

They picked up their sky-scoots and walked away from the silent lake, toward the thick of the waiting forest. There was no trail to follow, but the underbrush was light and walking easy, with many paths to choose from. Dirk was quiet, studying the woods around him, his shoulders slumped and his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Gwen did all the talking; the little there was. When she spoke, her voice was low and reverent as a child's whisper in a great cathedral. But mostly she just pointed and let him look.

The trees around the lake were all familiar friends that Dirk had seen a thousand times before. For this was the so-called forest of home, the wood that man carried with him from sun to sun and planted on all the worlds he walked. It had its roots on Old Earth, the homeforest, but it was not all of Earth. On each new planet humanity found new favorites, plants and trees that soon were as much a part of the blood as

those that came out from Earth in the beginning. And when the starships moved on, seedlings from those worlds went with the twice-uprooted grandchildren of Terra, and so the homeforest grew.

Dirk and Gwen passed through that forest slowly, as others had walked through the same forest on a dozen other worlds. And they knew the trees. Sugar maples there, and fire maples, and mockoak and oak itself, and silverwood and poison pine and asten. The outworlders had brought them here even as their ancestors had brought them to the Fringe, to add a touch of home, wherever home might be.

But here these woods looked different.

It was the light, Dirk realized after a time. The drizzling light that leaked so meager from the sky, the wan red gloom that passed for Worlorn's day. This was a twilight forest. In the slowness of time-in a far-extended autumn-it was dying.

He looked closer then and saw that the sugar maples were all bare, their faded leaves beneath his feet. They would not green again. The oaks were barren too. He paused and pulled a leaf from a fire maple, and saw that the fine red veins had turned to black. And the silverwoods were really dusty gray.

Rot would come next.

To parts of the forest, rot had come already. In one forlorn glen where the humus was thicker and blacker than elsewhere, Dirk noticed a smell. He looked at Gwen, asking. She bent and brought a handful of the black stuff to his nose, and he turned away.

"It was a bed of moss," she told him, sorrowing. "They brought it all the way from Eshellin. A year ago it was all green and scarlet, alive with little flowers. The black spread quickly."

They moved farther into the forest, away from the lake and the mountainwall. The suns were nearly overhead by now, Fat Satan dim and bloated like a blood-drenched moon, unevenly ringed by four small yellow star-suns. Worlorn had receded too far and in the wrong direction; the Wheel effect was lost.

They had been walking for more than an hour when the character of the forest around them began to change. Slowly, subtly, the change seeped in, almost too gradual for Dirk to notice. But Gwen showed him. The familiar blend of homeforest was giving way, yielding to something stranger, something unique, something wilder. Gaunt black trees with gray leaves, high walls of red-tipped briar, drooping weepers of pale phosphorescent blue, great bulbous shapes infested with dark flaking splotches; to each of these

Gwen pointed and gave a name. One type became more and more common: a towering yellowish growth that sprouted tangled branches from all over its waxy trunk, and smaller offshoots from those branches, and still smaller ones from those, until it had built itself into a tight wooden maze. "Chokers," Gwen called them, and Dirk soon saw why. Here in the deep of the wood one of the chokers had grown alongside a regal silverwood, sending out crooked yellow-wax branches to mingle with straight, stately gray ones, burrowing roots under and around those of the other tree, constricting its rival in an ever-tightening vise. And now the silverwood could scarce be seen: a tall dead stick lost in the swelling choker.

"The chokers are native to Tober," Gwen said. "They're taking over the forests here, just as they did there. We could have told them it would happen, but they wouldn't have cared. The forests were all doomed anyway, even before they were planted. Even the chokers will die, though they'll be the last to go."

They walked on, and the chokers grew steadily thicker, until soon they dominated the forest. Here the woods were denser, darker; passage was more difficult. Half-buried roots tripped them underfoot, while tangled branches interlocked above them like the straining arms of giant wrestlers. Where two or three or more chokers grew close together, they seemed to merge into a single twisted knot, and Gwen and Dirk were forced to detour. Other plant life was scarce, except for beds of black and violet mushrooms near the feet of the yellow trees, and ropes of parasitic scumweb.

But there were animals.

Dirk saw them moving through the dark twistings of the chokers and heard their high, chittering call. Finally he saw one. Sitting just above their heads on a swollen yellow branch, looking down on them; fist-sized, dead still, and somehow-transparent. He touched Gwen's shoulder and nodded upward. -

But she just smiled for him and laughed lightly.

Then she reached up to where the little creature sat and crumpled it in her hand. When she offered it to Dirk, her palm held only dust and dead tissue.

"There's a nest of tree-spooks around," she explained. "They shed their skins four or five times before maturity and leave the husks as guards to scare away other predators." She pointed. "There's a live one, if you're interested."

Dirk looked and caught a fleeting glimpse of a tiny yellow scampering thing with sharp teeth and enormous brown eyes. "They fly too," Gwen told him. "They've got a membrane that goes from arm to leg and lets them flit between the trees. Predators, you know. They hunt in packs, can bring down creatures a hundred times their size. But generally they won't attack a man unless he blunders into their nest."

The tree-spook was gone now, lost beneath a labyrinth of choker branches, but Dirk thought he saw another, briefly, from the corner of his eye. He studied the woods around him. The transparent skin husks were everywhere, staring fiercely into the twilight from their perches, all small grim ghosts. "These are the things that get Janacek so upset, aren't they?" he asked.

Gwen nodded. "The spooks are a pest on Kimdiss, but here they've really found their element. They blend perfectly with the chokers, and they can move through the tangles faster than anything I've ever seen. We studied them pretty thoroughly. They're cleaning out the forests. In time, they would kill off all the game and starve themselves to death, but they won't have time. The shield will fail before that, and the cold will come." She moved her shoulders in a tiny weary shrug and rested her forearm on a low-drooping limb. Their coveralls had long ago become the same dirty yellow color as the woods around them, but her sleeve slid up and back as she brushed the branch, and Dirk saw the dull sheen of jade-and-silver gleaming against the choker.

"Is there much animal life left?"

"Enough," she said. Pale red light made the silver strange. "Not as much as there used to be, of course. Most of the wildlife has deserted the homeforest. Those woods are dying, and the animals know it. But the outworld trees are sterner, somehow. Where the forests of the Fringe were planted, you'll find life, still

strong, still hanging on. The chokers, the ghost trees, the blue widowers-they'll flourish right until the end. And they'll have their tenants, old and new, until the cold comes."

Gwen moved her arm idly, this way and that, and the armet winked at him, screamed at him. Bond and reminder and denial, all at once, love sworn in jade-and-silver. And he had only a small whisper-jewel shaped like a tear and full of fading memories.

He looked up, past a wild crisscross of yellow choker branches, to where the Helleye sat in a murky slice of sky, looking more tired than hellish, more sorry than satanic. And he shivered. "Let's go back," he told Gwen. "This place depresses me."

He got no argument. They found a clear spot away from the chokers that pressed around them, a place to spread the silver-metal tissue of their scoots. Then they rose together for the long flight back to Larteyn.

Chapter 3

They raced again above the mountains, and Dirk did better this time, losing by less than he had before, but the improvement did not lighten his mood. For most of the weary trip they flew in silence, apart, Gwen meters ahead of him. Their backs were to the broken, muted Wheel of Fire as they went, and Gwen was a witch figure vague against the sky and aways out of reach. The melancholy of Worlorn's dying forests had seeped into his flesh, and he saw Gwen through tainted eyes, a doll figure in a suit as faded as despair, her black hair oily with red light. Thoughts came in a colored chaos as the wind swept past him, and one more often than the others. She was not his Jenny, was not and never had been.

Twice during their flight Dirk saw-or thought he saw-the jade-and-silver flashing, tormenting, as it had tormented him in the wood. He forced his eyes away each time and watched black clouds, long and thin, skitter across the barren, empty sky.

The gray manta aircar and the olive-green war machine were both gone from the rooftop lot when they reached Larteyn. Only Ruark's yellow teardrop was unmoved. They landed nearby-Dirk's landing yet another clumsy stumble, now oddly humorless, only stupid-and left the sky-scoots and flight boots out on the roof where they removed them. Near the tubes they spoke briefly, but Dirk forgot the words even as he said them. Then Gwen left him.

In his rooms at the base of the tower, Arkin Ruark was waiting patiently. Dirk found a recliner amid the pastel walls and sculpture and the potted Kimdissi plants. He reclined, wanting only to rest and not to think, but Ruark was there, chuckling and shaking his head so the white-blond hair danced, thrusting a tall green glass into his hand. Dirk took it and sat up again. The glass was a fine thin crystal, plain and unadorned except for a fast-melting coat of frost. He drank, and the wine was very green and cold, incense and cinnamon down his throat.

"Utter tired you look, Dirk," the Kimdissi said after he had found a drink of his own and seated himself with a plop in a slung-web chair beneath the shadow of a drooping black plant. The spear-shaped leaves

cast striped darkness on his plump, smiling face. He sipped, sucking the drink noisily, and very briefly Dirk despised him.

"A long day," he said noncommittally.

"Truth," Ruark agreed. "A day of Kavalars, heh, always long. Sweet Gwen and Jaantony and last Garsey, enough to make any day last forever. What do you say?"

Dirk said nothing.

"But now," Ruark said, smiling, "you have seen. Me, I wanted that, for you to see. Before I told you. But I was sworn to tell you, yes, a swearing to myself. Gwen, she has told me. We talk, you know, as friends, and I have known her and Jaan too since Avalon. But here we've grown closer. She cannot talk of it easily, ever, but she talks to me, or has, and I can tell you. Not violating trust. You are the one to know, I think."

The drink sent icy fingers down into his chest, and Dirk felt his weariness lifting. It seemed as if he had been half asleep, as if Ruark had been talking for a long time and he had missed it all. "What are you talking about?" he said. "What should I know?"

"Why Gwen needs you," Ruark said. "Why she sent . . . the thing. The red tear. You know. I know. She has told me."

Suddenly Dirk was quite alert, interested and puzzled. "She told you," he began, then stopped. Gwen had asked him to wait, and long ago the promise he had made-but it fit. Perhaps he should listen, perhaps it was simply hard for her to tell him. Ruark would know. Her friend, she had said in the forests, the only one she could talk to. "What?"

"You must help her, Dirk t'Larien, somehow. I don't know."

"Help her how?"

"To be free. To escape."

Dirk set his drink down and scratched, his head. "From who?"

"Them. The Kavalars."

He frowned. "Jaan, you mean? I met him this morning, him and Janacek. She loves Jaan. I don't understand."

Ruark laughed, sucked from his drink, laughed again. He was dressed in a three-piece suit of alternating brown and green squares, like motley, and as he sat spouting nonsense Dirk wondered if the short ecologist was indeed a fool.

"Loves him, yes, she said that?" Ruark said. "You are sure of it, are you? Well?"

Dirk hesitated, trying to remember her words when they had talked by the still, green lake. "I'm not sure," he said. "But something to that effect. She is- What was it?"

"Betheyn?" Ruark suggested.

Dirk nodded. "Yes, betheyn, wife."

Ruark chuckled. "No, utter wrong. In the car I listened. Gwen said it wrong. Well, not really, but you took the wrong impression. Betheyn is not wife. Part truth the biggest lie of all, remember? What do you think teyn is?"

The word stopped him. Teyn. He had heard the word a hundred times on Worlorn. "Friend?" he guessed, not knowing what it meant.

"Betheyn is more of wife than teyn is friend," Ruark said. "Learn the outworlds better, Dirk. No. Betheyn is woman-to-man word in Old Kavalat, for a heldwife bound by jade-and-silver. Now, there can be much affection in jade-and-silver, much love, yes. Though, you know, the word used for that, the standard Terran word, there is no like word in Old Kavalat. Interesting, eh? Can they love without a word for it, t'Larien friend?"

Dirk did not reply. Ruark shrugged and drank and continued. "Well, no matter, but think of it. I spoke of jade-and-silver and yes, often the Kavalars have love in that bond, love from betheyn-to-highbond, from highbond-to-betheyn sometimes. Or liking, if not love. But not always, and not necessarily! You see?"

Dirk shook his head.

"Kavalat bonds are custom and obligation," Ruark said, leaning forward very intently, "with love late-coming accident. Violent folk, I told you. Read history, read legends. Gwen met Jaan on Avalon, you know, and she did not read. Not enough. He was Jaan Vikary of High Kavalaan, and what was that, some planet? She never knew. Truth. So their liking grew-call it love, perhaps-and sex happens and he offers her jade-and-silver wrought in his pattern, and suddenly she is betheyn to him, still not quite knowing. Trapped."

"Trapped? How trapped?"

"Read history! The violence of High Kavalaan is

long past, the culture is unchanged. Gwen is betheyn to Jaan Vikary, betheyn heldwife, his wife, yes, his lover, and more. Property and slave, she is that too, and gift. She is his gift to Ironjade Gathering, with her he bought his highnames, yes. She must have children if he orders, whether she wishes or no. She must take Garse as lover also, whether she wishes or no. If Jaan dies in duel with a man of a holdfast other than Ironjade, a Braith or a Redsteel, Gwen passes to that man like baggage, property-to become his betheyn, or a mere eyn-kethi if the victor already wears jade-and-silver. If Jaan dies of natural causes, or in duel with another Ironjade, Gwen goes to Garse. Her will in the matter is no concern. Who cares that she hates him? Not the Kavalars. And when Garsey dies, eh? Well, when that time comes, she is an eyn-kethi, holdfast breeder, degraded forever, free to use for any of the kethi. Kethi meaning holdfast-brothers, more or less, the men of the family. Ironjade Gathering is all huge family, thousands and thousands of family, and any can have her. What did she call Jaan, husband? No. Jailer. That is what he is, he and Garse, loving jailers maybe if you think that such can love truly as you or I would. Jaantony honors our Gwen, and should, for he is high-Ironjade now, she is his betheyn-gift, and if she dies or leaves him, he is fre-

Ironjade, an old man, mocked, empty-armed, without voice in council. But he slaves her, does not love her, and she is years after Avalon now, older and wiser, and now she knows." Ruark had delivered the last in a breathless fury, his lips drawn tight.

Dirk hesitated. "He doesn't love her, then?"

"As you love your property, so a highbond and his betheyn. It is a tight bond, jade-and-silver, never to be broken, but it is a bond of obligation and possession. No love. That is elsewhere, if the Kavalars have it at all, to be found in chosen-brother, the shield and soulmate and lover and warrior twin, the ever-loyal bringer-of-pleasure and taker-of-blows and lifter-of-pain, the lifetime strongbond."

"Teyn," Dirk said, a little numbly, his mind racing ahead.

"Teyn!" Ruark nodded. "The Kavalars, all violent as they are, have great poetry. Much celebrates the teyn, the bond of iron-and-glowstone, none the jade-and-silver."

Things fell smoothly into place. "You are saying," Dirk began, "that she and Jaan don't love each other, that Gwen is all but a slave. Yet she doesn't leave?"

Ruark's chubby face was flushed. "Leave? Utter nonsense! They would only force her back. A highbond must keep and protect his betheyn. And kill the one who tries to steal her."

"And she sent the jewel to me ..."

"Gwen talks to me, I know. What other hope has she? The Kavalars? Jaantony has twice killed in duels. No Kavalars would touch her, and what good if they did? Me? Am I a hope?" His soft hands swept down his body, and he dismissed himself in contempt. "You, t'Larien, you are Gwen's hope. You who owe her. You who loved her once."

Dirk heard his own voice, as if from far away. "I still love her," he said.

"Good. I think, you know, that Gwen . . . though she would never say it, yet I think . . . she too still feels. As she did. As she never has for Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade Vikary."

The drink, the odd green wine, had touched him more than he would have imagined. Only one glass, a single tall glass, and strange the room ran around him, and Dirk t'Larien held himself upright with an effort and heard impossible things and began to wonder. Ruark made no sense, he thought, but then he made too much sense. He explained everything, really, and it was all so shining clear, and clear too what Dirk must do. Or was it? The room wavered, grew dark and then light again, dark and then light, and Dirk was one second very sure and the next not sure at all. What must he do? Something, something for

Gwen. He must find out the truth of things, and then...

He raised a hand to his forehead. Beneath the dangling locks of gray-brown hair his brow was beaded with sweat. Ruark stood suddenly, alarm across his face. "Oh," the Kimdissi said, "the wine has made you sick! Utter fool I am! My fault. Outworld wine and Avalon stomach, yes. Food will help, you know. Food." He scurried off, brushing the potted plant as he went so the black spears bobbed and danced behind him.

Dirk sat very still. Far off in the distance he heard a clatter of plates and pots but paid it no mind. Still sweating, his forehead was furrowed in thought, thought that was strangely difficult. Logic seemed to elude him, and the clearest things faded even as he grabbed hold of them. He trembled while dead dreams woke to new life, while the choker-woods withered in his mind and the Wheel burned hot and fiery above the new-flowering noonday woods of Worlorn. He could make it happen, force it, wake it, put an end to the long sunset, and have Jenny, his Guinevere, forever by his side. Yes. Yes!

When Ruark came back with forks and bowls of soft cheese and red tubers and hot meat, Dirk was calmer, cool again. He took the bowls and ate in half a trance while his host prattled on. Tomorrow, he promised himself. He would see them at breakfast, talk to them, learn what truth he could. Then he could act. Tomorrow.

". . . no insult is intended," Vikary was saying. "You are not a fool, Lorimaar, but in this I think you act foolishly."

Dirk froze in the doorway, the heavy wooden door that he had opened without thinking swinging away before him. All of them turned to regard him, four pairs of eyes, Vikary's last and not until he had finished what he was saying. Gwen had told him to come up to breakfast when they had parted the night be-

fore (him only, since Ruark and the Kavalars preferred to avoid each other whenever possible), and this was the correct time, just shortly after dawn. But the scene was not one he had expected to enter.

There were four of them in the cavernous living room. Gwen, hair unbrushed and eyes full of sleep, was seated on the edge of the low wood-and-leather couch that stretched in front of the fireplace and its gargoyle guards. Garse Janacek stood just behind her with his arms crossed and a frown on his face, while Vikary and a stranger confronted each other by the mantel. All three of the men were dressed formally, and armed. Janacek wore leggings and shirt of soft charcoal-gray, with a high collar and a double row of black iron buttons down his chest. The right sleeve of his shirt had been cut away to display the heavy bracelet of iron and dimly blazing glowstones. Vikary was also all in gray, but without the row of buttons; the front of his shirt was a V that swooped almost to his belt, and against the dark chest hair a jade medallion hung on an iron chain.

The newcomer, the stranger, was the first to address Dirk. His back was to the door, but he turned when the others looked up, and he frowned. Taller by a head than either Vikary or Janacek, he towered over Dirk, even at a distance of several meters. His skin was a hard brown, very dark against the milk-white suit he wore beneath the pleated folds of a violet half-cape. Gray hair, shot through with white, fell to his broad shoulders, and his eyes-flints of obsidian set in a brown face with a hundred lines and wrinkles - were not friendly. Neither was his voice. He looked Dirk over quickly, then said, very simply, "Get out."

"What?" No reply could be as stupid as his was, Dirk thought even as he said it, but nothing else came to mind.

"I said get out," the giant in white repeated. Like Vikary, both of his forearms were bare to display the bracelets, the almost-twins of jade-and-silver on his left arm and iron-and-fire on his right. But the patterns and settings of the stranger's armllets were very different. The only thing that was the same, exactly, was the gun on his hip.

Vikary folded his arms, just as Janacek had already folded his. "This is my place, Lorimaar high-Braith. You have no right to be rude to those who come at my invitation."

"An invitation you yourself lack, Braith," Janacek added with a tiny venomous smile.

Vikary looked over at his teyn, shook his head sharply and vigorously. No. But to what? Dirk wondered.

"I come to you in high grievance, Jaantony high-Ironjade, with serious talking to do," the white-suited Kavalair rumbled. "Must we treat before an off-worlder?" He glanced at Dirk again, still frowning. "A mockman, for all I know."

Vikary's voice was quiet but stern when he replied. "We are done dealing, friend. I've told you my answer. My betheyn has my protection, and the Kimdissi, and this man too"-he indicated Dirk with a wave of his hand, then folded his arms again- "and if you take any among these, then prepare to take me."

Janacek smiled. "He is no mockman either," the gaunt red-bearded Kavalair said. "This is Dirk t'Larien, korariel of Ironjade, whether you like it or no." Janacek turned very slightly in Dirk's direction and indicated the stranger in white. "T'Larien, this is Lorimaar Reln Winterfox high-Braith Arkellor."

"A neighbor of ours," Gwen said from the couch, speaking for the first time. "He lives in Larteyn too."

"Far from you, Ironjades," the other Kavalair said. He was not happy. The frown was deep-graven in his face, and his black eyes moved from one of them to the next, full of cold anger, before coming to rest on Vikary. "You are younger than me, Jaantony high-Ironjade, and your teyn younger still, and I would not willingly go to face you and yours in duel. Yet code has its demands, as you know and I, and neither of us should venture too far. You young highbonds oft press that line closely, I feel, and the highbonds of Ironjade most of all, and-

"And I most of all the highbonds of Ironjade," Vikary said, finishing for the other.

Arkellor shook his head. "Once, when I was but an unweaned child in the holdfasts of Braith, it was duel to so much as interrupt another, as you have done now to me. Truly, the old ways have gone. The men of High Kavalaan turn soft before my eyes."

"You think me soft?" Vikary asked quietly.

"Yes and no, high-Ironjade. You are a strange one. You have a hardness none can deny, and that is good, but Avalon has put the stench of the mockman on you, touched you with the weak and foolish. I do not like your betheyn-bitch, and I do not like your 'friends.' Would that I were younger. I would come at you in fury and teach you again the old wisdoms of the holdfast, the things that you forget so easy."

"Do you call us to duel?" Janacek asked. "You speak strongly."

Vikary unfolded his arms and waved casually with his hand. "No, Garse. Lorimaar high-Braith does not call us to duel. Do you, friend, highbond?"

Arkellor waited several heartbeats too long before his answer came. "No," he said. "No, Jaantony high-Ironjade, no insult is intended."

"And none is taken," Vikary said, smiling.

The Braith highbond did not smile. "Good fortunes," he said begrudgingly. He went to the door in long strides, pausing only long enough to let Dirk step hurriedly aside, then proceeded out and up the roof stairs. The door closed behind him.

Dirk started toward the others, but the scene was quickly breaking up. Janacek, with a frown and a shake of his head, turned and left quickly for another room. Gwen rose, pale and shaken, and Vikary took a step toward Dirk.

"That was not a good thing for you to witness," the Kavalair said. "But perhaps it will be enlightening to you. Still, I regret your presence. I would not have you think of High Kavalaan as the Kimdissi do."

"I didn't understand," Dirk said. Vikary put an arm around his shoulder and drew him off toward the dining room, Gwen just behind them. "What was he talking about?"

"Ah, much. I will explain. But I must tell you a second regret also, that your promised breakfast is not set and ready for you." He smiled.

"I can wait." They went into the dining room and sat, Gwen still silent and troubled. "What did Garse call me?" Dirk asked. "Kora-something, what does that mean?"

Vikary appeared hesitant. "The word is korariel. It is an Old Kavalair word. Its meanings have changed over the centuries. Today, here in this place, when used by Garse or myself, it means protected. Protected by us, protected of Ironjade."

"That is what you would like it to mean, Jaan," Gwen said, her voice barbed and angry. "Tell him the real meaning!"

Dirk waited. Vikary crossed his arms and his eyes went from one of them to the other. "Very well, Gwen, if you wish it." He turned to Dirk. "The full, older meaning is protected property. I can only hope you do not take insult at this. None is intended. Korariel is a word for people not part of a holdfast, yet still guarded and valued."

Dirk remembered the things Ruark had told him the night before, the words dimly perceived through a haze of green wine. He felt anger creeping like a red tide up his neck, and fought to hold it down. "I am not accustomed to being property," he said bitingly, "no matter how highly valued. And who are you supposed to be protecting me against?"

"Lorimaar and his teyn Saanel," Vikary said. He leaned forward across the table and took Dirk's arm in a powerful grip. "Garse used the word perhaps too hastily, t'Larien, yet to him it no doubt seemed right at that moment, an old word for an old concept.

Wrong-yes, I can recognize the wrongness-wrong in that you are a human, a person, no one's property. Yet it was an apt word to use to one like Lorimaar high-Braith, who understands such things and little else. If it disturbs you so greatly, as I know the concept disturbs Gwen, then I am grievously sorry my teyn used it."

"Well," Dirk said, trying to be reasonable, "I thank you for the apology, but that's not good enough. I still don't know what's going on. Who was Lorimaar? What did he want? And why do I have to be protected against him?"

Vikary sighed and released Dirk's arm. "It will not be a simple matter to answer your questions. I must tell you of the history of my people, a little that I know and much that I have guessed." He turned to Gwen. "We can eat while we talk, if no one objects. Will you bring food?"

She nodded and left, returning several minutes later carrying a large tray piled high with black bread and three kinds of cheese and hard-cooked eggs in bright blue shells. And beer, of course. Vikary leaned forward so that his elbows rested on the tabletop. He talked while the others ate.

"High Kavalaan has been a violent world," he said. "It is the oldest outworld except for the Forgotten Colony, and all its long histories are histories of struggle. Sadly, those histories are also largely fabrication and legend, full of ethnocentric lies. Yet these tales were believed right up until the time that the starships came again, following the interregnum.

"In the holdfasts of the Ironjade Gathering, for example, boys were taught that the universe has only thirty stars, and High Kavalaan is its center. Mankind originated there, when Kay Iron-Smith and his teyn Roland Wolf-Jade were born of a mating between a volcano and a thunderstorm. They walked steaming from the lips of the volcano into a world full of demons and monsters, and for many years they wandered far and near, having various adventures. At last they came across a deep cave beneath a mountain, and inside they found a dozen women, the first women in the world. The women were afraid of the demons and would not come out. So Kay and Roland stayed, seizing the women roughly and making them eyn-kethi. The cave became their holdfast, the women birthed them many sons, and thus began Kavalan civilization.

"The path upward was no easy one, the stories say. The boys born of the eyn-kethi were all the seed of Kay and Roland, hot-tempered and dangerous and strong-willed. There were many quarrels. One son, the wily and evil John Coal-Black, habitually killed his kethi, his holdfast-brothers, in fits of envy because he could not hunt as well as they. Then, hoping to gain some of their skill and strength, he fell to eating their bodies. Roland found him engaged in such a feast one day, and chased the child across the hills, beating him with a great flail. Afterwards John did not return to Ironjade, but started his own holdfast in a coal mine and took to teyn a demon. That was the origin of the cannibal highbonds of the Deep Coal Dwellings.

"Other holdfasts were founded in like manner, although the Ironjade histories give the other rebels a good deal more credit than Black John. Roland and Kay were stern masters, not easy to live with. Shan the Swordsman, for example, was a good strong boy who left with his teyn and betheyn after a violent fight with Kay, who would not respect his jade-and-silver. Shan was the founder of the Shanagate Holding. Ironjade recognizes his line as fully human, and always did. So it was with most of the great holdfasts. Those that died out, like the Deep Coal Dwellings, fared less well in the legends.

"Those legends are quite extensive, and many are enlightening. There is the tale of the disobedient kethi, as an instance. The first Ironjade knew that the only fit home for a man was deep under rock, a fastness in stone, a cave or a mine. Yet those who came later did not believe; the plains looked open and inviting to

their naive eyes. So they went out, with eyn-kethi and children, and erected tall cities. That was their folly. Fires fell from the sky to destroy them, melting and twisting the towers they had thrown up, burning the city men, sending the survivors fleeing underground in terror to where the flames could not reach. And when their eyn-kethl gave them births, the children were demons, not men at all. Sometimes they ate their way free of the womb."

Vikary paused and took a drink from his mug. Dirk, almost finished with his breakfast, pushed a few crumbs of cheese aimlessly across his plate and frowned. "This is all fascinating," he said, "but I don't see the relevance, I'm afraid."

Vikary drank again and took a quick bite of cheese. "Be patient," he said.

"Dirk," Gwen said dryly, "the histories of the four surviving holdfast-coalitions differ in many respects, but there are two great events on which they agree. Those are the milestones of Kavalars myth. All of them have a version of that last story-the burning of the cities. It is called the Time of Fire and Demons. A later story, the Sorrowing Plague, is also repeated virtually word for word in every holdfast."

"Truth," Vikary said. "These stories-these were the only accounts of ancient days that I was given to work with. By the time of my birth, no sane Kavalars believed any of this."

Gwen coughed politely.

Vikary glanced at her and smiled. "Yes, Gwen corrects me," he said. "Few sane Kavalars believed any of this." He went on. "Yet the doubters had nothing else to believe, no alternate truth to adhere to. Most of them did not particularly care. When star travel resumed, and the Wolfmen and Toberians and later the Kimdissi came to High Kavalaan, they found us eager to learn the lost arts of technology, and that is what they taught us in return for our gems and heavy metals. Soon we had starships, but still no history." He smiled. "I found what truth we now have during my studies on Avalon. It was little enough, and yet sufficient. Hidden in the great data banks of the Academy I found records of the original colonization of High Kavalaan.

"It was fairly late in the Double War. A group of settlers left from Tara for a world beyond the Tempter's Veil, where they hoped to find safety from the Hrangans and the Hrangans slaveraces. The computers indicate that for a time they did. They discovered a planet harsh and strange, yet rich. Quickly they built a high-level colony, based on mining operations. There are records of trade between Tara and the colony for about twenty years, then the planet beyond the Veil abruptly vanished from human history. Tara hardly noticed. Those were the crudest years of the war."

"And you think the planet was High Kavalaan?" Dirk asked.

"It is known for a fact," Vikary replied. "The coordinates match, and other fascinating pieces of data as well. The colony was named Cavanaugh, for example. Perhaps even more intriguing, the leader of the first expedition was a starship captain named Kay Smith. A woman."

Gwen smiled at that.

"There was something else I discovered as well," Vikary continued, "quite by chance. You must remember that most of the outworlds were never involved in the Double War. The Fringe civilizations are

children of the collapse, or even post-collapse. No Kavalair had ever seen a Hrangang, much less any of the various slaveraces. I had not, until I went to Avalon and grew interested in the broader aspects of human history. Then, in one account of the conflict in the jambles, I lucked upon illustrations of the various semi-sentient slaves the Hrangangs used as shock troops on worlds they did not deem worthy of their own immediate attention. Undoubtedly, being a man of the jambles, you know these alien races, Dirk. The nocturnal Hruun, heavy-gravity warriors of immense strength and savagery, who see well into the infrared. Winged dactyls, who got their name from some chance resem-

blance to a beast of human prehistory. Worst of all, the githyanki, the soulsucks, with their terrible psionic powers."

Dirk was nodding. "I've seen a Hruun or two during my travels. The other races are pretty much extinct, aren't they?"

"Perhaps," Vikary said. "I looked at the illustrations I had found for a long time, and returned to them again and again. There was a quality about them that disturbed me. Finally, I puzzled out the truth. The Hruun, the dactyls, the githyanki—each bore a vague semblance to the gargoyles that sit at the door of every Kavalair holdfast. They were the demons of our myth cycles, Dirk!"

Vikary stood up and began to pace slowly up and down the length of the room, still talking, his voice even and controlled, his excitement showing only in the act of pacing. "When Gwen and I returned to Iron-jade I put forward my theory, based on the old legends, the Demonsong cycle of the great poet-adventurer Jamis-Lion Taal, and on the Academy data banks. Consider its truth: The colony Cavanaugh stands, with its cities on the plains and its far-flung mining operations. The Hrangangs level the cities with a nuclear bombardment. Survivors live only in the deep shelters and out in the wild, in the mines. To make the planet their own, the Hrangangs also land contingents of their slaveraces. Then they depart, not to return for a century. The mines become the first holdfasts, others are built later, carved deep into stone. Their cities gone, the miners revert to a more primitive level of technology, and soon establish a rigid survival-oriented culture. For endless generations they war against the slaveraces and against each other. At the same time, beneath the radioactive ruins of the cities, human mutations begin to arise . . ."

Now Dirk stood up. "Jaan," he said.

Vikary stopped his pacing, turned, frowned.

"I have been very damn patient," Dirk said. "I understand that all this is of great concern to you. It's your work. But I want some answers and I want them now." He raised his hand and ticked off the questions on his fingers. "Who is Lorimaar? What did he want? And why do I have to be protected against him?"

Gwen rose too. "Dirk," she said, "Jaan is only giving you the background you need to understand. Don't be so—"

"No!" Vikary quieted her with a wave of his hand. "No, t'Larien is correct, I grow too enthusiastic whenever I speak of these matters." To Dirk he said, "I will answer you directly, then. Lorimaar is a very traditional Kavalair, so traditional that he is out of place even on High Kavalaan itself. He is a creature of another age. Do you recall yesterday morning, when I gave you my pin to wear, and Garse and I both expressed concern about your safety after dark?"

Dirk nodded. His hand went up and touched the small pin, snugly fastened to his collar. "Yes."

"Lorimaar high-Braith and others like him were the cause of our concern, t'Larien. The reasons are not easy to tell."

"Let me," Gwen said. "Dirk, listen. The highbond Kavalars, the holdfast folk, always respected each other throughout the centuries- Oh, they fought and warred, so much that some twenty-odd holdfasts and coalitions were destroyed utterly, leaving only the four great surviving holdfasts of modern times. Still, they recognized each other as human, subject to the rules of highwar and the Kavalars code duello. But there were others, you see-solitary people in the mountains, people who dwelled under the ruined cities, farmers. Those are just guesses-mine and Jaan's- but the point is such people did exist, survivors outside the mining camps that became the holdfasts-those survivors the highbonds would not recognize as men and women. Jaan left something out of all that history, you see- Oh, don't fidget so. I know it was a long story, but it was important. You remember all that about the Hrangan slaveraces corresponding to the three demons of Kavalars myth? Well, the only problem with that is there are three slaveraces, but four kinds of demons. The worst and most evil demons of all were the mockmen."

Dirk frowned. "Mockmen. Lorimaar called me a mockman. I thought it was something like not-man, more or less."

"No," Gwen said. "Not-man is a common term, mockman is unique to High Kavalaan. Shape-changers, the legends say, weres and liars. They can wear any form, but most often that of men, and they want to infiltrate the holdfasts. Inside, disguised as humans, they can secretly strike and kill."

"Those other survivors-the farmers and the mountain families and the mutants and the unlucky, the other humans on Cavanaugh-those were the mock-men, the werewolf. They were not allowed to surrender, the rules of highwar did not apply. The Kavalars exterminated them, never trusting any to be human. They were alien animals. After centuries, those that remained were hunted for sport. The holdfast men always hunted in pairs, teyn-and-teyn, so each could swear to the humanity of the other when they returned."

Dirk looked aghast. "Does this still go on?"

Gwen shrugged. "Seldom. Modern Kavalars admit the sins of their history. Even before the starships came, the Ironjade Gathering and Redsteel, the most progressive coalitions, had banned the taking of mock-men. The hunters had a custom. When they did not wish to kill a mockman immediately, for whatever reason, but wanted him as their personal prey later, they would brand him korariel, and no one else would touch him under penalty of duel. The Ironjade and Redsteel kethi went out and ran down all the mockmen they could, set them up in villages, and tried to bring them back to civilization from the savagery they had fallen into. All they caught they named korariel. There was a brief highwar over it, Ironjade against Shanagate. Ironjade won, and korariel took on a new meaning, protected property."

"And Lorimaar?" Dirk demanded. "How does he fit in?"

She smiled wickedly, for a second reminding him of Janacek. "In any culture, a few diehards remain, true believers and fundamentalists. Braith is the most conservative coalition, and about a tenth of them- Jaan's estimate-still believe in mockmen. Mostly hunters, who want to believe, and nearly all of them from Braith. Lorimaar and his teyn and a handful of his kethi are here to hunt. The game is more varied than on

High Kavalaan, and no one enforces any game laws. In fact, there are no laws. The Festival pacts ended long ago. Lorimaar can kill anything he wants to."

"Including humans," Dirk said.

"If they can find them," she said. "Larteyn has twenty citizens, I believe-twenty-one with you. Us, and a poet named Kirak Redsteel Cavis who lives in an old watchtower, and a pair of legitimate hunters from Shanagate. The rest are Braiths. Hunting mock-men, and other game when they can't find mockmen. A generation older than Jaan, chiefly, and quite bloodthirsty. Except for stories they heard in their holdfasts, and maybe a few illicit man-kills in the Lameraan Hills, they know nothing of the old hunts except the legends. All of them are bursting with tradition and frustration." She smiled.

"And this goes on? No one does anything?"

Jaan Vikary crossed his arms. "I have a confession to make, t'Larien," he said gravely. "We lied to you yesterday, Garse and I, when you asked us why we are here. In truth, I was the one who lied. Garse told at least the partial truth-we must protect Gwen. She is an offworlder, no Kavalars, and the Braiths would gladly kill her for a mockman without the shield of Ironjade. The same is truth for Arkin Ruark, who knows nothing of this, not even that he has our protection. Yet he does. He too is korariel of Ironjade.

"Our reasons for being here go beyond that, however. It was vital that I leave High Kavalaan at the time I did. When I took on my highnames and published my theories, I became at once very powerful and celebrated in highbond council, and very hated. Many religious men took personal insult from my contention that Kay Iron-Smith was a woman. I was challenged six times on that account alone. In the last duel, Garse killed a man, while I wounded his teyn so badly that he will never walk again. I was not willing to let this go on. Worlorn was empty of enemies, it seemed. At my urging, the Ironjade council dispatched Gwen on her ecological project.

"Yet, at the same time, I became aware of Lorimaar's activity here. He had already taken his first trophy, and word had come back to Braith and spread to us. Garse and I discussed the matter and determined to stop it. The situation is explosive in the extreme. If the Kimdissi should learn that the Kavalars are hunting mockmen again, they would gladly spread the news to all the outworlds. There is little love lost between Kimdiss and High Kavalaan, as you may know. We do not fear the Kimdissi themselves, who espouse a religion and a philosophy as nonviolent as the Emereli. Other Fringe worlds are more dangerous. The Wolfmen are always volatile and erratic; the Toberians might end their trade agreements if they learn that Kavalars are hunting their laggardly tourists. Perhaps even Avalon would turn against us, should the news go beyond the Veil, and we would be barred from the Academy. These risks cannot be taken. Lorimaar and his fellows do not care, and the holdfast councils can do nothing. They have no authority here, and only the Ironjades have even the slightest concern about events light-years away, on a dying world. Thus Garse and I act against the Braith hunters alone.

"Up to now, it has not come to open conflict. We travel as widely as we can, visiting each of the cities, searching for those who remain on Worlorn. Any we find we make korariel. We have found only a few- a wild child lost during the Festival, a few lingering Wolfmen in Haapala's City, an ironhorn hunter from Tara. To each I give a token of my esteem"-he smiled-"a little black iron pin shaped like a banshee. It is a proximity beacon, to warn a hunter who gets too close. Should they touch any wearing such a pin, any of

my korariel, it would be a dueling offense. Lorimaar may rant and rage, but he will not duel us. It would be his death."

"I see," said Dirk. He reached up to his collar, unfastened the little iron pin, and tossed it on the table amid the remains of their breakfast. "Well, that's lovely, but you can have your little pin. I am nobody's property. I've been taking care of myself for a long time, and I can keep on taking care of myself."

Vikary frowned. "Gwen," he said, "can you not convince him that it would be safer if-"

"No," she said sharply. "I appreciate what you are trying to do, Jaan, you know that. But I understand Dirk's feelings. I don't like being protected either, and I refuse to be property." Her voice was curt, decisive.

Vikary regarded them helplessly. "Very well," he said. He picked up Dirk's discarded pin. "I should tell you something, t'Larien. We have had better luck in finding people than the Braiths have simply because we search the cities while they hunt the forests, hopeless slaves to old habits. They seldom find anyone in the wild. Up to now they have had no inkling as to what Garse and I were doing. But this morning Lorimaar high-Braith came to me in grievance because the previous day he had come across likely game while hunting with his teyn, and had been prevented from taking that game.

"The prey he sought was a man on a sky-scoot, flying alone above the mountains." He held up the banshee-shaped pin. "Without this," he said, "he would have forced you down or lasered you from the sky, run you through the wilderness, and finally killed you." He put the pin into his pocket, stared at Dirk meaningfully for a minute, and left them.

Chapter 4

"It's unfortunate that you had to stumble into Lorimaar this morning," Gwen said after Jaan had gone. "There was no reason for you to get involved, and I had hoped to spare you all the grisly details. I hope you will keep this confidential after you leave Worlorn. Let Jaan and Garse take care of the Braiths. No one else will do anything anyway, except talk about it and slander innocent people on High Kavalaan. Above all, don't tell Arkin! He despises Kavalars, and he'd be off to Kimdiss in a shot." She stood up. "For the present, I'd suggest we talk of more pleasant things. We have a short time together; I can only be your tour guide so long before I have to return to my work. There is no reason to let those Braith butchers spoil the few days we have."

"Whatever you say," Dirk answered, anxious to please but still shaken by the whole business with Lorimaar and his mockmen. "You have something planned?"

"I could take you back to the forests," Gwen told him. "They go on and on forever, and there are hundreds of fascinating things to see in the wild: lakes full of fish larger than either of us, insect mounds bigger than this building erected by insects smaller than your fingernail, an incredible cave system that Jaan discovered beyond the mountainwall- He's a born caver, Jaan. Still, today I think we should play it safe.

We don't want to pour too much salt into Lorimaar's wound, or he and his fat teyn might hunt us both and Jaan be damned. Today I'll show you the cities. They have a fascination too, and a kind of macabre beauty. As Jaan said, Lorimaar has not yet thought to hunt there."

"All right," Dirk said, with little enthusiasm.

Gwen dressed quickly and took him up to the roof. The sky-scoots still lay where they had discarded them a day earlier. Dirk bent to retrieve them, but Gwen took the silver-metal tissues from his hands and tossed them into the back of the gray manta air-car. Then she got the flight boots and controls and chucked them in afterwards. "No scoots today," she said. "We'll be covering too much ground."

Dirk nodded, and both of them vaulted over the car's wings into the front seat. Worlorn's sky made him feel as if he should be coming in from an expedition instead of just setting out on one.

The wind shrieked around the aircar wildly, and Dirk briefly took the stick so Gwen could tie back her long black hair. His own gray-brown mop whipped around in mad convulsions as they raced across the sky, but thought had him too abstracted to notice, much less be annoyed.

Gwen kept them high over the mountainwall and bore south. The placid Common with its gentle grassy hills and meandering rivers stretched far away to their right, until the sky came down to meet it. On the distant left, when the mountains dropped off, they could glimpse the edge of the wilderness. The choker-infested areas were obvious even from this altitude - yellow cancers spreading through the darker green.

For nearly an hour they rode in silence, Dirk lost in his thoughts, trying to put one thing together with the next and failing. Until finally Gwen looked at him with a smile. "I like flying an aircar," she said. "Even this one. It makes me feel free and clean, cut off from all the problems down there. You know what I mean?"

Dirk nodded. "Yes. You're not the first one to say that. Lots of people feel that way. Myself included."

"Yes," she said. "I used to take you flying, remember? On Avalon? I'd fly for hours and hours, from dawn until dark that one time, and you'd just sit with an arm out the window, staring far and away with that dreamy look on your face." She smiled again.

He did remember. Those trips had been very special. They never spoke much, just looked at each other from time to time, and whenever their eyes met they'd grin. It was inevitable; no matter how hard he fought it, that grin had always come. But now it all seemed terribly far off, and lost.

"What made you think of that?" he asked her.

"You," she said, and gestured. "Sitting there, slouched, with one hand hanging over the side. Ah, Dirk. You cheat, you know. I think you did it deliberately, to make me think of Avalon, and smile, and want to hug you again. Bah."

And they laughed together.

And Dirk, almost unthinking, slid over in his seat and put his arm around her. She looked briefly into his face, then gave a small shrug, and her frown melted into a sigh of resignation and finally a reluctant smile. And she did not pull away.

They went to see the cities.

The city of the morning was a soft pastel vision set in a wide green valley. Gwen put the aircar down in the center of one of its terraced squares, and they strolled the broad boulevards for an hour. It was a gracious city, carved from delicately veined pink marble and pale stone. The streets were wide and sinuously curved, the buildings low and seemingly fragile structures of polished wood and stained glass. Everywhere they found small parks and wide malls, and everywhere art: statues, paintings, murals on sidewalks and along the sides of buildings, rock gardens, and living tree-sculptures.

But now the parks were desolate and overgrown, the blue-green grass gone wild. Black creepers snaked across the sidewalks, the parkside plinths were empty more often than not, and the sturdier tree-sculptures had grown into grotesque shapes that their shapers never dreamed of.

A slow-moving blue river divided and subdivided the city, wandering this way and that in a course as meandering and tortuous as the streets along its bank. Gwen and Dirk sat near the water for a while, beneath the shadow of an ornate wooden footbridge, and watched the reflection of Fat Satan float red and sluggish on the water. And while they sat, she told him of how the city once had been, in the days of the Festival, before either of them had come to Worlorn. The people of Kimdiss had built it, she said, and they called it the Twelfth Dream.

Perhaps the city was dreaming now. If so, its sleep was the final one. Its vaulted halls all echoed empty, its gardens were grim jungles, soon to be graveyards. Where laughter had once filled the streets, now the only sound was the rustling whisper of dead leaves blown by the wind. If Larteyn was a dying city, Dirk reflected while he sat beneath the bridge, then Twelfth Dream was a dead one.

"This is where Arkin wanted to set up our base of operations," Gwen said. "We vetoed him, though. If he and I were going to work together, it was clearly best that we live in the same city, and Arkin wanted it to be Twelfth Dream. I wouldn't go along, and I don't know if he's ever forgiven me. If the Kavalars built Larteyn as a fortress, the Kimdissi crafted this city as a work of art. It was even more beautiful in the old days, I understand. They dismantled the best buildings and took the finest sculpture from the squares when the Festival ended."

"You voted for Larteyn?" Dirk said. "To live in?"

She shook her head. Her hair, unbound now, tossed gently, and touched Dirk with a smile. "No," she said. "Jaan wanted that, and Garse. Me-well, I didn't vote for Twelfth Dream either, I'm afraid. I could never have lived here. The scent of decay is too strong. I agree with Keats, you know. Nothing is quite so melancholy as the death of beauty. There was more beauty here than ever in Larteyn, though Jaan would growl to hear me say it. So this is the sadder place. Besides, in Larteyn there is some company, at least, if only Lorimaar and his sort. Here there's no one left but ghosts."

Dirk looked out over the water, where the great red sun, drained and captured, bobbed eerily up and down in the slow roll of the waves. And he could almost see the ghosts she spoke of then, phantoms who

pressed the riverbank on both sides and sang laments for things long lost. And another too, a ghost uniquely his: a Braque bargeman, advancing down the river, pushing a long black pole. He was coming for Dirk, that bargeman, coming on and on. And the black boat that he rode was low in the water, very full of emptiness.

So he stood up and pulled Gwen up with him, saying nothing except he wanted to move on. And they ran from the ghosts, back to the terrace where the gray aircar waited.

Then it took them up again, for a second interlude of wind and sky and silent thought. Gwen flew them farther south and then east, and Dirk watched and brooded and was quiet, and at intervals she would look over at him and, never meaning to, she would smile.

They came at last to the sea.

The city of the afternoon was built along the shore of a jagged bay where dark green waves crested to break against rotting wharfs. Once it was called Musquel-by-the-Sea, Gwen said as they circled above it in low, looping spirals. Though it had risen with the other cities of Worlorn, there was an air of the ancient about it. The streets of Musquel were broken-backed snakes, twisting cobbled alleys between leaning towers of multicolored bricks. It was a brick city. Blue bricks, red bricks, yellow, green, orange, bricks painted and striped and speckled, bricks slammed together with mortar as black as obsidian or as red as Satan above, slammed together in crazy clashing patterns. Even more gaudy were the painted canvas awnings of the merchant stalls that still lined the rambling streets and sat deserted on the abandoned wooden piers.

They landed on a pier that looked stronger than most, listened to the breakers for a time, and then strolled into the city. All empty-all dust. The streets were windswept and vacant, the domes and onion towers deserted, and the fat red sun above washed out all the once-gay colors. The bricks crumbled as well; dust was everywhere, multicolored and choking. Musquel was not a well-built city, and now it was as dead as Twelfth Dream.

"It's primitive," Dirk said, amid the remains. They stood at the juncture of two alleys where a deep well had been sunk and ringed with stone. Black water splashed below. "The whole feel is pre-space, and the signs say the same thing about the culture. Braque is like this, but not to this degree. They have a little of the old technology, bits and pieces where they aren't forbidden by religion. Musquel looks as if it had nothing."

She nodded, running her hand lightly along the top of the well, sending a stream of dust and pebbles to tumble into darkness. The jade-and-silver shone dull red on her left arm, catching Dirk's eye and making him wince and wonder once again. What was it? A slave's mark, or a token of love, what? But he pushed the thought aside, reluctant to consider it.

"The people who built Musquel had very little," she was saying. "They came from the Forgotten Colony, which is sometimes called Letheland by the other outworlders, and is always called Earth by its own people. On High Kavalaan the people themselves are called the Lostfolk. Who they are, how they got to their world, where they came from . . ." She smiled and shrugged. "No one knows. They were here before

the Kavalars, though, and possibly before the Mao Tse-tung, which history records as the first human starship to breach the Tempter's Veil. The traditional Kavalars are certain all the Lostfolk are mockmen and Hrangans demons, but they have proved that they can interbreed with other human stocks from better-known worlds. But mostly the Forgotten Colony is a solitary globe, with not much interest in the rest of space. They have a Bronze Age culture, fisherfolk mostly, and they keep to themselves."

"I'm surprised they even came here at all then," Dirk said, "or bothered to build a city."

"Ah," she said, smiling and brushing loose more crumbling stone to fall into the well with tiny splashes. "But everyone had to build a city, all fourteen out-world cultures. That was the idea. Wolfheim had found the Forgotten Colony a few centuries ago, and so Wolfheim and Tober between them dragged the Lostfolk here. They had no starships of their own. Fisherfolk back on their homeworld so were they made fisherfolk here. Again it was Wolfheim, with the World of the Blackwine Ocean, who stocked the seas for them. They fished with woven nets from little boats, small black men and women bare to the waist, and they fried the catch in open pits for the visitors. They had bards and street singers to bring their alleys joy. Everyone stopped at Musquel during the Festival to listen to their odd myths and eat the fried fish and rent boats. But I don't think the Lostfolk loved the city much. Within a month of the Festival's end, every one of them was gone. They didn't even take down their awnings, and you can still find fish knives and clothing and a bone or two if you prowl through the buildings."

"Have you?"

"No. But I hear stories. Kirak Redsteel Cavis, the poet who lives in Larteyn, stayed here once and wandered and wrote some songs."

Dirk looked around, but there was nothing to see. Fading bricks and empty streets, unglazed windows like the sockets of a thousand blind eyes, painted awnings flapping loudly in the wind. Nothing. "Another city of ghosts," he commented.

"No," Gwen said. "No, I don't think so. The Lost-folk never gave their souls to Musquel, or to Worlorn. Their ghosts all went home with them."

Dirk shivered, and the city felt suddenly even emptier than it had a moment before. Emptier than empty. It was a strange idea. "Is Larteyn the only city that has any life at all?" he asked.

"No," she said, turning from the wall. They walked down the alley together, back in the direction of the waterfront. "No, I'll show you life now, if you'd like. Come on."

Airborne again, they were on another ride through the gathering gloom. They had consumed most of the afternoon reaching Musquel and wandering through it; Fat Satan was low on the western horizon, and one of the four yellow attendants had already sunk out of sight. It was twilight again, in fact as well as in appearance.

Very restless, Dirk took the controls this time, while Gwen sat at his side with her arm resting very lightly on his, giving curt directions. Most of the day was gone already, and he had so much to say, so much to ask, so many things to decide. Yet he had done none of it. Soon, though, he promised himself as he flew. Soon.

The aircar purred very softly, almost inaudibly, beneath his gentle touch. The ground grew dark below, and the kilometers raced by. Life, Gwen told him, would be found ahead, west, due west, toward the sunset.

The city of the evening was a single silver building with its feet in the rolling hills far beneath them and its head in the clouds two kilometers up. It was a city of light, its flanks metallic and windowless and shimmering with white-hot brilliance. Coruscating, flashing, the light climbed the vaulting shaft in waves, beginning at the far bottom where the city was anchored deep into the primal rock, then climbing and climbing and growing steadily brighter as the city rose and narrowed like the vast needle it was. Faster and higher the wave of light would ascend, up all that incredible climb, until it reached that cloud-cruised silver spire in a burst of blinding glory. And by then, three later waves had already begun to follow it up.

"Challenge," Gwen named the city as they approached. Its name and its intent. It was built by the urbanites of ai-Emerel, whose home cities are black steel towers set amid rolling plains. Each Emereli city was a nation-state, all in a single tower, and most Emereli never left the building they were born in (although those that did, Gwen said, often became the greatest wanderers in all of space). Challenge was all those Emereli towers in one, silver-white instead of black, twice as haughty and three times as tall-ai-Emerel's arcological philosophy embodied in metal and plastic-fusion-powered, automatic, computerized, and self-repairing. The Emereli boasted that it was immortal, a final proof that the glories of Fringe technology (or Emereli technology, at any rate) gleamed no less bright than that of Newholme or Avalon or even Old Earth itself.

There were dark horizontal slashes in the body of the city-airlot landing decks, each ten levels from the last. Dirk homed in on one, and when he reached it the black slit blazed into light for his approach. The opening was easily ten meters high; he had no trouble setting them down in the vast airtlot on the hundredth level.

As they climbed out, a deep bass voice spoke to them from nowhere. "Welcome," it said. "I am the Voice of Challenge. May I entertain you?"

Dirk glanced back over his shoulder, and Gwen laughed at him. "The city brain," she explained. "A supercomputer. I told you this city still lived."

"May I entertain you?" the Voice repeated. It came from the walls.

"Maybe," Dirk said tentatively. "I think we're probably hungry. Can you feed us?"

The Voice did not answer, but a wall panel rolled back several meters away and a silent cushioned vehicle moved out and stopped before them. They got in and the vehicle moved off through another obliging wall.

They rolled on soft balloon tires through a succession of spotless white corridors, past countless rows of numbered doors, while music played soothingly around them. Dirk remarked briefly that the white lights were a harsh contrast to the dun evening sky of Worlorn, and instantly the corridors became a soft, muted blue.

The fat-tired car let them off at a restaurant, and a robowaiter who sounded much like the Voice offered them menus and wine lists. Both selections were extensive, not limited to cuisine from ai-Emerel or even to the outworlds, but including famous dishes and vintage wines from all the scattered worlds of the manrealm, including a few that Dirk had never heard of. Each dish had its world of origin printed in small type beneath it on the menu. They mulled the selection for a long time. Finally Dirk chose sand dragon broiled in butter, from Jamison's World, and Gwen ordered bluespawn-in-cheese, from Old Poseidon.

The wine they picked was clear and white. The robot brought it frozen in a cube of ice and cracked it free, and somehow it was still liquid and quite cold.

That, the Voice insisted, was the way it should be served. Dinner came on warm plates of silver and bone. Dirk pulled a clawed leg from his entree, peeled back the shell, and tasted the white, buttery meat.

"This is incredible," he said, nodding down at his plate. "I lived on Jamison's World for a while, and those Jamies do love their fresh-broiled sand dragon, and this is as good as any I had. Frozen? Frozen and shipped here? Hell, the Emereli must have needed a fleet to move all the food they'd need for this place."

"Not frozen," came the reply. It wasn't Gwen, though she stared at him with a bemused grin. The Voice answered him. "Before the Festival, the trading ship Blue Plate Special from ai-Emerel visited as many worlds as it could reach, collecting and preserving samples of their finest foodstuffs. The voyage, long planned, took some forty-three standard years, under four captains and as many crews. Finally the ship came to Worlorn, and in the kitchens and bio-tanks of Challenge the collected samples were cloned and recloned to feed the multitudes. Thus were the fishes and loaves multiplied by no false prophet but by the scientists of ai-Emerel."

"It sounds very smug," Gwen said with a giggle.

"It sounds like a set speech," Dirk said. Then he shrugged and went back to his dinner, as did Gwen. The two of them ate alone, except for their robowaiter and the Voice, in the center of the restaurant built to hold hundreds. All around them, empty but immaculate, other tables sat waiting with dark red tablecloths and bright silver dinnerware. The customers were gone a decade ago; but the Voice and the city had infinite patience.

Afterwards, over coffee (black and thick with cream and spices, a blend from Avalon of fond memory), Dirk felt mellow and relaxed, perhaps more at ease than he had been since coming to Worlorn. Jaan Vikary and the jade-and-silver-it gleamed dark and beautiful in the dim lights of the restaurant, exquisitely wrought yet oddly drained of menace and meaning-had shrank somehow in importance now that he was back with Gwen. Across from him, sipping from a white china mug and smiling her dreamy faraway smile, she looked very approachable, very like the Jenny that he had known and loved once, the lady of the whisperjewel.

"Nice," he said, nodding, meaning everything around them.

And Gwen nodded back at him. "Nice," she agreed, smiling, and Dirk ached for her, Guinevere of the wide green eyes and the endless black hair, she who had cared, his lost soulmate.

He leaned forward and stared down into his cup. There were no omens in the coffee. He had to talk to her. "It's all been nice tonight," he said. "Like Avalon."

When she murmured, agreeing yet again, he continued. "Is there anything left, Gwen?"

She regarded him levelly and sipped at her coffee. "Not a fair question, Dirk, you know that. There is always something left. If what you had was real to begin with. If not, well, then it doesn't matter. But if it was real, then something, a chunk of love, a cup of hate, despair, resentment, lust. Whatever. But something."

"I don't know," Dirk t'Larien said, sighing. His eyes looked down and inward. "Maybe you're the only reality I've had, then."

"Sad," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I guess." His eyes came up. "I've got a lot left, Gwen. Love, hate, resentment, all of that. Like you said. Lust." He laughed.

She only smiled. "Sad," she said again.

He was not willing to let it go. "And you? Something, Gwen?"

"Yes. Can't deny it. Something. And it's been growing, off and on."

"Love?"

"You're pressing," she said gently, setting down her cup. The robowaiter at her elbow filled it again, already creamed and spiced. "I asked you not to."

"I have to," he said. "Hard enough to be so close to you, and talk about Worlorn or Kavalor customs or even hunters. That's not what I want to talk about!"

"I know. Two old lovers standing together talking. That's a common situation and a common strain. Both of them afraid, not knowing whether to try to open old gates again, not knowing if the other one wants them to reawaken those sleeping thoughts or let them go. Every time I think a thought of Avalon and almost say it, I wonder, Does he want me to talk about it or is he praying that I won't?"

"I suppose that depends on what you were going to say. Once I tried to start it all again. Remember? Just afterwards. I sent you my whisperjewel. You never answered, never came." His voice was even, with a faint tinge of reproach and regret, but no anger. Somehow he had lost his anger, just for now.

"Did you ever think why?", Gwen said. "I got the jewel and cried. I was still alone then, hadn't met Jaan yet, and I wanted someone so badly. I would have gone back to you if you'd called me."

"I did call you. You didn't come."

A grim smile. "Ah, Dirk. The whisperjewel came in a small box, and taped to it was a note. 'Please,' the note said, 'come back to me now. I need you, Jenny.' That was what it said. I cried and cried. If you'd only written 'Gwen,' if you'd only loved Gwen, me. But no, it was always Jenny, even afterwards, even then."

Dirk remembered, and winced. "Yes," he admitted after a short silence. "I guess I did write that. I'm sorry. I never understood. But I do now. Is it too late?"

"I said so. In the woods. Too late, Dirk, it's all dead. You'll hurt us if you press."

"All dead? You said something was left, and growing. Just now you said it. Make up your mind, Gwen. I don't want to hurt you, or me. But I want-"

"I know what you want. It can't be. It's gone."

"Why?" he asked. He pointed across the table at her bracelet. "Because of that? Jade-and-silver forever and ever, is that it?"

"Maybe," she said. Her voice faltered, uncertain. "I don't know. We ... that is, I..."

Dirk remembered all the things that Ruark had told him. "I know it's not easy to talk about," he said carefully, gently. "And I promised to wait. But some things can't wait. You said Jaan is your husband, right? What is Garse? What does betheyn mean?"

"Heldwife," she said. "But you don't understand. Jaan is different than other Kavalars, stronger and wiser and more decent. He is changing things, he alone. The old ties, of betheyn to highbond, our ties are not like that. Jaan doesn't believe that, no more than he believes in hunting mockmen."

"He believes in High Kavalaan," Dirk said, "and in code duello. Maybe he's atypical, but he's still a Kavalar."

It was the wrong thing to say. Gwen only grinned at him and rallied. "Pfui," she said. "Now you sound like Arkin."

"Do I? Maybe Arkin is right, though. One other thing. You say Jaan doesn't believe in many of the old ways, right?" Gwen nodded.

"Fine. What about Garse, then? I haven't had as much a chance to talk to him. Garse is equally enlightened, no doubt?"

That stopped her. "Garse . . ." she began. She stopped and shook her head dubiously. "Well, Garse is more conservative."

"Yes," said Dirk. Suddenly he seemed to have it all. "Yes, I think he is, and that's a big part of your problem, isn't it? On High Kavalaan it's not man and woman. No, it's man and man and maybe woman, but even then she's not so terribly important. You may love Jaan, but you don't care for Garse Janacek all that damn much, do you?"

"I feel a lot of affection for-"

"Do you?"

Gwen's face went hard. "Stop it," she said.

Her voice frightened him. He drew back, suddenly and sickeningly aware of the way he had been leaning across the table, pressing, pushing, jabbing, attacking, and taunting her, he who had come to care and to help. "I'm sorry," he blurted.

Silence. She was staring at him, her lower lip trembling, while she drew herself together and gathered strength. "You're right," she finally said. "Partly, anyway. I'm not . . . well . . . not entirely happy with my lot." She gave a forced ironic chuckle. "I guess I fool myself a lot. A bad idea, fooling yourself. Everyone does it, though, everyone. I wear the jade-and-silver and tell myself I'm more than a heldwife, more than other Kavalars women. Why? Just because Jaan says so? Jaan Vikary is a good man, Dirk, really he is, in many ways the best man I have ever known. I did love him, maybe I still do. I don't know. I'm very confused right now. But whether I love him or not, I owe him. Debt and obligation, those are the Kavalars bonds. Love is only something Jaan picked up on Avalon, and I'm not quite sure he's mastered it yet, either. I would have been his teyn, if I could. But he already had a teyn. Besides, not even Jaan would go that far against the customs of his world. You heard what he said about the duels-and all because he searched some old computer banks and found out one of their Kavalars folk heroes had tits." She smiled grimly. "Imagine what would happen if he took me to teyn! He would lose everything, just everything. Ironjade is relatively tolerant, yes, but it will be centuries before any holdfast is ready for that. No woman has ever worn the iron-and-glowstone."

"Why?" Dirk said. "I don't understand. All of you keep making these comments-about breeding women and heldwives and women hiding in caves afraid to come out, all that stuff. And I keep not quite believing it. How did High Kavalaan get so twisted up anyway? What do they have against women? Why is it so critical that the founder of Ironjade was female? Lots of people are, you know."

Gwen gave him a wan smile and rubbed her temples gently with her fingertips, as if she had a headache she was hoping to massage away. "You should have let Jaan finish," she said. "Then you'd know as much as we do. He was only warming up. He hadn't even gotten to the Sorrowing Plague." She sighed. "It is all a very long story, Dirk, and right now I don't have the goddamn energy. Wait till we get back to Larteyn. I'll hunt up a copy of Jaan's thesis and you can read it all for yourself."

"All right," Dirk said. "But there are a few things I'm not going to be able to read in any thesis. A few minutes ago you said you weren't sure if you loved Jaan anymore. You certainly don't love High Kavalaan. I think you hate Garse. So why are you doing all this to yourself?"

"You have a way of asking nasty questions," she said sourly. "But before I answer, let me correct you on a few points. I may hate Garse, as you say. Sometimes I'm quite sure that I hate Garse, though it would kill Jaan to hear me say that. At other times, however- I wasn't lying before when I told you that I feel considerable affection for him. When I first arrived on High Kavalaan, I was as dewy-eyed and innocent and vulnerable as I could be. Jaan had explained everything to me beforehand, of course, very patiently, very thoroughly, and I had accepted it. I was from Avalon, after all, and you can't get more sophisticated than Avalon, can you? Not unless you're an Earther. I'd studied all the weird cultures humanity has spread among the stars, and I knew that anyone who steps into a starship has got to be prepared to adapt to widely different social systems and moralities. I knew that sexual-familial customs vary and that Avalon was not necessarily wiser than High Kavalaan in that area. I was very wise, I thought.

"But I wasn't ready for the Kavalars, oh no. As long as I live I will never forget a second of the fear and the trauma of my first day and night in the holdfasts of Ironjade, as Jaan Vikary's betheyn. Especially the first night." She laughed. "Jaan had warned me, of course, and- Hell, I just wasn't ready to be shared. What can I say? It was bad, but I lived. Garse helped. He was honestly concerned for me, and very much for Jaan. You might even say he was tender. I confided in him; he listened and cared. And the next morning the verbal abuse started. I was frightened and hurt; Jaan was baffled and gloriously angry. He threw Garse halfway across the room the first time he called me betheyn-bitch. Garse was quiet for a little while after that. He rests fairly often, but he never stops. He is truly remarkable, in a way. He would challenge and kill any Kavalar who insulted me half so badly as he does. He knows that his jokes enrage Jaan and provoke terrible quarrels-or at least they did. By now Jaan has become dulled to it all. Yet he persists. Maybe he can't help himself, or maybe he honestly loathes me, or maybe he just enjoys inflicting pain. If so, I haven't given him much joy these past few years. One of the first things I decided was that I wasn't going to let him make me cry anymore. I haven't. Even when he comes out and says something that makes me want to split his head with an axe, I just smile and grit my teeth and try to think of something unpleasant to say back to him. Once or twice I've managed to throw him off his stride. Usually he leaves me feeling like a crushed bug.

"Yet, in spite of everything, there are other moments as well. Truces, little ceasefires in our never-ending war, times of surprising warmth and compassion. Many of them at night. They always shock me when they come. They're too intense. Once, believe it or not, I told Garse I loved him. He laughed at me. He did not love me, he said loudly, rather I was cro-betheyn to him and he treated me as he was obliged to treat me by the bond that existed between us. That was the last time I even came close to crying. I fought and I fought, and I won. I did not cry. I just shouted something at him and rushed out into the corridor. We lived underground, you know. Everyone lives underground on High Kavalaan. I wasn't wearing much except my bracelet, and I ran around crazy, and finally this man tried to stop me-a drunk, an idiot, a blind man who could not see the jade-and-silver, I don't know. I was so furious I pulled his sidearm out of its holster and smashed him across the face with it, the first time I'd ever hit another human being in anger, and just then Jaan and Garse arrived. Jaan seemed calm, but he was very upset. Garse was almost happy, and spoiling for a fight. As if the man I'd overpowered hadn't been insulted enough, Garse had to tell me that I should pick up all the teeth I'd knocked out and hand them back, that I had quite enough already. They were lucky to avoid a duel over that comment."

"How the hell did you ever get involved in a situation like this, Gwen?" Dirk demanded. He was struggling to keep his voice from breaking. He was angry with her, hurt for her, and yet oddly-or perhaps not so oddly-elated. It was all true, everything Ruark had told him. The Kimdissi was her good friend and her confidant; no wonder she had sent for him. Her life was a misery, she was a slave, and he could set it right, him. "You must have had some idea what it would be like."

She shrugged. "I lied to myself," she said, "and I let Jaan lie to me, although I think he honestly believes all the lovely falsehoods he tells me. If I had it to do. over- But I don't. I was ready for him, Dirk, and I needed him, and I loved him. And he had no iron-and-fire to give me. That he had given already, so he gave me jade-and-silver, and I took it just to be near him, with only the vaguest knowledge of what it meant. I'd lost you not long before. I didn't want Jaan to go as well. So I put on the pretty little bracelet and said very loudly, 'I am more than betheyn,' as if that made a difference. Give a thing a name and it will somehow come to be. To Garse, I am Jaan's betheyn and his cro-betheyn, and that is all. The names

define the bonds and duties. What more could there possibly be? To every other Kavalair it is the same. When I try to grow, to step beyond the name, Garse is there, angry, shouting betheyn! at me. Jaan is different, only Jaan, and sometimes I can't help myself and I begin to wonder how he really feels."

Her hands came up on the tablecloth and became two small fists, side by side. "The same damn thing, Dirk. You wanted to make me into Jenny, and I saved myself by rejecting the name. But like a fool I took the jade-and-silver, and now I am heldwife and all the denials I can utter won't change that. The same damn thing!" Her voice was shrill, her fists clutched so tightly the knuckles were turning white.

"We can change it," Dirk said quickly. "Come back to me." He sounded inane, hopeful, despairing, triumphant, concerned; his tone was everything at once.

At first Gwen did not answer. Finger by finger, very slowly, she unclenched her fists and stared at her hands solemnly, breathing deeply, turning her hands over and over again as if they were some strange artifacts that had been set before her for inspection. Then she put them flat on the table and pushed, rising to her feet. "Why?" she said, and the calm control had come back to her voice. "Why, Dirk? So you can make me Jenny again? Is that why? Because I loved you once, because something may be left?"

"Yes! No, I mean. You confuse me." He rose too.

She smiled. "Ah, but I loved Jaan once also, more recently than you. And with him now there are other ties, all the obligations of jade-and-silver. With you, well, only memories, Dirk." When he did not reply- he stood and waited-Gwen started toward the door. He followed her.

The robowaiter intercepted them and blocked the way, its face a featureless metal ovoid. "The charge," it said. "I require the number of your Festival accounts."

Gwen frowned. "Larteyn billing, Ironjade 797-742-677," she snapped. "Register both meals to that number."

"Registered," the robot said as it moved out of their way. Behind them the restaurant went dark.

The Voice had their car waiting for them. Gwen told it to take them back to the airtlot, and it set off through corridors that suddenly swam with cheerful colors and happy music. "The damn computer registered tension in our voices," she said, a little angrily. "Now it's trying to cheer us up."

"It's not doing a very good job," Dirk said, but he smiled as he said it. Then, "Thank you for the meal. I converted my standards to Festival scrip before I arrived, but it didn't come to much, I'm afraid."

"Ironjade is not poor," Gwen said. "And there isn't much to pay for on Worlorn, in any case."

"Hmm. Yes. I never thought there would be, until now."

"Festival programming," Gwen said. "This is the only city that still runs that way. The others are all shut down. Once a year ai-Emerel sends a man to clear all charges from the banks. Although soon it will reach the point where the trip will cost more than he picks up."

"I'm surprised that it doesn't already."

"Voice!" she said. "How many people live in Challenge today?"

The walls answered. "Presently I have three hundred and nine legal residents and forty-two guests, including yourselves. You may, if you wish, become residents. The charge is quite reasonable."

"Three hundred nine?" Dirk said. "Where?"

"Challenge was built to hold twenty million," Gwen said. "You can hardly expect to run into them, but they're here. In the other cities as well, though not as many as in Challenge. The living is easiest here. The dying will be easy too, if the highbonds of Braith ever think to begin hunting the cities instead of the wild. That has always been Jaan's great fear."

"Who are they?" Dirk demanded, curious. "How do they live? I don't understand at all. Doesn't Challenge lose a fortune every day?"

"Yes. A fortune in energy, wasted, squandered. But that was the point of Challenge and Larteyn and the whole Festival. Waste, defiant waste, to prove that the Fringe was rich and strong, waste on a grand scale such as the manrealm had never before known, a whole planet shaped and then abandoned. You see? As for Challenge, well, if truth be known, its life is all empty motion now. It powers itself from fusion reactors and throws off the energy in fireworks no one sees. It harvests tons of food every day with its huge farming mechs, but no one eats except the handful- hermits, religious cultists, lost children turned savage, whatever dregs remain from the Festival. It still sends a boat to Musquel every day to pick up fish. There are never any fish, of course."

"The Voice doesn't rewrite the program?"

"Ah, the crux of the matter! The Voice is an idiot. It can't really think, can't program itself. Oh, yes, the Emereli wanted to impress people, and the Voice is big, to be sure. But really it's very primitive compared to the Academy computers on Avalon or the Artificial Intelligences of Old Earth. It can't think, or change very well. It does what it was told, and the Emereli told it to go on, to withstand the cold as long as it could. It will."

She looked at Dirk. "Like you," she said, "it keeps on long after its persistence has lost point and meaning, it keeps on pushing-for nothing-after everything is dead."

"Oh?" said Dirk. "But, until everything is dead, you have to push. That's the point, Gwen. There is no other way, is there? I rather admire the city, even if it is an overgrown idiot like you say."

She shook her head. "You would."

"There's more," he said. "You bury everything too soon, Gwen. Worlorn may be dying, but it isn't dead yet. And us, well, we don't have to be dead either. What you said back at the restaurant, about Jaan and me, I think you should think about it. Decide what's left, for me, for him. How heavy that bracelet weighs on your arm"-he pointed-"and what name you like best, or rather who is more likely to give you your own name. You see? Then tell me what's dead and what's alive!"

He felt very "satisfied with the little speech. Surely, he thought, she could see that he could give up Jenny and let her be Gwen far more easily than Jaantony Vikary could make her a female teyn instead of a mere betheyn. It seemed very clear. But she only looked at him, saying nothing, until they reached the airtot.

Then she got out of the vehicle. "When the four of us chose where we would live on Worlorn, Garse and Jaan voted for Larteyn and Arkin for Twelfth Dream," she said. "I voted for neither. Nor for Challenge, for all its life. I don't like living in a warren. You want to know what's dead and what's alive? Come, then, I'll show you my city."

Then they were outside once more, Gwen tight-lipped and silent behind the controls, the sudden cold of the night air all around them, Challenge's shining shaft vanishing behind. Now it was deep darkness again, as it had been on the night when the Shuddering of Forgotten Enemies had brought Dirk t'Larien to Worlorn. Only a dozen lonely stars swung through the sky, and half of those were hidden by the churning clouds. The suns had all set.

The city of the night was vast and intricate, with only a few scattered lights to pierce the darkness it was set in, as a pale jewel is set on soft black felt. Alone among the cities it stood in the wild beyond the mountainwall, and it belonged there, in the forests of chokers and ghost trees and blue widowers. From the dark of the wood, its slim white towers rose wraithlike toward the stars, linked by graceful spun bridges that glittered like frozen spiderwebs. Low domes stood lonely vigils amid a network of canals whose waters caught the tower lights and the twinkle of infrequent far-off stars, and ringing the city were a number of strange buildings that looked like thin-fleshed angular hands clutching up at the sky. The trees, such as there were, were outworld trees; there was no grass, only thick carpets of dimly glowing phosphorescent moss.

And the city had a song.

It was like no music Dirk had ever heard. It was eerie and wild and almost inhuman, and it rose and fell and shifted constantly. It was a dark symphony of the void, of starless nights and troubled dreams. It was made of moans and whispers and howls, and a strange low note that could only be the sound of sadness. For all of this, it was music.

Dirk looked at Gwen, wonder in his eyes. "How?"

She was listening as she flew, but his question tore her loose from the drifting strains, and she smiled faintly. "Darkdawn built this city, and the Darklings are a strange people. There is a gap in the mountains. Their weather wardens made the winds blow through it. Then they built the spires, and in the crest of each there is an aperture. The wind plays the city like an instrument. The same song, over and over. The weather control devices shift the winds, and with each shift, some towers sound their notes while others fall silent.

"The music-the symphony was written on Dark-dawn, centuries ago, by a composer named Lamiya-Bailis. A computer plays it, they say, by running the wind machines. The odd thing about it is that the Darklings never used computers much and have very little of the technology. Another story was popular during the days of the Festival. A legend, say. It claimed that Darkdawn was a world always perilously close to the edge of sanity, and that the music of Lamiya-Bailis, the greatest of the Darkling dreamers, pushed the whole culture over into madness and despair. In punishment, they say, her brain was kept

alive, and can now be found deep under the mountains of Worlorn, hooked up to the wind machines and playing her own masterpiece over and over, forever." She shivered. "Or at least until the atmosphere freezes. Even the weather wardens of Darkdawn can't stop that."

"It's . . ." Dirk, lost in the song, could find no words. "It fits, somehow," he finally said. "A song for Worlorn."

"It fits now," Gwen said. "It's a song of twilight and the coming of night, with no dawn again, ever. A song of endings. In the high day of the Festival the song was out of place. Kryne Lamiya-that was this city's name, Kryne Lamiya, although it was often called the Siren City, in much the same way that Larteyn was called the Firefort-well, it was never a popular place. It looks big, but it isn't really. It was built to house only a hundred thousand, and it was never more than a quarter full. Like Darkdawn itself, I suppose. How many travelers ever go to Darkdawn, right on the edge of the Great Black Sea? And how many go in winter, when the Darkdawn sky is almost totally empty, with nothing to see by but the light of a few far galaxies? Not many. It takes a peculiar sort of person for that. Here too, to love Kryne Lamiya. People said the song disturbed them. And it never stopped. The Darklings didn't even soundproof the sleeping rooms."

Dirk said nothing. He was looking at the fairy spires and listening to them sing.

"Do you want to land?" Gwen asked.

He nodded, and she spiraled down. They found an open landing slit in the side of one of the towers. Unlike the aircars in Challenge and Twelfth Dream, this one was not completely empty. Two other aircars rested there, a stub-winged red sportster and a tiny black-and-silver teardrop, both of them long abandoned. The windblown dust was thick on their hoods and canopies, and the cushions inside the sportster had gone to rot. Out of curiosity, Dirk tried them both. The sportster was dead, burned-out, its power vanished years ago. But the little teardrop still warmed under his touch, and the control panel lit up and flickered, showing that a small reserve of power was left. The huge gray manta from High Kavalaan was bigger and heavier than the two derelicts combined.

From the aircar they went out into a long gallery where gray-and-white light-murals swirled and spun in dim patterns that matched the echoing music. Then they climbed to a balcony they had spied when coming in.

Outside, the music was all around them, calling to them with unearthly voices, touching them and playing with their hair, booming and beckoning like passion-thunder. Dirk took Gwen's hand in his own and listened as he stared blindly out across the towers and domes and canals toward the forests and the mountains beyond. The music-wind seemed to pull at him as he stood there. It spoke to him softly, urging him to jump, it seemed-to end it all, all the silly and undignified and ultimately meaningless futility that he called his life.

Gwen saw it in his eyes. She squeezed his hand, and when he looked at her she said, "During the Festival, more than two hundred people committed suicide in Kryne Lamiya. Ten times the number of any other city. Despite the fact that this city had the smallest population of all."

Dirk nodded. "Yes. I can feel it. The music."

"A celebration of death," Gwen said. "Yet, you know, the Siren City itself is not dead, not like Musquel or Twelfth Dream at all. It still lives, stubbornly, if only to exalt despair and glorify the emptiness of the very life it clings to. Strange, eh?"

"Why would they build such a place? It's beautiful, but-"

"I have a theory," Gwen said. "The Darklings are black-humored nihilists, chiefly, and I think that Kryne Lamiya is their bitter joke on High Kavalaan and Wolfheim and Tober and the other worlds that pushed so hard for the Festival of the Fringe. The Darklings came, all right, and they built a city that said it was all worthless. All worthless-the Festival, human civilization, life itself. Think of it! What a trap for a smug tourist to walk into!" She threw back her head and began to laugh wildly, and Dirk briefly felt a sudden irrational fear, as if his Gwen had gone mad.

"And you wanted to live here?" he said.

Her laughter faded as abruptly as it had begun; the wind snatched it from her. Away on their right, a needle-tower sounded a brief piercing note that wavered like the wail of an animal in pain. Their own tower answered with the low mournful moan of a foghorn, lingering, lingering. The music swirled around them. Far off, Dirk thought he could hear the pounding of a single drum, short dull booms, evenly spaced.

"Yes," Gwen said. "I wanted to live here." The foghorn faded; four reedy spires across the canal, tied together by drooping bridges, began to ululate wildly, each note higher than the one preceding, until they finally climbed up into the inaudible. The drum persisted, unchanging: boom, boom, boom.

Dirk sighed. "I understand," he said, in a voice very tired. "I would live here too, I suppose, though I wonder how long I'd live if I did. Braque was a little like this, the faintest echo, mostly at night. Maybe that was why I lived there. I had gotten very weary, Gwen. Very. I guess I'd given up. In the old days, you know, I was always searching-for love, for fairy gold, for the secrets of the universe, whatever. But after you left me ... I don't know, everything went wrong, turned sour in my mouth. And when something did go right, I'd find it didn't matter, didn't make any difference. It was all empty. I tried and tried, but all I got was tired and apathetic and cynical. Maybe that was why I came here. You . . . well, I was better then, when I was with you. I hadn't given up on quite so many things. I thought that maybe, if I found you again, maybe I could find me again as well. It hasn't worked quite that way. I don't know that it's working at all."

"Listen to Lamiya-Bailis," Gwen said, "and her music will tell you that nothing works, that nothing means anything. I did want to live here', you know. I voted

. . . well, I didn't plan to vote this way, but we were talking it over when we first landed, and it just came out. It scared me. Maybe you and I are still a lot alike, Dirk. I've gotten tired too. Mostly it doesn't show. I have my work to keep me busy, and Arkin is my friend, and Jaan loves me. But then I come here . . . or sometimes I just slow down and think a bit too long, and then I wonder. It's not enough, the things I have. Not what I wanted."

She turned toward him and took his hand in both of hers. "Yes, I've thought of you. I've thought that things were better when you and I were together back on Avalon, and I've thought that maybe it was still you I loved and not Jaan, and I've thought that you and I could bring the magic back, make it all make

sense again. But don't you see? It isn't so, Dirk, and all your pushing won't make it so. Listen to the city, listen to Kryne Lamiya. There's your truth. You think about me, and I sometimes about you, only because it's dead between us. That's the only reason it seems better. Happiness yesterday and happiness tomorrow, but never today, Dirk. It can't be, because it's only an illusion after all, and illusions only look real from a distance. We're over, my dreamy lost love, over, and that's the best thing of all, because it's the only thing that makes it good."

She was weeping; slow tears moved trembling down her cheeks. Kryne Lamiya wept with her, the towers crying their lament. But it mocked her too, as if to say, Yes, I see your grief, but grief has no more meaning than anything else, pain is as empty as pleasure. The spires wailed, thin gratings laughed insanely, and the low far-off drum went: boom, boom, boom.

Again, more strongly this time, Dirk wanted to jump -off the balcony toward the pale stone and dark canals below. A dizzy fall, and then rest at last. But the city sang him for a fool: Rest? it sang, there is no rest in death. Only nothing. Nothing. Nothing. The drum, the winds, the wailings. He trembled, still holding

Gwen's hands. He looked down toward the ground below.

Something was moving down the canal. Bobbing and floating, drifting easily, coming toward him. A black barge, with a solitary pole-man. "No," he said.

Gwen blinked. "No?" she repeated.

And suddenly the words came, the words that the other Dirk t'Larien would have said to his Jenny, and the words were in his mouth, and though he was no longer quite sure that he could believe them, he found himself saying them all the same. "No!" he said, all but shouting it at the city, throwing a sudden rage back at the mocking music of Kryne Lamiya. "Damn it, Gwen, all of us have something of this city in us, yes. The test is how we meet it. All this is frightening"-he let loose of her hands and gestured out at the darkness, the sweep of his hand taking in everything-"what it says is frightening, and worse is the fear you get when part of you agrees, when you feel that it's all true, that you belong here. But what do you do about it? If you're weak, you ignore it. Pretend it doesn't exist, you know, and maybe it'll go away. Busy yourself in the daylight with trivial tasks, and never think about the darkness outside. That's the way you let it win, Gwen. In the end it swallows you and all your trivia, and you and the other fools lie to each other blithely and welcome it. You can't be like that, Gwen, you can't be. You have to try. You're an ecologist, right? What's ecology all about? Life! You have to be on the side of life, everything you are says so. This city, this damn bone-white city with its death hymn, denies everything you believe in, everything you are. If you're strong, you'll face it and fight it and call it by name. Defy it."

Gwen had stopped weeping. "It is no use," she said, shaking her head.

"You're wrong," he answered. "About this city, and about us. It's all tied up, you see? You say you want to live here? Fine! Live here! To live in this city would be a victory all in itself, a philosophical victory. But live here because you know that life itself refutes

Lamiya-Bailis, live here and laugh at this absurd music of hers, don't live here and agree with this damn wailing lie." He took her hand again.

"I don't know," she said.

"I do," he said, lying.

"Do you really think that. . . that we could make it work again? Better than before?"

"You won't be Jenny," he promised. "Never again."

"I don't know," she repeated in a low whisper.

He took her face in both hands and raised it so her eyes looked at his. He kissed her, very lightly, the barest driest touching of their lips. Kryne Lamiya moaned. The foghorn sounded deep and sorrowing around them, the distant towers screamed and keened, and the solitary drum kept up its dull, meaningless booming.

After the kiss they stood amid the music and stared at each other. "Gwen," he finally said, in a voice not one half as strong and sure as it had been just a moment before. "I don't know either, I guess. But maybe it would be worth it just to try ..."

"Maybe," she said, and her wide green eyes looked away and down again. "It would be hard, Dirk. And there's Jaan to think of, and Garse, so many problems. And we don't even know if it would be worth it. We don't know if it will make the slightest bit of difference."

"No, we don't," he said. "Lots of times in these last few years I've decided that it doesn't matter, that it's not worth trying. I don't feel good then, just tired, endlessly tired. Gwen, if we don't try, we'll never know."

She nodded. "Maybe," she said, and nothing more. The wind blew cold and strong; the music of the Darkling madness rose and fell. They went inside, then down the stairs from the balcony, past the fading, flickering walls of gray-white light, to where the solid sanity of their aircar rested, waiting to carry them back to Larteyn.

Chapter 5

They flew from the white towers of Kryne Lamiya to the fading fires of Larteyn in a lonely silence, not touching, both thinking their own thoughts. Gwen left the aircar in its usual place on the roof, and Dirk followed her downstairs to her door. "Wait," she said in a quick whisper, when he had expected her to say good night. She vanished inside; he waited, puzzled. There were noises from the other side of the door - voices-then abruptly Gwen was back, pressing a thick manuscript into his hand, an impressively heavy mass of paper hand-bound in black leather. Jaan's thesis. He had almost forgotten. "Read it," she whispered, leaning out the door. "Come up tomorrow morning, and we'll talk some more." She kissed him lightly on the cheek and closed the heavy door with a small click. Dirk stood for a moment turning the bound manuscript over in his hands, then turned toward the tubes.

He was only a few steps down the hall when he heard the first shout. Then, somehow, he could not continue; the sounds drew him back, and he stood listening at Gwen's door.

The walls were thick, and very little of what was said came through. The words and the meanings he lost entirely, but the voices themselves carried, and the tones. Gwen's voice dominated: loud, sharp-edged- at times she was shouting-close to the edge of hysteria. In his mind Dirk could see her pacing the living room before the gargoyles, the way she always paced when she was angry. Both of the Kavalars would be present, berating her-Dirk was sure he heard two other voices-one quiet and sure, without anger, questioning relentlessly. That had to be Jaan Vikary. His cadence gave him away, the rhythms of his speech distinctive even through the wall. The third voice, Garse Janacek, spoke infrequently at first, then more and more, with increasing volume and anger. After a time the quiet male voice was virtually silent, while Gwen and Garse screamed at one another. Then it said something, a sharp command. And Dirk heard a noise, a fleshy thud. A blow. Someone hitting someone, it could be nothing else.

Finally Vikary giving orders, followed by silence. The light went off inside the room.

Dirk stood quietly, holding Vikary's manuscript and wondering what to do. There did not seem to be anything he could do, except talk to Gwen the next morning and find out who had hit her, and why. It had to be Janacek, he thought.

Ignoring the tubes, he decided to walk downstairs to Ruark's rooms.

Once in bed, Dirk found he was immensely tired and badly shaken by the events of the day. So much all at once, he could hardly cope with it. The Kavalars and their mockmen, the strange bitter life Gwen lived with Vikary and Janacek, the sudden dizzy possibility of her return. Unable to sleep, he thought about it all for a long time. Ruark was already asleep; there was no one to talk to. Finally Dirk picked up the thick manuscript Gwen had given him and began to leaf through the first few pages. There was nothing like a good chunk of scholarly writing to put a man to sleep, he reflected.

Four hours and a half-dozen cups of coffee later, he put down the manuscript, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. Then he shut off the light and stared at the darkness.

Jaan Vikary's thesis-Myth and History: Origins of Holdfast Society As Based on an Interpretation of the Demonsong Cycle of Jamis-Lion Taal-was a worse indictment of his people than anything that Arkin Ruark could possibly say, Dirk thought. He had laid it all out, with sources and documentation from the computer banks on Avalon, with lengthy quotations from the poetry of Jamis-Lion Taal and even lengthier dissertations on what Jamis Taal had meant. All of the things that he and Gwen had told Dirk that morning were there, in detail. Vikary supplied theories on theories, attempted to explain everything. He even explained the mockmen, more or less. He argued that during the Time of Fire and Demons some survivors from the cities had reached the mining camps and sought shelter. Once taken in, however, they proved dangerous. Some were victims of radiation sickness; they died slowly and horribly, and possibly passed the poison on to those who nursed them. Others, seemingly healthy, lived and became part of the proto-holdfast, until they married and produced children. Then the taint of radiation showed up. It was all conjecture on Vikary's part, with not even a line or two from Jamis-Lion to support it, yet it seemed a glib and plausible rationalization of the mockman myth.

Vikary also wrote at length of the event the Kavalars called the Sorrowing Plague-and what he carefully called "the shift to contemporary Kavalars sexual-familial patterns."

According to his hypothesis, the Hrangans had returned to High Kavalaan approximately a century after their first raid. The cities they had bombed were still slag; there was no sign of new building on the part of the humans. Yet the three slaveraces they had dropped to seed the planet were nowhere in evidence: decimated, extinct. Undoubtedly the Hrangans Mind commanding concluded that some of the humans still lived. To effect a final wiping up, the Hrangans dropped plague bombs. That was Vikary's theory.

Jamis-Lion's poems had no mention of Hrangans, but many mentions of sickness. All the surviving Kavalars accounts agreed on that. There was a Sorrowing Plague, a long period when one horrible epidemic after another swept through the holdfasts. Each turn of the season brought a new and more dreadful disease-the ultimate demon-enemy, one the Kavalars could not fight or kill.

Ninety men died out of every hundred. Ninety men, and ninety-nine women.

One of the many plagues, it seemed, was female-selective. The medical specialists Vikary had consulted on Avalon had told him that, based on the meager evidence he gave them-a few ancient poems and songs-it seemed likely that the female sex hormones acted as a catalyst for the disease. Jamis-Lion Taal had written that young maids were spared the bloody wasting because of their innocence, while the rutting eyn-kethi were struck down horribly and died in shuddering convulsions. Vikary interpreted this to mean that prepubescent girls were left untouched, while sexually mature women were devastated. An entire generation was wiped out. Worse, the disease lingered; no sooner did girl children reach puberty than the plague struck. Jamis-Lion made this a truth of vast religious significance.

Some women escaped-the naturally immune. Very few at first. More later; because they lived, producing sons and daughters, many of whom were also immune, while those who did not share the resistance died at puberty. Eventually all Kavalars were immune, with rare exceptions. The Sorrowing Plague ended.

But the damage had been done. Entire holdfasts had been wiped out; those that clung to life had seen their populations decline far below the numbers necessary to maintain a viable society. And the social structure and sexual roles had been warped irrevocably away from the monogamous egalitarianism of the early Taran colonists. Generations had grown to maturity in which men outnumbered women ten to one; little girls lived all through childhood with the knowledge that puberty might mean death. It was a grim time. On that both Jaan Vikary and Jamis-Lion Taal spoke with one voice.

Jamis-Lion wrote that sin had finally passed from High Kavalaan when the eyn-kethi were safely locked away from the daylight, back in the caves from which they had issued, where their shame could not be seen. Vikary wrote that the Kavalars survivors had fought back as best they could. They no longer had the technological skills to construct airtight sterilized chambers; but no doubt rumors of such places had drifted down the years to them, and they still hoped that such places could be proof against disease. So the surviving women were secured in prisonlike hospitals deep under the ground, in the safest part of the holdfast, the farthest from the contaminated wind and rain and water. Men who had once roamed and hunted and warred with their wives by their sides now teamed with other men, both grieving for lost partners. To relieve the sexual tensions-and maintain the gene pool as best they could, if they even understood such things-the men who lived through the Sorrowing Plague made their women sexual

property of all. To insure as many children as possible, they made them perpetual breeders who lived their lives safe from danger and in constant pregnancy. The holdfasts that did not adopt such measures failed to survive; those that did passed on a cultural heritage.

Other changes took root as well. Tara had been a religious world, home of the Irish-Roman Reformed Catholic Church, and the urge to monogamy died hard. The patterns appeared in two mutated forms; the strong emotional attachments that grew up between male hunting partners became the basis for the intense total relationship of teyn-and-teyn, while those men who desired a semi-exclusive bond with a woman created betheyns by capturing females from other holdfasts. The leaders encouraged such raidings, Jaan Vikary said; new women meant new blood, more children, a larger population, and thus a better chance of survival. It was unthinkable that any man take exclusive possession of one of the eyn-kethi; but a man who could bring a woman in from outside was rewarded with honors and a seat in the councils of leadership and, perhaps most importantly, the woman herself.

These were the likely events, Vikary argued, self-evident truths that produced modern Kavalan society. Jamis-Lion Taal, wandering the face of the world many generations later, had been so much a child of his culture that he was unable to conceive of a world in which women held any status other than what he saw; and when he was forced to think otherwise by the folklore he collected, he thought the idea intolerably wicked. Thus he rewrote all the oral literature as he cast his Demonsong cycle. He transformed Kay Iron-Smith into a thundering giant of a man, made the Sorrowing Plague a ballad of eyn-kethi wickedness, and generally created the Impression that the world had always been the way he found it. Later poets built on the foundations he had laid.

The forces that had produced the holdfast society of High Kavalaan had long ago, vanished. Today, women and men numbered roughly the same, the epidemics were only grisly fables, most of the dangers of the planet's surface had been conquered. Nonetheless the holdfast-coalitions continued. The men fought duels and studied the new technology and worked on the farms and in the factories and sailed the Kavalan starships, while the eyn-kethi lived in vast subterranean barracks as sexual partners for all the men of the holdfast, laboring at whatever tasks the high-bond councils deemed safe and suitable, and having babies, though fewer now. Kavalan population was strictly controlled. Other women lived slightly freer lives under the protection of jade-and-silver, but not many. A betheyn had to come from outside the holdfast, which in practice meant that an ambitious youngster had to challenge and kill a highbond of another coalition, or lay claim to one of the eyn-kethi in an enemy holdfast and face a defender chosen in council. The second route was rarely successful; highbond councils invariably chose the holdfast's most accomplished duelist to champion the eyn-kethi. In fact, the designation was a singular honor. A man who did succeed in winning a betheyn immediately took his highnames and his place among the rulers. It was said that he had given his kethi the gift of the two bloods—the blood of death, a slain enemy, and the blood of life, a new woman. The woman enjoyed the status of jade-and-silver until such time as her highbond was killed. If he was slain by one of his own holdfast, she became an eyn-kethi; if the killer was an outsider, she passed to him.

Such was the status that Gwen Delvano had taken when she clasped Jaan's bracelet around her wrist.

Dirk lay awake for a long time, thinking of everything he had read and staring up at the ceiling, growing more and more angry the more he thought. By the time the first dawn light began to filter slowly through the window above his head, he had decided. In a sense it no longer mattered if Gwen returned to him or

not, so long as she left Vikary and Janacek and the whole sick society of High Kavalaan. But alone she could not make the break, much as she might wish to. Very well then, Arkin Ruark was right; he would help her. He would help her to be free. And afterwards there would be time to consider their own relationship.

Finally, his resolve fixed firmly in his mind, Dirk slept.

It was midday when he awoke, suddenly, with a snap of guilt. He sat up and blinked and remembered he had promised Gwen that he would come up that morning, and here the morning was gone and he had overslept. Hurriedly he rose and dressed, looked around briefly for Ruark-the Kimdissi was gone, no clue as to where or for how long-and then went up to Gwen's apartment, Vikary's thesis tucked firmly under his arm.

Garse Janacek answered his knock.

"Yes?" the red-bearded Kavalari said, frowning. He was bare to the waist, dressed only in snug-fitting black trousers and the eternal bracelet of iron-and-glowstone on his right arm. Dirk saw at a glance why Janacek did not wear the sort of V-necked shirts that Vikary seemed to favor; the left side of his chest, from his armpit to his breast, bore a long crooked scar, slick and hard.

Janacek saw his stare. "A duel that went wrong," he snapped. "I was too young. It will not happen again. Now, what do you require?"

Dirk flushed. "I want to see Gwen," he said.

"She is not here," Janacek said, his ice eyes hard and unfriendly. He started to shut the door.

"Wait." Dirk stopped the door with his hand.

"More? What is it?"

"Gwen. I was supposed to see her. Where is she?"

"In the wilderness, t'Larien. I would be pleased if you would remember that she is an ecologist, sent here by the highbonds of Ironjade to do important work. She has neglected that work for two full days to guide you hither and yon. Now, as is proper, she has returned to it. She and Arkin Ruark took their instruments and went off into the forests."

"She didn't say anything last night," Dirk insisted.

"She is not required to inform you of her plans," Janacek said. "Nor must she secure your permission for anything. There is no bond between you."

Remembering the argument he had overheard the night before, Dirk was suddenly suspicious. "Can I come in?" he said. "I want to give this back to Jaan, talk to him about it," he added, showing Garse the leather-bound thesis. Actually he hoped to look for Gwen, to find out if she was being kept from him. But it would hardly have been polite to say this; Janacek was dripping hostility, and an attempt to push past him would be very unwise.

"Jaan is not presently at home. No one is here but me. I am about to leave." He reached out and snatched the thesis from Dirk's hands. "I will take this, however. Gwen should never have given it to you."

"Hey!" Dirk said. He had an impulse. "The history was very interesting," he said suddenly. "Can I come in and talk to you about it? A second or two-I won't keep you."

Abruptly Janacek seemed to change. He smiled and gave way, beckoning Dirk into the apartment.

Dirk looked around quickly. The living room was deserted, the fireplace cold; nothing seemed amiss or out of place. The dining room, visible through an open archway, was also empty. The whole apartment was very quiet. No sign of Gwen or Jaan. From what he could see, it appeared Janacek had been telling the truth.

Uncertain, Dirk wandered across the room, pausing before the mantel and its gargoyles. Janacek watched him wordlessly, then turned and left, returning shortly. He had strapped on his mesh-steel belt with its heavy holster and was buttoning up the front of a faded black shirt when he re-entered.

"Where are you going?" Dirk asked.

"Out," Janacek replied with a brief grin. He undid the latch flap of his holster and drew out the laser pistol within, checked the power reading on the side of its butt, then reholstered and drew again-a smooth flowing motion with his right hand-and sighted down on Dirk. "Do I alarm you?" he asked.

"Yes," Dirk said. He moved away from the mantel.

Janacek's grin came back again. He slid the laser into its holster. "I am quite good with a dueling laser," he said, "though in truth my teyn is better.

Of course, I must use only my right arm. The left still pains me. The scar tissue pulls, so the chest muscles on that side cannot move so far or so easily as those on my right. Yet it matters little. I am chiefly right-handed. The right arm is always more than the left, you know." His right hand rested on the laser pistol as he spoke, and the glowstones in their black iron setting shone like dim red eyes along his forearm.

"Too bad about your injury."

"I made a mistake, t'Larien. I was too young, perhaps, but my mistake was none the less serious for my age. Such mistakes can be very grave matters, and in some ways I escaped easily." He was staring very fixedly at Dirk. "One should be careful that one does not make mistakes."

"Oh?" Dirk affected an innocent smile.

For a time Janacek did not reply. Then, finally, he said, "I think you know what I am speaking about."

"Do I?"

"Yes. You are not an unintelligent man, t'Larien. Nor am I. Your childish ruses do not amuse me. You have nothing to discuss with me, for example. You simply wanted to gain admittance to this chamber for some reasons of your own."

Dirk's smile vanished. He nodded. "All right. A lousy trick, clearly, since you saw right through it. I wanted to look for Gwen."

"I told you that she was out in the wild, at work."

"I don't believe you," Dirk said. "She would have said something to me yesterday. You're keeping me from her. Why? What's going on?"

"Nothing that need concern you," said Janacek. "Understand me, t'Larien, if you will. Perhaps to you, as to Arkin Ruark, I seem an evil man. You may think that of me. I care very little. I am not an evil man. That is why I warn you against mistakes. That is why I admitted you, though I know full well that you have nothing to say to me. For I have things to say to you."

Dirk leaned against the back of the couch and nodded. "All right, Janacek. Go ahead."

Janacek frowned. "Your problem, t'Larien, is that you know little and understand less of Jaan and myself and our world."

"I know more than you think."

"Do you? You have read Jaan's writings on the Demonsong, and no doubt people have told you things. Yet what is that? You are no Kavalat. You do not understand Kavalats, I would guess, yet you stand here and I see judgment in your eyes. By what right? Who are you to judge us? You scarcely know us. I will give you an instance. Just a second ago you called me Janacek."

"That's your name, isn't it?"

"That is part of my name, the last part, the least and smallest part of who I am. It is my chosen-name, the name of an ancient hero of the Ironjade Gathering who lived a long and fruitful life, many times honorably defending his holdfast and his kethi in highwar. I know why you use it, of course. On your world and in your naming system it is customary to address those toward whom you feel distance or hostility by the final component of their names-an intimate you would call by his first name, would you not?"

Dirk nodded. "More or less. It's not quite that simple, but you're close enough."

Janacek smiled thinly; the blue eyes seemed to sparkle. "You see, I do understand your people, only too well. I give you the benefit of your own ways-I call you t'Larien because I am hostile to you, and that is correct. You do not reciprocate, however. You address me as Janacek, without an instant of thought or concern, quite deliberately imposing your own naming system on me."

"What should I call you then? Garse?"

Janacek made a sharp, impatient gesture. "Garse is my true name, but it is not proper from you. In Kavalat custom, use of that name alone would indicate a relationship that does not in fact exist between us.

Garse is a name for my teyn and my cro-betheyn and my kethi, not for an offworlder. Properly you should call me Garse Ironjade, and my teyn Jaantony high-Ironjade. Those are traditional and correct from an

equal, a Kavalat of another house with whom I am on speaking terms. I give you the benefit of many doubts." He smiled. "Now understand, t'Larien, that I tell you this as illustration only. I care precious little whether you call me Garse or Garse Ironjade or Mister Janacek. Call me whatever makes your heart happiest, and I will take no insult. The Kimdissi Arkin Ruark has even been known to call me Garsey, yet I have resisted the urge to prick him and see if he pops.

"These matters of courtesy and address- I do not need Jaan to tell me that they are old things, legacies of days both more elaborate and more primitive, dying in this modern time. Today Kavalars sail ships from star to star, talk and trade with creatures we would once have exterminated as demons, even shape planets as we have shaped Worlorn. Old Kavalat, the language of the holdfasts for thousands of your standard years, is scarcely spoken anymore, though a few terms linger on and will continue to linger, since they name realities that can be named only clumsily or not at all in the tongues of the star travelers-realities that would soon vanish if we gave up their names, the Old Kavalat terms. Everything has changed, even we of High Kavalaan, and Jaan says that we must change still more if we are to fulfill our destiny in the histories of man. Thus the old rules of names and namebonds break down, and even highbonds grow lax in their speech, and Jaantony high-Ironjade goes about calling himself Jaan Vikary."

"If it doesn't matter," Dirk said, "then what's your point?"

"The point was illustration, t'Larien, a simple and elegant illustration of how much of your own culture you wrongly presume to be part of ours, of how you press your judgments and your values on us with every word and action. That was the point. There are more important matters in question, but the pattern is the same; you make the same mistake, a mistake you ought not make. The price might be greater than you can afford. Do you think I do not know what you are trying to do?"

"What am I trying to do?"

Janacek smiled again, his eyes small and hard, tiny wrinkles creasing the skin at their corners. "You try to take Gwen Delvano away from my teyn. Truth?" Dirk said nothing.

"It is truth," Janacek said. "And it is wrong. Understand that it will never be permitted. I will not permit it. I am bonded by iron-and-fire to Jaantony high-Ironjade, and I do not forget that. We are teyn-and-teyn, we two. No bond that you have ever known is as strong."

Dirk found himself thinking of Gwen and of a deep red teardrop full of memories and promises. He thought it a pity that he could not give the whisper-jewel to Janacek to hold for a moment, so the arrogant Kavalat could taste just how strong a bond Dirk had had with his Jenny. But such a gesture would be useless. Janacek's mind would have no resonances with the patterns esper-etched in the stone; it would be only a gem to him. "I loved Gwen," he said sharply. "I doubt that any bond of yours is more than that."

"Do you? Well, you are no Kavalat, no more than Gwen is, you do not understand the iron-and-fire. I first encountered Jaantony when each of us was quite young. I was even younger than he, in truth. He was fond of play with children younger than himself rather than his agetates, and he came frequently to our creche. I held him in great esteem from the first, as only a boy can, because he was older than me and thus closer to being a highbond, and because he led me on adventures into strange corridors and caves, and because he told fascinating stories. When I was older, I learned why he came among the younger children so often, and I was shocked and shamed. He was afraid of those as old as he, because they taunted him

and often beat him. Yet by the time I learned that, a bond existed between us. You might call it friendship, but you would be wrong to do so; you would be imposing your own concepts on our lives once more. It was more than your offworlder friendship, there was iron between us already, although we were not yet teyn-and-teyn.

"The next time that Jaan and I went exploring together-we were far beyond our holdfast, in a cavern he knew well-I surprised him and beat him until every part of his flesh was bruised and swollen. He did not visit my age-barracks for the entire winter, yet at last he returned. We had no bitterness between us. We began to roam and hunt together once more, and he told me more stories, tales of myth and history. For my part, I would assault him randomly, always catching him unready and overwhelming him. In time he began to fight back, and well. In time it became impossible for me to surprise him with my fists. One day I smuggled a knife out from Ironjade beneath my shirt, and bared it on Jaan and cut him. Then we both began to carry knives. When he reached his adolescence, the age where he would pick his chosen-names and become subject to the code duello, Jaantony was no longer a subject of easy taunt.

"He was always unpopular. You must understand that he was ever a questioning sort, given to uncomfortable inquiries and unorthodox opinions, a lover of history but openly contemptuous of religion, with much too much unhealthy interest in the offworlders who moved among us. As such, he was challenged again and again that first year he attained dueling age. He always won. When I reached adolescence a few years later, and we became teyn-and-teyn, I had scarcely anyone to fight. Jaantony had put fear in all of them, so they would not challenge us. I was very disappointed.

"Since that time we have dueled together often. We are bonded for life, and we have been through much, and I do not care to hear you spout comparisons with this meaningless 'love' you offworlders are so enchanted by, this mockman bond that comes and goes with the whim of a moment. Jaantony himself was badly corrupted by the concept during his years on Avalon, and that was in some measure my responsibility because I let him go alone. It was true that on Avalon I would have had no function and no place, yet I should have been there. I failed Jaan in that. I will never fail him again. I am his teyn and always his teyn, and I will permit no one to kill him or wound him, or twist his mind, or steal his name. These things are my bond and my duty.

"Too often these days Jaan lets his very name be threatened by such as you and Ruark. Jaan is in many ways a perverse and dangerous man, and the quirks of his mind often bring us into peril. Even his heroes-I remembered, one day, some of the stories he had told me in childhood, and was struck by the fact that all of Jaan's favorite heroes were solitary men who suffered ultimate defeat. Aryn high-Glowstone, as an instance, who dominated an entire epoch of history. He ruled by force of personality the most powerful holdfast High Kavalaan ever knew, the Glowstone Mountain; and when his enemies leagued against him in highwar, all hands raised against his, he put swords and shields on the arms of his eyn-kethi and took them to battle to swell the size of his army. His foes were broken and humiliated, and so Jaan would tell me the story. Yet later I learned that Aryn high-Glowstone won no victory at all. So many of his holdfast's eyn-kethi were slain that day that few remained to birth new warriors. Glowstone Mountain declined steadily in power and in population, and forty years after Aryn's bold stroke the Glowstones fell and highbonds from Taal and Ironjade and Bronzefist took their women and children, leaving the halls abandoned. The truth of Aryn high-Glowstone is that he was a failure and a fool, one of history's pariahs, and such are all Jaan's mad heroes."

"Aryn sounds heroic enough to me," Dirk said

sharply. "On Avalon we'd probably credit him with freeing the slaves, even if he didn't win."

Janacek glowered at him, his eyes like blue sparks set in his narrow skull. He tugged at his red beard in annoyance. "t'Larien, that comment is precisely what I warned you of. Eyn-kethi are not slaves, they are eyn-kethi. You judge wrongly and your translations are false."

"According to you," Dirk said. "According to Ruark-"

"Ruark." Janacek's tone was contemptuous. "Is the Kimdissi the source of all your information about High Kavalaan? I see that I have wasted time and words on you, t'Larien. You are already poisoned and you have no interest in understanding. You are a tool of the manipulators of Kimdiss. I will lecture you no more."

"Fine," Dirk said. "Just tell me where Gwen is."

"I told you."

"When will she be back, then?"

"Late, and then she will be tired. I am certain that she will not wish to see you."

"You are keeping her from me!"

Janacek was silent for a moment. "Yes," he said finally, his mouth grim. "It is the best course, t'Larien, for you as well as her, although I do not expect you to believe that."

"You have no right."

"In your culture. I have every right in mine. You will not be alone with her again."

"Gwen is not part of your damned sick Kavalar culture," Dirk said.

"She was not born into it, yet she took the jade-and-silver, and the name betheyn. Now she is Kavalar."

Dirk was trembling, his control gone, "What does she say to that?" he demanded, stepping closer to Janacek. "What did she say last night? Did she threaten to leave?" He jabbed the Kavalar with his finger. "Did she say she was coming with me, was that it? And you hit her and carried her off?"

Janacek frowned and brushed Dirk's hand away forcefully. "So you spy on us too. You do it poorly, t'Larien, but it is offensive nonetheless. A second mistake. The first was Jaan's, in telling you the things he did, in trusting you and lending you his protection."

"I don't need anyone's protection!"

"So you say. An idiot's misplaced pride. Only those who are strong should reject the protections given the weak; those who are truly weak need them." He turned away. "I will waste no more time with you," he said, walking toward the dining chamber. There was a thin black carrying case lying on the table. Janacek opened it, clicking back both locks simultaneously and flipping up the lid. Inside Dirk saw five rows of

the black iron banshee pins on red felt. Janacek held one up. "Are you quite certain that you do not want one of these? Korariel?" He grinned.

Dirk crossed his arms and did not dignify the question with an answer.

Janacek waited a moment for a reply. When none came, he slipped the banshee pin back into its place and closed the case. "The jelly children are not so choosy as you are," he said. "Now I must bring these to Jaan. Get out of here."

It was early afternoon. The Hub burned dimly in the center of the sky, with the scattered small lights of the four visible Trojan Suns arrayed unevenly around it. A strong wind was blowing from the east, building into a gale, it seemed. Dust swirled through the gray and scarlet alleys.

Dirk sat on one corner of the roof, his legs hanging out over the street, mulling his possibilities.

He had followed Garse Janacek up to the airtel and had seen him depart, carrying the case of banshees and flying his massive squared-off military relic in its olive-green armor. The other two aircars, the gray manta-wing and the bright yellow teardrop, were gone as well. He was stranded here in Larteyn, with no idea of where Gwen was or what they were doing to her. He wished briefly that Ruark was somewhere around.

He wished he had an aircar of his own. No doubt he could have rented one in Challenge, if he had thought of it, or even at the spacefield the night he had come in. Instead he was alone and helpless; even the sky-scots were missing. The world was red and gray and pointless. He wondered what to do.

Abruptly it came to him as he sat and thought about arrears. The Festival cities he had seen were all very different, but they had one thing in common: none of them had nearly enough landing space to accommodate an aircar population equal to their human population. Which meant the cities had to be linked "by some other kind of transportation network. Which meant that maybe he had some freedom of action after all.

He got up and went to the tubes and then down to Ruark's quarters in the base of the tower. Between two black-barked ceiling-high plants in earthenware pots, a wallscreen waited, just as he remembered seeing it, dark and unlit, as it had been since Dirk arrived; there were very few people left on Worlorn to call or be called. But no doubt there was an information circuit. He studied the double row of buttons beneath the screen, selected one, and punched. The darkness gave way to a soft blue light, and Dirk breathed a little easier; the communications grid, at least, was still operational.

One of the buttons was marked with a question mark. He tried it and was rewarded. The blue light cleared and suddenly the screen was full of small script, a hundred numbers for a hundred basic services, everything from medical aid and religious information to offplanet news.

He punched the sequence for "visitor transport." Figures flowed across the screen, and one by one Dirk's hopes withered. There were aircar rental facilities at the spacefield and at ten of the fourteen cities. All closed. The functional arrears had left Worlorn with the Festival crowds. Other cities had provided hovercraft and hydrofoil boats. No longer. At Musquel-by-the-Sea, visitors could sail upcoast and down in a genuine wind-powered ship from the Forgotten Colony. Service terminated. The intercity airbus line

was closed down, the nuclear-powered stratoliners of Tober and the helium dirigibles of Eshellin were all grounded and gone. The wallscreen showed him a map of the high-speed subways that had run from beneath the spacefield out to each of the cities, but the map was drawn all in red, and the legend below it explained that red meant "Depowered-No Longer Operational."

There was no transportation left on Worlorn except walking, it seemed. Plus whatever late visitors had brought with them.

Dirk scowled and killed the readout. He was about to turn off the screen when another thought hit him. He punched for "Library" and got a query sign and instructions. Then he coded in "jelly children" and "define." He waited.

It was a short wait and he hardly needed the vast bulk of information the library threw at him, the details of history and geography and philosophy. The critical information he took in quickly, the rest he disregarded. "Jelly children," it seemed, was a popular nickname for the followers of a pseudo-religious drug cult on the World of the Blackwine Ocean. They were so called because they spent years at a time living in the cavernous inner dampness of kilometer-long gelatinous slugs that crept with infinite slowness along the bottom of their seas. The cultists called the creatures Mothers. The Mothers fed their children with sweet hallucinogenic secretions and were believed to be semi-sentient. The belief, Dirk noted, did not stop the jelly children from killing their host when the quality of her dream secretions began to decline, which invariably happened as the slugs aged. Free of one Mother, the jelly children would then seek another.

Quickly Dirk cleared the screen of that data and consulted the library again. The World of the Black-wine Ocean had a city on Worlorn. It lay beneath an artificial lake fifty kilometers around, under the same dark, teeming waters that covered the surface of the Blackwiners' homeworld. It was called the City in the Starless Pool, and the surrounding lake was full of lifeforms brought in for the Festival of the Fringe. Including Mothers, no doubt.

Out of curiosity, Dirk found the city on a map of Worlorn. He had no way of getting there, of course. He killed the wallscreen and walked into the kitchen to mix himself a drink. As he tossed it down-it was a thick off-white milk from some Kimdissi animal, very cold, bitter but refreshing-he drummed his fingers very impatiently on the bar. The restlessness was growing in him, the urge to do something. He felt trapped here, waiting for one of the others to return, not knowing which it would be or what would happen then. It seemed as though he had been moved back and forth at the whim of others ever since he had first come down on the Shuddering of Forgotten Enemies. He had not even come of his own volition; Gwen had called him with her whisperjewel, although she had hardly seemed to welcome him when he arrived. That, at least, he had begun to understand. She was trapped in a very complex web, a web that was political and emotional at the same time; and he seemingly had been pulled in with her, to stand helpless while half-understood storms of psychosexual and cultural tension swirled all around them. He was very tired of standing helpless.

Abruptly, he thought of Kryne Lamiya. In a windswept landing deck two arrears sat abandoned. Dirk put his glass down thoughtfully, wiped his lip with the back of his hand, and went back to the wallscreen.

It was a simple matter to find the location of all aircar landing facilities in Larteyn. There were aircars atop all of the larger residential towers, and a big public garage deep within the rock beneath the city. The garage, the city directory informed him, could be reached from any of twelve undertubes spaced evenly through Larteyn; its concealed doors opened in the middle of the plunging cliff that loomed above the Common. If the Kavalars had left any aircars at all in the shell of their city, that was where he would find them.

He took the tubes down to ground level and the street. Fat Satan had climbed past zenith and was sinking toward the horizon. The glowstone streets were faded and black where the red gloom fell, but when Dirk walked through the shadows between the square ebon towers he could still see the cold fires of the city beneath his feet, the soft red glow of the rock, fading yet still persisting. In the open, he himself threw shadows, dim dark wraiths that piled clumsily atop one another-almost but not quite coinciding-and scuttled too swiftly at his heels to wake the sleeping glow-stone into life. He saw no one else during his walk, although he wondered uneasily about the Braiths, and once he passed what must have been a dwelling. It was a square building with a domed roof and black iron pillars at its door, and chained to one of those pillars was a hound that stood taller than Dirk, with bright red eyes and a long hairless face that reminded him somehow of a rat's. The creature was worrying a bone, but it stood when he walked past and growled deep in its throat. Whoever lived in that building clearly did not relish the idea of visitors.

The undertubes still functioned. He fell and daylight vanished, and he got out again in the lower passages, where Larteyn had the greatest resemblance to the holdfasts of High Kavalaan itself: echoing stone halls with wrought-iron hangings, metal doors everywhere, chambers within chambers. A fastness in stone, Ruark had said once. A fortress, no part of which could be taken easily. But now abandoned.

The garage was multileveled and dimly lit, with space enough for a thousand aircars on each of its ten levels. Dirk wandered through the dust for a half-hour before he found even one. It was useless to him. Another beast-car, fashioned of blue-black metal in the grotesque likeness of a giant bat, it was more realistic and frightening than Jaan Vikary's rather stylized manta-banshee. But it was also a burned-out hulk. One of the ornamental batwings was twisted and half melted, and of the aircar itself only the body remained. The interior appointments, the power plant, and the weaponry were all gone, and Dirk suspected the gravity grid would be missing as well, though he could not see the underside of the derelict. He walked around it once and passed on.

The second aircar he found was in even worse shape. In fact, it could hardly be called a car at all. Nothing remained but a bare metal frame and four rotting seats squatting in the midst of the tubing-a skeleton gutted of even its skin. Dirk passed by that one too.

The next two wrecks he came to were both intact, but ghosts. He could only guess that their owners had died here on Worlorn, and the arrears had waited in the depths of the city long after they had been forgotten, until all power was gone. He tried both of them, and neither responded to his touch and his tinkering.

The fifth car-by then a full hour had passed- responded much too quickly.

Thoroughly Kavalars, the car was a stubby two-seater with short triangular wings that looked even more useless than the wings on other aircars of High Kavalaan manufacture. It was all silver and white enamel,

and the metal canopy was shaped to resemble a wolf's head. Lasercannon were mounted on both sides of the fuselage. The car was not locked; Dirk pushed up on the canopy, and it swung open easily. He climbed in, snapped it shut, and looked out of the wolf's great eyes with a wry smile on his face. Then he tried the controls. The aircar still had full power.

Frowning, he killed that power again and sat back to think. He had found the transportation he was looking for, if he dared to take it. But he could not fool himself; this car was not a derelict like the others he had discovered. Its condition was too good. No doubt it belonged to one of the other Kavalars still in Larteyn. If colors meant anything-he wasn't sure about that-then it probably belonged to Lorimaar or one of the other Braiths. Taking it was not the safest course he could choose, not by a long margin.

Dirk recognized the danger and considered it. Waiting did not appeal to him, but neither did the prospect of danger. Jaan Vikary or no Jaan Vikary, stealing an aircar might just provoke the Braiths into action.

Reluctantly, he swung back the canopy and climbed out, but no sooner had he emerged than he heard the voices. He eased the aircar canopy down and it closed with a faint but audible click. Dirk crouched and made for the safety of the shadows a few meters beyond the wolf-car.

He could hear the Kavalars talking, and their footsteps noisily echoing, long before he saw them; there were only two, but they sounded like ten. By the time they had moved into the light near the aircar, Dirk was pressed flat against a niche in the garage wall, a small cavity full of hooks where tools had once been hung. He was not quite sure why he was hiding, but he was very glad of it. The things that Gwen and Jaan had told him of the other residents of Larteyn had not reassured him.

"Are you sure of all this, Bretan?" one of them, the taller, was saying as they came into sight. He was not Lorimaar, but the resemblance was striking; this man had the same imposing height, the same tan and wrinkled face. But he ran more to fat than Lorimaar high-Braith, and his hair was pure white where the other's had been mostly gray, and he had a small toothbrush of a mustache. Both he and his companion wore short white jackets over pants and shirt of chameleon cloth that had darkened to near-black in the dimness of the garage. And they both had lasers.

"Roseph would not jape me," the second Kavalars said in a voice that rasped like sandpaper. He was much shorter than the other man, close to Dirk's own height, and younger as well, very lean. His jacket had the sleeves cut off to display powerful brown arms and a thick iron-and-glowstone armlet. As he moved to the aircar, he came full into the light for an instant and seemed to stare at the darkness where Dirk was hidden. He had only half a face; the rest was all twitching scar tissue. His left "eye" moved restlessly as his face turned, and Dirk saw the telltale fire: a glowstone set in an empty socket.

"How do you know this?" the older man said as the two paused briefly by the side of the wolf-car.

"Roseph is fond of japes."

"I am not fond of japes," said the other, the one who had been called Bretan. "Roseph might jape you, or Lorimaar, or even Pyr, but he dare not jape me." His voice was horribly unpleasant; there was a grating rawness to it that offended the ear, but with the scars as thick as they were up and down his neck, Dirk found it surprising that the man could talk at all.

The taller Kavalat pushed up against the side of the wolf's head, but the canopy did not lift. "Well, if this is truth, then we must hurry," he said querulously. "The lock, Bretan, the lock!"

One-eyed Bretan made an odd noise partway between a grunt and a growl. He tried the canopy himself. "My teyn," he rasped. "I left the head slightly ajar ... I ... it only took a moment to come up and find you."

In the shadows Dirk pressed back hard against the wall, and the hooks dug painfully into his back between the shoulder blades. Bretan frowned and knelt, while his older companion stood and looked puzzled.

Then suddenly the Braith was standing again, and his laser pistol was snug in his right hand, trained on Dirk. His glowstone eye smoldered faintly. "Come out and let us discover what you are," he announced. "The trail you left in the dust is very plain to see."

Dirk, silent, raised his hands above his head and emerged.

"A mockman!" the taller Kavalat said. "Down here!"

"No," Dirk said carefully. "Dirk t'Larien."

The tall one ignored him. "This is rare good fortune," he said to his companion with the laser. "Those jelly men of Roseph's would have been poor prey at best. This one looks fit."

His young teyn made the odd noise again, and the left side of his face twitched. But his laser hand was quite steady. "No," he told the other Braith. "Sadly, I do not think he is ours to hunt. This can only be the one that Lorimaar spoke of." He slid his laser pistol back into his holster and nodded at Dirk, a very slight and deliberate motion, more a shifting of his shoulders than of his head. "You are grossly careless. The canopy locks automatically when full-closed. It may be opened from the inside, but-

"I realize that now," Dirk said. He lowered his hands. "I was only looking for an abandoned car. I needed transportation."

"So you sought to steal our aircar."

"No."

"Yes." The Kavalat's voice made every word a painful effort. "You are korariel of Ironjade?"

Dirk hesitated, his denial caught in his throat. Either answer seemed likely to get him in trouble.

"You have no answer to that?" said the scarred one.

"Bretan," the other cautioned. "The mockman's words are no matter to us. If Jaantony high-Ironjade names him korariel, then such is truth. Such animals have no voice about their status. Whatever he might say cannot lift the name, so the reality is the same regardless. If we slay him, we have stolen Ironjade property and they will surely issue challenge."

"I urge you to consider the possibilities, Chell," Bretan said. "This one, this Dirk t'Larien, he can be man or mockman, korariel of Ironjade or not. Truth?"

"Truth. But he is no true man. Listen to me, my teyn. You are young, but I know of these things from kethi long dead."

"Consider nonetheless. If he is mockman and the Ironjades name him korariel, then he is korariel whether he admits it or no. But if that is truth, Chell, then you and I must go against the Ironjades in duel. He was trying to steal from us, remember. If he is Ironjade property, then that is an Ironjade theft."

The big white-haired man nodded slowly, reluctantly.

"If he is mockman but not korariel then we have no problem," Bretan continued, "since then he may be hunted. And what if he is a true man, human as a highbond, and no mockman at all?"

Chell was much slower than his teyn. The older Kavalar frowned thoughtfully and said, "Well, he is no female, so he cannot be owned. But if he is human, he must have a man's rights and a man's name."

"Truth," Bretan agreed. "But he cannot be korariel, so his crime would be his alone. I would duel him, not Jaantony high-Ironjade." The Braith gave his strange grunt-growl again.

Chell was nodding, and Dirk was almost numb. The younger of the two hunters seemed to have worked things out with a nasty precision. Dirk had told both Vikary and Janacek in no uncertain terms that he rejected the tainted shield of their protection. At the time, it had been an easy enough thing to do. On sane worlds like Avalon it would unquestionably have been the right thing as well. On Worlorn, things were not quite so clear.

"Where shall we take him?" Chell said. The two Braiths spoke as if Dirk had no more volition than their aircar.

"We must take him to Jaantony high-Ironjade and his *teyn*," Bretan said in his sandpaper growl. "I know their tower by sight."

Briefly Dirk considered running. It did not seem feasible. There were two of them, with sidearms and even an aircar. He would not get far.

"I'll come," he said when they started toward him. "I can show you the way." It seemed that he would be given some time to think, in any event; the Braiths did not seem to know that Vikary and Janacek were already out at the City of the Starless Pool, no doubt trying to protect the hapless jelly children from the other hunters. "Show us, then," Chell said. And Dirk, not knowing what else to do, led them toward the undertubes. On the way up he reflected bitterly that all this had come about because he was tired of waiting. And now, it seemed, he would wait after all.

Chapter 6

At first, the waiting was sheer hell.

They took him to the airtight on top of the empty tower after they discovered that the Ironjades were not to be found, and they forced him to sit in a corner of the windswept roof. The panic was rising in him by then, and his stomach was a painful knot. "Bretan," he began, in a voice laced by hysteria, but the Kavalars only turned on him and delivered a stinging open-handed blow across the mouth.

"I am not 'Bretan' to you," he said. "Call me Bretan Braith if you must address me, mockman."

After that, Dirk was silent. The broken Wheel of Fire limped oh-so-slowly across the sky of Worlorn, and as he watched it crawl, it seemed to Dirk that he was very close to a breaking point. Everything that had happened to him seemed unreal, and the Braiths and the events of the afternoon were the least real of all, and he wondered what would happen if he were to suddenly leap to his feet and vault over the edge of the roof into the street. He would fall and fall, he thought, as one does in a dream, but when he smashed on the dark glowstone blocks below there would be no pain, only the shock of a sudden awakening. And he would find himself in his bed on Braque, drenched with sweat and laughing at the absurdities of his nightmare.

He played with that thought and others like it for a time that seemed like hours, but when he looked up at last, Fat Satan had hardly sunk at all. He began to tremble then; the cold, he told himself, the cold Worlorn wind, but he knew that it was not the cold, and the more he fought to control it the more he shook, until the Kavalars looked at him strangely. And still the waiting went on.

And finally the shakes ran their course, as had the thoughts of suicide and the panic before them, and an odd sort of calm swept over him. He found himself thinking again, but thinking of nonsensical things: speculating idly-as if he were soon going to place a wager-on whether the gray manta or the military flyer would return first, on how Jaan or Garse would fare in a duel with one-eyed Bretan, on what had happened to the jelly children in the distant Blackwiner city. Such matters seemed terribly important, though Dirk didn't know why.

Then he began to watch his captors. That was the most interesting game of all, and it served to pass the time as well as any other. As he watched, he noticed things.

The two Kavalars had hardly spoken since they escorted him up to the rooftop. Chell, the tall one, sat on the low wall that surrounded the airtight only a meter away from Dirk, and when Dirk began to study him, he saw that he was quite an old man indeed. The resemblance to Lorimaar high-Braith was very deceptive. Although Chell walked and dressed like a younger man, he was at least twenty years senior to Lorimaar, Dirk guessed. Seated, his years weighed on

him heavily. A distinct paunch bulged over the soft-shining metal of his mesh-steel belt, and his wrinkles were carved very deep into his worn brown face, and Dirk saw blue veins and splotches of grayish-pink skin on the back of Chell's hands as they rested on his knees. The long useless wait for the Ironjades' return had touched him too, and it was more than boredom. His cheeks seemed to sag, and his wide shoulders had unconsciously fallen into a tired slouch.

He moved once, sighing, and his hands came off his knees and twined together, and he stretched. That was when Dirk saw his armlets. The right arm was iron-and-glowstone, twin to the one displayed so proudly by one-eyed Bretan, and the left was silver. But the jade was missing. It had been there once, but the stones had been torn from their settings, and now the silver bracelet was riddled by holes.

While weary old Chell-it seemed suddenly hard for Dirk to see him as the menacing martial figure he had been just a short time ago-sat and waited for something to happen, Bretan (or Bretan Braith, as he demanded he be called) paced the hours away. He was all restless energy, worse than anyone that Dirk had ever known, even Jenny, who had been quite a pacer in her time. He kept his hands deep in the slit pockets of his short white jacket and walked back and forth across the rooftop, back and forth, back and forth. Every third trip or so he would glance up impatiently, as if he were reproaching the twilight sky because it had not yet yielded up Jaan Vikary to him.

They were a strange pair, Dirk decided as he watched them. Bretan Braith was as young as Chell was old-surely no older than Garse Janacek and probably younger than Gwen and Jaan or himself. How had he come to be *teyn* to a Kavalat so many years his senior? He was no high, either, he had given no *betheyn* to Braith; his left arm, covered by fine reddish hairs that glinted now and then when he walked very close and let them catch the sunlight, had no bracelet of jade-and-silver.

His face, his strange half-face, was ugly beyond anything that Dirk had ever seen, but as the day waned and false dusk became real, he found himself getting used to it. When Bretan Braith paced in one direction, he looked utterly normal: a whip-lean youth, full of nervous energy held tightly in check, so tightly that Bretan almost seemed to crackle. His face on that side was unlined and serene; short black curls pressed tightly around his ear and a few ringlets dropped to his shoulder, but he had no hint of a beard. Even his eyebrow was only a faint line above a wide green eye. He appeared almost innocent.

Then, pacing, he would reach the edge of the roof and turn back the way he had come, and everything would be changed. The left side of his face was inhuman, a landscape of twisted plains and angles that no face ought to have. The flesh was seamed in a half-dozen places, and elsewhere it was shiny-slick as enamel. On this side, Bretan had no hair whatsoever, and no ear-only a hole-and the left half of his nose was a small piece of flesh-colored plastic. His mouth was a lipless slash, and worst of all, it moved. He had a twitch, a grotesque tic, and it touched the left corner of his mouth at intervals and rippled up his bare scalp over the hills of scar tissue.

In the daylight the Braith's glowstone eye was as dark as a piece of obsidian. But slowly night was coming, the Helleye sank, and the fires were stirring in his socket. At full darkness, Bretan would be the Helleye, not Worlorn's tired supergiant of a sun; the glowstone would burn a steady, unwinking red, and the half-face around it would become a black travesty of a skull, a fit home for an eye such as that.

It all seemed very terrifying until you remembered -as Dirk remembered-that it was all quite deliberate. Bretan Braith had not been forced to have a glowstone for an eye; he had chosen it, for his own reasons, and those reasons were not hard to comprehend.

Dirk's mind raced back to the earlier part of the afternoon and the conversation by the wolf's-head air-car. Bretan was quick and shrewd, no doubt about that, but Chell might easily be in the early years of senility. He had been painfully slow to grasp anything, and his young *teyn* had led him by the hand at every point, Dirk recalled. Suddenly the two Braiths seemed much less fearful, and Dirk could only wonder why he had ever been so terrified of them. They were almost amusing. Whatever Jaan Vikary might say when he returned from the City in the Starless Pool, surely nothing could happen; there was no real danger from such as these.

As if to underline the point, Chell began to mumble, talking to himself without realizing it, and Dirk glanced over and tried to hear. The old man jiggled a little as he spoke, his eyes vacantly staring. His words made no sense at all. It took Dirk several minutes to think things through, but he did, and it finally dawned on him that Chell was speaking in Old Kavalan. A tongue that evolved on High Kavalaan during the long centuries of interregnum, when the surviving Kavalans had no contact with other human worlds, it was a language that was quickly melting back into standard Terran, though enriching the mother language with words that had no equivalents. Hardly anyone spoke Old Kavalan anymore, Garse Janacek had told him, and yet here was Chell, an elderly man from the most traditional of the holdfast-coalitions, mumbling things he had no doubt heard in his youth.

And so too Bretan, who slapped Dirk soundly because he used the wrong form of address, a form permitted only to *kethi*. Another dying custom, Garse had said; even the highbonds were growing lax. But not Bretan Braith, young and not high at all, who clung to traditions that men generations older than himself had already discarded as dysfunctional.

Dirk almost felt sorry for them. They were misfits, he decided, more outcast and more alone than Dirk himself, worldless in a sense, because High Kavalaan had moved beyond them and could be *their* world no longer. No wonder they came to Worlorn; they belonged here. They and all their ways were dying.

Bretan in particular was a figure of pity, Bretan who tried so hard to be a figure of fear. He was young, perhaps the last true believer, and he might live to see a time when no one felt as he did. Was that why he was *teyn* to Chell? Because his peers rejected him and his old man's values? Probably, Dirk decided, and that was grim and sad.

One yellow sun still glinted in the west. The Hub was a vague red memory on the horizon, and Dirk was thoughtful and in control, beyond all fear, when they heard the aircars approach.

Bretan Braith froze and looked up, and his hands came out of his pockets. One of them came to rest, almost automatically, on the holster of his laser pistol. Chell, blinking, got slowly to his feet and suddenly seemed to shed a decade. Dirk rose as well.

The cars came in. Two of them together, the gray car and the olive-green one, flying with an almost military precision side by side.

"Come here," Bretan rasped, and Dirk walked over to him, and Chell joined them so that the three were standing together, with Dirk in the center like a prisoner. The wind bit at him. All around, the glowstones of the city Larteyn were radiant and bloody, and Bretan's eye-so close-shone savagely in its scarred nesting place. The twitching had stopped, for some reason; his face was very still.

Jaan Vikary hovered the gray manta and let it float gently down, then vaulted over the side and came to them with quick strides. The square and ugly military machine, roofed over and armored so the pilot was not visible, landed almost simultaneously. A thick metal door swung open in its side, and Garse Janacek emerged, ducking his head a trifle and looking around to see what was the problem. He saw, straightened, and slammed the door with a resounding *clang*, then came over to stand at Vikary's right arm.

Vikary greeted Dirk first, with a curt nod and a vague smile. Then he looked at Chell. "Chell Nim Coldwind fre-Braith Daveson," he said formally. "Honor to your holdfast, honor to your *teyn*."

"And to yours," the old Braith said. "My new *teyn* guards my side, and you know him not." He indicated Bretan.

Jaan turned, weighed the scarred youth quickly with his eyes. "I am Jaan Vikary," he said, "of the Ironjade Gathering."

Bretan made his noise, his peculiar noise. There was an awkward silence.

"More properly," Janacek said, "my *teyn* is Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade Vikary. And I am Garse Ironjade Janacek."

Now Bretan responded. "Honor to your holdfast, honor to your *teyn*. I am Bretan Braith Lantry."

"I would never have known," Janacek said with the barest trace of a smile. "We have heard of you."

Jaan Vikary threw him a warning glance. There seemed to be something wrong with Jaan's face. At first Dirk thought it was a trick of the light-darkness was coming fast now-but then he saw that Vikary's jaw was slightly swollen on one side, giving his profile a puffed look.

"We come to you in high grievance," said Bretan Braith Lantry.

Vikary looked at Chell. "This is so?"

"It is so, Jaantony high-Ironjade."

"I am sorry we must quarrel," Vikary replied. "What is the problem?"

"We must question you," Bretan said. He put his hand on Dirk's shoulder. "This one, Jaantony high-Ironjade. Tell us, is he *korariel* of Ironjade, or no?"

Now Garse Janacek grinned openly and his hard blue eyes met Dirk's, laughing just a little in their icy depths, as if to say, Well, well, what have you done now?

Jaan Vikary only frowned. "Why?"

"Does your truth depend on our reasons, high-bond?" Bretan asked harshly. His scarred cheek twitched violently.

Vikary looked at Dirk. Clearly he was not pleased.

"You have no cause to delay or deny us your answer, Jaantony high-Ironjade," Chell Daveson said. "The truth is yes or the truth is no; there cannot be more to it than that." The old man's voice was quite even; he at least had no nervousness to conceal, and his code dictated each word that he would say.

"Once you were correct, Chell fre-Braith," Vikary began. "In the old days of the holdfasts, truth was a simple matter, but these are new times and full of new things. We are a people of many worlds now, not simply of one, and so our truths are more complex."

"No," said Chell. "This mockman is *korariel* or this mockman is not *korariel*. That is not complex."

"My *teyn* Chell speaks the truth," Bretan added. "The question I have put to you is quite simple, high-bond. I demand your answer."

Vikary would not be pushed. "Dirk t'Larien is a man from the distant world of Avalon, far within the Tempter's Veil, a human world where I once studied. I did name him *korariel*, to give him my protection and the protection of Ironjade against those who would do him harm. But I protect him as a friend, as I would protect a brother in Ironjade, as a *teyn* protects a *teyn*. He is not my property. I make no claim to own him. Do you understand?"

Chell did not. The old man pressed his lips together beneath his little stiff mustache and mumbled something in Old Kavalan. Then he spoke aloud. Too loud, in fact, almost shouting. "What is this nonsense? Your *teyn* is Garse Ironjade, not this strange one. How can you shield him as a *teyn*? Is he of Ironjade? He is not even armed! Is he a man at all? Why, if he is, he cannot be *korariel*; and if he is not and he is *korariel*, then you must own him. I do not hear any sense in your mockman words."

"I am sorry of that, Chell fre-Braith," Vikary said, "but it is your ears that fail, and not my words. I try to do you honor, but you do not make it easy."

"You jape me!" Chell said, accusingly.

"No."

"You do!"

Bretan Braith spoke then, and his voice had none of Chell's anger, but it was very hard. "Dirk t'Larien, as he calls himself and you call him, has done us wrong. This is the heart of the matter, Jaantony high-Ironjade. He has laid hands upon the property of Braith without any word of Braith permission. Now, who pays for this? If he is a mockman and *korariel* to you, then here and now I issue challenge. Ironjade has done wrong to Braith. If he is not *korariel*, then, well..." He stopped.

"I see," Jaan Vikary said. "Dirk?"

"For one thing, all I did was sit in the damned aircar for a second," Dirk said uneasily. "I was looking for a derelict, an abandoned car still in working order. Gwen and I found one like that in Kryne Lamiya, and I thought maybe I could find another."

Vikary shrugged and looked at the two Braiths. "It seems that small wrong has been done, if any. Nothing was taken."

"Our car was *touched!*" old Chell bellowed. "By him, by a mockman; he had no right! Small wrong, you call this? He might have flown it off. Would you have me close my eyes like a mockman and be thankful he did so little?" He turned to Bretan, his *teyn*. "The Ironjades jape us, insult us," he said. "Perhaps they are not true men, but mockmen themselves. They are full of mockman words."

Garse Janacek responded immediately. "I am *teyn* to Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade, and I vouch for him. He is no mockman." The words came quickly, a rote formula.

From the way that Janacek then looked toward Vikary, it seemed clear to Dirk that he expected his *teyn* to repeat the same words. Instead Jaan shook his head and said, "Ah, Chell. There are no mockmen."

He sounded immensely tired, and there was a slump to his broad shoulders.

The tall, elderly Braith looked as though Jaan had struck him. Again he muttered low hoarse words in Old Kavalat.

"This cannot go on," Bretan Braith said. "We get nowhere. Did you name this man *korariel*, Jaantony high-Ironjade?"

"I did."

"I rejected the name," Dirk said quietly. He felt compelled to, and the time seemed right. Bretan half turned and glared at him, and the Braith's green eye seemed to have as much fire in it as its glowstone counterpart.

"He rejected only the suggestion of property," Vikary said very quickly. "My friend asserted his humanity, but he still wears the shield of my protection."

Garse Janacek grinned and shook his head. "No, Jaan. You were not home this morning. T'Larien wants none of our protection, either. He said so."

Vikary looked at him, furious. "Garse! This is no time for jokes."

"I do not joke," said Janacek.

"It's true," Dirk admitted. "I said I could take care of myself."

"Dirk, you do not know what you are saying!" Vikary said.

"For a change, I think I do."

Bretan Braith Lantry made his noise, quite loudly and suddenly, while Dirk and the two Ironjades argued and his *teyn* Chell stood stiff with fury. "Silence," the sandpaper voice demanded, and it got it. "This is of no consequence. Things are the same. You say he is human, Ironjade. If so, he cannot be *korariel* and you cannot protect him. If he wants it or no, you cannot protect him. My *kethi* will see that you do not." He spun on his heel to face Dirk full front. "I challenge you, Dirk t'Larien." Everyone was quiet. Larteyn smoldered all around, and the wind was very cold. "I meant no insult," Dirk said, remembering words that the Ironjades had used at other times. "Am I allowed to apologize, or what?" He offered his palms to Bretan Braith, up and open and empty.

The scarred face twitched. "Insult was taken."

"You must duel him," Janacek said.

Dirk's palms sank slowly. At his side they became fists. He said nothing.

Jaan Vikary was staring at the ground mournfully, but Janacek was still animated. "Dirk t'Larien knows nothing of the dueling customs," he told the two Braiths. "Such customs do not prevail on Avalon. Will you allow me to instruct him?"

Bretan Braith nodded, the same curiously awkward motion of head and shoulders that Dirk had noticed that afternoon in the garage. Chell did not even seem to hear; the old Braith was still facing Vikary, mumbling and glaring.

"There are four choices to make, t'Larien," Janacek said to Dirk. "As challenged, you make the first. I urge you to make the choice of weapons, and to choose blades." . "Blades," Dirk said softly.

"I make the choice of mode," Bretan rasped, "and I choose the death-square."

Janacek nodded. "You have the third choice also, t'Larien. Since you have no *teyn*, the choice of numbers is dictated. It must be singles. You may say that, or you may choose the place."

"Old Earth?" Dirk said hopefully.

Janacek grinned. "No. This world only, I fear. Other choices are not legal." Dirk shrugged. "Here, then."

"I make the choice of numbers," Bretan said. It was fully dark now, with only the thin scattering of outworld stars to light the black sky above. The Braith's eye flamed, and strange reflected light glistened wetly on his scars. "I choose singles, as it must be."

"It is set then," Janacek said. "You two must agree on an arbiter, and then ..."

Jaan Vikary looked up. His features were dim and shadowy, with only the pale light of the glowstones to shine on them, but his swollen jaw cast an odd silhouette. "Chell," he said very quietly, in a deliberate and even tone.

"Yes," the old Braith replied.

"You are a fool to believe in mockmen," Vikary told him. "All of you who believe such are fools."

Dirk was still facing Bretan Braith when Vikary spoke. The scarred face twitched once, twice, a third time.

Chell sounded as if he were in a trance. "Insult is taken, Jaantony high-Ironjade, false Kavalara, mockman. I issue challenge."

Bretan whirled and tried to shout. His voice was not capable of it, and he sputtered and choked instead. "You ... duel breaker! Ironjade ... I..."

"It is within the code," Vikary replied halfheartedly. "Though perhaps, if Bretan Braith could overlook the small trespass of an ignorant offworlder, then I might find it in myself to beg forgiveness from Chell fre-Braith."

"No," Janacek said darkly. "Begging has no honor."

"No," Bretan echoed. His face *was* a skull now. His jewel-eye gleamed and his cheek was twisted in fury. "I have bent as far as I may bend for you, false Kavalat. I will not make jape of all the wisdom of my holdfast. My *teyn* was more right than I. In truth, I was bitter wrong to even try to avoid duel with you, liar. Mockman. There was great shame in it. But now I will be clean. We will kill you, Chell and I. We will kill all three of you."

"Perhaps that is truth," Vikary said. "It will soon be done, and then we will see."

"And your *betheyn-bitch* too," Bretan said. He could not shout; his voice broke when he tried. So he spoke as low as ever, and the rawness caught in his throat, and he could not be held. "When we have done with you, we will wake our hounds and hunt her and her fat Kimdissi through the forests they know so well."

Jaan Vikary ignored him. "I am challenged," he said to Chell fre-Braith. "The first of the four choices is mine. I make the choice of numbers. We will fight *teyned*."

"I make the choice of weapons," Chell replied. "I choose sidearms."

"I make the choice of mode," said Vikary. "I choose the death-square."

"Last the choice of place," Chell said. "Here, then."

"The arbiter will chalk only one square," Janacek said. Of the five men on the roof, only he was still smiling. "We need an arbiter still. The same for both duels?"

"One man will do," Chell said. "I suggest Lorimaar high-Braith."

"No," said Janacek. "He came to us in high grievance only yesterday. Kirak Redsteel Cavis."

"No," Bretan said. "He writes fair poetry, but I have no other use for Kirak Redsteel."

"There are two of the Shanagate Holding," Janacek said. "I am not certain of their names."

"We would prefer a Braith," Bretan said, twitching. "A Braith will rule well, uphold all the honor of the code."

Janacek glanced at Vikary; Vikary shrugged. "Agreed," Janacek said, facing Bretan once more. "A Braith, then. Pyr Braith Oryan."

"Not Pyr Braith," Bretan said.

"You are not easy to please," Janacek said dryly. "He is one of your *kethi*."

"I have had frictions with Pyr Braith," Bretan said.

"A highbond would make a better choice," old Chell said. "A man of stature and wisdom. Roseph Lant Banshee high-Braith Kelcek."

Janacek shrugged. "Agreed."

"I will ask him," said Chell. The others nodded.

"Tomorrow, then," said Janacek.

"All is done," Chell said.

And while Dirk stood and watched, feeling lost and out of place, the four Kavalars took their farewell. And strangely, before parting, each of them kissed his two enemies lightly on the lips.

And Bretan Braith Lantry, scarred and one-eyed, his lip half gone-Bretan Braith Lantry kissed Dirk.

When the Braiths had gone, the others went downstairs. Vikary opened the door to his apartment and turned on the lights. Then, in methodical silence, he began to build a fire in the great hearth beneath the mantel, taking logs of twisted black wood from a concealed storage cabinet in a nearby wall. Dirk sat on one end of the couch frowning. Garse Janacek sat on the other end with a vague smile on his face, his fingers tugging absently at the orange-red hairs of his beard. No one spoke.

The fire woke to blazing life, orange and blue-tipped tongues of flame licking around the logs, and Dirk felt the sudden heat on his face and hands. A scent like cinnamon filled the room. Vikary stood up and left.

He came back with three glasses, brandy snifters as black as obsidian. A bottle was under his arm. He handed one glass to Dirk and one to Garse, put the third down on a nearby table, and yanked the cork with his teeth. The wine within was a deep red in color, very pungent. Vikary poured all three glasses very full, and Dirk passed his under his nose. The vapors burned, but he found them oddly pleasant.

"Now," Vikary said, before any of them had tasted the wine. He had set down the bottle and lifted his own glass. "Now I am going to ask something very difficult of both of you. I am going to ask each of you to go beyond his own little culture for a time, and be something he has not been before, something strange to him. Garse, I ask you-for the good of each of us- to be friend to Dirk t'Larien. There is no word for it in Old Kavalars, I know. There is no need of such on High Kavalaan, where a man has his holdfast and his *kethi* and most of all his *teyn*. But we are all on Worlorn, and tomorrow we duel. Perhaps we do not duel all together, yet we have common enemies. So I ask you, as my *teyn*, to take the name and namebonds of friend with t'Larien."

"You ask a good deal of me," Janacek replied, holding his wine in front of his face and watching the flames dance in the black glass. "T'Larien has spied upon us, has attempted to steal my *cro-betheyn* and your name, and now has involved us in his quarrel with Bretan Braith. I am tempted to issue challenge against him myself for all he has done. And you, my *teyn*, you ask me to take the bond of friend instead."

"I do," Vikary said.

Janacek looked at Dirk, then tasted his wine. "You are my *teyn*," he said. "I yield to your wishes. What obligations must I fulfill in the namebond of friend?"

"Treat a friend as you would a *keth*" Vikary said. He turned slightly to face Dirk. "And you, t'Larien, you have been the cause of very great trouble, but I am not sure how much of it, if any, you must truly bear the weight for. I ask something of you also. To be holdfast-brother, for a time, to Garse Ironjade Janacek."

Dirk never got the chance to respond; Janacek beat him to it. "You cannot do that. Who is he, this t'Larien? How can you think him worthy, bring him into Ironjade? He will be false, Jaan. He will not keep the bonds, will not defend the holdfast, will not return with us to the Gathering. I protest this."

"If he accepts, I think he will keep the bonds for a time," Vikary said.

"For a time? *Kethi* are linked forever!"

"Then this will be a new thing, a new sort of *keth*, a friend for a time."

"It is more than new," said Janacek. "I will not allow it."

"Garse," said Jaan Vikary, "Dirk t'Larien is now your friend. Or have you forgotten so soon? You do wrong to try to block my offer. You break the bonds that you have just taken. You would not act such to a *keth*."

"You would not be inviting a *keth* to be a *keth*," Janacek grumbled. "He would be already, so the whole thing has no sense to it. He is an outbonder. The high-bond council would rebuke you, Jaan. This is wrong, clearly."

"The highbond council is seated on High Kavalaan, and this is Worlorn," Vikary said. "Only you are here to speak for Ironjade. Will you hurt your friend?"

Janacek did not reply.

Vikary turned again to Dirk. "Well, t'Larien?"

"I don't know," Dirk said. "I think I know what it would mean, to be a holdfast-brother, and I suppose that I appreciate the honor, or whatever. But we have a lot of things between us, Jaan."

"You are speaking of Gwen," Vikary said. "She is indeed between us. But Dirk, I am asking you to be a new and special sort of holdfast-brother. Only for so long as you are on Worlorn, and only to Garse, not to myself or any other Ironjade. Do you understand?"

"Yes. That makes it easier." He glanced at Janacek. "Even with Garse, though, I've got problems. He was the one who tried to make property of me, and just now he wasn't exactly trying to get me *out* of that duel."

"I spoke only truth," Janacek said, but Vikary waved him quiet.

"Those things I could forgive, I guess," Dirk said. "But not the business with Gwen."

"That matter will be resolved by myself and you and Gwen Delvano," Vikary said calmly. "Garse has no voice in it, though he may tell you that he has."

"She is my *cro-betheyn*," Garse complained. "I have a right to speak and act. I have an obligation."

"I'm talking about last night," Dirk said. "I was at the door. I heard. Janacek hit her, and since then the two of you have had her locked up away from me."

Vikary smiled. "He hit her?"

Dirk nodded. "I heard it."

"You heard an argument and a blow, of that I have no doubt," Vikary said. He touched his swollen jaw. "How do you think *this* transpired?"

Dirk stared, and suddenly felt incredibly dense. "I ... I thought ... I don't know. The jelly children . . ."

"Garse hit *me*, not Gwen," Vikary said.

"I would do it again," Janacek added in a surly voice.

"But," said Dirk, "but then, what was going on? Last night? This morning?"

Janacek rose and walked to Dirk's end of the couch to loom over him. "Friend Dirk," he said in slightly venomous tones, "this morning I told you the truth. Gwen went out with Arkin Ruark, to work. The Kimdissi had been calling for her all throughout yesterday. He was most frantic. The tale he told to me was that a column of armor-bugs had begun to migrate, undoubtedly in response to the growing cold. This is said to be very rare even on Eshellin. On Worlorn, of course, such an event is unique and cannot be recreated, and Ruark felt that it had to be studied at once. *Now* do you comprehend, my *friend* Dirk t'Larien, *now*?"

"Uh," said Dirk. "She would have said something."

Janacek returned to his seat with his gaunt hatchet face screwed up in a scowl. "My friend calls me a liar," he said.

"Garse speaks the truth," Vikary said. "Gwen said she would leave word for you, a note or a tape. Perhaps in the excitement of her preparation she forgot. Such things happen. She is very involved in her work, Dirk. She is a good ecologist."

Dirk looked at Garse Janacek. "Hold on," he said. "This morning you *said* you were keeping her from me. You admitted it."

Vikary looked puzzled also. "Garse?"

"Truth," Janacek said grudgingly. "He came up and pressed and pressed, forced his way inside with a transparent lie. More, he clearly wanted to believe that Gwen was being held captive by the foul Ironjades. I doubt that he would have believed anything else." He sipped carefully at his wine.

"*That*," Jaan Vikary said, "was not wise, Garse."

"Untruth given, untruth returned," Janacek said, looking smug.

"You are not being a good friend."

"I will henceforth be better," said Janacek.

"That pleases me," Vikary said. "Now, t'Larien, will you be *keth* to Garse?"

Dirk considered it for a long moment. "I guess," he finally said.

"Drink then," Vikary said. The three men raised their glasses simultaneously-Janacek's was already half drained-and the wine flowed hot and a little bitter over Dirk's tongue. It was not the best wine he had ever tasted. But it was good enough.

Janacek finished his glass and stood. "We must talk of the duels."

"Yes," Vikary said. "This has been a bitter day. Neither of you has been wise."

Janacek leaned up against the mantel below one of the leering gargoyles. "The greatest lack of wisdom was yours, Jaan. Understand me, I have no fear of duel with Bretan Braith and Chell Empty-Arms, but it was not needed. You deliberately provoked it. The Braith had to issue challenge after your words, lest even his own *teyn* spit upon him."

"It did not go as I had hoped," Vikary said. "I thought perhaps Bretan feared us, that he might let pass his duel with t'Larien in order to avoid us. He did not."

"No," said Janacek, "he did not. I could have told you, had you asked. You pushed him too far and came perilously close to duel-breaking."

"It is within the code."

"Perhaps. Yet Bretan was correct; there would have been great shame for him if he had ignored t'Larien's trespass in fear of you."

"No," said Vikary. "That is where you and all our people are wrong. There should be no shame in avoiding a duel. If we are ever to achieve our destiny, we must learn that. Yet, in a sense, you are right-in consideration of who and what he was, he could give no other answer. I misjudged him."

"A serious misjudgement," Janacek said. A grin split his red beard. "It would have been better to let t'Larien duel. I saw to it that they will fight with blades, did I not? The Braith would not have slain him for such a trifling offense. A man like Dirk, ah, there would have been no honor in it. One blow only, I would have said. A cut would do t'Larien good. A lesson for him, a lesson about mistakes. It would add character to his face, a small cut." He looked at Dirk. "Now, of course, Bretan Braith will kill you."

He was still grinning and he made his final comment with casual elan. Dirk tried not to choke on his wine. "What?"

Janacek shrugged. "As first-challenged, you must duel first, so you cannot hope that Jaan and I will slay them before they get to you. Bretan Braith Lantry is as widely known for his skill in duel as he is for his striking good looks. In truth, he is notorious. I suppose he is here hunting mockmen with Chell, but he is not really much a hunter. He is more comfortable in the death-square than in the wild, from all that I have

heard of him. Even his own *kethi* find him difficult. In addition to being ugly, he took Chell fre-Braith to *teyn*. Chell was once a highbond of great power and honor. He outlived his *betheyn* and his original *teyn*. Today he is a superstitious dodderer with a small mind and great wealth. The holdfast rumors say the wealth is the reason Bretan Braith wears Chell's iron-and-fire. No one tells this to Bretan openly, of course. He is said to be quite touchy. And now Jaan has made him angry as well, and perhaps he is a bit frightened. He will have no mercy for you. I hope that you can manage to cut him a bit before you die. That would make it easier for us in the duel to follow."

Dirk was remembering the confidence that had filled him up on the roof; he had been quite certain that neither of the Braiths was a real danger. He understood them; he felt sorry for them. Now he began to feel sorry for himself. "Is he right?" he asked Vikary.

"Garse jokes and exaggerates," Vikary said, "yet you are in danger. No doubt Bretan will try to kill you, if you let him. This need not happen. The rules of your mode and weaponry are quite simple. The arbiter will chalk a square upon the street, five meters by five, and you and your enemy will start from opposite corners. At a word from the arbiter, each of you will advance with your sword toward the center. When you meet, you fight. To satisfy the requirements of honor, you must take one blow and deal one. I would advise you to cut at his foot or at his leg, since this will indicate that you have no wish for a true death-duel. Then, after you have taken his first blow-try to deflect it with your sword, if you can-you can walk to the perimeter of the square. Do not run. There is no honor in running, and the arbiter will rule the duel a death-victory for Bretan, and then the Braiths will kill you. You must walk, calmly. At the perimeter line, once beyond it, you are safe."

"To achieve this safety you must *reach* the perimeter line," Janacek said. "Bretan will kill you first."

"If I deal my one blow, and take one, then can I drop my sword and walk away?" Dirk asked.

"In such a case Bretan will kill you with a puzzled look on his face, or what remains of it," said Janacek.

"I would not do that," Vikary cautioned.

"Jaan's suggestions are folly," Janacek said. He walked slowly back to the couch, retrieved his glass, and poured himself more wine. "You should keep your sword and fight him. Consider, the man is blind on one side. Surely he is vulnerable there! And see how awkwardly he nods or turns his head."

Dirk's glass was empty. He held it out and Janacek filled it with wine. "How will you duel them?" Dirk asked.

"The rules for our mode and weaponry differ from yours," Vikary said. "The four of us must stand at the four corners of the death-square with dueling lasers or other sidearms. We may not move except to step backwards, outside the square, to safety. And that we may not do until each man within the square had taken one shot. That done, the choice is ours. Those who remain within, if they still stand, may continue to fire. It can be a harmless mode, or a very deadly one, depending on the will of those participating."

"Tomorrow," Janacek promised, "it must be deadly." He drank again.

"I would wish otherwise," Vikary said with a rueful shake of his head, "but I fear you speak the truth. The Braiths are too full of anger for us to fire into the air."

"Indeed," Janacek said with a small smile. "They took the insult too deeply. Chell Empty-Arms, at least, will not forgive."

"Can't you shoot to wound?" Dirk suggested. "Disarm them?" The words came easily, but it was odd to hear himself say it. The situation was so totally outside his experience, and yet he found himself accepting it, becoming strangely comfortable with the two Kavalars and their wine and their quiet talk of death and maiming. Perhaps it meant something, to be one of the *kethi*; perhaps that was why his unease was fading. All Dirk knew was that he felt peaceful, and at home.

Vikary looked troubled. "Wound them? I might wish that too, but it cannot be. The hunters fear us now. They spare *korariel* of Ironjade because of that fear. We save lives. That will not be possible if we are too easy on the Braiths tomorrow. The others might not hold back their hunting if they thought that all they risked was a small wound. No, sadly, I think we must kill Chell and Bretan if we can."

"We can," Janacek said confidently. "And, friend t'Larien, it is not so easy or so wise to wound an enemy in duel as you might think it is. Disarming them, well, you jape us. That is virtually impossible. We fight with dueling lasers, friend, not with war weapons. Such side-arms fire in half-second pulses and require a full fifteen seconds to recycle between firings. You understand? A man who hurries his shot, or makes it needlessly difficult, a man who shoots to disarm—he is soon dead. Even at five meters you can still miss, and your enemy will kill you clean before your laser is ready for a second shot."

"It can't be done?" Dirk said.

"Many people are only wounded in duel," Vikary told him. "Far more than are killed, in truth. Yet in most cases this is not the intended result. Sometimes yes. When a man fires into the air, and his enemy decides to punish him, then horrible scars can be inflicted. But this does not happen often."

"We might wound Chell," Janacek said. "He is old and slow, his sidearm will not rise quickly to his hand. But Bretan Braith is another matter. He is said to have a half-dozen kills already."

"He will be my concern," said Vikary. "See that Chell's laser stays dark, Garse, and that will be enough."

"Perhaps." Janacek looked toward Dirk. "If you could cut Bretan only a little, t'Larien, in the arm or hand or shoulder—give him a single painful gash, slow him a bit. That would make a difference." He grinned.

Despite himself, Dirk found that he was returning the smile. "I can try," he said, "but remember, I know damn little about dueling and less about swords, and my first concern is going to be staying alive."

"Don't fret over the impossible," Janacek said, still grinning. "Just do as great a damage as you can."

The door opened. Dirk turned and looked up, and Janacek fell silent. Gwen Delvano stood framed in the doorway, her face and clothing streaked with dust. She looked uncertainly from one face to the next, then came slowly into the room. A sensor pack was slung over one shoulder. Arkin Ruark followed her in, carrying two heavy cases of instruments under his arms. He was sweaty and panting, dressed in heavy green pants and jacket and hood, and he looked much less foppish than usual.

Gwen lowered the sensor pack to the ground gently, but her hand kept its hold on the strap. "Damage?" she said. "What was this? Who is going to do damage to who?"

"Gwen," Dirk began.

"No," Janacek interrupted. He stood very stiffly. "The Kimdissi must leave."

Ruark looked around, white-faced and puzzled. He threw back his hood and began to mop his forehead beneath his white-blond hair. "Utter trash, Garsey," he said. "What is this, big Kavalars secret, eh? A war, a hunt, a duel, some violence, yes? I would not pry such things, no, not me. I give you privacy then, yes, yours to keep." He started back toward the door.

"Ruark," Jaan Vikary said. "Wait."

The Kimdissi paused.

Vikary faced his *teyn*. "He must be told. If we fail-

"We will not fail!"

"If we fail, they have promised to hunt them. Garse, the Kimdissi is too involved. He must be told."

"You know what will happen. On Tober, on Wolfheim, on Eshellin, all throughout the Fringe. He and his kind will spread lies, and all Kavalars will be Braiths. It is the way of the manipulators, the mock-men." Janacek's voice had none of the savage humor with which he had jabbed Dirk; he was cold serious now.

"His life is at stake in this, and Gwen's," Vikary said. "They must be told."

"Everything?"

"The charade is over," Vikary said.

Ruark and Gwen spoke simultaneously.

"Jaan, what-" she started.

"Charade, life, hunting, what is all this? Tell!"

Jaan Vikary turned and told him.

Chapter 7

"Dirk, Dirk, you cannot be serious. No, I do not believe it. All along I have thought, well, yes, that you were better than them. And you say *this* to me? No, I dream. This is utter folly!" Ruark had recovered somewhat. In his long dressing gown, green silken embroidered with owls, he looked more like himself, although he was woefully out of place amid the clutter of the workroom. He sat on a high stool with his back to the dark rectangular screens of the computer console; his slippered feet were crossed at the ankles, and his chubby hands held a tall frosted glass of green Kimdissi wine. The bottle was behind him, sitting next to two empty glasses.

Dirk was on top of a wide plastic worktable, his legs folded under him and his elbow resting on a sensor pack. He had cleared a space for himself by shoving the pack to one side and a stack of slides and papers to the other. The room was in incredible disarray. "I don't see what the folly is," he said stubbornly. Even as he spoke, his eyes were wandering. He had never seen the workroom before. It was about the same size as the living room in the Kavalars compartment, but seemed much smaller. A bank of small computers lined one wall. Across from it was a huge map of Worlorn in a dozen different colors, stuck full of various pins and markers. In between were the three worktables. This was where Gwen and Ruark pieced together the bits of knowledge they hunted down in the wilds of the dying Festival world, but it looked more like a military headquarters to Dirk's eyes.

He still wasn't quite sure why they were there. After Vikary's long explanation and the acrimonious discussion that had followed between Ruark and the two Kavalars, the Kimdissi had stomped down to his own apartment, taking Dirk with him. The time had not seemed right to talk to Gwen. But no sooner had Ruark changed clothes and quieted his nerves with a slug of wine than he insisted that Dirk accompany him back upstairs to the workroom. He brought along three glasses, but Ruark himself was the only one drinking. Dirk still remembered the last time, and he had tomorrow to consider; he had to be sharp. Besides, if Kimdissi wine mixed with its Kavalars counterpart the way the Kimdissi mixed with Kavalars, it would be sheer suicide to drink one after the other.

So Ruark drank alone. "The folly," the Kimdissi said after one sip of the green stuff, "is you dueling like a Kavalars. I say it, I hear myself, I cannot believe it! Jaantony, yes, Garsey by all means, and of course these Braiths. Xenophobe animals, violent folk. But you, ah! Dirk, you, a man of Avalon, this is beneath you. Think, I beg you, yes, I beg, for me, for Gwen, for you yourself. How *how* can you be serious? Tell me, I must know. From Avalon! You grew up with the Academy of Human Knowledge, yes, with the Avalon Institute for the Study of Non-Human Intelligence, that too. The world of Tomas Chung, the home base of the Kleronomas Survey, all that history and knowledge all about you, as much as is left anywhere except perhaps Old Earth or Newholme maybe. You are traveled, cultured, you have seen different worlds, many scattered folks. Yes! You know better. You must, no? Yes!"

Dirk frowned. "Arkin, you don't understand. I didn't pick this fight. It's all some sort of mistake. I tried to apologize, but Bretan wouldn't listen. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Do? Why, leave, of course. Take sweet Gwen and leave; get off Worlorn as soon as you can. You owe her, Dirk, you know it, truth. She needs you, yes, no one else can help. How do you help her? By being as bad as Jaan? By killing yourself? Eh? You tell me, Dirk, you tell me."

It was getting all confused again. When he had been drinking with Janacek and Vikary, everything had seemed so very clear, so easy to accept. But now Ruark was saying it was all wrong. "I don't know," Dirk replied. "I mean, I turned down Jaan's protection. So I have to protect myself, don't I? Who else is responsible? I made the choices and all that; the duel is set. I can't very well back out now."

"Of course you can," Ruark said. "Who is to stop you? What law, eh? No law on Worlorn, no, none. Utter truth! Could these beasts hunt us with a law? No, but is no law, so everyone is in trouble, but you don't have to duel unless you want to."

The door clicked open, and Dirk turned in time to see Gwen enter. His eyes narrowed, while Ruark beamed. "Ah, Gwen," the Kimdissi said, "come with me, talk sense into t'Larien. This utter fool intends to duel, truth, like he was Garsey himself."

Gwen came forward and stood between them. She wore pants of chameleon cloth (dark gray now) and a black pullover, with a green scarf knotted in her hair. Her face was freshly scrubbed and serious. "I told them I was coming down to run over some data," she said, the tip of her tongue flicking nervously over her lips. "I don't know what to say. I asked Garse about

Bretan Braith Lantry. Dirk, the chances are very good that he'll kill you out there."

Her words chilled him. Somehow hearing it from Gwen made it different. "I know," he said. "It doesn't change anything, Gwen. I mean, if I wanted to be safe, I could just be *korariel* of Ironjade, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. But you rejected it. Why?"

"What did you say in the forest? And later, again? About names? I didn't want to become anyone's property, Gwen. I am not *korariel*."

He watched her. Very briefly her face darkened, and her eyes nicked down to the jade-and-silver. "I understand," she said in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"I do not," Ruark said in a snort. "So be *korariel*. What is it? Some word only! Then you are alive, eh?"

Gwen looked at him, up on his perch on his stool. He looked faintly comic in his long gown, clutching his drink and scowling. "No, Arkin," she said. "That was my mistake. I thought *betheyn* was only a word."

He flushed. "All right, so! So Dirk is no *korariel*, fine, he is no one's property. It does not mean he must duel, no, utter not. The Kavalar honor code is nonsense, great high stupidity in truth. So, you are bound to be stupid, Dirk? To die and be stupid?"

"No," Dirk said. Ruark's words bothered him. He did not believe in the code of High Kavalaan. Why then? He was far from sure. To prove something, he thought, but he did not know what or to whom. "I have to, that's all. It is the right thing to do."

"Words!" Ruark said.

"Dirk, I don't want to see you dead," Gwen said. "Please. Don't put me through that."

The pudgy Kimdissi chuckled. "No, we will talk him out of it, us two, eh?" He sucked at his wine. "Listen to me, Dirk, will you do that much?"

Dirk nodded sullenly.

"Good. First, answer me this, do you believe in code duello? As a social institution? As a moral thing? Tell me, in truth, do you?"

"No," Dirk said. "But I don't think Jaan does either, from some of the comments he's made. Still, he duels when he has to. Anything else would be cowardice."

"No, no one thinks you are a coward, or him even. Jaantony may be Kavalari, with all the bad that is in that, but even I do not say he is coward. But there are different kinds of courage, no? If this tower caught fire, would you risk your life to save Gwen and maybe me? Garse too, perhaps?"

"I'd hope so," Dirk said.

Ruark nodded. "See then, you are courageous man. It is not needed, a suicide, to prove that."

Gwen nodded. "Remember what you said that night in Kryne Lamiya, Dirk, about life and death. You can't go off and kill yourself after that, can you?"

He frowned. "Damn it, this isn't suicide."

Ruark laughed. "No? Same thing, close enough. You think you will outduel him, maybe?"

"Well, no but-"

"If he drops his sword, sweat on his fingers, or such, will you kill him?"

"No," Dirk said. "I-"

"That would be wrong, yes, in truth? Yes! Well, to let him kill you, that is just as wrong. Even to give him the chance. Stupid. You are no Kavalari either, so point me not at Jaantony. Misgivings or no, he is still a killer. You are better, Dirk. And he has an excuse, something he thinks he fights for maybe, to change his people. A big savior complex, Jaan, but we will not mock at him, no. But you, Dirk, you have no reason like that. Do you?"

"I guess not. But damnit, Ruark, he's doing the right thing. You didn't look so good up there when he told you how the Braiths would have hunted you down except for his protection."

"No, and I did not feel so good either, no lie. That changes nothing. So I am *korariel* maybe, so the Braiths are worse than the Ironjades, so Jaan uses violence to stop worse violence, maybe. Is that right? Ah,

I cannot say. Tough moral issue, utter truth! Maybe Jaan's duels serve some purpose, eh, for his people, for us. But your duel is utter folly, serves nothing, just gets you dead. And Gwen stays with Jaan and Garse forever, until they lose a duel maybe, and then it is not so pleasant for her."

Ruark paused and finished his wine, then swiveled around on his stool to pour himself another glass. Dirk sat very still, Gwen's eyes on him, her patient stare heavy enough to feel. His head pounded. Ruark was confusing everything, he thought again. He had to do the right thing, but what was it? Suddenly all his insights and his decisions had evaporated on him. The silence lay thick over the workroom.

"I won't run," Dirk said at last. "I won't. But I won't duel, either. I'll go there and tell them my decision, refuse to fight."

The Kimdissi swirled his wine and chuckled. "Well, a certain moral courage is in that. Utter truth. Jesus Christ and Socrates and Erika Stormjones and now Dirk t'Larien, great martyrs of history, yes. Maybe the Redsteel poet will write something on you."

Gwen gave a more serious answer. "These are Braiths, Dirk, Braith highbonds of the old school. On High Kavalaan itself you might never be challenged to duel. The highbond councils recognize that offworlders don't adhere to then: code. But this is different. The arbiter will rule you forfeit, and Bretan Braith and his holdfast-brothers will kill you or hunt you down. By refusing to duel, in their eyes, you'll have proven yourself a mockman."

"*I can't run*," Dirk repeated. His arguments were all gone suddenly; he had nothing left but emotion, a determination to face the dawn and see it through.

"You push away your only sanity, yes, in truth. It is no cowardice, Dirk. The bravest choice of all, think that way, to risk their scorn by flight. Even then, you face peril. Probably they hunt you, Bretan Braith if he lives, the others if not, you know? But you'll live, avoid them maybe, help Gwen."

"I can't," Dirk said. "I promised them, Jaan and Garse."

"Promise? What? That you'd die?"

"No. Yes. I mean, Jaan had me promise to be a brother to Janacek. They wouldn't be in this duel if Vikary hadn't been trying to get me out of trouble."

"After Garse pushed you in," Gwen said bitterly, and Dirk started at the sudden venom in her quiet tones.

"They could die tomorrow too," Dirk said uncertainly. "And I'm responsible for that. Now you say I should desert them."

Gwen stepped very close to him and lifted her hands. Her fingers lightly grazed his cheeks as she brushed gray-brown hair back from his forehead, and the wide green eyes stared into his. Suddenly he remembered other promises: the whisperjewel, the whisperjewel. And times long gone came flashing back, and the world spun, and right and wrong began to melt and run together.

"Dirk, listen to me," Gwen said slowly. "Jaan has been in six duels because of me. Garse, who doesn't even love me, has shared four of those. They've killed for me, for my pride, my honor. I didn't ask it, no more than you asked for their protection. It was *their* conception of my honor, not my own. But still, those duels were for me as much as this one is for you. Despite that, you asked me to leave them, to return to *you*, to love you again."

"Yes," Dirk said. "But- I don't know. I've left a trail of broken promises." His voice was anguished. "Jaan named me *keth*."

Ruark snorted. "If he named you *dinner*, you would jump into the oven, eh?"

Gwen just shook her head sadly. "You feel what? A duty? An obligation?"

"I guess," he said reluctantly.

"Then you've answered yourself, Dirk. You've told me what my answer to *you* must be. If you feel so strongly that you have to fulfill the duties of a shortterm *keth*, a bond that doesn't even have any reality on High Kavalaan, how can you ask me to discard the jade-and-silver? *Betheyn* means more than *keth*."

Her soft hands left his face. She stepped back.

Dirk's hand shot out and caught her by the wrist. The left wrist. His grip closed around cold metal and polished jade. "No," he said.

Gwen said nothing. She waited.

For Dirk, Ruark was forgotten, the workroom had faded to darkness. There was only Gwen, staring at him, eyes green and wide and full of-what? Promises? Threats? Lost dreams? She waited, all silent, and he fumbled over his words, never knowing what he would say next. And the jade-and-silver was cool in his hand, and he was remembering:

Red teardrops full of love, wrapped in silver and velvet, burning fiercely cold.

Jaan's face: high cheekbones, the clean square jaw, the receding black hair, and the easy smile. His voice, quiet as steel, always even: *But I do exist.*

The white ghost towers of Kryne Lamiya, wailing, mocking, singing bright despair while a distant drum sounded its low, meaningless booms. In the middle of it all, defiance, resolution. Briefly he had known what to say.

The face of Garse Janacek: distant (the eyes blue smoke, the head held stiffly, the mouth set), hostile (ice in his sockets, a savage smile at play behind his beard), full of bitter humor (his eyes snapping, his teeth bared in death's own grin).

Bretan Braith Lantry: a tic and a glowstone eye, a figure of fear and pity with a cold and frightening kiss.

Red wine in obsidian goblets, vapors that stung the eye, drinking in a room full of cinnamon and a strange fellowship.

Words. *A new and special kind of holdfast-brother*, Jaan said.

Words. *He will be false*, Garse promised.

Gwen's face, a younger Gwen, slimmer, with eyes somehow wider. Gwen laughing. Gwen crying. Gwen in orgasm. Holding him, her breasts flushed and red, the blush spreading over her body. Gwen whispering to him, *I love you, I love you*. Jenny!

A solitary black shadow, poling a low barge down an endless dark canal.

Remembering.

His hand trembled where it gripped her. "If I do not duel," he said, "you will leave Jaan, then? And come with me?"

Her answering nod was painfully slow. "Yes. I thought of it all day, talked about it with Arkin. We had planned it so he would bring you up here, and I'd tell Jaan and Garse that I had to work."

Dirk unfolded his legs from beneath him, and they tingled to the jabs of a hundred tiny knives as the sleep and the stiffness ran out of them. He stood up, and he was decided. "You were going to do this anyway, then? It's not just because of the duel?"

She shook her head.

"Then I'll go. How soon can we leave Worlorn?"

"Two weeks and three days," Ruark said. "No ship till then."

"We'll have to hide," Gwen said. "All things considered, it's the only safe course. I wasn't sure this afternoon whether I should tell Jaan my decision or simply leave. I thought maybe we would talk, then go up together to face him. But the duel business settles it. You would not be allowed to leave now."

Ruark climbed down off his stool. "Go, then," he said. "I'll stay, keep watch, you can call and I tell you what happens. Safe enough for me, unless Garsey and Jaantony lose their duel. Then I'd come quick, run and join you, eh?"

Dirk took Gwen's hands. "I love you," he said. "Still. I do."

She smiled gravely. "Yes. I'm glad, Dirk. Maybe it will work again. But we have to move fast, lose ourselves thoroughly. From now on, all Kavalars are poison to us."

"All right," he said. "Where?"

"Go down and get your things, you'll need warm clothing. Then meet me up on the roof. We'll take the aircar and decide after we're on our way."

Dirk nodded and kissed her quickly.

They were airborne over the dark rivers and rolling hills of the Common when the first blush of dawn touched the sky, a crimson glow low in the east. Soon the first yellow sun rose, and the darkness below turned to a gray morning mist that was fast dissolving. The manta aircar was open, as ever, and Gwen had pushed its speed to maximum, so the chill wind rushed about loudly, making it impossible to talk. While she flew, Dirk slept by her side, huddled up in a patchwork brown greatcoat that Ruark had given him before they left.

She woke him when the shining spear of Challenge came into sight ahead of them, by pushing gently against his shoulder. He had been sleeping lightly, uneasily. At once he straightened and yawned. "We're there," he said, unnecessarily.

Gwen did not answer. The manta slackened in speed as the Emereli city grew larger and nearer.

Dirk looked off toward the dawn. "Two suns are up," he said, "and look, you can almost see Fat Satan. I guess they know we've gone." He thought of Vikary and Janacek, waiting for him at the death-square, chalked on the street, waiting with the Braiths. Bretan would have paced impatiently, no doubt, and then made his odd noise. His eye would be drained and cold in the morning, a dead ember in his scarred face. Maybe he was dead as well by now, or Jaan, or Garse Janacek. Briefly Dirk flushed with shame. He moved closer to Gwen and put an arm around her.

Challenge swelled before them. Gwen took the air-car up in a sharp ascent through a bank of wispy white clouds. The black maw of a landing deck lit at their approach and Dirk saw the numbers as Gwen took them in. The 520th level, an airtight vast and immaculate and deserted.

"Welcome," a familiar tone said as the manta hovered and sank to the floor plates. "I am the Voice of Challenge. May I entertain you?"

Gwen killed the aircar's power and climbed out over the wing. "We want to become temporary residents."

"The charge is quite reasonable," the Voice said.

"Take us to a compartment then."

A wall opened, and another of the balloon-tired cars rolled out to meet them. In everything except color, it was twin to the one that had carried them during their last visit. Gwen got in, and Dirk began to load the vehicle with the luggage from the back seat of the aircar: a sensor pack that Gwen had brought along, three bags jammed with clothing, a package of field supplies for jaunts into the wild. The two sky-scoots, complete with flight boots, were on the bottom of the pile, but Dirk left them in the aircar.

The vehicle set off, and the Voice began to tell them about the various kinds of living quarters that it could provide. Challenge had rooms furnished in a hundred different styles, to make offworlders feel at home, although the flavor of ai-Emerel predominated.

"Something simple and cheap," Dirk told it. "A double bed and cooking facilities and a wet-shower will do."

The Voice deposited them in a small cubicle with pastel blue walls two levels up. It did have a double bed, which filled most of the room, plus a kitchenette built into one wall and a huge color viewscreen that filled three-quarters of another.

"Real Emereli splendor," Gwen said sarcastically when they entered. She set down her sensor pack and clothing, and fell gratefully onto the bed. Dirk stashed the bags he was carrying behind a sliding panel-closet, then sat by Gwen's feet on the edge of the bed and regarded the wallscreen.

"A wide selection of library tapes is available for your viewing pleasure," the Voice said. "I regret to inform you that all regular Festival programming has been terminated."

"Don't you ever go away?" Dirk snapped.

"Basic monitoring functions continue at all times, for your safety and protection; but if you wish, my service function can be temporarily deactivated in your vicinity. Some residents prefer it this way."

"Including me," Dirk said. "Deactivate."

"If you should change your mind or require some service," the Voice said, "simply push the button marked with a star on any nearby wallscreen, and I will again be at your command." Then it fell silent.

Dirk waited briefly. "Voice?" he said. No response. He nodded with satisfaction and went back to his inspection of the screen. Gwen, behind him, was already asleep, her hands cradling her head as she lay curled up on one side.

He wanted to call Ruark desperately, to find out what had happened at the duel, who had lived and who had died. But he did not think it would be safe yet. One of the Kavalars-or more than one-might be keeping Ruark company in either his quarters or the workroom, and a call could give away their location. He would have to wait. Before they had taken off, the Kimdissi had given them the call number of a deserted apartment two floors above his own, and told Dirk to try that number just past dusk. If it was safe, he promised to be there and respond to the buzz. If not, there would be no answer. In any case, Ruark did not know where the two fugitives had gone, so the Kavalars could not possibly force the information out of him.

Dirk was very tired. Despite his nap in the aircar en route, exhaustion weighed heavily on him, tinged with the dark colors of guilt. He had Gwen back at his side again at last, but he felt no exultation. Perhaps that would come later, when his other concerns had faded and they had begun to know each other once more, as they had known each other on Avalon seven long years ago. Yet that might not be until they were safely off Worlorn, away from Jaan Vikary and Garse Janacek and all the other Kavalars, away from the dead cities and the dying forests. They would go back inside the

Tempter's Veil, Dirk thought then as he sat and looked absently at the blank screen, leave the Fringe entirely, go to Tara or Braque or some other sane planet, maybe back to Avalon, maybe farther in than that, to Gulliver or Vagabond or Old Poseidon. There were a hundred worlds he had never seen, a thousand, more- worlds of men and not-men and aliens, all sorts of distant romantic places where no one had ever heard of High Kavalaan or Worlorn. He and Gwen could see those worlds together now.

Too tired to sleep, restless and ill at ease, Dirk began to play with the viewscreen, idly testing its capabilities. He flicked it on and punched the button marked with a query as he had the day before in Ruark's apartment in Larteyn, and the same list of services flashed before him in figures three times the size. He studied them carefully, to learn what he could learn. Perhaps he might pick up some bit of knowledge that could be useful, become aware of something that could help them.

The list included a call number for planetary news. He tapped it out, hoping that the dawn duel in Larteyn would have been noted, maybe as an obituary. But the screen went gray on him, and white letters flashed "Service Terminated" on and off until he wiped them.

Frowning, Dirk tried another sequence, for spaceport information, to check Ruark's data on the ship. This time he had better luck. There were three ships due within the next two standard months. The earliest, as the Kimdissi had said, would come in a little over two weeks from now, a Fringe shuttle named *Teric neDahlir*. What Ruark hadn't mentioned, however, was that the ship was outbound, coming from Kimdissi and headed on toward Eshellin and the World of the Blackwine Ocean and finally ai-Emerel, its point of origin. A week after that a supply ship was due in from High Kavalaan. Then there was nothing until the *Shuddering of Forgotten Enemies* returned, inbound.

There was no question of waiting that long, however; he and Gwen would simply have to catch the *Teric neDahlir* and switch ships on some other world farther out. Getting to the ship was going to be the biggest

risk they faced, Dirk had decided. The Kavalars had virtually no chance of finding them here in Challenge, with an entire planet to search, but Jaan Vikary would certainly guess that they intended to go offworld as soon as possible. That meant he could be waiting for them at the spacefield when the time came. Dirk didn't know how they would deal with that. He could only hope they would not have to.

Dirk cleared the screen and tried other numbers, noting which functions had been shut down entirely, which had been stripped to a skeleton status-medical emergency service, for one-and which still operated at Festival levels. Often there was a city-by-city breakdown, which convinced him that they had chosen correctly in coming to Challenge. The Emereli had been determined to prove their tower-city immortal, and they had left nearly everything on in defiance of the cold and the dark and the coming ice. This would be an easy place to live. The other cities were in sorry shape by comparison. Four of the fourteen were entirely dark and depowered, and one of those had suffered so much erosion from wind and weather that it was already crumbling into dusty ruins.

For a time Dirk continued to punch buttons, but finally the game began to wear on him, and he grew bored and restive. Gwen slept on. It was still morning, impossible to call Ruark. He turned off the wallscreen, washed briefly in the waste cubicle, and then went back to the bed, flicking off the light panels. It was some time before he went to sleep. He lay in the warm darkness staring at the ceiling and listening to Gwen's faint breathing, but his mind was far away and troubled.

Soon everything will be good again, he told himself, the way things were on Avalon. Yet he could not believe it. He did not feel like the old Dirk t'Larien, Gwen's Dirk, the one he had promised himself he would become again. He felt, instead, as if nothing had changed; he labored on, as wearily, as hopelessly, as he had on Braque and the other worlds before it. His Jenny was with him again, and he should be full of joy, but he only knew a sick, tired feeling. As if he had failed her once again.

Dirk pushed the thoughts aside and closed his eyes.

When he woke, it was late afternoon. Gwen was already up and about. Dirk showered and dressed in soft faded garments of Avalon synthetic. Then the two of them went out into the corridors to explore the 522nd level of Challenge. They held hands as they walked.

Their compartment was one of thousands in a residential sector of the building. Around it were other compartments, identical to their own except for the numbers on the black doors. The floors and walls and ceilings of the corridors through which they walked were all carpeted in rich cobalt shades, and the lights that hung down at intersections-dim globes, restful, easy on the eyes-matched the hue.

"This is boring," Gwen said after they had walked for a few minutes. "The sameness is too depressing. And I don't see any maps, either. I'm surprised people don't get lost."

"I imagine they could just ask the Voice for directions," Dirk said.

"Yes. I forgot about that." She frowned. "What happened to the Voice? It hasn't had much to say lately."

"I shut it up," Dirk told her. "But it's still watching."

"Can you get it working again?"

He nodded and stopped, then led her toward the nearest of the black doors. The compartment, as he'd expected, was unoccupied, and opened easily at his touch. Inside, the bed, the layout, the viewscreen—everything was the same.

Dirk turned on the viewscreen, pressed the button marked with a star, then turned the set off again.

"Can I help you?" the Voice asked.

Gwen smiled at him; a thin, strained sort of smile it was. She was as tired as he was, it seemed. There were worry lines around the corners of her mouth.

"Yes," she said. "We want something to do. Entertain us. Keep us busy. Show us the city." Dirk thought that she spoke a trifle too quickly, like someone frantic to distract herself and take her mind off an unpleasant subject. He wondered whether it was fear about their safety he was hearing, or possibly concern about Jaan Vikary.

"I understand," the Voice replied. "Let me be your guide, then, to the wonders of Challenge, the glory of ai-Emerel reborn on distant Worlorn." Then it began to direct them, and they walked to the nearest bank of tubes, out of the realm of endless straight cobalt corridors, into regions more colorful and diverting.

They ascended to Olympus, a plush lounge at the very summit of the city, and stood ankle deep in black carpet while they looked out of Challenge's single vast window. A kilometer below them rows of dark clouds scuttled by, racing on a bitter wind they could not feel. The day was dim and gloomy; the Helleye burned and glowered as always, but its yellow companions were hidden by gray haze smeared across the sky. They could see the distant mountains from their tower, and the faint dark green of the Common far beneath them. A robowaiter served them iced drinks.

They walked to the centershaft, a plunging cylinder that cored the tower-city from top to bottom. Standing on the highest balcony, they held hands and looked down together, past other balconies in never-ending rows that dwindled into dim-lit depths. Then they opened the wrought-iron gate and jumped, and hand-in-hand they floated down in the gentle grip of the warm updraft. The centershaft was a recreational facility, maintained at a trace gravity that was hardly great enough to be called a gravity at all—less than .01 percent Emereli normal.

They strolled the outer concourse, a broad slanting corridor that spiraled around and around the rim of the city like the threading on some vast screw, so that an ambitious tourist could walk from the ground level to the top. Restaurants, museums, and shops lined both sides of the concourse; in between were deserted traffic lanes for both the balloon-tired cars and faster vehicles. A dozen slidewalks—six up, six down—formed the median strip of the gently curving boulevard. When their feet grew tired, they climbed onto a belt, then to a faster one, then onto one faster still. As the scenery slid by, the Voice pointed out items of particular interest, none of which were particularly interesting.

They swam nude in the Emereli Ocean, a freshwater pseudo sea that occupied most of the 231st and 232nd levels. The water was bright green crystal, so clean that they could see algae twisting in sinuous ropes on the bottom two levels below. It sparkled beneath panels of lights that gave the illusion of bright sunshine. Small scavenger fish darted to and fro in the lower reaches of the ocean; on the surface, floating plants bobbed and drifted like giant mushrooms done up in green felt.

They used power-skis to descend the ramp, a plunging, bracing flight over low-friction plastic that took them from the hundredth level all the way down to the first. Dirk fell twice, only to bounce back up again.

They inspected a free-fall gymnasium.

They looked into darkened auditoriums built for thousands, and declined to view the taped holoplays the Voice offered.

They ate, briefly and without relish, at a sidewalk cafe in the middle of a once-busy shopping mall.

They wandered in a jungle of twisted trees and yellow moss where the animal sounds were all on tape and echoed strangely off the walls of the hot, steamy park.

Finally, still restive and worried and only a little distracted by it all, they allowed the Voice to whisk them up to their room. Outside, they had been told, true dusk was settling over Worlorn.

Dirk stood in the narrow space between the bed and the wall as he pressed the buttons in sequence. Gwen sat just behind him.

Ruark was a long time answering, too long. Dirk wondered apprehensively if something terrible had happened. But just as he thought it, the throbbing blue call signal faded out, and the plump face of the Kimdissi ecologist filled the screen. Behind him, in a grayish pall, was the dirt of a deserted apartment.

"Well?" Dirk said. He glanced back at Gwen. She was chewing the edge of her lip, and her right hand was still, resting on the jade-and-silver bracelet that she wore yet on her left forearm.

"Dirk? Gwen? Is this you? I cannot see you, no, my screen is dark." Ruark's pale eyes flicked back and forth restlessly beneath lank strands of paler hair.

"Of course it's us," Dirk snapped. "Who else would call this number?"

"I cannot see you," Ruark repeated.

"Arkin," Gwen said from where she sat on the bed, "if you could see us, then you'd know where we were."

Ruark's head bobbed. He had just the slightest suggestion of a double chin. "Yes, I did not think, you are right. Best that I do not know, yes."

"The duel," Dirk prompted. "This morning. What happened?"

"Is Jaan all right?" Gwen asked.

"No duel," Ruark told them. His eyes still flicked back and forth, searching for something to look at, Dirk supposed. Or perhaps he was nervous that the Kavalars would burst in on him in the vacant apartment. "I went to see, but no duel, utter truth."

Gwen sighed audibly. "Then everyone is all right? Jaan?"

"Jaantony is alive and well, and Garsey, and the Braiths," Ruark said. "No shooting or killing at all, but when Dirk did not come to die on schedule, everyone got crazy, yes."

"Tell me," Dirk said quietly.

"Yes, well, you were the cause of the other duel being postponed."

"Postponed?" said Gwen.

"Postponed," Ruark replied. "They will still fight, same mode and weapons, but not now. Bretan Braith appealed to the arbiter. He said he had a right to face Dirk first, since he might die in the duel with Jaan and Garsey, so his grievance against Dirk would go unsettled. He demanded that the second duel be stayed till Dirk could be found. The arbiter said yes to him. A Braith too, the arbiter, yes, agreed with everything the animals wanted. Roseph high-Braith, they called him, an utter malevolent little man."

"The Ironjades," Dirk said. "Jaan and Garse. Did they say anything?"

"Jaantony, no. He said nothing at all, no, just kept standing very still in his corner of the death-square. All the rest of them were running around, shouting and yelling and being Kavalars. Nobody else was even *in* the square but Jaan, no, but he kept standing there looking around, like he expected the duel to start any second. Garsey, now, he got very angry. First, when you did not come, he made jokes about you being sick, then he got very cold and silent for a time, quiet as Jaan was, but later he was a little less angry, I think, so he began to argue with Bretan Braith and the arbiter and the other dueler, Chell. All the Braiths were here, to witness perhaps. I did not know we had so much company in Larteyn, no. Well, I did abstractly, yes, but it is different when they come together all in one place. A pair of Shanagates came also, though not the Redsteel poet, so we were short three, you two and him. Otherwise, perhaps it was a city council meeting, everyone dressed up formally." He chuckled.

"Do you know what's going to happen now?" Dirk said.

"Do not worry," Ruark said. "You two. will hide and catch the ship, yes. They cannot track you down, a whole planet to hunt! The Braiths, I think, will not even look. Truth, they had you named a mockman."

Bretan Braith demanded it, and his partner spoke about old traditions, and others of the Braiths too, and the arbiter said yes, that if you did not come to duel you are no true man at all. So they will hunt you, maybe, but not with special purpose, you are now just another animal to kill, any other will do as well."

"Mockman," Dirk said hollowly. Oddly, he felt as if he had lost something.

"To Bretan Braith and those, yes. Garse, I think, will try harder to find you, but he will not hunt you like an animal. He swore that you would duel, duel Bretan Braith and then duel him, or maybe him first."

"What about Vikary?" Dirk said.

"I have told you, he said nothing at all, nothing."

Gwen rose from the bed. "You've only been talking about Dirk," she said to Ruark. "What about me?"

"You?" Ruark's pale eyes blinked. "The Braiths said you were mockman too, but Garse would not allow it. He talked very strong of dueling any who touched you. Roseph high-Braith waffled. He wanted to call you mockman as well as Dirk, but Garsey was very angry, and I understand Kavalars can challenge arbiters who make bad decisions, though they are still bound to follow the decision, truth. So, sweet Gwen, you are still *betheyn* and protected, and they will only bring you back if they catch you. Afterwards, you will be punished, but it will be a punishment of Ironjade. In truth, they did not talk of you overmuch, many more words were spent on Dirk. You are only a woman, eh?"

Gwen said nothing.

"We'll call you again in a few days," Dirk said.

"Dirk, it must be a picked time, no? I am not always in this dust hole." Ruark gave another little chuckle at that.

"In three days, then, at dusk again. We've got to give some thought to how we're going to get to the ship. I figure that Jaan and Garse will cover the space-field when the time comes."

Ruark nodded. "I will think on it."

"Can you get us weapons?" Gwen asked suddenly.

"Weapons?" The Kimdissi made a clucking noise. "Truth, Gwen, the Kavalars are seeping into your blood. I am from Kimdiss. What do I know of lasers and such, violent things? I can try, however, for you, for Dirk my friend. We will talk of it when we speak again; now I must go."

His face dissolved, and Dirk blacked out the wall-screen before turning to face Gwen. "You want to fight them? Is that wise?"

"I don't know," she said. She walked to the door slowly, turned, walked back again. And then stopped; the compartment was so small that it was impossible to pace with any real vehemence.

"Voice!" Dirk said as sudden inspiration struck. "Is there a gun shop in Challenge? A place where we can purchase lasers or other weapons?"

"I regret to inform you that the norms of ai-Emerel prohibit the carrying of personal weaponry," the Voice replied.

"Sport weapons?" Dirk suggested. "For hunting and target practice?"

"I regret to inform you that the norms of ai-Emerel prohibit all blood sports and games based on sublimated violence. If you are a member of a culture where such pursuits are esteemed, please be assured that no insult is intended to your homeworld. These forms of recreation are available elsewhere on Worlorn."

"Forget it," Gwen said. "It was a bad idea anyway."

Dirk put his hands on her shoulders. "We won't need weapons in any case," he said with a smile, "though I'll admit that it might make me feel a little better to be carrying one. I doubt that I'd know how to use it if the time came."

"I would," she said. Her eyes-her wide green eyes-had a hardness in them that Dirk had never seen. For a single strange second he was reminded of Garse Janacek and his icy blue disdain.

"How?" he said.

She waved impatiently and shrugged, so that his hands slid off her shoulders. Then she turned away from him. "In the field, Arkin and I use projectile guns. To fire tracer-needles when we're trying to keep track of an animal, study its patterns of migration. Sleep darts too. And there are sensor implants the size of a thumbnail that will tell you everything you might want to know about a life form-how it hunts, what it eats, mating habits, brain patterns during various stages of the life cycle. Enough clues like that, and you can work out a whole ecosystem from the data that different species are reporting back. But you have to plant your spies first, and you do that by immobilizing the subjects with darts. I've fired thousands of them. I'm good. I only wish I'd thought to lug one along."

"It's different," Dirk said. "Using a weapon for something like that, and shooting a man with a laser. I've never done either, but I don't think they would be at all comparable."

Gwen leaned against the door and regarded him sourly from several meters away. "You don't think I could kill a man?"

"No."

She smiled. "Dirk, I'm not the little girl you knew on Avalon. In between then and now I spent several years on High Kavalaan. They were not easy years. I've had other women spit in my face. I've heard Garse Janacek deliver a thousand lectures on the obligations of jade-and-silver. I've been called mock-man and *betheyn-bitch* by other Kavalan men so often that sometimes I find myself answering to them." She shook her head. Beneath the broad headband pulled tight across her forehead, her eyes were hard green stone. Jade, Dirk thought inately, jade as in the armlet she still wore.

"You're angry," he said. "It's easy to get angry. But I've known you, love, and you're essentially a gentle person."

"I was. I try to be. But it's been a long time, Dirk, a long, long time, and it's been building, and Jaan Vikary has been the only part of it that's been any good at all. I've told Arkin; he knows how I feel, what I've felt. There have been times when I've come so close-so damned close. With Garse especially, because in a very odd way he *is* part of me, and very much a part of Jaan, and it hurts more when it's someone who you care about, someone you could almost love if it weren't for ..."

She stopped. Her arms were crossed tightly across her chest and she was frowning, but she stopped. She must have seen the expression on his face, Dirk thought. He wondered what it was.

"Maybe you're right," she said after a little bit, uncrossing her arms. "Maybe I couldn't kill anyone. But, you know, I feel as if I could sometimes. And right now, Dirk, I would very much like to have a gun." She laughed a small unfunny laugh. "On High Kavalaan, of course, I wasn't allowed to go armed. Why

does a *bethryn* need a sidearm? Her highbond and his *teyn* protect her. And a woman with a gun might shoot herself. Jaan . . . well, Jaan has fought to change a lot of things. He tries. I'm here, after all. Most women never leave the safe stone of their holdfasts once they take the jade-and-silver. But for all his trying, and I do respect it, Jaan doesn't understand. He's a highbond, after all, and he's fighting other things as well, and for everything I tell him, Garse tells him something else. Sometimes Jaan doesn't even notice. And the small things, like my going armed, he says aren't Important. I talked to him about it once, and he pointed out that I objected to the whole practice of going armed, the whole big artifice of code duello, which is true. And yet-Dirk, you know, I did understand what you were saying to Arkin last night, about wanting to face Bretan even if you don't feel yourself bound by his code. I've felt the same way at times."

The room lights flickered briefly, dimming, then flaring back to full Intensity, "What?" Dirk said, looking up.

"Residents should not be alarmed," the Voice said in its even bass tones. "A temporary power failure affecting your level has now been rectified."

"Power failure!" A picture flashed through Dirk's mind, a picture of Challenge-sealed, windowless, totally contained Challenge-without power. He did not like the idea. "What's going on?"

"Please do not be alarmed," the Voice repeated, but the overhead lights gave the He to its words. They went out entirely, and for a brief second Gwen and Dirk stood in frighteningly total darkness.

"I think we had better leave," Gwen said when the lights came back on. She turned and slid open the wall panel and began to remove their bags. Dirk went to help her.

"Please do not panic," the Voice said. "For your own safety, I urge you to remain within your compartment. The situation is under control. Challenge has many built-in safeguards, as well as back-ups for every important system." ,

They finished packing. Gwen went to the door. "Are you on secondary power now?" she asked.

"Levels one through fifty, 251 through 300, 351 through 451, and 501 through 550 are on secondary power at present," the Voice admitted. "This is no cause for alarm. Robotechs are repairing primary power as quickly as possible, and other standby systems exist in the unlikely event that secondary power should fail."

"I don't understand," Dirk said. "Why? What's the cause of the failures?"

"Please do not be alarmed," the Voice said.

"Dirk," Gwen said calmly. "Let's go." She went out, a bag in her right hand and her sensor pack slung over her left shoulder on a strap. Dirk picked up the other two bags and followed her out into the cobalt-blue corridors. They hurried toward the tubes, Gwen two steps ahead, the carpets swallowing the sounds of their footfalls.

"Residents who panic are more likely to harm themselves than those who remain within the safety of their own compartments during the duration of this small inconvenience," the Voice chided them.

"Tell us what's going on and we might reconsider," Dirk said. They did not stop or slow up.

"Emergency regulations are now in effect," the Voice said. "Warders have been dispatched to conduct you back to your own compartment. This is for your own protection. I repeat, warders have been dispatched to conduct you back to your own compartment. The norms of ai-Emerel prohibit . . ." The words abruptly began to slur, and the bass voice rose and squeaked and became a grating whine that clawed briefly at their ears. It ended in a sudden shuddering silence.

The lights went off.

Dirk stopped for an instant, then took two steps forward in the thick darkness and bumped into Gwen. "What?" he said. "Sorry."

"Quiet," Gwen whispered. She began to count off the seconds. At thirteen, the hanging globes at the cross corridors came on again. But the blue radiance was a dim ghost glow, barely enough to see by.

"Come on," Gwen said. She began walking again, more slowly this time, treading carefully in the blue gloom. The tubes were not far ahead.

When the walls spoke to them, the voice was not the Voice.

"This is a large city," it said, "yet it is not large enough to hide you, t'Larien. I am waiting in the lowest of the Emereli cellars, the fifty-second sublevel. The city is mine. Come to me, now, or all power will die around you, and in the darkness my *teyn* and I will come hunting."

Dirk recognized the speaker. He could hardly be mistaken. On Worlorn, or anywhere, it would not be easy to duplicate the twisted, rasping voice of Bretan Braith Lantry.

Chapter 8

They stood in the shadowed corridor as if paralyzed. Gwen was a dim blue silhouette, her eyes black pits. Her mouth twitched at the corner, reminding Dirk horribly of Bretan and *his* twitch. "They found us," she said.

"Yes," Dirk said. Both of them were whispering, out of fear that Bretan Braith-like the displaced Voice of Challenge-would hear them if they spoke aloud. Dirk was acutely aware that speakers surrounded him, and ears as well, and maybe eyes-all invisible behind the carpeted walls.

"How?" said Gwen. "They couldn't have. It's impossible."

"They did. It must be possible. But what do we do now? Do I go to them? What's down on the fifty-second sublevel anyway?"

Gwen frowned. "I don't know. Challenge wasn't my city. I know the subsurface levels weren't residential, though."

"Machines," Dirk suggested. "Power. Life support."

"Computers," Gwen added, in a small hollow whisper.

Dirk set down the bags he was carrying. It seemed silly to cling tightly to clothing and possessions at this point. "They killed the Voice," he said.

"Maybe. If it can be killed. I thought it was a whole network of computers, scattered throughout the tower. I don't know. Maybe it was only one large installation."

"In any case they got the central brain, the nerve center, whatever. No more friendly advice from the walls. And Bretan can probably see us right now."

"No," Gwen said.

"Why not? The Voice could."

"Yes, maybe, though I don't think the Voice's sensing devices had to include visual sensors, by any means. I mean, it didn't need them. It had other senses, things humans don't have. That's not the point. The Voice was a supercomputer, built to handle billions of bits of information simultaneously. Bretan can't do that. No human can. Besides, the inputs weren't intended to make sense to him, or to you or to me. Only to the Voice. Even if Bretan is standing where he has access to all of the data the Voice was getting, it will mostly be meaningless gibberish to him, or it will flood by so fast as to be useless. Maybe a trained cyberneticist could make something out of it, though I doubt it. Not Bretan, though. Not unless he knows some secret we don't."

"He knew how to find us," Dirk said. "And he knew where the brain of Challenge was, and how to short-circuit it."

"I don't know how he found us," Gwen replied, "but . it was no great trick to get to the Voice. The lowest sublevel, Dirk! It was just a guess on his part, it had to be. Kavalars build their holdfasts deep into stone, and the lowest level is always the safest, the most secure. That's where they quarter the women, and other holdfast treasures."

Dirk was thoughtful. "Wait a minute. He can't know exactly where we are. Otherwise, why try to get us down to the basement, why threaten to hunt us?"

Gwen nodded.

"If he's in a computer center, though," Dirk continued, "we have to be careful. He might be able to find us."

"Some of the computers must still be functioning," Gwen said, glancing toward the dim blue globe a few meters away. "The city is still alive, more or less."

"Can he ask the Voice where we are? If he brings it back?"

"Maybe, but would it tell him? I don't think so. We're legal residents, unarmed, he's a dangerous intruder violating all the norms of ai-Emerel."

"He? You mean they. Chell is with him. Maybe others as well."

"A party of intruders, then."

"But there can't be more than-what? Twenty? Less? How could they take over a city this size?"

"Ai-Emerel is a world singularly without violence, Dirk. And this is a Festival world. I doubt that Challenge had many defenses. The warders . . ."

Dirk looked around suddenly. "Yes, warders. The Voice mentioned them. It was sending one for us." He almost expected to see something large and menacing wheel into sight from a cross corridor, as if on cue. But there was nothing. Shadows and cobalt globes and blue silence.

"We can't just stand here," Gwen said. She had stopped whispering. So had he. Both of them realized that if Bretan Braith and his fellows could hear every word they spoke, then they could surely be located in a dozen other ways as well. If so, their case was hopeless. Whispering was a wasted gesture. "The air-car is only two levels away," she said.

"The Braiths might be two levels away too," Dirk replied. "Even if they're not, we have to avoid the air-car. They have to know we've got one, and they'll be expecting us to run for it. Maybe that was why Bretan made his little speech, to flush us out into the air, where we'd be easy prey. His holdfast-brothers are probably out there waiting to laser us down." He paused, thoughtful. "But we can't just stay here, either."

"Not around our own compartment," she said. "The Voice knew where we were, and Bretan Braith might be able to find out. But we have to stay in the city; you're right about that."

"We hide, then," Dirk said. "Where?" Gwen shrugged. "Here, there, and everywhere. It's a big city, as Bretan Braith said."

Gwen quickly knelt and went through her bag, discarding all the cumbersome clothing but retaining her field supplies and sensor pack. Dirk put on the heavy greatcoat that Ruark had given him and abandoned everything else. They walked toward the outer concourse; Gwen was anxious to get as far from their compartment as possible, and neither of them was willing to risk using the tubes.

The lights above the wide concourse boulevard still burned bright and white, and the slidewalks were humming evenly; the corkscrew road seemed to have an independent power supply. "Up or down?" Dirk asked.

Gwen did not seem to hear; she was listening to something else. "Quiet," she said. Her mouth twitched. Above the steady hum of the slidewalks then Dirk heard the *other* noise, faint but unmistakable. A howl.

It came from the corridor behind them, Dirk was positive of that. It came like a chill breath from out of the warm blue stillness, and it seemed to hang in the air far longer than it should have. Dim, distant shouts followed close on its heels.

There was a short silence. Gwen and Dirk looked at each other and stood very still, listening. The howl came again, louder, more distinct, echoing a bit this time. It was a furious shriek of a howl, long and high pitched.

"Braith hounds," Gwen said, in a voice that was much steadier than it had any right to be.

Dirk remembered the beast he had encountered when he walked through the streets of Larteyn-the horse-sized dog that had snarled at his approach, the creature with the hairless rat's face and the small red eyes. He looked down the corridor behind them with apprehension, but nothing moved in the cobalt shadows.

The sounds were growing louder, closer.

"Down," Gwen said. "And quickly."

Dirk needed no persuasion. They hurried to the median strip of the concourse, across the width of the silent boulevard, and got onto the first and slowest of the descending slidewalks. Then they began to move in, hopping from belt to belt until they were riding the swiftest of the descenders. Gwen unslung her field supplies and opened the packet, rummaging through the contents while Dirk stood above her, one hand resting on her shoulder, and watched the level numbers slide by, black sentinels mounted above the dusk-dark maws that led off into the interior corridors of Challenge. The numbers flashed past at regular intervals, growing steadily smaller.

They had just passed into the 490s when Gwen stood, holding a palm-sized rod of blue-black metal in her right hand. "Take off your clothes," she said.

"What?"

"Take off your clothes," she repeated. When Dirk only looked at her, she shook her head impatiently and tapped his chest with the point of the rod. "Null-scent," she told him. "Arkin and I use it in the wild. Spray ourselves before going out. It will kill the body scent for about four hours, and hopefully throw the hounds off the trail."

Dirk nodded and began to strip. When he was naked, Gwen made him stand with his legs far apart and his arms raised over his head. She touched one end of the metal rod, and from the other a fine gray mist issued, its soft touch tingling his bare skin. He felt cold and foolish and very vulnerable as she treated him, back and front, head to toe. Then she knelt and sprayed his clothing as well, inside and out, everything except the heavy greatcoat that Arkin had given him, which she carefully set to one side. When she was finished, Dirk dressed again-his clothes were dry and dusty with the ashen powder-while Gwen stripped in turn, and let him spray her.

"What about the coat?" he said while she got back into her clothes. She had treated everything: the sensor pack, the field supplies, her jade-and-silver armband- everything except Arkin's patched brown greatcoat. Dirk nudged it with the toe of his boot.

Gwen picked it up and tossed it over the guardrail, onto the swiftly moving belt of an ascending slidewalk. They watched as it receded from them, out of sight. "You don't need it," Gwen said when the coat was gone. "Maybe it will lead the pack in the wrong direction. They're certain to have followed us as far as the concourse."

Dirk looked dubious. "Maybe," he said, with a glance at the inner wall. Level 472 came and went. "I think we should get off," he said suddenly. "Get away from the concourse."

Gwen looked at him, questioning.

"You said it yourself," he said. "Whoever is behind us will get at least as far as the concourse. If they've already started down, my coat won't fool them much. They'll see it sailing past, and laugh."

She smiled. "Conceded. But it was worth a try."

"So assume they're coming down after us . . ."

"We'll have built a good lead by this point," she interrupted. "They'll never get a pack of hounds onto a slidewalk, which means they'll be on foot."

"So? The concourse still isn't safe, Gwen. Look, that can't be Bretan up there, he's down in the sublevels. It probably isn't Chell either, is it?"

"No. A Kavalat hunts with his *teyn*. They do not split."

"I figured as much. So we've got one pair playing games with the power way below us, another pair at our backs. How many others are after us? Can you answer that?"

"No."

"I'd guess a few, at least; and even if it isn't so, we'd be better off to assume the worst and work from there. If there are other Braiths loose in the city, and if they're in contact with the hunters behind us, the ones above us will tell the others to close off the concourse."

Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe not. Hunting parties seldom work together. Each pair want the kill for themselves. *Damn*, but I wish I had a weapon!"

Dirk ignored her final comment. "We shouldn't take any chances," he said. Even as he said it, the bright lights above them began to flicker, fading down abruptly into a dun lingering grayness, and simultaneously the slidewalk beneath them jerked and began to slow. Gwen stumbled. Dirk caught her and held her in his arms. The slowest belt stopped first, then the one next to it, and finally the descender they were riding.

Gwen shivered and looked up at him, and Dirk hugged her more tightly, drawing desperately needed reassurance from the warmth and closeness of her body.

Below them--Dirk swore that the sound came from *below* them, from the direction the slidewalk had been taking them--a shrill scream rang briefly, and not so very far away.

Gwen pulled loose of him. They did not speak. They moved from belt to belt, across the shadowed, empty traffic lanes, toward the passage that led away from the dangerous concourse and into the corridors again. He glanced up at the numbers as they passed from gray dimness into blue: level 468. When the carpets swallowed their footsteps once again, they began to run, moving quickly down the first long corridor, then turning again and yet again, sometimes right and sometimes left, choosing at random the directions

they took. They ran until both of them were short of breath, and then they paused and sank into the carpets beneath the light of a dusky bluish globe.

"What was it?" he said at last, when his breath returned to him.

Gwen was still heaving and panting with the effort of their run. They had come a long way. She fought to catch her breath. Silent tears left wet trails down her face in the blue light. "What do you *think* it was?" she said at last, with an edge in her voice. "That was a mockman, screaming."

Dirk opened his mouth and tasted salt. He touched the wetness on his own cheeks then, and wondered how long he had been crying. "More Braiths, then," he said.

"Below us," she said. "And they've found a victim. Damn, damn, *damn!* We led them here, we're to blame. How could we have been so stupid? Jaan was always afraid they would start to hunt the cities." - "They started yesterday," Dirk said, "with the Blackwiner jelly children. It was only a matter of time until they came here. Don't get all..."

She turned her face up to his, her features tight with anger, her cheeks streaked by tears. "What?" she spat. "You don't think we're responsible? Who else, then? Bretan Braith followed *you*, Dirk. Why did we come here? We could have gone to Twelfth Dream, to Musquel, to Esvoch. Empty cities. No one would have gotten hurt. Now the Emereli will be- How many residents did the Voice say were left?"

"I don't remember. Four hundred, I think. Something like that." He tried to put his arm around her and pull her to him, but she shrugged it off and glared at him.

"It's our fault," she said. "We have to do something."

"All we can do is try to stay alive," he told her. "They're after us too, remember? We can't worry about the others."

Gwen was staring at him, her face hard with- what?-perhaps contempt, Dirk thought. The look startled him.

"I don't believe what you're saying," she said. "Can't you think of anyone besides yourself? Damn it, Dirk, we've got the null-scent going for us, if nothing else. The Emereli, they've got nothing at all. No weapons, no protection. They're mockmen, game, that's all. *We've got to do something!*"

"What? Commit suicide? Is that what? You didn't want me to go against Bretan this morning, in the duel, but now you-"

"Yes! Now we have to. You wouldn't have talked this way back on Avalon," she said, her voice rising until it was almost a shout. "You were different then. *Jaan* wouldn't ..."

She stopped, suddenly aware of her words, and looked away from him. Then she began to sob. Dirk sat very still.

"So that's it," he said after a time. His voice was quiet. "Jaan wouldn't think of himself, right? Jaan would play the hero."

Gwen looked at him again. "He would, you know."

He nodded. "He would. Maybe I would have, once. Maybe you're right. Maybe I've changed. I don't know anything anymore." He felt sick and weary and defeated then, and very shamed. His thoughts went back and forth and round and round. They were both right, he kept thinking. They *had* brought the Braiths down on Challenge, on hundreds of innocent victims. The guilt was theirs; Gwen was right. And yet, *he* was right, too, they could do nothing now, nothing. If that was selfish, it was no less true.

Gwen was crying openly. He reached for her once more, and this time she let him hold her and try to comfort her with his hands. But all the while, as he stroked her long black hair and fought to hold back his own tears, he knew that it was no good, that it changed nothing. The Braiths were hunting, killing-and he could not stop them. He could hardly save himself. He was not the old Dirk after all, the Dirk of Avalon, no. And the woman in his arms was not Jenny. Both of them were only prey.

Then suddenly it came to him. "Yes," he said loudly.

Gwen looked at him, and Dirk got unsteadily to his feet, pulling her up after him.

"Dirk?" she said.

"We can do something," he said, and he led her to the door of the nearest compartment. It opened easily. Dirk went to the viewscreen by the bed. The room lights were all out; the only illumination was the long rectangle of faded blue that fell from the open doorway. Gwen stood in the frame, uncertain, a bleak dark silhouette.

Dirk turned on the screen, hoping (he could do nothing else), and it lit under his hands, and he breathed easier. He turned to Gwen.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him.

"Tell me your home call number," he said.

She understood. Slowly she nodded, and she told him the numbers, and he punched them out, one by one, and waited. The throbbing call signal brightened the room. When it dissolved, the patterns of light reshaped themselves into the strong-jawed features of Jaan Vikary.

No one spoke. Gwen came forward to stand behind Dirk, one hand up on his shoulder. Vikary looked at them in silence, and Dirk was afraid for a long moment that he would blank the screen and leave them to their fate.

He did not. He said to Dirk, "You were a holdfast-brother. I trusted you." Then his eyes shifted to Gwen. "And you I loved."

"Jaan," she said, quick and soft, in a voice so much a whisper that Dirk doubted that Vikary could hear. Then she broke and turned and walked swiftly from the room.

Still Vikary did not close out the connection. "You are in Challenge, I see. Why have you called, t'Larien? You know what we must do, my *teyn* and I?"

"I know," Dirk said. "I risk it. I had to tell you. The Braiths have followed us. Somehow, I don't know how, we never thought we would be traced. But they are here. Bretan Braith Lantry has knocked out the city computer, and seems to control much of the remaining power. The others-they have hunting packs here. They are in the corridors."

"I understand," Vikary said. Emotion-unreadable, strange-flickered across his face. "The residents?"

Dirk nodded. "Will you come?"

Vikary smiled very faintly, and there was no joy in it. "You ask my help, Dirk t'Larien?" He shook his head. "No, I should not jape, it is not you who asks, not for yourself. I understand that. For the others, the Emereli, yes, Garse and I will come. We will bring our beacons, and those such as we find before the hunters we shall make *korariel* of Ironjade. Yet it will take time, too long perhaps. Many will die. Yesterday, at the City in the Starless Pool, a creature called a Mother died a sudden death. The jelly children- Do you know of the Blackwiner jelly children, t'Larien?"

"Yes. I know enough."

"They burst forth from their Mother to find another, and discovered none. During the decades they have lived inside their vast host, others of their world had caught the creature and brought it to Worlorn from the World of the Blackwine Ocean, and lastly abandoned it. There is scant love lost between the jelly children and other Blackwiners not of the cult. So they stumbled forth, a hundred of them or more, overrunning their city, filling it with a sudden life, knowing nothing of where they were or why. Most were old, quite old. In panic, they began to wake their dead city, so Roseph high-Braith found them. I did what I could do, protected some. The Braiths found many others, because it took time. It will be the same in Challenge. Those that take to the corridors and run, those will be hunted down and slain, long before my *teyn* and I can help. Do you understand?"

Dirk nodded.

"It is not enough to call me," Vikary said. "You must act yourself. Bretan Braith Lantry wants you badly, you and no other. He may even allow you to duel. The others want only to hunt you, as a mock-man, but even they value you high above any other prey. Come into the open, t'Larien, and they will come after you. For the Emereli hiding around you, the time will be important."

"I see," Dirk said. "You want Gwen and me . . ."

Vikary flinched visibly. "No, not Gwen."

"Me, then. You want me to draw attention to myself? Without a weapon?"

"You have a weapon," Vikary said. "You stole it yourself, giving insult to Ironjade. Whether you choose to use it or not is a decision that only you can make. I will not trust you to make the correct choice. I trusted you once. I simply tell you. One other thing, t'Larien. Whatever you do, or do not do, it changes nothing between you and me. This call changes nothing. You know what we must do."

"You said that," Dirk replied.

"I say it a second time. I want you to remember." Vikary frowned. "And now I will go. It is a long flight to Challenge, a long cold flight."

The screen went dark before Dirk could frame an answer.

Gwen was waiting just outside the door, leaning up against the carpeted wall, her face in her hands. She straightened when Dirk came out. "Are they coming?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I... left. I couldn't face him."

"It doesn't matter."

"It *does*."

"No," he said sharply. His stomach ached. He kept imagining far-off screams. "It doesn't. You made it clear before-how you feel."

"Did I?" She laughed. "If you know how I feel, you know more than me, Dirk."

"Gwen, I don't- No, listen, it doesn't matter.

You were right. We have to ... Jaan said we have a weapon."

She frowned. "He did? Does he think I took my dart gun? Or what?"

"No, I don't think so. He only said that we have a weapon, that we stole it ourselves and insulted Iron-jade."

She closed her eyes. "What?" she said. "Of course." Her eyes opened again. "The aircar. It's armed with lasercannon. That has to be what he meant. They aren't charged. I don't even think they're connected. That was the aircar I used most of the time, and Garse ..."

"I understand. But you think the lasers can be fixed? Made to work?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But what else could Jaan have meant?"

"The Braiths may have found the car, of course," Dirk said. His voice was cool and even. "We'll have to take that chance. Hiding-we can't hide, they'll find us. Bretan may be on his way right now, if my transmission to Larteyn registered anywhere down below. No, we double back to the aircar. They won't expect that, if they know we were headed down along the concourse."

"The aircar is fifty-two levels above us," Gwen pointed out. "How do we get to it? If Bretan has as much control over the power as we think he does, he has surely killed the tubes. He stopped the slidewalks."

"He knew we were using the slidewalks," Dirk said. "Or at least that we were on the concourse. The ones tracking us told him. They *are* in contact, Gwen. The Braiths. They have to be, the belts stopped too conveniently. But that makes it easy."

"Easy? What?"

"For us to draw attention to ourselves," he said. "For us to get them after us, to save the goddamned Emereli. That's what Jaan wants us to do. Isn't that what you want us to do?" His voice was sharp.

Gwen paled slightly. "Well," she said. "Yes."

"Then you win. We're going to do it."

She looked thoughtful. "The tubes, then? If they are still working?"

"We couldn't trust the tubes," Dirk said. "Even if they were working. Bretan might stop them while we were inside one."

"I don't know of any stairs," she said. "And we'd never find them without the Voice even if they do exist. We could walk up the concourse, but..."

"We know of at least two Braith hunting parties roaming the concourse. There are probably more. No."

"What then?"

"What's left?" He frowned. "The centershaft."

Dirk leaned forward across the wrought-iron railing, looked up and then down, and grew dizzy. The center-shaft seemed to go on forever in both directions. It was only two kilometers from top to bottom, he knew, but everything about it gave the feeling of all but infinite distance. The rising currents of warm air that gave buoyancy to the feather-light floaters also filled the echoing shaft with a gray-white mist, and the balconies that lined the circumference-level on level on level -were all identical, giving the illusion of unending repetition.

Gwen had taken something from her sensor pack, a palm-sized silvery metallic instrument. She stood next to Dirk by the railing and tossed it lightly out into the shaft. Both of them watched it travel, spinning over and over, winking at them with reflected light. It sailed halfway across the diameter of the great cylinder before it began to fall-slowly, gently, half supported by the rising air, a mote of metal dust dancing in the artificial sunlight. They watched it for a eon before it vanished in the gray gulf below them. "Well," Gwen said after it was lost to sight, "the gravity grid is still on."

"Yes. Bretan doesn't know the city. Not well enough." Dirk glanced up again. "I guess we should get started. Who goes first?"

"After you," she said.

Dirk opened the balcony gate and retreated to the wall. He brushed a tangle of hair out of his eyes impatiently, shrugged, and ran forward, kicking as hard as he could when his boot touched the edge.

The leap took him out and up and *up*. For one wild moment it was like falling, and Dirk's stomach wrenched, but then he looked and saw and felt, and it was not like falling at all, it was flying, soaring. He laughed aloud, suddenly giddy, and he brought his arms in front of him and swept them back in powerful strokes, swimming higher and faster. The rows of empty balconies went by: one level, two, five. Sooner

or later he would begin to drop, a slow curving descent into gray-shrouded distance, but he would scarcely have time to fall far. The other side of the centershaft was only thirty meters off, an easy jump against the paperclip chains of the shaft's trace gravity.

Finally the curving wall grew near, and he bounced off one black iron railing, spinning out and tumbling upward absurdly before he reached and caught a post of the balcony just above the one he'd hit. It was easy to pull himself in. He'd come clear across the center-shaft, and eleven levels up. Smiling and strangely elated, he sat and gathered strength for a second leap while he watched Gwen come after him. She flew like some graceful impossible bird, her black hair shimmering behind her as she soared. She also outjumped him by two levels.

By the time he reached the 520th level, Dirk was bruised in a half-dozen places where he'd banged up against the iron railings, but he felt almost good. At the end of his sixth dizzy leap across the plunging shaft he was half reluctant to pull himself onto the target balcony and return to normal gravity. But he did. Gwen was already there waiting for him, her sensor pack and field supplies strapped to her back between the shoulder blades. She gave him a hand and helped pull him over the railing.

They went out into the broad corridor that circled the centershaft, into the now-familiar blue shadows.

Globes shone dimly at junctions on either side of them, where long straight passages led away from the city's core like spokes on some great wheel. At random they chose one and began to walk swiftly toward the perimeter. It was a longer walk than Dirk would have thought possible, past numerous other intersections (he lost count at forty) each like the others, past black doors that differed only in their numbering. Neither he nor Gwen spoke. The good feeling that he had touched briefly, the joy of wingless flight, dropped from him as suddenly as it had come while he walked through the murky dimness. In its place, a faint tinge of fear. His ears conjured up phantoms to worry him, far-off howl-ings and the soft footfalls of pursuers; his eyes made the more distant light globes into something strange and terrible, and found shapes in the cobalt corners where only darkness lay. But they encountered nothing, no one; it was only his mind playing tricks on him.

Yet the Braiths had been here. Close to the perimeter of Challenge, where the cross corridor met the outer concourse, they found one of the balloon-tired vehicles that the Voice used to carry guests back and forth. It was empty and overturned, lying half on the blue carpet and half on the clean cold plastic that floored the concourse proper. When they reached it, they stopped, and Gwen's eyes met Dirk's in wordless comment. The balloon-tired cars, he recalled shortly, had no controls for their passengers; the Voice drove them directly. And here one lay, on its side, without power or motion. He noticed something else as well. Near one rear wheel the blue carpet was damp and smelly.

"Come," Gwen whispered, and they started out across the silent concourse, hoping that the Braiths who had been here were gone out of earshot. The airtol and their car were very close now; it would be cruel irony if they did not reach them. But it seemed to Dirk that their steps echoed horribly loud on the uncarpeted surface of the boulevard; surely the whole building could hear them, even Bretan Braith in the deep cellars kilometers below. When they reached the pedestrian walkway that bridged the median strip of unmoving slidewalks, the two of them began to run. He was not sure who started, Gwen or himself. One instant they were walking side by side, trying to move as quickly as possible with as little noise as they could; then suddenly they were running.

Beyond the concourse-uncarpeted corridor, two turns, a wide door that seemed reluctant to open. Finally Dirk smashed his bruised shoulder against it, and he and it both groaned in protest, but the door gave way, and they stood again on the airtol of Challenge's 520th level.

The night was cold and dark. They could hear Worlorn's eternal wind whining against the Emereli tower, and a single bright star burned in the long low rectangle that framed the outworld sky. Inside, the airtol itself was just as black.

No lights went on when they entered.

But the aircar was still there, hunched in the darkness like a living thing, like the banshee it was intended to resemble, and no Braiths stood guarding it.

They went to it. Gwen took off her sensor pack and field supplies and put them in the back seat, where the sky-scoots still lay. Dirk stood and watched her, shivering as he did so; Ruark's greatcoat was gone, and the air was frigid tonight.

Gwen touched a control on the instrument panel, and a dark crack opened in the center of the manta's hood. Metal panels swung back and up, and the guts of the Kavalair machine were before them. She came around front and turned on a light built into the underside of one of the hood panels. The other panel, Dirk saw, was lined with metal tools in clips.

Gwen stood in a small pool of yellow light studying the intricate machinery. Dirk went to her side.

Finally she shook her head. "No," she said in a tired voice. "It won't work."

"We can draw power from the gravity grid," Dirk suggested. "You have the tools." He pointed.

"I don't know enough," she said. "A little, yes. I hoped I'd be able to figure . . . you know. I can't. It's more than just a matter of power. The wing lasers aren't even connected. They might as well be ornaments for all the good they're going to do us." She looked at Dirk. "I don't suppose you ... ?"

"No," he said.

She nodded. "We have no weapon, then."

Dirk stood and glanced out past the manta, toward Worlorn's empty sky. "We could fly out of here."

Gwen reached out and caught the hood panels, one in each hand, and brought them down and together again, and once more the dark banshee was whole and fierce. Her voice was toneless. "No. Remember what you said. The Braiths will be outside. Their cars will be armed. We wouldn't have a chance. No." She walked around Dirk and got into the aircar.

After a time he followed her. He sat twisted about in his seat, so that he faced the lonely star in the cold night sky. He was conscious of being very tired, and he knew it was more than physical. Since coming to Challenge, his emotions had washed over him like waves over a beach, one after another, but suddenly it seemed as though the ocean had gone. There were no waves left at all.

"I suppose you were right before, in the corridor," he said in a thoughtful, introspective voice. He was not looking at Gwen.

"Right?" she said.

"About being selfish. About . . . you know . . . about not being a white knight."

"A white knight?"

"Like Jaan. I was never a white knight, maybe, but back on Avalon I liked to think I was. I believed in things. Now I can hardly even remember what they were. Except for you, Jenny. You I remembered. That was why . . . well, you understand. The last seven years, I've done things, nothing terrible, you know, but still things that I might not have done on Avalon. Cynical things, selfish things. But until now I'd never gotten anyone killed."

"Don't flog yourself, Dirk," she said. Her voice was weary too. "It's not attractive."

"I want to do something," Dirk said. "I have to. I can't just... you know. You were right."

"We can't do anything, except run and die, and that won't help at all. We have no weapon."

Dirk laughed bitterly. "So we wait for Jaan and Garse to come and save us, and then . . . Our reunion was terribly short-lived, wasn't it?"

She leaned forward without answering, and cradled her head against her forearm on the top on the instrument panel. Dirk glanced at her and then looked outward again. He was still cold in his thin clothing, but somehow it did not seem important.

They sat quietly in the manta.

Until finally Dirk turned and put a hand on Gwen's shoulder. "The weapon," he said in a strangely animated voice. "Jaan said we had a weapon."

"The lasers on the aircar," Gwen said. "But-"

"No," Dirk said, suddenly grinning. "No, no, *no!*"

"What else could he have meant?"

In answer Dirk reached out and turned on the air-car's lifters, and the gray metal banshee stirred to life and rose slightly from the floor plates. "The car," he said. "The car itself."

"The Braiths outside have cars," she said. "*Armed* cars."

"Yes," Dirk said. "But Jaan and I weren't talking about the Braiths outside. We were talking about the hunting parties *inside*, the ones roaming around through the concourse killing people!"

Understanding burst across her face like sunlight. She grinned. "Yes," she said savagely, and she reached out to her instruments and the manta growled and from somewhere under its hood bright columns of white light fanned out to chase the darkness before them.

While she hovered a half-meter from the floor, Dirk vaulted out over the wings, went to the battered door and used his equally battered shoulder to knock loose a second panel, wide enough to give the aircar exit. Then Gwen moved the manta to him and he climbed in again.

A short time later, they were in the concourse, floating above the boulevard, close to where the overturned balloon-tired car lay. The bright beams of the headlamps swung over the stilled slidewalks and the long-deserted shops to point straight ahead, down the path that would lead around and around and around the tall tower of Challenge until it reached the ground at last.

"You realize," Gwen said before they started, "that we're in the *up* lane. Descending traffic is supposed to stay on the other side of the median." She pointed.

"This is prohibited, no doubt, by the norms of ai-Emerel." Dirk smiled. "But I don't think the Voice will mind."

Gwen gave him a fault smile back, touched her instruments, and the manta beneath them leaped forward with a rush and gathered speed. Then for a long time they made their own wind as they swept through the gray gloom, faster and faster, Gwen pale and tight-lipped at the controls, Dirk beside her idly watching the level numbers as corridor after corridor flicked by.

They heard the Braiths a long time before they saw them—the howling again, the wild baying shrieks unlike any canine that Dirk had ever heard before, made even wilder by the echoes that raced up and down the concourse in their wake. When he first heard the pack, Dirk reached out and snapped off the aircar's lights.

Gwen looked at him, questioning.

"We don't make much noise," he said. "They'll never hear us over the howls and their own shouts. But they might see the light coming up behind them. Right?"

"Right," she said. Nothing more. She was intent on the aircar. Dirk watched her in the pale gray light that remained to them. Her eyes were jade again, hard arid polished, as angry as Garse Janacek's could sometimes be. She had her gun at last, and the Kavalars hunters were somewhere ahead.

Close to level 497 they passed an area littered with scraps of torn cloth that fluttered and stirred in the wash of their descent. One piece, bigger than the others, scarcely moved from where it lay in the middle of the boulevard. The remains of a brown patchwork greatcoat, ripped to shreds.

Ahead, the howling came stronger and louder.

A smile passed briefly across Gwen's lips. Dirk saw it, and wondered, and remembered his gentle Jenny of Avalon.

Then they saw the figures, small black shapes on the shadowed concourse, shapes that swelled rapidly into men and dogs as the manta swept forward toward them. Five of the great hounds were loping down the boulevard freely, close on the heels of a sixth, larger than any of them, that strained at the ends of two

heavy black chains. Two men were on the far ends of the chains, stumbling behind the pack as the massive leader pulled them along.

They grew. How *fast* they grew!

The hounds heard the aircar coming first. The leader fought to turn, and one of the chains whipped loose from the hands of a hunter. Three of the free-roaming pack hounds spun, snarling, and a fourth began bounding back up the concourse toward the fast-descending car. The men briefly seemed confused. One was tangled in the chain he was holding when the lead dog reversed directions. The other, empty-handed, began to reach for something at his hip.

Gwen turned on the lights. In the semi-darkness, the manta's eyes were blinding.

The aircar ripped into them.

Impressions rolled over Dirk one after another. A lingering howl turned abruptly into a squeal of pain; impact made the manta shudder. Savage red eyes gleaming horribly close, a rat's face and yellow teeth wet with slaver, then impact again, another shudder, a snap. More impacts, sickening fleshy sounds, one, two, three. A scream, a very human scream, then there was a man outlined in the wash of the headlamps. It took them an hour to reach him, it seemed. He was a large square man, no one that Dirk knew, dressed in thick pants and jacket of chameleon cloth that seemed to change color as they neared. His hands were up in front of his eyes, one clutching a useless dueling laser, and Dirk could see the sheen of metal peeking from beneath the man's sleeve. White hair fell to his shoulders.

Then, suddenly, after an eternity of frozen motion, he was gone. The manta shuddered once again. Dirk shook with it.

Ahead was gray emptiness, the long curving boulevard.

Behind-Dirk turned to look-a hound was chasing after them, dragging two chains noisily as it ran. But it dwindled smaller and smaller as he watched. Dark shapes littered the cold plastic street. No sooner had he started to count them than they were gone. A pulse of light flamed briefly overhead, coming nowhere near them.

Shortly he and Gwen were alone again, and there was no sound except the rushing whisper of their descent. Her face was very still. Her hands were steady. His were not. "I think we killed him," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "We did. Some of the hounds as well." She was quiet for a while. Then she said, "His name, as I recall, was Teraan Braith something."

Both of them were quiet. Gwen turned off the headlamps once more.

"What are you doing?" Dirk said.

"There are more ahead of us," she said. "Remember the scream we heard."

"Yes." He thought for a time. "Can the car take any more collisions?"

She smiled faintly. "Ah," she said. "The Kavalair code duello has several aerial modes. Arrears are often chosen as weapons. They are strongly built. This car is constructed to withstand laser fires as long as possible. The armor- Need I go on?"

"No." He paused. "Gwen."

"Yes?"

"Don't kill any more of them."

She glanced at him. "They're hunting the Emereli," she said, "and whoever else is unlucky enough to be left inside of Challenge. They would gladly hunt us."

"Still," he said. "We can draw them off, win some time for the others. Jaan will get here soon. No one need be killed."

She sighed and her hands moved and she slowed the aircar. "Dirk," she started to say. Then she saw something and brought them to a near halt, so they hovered and slid forward slowly. "Here," she said, "look." She pointed.

The light was so dim, it was hard to make things out clearly, until they came closer, and then-a carcass of some sort, or what remained of one. In the center of the concourse, still and bloody. Chunks of meat scattered around it. Dried dark blood on the plastic.

"That has got to be the victim we heard earlier," Gwen explained in conversational tones. "Mockman hunters don't eat their kill, you know. In one breath, they say the creatures aren't human, only some sort of semi-sentient animals, and they believe it too. Yet the stench of cannibalism is too strong, even for them, so they don't dare. Even in the oldest days, on High Kavalaan during the dark centuries, the holdfast hunters never ate the flesh of the mockmen they ran down. They would leave that, for the gods, for the carrion moths, for the sand beetles. After they had given their hounds a taste, of course, as a reward. The hunters do take trophies, however. The head. You see the torso there? Show me the head."

Dirk felt sick.

"The skin too," Gwen continued. "They carry flaying knives. Or they did. Remember, mockman hunting has been banned on High Kavalaan for generations.

Even the highbond council of Braith has ruled against it. Such kills as the remaining hunters made were surreptitious. They have to hide their trophies, except maybe from each other. Here, though, well, let me just say that Jaan expects the Braiths to remain on Worlorn for as long as they can. He has told me there is talk of renouncing Braith, of bringing their *betheyns* from the homeworld's holdfasts, and forming a new coalition here, a gathering that will bring back all the old ways, all the dead and dying ugliness. For a time, a year or two or ten, as long as the Toberian stratoshield can gather in the warmth. Lorimaar high-Larteyn, and the like, with no one to restrain them."

"It would be insane!"

"Perhaps. That won't stop them. If Jaantony and Garse were to leave tomorrow, it would be done. The presence of Ironjade deters them. They fear that if they and the other Braith traditionalists moved here in force, then the progressive faction of Ironjade would also send men in force. There would be nothing to hunt then, and they and their children would face a short, hard life on a dying world, without even the pleasures they covet, the joys of high hunt. No." She shrugged. "But there are trophy rooms in Larteyn even now. Lorimaar alone boasts five heads, and it is said he has two jackets of 'mockman' skin. He doesn't wear them. Jaan would kill him."

She threw the aircar forward again, and once more they began to build up speed.

"Now," she said, "do you still want me to swerve aside the next time some of them come up? Now that you know what they are?"

He did not answer.

A very short time later the noises began once more below them, the drawn-out howls and the shouts, echoing down the otherwise empty concourse. They passed another overturned vehicle, its fat soft tires deflated and torn, and Gwen had to turn to pass around it. A little later there was a dead hulk of black metal blocking their descent, a massive robot with four tensed arms frozen in grotesque postures above its head. The upper part of its torso was a dark cylinder studded with glass eyes; the lower part was a base the size of an aircar, on treads. "A warder," Gwen said as they went by the quiet mechanical corpse, and Dirk saw that the hands had been sheared off each of its arms in turn, and that the body was riddled with fused laser holes.

"Was it fighting them?" he asked.

"Probably," she answered. "Which means that the Voice is still alive, still controls some functions. Maybe that's why we haven't heard anything further from Bretan Braith. It could be that they're having trouble down there. The Voice would naturally mass its warders to protect the city's life functions." She shrugged. "But it doesn't matter. The Emereli don't hold with violence. The warders are instruments of restraint. They fire sleep-darts, and I think they can emit tear gas from those grills in their base. The Braiths will win. Always."

Behind them the robot was already gone, and the concourse was empty once more. The noises ahead grew very loud.

This time Dirk said nothing when Gwen bore down upon them and turned on her lights, and the screams and the impacts piled one upon the other. She got both of the Braith hunters, although afterwards she said she was not so sure the second one was dead. He'd been hit a glancing blow that spun him to one side, into one of his own hounds.

And Dirk could find no voice at all, because as the man went stumbling and spinning off their right wing he lost his grip on the thing he had been carrying, and it flew through the air and smashed against the window of a shop, leaving a bloody path on the glass when it slid down to the floor. He had been holding it, Dirk noted, by the hair.

The corkscrew road went around and around the tower that was Challenge, sinking slowly and steadily. It took more time than Dirk could have imagined to sink from level 388-where they surprised the second party of Braiths-to level one. A long flight in gray silence.

They encountered no one else, neither Kavalair nor Emereli.

On level 120 a solitary warder blocked their way, turning all its dim eyes on them and commanding them to halt in the voice-still even and cordial-of the Voice of Challenge. But Gwen did not slow, and when she neared, the warder rolled off out of her way, firing no darts and emitting no gas. Its echoing commands chased them down the concourse.

On level fifty-seven the dim lights above them flickered and went out, and for an instant they flew in total darkness. Then Gwen turned on the headlamps and slackened her speed just a bit. Neither of them spoke, but Dirk thought of Bretan Braith and wondered briefly whether the lights had failed or had been turned off. The latter, he guessed; a survivor above had finally called his holdfast-brothers below.

On level one the concourse ended in a great mall and traffic circle. They could see very little of it; only where the beams of the headlamps touched did shapes leap startlingly out of the ocean of pitch that surrounded them. The center of the mall seemed to be a tree of sorts. Dirk caught glimpses of a massive gnarled trunk, a virtual wall of wood, and they could hear leaves rustling above them. The road curved around the great tree and met itself. Gwen followed it, all around the wide circle.

On the far side of the tree a wide gateway stood open to the night and Dirk felt the touch of wind on his face and realized why the leaves had been rustling. As they swept past the gateway, staying on the circle, he looked out. Beyond the gate a white ribbon of road led away from Challenge.

And an aircar was moving low over the road, quickly, toward the city. Toward them. Dirk glimpsed it only for an instant. It was dark-but everything was dark in the meager outworld starlight-and metallic, some misshapen Kavalair beast he could not even begin to identify.

It was not the Ironjades, of that he was sure.

Chapter 9

"We have succeeded," Gwen said dryly after they had moved beyond the gate. "They're after us."

"They saw us?"

"They had to. Our light, as we went past the open gateway. They couldn't miss that."

Thick darkness rushed by them on either side, and the leaves still rustled above their heads. "We run?" Dirk said.

"Their car will have working lasers, and ours doesn't. The outer concourse is the only road open to us. The Braith aircar will chase us up, and somewhere above us the hunters will be waiting. We only killed two, maybe three. There will be more. We're trapped."

Dirk was thoughtful. "We can loop around the circle again, go out the gate after they've entered."

"Yes, that's an obvious try. Too obvious, though. There will be another aircar outside waiting for us, I'd guess. I have a better idea." As she spoke, she slowed the manta and brought it to a halt. Immediately before them the road forked, amid the bright wash of the headlamps. To the left the traffic circle curved back on itself; to the right was the outer concourse, beginning its two-kilometer ascent.

Gwen turned off the lights and darkness engulfed them. When Dirk started to speak, she quieted him with a sharp "Sssh!"

The world was very black. He had gone blind. Gwen, the aircar, Challenge-everything had vanished. He heard leaves brushing against each other, and he thought he heard the other aircar, the Braiths, coming down on them, but that had to be his mind, for surely he would first have seen their lights.

There was a gentle rocking motion, as if he were sitting in a small boat. Something hard touched his arm, and Dirk started, and then other somethings scraped against his face.

Leaves.

They were rising, right up into the low-hanging dense foliage of the great spreading Emereli tree.

A branch, pushed down and then released, whipped him painfully across the cheek, drawing blood. Leaves pressed all around him. Finally there was a soft thud as the wings of the manta came hard against the bulk of a massive limb. They could rise no more. They hovered, blind, enveloped by darkness and unseen foliage.

A very short time later a blur of light flashed by beneath them, curving off to the right, up the concourse. No sooner was it gone than another came into sight-from the *left*-turned sharply up the fork, and followed the first. Dirk was very grateful that Gwen had ignored his suggestion.

They hovered amid the leaves for an endless time, but no other cars appeared. Finally Gwen lowered them back to the road. "That won't lose them permanently," she said. "When their trap closes and we're not in it, they'll begin to wonder."

Dirk was dabbing at the wetness on his cheek with his shirttail. When his fingers finally told him that the thin trickle of blood had dried, he turned in the direction of Gwen's voice. He was still blind. "So they'll hunt for us," he said. "That's good. While they're being bothered by trying to figure out where we went, they won't be killing any Emereli. And Jaan and Garse should get here soon. Now is the time for us to hide, I think."

"Hide or run," came Gwen's answer from the darkness. She still had not touched the aircar lights.

"I have an idea," Dirk said. He touched his cheek again. Then, satisfied, he began to tuck away his shirttails. "When you were swinging around the circle I noticed something. A ramp, with a sign. Just saw it briefly in the headlamps, but it reminded me. Worlorn has a subway network, right? Intercity?"

"True," Gwen said. "It's dismantled, though."

"Is it? I know the trains don't run, but what about the tunnels? Did they fill them in?"

"I don't know. I hardly think so." Suddenly the air-car's headlamps woke again, and Dirk blinked at the sudden light. "Show me this sign," Gwen said, and once more they began the wide circuit around the central tree.

It was a subway entrance, as Dirk had guessed. A shallow ramp led down into darkness. Gwen stopped their forward motion and left them hovering a few meters away while she played the headlamps over the sign. "It will mean abandoning the aircar," she said at last. "Our only weapon."

"Yes," Dirk said. The entrance was much too narrow for the gray metal manta to pass; clearly the subway builders had not counted on anyone wanting to fly through their tunnels. "But that might be best. We can't leave Challenge, and inside the city the car limits our mobility pretty severely. Right?" When Gwen did not answer immediately, he rubbed his head wearily. "It sounds right to me, but maybe I'm not thinking so clearly. I'm tired and I'd probably be scared if I stopped to think about this. I've got bruises and cuts and I want to get some sleep."

"Well," Gwen said, "the subway might be worth a chance then. We can put a few kilometers between us and Challenge, and sleep. I don't think the Braiths will think to hunt for us there, down in the tunnels."

"It's decided, then," Dirk said.

They went about it very methodically. Gwen set the aircar down next to the subterranean ramp and got the sensor pack and the field supplies out of the back seat. They took the sky-scoots as well, changing into the flight boots and discarding their own footwear. And among the tools mounted on the underside of the banshee's hood was a small hand torch, a metal-and-plastic rod as long as a man's forearm that gave off a pale white light.

When they were ready to depart, Gwen treated them both with null-scent again, then had Dirk wait by the subway entrance while she flew the aircar halfway around the great circle and left it standing in the center of the roadway near one of the largest first-level corridors. Let the Braiths think they had gone off into the interior labyrinths of Challenge; they'd have a fine long hunt ahead of them.

Dirk waited in darkness while Gwen walked the long walk back around the tree, lighting her path with the hand torch. Then, together, they went down the ramp to the abandoned subway terminal. The descent was longer than Dirk had expected. They went at least two levels below the surface, he guessed, walking quietly while their light reflected off featureless walls of pastel blue. He thought of Bretan Braith, some fifty levels below even them, and hoped briefly and insanely that the tunnels would still be powered, being (after all) something outside of the Emereli tower-city and thus beyond Bretan's reach.

But of course the subway system had been de-powered long before Bretan and the other Braiths had even come to Worlorn; below they found nothing but a vast echoing platform and massive stone wormholes

rushing away to infinity. Infinity seemed very close at hand in the dark. The terminal was still, and its stillness seemed steeped in death, much more so than the quiet corridors of Challenge. It was like walking through a tomb. There was dust everywhere. The Voice had permitted no dust in Challenge, Dirk realized, but the subways were not of Challenge, not the work of ai-Emerel at all. As they walked, their footsteps sounded horribly loud.

Gwen studied a systems map very carefully before they set off into the tunnels. "There are two lines down here," she said, whispering for some reason. "One line connects all the Festival cities in a great circuit. Trains, it appears, used to run along it in both directions. The other line is a shuttle service connecting Challenge with the spaceport. Each city had its own spaceport shuttle. So which way should we go?"

Dirk was exhausted and irritable. "I don't care," he said. "What difference does it make? We can't very well walk to the next city anyway. Even with the sky-scoots, the distances are too much."

Gwen nodded thoughtfully, still looking at the map. "Two hundred thirty kilometers to Esvoch in one direction, three hundred eighty to Kryne Lamiya if we go the other way. More than that to the spaceport. I guess you're right." She shrugged and turned and picked a direction at random. "That way," she said.

They wanted speed and distance. Sitting on the edge of the platform above the track, they locked their boots into the tissue-metal platforms of their sky-scoots, then set off slowly in the direction Gwen had indicated. She went first, staying a bare quarter-meter off the ground and trailing her left hand along the tunnel wall lightly. Her right held the hand torch. Dirk stayed behind her, flying a little higher so that he could see over her shoulder. The tunnel they had chosen was a great gentle curve, veering away ever so slightly to their left. There was nothing to see, nothing to remark on. At times Dirk lost the sensation of motion entirely, so even and uneventful was their flight.

Then it seemed to him that he and Gwen were floating in some timeless limbo, while the walls crawled steadily past.

But at last, when they had come a good three kilometers from Challenge, they dropped to the bottom of the tunnel and stopped. By then neither of them had anything to say. Gwen leaned the hand torch up against a rough-hewn stone wall while they sat in the dirt and removed their boots. Wordless, she unslung her field supplies and used the packet as a pillow. No sooner did her head touch it than she was asleep, gone from him.

And apart from him too.

His own weariness did not lift, but Dirk found it difficult to sleep. Instead he sat by the edge of the small circle of pale light-Gwen had left the hand torch on-and watched her, watched her breathe, watched the shadows play along her cheeks and in her hair when she moved restlessly in sleep. He grew aware then of how very far she lay from him, and he remembered that they had not touched or talked all the way from Challenge. He did not think about it; his mind was too fogged by fear and fatigue for thought. But he felt it, like a weight upon his chest, and the dark pressed very heavy on him in the long dusty hollow beneath the world.

Finally he shut off the torch and all sight of his Jenny, and tried to sleep himself. It came in time. But nightmares came with it. He dreamed he was with Gwen, kissing her, holding her closely. But when his

lips met hers, it was not Gwen at all; it was Bretan Braith he was kissing, Bretan whose lips were dry and hard, whose glowstone eye flamed frighteningly close in the blackness.

And after that he was running again, running down some endless tunnel, running to nowhere. But at his back he could hear the rush of water, and when he looked over his shoulder he thought he could glimpse a solitary bargeman poling an empty barge. The bargeman was floating down an oily black stream, and Dirk was running over dry stone, but somehow in the dream that seemed not to matter. He ran and he ran, but always the barge loomed closer, and finally he could see that the bargeman had no face, no face at all.

There was a quiet after that, and for the rest of the long night Dirk did not dream.

A light was shining where no light ought to be.

It reached him even through his closed eyelids and his slumber: a wavering yellow radiance, close at hand and then receding a bit. Dirk was aware of it only dimly when it first intruded on his hard-earned sleep. He mumbled and rolled away from it. Voices muttered nearby, and someone laughed a small sharp laugh. Dirk ignored it.

Then they kicked him, quite hard, across the face.

His head snapped sideways and the chains of sleep dissolved in a blur of pain. Lost and hurt, not knowing where he was, he struggled to sit up. His temple throbbed. Everything was too bright. He threw an arm across his eyes to block out the light and shield himself from further kicks. There was another laugh.

Slowly the world took form.

They were Braiths, of course.

One of them, a gangling bony man with a frizz of black hair, stood on the far side of the tunnel holding Gwen with one hand and a laser pistol with the other. Another laser, a rifle, was slung across his shoulders on a strap. Gwen's hands had been bound behind her back, and she stood silently with her eyes downcast.

The Braith who was standing over Dirk had not drawn a laser, but in his left hand was a high-powered hand torch that filled the subway with yellow light. The glare of the torch made it difficult for Dirk to make out his features, but he was Kavalars-tall and quite heavy, and seemed to be bald as an egg.

"At last we have won your attention," said the man with the light. The other one laughed, the same laugh Dirk had heard earlier.

With difficulty, Dirk rose to his feet and took a step backwards, away from the Kavalars. He leaned up against the tunnel wall and tried to steady himself, but his skull screamed at him and the scene swam. The bright hot hand torch was an ache eating into his eyes.

"You have injured the game, Pyr," the Braith with the laser commented from the other side of the tunnel.

"Not overly, I would hope," said the heavy man.

"Are you going to kill me?" Dirk asked. The words came with remarkable ease, considering what they were. He was finally beginning to recover from the kick.

Gwen raised her eyes when he spoke. "Eventually they'll kill you," she said in a hopeless voice. "It won't be an easy end. I'm sorry, Dirk."

"Silence, *betheyn-bitch*," said the heavy man, the one called Pyr. Dirk was vaguely conscious of having heard the name before. The man glanced at her casually as he spoke, then looked back toward Dirk.

"What does she mean?" Dirk said nervously. He was pressing himself hard against the stone and trying to tense his muscles inconspicuously. Pyr stood less than a meter away. The Braith seemed cocky and off-guard, but Dirk wondered how true an impression that might be. The man was holding the torch aloft in his left hand, but his right held something else—a baton about a meter long, of some dark wood, with a round hardwood knob at one end and a short blade at the other. He held it lightly between his fingers, his hand around the center shaft, tapping it rhythmically against his leg.

"You have led us a spirited chase, mockman," Pyr said. "I do not say this lightly, or in jape. Few are my equals in the old high hunt. None are my superior. Even Lorimaar high-Braith Arkellor has only half my trophy count. So when I tell you that this hunt has been extraordinary, you know I say truth. I am elated that it is not over."

"What?" Dirk said. "Not over?" The man was so close—he wondered if he could get Pyr between himself and the other man, the one with the laser, and maybe wrest the bladed baton away from him. Perhaps he could even get Pyr's holstered sidearm.

"There is no sport in taking a sleeping mockman, nor is there honor. You will run again, Dirk t'Larien."

"He'll make you his personal *korariel*," Gwen said angrily, looking at the two Braiths with calculated defiance. "No one will be able to hunt you except him and his *teyn*."

Pyr turned toward her again. "I said silence!"

She laughed at him. "Knowing Pyr," she continued, "the hunt will be pure tradition. You'll be cut loose in the forests, probably naked. These two will put away their lasers and aircars and come after you on foot, with knives and throwing-swords and hounds. After they deliver me to my masters, of course."

Pyr was frowning. The other Braith raised his pistol and used it to give Gwen a sharp crack across the mouth.

Dirk tensed, hesitated an instant too long, and jumped.

Even a meter was too far; Pyr was smiling as his head turned again. The baton came up with frightening speed, and the knob caught Dirk square in the gut. He staggered and doubled up and somehow tried to keep going. Pyr stepped daintily backwards and brought his stick around hard, into Dirk's groin. The world vanished in a red haze.

He was vaguely conscious of Pyr standing over him once more after he had collapsed. Then the Braith struck him a third time, an almost casual blow to the side of his head, and then there was nothing.

He hurt. That was the first thing he knew. That was all he knew. He hurt. His head spun and throbbed and shuddered in a strange sort of rhythm; his stomach ached as well, and below that he felt numb. Pain and dizziness were the boundaries of Dirk's world. For the longest time, that was everything.

Gradually, though, a blurred sort of awareness returned to him. He began to notice things. The pain first-it came and went in waves. Up and down it went, up and down. He was going up and down too, he finally realized, jouncing and bouncing. He was lying on something. Being dragged or carried. He moved his hands, or tried to. It was hard. The pain seemed to wipe away all normal sensation. His mouth was full of blood. His ears were ringing, buzzing, burning.

He was being carried, yes. There were voices; he could hear voices, talking and buzzing. The words would not come clear. Ahead, somewhere, a light danced and wavered; everything else was a gray mist.

Little by little the buzzing dwindled. Finally the words began to come.

". . . not be happy," said a voice he did not know. He did not think he knew it, anyway. It was hard to tell. Everything was so terribly distant, and he was bouncing, and the pain came and went, came and went, came and went.

"Yes," said another voice, heavy, clipped, sure.

More buzzing-several voices at once. Dirk understood nothing.

Then one man silenced the others. "Enough," he said. This voice was more removed even than the first two; it came from somewhere ahead, from the wavering light. Pyr? Pyr. "I have no fear of Bretan Braith Lantry, Roseph. You forget who I am. I had taken three heads in the wilds when Bretan Braith was still sucking women's teats. The mockman is mine by all the old rights."

"Truth," the first unknown voice replied. "If you had taken him in the tunnels, none would deny your right. Yet you did not."

"I wish a pure hunt, of the oldest kind." Someone said something in Old Kavalan. There was a laugh.

"Many the time we hunted together in our youth, Pyr," the strange voice said. "Had you only felt differently about women, we might well have become *teyn-and-teyn*, we two. I would not speak you wrong. Bretan Braith Lantry wants this man badly."

"He is no man, he is mockman. You ruled him so yourself, Roseph. The wants of Bretan Braith are nothing to me."

"I did rule him mockman, and so he is. To you and me, he is only one such, one among many. We have the jelly children to hunt, the Emereli, and others. You do not need him, Pyr. Bretan Braith feels differently. He came to the death-square and was made a fool when the man he challenged was no man at all."

"That is truth, but it is not the whole of it. T'Larien is a special sort of prey. Two of our *kethi* are dead at his hands, and Koraat lies dying with a broken spine. No mockman has ever run that way before. I will take him, as is my right. I found him, I alone."

"Yes," said the second new voice, the heavy, clipped one. "That is truth enough, Pyr. How did you discover him?"

Pyr was glad enough of a chance to boast. "I was not misled by the aircar, as you were, and you, and even Lorimaar. He had been too clever, this mockman, and the *betheyn-bitch* who ran at his side. They would not let the car sit like a pointer to the place they had gone. When you had all taken your hounds and fanned out down the corridor, my *teyn* and I began to search the mall by torchlight, looking for a trail. I knew the hounds would be useless. No need for them. I am a better tracker than any hound or hound master. I have tracked mockmen over the bare stone of the Lameraan Hills, through the blasted dead cities, even into the abandoned holdfasts of Taal and Bronzefist and the Glowstone Mountain. These two were pitifully easy. We checked each corridor for a distance of several meters, then moved on to check the next. We found the trail. Scuffmarks on the floor outside a subway ramp, then veritable road signs in the dust. The track vanished when they began to use their flying toys, of course, but by then we had only two possible directions to consider. I feared they might try to fly all the way to Esvoch or Kryne Lamiya, but such was not the truth. It took us most of the day and long walking, yet we caught them."

Dirk was almost alert by then, though his body was still wrapped in a gauze of pain and he doubted that it would respond very efficiently if he tried to move. He could see quite clearly. Pyr Braith was walking in front with the hand torch, talking to a smaller man in white and purple, who must be Roseph, the arbiter of the duels that never were. Between them was Gwen, walking under her own power, her hands still bound. She was silent. Dirk wondered if they had gagged her, but it was impossible to tell, since he could only see her back.

He was lying in a litter of sorts, bouncing with every step. Another Braith in white and purple was holding the front end, his big-knuckled fists wrapped around the wooden poles. The bony laughter, Pyr's *teyn*, was probably behind him, then, at the other end of the litter. They were still in the tunnel, walking; the subway appeared to go on forever, and Dirk had no inkling of how long he had been out. Quite a while, he guessed; there had been no Roseph and no litter when he had tried to tackle Pyr, he was certain of that. His captors had probably waited in the tunnel after calling their holdfast-brothers for help.

No one appeared to have noticed that Dirk had opened his eyes. Or perhaps they had noticed and they simply didn't care. He was in no condition to do anything except maybe scream for help.

Pyr and Roseph continued to talk, with the two others interjecting comments from time to time. Dirk tried to listen, but the pain made it hard to concentrate, and what they were saying was of very little value to Gwen and himself. Chiefly Roseph seemed to be warning Pyr that Bretan Braith would be very upset if Pyr killed Dirk, since Bretan Braith wanted to kill Dirk himself. Pyr didn't care; from his comments, it seemed clear that he had little respect for Bretan, who was two generations younger than the rest of them and therefore suspect. At no time in the conversation did any of the hunters mention the Ironjades, which led Dirk to conclude that either Jaan and Garse had not yet reached Challenge or these four were not yet aware of it.

After a while he stopped straining to understand and let himself slide back into a semi-sleep. The voices became a blur again and went on a long time. Finally, though, they stopped. One end of the litter dropped roughly, and he was jarred back to attention. Strong hands supported him beneath his arms and lifted.

They had reached the terminal beneath Challenge, and Pyr's *teyn* was lifting him to the platform. He did not even try to help. He went limp as he could and let them move him like, a piece of dead meat.

Then he was in the litter again and they were carrying him up the ramp into the city proper. They had not handled him gently at the platform; his head was swimming once again. Pastel blue walls went by, and he was reminded of their descent down the ramp last night. For some reason, hiding in the subway had seemed like a terribly good idea at the time.

The walls vanished, and they were in Challenge once again. He saw the great Emereli tree, this time in all of its massive grandeur. It was a gnarled giant, blue and black, its limbs hanging low over the visible curve of the traffic circle while its topmost branches brushed against the shadowed ceiling. Day had come, Dirk realized. The gateway remained open, and through its arch he could see Fat Satan and a single yellow star hanging on the horizon. He was much too lost and weary to know whether they were rising or setting.

Two hulking Kavalair aircars sat on the road near the subway ramp. Pyr halted nearby, and Dirk was lowered to the floor. He struggled to sit up, to no avail. His limbs thrashed weakly and the pain came back, until he surrendered and lay back again.

"Summon the others," Pyr said. "These matters should be settled here and now, so my *korariel* can be made ready for the hunt." He stood over Dirk as he spoke. All of them were clustered around the litter, even Gwen. But she alone looked down, and her eyes caught his. She was gagged. And tired. And hopeless.

It took well over an hour for the other Braiths to assemble; for Dirk an hour of fading light and gathering strength. It *was* sunset, he soon realized; beyond the gateway, Fat Satan sank slowly out of sight. The darkness swelled around them, growing thicker and denser until finally the Kavalairs were forced to turn on the headlamps of their aircars. By then Dirk's dizziness had all but passed. Pyr, noticing, had his hands bound behind his back and forced him to sit up against the side of one of the cars. They placed Gwen beside him, but did not remove her gag.

Though Dirk was not gagged, he did not try to speak. He sat with the cold metal to his back and his wrists chafing within their bonds, and he waited and watched and listened. From time to time he would glance toward Gwen, but she sat slumped with her head downcast and did not return his gaze.

Singly and in pairs they came. The *kethi* of Braith. The hunters of Worlorn. From the shadows and dark places they came. Like pale ghosts. A noise and a vague shape at first, before they walked into the small circle of light and turned to men again. Even then they were more and less than human.

The first to come led four tall rat-faced hounds, and Dirk recognized him from the wild gray plunge down the outer concourse. The man chained his hounds to the bumper of Roseph's aircar, gave curt greetings to Pyr and Roseph and their *teyns*, then sat cross-legged on the floor a few meters from the prisoners. He did not speak, not once. His eyes fixed on Gwen and never left her, and he did not move at all. Nearby, Dirk could hear his hounds growling in the shadows, their iron chains twisting and rattling.

Then the others came. Lorimaar high-Braith Arkellor, a brown giant in a pitch-black suit of chameleon cloth fastened with buttons of pale bone, arrived in a massive domed aircar of deep red. Within, Dirk could hear the sounds of a pack of Braith hounds. With Lorimaar was another man, a square fat man twice as heavy as Pyr, his bulk hard and solid as brick, his face pale and porcine. After them, alone and on foot, came a frail-looking oldster, bald and wrinkled and nearly toothless, with one hand of flesh and bone and one three-pronged claw of dark metal. The old man had a child's head slung from his belt; it was still bleeding, and one leg of his white trousers bore the long brown stain of its dripping.

Finally Chell arrived, as tall as Lorimaar, white-haired and mustachioed and very weary, leading a single huge Braith hound. Within the pool of light he stopped and blinked.

"Where is your *teyn*?" Pyr demanded.

"Here." A rasp from the darkness. A few meters away a single glowstone shone dimly. Bretan Braith Lantry came forward and stood next to Chell. His face twitched.

"All have gathered," Roseph high-Braith said to Pyr.

"No," someone objected. "There is Koraat."

The silent hunter spoke up from the floor. "He is no more. He begged ending. I granted it. In truth, he was badly broken. He was the second *keth* I have watched die today. The first was my *teyn*, Teraan Braith Nalarys." As he spoke, his eyes never left Gwen. He finished with a long breathless sentence in Old Kavalat.

"Three of us are gone," the old man said.

"We shall have a silence for them," Pyr said. He was still holding his baton, with its hardwood knob and its short blade, and he tapped it restlessly against his leg as he spoke, just as he had done in the tunnels.

Through her gag, Gwen tried to scream. Pyr's *teyn*, the gangling Kavalat with the wild black hair, came over and stood above her menacingly.

But Dirk, ungagged, had gotten the idea. "I'm not going to keep silence," he shouted. Or tried to. His voice was not quite up to shouting. "They were killers, all of them. Deserved to die."

All of the Braiths were looking at him.

"Gag him and stop his screaming," Pyr said. His *teyn* moved quickly to comply. When it was done, Pyr spoke again. "You shall have time enough to scream, Dirk t'Larien, when you run naked through the forests and you hear my hounds baying behind you."

Bretan's head and shoulders turned awkwardly. Light glistened on his scar tissue. "No," he said. "First claim is mine."

Pyr faced him. "I tracked the mockman. I took him."

Bretan twitched. Chell, still holding the great hound by a chain wrapped about one heavy hand, laid his other hand on Bretan's shoulder.

"This is no matter to me," another voice said. The Braith who sat on the floor. Staring. Unmoving. "What of the bitch?"

The others shifted their attention uneasily. "She can not be at issue, Myrik," said Lorimaar high-Braith. "She is of Ironjade."

The man's lips drew back sharply; for an instant his placid face was wildly distorted, a beast's face, a rictus of emotion. Then it passed. His features settled into pale stillness again, everything held in check. "I will kill this woman," he said. "Teraan was my *teyn*. She has set his ghost adrift upon a soulless world."

"Her?" Lorimaar's voice was incredulous. "Is this truth?"

"I saw," replied the man on the floor, the one called Myrik. "I fired after her when she rode us down and left Teraan dying. This is truth, Lorimaar high-Braith."

Dirk tried to rise to his feet, but the gangling Kavalat pushed him down again, hard, and slammed his head back against the metal flank of the aircar to underline the point.

The frail oldster spoke then—the clawed ancient who carried the child's head. "Take her then as your personal prey," he said, his voice as thin and sharp as the blade of the flaying knife that hung at his belt. "The wisdom of the holdfasts is old and certain, my brothers. She is no true woman now, if she ever was, neither heldwife or *eyn-keth*. Who is there to vouch for her? She has left her highbond's protection to run with a mockman! If she was flesh of man's flesh once, it is so no longer. You know the ways of the mockmen, the liars, the weres, the great deceivers. Alone with her in the dark, this mockman Dirk would surely have slain her and set in her place a demon like himself, fashioned in her image."

Chell nodded agreement and said something grave in Old Kavalat. The other Braiths looked less certain. Lorimaar traded scowls with his *teyn*, the square fat man. Bretan's hideous face was noncommittal, half a mask of scar tissue, half blank innocence. Pyr frowned and continued to tap restlessly with his baton.

It was Roseph who replied. "I ruled Gwen Delvano human when I was arbiter at the square of death," he said carefully.

"This is truth," Pyr said.

"Perhaps she was human then," the old man said. "Yet she has tasted blood and slept with a mockman, and who will call her human now?"

The hounds began to howl.

The four that Myrik had chained to the aircar started the cacophony, and it was taken up by the pack locked inside Lorimaar's domed vehicle. Chell's massive canine snarled and pulled at his chain, until the elderly Braith jerked back angrily; then the creature sat and joined the howling.

Most of the hunters glanced toward the silent darkness beyond their little circle (Myrik, frozen-faced and immobile, was the notable exception—his eyes never left Gwen Delvano), and more than one touched his sidearm.

On the edge of the circle, beyond the aircars and their pool of light, the two Ironjades stood side by side in shadow.

Dirk's pain-his head was pounding-abruptly seemed of no consequence. His body trembled and shook. He looked at Gwen; she was looking up, at *them*. At Jaan especially.

He walked into the light then, and Dirk saw that he was staring at Gwen almost as fixedly as the man called Myrik. He seemed to move very slowly, like a figure in some dusty dream, a man asleep. Garse Janacek was alive and liquid at his side.

Vikary was dressed in a mottled suit of chameleon cloth, all shades of black and blacker when he entered the circle of his enemies. By the time the hounds had quieted, he was wearing dusty gray. The sleeves of his shirt ended just above the elbow; iron-and-glowstone embraced his right forearm, jade-and-silver his left. For an endless instant he loomed very large. Chell and Lorimaar both stood a head taller, but somehow, briefly, Vikary seemed to dominate. He flowed past them, a striding ghost-how unreal he was even there-who walked through the Braiths as if he could not see them, and stopped near Gwen and Dirk.

But it was all illusion. The noise subsided, the Braiths began to speak, and Jaan Vikary was just a man again, larger than many but smaller than some. "You trespass, Ironjades," Lorimaar said in a hard angry tone. "You were not called to this place. You have no right to be here."

"Mockmen," spat Chell. "False Kavalars." Bretan Braith Lantry made his singular noise. "Your *betheyn* I grant to you, Jaantony high-Ironjade," Pyr said firmly, but his baton moved in nervous haste. "Discipline her as you will, as you must. The mockman is mine to hunt."

Garse Janacek had stopped a few meters away. His eyes moved from one speaker to another, and twice he seemed about to reply. But Jaan Vikary ignored all of them. "Remove the bindings from their mouths," he said, gesturing toward the prisoners.

Pyr's long-limbed *teyn* stood over Dirk and Gwen, facing the Ironjade highbond. He hesitated a long moment, then bent and undid the gags.

"Thanks," Dirk said.

Gwen shook her head to throw loose hair out of her eyes and climbed unsteadily to her feet, her arms still bound behind her back. "Jaan," she said in an uncertain voice. "You heard?"

"I heard," Vikary said. Then, to the Braiths, "Cut loose her arms."

"You presume, Ironjade," Lorimaar said.

Pyr, however, seemed curious. He leaned on his baton. "Cut loose her arms," he said.

His *teyn* pulled Gwen around roughly and used his knife to free her.

"Show me your arms," Vikary said to Gwen.

She hesitated, then brought her hands out from behind her back and extended them, palms down. On her left arm the jade-and-silver shone. She had not removed it.

Dirk watched, bound and helpless, feeling chill. She had not removed it.

Vikary looked down on Myrik, who still sat with his legs crossed and his small eyes set on Gwen. "Rise to your feet."

The man rose and turned to face the Ironjade, taking his gaze from Gwen for the first time since he had arrived. Vikary started to speak.

"No," Gwen said.

She had been rubbing her wrists. Now she stopped and laid her right hand on her bracelet. Her voice was steady. "Don't you understand, Jaan? No. If you challenge him, if you kill him, then I will take it off. I will."

For the first time, emotion washed over Jaan's face, and the name of it was anguish. "You are my *betheyn*," he said. "If I do not... Gwen ..."

"No," she said.

One of the Braiths laughed. At the sound, Garse Janacek grimaced, and Dirk saw a savage spasm come and go on the face of the man called Myrik.

If Gwen noticed, she paid no mind. She faced Myrik. "I killed your *teyn*," she said. "Me. Not Jaan.

Not poor Dirk. I killed him, and I admit it. He was hunting us, as you were. And killing the Emereli as well."

Myrik said nothing. Everyone was still.

"If you must duel, then, if you really want me dead, duel *me!*" Gwen continued. "I did it. Fight me if your revenge is so important."

Pyr laughed loudly. An instant later his *teyn* joined him, and Roseph as well, then several of the others - the fat man, Roseph's blocky stern-faced companion, the clawed ancient. All of them were laughing.

Myrik's face went blood-dark, then white, then dark again. "*Betheyn-bitch*," he said. The shuddering rictus passed across his face once more, and this time everyone saw. "You jape me. A duel is ... my *teyn* . . . and you a woman!"

He ended with a scream that startled the men and set the hounds again to howling. Then he shattered.

His hands rose over his head and clenched and unclenched, and he struck her across the face as she shied away from his fury, and suddenly he was on her. His fingers wrapped around her throat and he dove forward and she went over backwards, and then they were rolling over and over on the floor until they came up hard against the side of an aircar. Myrik came out firmly on top, with Gwen pinned beneath him and his hands digging deep into the flesh of her neck. She hit him then, hard across the jaw, but in his rage he scarcely seemed to feel it. He began to slam her head against the aircar, again and again and again, screaming all the while in Old Kavalair.

Dirk struggled to his feet only to stand uselessly with his hands bound. Garse took two quick steps forward, and Jaan Vikary was finally moving. But it was Bretan Braith Lantry who reached them first and dragged Myrik off her with an arm around his neck. Myrik flailed wildly, until Lorimaar joined Bretan and between them they held the man still.

Gwen lay inert, her head up against the plate-metal door where Myrik had slammed it. Vikary knelt at her side, on one knee, and tried to put an arm around her shoulders. The back of her head left a smear of blood on the side of the aircar.

Janacek knelt too, quickly, and felt her pulse. Satisfied, he rose again and turned back to face the Braiths, his mouth tight with anger. "She wore jade-and-silver, Myrik," he said. "You are a dead man. I issue challenge."

Myrik had stopped screaming, though he was panting. One of the hounds howled and fell silent.

"Does she live?" Bretan asked in his sandpaper voice.

Jaan Vikary looked up at him out of a face as strange and strained as Myrik's had been just a short time before. "She lives."

"Good fortune," said Janacek, "but no thanks to you, Myrik, nor will it make a difference. Make your choices!"

"Let me loose!" Dirk said. No one moved.

"Let me loose!" he shouted.

Someone sliced apart his bonds.

He went to Gwen, kneeling beside Vikary. Briefly their eyes met. Dirk examined the back of her head, where the dark hair was already beginning to crust with clotted blood. "A concussion at least," he said. "Maybe a fractured skull, maybe worse. I don't know. Are there medical facilities?" He looked at each of them. "Are there?"

Bretan answered. "None functional in Challenge, t'Larien. The Voice fought me. The city would not respond. I had to kill it."

Dirk grimaced. "She shouldn't be moved, then. Maybe it's only a concussion. I think she's supposed to rest."

Incredibly, Jaan Vikary left her in Dirk's arms and stood up. He gestured to Lorimaar and Bretan, who held Myrik prisoned between them. "Release him."

"Release. . . ?" Janacek threw Vikary a puzzled glance.

"Jaan," Dirk said, "never mind about him. Gwen-"

"Get her inside an aircar," Vikary said.

"I don't think we should move-

"It is not safe here, t'Larien. Get her inside an aircar."

Janacek was frowning. "My *teyn*?"

Vikary faced the Braiths again. "I told you to release that man." He paused. "That mockman, as you would call him. He has earned the name."

"What do you intend, high-Ironjade?" Lorimaar said sternly.

Dirk lifted Gwen and laid her gently in the back of the closest of the aircars. She was quite limp, but her breathing was still regular. Then he slid into the driver's seat and waited, massaging his wrists to restore circulation.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten him. Lorimaar high-Braith was still talking. "We recognize your right to face Myrik, but it must be singled, as Teraan Braith Nalarys lies dead. Since your own *teyn* challenged first..."

Jaan Vikary had his laser pistol in his hand. "Release him and stand away."

Lorimaar, startled, let go of Myrik's arm and stepped swiftly to the side. Bretan hesitated. "High-Ironjade," he rasped, "for your honor and his, for your holdfast and your *teyn*, set down your weapon."

Vikary aimed at the half-faced youth. Bretan twitched, then released Myrik and fell back with a grotesque shrug.

"What is happening?" the one-handed oldster was demanding in a shrill voice. "What is he doing?" Everyone ignored him.

"Jaan," Garse Janacek said in a horrified tone. "This has disarrayed your thoughts. Lower your gun, my *teyn*. I have challenged. I will kill him for you." He laid his hand on Jaan's arm.

And Jaan Vikary wrenched free and pointed his weapon at Garse. "No. Stand back. You will not interfere, not now. This is for her."

Janacek's face darkened; he had no grins now, none of his savage wit. His right hand balled into a fist, and he slowly raised it straight up in front of his face. Iron-and-glowstone stood shining in the space between the two Ironjades. "Our bond," said Janacek. "Think, my *teyn*. My honor, and yours, and that of our holdfast." His voice was grave.

"What of *her* honor?" Vikary said. Gesturing impatiently with his laser, he forced Janacek away from him and turned again on Myrik.

Alone and confused, Myrik seemed not to know what was expected of him. His rage had deserted him, though he was still breathing hard. A trail of spittle, tinged pink by blood, ran from one corner of his mouth. He wiped it off with the back of his hand and looked uncertainly toward Garse Janacek. "The first of the four choices," he began in a dazed voice. "I make the choice of mode."

"No," said Vikary. "You make no choices. Face *me*, mockman."

Myrik looked from Vikary to Janacek and back again. "The choice of mode," he repeated numbly.

"No," Vikary said again. "You gave Gwen Delvano no choices, she who would have faced you fair, in duel."

Myrik's face twisted into a look of honest bafflement. "She? In duel? I ... she was a woman, a mockman." He nodded, as if he had settled everything. "She was a *woman*, Ironjade. Have you gone mad? She japed me. A woman does not duel."

"And you do not duel, Myrik. Do you understand? Do you? *You*"-he fired, and a half-second pulse of light took Myrik low, between his legs, so the man screamed-

"*do*"-and he fired again, and burned Myrik in the neck just beneath his chin, and then waited as the man fell and his laser recycled-

"*not*"-he continued, fifteen seconds later, and with the word a spurt of light that burned the writhing figure across the chest, and then Vikary was stepping backwards, toward the aircar-

"*duel!*" he finished, half in and half out of the car, and with the word came a flick of his wrist and a fourth burst of light, and Lorimaar high-Braith Arkellor was falling, his weapon half drawn.

Then the door slammed, and Dirk threw on the the gravity grid, and they jerked forward and up and out, and were halfway to the exit arch when the laser fire began to hiss and burn against their armor.

Chapter 10

It was full night above the Common. The air was black crystal, clear and cold. The winds were bad. Dirk was grateful for the heavily armored Braith aircar, with its warm cabin, fully enclosed.

He kept them about a hundred meters above the plains and the gentle hills, and pushed the car as fast as he was able. Once, before Challenge had vanished behind them, Dirk looked back to see if there were any signs of pursuit. He saw none, but the Emereli city caught and held his eye. A tall black spear, soon to be lost against the blacker sky, it reminded him somehow of the great tree that had been caught in a forest fire, its branches and its leaves all gone, nothing left but a charred and soot-dark stick to echo its former glory. He remembered Challenge as Gwen had first shown it to him, when he had asked to see a city with life: bright against the evening, impossibly tall and shining silver, crowned by its ascending bursts of light. A dead husk now, and dead too the dreams of its builders. The hunters of Braith killed more than men and animals.

"They will be after us soon enough, t'Larien," Jaan Vikary said. "You need not search for them."

Dirk turned his attention back to his instruments. "Where are we going? We can't just fly blind above the Common all night, heading for nowhere in particular. Larteyn?"

"We dare not go to Larteyn now," Vikary replied. He had holstered his laser, but his face was as grim as it had been in Challenge when he burned down Myrik. "Are you so much the fool that you do not realize what I did? I broke the code, t'Larien. I am an outbonder now, a criminal, a duel-breaker. They will come after me and kill me as easily as they would a mockman." He knotted his hands together thoughtfully beneath his chin. "Our best hope ... I do not know. Perhaps we have no hope."

"Speak for yourself. I have quite a bit more hope right now than I did a minute ago, back *there!*"

Vikary looked at him and smiled despite himself. "In truth. Though that is a most selfish viewpoint. It was not for you that I did what I did."

"For Gwen?"

Vikary nodded. "He- He did not even do her the honor of refusing. As if she were an animal. And yet . . . yet by the code, he was correct. The code I have lived by. I could have killed him for it. Garse intended to, as you witnessed. He was angry, because Myrik had . . . had damaged his property, had darkened his honor. He would have avenged the slight, had I let him." He sighed. "Do you understand why I could not, t'Larien? Do you? I have lived on Avalon, and I have loved Gwen Delvano. She lay there, alive only by a quirk of fortune. Myrik Braith would not have cared had she died, nor would the others. Yet Garse would have granted the man who did this thing a clean and decent dying, would have given him the kiss of shared honor before taking his small life. I ... I care for Garse. Yet I could not let it be, t'Larien, not when Gwen lay so ... so still, and disregarded. I could not let it be."

Vikary fell silent, brooding. Outside, in the moment of quiet, Dirk could hear the high keening of Worlorn's wind.

"Jaan," Dirk said after a while, "we still need to decide where we're going. We've got to get Gwen to shelter. Some place we can make her comfortable, where she won't be bothered. Maybe get a doctor to look at her."

"I know of no doctors on Worlorn," Vikary said. "Still, we must bring Gwen to a city." He considered the question. "Esvoch is closest, but the city is a ruin. Kryne Lamiya is then our best choice, I think, since it lies second nearest to Challenge. Turn south."

Dirk swung the aircar about in a wide arc, sliding upward and heading for the distant line of the mountainwall. He vaguely remembered the course Gwen had flown from the shining tower of ai-Emerel to the Darkdawn wilderness city and its bleak music.

As they flew on toward the mountains, Vikary fell to brooding again, staring out blind into the blackness of Worlorn's night. Dirk, who had more than a hint of what the Kavalars were suffering, did not attempt to break his melancholy but withdrew into his own sphere of thought and silence. He felt very weak; the ache in his head had returned to pound at him, and he was suddenly conscious of a parched rawness in his mouth and throat. He tried to recall when last he had taken food or water, and failed; somehow, he had lost all track of time.

The great coal peaks of Worlorn loomed up near at hand, and Dirk took the Braith aircar higher, to fly over them, and still neither he nor Jaan Vikary said a word. It was not until the mountains were behind

them and the wilderness below that the Kavalär spoke again, and then it was only to give Dirk terse directions on the proper course to fly. Afterwards he lapsed back into silence, and it was in silence that they flew the lonely kilometers to their destination.

This time Dirk knew what to expect, and he listened. The music of Lamiya-Bailis came to his ears, a faint wailing on the wind, long before the city itself rose up out of the forests to engulf them. Outside their armored haven was nothing but the void: the tangled forests of the night below them, the thin-starred and empty sky above. Yet the notes of dark despair came talking, tinkling, and they touched him where he sat.

Vikary heard the music too. He glanced at Dirk. "This is a fitting city for us now, t'Larien."

"No," Dirk said, too loudly, not wanting to believe it.

"For me, then. All my effort has gone to ashes. The folk I thought to save are saved no longer. The Braiths can hunt them at will now, *korariel* of Iron-jade or no. I cannot stop them. Garse may, perhaps, but what can one man do alone? He may not even try. It was my obsession, never his. Garse is lost too. He will go back to High Kavalaan alone, I think, and descend alone to the holdfasts of Ironjade, and the highbond council will take away my names. And he must find a knife and cut the glowstones from their settings, and wear empty iron about his arm. His *teyn* is dead."

"On High Kavalaan, perhaps," Dirk said. "But you lived on Avalon too, remember?"

"Yes," said Vikary. "Sadly. Sadly."

The music swelled and boomed around them, and the Siren City itself took shape below: the outer ring of towers like fleshless hands in frozen agony, the pale bridges spanning dark canals, the swords of dimly shining moss, the whistling spires stabbing up into the wind. A white city, a dead city, a forest of sharpened bones.

Dirk circled until he found the same building that Gwen had taken them to and came in for a landing. In the airtlot the two derelict cars were still resting undisturbed, deep in dust. They seemed to Dirk like fragments of some other long-forgotten dream. Once, for some reason, they had seemed important; but he and Gwen and the world had all been different then, and now it was difficult to recall what possible relevance these metallic ghosts had had.

"You have been here before," Vikary said, and Dirk looked at him and nodded. "Lead, then," the Kavalär ordered.

"I don't..."

But Vikary was already up. He had taken Gwen gently from where she lay and lifted her in his arms, and he stood waiting. "Lead," he said again.

So Dirk led him away from the airtlot, into the halls where the gray-white murals danced to the Darkdawn symphony, and they tried door after door until they found one room still furnished. It was a suite, actually, of four connecting rooms, all barren and high-ceilinged and far from clean. The beds—two of the rooms were bedrooms—were circular holes sunk deep into the floor; the mattresses were covered with a seamless oily leather that gave off a faintly unpleasant odor, like sour milk. But they were beds, soft

enough and a place to rest, and Vikary arranged Gwen's limp form carefully. When she was resting easily-she looked almost serene-Jaan left Dirk sitting by her side, his legs folded under him on the floor, and went out to search the aircar they had stolen. He returned shortly with a covering for Gwen and a canteen.

"Drink only a swallow," he said, giving the water to Dirk.

Dirk took the cloth-covered metal, twisted off the top, and took a single short pull before handing it back. The liquid was lukewarm and vaguely bitter, but it felt very good trickling down his dry throat.

Vikary wet a strip of gray cloth and began to clean the dry blood from the back of Gwen's head. He dabbed gently at the brownish crust, wetting his rag again and yet again, working until her fine black hair was clean again and lay in a lustrous fan on the mattress, gleaming in the fitful light of the murals. When he was finished, he bandaged her and looked at Dirk. "I will watch," he said. "Go to the other room and sleep."

"We should talk," Dirk said, hesitant.

"Later, then. Not now. Go and sleep."

Dirk could hardly argue; his body was weary, and his own head was still throbbing. He went to the other room and fell gracelessly onto the sour-smelling mattress.

But, despite his pains, sleep did not come easily. Perhaps it was his headache; perhaps it was the uneasy motion of the light that ran within the walls, which haunted him even through closed eyelids. Chiefly, though, it was the music. Which did not leave him, and seemed to echo louder when he closed his eyes, as if that act had trapped it within his skull: thin pipings and wails and whistles, and *still*-forever-the booming of a solitary drum.

Fever dreams stalked that endless night-visions intense and surreal and hot with anxiety. Three times Dirk was shaken from his uneasy sleep, to sit up- trembling, his flesh clammy-and face the song of Lamiya-Bailis once again, never quite remembering what had stirred him. Once on waking he thought he heard voices in the next room. Another time he was quite certain that he saw Jaan Vikary sitting up against a far wall watching him. Neither of them spoke, and it took Dirk almost an hour to fall back into sleep. Only to waken yet again, to an empty echoing room and moving lights. He wondered briefly if they had left him here alone to live or die; the more he thought on it, the more the fear grew, and the worse his trembling became. But somehow he was unable to rise, to walk to the adjoining bedroom and see for himself. Instead he closed his eyes and tried to force all memory away.

And then it was dawn. Fat Satan was halfway up the sky, and feverish light as red and cold as Dirk's nightmares was flooding through a tall stained-glass window (predominantly clear in its center, but bordered all around with an intricate pattern of somber red-brown and smoky gray) to fall across his face. He rolled away from it and struggled to sit up, and Jaan Vikary appeared, offering the canteen.

Dirk took several long swallows, almost choking on the cold water and letting some of it splash over his dry, chapped lips and trickle down his chin. The canteen had been full when Jaan handed it to him; he gave it back half empty. "You found water," he said.

Vikary sealed up the canteen again and nodded. "The pumping stations have been closed for years, so there is no fresh water in the towers of Kryne Lamiya. Yet the canals still run. I went down last night while you and Gwen were sleeping."

Dirk rose to his feet unsteadily, and Vikary lent a hand to help him out of the sunken bed. "Is Gwen. . . ?"

"She regained consciousness early in the night, t'Larien. We spoke together, and I told her what I had done. I think she will recover soon enough."

"Can I talk to her?"

"She is resting now, sleeping normally. Later I am sure she will want to speak to you, but at the moment I do not think you should wake her. She tried to sit up last night and grew very unsteady and finally nauseous."

Dirk nodded. "I see. What about you? Get any sleep?" As he spoke, he looked around their quarters. The Darkdawn music had shrunk somehow. It still sounded, still wailed and moaned and permeated the very air of Kryne Lamiya; but to his ears it seemed fainter and more distant, so perhaps he was finally getting used to it, learning to tune it out of his conscious hearing. The light-murals, like the glowstones of Larteyn, had faded and died at the touch of normal sunlight; the walls were gray and empty. What furnishings there were—a few uncomfortable-looking chairs—flowed from the walls and floor: twisting extrusions that matched the color and tone of the chamber so well that they were almost invisible.

"I have slept enough," Vikary was saying. "That is not important. I have been considering our position." He gestured. "Come."

They walked through another chamber, an empty dining room, and *out* onto one of the many balconies that overlooked the Darkdawn city. By day, Kryne Lamiya was different, less despairing; even Worlorn's wan sunlight was enough to put a sparkle on the swift-flowing waters of the canals, and in the daylong twilight the pale towers were less sepulchral.

Dirk was weak and very hungry, but his headache had gone and the brisk wind felt good against his face. He brushed his hair-knotted and hopelessly filthy—back from his eyes and waited for Jaan to begin.

"I watched from here during the night," Vikary said, with his elbows on the cold railing and his eyes searching the horizon. "They are searching for us, t'Larien. Twice I glimpsed aircars above the city. The first time it was only a light, high in the distance, so perhaps I was wrong. Yet the second could be no mistake. The wolf-head car of Chell's flying near to ground level over the canals, with a searchlight of some sort attached. It passed quite close. There was a hound also. I heard it howling, all wild at the Darkling music."

"They didn't find us," Dirk said.

"In truth," Vikary replied. "I think we are safe enough here, for a while. Unless— I am not sure how they found you in Challenge, and that gives me a fear. If they track us to Kryne Lamiya and comb the city with Braith hounds, our danger will be severe. We have no null-scent now." He looked at Dirk. "How *did* they know where you had fled? Do you have any ideas?"

"No," said Dirk. "No one knew. Certainly no one followed. Maybe they just guessed. It was the most logical choice, after all. Living was more comfortable in Challenge than in any of the other cities. Easier. You know."

"Yes, I know. I do not accept your theory, however. Remember, t'Larien, Garse and I considered this problem too, when you left us shamed and deserted at the death-square. Challenge was the most *obvious* choice, and therefore the least logical, we felt. It seemed more likely that you would go to Musquel and live off what fish you could take, or that Gwen would forage for you both in the wilds she knew so well. Garse even suggested that you might simply have hidden the aircar and remained in some other section of Larteyn itself, so you could laugh at us while we searched the planet for you."

Dirk fidgeted. "Yes. Well, I suppose our choice was stupid."

"No, t'Larien, I did not say that. The only stupid choice, I think, would have been to flee to the City in the Starless Pool, where the Braiths were known to be thick. Challenge was a subtle choice, whether you intended it to be that or not. It seemed such a wrong choice that it was actually a right one. Do you understand? I cannot see how the Braiths discovered you by any process of deduction."

"Maybe," Dirk said. He thought a bit. "I remember the first we knew of it was when Bretan spoke to us. He- Well, he wasn't testing a theory, either. He knew we were there, somewhere."

"Yet you have no idea how?"

"No. No idea."

"We shall have to live with the fear that they can find us here, then. Otherwise, unless the Braiths can repeat their miracle, we are secure."

"Understand, though, that our position is not without difficulties. We have shelter and unlimited water, but no food to speak of. Our ultimate exit—we must go to the spaceport and leave Worlorn as soon as possible, I have concluded—our ultimate exit is going to be very difficult. The Braiths will anticipate us. We have my laser pistol, and two hunting lasers that I found in the aircar. Plus the vehicle itself, armed and well armored, probably belonging to Roseph high-Braith Kelcek—"

"One of the derelicts in the airtlot is still marginally functional," Dirk interjected.

"Then we have two aircars, should we need them," Vikary said. "Against us, at least eight of the Braith hunters still live, and probably nine. I am not sure how seriously I wounded Lorimaar Arkellor. It is possible that I killed him, though I am inclined to doubt it. The Braiths can probably put eight aircars in the sky at once, if they choose to, although it is more traditional to fly together, *teyn-and-teyn*. Every car will be armored. They have supplies, power, food. They outnumber us. Possibly, since I am an outbond duel-breaker, they will prevail upon Kirak Redsteel Cavis and the two hunters from the Shanagate Holding to join them in running me down. Finally, there is Garse Janacek."

"Garse?"

"I hope-I pray-that he will cut the glowstones from his arm and return to High Kavalaan. He will be shamed, alone, wearing dead iron. No easy fate, t'Larien. I have disgraced him, and Ironjade. I am sorry for his pain, yet this is how I hope it will be. For there is another possibility, you see."

"Another. . . ?"

"He may hunt for us. He cannot leave Worlorn until a ship comes. That will be some time. I do not know what he will do."

"Surely he won't join the Braiths. They're his enemies, and you are his *teyn*, and Gwen his *cro-betheyn*. He might want to kill me, I don't doubt it, but-

"Garse is more a Kavalar than me, t'Larien. He always has been. And now more than ever, since I am no Kavalar at all after the thing I have done. The old customs require a man's *teyn*, no less than any other, to bring death to a duel-breaker. It is a custom that only the very strong can follow. The bond of iron-and-fire is too close for most, so they are left alone to mourn. Yet Garse Janacek is a very strong man, stronger than myself in so many ways. I do not know. I do not know."

"And if he does come after us?"

Vikary spoke calmly. "I will not raise a weapon against Garse. He is my *teyn*, whether I am his or no, and I have hurt him badly enough already, failed him, shamed him. He has worn a painful scar through most of his adult life because of me. Once, when we were both younger, an older man took offense at one of his jokes and issued challenge. The mode was single-shot and we fought *teyned*, and in my less-than-infinite wisdom I convinced Garse that our honor would be served if we fired into the air. We did, to our regret. The others decided to teach Garse a lesson about humor. To my shame, I was left untouched while he was disfigured for my folly.

"Yet he never reproached me. The first time I was with him after the duel, when he was still recovering from his wounds, he said to me, 'You were right, Jaantony, they *did* aim for empty air. A pity that they missed.' " Vikary laughed, but Dirk looked at him and saw that his eyes were full of tears, his mouth set grimly. He did not cry, though; as if by some immense effort of will, he kept the tears from falling.

Abruptly Jaan turned and walked back inside, leaving Dirk alone on the balcony with the wind and the white twilight city and the music of Lamiya-Bailis. Off in the far distance the straining white hands rose, holding back the encroaching wilderness. Dirk studied them, thoughtful, reflecting on Vikary's words.

Minutes later the Kavalar returned, dry-eyed and blank-faced. "I am sorry," he began.

"No need to-

"We must get to the crux, t'Larien. Whether Garse hunts us or not, we face formidable odds. We have weapons, should we have to fight, but no one to use them. Gwen is a good marksman, and fearless enough, but she is injured and unsteady. And you- can I trust you? I put it to you bluntly. I trusted you once, and you betrayed me."

"How can I answer that question?" Dirk said. "You don't have to believe any promise I give you. But the Braiths want to kill me too, remember? And Gwen as well. Or do you think I'd betray her as easily as I..." He stopped in horror of his own words.

". . . as easily as you did me," Vikary finished for him with a hard smile. "You are blunt enough. No, t'Larien, I do *not* think you would betray Gwen. Yet I did not think you would desert us either when we had named you *keth* and you had taken the name. We would not have dueled except for you."

Dirk nodded. "I know that. Maybe I made a mistake. I don't know. I would have died, though, if I'd kept faith with you."

"Died a *keth* of Ironjade, with honor."

Dirk smiled. "Gwen appealed to me more than death. That much I expect you to understand."

"I do. She is still between us, ultimately. Face that, and know it for a truth. Sooner or later she will choose."

"She did choose, Jaan, when she left with me. You should face *that*." Dirk said it quickly, stubbornly; he wondered how much he believed it.

"She did not remove the jade-and-silver," Vikary answered. He gestured impatiently. "This is no matter. I *will* trust you, for now."

"Good. What do you want me to do?"

"Someone must fly to Larteyn."

Dirk frowned. "Why are you always trying to talk me into suicide, Jaan?"

"I did not say that you must make the flight, t'Larien," Vikary said. "I will do that myself. It will be dangerous, yes, but it must be done."

"Why?"

"The Kimdissi."

"Ruark?" Dirk had almost forgotten about his erstwhile host and co-conspirator.

Vikary nodded. "He has been a friend to Gwen since our days on Avalon. Though he has never liked me, nor I him, I cannot abandon him entirely. The Braiths ..."

"I understand. But how will you get to him?"

"Should I reach Larteyn safely, I can summon him by viewscreen. That is my hope, at least." He gave a vaguely fatalistic shrug.

"And me?"

"Remain here with Gwen. Nurse her, guard her. I will leave you one of Roseph's laser rifles. If she recovers sufficiently, let Gwen use it. She is probably more skilful than you. Agreed?"

"Agreed. It doesn't sound very difficult."

"No," said Vikary. "I expect that you will remain safely hidden, that I will return with the Kimdissi and find you as I leave you. Should it become necessary for you to flee, you will have this other aircar close at hand. There is a cave nearby that Gwen knows of. She can show you the way. Go to that cave if you must leave Kryne Lamiya."

"What if you *don't* come back? That *is* a possibility, you know."

"In that case you will be on your own again, as you were when you first fled Larteyn. You had plans then. Follow them, if you can." He smiled a humorless smile. "I expect to return, however. Remember that, t'Larien. Remember that."

There was an undertone of edged iron in Vikary's voice, an echo that called back another conversation in the same chill wind. With startling clarity, Jaan's old words came back to Dirk: *But I do exist. Remember that . . . This is not Avalon now, t'Larien, and today is not yesterday. It is a dying Festival world, a world without a code, so each of us must cling tightly to whatever codes we bring with us.* But Jaan Vikary, Dirk thought wildly, had brought two codes with him when he came to Worlorn.

While Dirk himself had brought none at all, had brought nothing but his love of Gwen Delvano.

Gwen was still sleeping when the two men went from the balcony. Leaving her undisturbed, they walked together to the airtot. Vikary had unpacked the Braith aircar thoroughly. Roseph and his *teyn* had obviously been planning for a short hunting sojourn in the wild when everything had broken loose. Dirk thought it unfortunate that they had not intended a longer trip.

As it was, Vikary had found only four hard protein bars in the way of food, plus the two hunting lasers and some clothing that had been slung over the seats. Dirk ate one of the bars immediately-he was famished- and slid the other three into the pocket of the heavy jacket he chose. It hung slightly loose on him, but the fit wasn't too bad; Roseph's *teyn* had approximated Dirk in size. And it was *warm*-thick leather, dyed a deep purple, with a collar, cuffs, and lining of soiled white fur. Both sleeves of the jacket were painted in intricate swirling patterns; the right was red and black, the left silver and green. A smaller matching jacket was also found (Roseph's, no doubt), and Dirk appropriated that one for Gwen.

Vikary took out the two laser rifles, long tubes of jet-black plastic with snarling wolves embossed upon the stocks in white. The first he strapped around his own shoulders; the second he gave to Dirk, along with curt instructions on its operation. The weapon was very light and slightly oily to the touch. Dirk held it awkwardly in one hand.

The farewells were brief and overly formal. Then Vikary sealed himself into the big Braith aircar, lifted it from the floor, and shot forward into empty air. Dust rose in great clouds at his departure, and Dirk retreated from the backwash choking, with one hand over his mouth and the other on the rifle.

When he returned to the suite, Gwen was just stirring. "Jaan?" she said, raising her head from the leather mattress to see who had just entered. She groaned and lay back again quickly and began to massage her temples with both hands. "My head," she said in a whimpering whisper.

Dirk stood the laser up against the wall just inside the door and sat by the side of the sunken bed. "Jaan just left," he said. "He's flying back to Larteyn to get Ruark."

Gwen's only reply was another groan.

"Can I get you anything?" Dirk asked. "Water? Food? We've got a couple of these." He took the protein bars out of the pocket of his jacket and handed them down for her inspection.

Gwen gave them a brief glance and grimaced in disgust. "No," she said. "Get them away. I'm not that hungry."

"You should eat something."

"Did," she said. "Last night. Jaan crushed up a couple of those bars in water, made a sort of paste." She lowered her hands from her temples and turned on her side to face him. "I didn't keep it down very well," she said. "I don't feel so good."

"I gathered that," Dirk said. "You can't expect to feel well after what happened. You've probably got a concussion, and you're lucky you're not dead."

"Jaan told me," she said, a little sharply. "About afterwards, too-what he did to Myrik." She frowned. "I thought I hit him pretty good when we fell. You saw, didn't you? It felt like I broke his jaw, either that or my fingers. But he didn't even notice."

"No," said Dirk.

"Tell me about-you know, about afterwards. Jaan just sort of sketched it out. I want to know." Her voice was weary and full of pain, but not to be denied.

So Dirk told her.

"He pointed his gun at Garse?" she said at one point. Dirk nodded, and she subsided again.

When he had finished, Gwen was very silent. Her eyes closed briefly, opened again, then closed and did not reopen. She lay quietly on her side, curled up into a sort of fetal ball, her hands clenched into small fists beneath her chin. Watching her, Dirk felt his eyes drawn to her left forearm, to the cold reminder of the jade-and-silver she still wore.

"Gwen," he said, softly. Her eyes opened again- for a very short time-and she shook her head violently, a silent shouted *no!* "Hey," he said, but by then her lids were shut tight once more, and she was lost within herself, and Dirk was alone with her jewelry and his fears.

The room was soaked in sunlight, or what passed for sunlight here on Worlorn; the sunset tones of high noon were slanting through the window, and dust motes drifted lazily through the broad beam. The light fell so that only one side of the mattress was illuminated; Gwen lay half in and half out of shadow.

Dirk-he did not speak again to Gwen, or look at her-found himself watching the patterns the light made on the floor.

In the center of the chamber everything was warm and red, and it was here the dust danced, drifting in from the darkness and turning briefly crimson, briefly golden, throwing tiny shadows, until it drifted out of the light again and was gone. He raised his hand, held it out for-minutes? hours?-for a time. It grew warm and warmer; dust swirled around it; shadows fell away like water when he twitched and turned his fingers; the sun was friendly and familiar. But suddenly he became aware that the movements of his hand, like the endless whirling of dust, had no purpose, no pattern, and no meaning. It was the music that told him so; the music of Lamiya-Bailis.

He pulled his hand in and frowned.

Around the great center of light and life was a thin twisting border where the sun shone through the window's rim of black and blood stained glass. Or fought through. It was only a small border, but it sealed the land of the stirring dust on every side.

Beyond it were the black corners, the sections of the room that the Hub and the Trojan Suns never reached, where fat demons and the shapes of Dirk's fears hunched obscurely, forever safe from scrutiny.

Smiling and rubbing his chin-stubble covered his cheeks and jaw, and he was starting to itch-Dirk studied those corners and let the Darkdawn music back into his soul. How he had ever tuned it out he was not sure, but now it was back and all around him.

The tower they were in-their home-sounded its long low note. Years away, or centuries, a chorus answered in ringing widows' wails. He heard shuddering throbs, and the screams of abandoned babies, and the slippery sliding sound of knives slicing warm flesh. And the drum. How could the wind beat a drum? he thought. He didn't know. Perhaps it was something else. But it sounded like a drum. So terribly far off, though, and so *alone*.

So horribly endlessly alone.

The mists and the shadows gathered in the farthest, dimmest corner of their room, and then began to clear. Dirk saw a table and a low chair, growing from the walls and floor like strange plastic vegetables. He wondered briefly what he was seeing them by; the sun had moved a little, and only a thin beam of light was trickling through the window now, and finally that snapped off too, and the world was gray.

When the world was gray, he noted, the dust did not dance. No. Not at all. He felt the air to be sure; there was no dust, no warmth, no sunlight. He nodded sagely. It seemed that he had discovered some great truth.

Dim lights were stirring in the walls, ghosts waking for another night. Phantoms and husks of old dreams. All of them were gray and white; color was only for the living, and had no place here.

The ghosts began to move. They were locked into the walls, each of them; from time to time, Dirk thought he could see one stop its furious dancing and beat helplessly and hopelessly against the glass walls that kept it from the room. Wraith hands pounding, pounding, yet the room shook not at all.

Stillness was a part of these things; the phantoms were just that, all insubstantial, and pound though they might, finally they must return to dancing.

The dance-the dance macabre-shapeless shadows- Oh, but it was beautiful! Moving, dipping, writhing. Walls of gray flame. So much better than the dust motes, *these* dancers; they had a pattern, and their music was the song of the Siren City.

Desolation. Emptiness. Decay. A single drum, beaten slow. Alone. Alone. Alone. Nothing has meaning.

"Dirk!"

It was Gwen's voice. He shook his head, looked away from the walls, down to where she lay in darkness. It was night. Night. Somehow the day had gone.

Gwen-she had not been sleeping-was looking up at him. "I'm sorry," she said. She was telling him something. But he knew it already, knew it from her silence, knew it from- From the drum perhaps. From Kryne Lamiya.

He smiled. "You never forgot, did you? It wasn't a question of forgetting. There was a reason why you never removed the ..." He pointed.

"Yes," she said. She sat up in the bed, the coverlet falling down around her waist. Jaan had unsealed the front of her suit, so it hung on her loosely, and the soft curves of her breasts were visible. In the flickering light the flesh was pale and gray. Dirk felt no stirrings. Her hand went to the jade-and-silver. She touched it, stroked it, sighed. "I never thought- I don't know- I said what I had to say, Dirk. Bretan Braith would have killed you."

"Maybe that would have been better," he answered. Not bitterly, but in a bemused, faintly distracted sort of way. "So you never meant to leave him?"

"I don't know. How do I know what I meant? I was going to try, Dirk, really I was. I never really believed, though. I told you that. I was honest. This isn't Avalon, and we've changed. I'm not your Jenny. I never was, and now less than ever."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "I remember you driving. The way you gripped the stick. Your face. Your eyes. You have jade eyes, Gwen. Jade eyes and a silver smile. You frighten me." He glanced away from her, back to the walls. Light-murals moved in chaotic patterns, along with the thin wild music. Somehow the ghosts had gone away. He had only taken his eyes from them for an instant, yet all of them had melted and left. Like his old dreams, he thought.

"Jade eyes?" Gwen was saying.

"Like Garse."

"Garse has blue eyes," she said.

"Still. Like Garse."

She chuckled, and groaned. "It hurts when I laugh," she said. "But it's funny. Me like Garse. No wonder Jaan-

"You'll go back to him?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. It would be very hard to leave him now. Do you understand? He's finally chosen. When he pointed his laser at Garse. After that, after he turned against *teyn* and holdfast and world, I can't just- You know. But I won't go back to being a *betheyn* to him, not ever. It will have to be more than jade-and-silver."

Dirk felt empty. He shrugged. "And me?"

"You know it wasn't working. Surely. You had to feel it. You never stopped calling me Jenny."

He smiled. "I didn't? Maybe not. Maybe not."

"Never," she said. She rubbed her head. "I'm feeling a little better now," she said. "You still have those protein bars?"

Dirk took one from his pocket and flipped it at her. She snatched it from the air with her left hand, smiled at him, unwrapped it, and began to eat.

He stood up abruptly, jamming his hands deep into his jacket pockets, and walked to the high window. The tops of the bone-white towers still wore a faint, waning reddish tinge-perhaps the Helleye and its attendants were not entirely gone from the western sky. But below, in the streets, the Darkdawn city drank of night. The canals were black ribbons, and the landscape dripped with the dim purple radiance of phosphorescent moss. Through that lambent gloom Dirk glimpsed his solitary bargeman, as he had glimpsed him once before upon those same dark waters. He was leaning on his pole, as ever, letting the current take him, coming on and on, easily, inexorably. Dirk smiled. "Welcome," he muttered, "welcome."

"Dirk?" Gwen had finished eating. She was fastening her jumpsuit tight again, framed in the murky light. Behind her the walls were alive with gray-white dancers. Dirk heard drums, and whispers, and promises. And he knew the last were lies.

"One question, Gwen," he said heavily.

She stared at him.

"Why did you call me back?" he said. "Why? If you thought we were so dead, you and me, why couldn't you leave me alone?"

Her face was pale and blank. "Call you back?"

"You know," he said. "The whisperjewel."

"Yes," she said uncertainly. "It's back in Larteyn."

"Of course it is," he said. "In my luggage. You sent it to me."

"No," she said. "No."

"You met me!"

"You lasered us from your ship. I never- Believe me, that was the first I knew that you were coming. I didn't know what to think of it. I thought you'd get around to telling me, though, so I never pressed."

Dirk said something, but the tower moaned its low note and took his words away from him. He shook his head. "You didn't call me?"

"No."

"But I got the whisperjewel. On Braque. The same one, esper-etched. You can't fake that." He remembered something else. "And Arkin *said-*"

"Yes," she said. She bit her lip. "I don't understand. He must have sent it. But he was my friend. I had to have someone to talk to. I don't understand." She whimpered.

"Your head?" Dirk asked quickly.

"No," she said. "No."

He watched her face. "Arkin sent it?"

"Yes. He was the only one. It had to be. We met on Avalon, right after you and I ... you know. Arkin helped me. It was a bad time. He was there when you sent your jewel to Jenny. I was crying and all. I told him about it, and we talked. Even later, after I met Jaan, Arkin and I stayed close. He was like a brother!"

"A brother," Dirk repeated. "Why would-"

"I don't *know!*"

Dirk was thoughtful. "When you met me at the spaceport, Arkin was with you. Did you ask him to come along? I was counting on you being alone, I remember."

"It was his idea," she said. "Well, I told him I was nervous. About seeing you again. He ... he offered to come along and lend me moral support. And he said he wanted to meet you too. You know. After all I had told him on Avalon."

"And the day you and he took off into the wild- you know, when I got into trouble with Garse and then Bretan-what went on?"

"Arkin said ... an armor-bug migration. It wasn't actually, but we had to check. We rushed away."

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going? I thought that Jaan and Garse had beaten you up, that they were keeping you away from me. The night before, you'd said-"

"I know, but Arkin said he'd tell you."

"And he convinced me to run away," Dirk said. "And you, I suppose he told you that to convince me you should..."

She nodded.

He turned toward the window. The last light was gone from the tower tops. Above, a handful of stars sparkled. Dirk counted them. Twelve. An even dozen. He wondered if some of them were really galaxies, away across the Great Black Sea. "Gwen," he said, "Jaan left this morning. From here to Larteyn and back, by aircar-how long should that take?"

When she did not answer, he turned to look at her again.

The walls were full of phantoms, and Gwen trembled in their light.

"He should be back by now, shouldn't he?" She nodded and lay back again on the pale mattress. The Siren City sang its lullaby, its hymn to final sleep.

Chapter 11

Dirk walked across the room.

The laser rifle was leaning up against the wall. He lifted it, felt once again the vaguely oily texture of the slick black plastic. His thumb brushed over the wolf's head. He raised the weapon to his shoulder, sighted, fired.

The wand of light hung for at least a full second in the air. He moved the rifle slightly, and the pencil beam moved with it. When it faded, and the afterimage left his retinas, he saw that he had burned an uneven hole in the window. The wind was whistling through it loudly, making an odd dissonance with the music of Lamiya-Bailis.

Gwen climbed unsteadily out of her bed. "What? Dirk?"

He shrugged at her and lowered the rifle.

"What?" she repeated. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to make sure I knew how it worked," he explained. "I'm... I'm going."

She frowned. "Wait," she said. "I'll find my boots."

He shook his head.

"You too?" Her face was hard, ugly. "I don't need to be protected, damn it."

"It's not like that," he said.

"If this is some idiot move to make yourself a hero in my eyes, it isn't going to work," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

He smiled. "What this is, Gwen, is some idiot move to make myself a hero in *my* eyes. Your eyes . . . your eyes aren't important anymore."

"Why, then?"

He hefted the rifle uncertainly. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe because I like Jaan, and owe him. Because I want to make it up to him for running out after he'd trusted me and named me *keth*."

"Dirk," she began.

He waved her quiet. "I know . . . but that isn't all. Maybe I just want to get Ruark. Maybe it's because Kryne Lamiya had more suicides than any other Festival city, and I'm one of them. You can pick your own motive, Gwen. All of the above." A faint smile brushed across his face. "Maybe it's because there are only twelve stars, you know? So it doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"What good can you possibly do?"

"Who knows? And why does it matter? Do you care, Gwen? Do you *really*?" He shook his head, and the motion sent his hair tumbling over his forehead once again, so once more he had to stop and brush it back. "I don't *care* if you care," he said forcefully. "You said, or implied, that I was being selfish back in Challenge. Well, maybe I was. And maybe I am now. I'll tell you something, though. Whatever I'm going to do, I'm not asking to look at your arms first, Gwen. Know what I mean?"

It was a fine exit line, but halfway out the door he softened, hesitated, turned back. "Stay here, Gwen," he told her. "Just stay. You're still hurt. If you have to run, Jaan said something about a cave. You know anything about a cave?" She nodded. "Well, go there if you have to. Otherwise stay here." He waved a clumsy farewell at her with the rifle, then spun and walked away too quickly.

Down in the airtel the walls were just walls-no ghosts, no murals, no lights. Dirk stumbled over the aircar he wanted in the dark, then waited while his eyes adjusted. His derelict was no product of High Kavalaan; it was a cramped two-seater, a black and silver teardrop of plastic and lightweight metal. No armor at all, of course, and the only weapon it carried was the laser rifle he laid across his lap.

It was only a little less dead than the rest of Worlorn, but that little was enough. When he tapped into the power, the car woke, and the instruments lit the cabin with their pale radiance. He ate a protein bar quickly and studied the readings. The energy supply was low, too low, but it would have to do. He would not use the headlamps; he could fly by the scant starlight. And the heater was likewise to be dispensed with, as long as he had his leather jacket to keep him from the chill.

Dirk slammed down the door, sealing himself in, and flicked on the gravity grid. The aircar lifted, rocking a bit unsteadily, but it lifted. He gripped the stick and threw it forward, and then he was outside and airborne.

He had one brief flash of terror. If the grid had been feeble enough, he knew, there would be no flight at all, just a rolling rumble to the moss-choked ground below. The aircar throbbed and dipped alarmingly

once clear of the lot, but only for an instant; then the grid caught hold and they rode up on the singing winds, and the only thing left tumbling was his stomach.

Dirk climbed steadily, trying to push the small car as high as it would go. The mountainwall was ahead, and he had to clear it. Besides, he was not anxious to encounter other nocturnal flyers. High up, with his lights doused, he could see any other aircars that passed below him, but the chances were good that he would escape their notice.

He did not look back at Kryne Lamiya, but he felt the city behind him, driving him onward, washing away his fears. Fear was so foolish; nothing mattered, death least of all. Even when the Siren City and its white and gray lights were gone, the music lingered, steadily fading and growing weaker, but always with him, always potent. One note, a thin wavering whistle, outlasted the rest. Some thirty kilometers from the city he was still hearing it, mixed with the deeper whistle of the wind. Finally he realized that the noise was coming from his own lips.

He stopped whistling and tried to concentrate on flying.

When he had been airborne for almost an hour, the mountainwall bulked up before him, or rather beneath him, for he was quite high by that time, and he felt closer to the stars and the pinpoint galaxies above than to the forests far below. The wind had grown shrill and furious as it forced its way through hairline cracks in the door seam, but Dirk was ignoring the sound.

Where the mountains met the wilderness, he saw a light.

He banked the aircar, circled, and began to descend. No lights should shine this side of the mountains, he knew; whatever it was, it should be investigated.

He spiraled down until he was directly above the light, then stilled all forward motion of the aircar, hung hovering for a short moment, and faded his gravity grid. With infinite slowness, he settled, rocking back and forth slightly in the wind, falling quietly.

There were several lights beneath him. The main source of illumination was a fire. He could tell that now; he could see it shifting and flickering as the winds fanned the flames this way and that. But there were other, smaller lights as well—steady and artificial, a circle of them off in the blackness not terribly distant from the fire. Perhaps a kilometer, he estimated, perhaps less.

The temperature in the small cabin began to rise, and Dirk felt sweat on his skin, soaking his clothing beneath the heavy jacket. Smoke assaulted him as well; clouds of it, black and sooty, rose from the fire and obscured his view. Frowning, he moved the air-car until he was no longer directly above the blaze, and continued to descend.

The flames rose up to greet him, long orange tongues, very bright against the plumes of smoke. He saw sparks as well, or embers, or something of that sort; they issued from the fire in hot bright showers, shooting off into the night and then vanishing. Drifting lower, he was treated to yet another display, a furious crackling of blue-white flame that came with a sharp scent of ozone and then was gone again.

Dirk stopped the aircar dead when the fire was still decently below him. There were other people about—the circle of steady artificial lights—and he did not care to be seen. His black and silver aircar, motionless

against the black sky, would not be easy to spot, but it would be a different story if he let himself be outlined by the flames. Although he had an unobstructed view from where he hovered, he still could not make out what was burning; the center of the fire was a shapeless darkness from which the sparks issued periodically. Around it he could see the dense tangle of chokers, their waxy limbs shining bright yellow in the reflected glare. Several had fallen into the heart of the conflagration and were contributing most of the black smoke as they shriveled and turned to ash. But the rest, the twisting fence that surrounded the black burning thing, refused to go up. Instead of spreading, the fire was visibly dying out.

Dirk waited and watched it die. He was already fairly certain that he was looking at a fallen aircar; the sparks and ozone smell told him that much. He wanted to know *which* aircar.

After the flames had dwindled and the sparks had ceased to storm, but before the fire had guttered out entirely and turned to greasy smoke, Dirk saw a shape. Briefly; a wing, vaguely batlike, twisted at a grotesque angle and poking toward the sky, a sheet of fire flaring behind it. That was enough; this was not any aircar he knew, though it was clearly of Kavalair manufacture.

A dark ghost above the forest, he flitted away from the dying fire, toward the ring of man-made illumination. This time he maintained a greater distance. He did not need to go closer. The lights were quite bright, and the scene was etched in fine detail.

He saw a wide clearing, ringed by electric torches, on the edge of some broad body of still water. Three aircars were down there, and he knew all three; the same trio had been down beneath the Emereli tree within Challenge when Myrik Braith had assaulted Gwen. One of them, the great-domed car with dark red armor, belonged to Lorimaar high-Braith. The other two were smaller, almost identical, except they were identical no longer, since one of them was visibly damaged, even seen from this distance. It was lying awkwardly, half submerged in the water, and part of it was misshapen and *glowing*. Its armored door gaped open.

Stick figures moved about the wreck. Dirk would hardly have seen them at all except for their motion, so well did they blend with the background. Nearby, someone was leading Braith hounds from a gate in the flank of Lorimaar's aircar.

Frowning, Dirk touched his grid control and took his own car straight up, until the men and aircars were lost to sight and nothing remained below but a point of light in the forest. Two points, in truth, but the fire was a faint orange ember now, visibly fading.

Safe in the black womb of sky, he paused to think.

The damaged aircar had been Roseph's, the same car they had stolen in Challenge, the car Jaan Vikary had flown to Larteyn that morning. He was sure of that. The Braiths had found him, clearly, and pursued him to the forest, lasered him down. But it seemed unlikely that he was dead; otherwise why the Braith hounds? Lorimaar wasn't just taking his pack for a walk. It was more than likely that Jaan had survived to flee into the forest, and that the Braiths were going to hunt him down.

Dirk considered briefly trying to effect a rescue, but the prospects seemed dim. He had no idea how to find Jaan in the night-shrouded outworld wild. The Braiths were better equipped for that than he was.

He resumed his course toward the mountainwall, and Larteyn beyond. In the forest, armed and alone as he was, he could do Jaan Vikary no particular good. In the Kavalair Firefort, however, he could at the very least settle Ironjade's score with Arkin Ruark.

The mountains slid beneath him, and Dirk relaxed once more, though one hand fell to rest on the laser rifle that still lay across his lap.

The flight took just under an hour; then Larteyn, red and smoldering, shouldered up out of the mountains. It looked very dead, very empty, but Dirk knew that for a lie. He kept low and wasted no time, shooting straight across the low square rooftops and the glow-stone plazas to the building that he had once shared with Gwen Delvano, the two Ironjades, and the Kimdissi liar.

Only one other aircar waited on the windswept roof -the armor-clad military relic. Of Ruark's small yellow flyer there was no sign, and the gray manta was missing as well. Dirk briefly wondered what had happened to it, abandoned back in Challenge, then shoved the thought aside as he descended for a landing.

He kept the laser firmly in his grip as he climbed out. The world was still and crimson. He walked swiftly to the tubes, and rode down to Ruark's quarters.

They were empty.

He searched them quite thoroughly, turning things this way and that, not caring what he disturbed, what he destroyed. All of the Kimdissi's belongings were still in place, but Ruark was not there, nor was there any sign of where he had gone.

Dirk's own possessions remained as well, the few things he had left behind when he and Gwen had run, nothing but a small pile of light clothing he had brought from Braque. Useless here in the chill of Worlorn. He set down the laser, knelt, and began to rummage through the pockets of the soiled pants. It was not until he found it-jammed away, still in its wrappings of silver and velvet-that he really knew what he was looking for, and why he had come back to Larteyn.

In Ruark's bedroom he found a small cache of personal jewelry in a lockbox: rings, pendants, intricate bracelets and crowns, earrings of semi-precious stones. He pawed through the box until he found a thin fine chain with a silver-wire owl frozen in amber and suspended on a clip. It looked about the right size, that clip. Dirk tore away the amber and the owl and replaced them with the whisperjewel.

Then he unsealed his jacket and his heavy shirt and hung the chain around his neck, so the cold red teardrop was next to his bare skin, whispering its whispers, promising its lies. The small stab of ice was painful against his chest, but that was all right; it was Jenny. Very shortly he grew used to it, and it passed. Salt tears rolled down his cheeks. He did not notice. He went upstairs.

The workroom that Ruark had shared with Gwen was as cluttered as Dirk remembered it, but the Kimdissi was not there. Nor was he to be found in the deserted apartment above that where Dirk had called Ruark from Challenge. There was only one more place to search.

Quickly he climbed to the top of the tower. The door was open. He hesitated, and then entered, holding his laser at the ready.

The great living room was chaos and destruction.

The viewscreen had been smashed or had exploded; glass shards were everywhere. The walls were scarred by laser fire. The couch had been overturned and ripped in a dozen places, stuffing pulled out in great handfuls and scattered. Some of it had been thrown into the fireplace, where it contributed to the sodden, smoky mess that choked the hearth. One of the gargoyles, headless and upside down, leaned up against the base of the mantel. Its head, glowstone eyes and all, had been thrown into the sodden ashes of the fire. The air stank of wine and vomit.

Garse Janacek was sleeping on the floor, shiftless, his red beard stained even redder by dribbled wine, his mouth hanging open. He smelled like the room. He was snoring loudly and his laser pistol was still clutched in one hand. Dirk saw his shirt balled up and lying in a pool of vomit that Janacek had tried to mop at halfheartedly.

He walked around carefully and took the laser out of Janacek's limp fingers. Vikary's *teyn* was not quite the iron Kavalär that Jaan imagined him.

Janacek's right arm was still bound by iron-and-glowstones. A few of the red-black jewels had been forced from their settings; the empty holes looked obscene. But most of the bracelet was intact, except where it was marred by long scratches. Janacek's forearm, above the bracelet, was also scarred. The scratches were deep, and often continuous with those scored in the black iron. Arm and armband both were caked by dried blood.

Near to Janacek's boot Dirk saw the long bloodstained knife. He could imagine the rest. Drunk, no doubt, his left hand made awkward by his old wound, trying to pry the glowstones free, losing patience and stabbing wildly, dropping the blade in his pain and his rage.

Stepping backward lightly, detouring around Janacek's damp shirt, Dirk paused in the door frame, leveled his rifle, and shouted. "*Garse!*"

Janacek did not stir. Dirk repeated his shout. This time the volume of snoring declined appreciably. Encouraged, Dirk stooped and picked up the nearest object at hand—a glowstone—and lofted it through the air at the Kavalär. It hit Janacek on the cheek.

He sat up slowly, blinking. He saw Dirk and scowled at him.

"Get up," Dirk said. He waved his laser.

Janacek rose shakily to his feet, looked around for his own weapon.

"You won't find it," Dirk told him. "I've got it here."

Janacek's eyes were blurred and weary, but he had slept off most of his drunkenness. "Why are you here, t'Larien?" he said slowly, in a voice tinged more by exhaustion than by wine. "Have you come to mock me?"

Dirk shook his head. "No. I'm sorry for you."

Janacek glared. "Sorry for me?"

"You don't think you deserve pity? Look around you!"

"Careful," Janacek told him. "Jape me too much, t'Larien, and I will discover if you have steel enough to fire that laser you hold so awkwardly."

"Don't, Garse," Dirk said. "Please. I need your help."

Janacek laughed, throwing back his head and roaring.

When he had stopped, Dirk told him everything that had happened since Vikary killed Myrik Braith in Challenge. Janacek stood very stiffly as he listened, his arms crossed tightly across his bare, scarred chest. He laughed one more time-when Dirk told him his conclusions about Ruark. "The manipulators of Kimdiss," Janacek muttered. Dirk let him mutter, then finished his story.

"So?" Janacek demanded when he had concluded. "Why do you think any of this is any matter to me?"

"I guess I didn't think you'd let the Braiths hunt Jaan down like an animal," Dirk said.

"He has made himself an animal."

"By Braith lights, I suppose," Dirk replied. "Are you a Braith?"

"I am a Kavalar."

"Are all Kavalars the same now?" He gestured toward the stone head of the gargoyle sitting in the fireplace. "I see you take trophies now, just like Lorimaar."

Janacek said nothing. His eyes were very hard.

"Maybe I was wrong," Dirk said. "But when I came in here and saw all this, it made me think. It made me think that maybe you did have some human feeling for the man who used to be your *teyn*. It reminded me that once you told me that you and Jaan had a bond stronger than any I had ever known. I guess that was a lie, though."

"It was truth. Jaan Vikary broke that bond."

"Gwen broke all the bonds between *us* years ago," Dirk said. "But I came when she needed me. Oh, it turned out that she didn't really need me, and I came for a lot of selfish reasons. But I came. You can't rob me of that. Garse. I kept my promise." He paused. "And I would not let anyone hunt her, if I could stop them. It appears that we were bonded by something a lot stronger than your Kavalar iron-and-fire."

"Say what you want, t'Larien. Your words change nothing. The idea of you keeping promises is ludicrous. What of your promises to Jaan and myself?"

"I betrayed them," Dirk said quickly. "I know that. So you and I are even, Garse."

"I have betrayed no one."

"You are abandoning those who stood closest to " you. Gwen, who was your *cro-betheyn*, who slept with you and loved you and hated you ail at once. And Jaan. Your precious *teyn*."

"I have never betrayed them," Janacek said hotly. "Gwen betrayed both myself and the jade-and-silver she wore from the day she joined us. Jaan deserted all that was decent in the way he slew Myrik. He ignored me, ignored the duties of iron-and-fire. I owe neither of them."

"You don't, do you?" Beneath his shirt Dirk could feel the whisperjewel hard against his skin, flooding him with words and memories, with a sense of the man he had once been. He was very angry. "And that says it all, right? You don't owe them, so who cares? All your damn Kavalars are, after all, are debt and obligation. Traditions, old holdfast wisdom, like the code duello and mockman hunting. Don't think about them, just follow them. Ruark was right about one thing-there is no love in any of you, except maybe Jaan, and I'm not so sure about him. What the hell was he going to do if Gwen hadn't been wearing his bracelet?"

"The same thing!"

"Really? And what about you? Would you have challenged Myrik just because he hurt Gwen? Or was it because he damaged your jade-and-silver?" Dirk snorted. "Maybe Jaan would have done the same thing, but not you, Janacek. You're as Kavalars as Lorimaar himself, as stiff as Chell or Bretan. Jaan wanted to make his folk better, but I guess you were only along for a ride and didn't believe any of it for a minute." He yanked Janacek's laser out of his belt and flung it across the room with his free hand. "Here," he shouted, lowering his rifle. "Go hunt a mockman!"

Janacek, startled, snapped the weapon out of the air almost by reflex. He stood holding it clumsily and frowned. "I could kill you now, t'Larien," he said.

"Do that or do nothing," Dirk said. "It's all the same. If you had ever *really* loved Jaan-

"I do not *love* Jaan," Janacek snapped, his face flushed. "He is my *teyn!*"

Dirk let the Kavalars' words hang in the air for a long minute. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Is?" he said. "You mean Jaan *was* your *teyn*, don't you?"

Janacek's flush faded as suddenly as it had come. Beneath his beard one corner of his mouth twitched in a manner that reminded Dirk of Bretan. His eyes shifted, almost furtively, half ashamed, to the heavy iron bracelet that still hung about his bloodied forearm.

"You never did get all the glowstones out, did you?" Dirk said gently.

"No," Janacek said. His voice was oddly soft. "No, I did not. It means little, of course. The physical iron is nothing when the other iron is gone."

"But it's not gone, Garse," Dirk said. "Jaan spoke of you when we were together in Kryne Lamiya. I know. Maybe he feels himself iron-bound to Gwen too, and maybe that is wrong. Don't ask me. All I know is that for Jaan the other iron is still there. He wore his iron-and-fire bracelet in Kryne Lamiya. He'll be wearing it when the Braith hounds tear him down, I imagine."

Janacek shook his head. "T'Larien," he said, "your mother comes from Kimdiss, I would vow. Yet I cannot resist you. You manipulate too well." He grinned; it was the old grin, the one he had flashed that

morning when he aimed his laser at Dirk and asked if it alarmed him. "Jaan Vikary *is* my *teyn*," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

Janacek's conversion, however reluctant, was thorough enough. The Kavalat took charge almost immediately. Dirk thought they should leave at once and discuss their plans en route, but Janacek insisted that they take time to shower and dress. "If Jaan is still alive, he will be safe enough until dawn. The hounds have poor night sight, and the Braiths will not be eager to go blundering into a dark choker-wood. No, t'Larien, they will camp and wait. A man alone and on foot cannot get far. So we have time enough to meet them like Ironjades."

By the time they were ready to depart, Janacek had removed almost every trace of his drunken rage. He was slim and immaculate in a suit of fur-lined chameleon cloth, his beard cleaned and trimmed, his dark red hair combed carefully back from his eyes. Only his right arm-scrubbed and carefully bandaged, but still conspicuous-gave evidence against him. But the scratches did not seem to have impaired him much; he looked graceful and fluid as he charged and checked his laser and slid it into his belt. In addition to the pistol, Janacek was also carrying a long double-bladed knife and a rifle like Dirk's. He grinned gleefully as he took it up.

Dirk had washed and shaved while waiting, and had also taken the opportunity to eat his first full meal in days. He was feeling almost energetic when they set off for the roof.

The interior of Janacek's huge square aircar was every bit as cramped as that of the tiny derelict Dirk had flown from Kryne Lamiya, although Janacek's machine did have four small seats instead of only two. "The armor," Garse said when Dirk remarked on the limited interior space. He strapped Dirk into a rigid uncomfortable seat with a tight battle harness, did likewise for himself, and took them swiftly aloft.

The cabin was dimly lit and completely enclosed, with gauges and instruments everywhere, even above the doors. No windows; a panel of eight small view-screens gave the pilot eight different exterior views. The decor was unpainted, unornamented duralloy.

"This vehicle is older than both of us," Janacek said as he took them up. He seemed eager enough to talk, and friendly in his abrasive sort of way. "And it has seen more worlds than even you. Its history is fascinating. This particular model dates to some four hundred standard years ago. It was built by the Wisdoms of Dam Tullian, well within the Tempter's Veil, and used in their wars against Erikan and Rogue's Hope. After a century or so it was disabled and abandoned. The Erikaners salvaged it during a peace and sold it to the Steel Angels on Bastion. They used it in a number of campaigns, until it was finally captured from them by Prometheans. A Kimdissi trader picked it up on Prometheus and sold it to me, and I adapted it to the code duello. No one has challenged me to aerial combat since. Watch." His hand reached out and depressed a glowing button, and suddenly there was a surge of acceleration that pressed Dirk back against his seat. "Auxiliary pulse-tubes for emergency speed," Janacek said with a grin. "We will be there in less than half the time it took you, t'Larien."

"Good," Dirk said. Something was nagging at him. "Did you say you got it from a Kimdissi trader?"

"That is truth," Janacek said. "The peaceful Kimdissi are great arms traders. I have scant regard for the manipulators, as you know, but I am not above taking advantage of a bargain when one is offered."

"Arkin made a great show of being nonviolent," Dirk said. "I suppose that was all another sham."

"No," Janacek said. He glanced at Dirk and smiled. "Startled, t'Larien? The truth is perhaps more bizarre. We do not call the Kimdissi manipulators without reason. You studied history on Avalon, I assume?"

"Some," Dirk said. "Old Earth history, the Federal Empire, the Double War, the expansion."

"Yet no outworld history." Janacek clucked. "It is expected. So many worlds and cultures in the man-realm, so many histories. Even the names are too much to learn. Listen, and I will enlighten you. When you landed on Worlorn, did you notice the circle of flags?"

Dirk looked at him blankly. "No."

"Perhaps they are no longer in place. Once, though, during the Festival itself, the plaza outside the spacefield flew fourteen flags. It was an absurd Toberian conceit, yet it came to pass, in a fashion, though the planetary flags in ten of the fourteen cases represented nothing. Worlds like Eshellin and the Forgotten Colony did not even know what a flag was, while at the other extreme the Emereli had a different banner for each of their hundred urban towers. The Darklings laughed at us all and flew a cloth of solid black." He seemed very amused at that. "As for High Kavalaan, we had no flag for all our world. We found one, though. It was taken from history. A rectangle divided into four quadrants of different colors: a green banshee on a field of black for Ironjade,

Shanagate's silver hunting bat on yellow, crossed swords against crimson for Redsteel, and for Braith a white wolf on purple. It was the old standard of the Highbond League.

"The League was created about the time that the starships first returned to High Kavalaan. There was a man, a great leader, named Viktor high-Redsteel Corben. He dominated Redsteel's highbond council for a generation, and when the offworlders came he was convinced that all Kavalars must band together to share knowledge and wealth equally. Thus he formed the Highbond League, whose flag I have described to you. The union was sadly short-lived. Kimdissi traders, fearful of the power of a unified High Kavalaan, contracted to provide modern armaments exclusively to the Braiths. The Braith highbonds had joined the League only from fear; in truth, they wished to shun the stars, which they avowed were all full of mockmen. Yet they did not shrink from taking mock-man lasers.

"So we had the last highwar. Ironjade and Redsteel and Shanagate together subjugated Braith, despite the Kimdissi arms, but Viktor high-Redsteel himself was killed, and the cost in lives was hideous. The Highbond League outlasted its founder by only a handful of years. Braith, badly beaten, fastened on the belief that it had been tricked and used by Kimdissi mock-men, and thus cleaved to the old traditions even more firmly than before. To blood the peace and make it lasting, the League-now dominated by highbonds from Shanagate-seized all the Kimdissi traders on High Kavalaan and a ship of Toberians as well, declared all of them to be war criminals-a term the offworlders taught us, by the way-and set them free on the plains to be hunted as mockmen. Banshees killed many of them, others starved, but the hunters took the most and carried the heads home for trophies. It is said that the Braith highbonds took special joy in flaying the men who had armed and advised them.

"We are not proud of that hunt overmuch today, yet we can understand it. The war had been longer and bloodier than any in our history since the Time of Fire and Demons. It was a time of great griefs and

towering hatreds, and it destroyed the Highbond League. The Ironjade Gathering withdrew rather than condone the hunting, declaring that the Kimdissi were human. Redsteel soon followed. The mockmen killers were all Braiths and Shanagates, and the Shanagate Holding was thenceforth leagued only to itself. Viktor's banner was soon abandoned and forgotten, until the Festival caused us to remember it." Janacek paused and glanced toward Dirk. "Can you see the truth now, t'Larien?"

"I can see why Kavalars and Kimdissi don't like each other much." Dirk admitted.

Janacek laughed. "It goes beyond our own history," he said. "Kimdiss has fought no wars, but the world has bloody hands. When Tober-in-the-Veil attacked Wolfheim, the manipulators supplied both sides. When civil war flared on ai-Emerel between the urbanites whose universe is a single building and the disaffected star-seekers who urged a broader horizon, Kimdiss was deeply involved, giving the urbanites the means to win conclusively." He grinned. "In truth, t'Larien, there are even tales of Kimdissi plots *within* the Tempter's Veil. It is said it was Kimdissi agents who set the Steel Angels and the Altered Men of Prometheus against each other, who deposed the Fourth Cuchulainn of Tara because he refused to trade with them, who interfered on Braque to keep technology stillborn beneath the weight of the Braqui priests. Do you know the ancient religion of Kimdiss?"

"No."

"You would approve," Janacek said. "It is a peaceful and civilized creed, exceedingly complex. You can use it to justify anything except personal violence. Yet their great prophet, the Son of the Dreamer-accepted as a myth-figure, but they continue to revere him-he said once, 'Remember, your enemy has an enemy.' Indeed he does. That is the heart of Kimdissi wisdom."

Dirk shifted uneasily in his seat. "And you're saying that Ruark-

"I am saying nothing," Janacek interrupted. "Draw your own conclusions. You need not accept mine. I told all of this to Gwen Delvano once, because she stood *cro-betheyn* to me and I had a concern. She was vastly amused. The history meant nothing, she told me. Arkin Ruark was only himself, not some archetype of outworld history. So she informed me. He was also her friend, I was told, and this bond, this *friendship*" -his voice was acid as he said the word-"somehow transcended the fact that he was a liar and a Kimdissi. Gwen told me to look to my own history. If Arkin Ruark was a manipulator by mere fact of birth on Kimdiss, then I was a taker of mockman heads by simple virtue of being Kavalars."

Dirk considered that. "She was right, you know," he said quietly.

"Oh? Was she?"

"Her argument was right," Dirk said. "It seems as though she was wrong in her assessment of Ruark, but in general-

"In general it is better to distrust all Kimdissi," Janacek said firmly. "You have been deceived and used, t'Larien, yet you do not learn. You are very like Gwen. Enough of this."

He tapped one of the viewscreens with a knuckle. "We have the mountains close at hand. It will not be long now."

Dirk had been gripping his laser rifle very tightly. He wiped his sweating palms on his trousers. "You have a plan?"

"Yes," said Janacek, grinning. And at that he leaned across the space between them and smoothly snatched the laser from off Dirk's lap. "A very simple plan, in truth," he continued, setting the weapon down carefully out of reach. "I will hand you over to Lorimaar."

Chapter 12

Dirk was not startled. Beneath his clothing the whisperjewel was still cold against his skin, reminding him of past promises and past betrayals. He had almost ceased to care. He folded his arms and waited.

Janacek looked disappointed. "You do not seem concerned," he said.

"It doesn't matter, Garse," Dirk answered. "When I left Kryne Lamiya, I expected to die." He sighed. "How is all this going to do Jaan any good?"

Janacek did not answer at once; his blue eyes appraised Dirk carefully. "You are changing, t'Larien," he said at last, the smile gone from his face. "Do you truly care more about Jaan Vikary's fate than about your own?"

"How would I know?" Dirk said. "Get on with your plan!"

Janacek frowned. "I considered a landing in the Braith camp and a direct confrontation. I rejected the idea. My death wish has not waxed so greatly as yours. While I might call one or several of the hunters to duel, it would be too obviously in aid of a criminal outbender. They would never face me. My own status is tenuous at the moment; because of my words and actions in Challenge, the Braiths still think me human, although in disgrace. Should I openly seek to help Jaan, however, I would taint myself in their eyes. The courtesies of code would no longer rule. I too would become a criminal, a probable mockman.

"A second alternative was to attack them suddenly, without warning, and kill as many as we could. I am not yet so depraved as to consider that idea. Even Jaan's deed against Myrik would be clean compared to such a crime.

"It would be best, of course, if we could fly in and locate Jaan and get him away, safely and secretly. Yet I see little chance of this. The Braiths have hounds. We have none. They are experienced hunters and trackers, particularly Pyr Braith Oryan and Lorimaar high-Braith himself. I am less skilled, and you are useless. The chances are excellent that they would find Jaan before we did."

"Yes," said Dirk. "So?"

"I am being a false Kavalat in aiding Jaan at all," Janacek said in a faintly troubled voice. "Thus I will be just a bit more false. In that lies our best chance. We will fly in openly, and I will hand you over, as I have said. That act should gain at least a grudging trust from them. Then I will join the hunt, and do all that I

can short of murder. Perhaps I can provoke a quarrel and call some of them to duel in a manner that will not make it seem as though I am protecting Jaan Vikary."

"You could lose," Dirk pointed out.

Janacek nodded. "Truth enough. I could lose. Yet I do not think so. In singled duel, only Bretan Braith Lantry is a really dangerous antagonist, and he and his *telyn* are not among the hunters, if the aircars you saw are all. Lorimaar has his skills, but Jaan wounded him in Challenge. Pyr is fast and talented with his little stick, but not with a blade or a sidearm. The others are old men and weaklings. I would not lose."

"And if you can't trick them into dueling?"

"Then I can be near when they run down Jaan."

"And then?"

"I do not know. They will not take him, though. I promise you that, t'Larien. They will not take him."

"And meanwhile, what about me?"

Janacek looked over once again, and once more the blue eyes regarded him thoughtfully. "You will be in great danger," the Kavalari said, "but I do not think they will kill you immediately, and certainly not as I will hand you to them, bound and helpless. They will wish to hunt you. Pyr will probably claim you. I hope that they will cut you free and strip you and set you to running in the forest. If some of them elect to hunt you, less will be hunting Jaan. There is another possibility as well. In Challenge, Pyr and Bretan were near to quarreling over you. Should Bretan ever join the hunters, it is likely they would resume their conflict. We can only benefit by that."

Dirk smiled. "Your enemy has an enemy," he said sardonically.

Janacek grimaced. "I am no Arkin Ruark," he said. "I will help you if I can. Before we enter the Braith camp, we will drop-dark and secret, if we can-to this downed aircar you saw, this dead fire. We will leave your laser in the wreck. Then, after they have cut you free and sent you naked into the forest, you can make for the weapon, and hopefully surprise those who come after you." He shrugged. "Your life may depend on how fast and straight you can run, and how accurately you can fire your rifle."

"And whether I can kill," Dirk added.

"And whether you can kill," Janacek acknowledged. "I can give you no better chances, t'Larien."

"I accept the ones you offer," Dirk said. Then they flew in silence for a long time. But when the black knives of the mountainwall had finally fallen behind them, and Janacek had doused all the aircar's lights and begun his slow, careful descent, Dirk turned to speak to him once more. "What would you have done," he asked, "if I had refused to play along with your deceit?"

Garse Janacek swiveled in his seat and laid his right hand on Dirk's arm. The untouched glowstones burned very faintly in the iron of his bracelet. "The bond of fire-and-iron is stronger than any bond you know," the Kavalari said in a grave voice, "and far stronger than any bonds of fleeting gratitude. Had you refused me, t'Larien, I would have cut your tongue from your mouth so you could not tell the Braiths of

my plans, and I would have proceeded. Willing or unwilling, you would have played your role. Understand, t'Larien, I do not hate you, though you have earned my hate several times over. At times I have even found myself liking you, as much as an Ironjade may like an outbonder. I would not have hurt you out of malice. Yet I would have hurt you. For I have considered carefully, and my plan is Jaan Vikary's best hope."

As he spoke, not the faintest trace of a smile could be seen on Janacek's face. For once he was not joking.

Dirk did not have long to reflect on Janacek's words. They dropped down through the night like some impossibly light boulder and flitted wraithlike above the tops of the chokers. The wreck still smoldered a dim orange (the light seeping from the core of a blackened, fallen tree), and a haze of smoke obscured its contours. Janacek hovered over the crash, opened one of the great armored doors, and tossed the laser rifle to the forest floor a few meters below. At Dirk's insistence, he also threw out the Braith jacket Dirk had been wearing, whose fur and heavy leather would be a godsend to a man running naked through the forest.

Afterwards they soared straight up again, high into the sky, and Garse bound Dirk hand and foot, the thin cords tight and painful, threatening to cut off circulation, and so very authentic. Then, after flicking on his headlamps and running lights, Janacek took them swooping toward the circle of lights.

The hounds were staked out and sleeping by the water's edge, but they woke when the strange aircar descended, and Janacek landed in the midst of their wild howling. Only one of the Braiths was about, the skin-and-bones hunter whose unkempt black hair stood out as stiffly as if it had been fried to a charcoal crisp. Pyr's *teyn*, Dirk knew, though he did not know his name. The man was sitting by a low campfire near the Braith hounds, a laser rifle by his side, when they first saw him, but he scrambled to his feet swiftly enough as they came down.

Janacek unsealed the massive door again, swinging it up and open and letting the cold night flow into the warmth of the cabin. He pulled Dirk to his feet and shoved him roughly outside, forcing him to kneel in the cool sand.

"Ironjade," the man on guard said harshly. By then his *kethi* had started to gather, pulling themselves from their sleeping bags and piling out of the aircars.

"I have a gift for you," Janacek said, his hands on his hips. "An offering from Ironjade to Braith."

The hunters were six in number, Dirk saw as he looked up from where he knelt; all of them had been in Challenge. Bald, bulky Pyr had been sleeping outside near his *teyn*; he was the first one on hand. Soon afterwards Roseph high-Braith and his quiet muscular companion joined them. They too had been asleep on the ground near their aircar. Lastly Lorimaar high-Braith Arkellor, the left side of his chest wrapped in dark bandages, came slowly from the domed red air-car, leaning on the arm of the fat man who had been with him before. All six of them appeared as they had slept-fully dressed, and armed. ,

"The gift," Pyr said, "is appreciated, Ironjade." He wore a sidearm on a black metallic belt, but his baton was missing, and he looked almost incomplete without it.

"Your presence is *not* appreciated," Lorimaar said, as he struggled to join the circle. He was leaning much of his weight on his *teyn*, so that he seemed hunched and broken, no longer quite the giant he had been. And Dirk, looking at him, thought he could see new creases in the dark, deeply lined skin-fresh-carved runnels of pain.

"It is obvious now that the duels for which I was named arbiter will never come to pass," Roseph said evenly, with none of the heavy hostility that thickened Lorimaar's voice, "so I have no particular authority, and I cannot pretend to speak for High Kavalaan, or Braith. Yet I am certain that I speak for all of us. We will not tolerate your interference, Ironjade. Blood-gift or no."

"Truth," Lorimaar said.

"I do not seek to interfere," Janacek told them. "I seek to join you."

"We hunt your *teyn*," Pyr's companion said. "He knows that," Pyr snapped. "I have no *teyn*," Janacek said. "An animal roams the forest, wearing my iron-and-fire. I would help you kill it, and reclaim the thing that is mine." He sounded very hard, very convincing.

One of the hounds was stalking back and forth impatiently on its chain. It growled and stopped long enough to wrinkle its rat's face at Janacek and bare a row of yellowed canines. "He is a liar," Lorimaar high-Braith said. "Even our dogs smell out his lies. They do not like him."

"A mockman," added his *teyn*. Garse Janacek turned his head very slightly. The shifting firelight woke red highlights in his beard as he smiled his thin and threatening smile. "Saanel Braith," he said, "your *teyn* is wounded and thus insults me with impunity, knowing I cannot call on him to make his choices. You enjoy no such safety."

"For the moment he does," Roseph said harshly. "That is a trick we do not allow you, Ironjade. You will not duel us, one by one, and save your outbond *teyn*."

"I have sworn that I have no wish to save him. I have no *teyn*. You cannot strip me of my rights under the code."

Small, shriveled Roseph-the smallest of the Kavalars by half a meter-stared at Janacek and refused to flinch. "We are on Worlorn," he said. "And we do what we will." Several of the others muttered agreement.

"You are Kavalars," Janacek insisted, but a flicker of doubt passed across his face. "You are Braiths and highbonds of Braith, bound to your holdfast and your council and its ways."

"In years past," Pyr said with a smile, "I have seen many of my *kethi* and even more the men of other holdfasts abandon the old wisdoms. 'This and this and this are wrong,' the mincing Ironjades would say. 'We will not follow them.' And the sheep of Redsteel would echo them, and the womanly men of Shanagate, and sadly many Braiths. Are my memories false? You stand and preach code at us, but do I not recall the Ironjades in my youth telling me that I may hunt mockmen no longer? Am I misremembering the soft Kavalars who were sent to Avalon to learn spaceships and weaponry and other useful things, who returned full of lies about how we must change this way, and that way, how so much

of our old code was a thing of shame, when it had been so long a pride to us? Tell me, Ironjade, *am* I wrong?"

Garse said nothing. He folded his arms tightly against his chest.

"Jaan Vikary, once high-Ironjade, was the greatest of the changers, the liars. You were not far behind," Lorimaar said.

"I have never been to Avalon," Janacek said simply.

"*Answer me*," Pyr said. "Did you and Vikary not seek to change old ways? Did you not laugh at the parts of the code you disliked?"

"I have never broken code," Janacek said. "Jaan ... Jaan would sometimes ..." He faltered.

"He admits it," fat Saanel said.

"We have talked among ourselves," Roseph said in a calm voice. "If highbonds can kill outside the code, if the things we know as truth can be changed and disregarded, then we too can make changes, and shun false wisdoms we do not care for. We are bound by Braith no longer, Ironjade. It is the best of holdfasts, but that is not good enough. Our old *kethi* had taken too many soft lies to their hearts. We will be twisted and toyed with no more. We will return to the old true things, to the creed that was ancient before Bronzefist fell, even to the days when the highbonds of Ironjade and Taal and the Deep Coal Dwellings fought together against demons in the Lameraan Hills."

"You see, Ironjade," Pyr said, "you call us false names."

"I did not know," Janacek said, a bit slowly.

"Call us truly. We are no Braiths."

The Ironjade's eyes seemed dark and hooded. His arms were still crossed. He looked at Lorimaar. "You have made a new holdfast," he said.

"There is precedent," Roseph said. "Redsteel was birthed by those who broke from Glowstone Mountain, and Braith itself grew out of Bronzefist."

"I am Lorimaar Reln Winterfox *high-Larteyn* Arkellor," Lorimaar said in his hard, pain-filled voice.

"Honor to your holdfast," Janacek answered, holding himself stiffly, "honor to your *teyn*."

"We are all Larteyns," Roseph said.

Pyr laughed. "We are the highbond council of Larteyn, and we keep the old codes," he said.

In the silence that followed, Janacek's eyes went from one face to the next. Dirk, still helpless and kneeling in the sand, watched his head move, turning from one to the other. "You have named yourself Larteyns," Janacek said at last, "and so you are Larteyns. All the old wisdoms agree on that much. Yet I remind you that all the things you speak of, the men and teachings and the holdfasts you invoke, all these

things are dead. Bronzefist and Taal were destroyed in highwars before any of you were born, and the Deep Coal Dwellings were flooded and empty even during the Time of Fire and Demons."

"Their wisdoms live in Larteyn," Saanel said.

"You are only six," Janacek said, "and Worlorn is dying."

"Under us it will thrive again," Roseph said. "News will go back to High Kavalaan and others will come. Our sons will be born here, to hunt these choker-woods."

"As you will," said Janacek. "It is no matter to me. Ironjade has no grievance with Larteyn. I come to you openly and ask to join your hunt." His hand dropped to Dirk's shoulder. "And I bring you a blood-gift."

"Truth," Pyr said and was silent for a moment. Then, to the others: "I say let him come."

"No," said Lorimaar. "I do not trust him. He is too eager."

"For a reason, Lorimaar high-Larteyn," Janacek said. "A great shame has been put on my holdfast and my name. I seek to wipe it clean."

"A man must keep his pride, no matter the pain," Roseph said, nodding. "That is truth enough for anyone."

"Let him hunt," Roseph's *teyn* said. "We are six and he is alone. How can he harm us?"

"He is a liar!" Lorimaar insisted. "How did he come to us here? Ask yourselves that! And look!" He pointed at Janacek's right arm, where glowstones burned like red eyes in their settings. Only a handful were missing.

Janacek put his left hand on his knife and slid it smoothly from its sheath. Then he held out his right hand to Pyr. "Help me hold my arm steady," he said in a calm conversational tone, "and I will cast away Jaan Vikary's false fires."

Pyr did as he was asked. No one spoke. Janacek's hand was sure and quick. When he was finished, glowstones lay in the sand like coals from a scattered fire.

He bent and picked one up, tossed it lightly into the air and caught it again, as if he were testing its weight, smiling all the while. Then he drew back his arm and threw; the stone sailed up and off a long way before it began to fall. At the far end of its arc, sinking, it looked a bit like a shooting star. Dirk almost expected it to hiss when it sank into the lake's dark waters. But there was no sound at all, not even a splash at this distance.

Janacek picked up all of the glowstones in turn, rolled them in his palm briefly, and gave them to the lake.

When the last of them was gone, he turned back to the hunters and held out his right arm. "Empty iron," he said. "Look. My *teyn* is dead."

After that there was no more trouble.

"Dawn is near upon us," Pyr said. "Set my prey to running."

So the hunters turned their attention to Dirk, and it went much as he had been told it would go. They cut him free of his bonds and let him rub his wrists and ankles a bit to get his blood moving once again. Then he was pushed back against an aircar, and Roseph and fat Saanel held him still while Pyr himself cut his clothes away. The bald hunter handled his little knife as deftly as he did his baton, but he was not gentle; he left a long cut down the inside of Dirk's thigh, and a shorter deeper one on his chest.

Dirk winced when Pyr slashed him, but made no effort to resist. Until he was finally naked, and beginning to shiver in the wind, his back pressed too hard against the cold metal flank of the aircar.

Pyr frowned suddenly. "What's this?" he said, and his small white hand wrapped around the whisper-jewel where it hung against Dirk's chest.

"No," Dirk said.

Pyr yanked hard and twisted. The fine silver chain dug painfully into Dirk's throat; the jewel popped free of its improvised clip.

"No!" Dirk shouted. He threw himself forward suddenly and began to struggle. Roseph stumbled and lost his grip on Dirk's right arm and went down. Saanel hung on grimly. Dirk punched him hard in his bull-thick neck, just beneath his chin. The fat man let go with an oath, and Dirk swung around at Pyr.

Pyr had picked up his baton. He was smiling. Dirk took a single quick step toward him and stopped.

That was enough of a hesitation. Saanel slid a thick arm around his head from behind and began applying a headlock that gradually turned into a choke.

Pyr watched with disinterest. He thrust his baton into the sand and held the whisperjewel between thumb and forefinger. "Mockman jewelry," he said disdainfully. It meant nothing to him; there was no resonance in his mind with the patterns esper-etched into the gemstone. Perhaps he noticed how cold the little teardrop was to his touch, perhaps not-but he heard no whispers. He called to his *teyn*, who was kicking sand onto the fire. "Would you like a gift from t'Larien?"

Saying nothing, the man came over and took the jewel and held it briefly, then put it into a pocket of his jacket. He turned away unsmiling and began to walk around the perimeter of the Braith camp, extinguishing the ring of electric hand torches planted in the sand. As the lights went out, Dirk saw that the first blush of dawn was on the eastern horizon.

Pyr waved his baton at Saanel. "Release him," he ordered, and the fat man undid his chokehold and stepped away. Dirk stood free again. His neck ached, and the dry sand beneath his feet was coarse and cold. He felt very vulnerable. Without the whisperjewel, he was now very much afraid. He looked around for Garse Janacek, but the Ironjade was off on the other side of the camp talking intently to Lorimaar.

"Dawn is already here," Pyr said. "I can come after you at once, mockman. Run."

Dirk glanced over his shoulder. Roseph was frowning and massaging his shoulder; he had fallen hard when Dirk yanked loose. Saanel, smirking, was leaning back against the aircar. Dirk took a few hesitant steps away from them, toward the forest.

"Come, t'Larien, I am certain you can run faster than that," Pyr called out to him. "Run fast enough, and you may live. I will be on foot as well, and my *teyn*, and our hounds." He took out his sidearm and tossed it through the air, spinning, toward Saanel, who caught it and smothered it in two massive slab-fingered hands. "I will carry no laser, t'Larien," Pyr continued. "This will be a pure clean hunt, of the oldest sort. A hunter with his knife and his throwing-blade, a naked prey. Run, t'Larien, run!" His bony black-haired companion had come over to join him. "My *teyn*," Pyr said to him, "unchain our hounds."

Dirk spun and began sprinting for the edge of the wood.

It was a run out of nightmare.

They had taken his boots; no sooner had he gone three meters into the trees than he cut his foot on a sharp rock in the dark and began to limp. There were other rocks. Running, he seemed to find them all.

They had taken his clothes; it was better in the shelter of the trees, where the wind was not so bad, but he was still cold. Very cold. He had gooseflesh for a time, then it passed. Other pains came, and the cold seemed less important.

The outworld wilderness was too dark and too light. Too dark to see where he was going. He stumbled over roots, skinned his knees and palms badly, ran into holes. But it was too light as well. Dawn was coming too fast, too fast, the light spreading agonizingly through the trees. He was losing his beacon. He looked up at it every time he reached a clear space, every time he could see between the dense overhanging foliage, looked up and found it. A single bright red star, High Kavalaan's own star aflame in Worlorn's sky. Garse had pointed it out to him, and told him to follow it if he lost his way. It would lead him through the woods to his laser and his jacket. But dawn was coming, coming too quickly; the Braiths had delayed too long in cutting him loose. And every time he looked up again and tried to go the right way- the forest was thick and confusing, the chokers formed impenetrable walls at points and forced him to take detours, all directions looked the same, it was easy to go astray-every time he searched for his beacon, it was fainter, more washed out. The eastern light had taken on a reddish tinge; Fat Satan was rising somewhere, and soon his homing star would be washed from a mock-twilight sky. He tried to run faster.

It was less than a kilometer to run, less than a kilometer. But a kilometer is a long way to go through a wilderness, naked, close to lost. He had been running ten minutes when he heard the Braith hounds baying wildly behind him.

After that, he neither thought nor worried. He ran.

He ran in animal panic, breathing hard, bleeding, his whole body trembling and aching. The run became an endless thing, a thing outside of time, a fever dream of frantic pumping feet and snatches of vivid sensation and the noises behind him of the hounds, growing ever closer-or so it seemed. He ran and ran, and got nowhere, and ran and ran, and did not move. He crashed through a thick wall of firebriars, and the red-tipped thorns cut his flesh in a hundred places, and he did not cry; he ran, he ran. He reached an area

of smooth gray slate and tried to scramble over it quickly and fell and smashed his chin with a crack against the stone and his mouth was full of blood and he spat it out. Blood on the rock, as well, no wonder he had fallen; his blood, all of it, from the cuts on his feet.

He crawled over the smooth stone and reached the trees again and ran some more, wild, until he remembered that he was not looking for his beacon. And when he found it again, it was back behind him and to the side, very faint, a small shining dot in a scarlet sky, and he turned and went to it and across the stone once more, tripping over unseen roots, tearing the foliage away with wild hands, running, running. He ran into a low branch, sat down hard, got up holding his head, ran on. He tripped on a slimy bed of moss, black, smelling of rot, rose covered with the slime and the smell, ran on, ran on. He looked for his beacon star, and it was gone. He kept going. It had to be the right way, it had to. The hounds were behind him, baying. It was only a kilometer, it was less than a kilometer. He was freezing. He was on fire. His chest was full of knives. He kept running, staggered and tripped and fell, got up, kept running. The hounds were behind him, close, close, the hounds were behind him.

And then suddenly-he did not know when, he did not know how long he had been running, he did not know how far he had come, the star was gone-he thought he caught the faint odor of smoke on the forest wind. He ran toward it, and came out from among the trees into a small clearing, and ran toward the other side of the barren open space, and stopped.

The hounds were in front of him.

One of them, at least. It came slinking out of the^x trees snarling, its little eyes deadly, its hairless snout drawn back to flash its ugly fangs. He tried to run around it and it was on him, knocking him over, slashing at him and rolling with him, then jumping up. Dirk struggled to his knees; the hound circled him and snapped savagely whenever he tried to rise to his feet. It had bitten his left arm and drawn more blood. But it had not killed him, had not torn out his throat. Trained, he thought, it was trained. It circled him, circled, its eyes never leaving him. Pyr had sent it out ahead and was coming behind with his *teyn* and his other dogs. This one would keep him trapped here until they arrived.

He jumped to his feet suddenly, lunged toward the trees. The dog leaped, knocked him over again, wrestled him to the ground, and almost tore loose his arm. This time he did not get up. The hound backed off again, stood waiting, poised, its mouth wet with blood and slaver. Dirk tried to push himself up with his good arm. He crawled a half-meter. The hound growled. The others were near. He heard the baying.

Then, from above, he heard something else. He looked up weakly into the small slice of cloud-streaked sky, dim with the dawning rays of the Hell-eye and its attendants. The Braith hound, backing off from him a meter, was looking up too. And the *sound* came again. It was a wail and a war yell, a lingering ululating shriek, a death hoot that was almost musical in its intensity. Dirk wondered if he were dying and hearing the sounds of Kryne Lamiya in his mind. But the hound heard it too. It was squatting, paralyzed, looking up.

A dark shape dropped from the sky. Dirk saw it fall. It was huge, very black, pitch almost, and its underside was puckered with a thousand small red mouths, and they were all open, all singing, all sounding that terrible shuddering wail. It had no head that he could see; it was triangular, a wide dark sail,

a wind-borne manta ray, a leather cloak someone had cast loose in the sky. A leather cloak with mouths, though, and a long thin tail.

He saw the tail whip around once, suddenly, and snap at the Braith hound's face. The dog blinked and stepped back. The flying creature hovered for an instant, beating its vast wings with exquisite rippling slowness, then settled down over the hound and wrapped itself around it. Both animals were silent. The hound-the huge muscular rat-faced dog that stood as tall as a man-the hound was gone. The other covered it completely, and lay in the grass and the dirt like a black leather sausage of immense proportions.

Everything was silent. The hunter's wail had stilled the entire forest. He did not hear the other hounds. Carefully he rose to his feet and walked, limping, around the torpid killer-cloak. It scarcely seemed to stir. In the dawn half-light, it might have been a big misshapen log.

In his mind, Dirk saw it still as it had looked in the sky: a black shape, howling, falling, all wing and mouth. For an instant, glimpsing only the silhouette, he had thought that Jaan Vikary had come to rescue him, flying the gray manta aircar.

The far side of the clearing was a choker tangle, thick and yellow-brown and very dense. But the smoke came from beyond it. Warily Dirk dodged and squeezed and pushed the waxy limbs aside, breaking them when he had to, and forced his way through.

The wreck had ceased to burn, but a thin pall of smoke still hung above it. One wing had scraped along the ground, tearing a great gouge in the earth and felling several trees before snapping; the other jabbed up into the air, its bat shape distorted by fused runnels of frozen metal and holes punched through it by a laser cannon. The cabin was black and shapeless, open to the outside through a wide jagged hole.

Dirk found his laser rifle nearby. He also found bones: two skeletons twisted around each other in a death's embrace, the bones dark and wet, still brown with blood and bits of clinging meat. One skeleton was human, or had been. All the arms and legs were broken, and most of the ribs shattered and gone, but Dirk recognized the triple-pronged metal claw that ended one twice-broken arm. Mingled with it, and just as dead, were the remains of whatever creature had dragged the carcass from the smoking aircar out into the open-some scavenger whose bones were black-veined and rubbery-looking, curved and very big. The banshee had caught it feeding. No wonder it had been so close. '

There was no trace of the leather and fur jacket that he and Garse had dropped here. Dirk dragged himself over to the cold hulk of the aircar and climbed into its shadowed maw. He cut himself on a sharp metal surface going in, but hardly noticed it; what was one more cut now? He settled down to wait, sheltered from the wind, and hoping he was hidden from banshee and Braiths both. Most of his wounds seemed to have clotted, he noted dully. At least he was only bleeding fitfully, here and there. But the brown scabs that had formed were all crusted with dirt, and he wondered if he should do something to fight infection. It did not seem to matter, though; he pushed the thought aside and held his laser a bit more tightly, hoping the hunters would get here soon.

What had slowed them down? Perhaps they were afraid of disturbing the banshee; that made a certain amount of sense. He lay down in the cold ashes, resting his head on his arm, and tried not to think, not to feel. His feet were bundles of raw agony. Awkwardly he tried to lift them in the air, so they would not touch anything. That helped a little, but he did not have the strength to hold them up for long. His arm

was throbbing where the Braith hound had bitten him. For a time he wished fervently that he could stop hurting, that his head would stop spinning so badly. Then he changed his mind. The pain, he thought, was probably the only thing that was keeping him conscious. And if he fell asleep now, somehow he did not think it likely that he would ever wake up again.

He saw Fat Satan hanging over the forest, its bloody disc half obscured by a screen of blue-black branches. Nearby a single yellow sun burned very brightly, a small spark in the firmament. He blinked at them. They were old friends.

The sound of Braith hounds brought him back to attention. Ten meters away, the hunters came eagerly out of the foliage. Not as close as he had expected them. Of course, he thought, they had gone around the chokers instead of fighting through them. Pyr Braith was almost invisible, blue-black like the tree he stood against, but Dirk saw his motion, and the baton he carried in one hand, and the bright silvery shaft taller than he that he held in the other. His *teyn* was a few steps ahead of him, holding two hounds on short chains; the dogs were barking wildly and pulling him forward almost at a trot. A third hound ran free at his side, and began bounding toward the downed aircar as soon as it was out of the underbrush.

Dirk, lying on his stomach amid the ashes and the shattered instruments of the wreck, suddenly found it all immensely funny. Pyr hefted his silver shaft above his head and began to run; he was sure he had his prey at last. But he had no laser, and Dirk did. Giggling and giddy, Dirk raised the rifle and took careful aim.

As he fired, a memory came back to him, as sudden and stabbing as the pulse of light that flashed from his laser. Janacek, just a short time ago, stern-faced, shrugging: *Your life may depend on how fast and straight you can run, and how accurately you can fire your rifle*, he had said. And Dirk had added; *And whether I can kill*. It had seemed terribly important, the killing; how much more difficult it would be than simple running.

He giggled again. The running had been very difficult. The killing was just something he did, and it was almost easy.

The bright burning knife of the laser hung in the air for a long second, impaling Pyr square in his broad gut as he ran toward the hulk. The Braith stumbled and fell to his knees. His mouth hung open absurdly for a second before he collapsed on his face and was lost to Dirk's sight. The long silver blade he had carried remained stuck in the torn ground, swaying back and forth as the wind whipped at it.

Pyr's black-haired companion let go of the chain he was holding and seemed to freeze when his *teyn* went down. Dirk moved the laser slightly and fired once more, but nothing happened; the weapon was still in its fifteen-second recycle. That made the hunting a *sport*, he remembered; it gave the game a chance to get away if you missed. He found himself giggling again.

The hunter woke up and threw himself flat, rolling over the ground into the long gully ripped by the aircar's wing. Down in the trenches looking for his laser, Dirk thought, but he won't find it.

The hounds had surrounded the aircar, barking at him whenever he shifted his position or raised his head. None of them tried to come in for the kill. That was the hunter's business. Dirk took careful aim and shot the nearest one through the throat. It dropped like dead meat, and the other two backed off. Pulling

himself to his knees, Dirk crawled out of his shelter. He tried to stand, steadying himself with one hand on the twisted wing. The world was spinning. Savage stabbing pains ran up his legs, and he found he could no longer feel his feet at all. But somehow he kept himself erect.

A shout rang out, something in Old Kavalari; Dirk did not know the word. The huge hounds charged, one right after the other, wet red mouths agape, snarling. And in the corner of his eye he saw the hunter emerging, two meters away, his knife out already. One of his long thin arms flicked it around in a sideways sort of motion, and it clattered off the aircar wing Dirk was leaning against. Already the man had turned and was running, and the nearest hound was there, in the air. Dirk let himself fall and brought up the rifle. The canines snapped, missed, but the beast's body smashed into him, knocking him spinning, and then it was on top of him in the dust. Somehow he found the trigger. There was a brief light and the smell of wet hair burning and an awful whine. The hound snapped again, feebly, choking on its own blood. Dirk pushed the carcass off and struggled to one knee. The Braith had reached Pyr's body and was lifting the long silver blade. The other hound had caught its loose chain on a jagged edge of the wreck. When Dirk rose, it yelped and lunged, and the whole great burned hulk of the aircar seemed to shake a little and move, but still the beast was caught.

The black-haired hunter had the silver thing. Dirk aimed his laser and fired; the beam burned wide, but a second is long enough, and Dirk swung the rifle sharply, right to left, left to right.

The man fell even as he released his weapon. It sailed a few meters, slid off the twisted wing, and stuck in the ground, where it moved back and forth in the wind. Dirk was still swinging his laser, left right left right left right, long after the hunter had fallen and the light had gone out. Finally it recycled and pulsed again for a second, burning nothing but a row of chokers, and Dirk, startled, released his hold on the trigger and dropped the weapon.

The hound, still caught, was snarling and lunging. Dirk looked at it, open-mouthed, almost uncomprehending. Then he giggled. He got down on his knees, found the laser, and began to crawl toward the Kavalars. It took an awfully long time. His feet hurt. His arm as well, where he had been bitten. The hound finally fell silent, but there was no quiet. Dirk could hear crying, a continuous low whimper.

He dragged himself through the dirt and the ashes, over the burned-out trunk of a choker, to where the hunters had fallen. They were lying side by side. The gaunt one, the one whose name he had never learned, who had tried to kill him with his knife and his dogs and his silver blade, that one was still, and his mouth was full of blood. Pyr, lying face down, was the source of the whimpers. Dirk knelt by him, shoved his hands beneath him, laboriously turned him over. His face was covered with ashes and blood; he had smashed his nose when he fell, and a thin red trickle still ran from one nostril, leaving a bright trail across his soot-smearred cheeks. His face was old. He kept whimpering and did not seem to see Dirk at all, and his hands were clutching his stomach. Dirk stared at him for a long time. He touched one of his hands-it was strangely soft and small, clean except for a single black slash that ran across the palm, almost a child's hand that ought not to belong to that old bald face -and lifted it away and did the same with the other hand and looked at the hole he had burned in Pyr's gut. A big gut and a small dark hole; it ought not to have hurt him so much. No blood, either, except from his nose. That was almost funny, but Dirk discovered that he had no more giggles left in him.

Pyr opened his mouth then, and Dirk wondered if the man was trying to tell him something, some last words perhaps, some plea for forgiveness. But the Braith only made a thick choking sound, and then resumed his low whimpers.

His baton was lying nearby. Dirk took it up and wrapped his hands around the hardwood knob at one end and placed the small blade over Pyr's chest where his heart ought to be and leaned all his weight forward and down, thinking to give the other release. The hunter's heavy body thrashed horribly for an instant, and Dirk withdrew the blade and thrust it in again, and yet again, but Pyr would not keep still. The little blade was too short, Dirk decided after a time, so he used it differently, found an artery in Pyr's fleshy throat, held the baton very tightly right up by the knife end and pressed it in through the pale fatty skin. There was a terrible lot of blood then, a spurting stream that caught Dirk right in the face until he let go of the baton and pushed himself away. Pyr thrashed again and his neck continued to spurt where Dirk had cut him, and Dirk watched, but each spurt was a little feebler than the one before, and after a time the fountain was only a trickle and after another time it seemed to stop. The ashes and the dirt drank up a lot of the blood, but there was still a great deal of it around, a regular little pool of it between the two of them, and Dirk had never known that a man had enough blood in him to form a real pool of blood. He felt very sick. But at least Pyr was still, and the whimpering had stopped.

He sat alone, resting, in the wan red light. He was very hot and very cold all at once, and he knew he should take some clothing from the corpses and cover himself, but he could not find the strength. His feet hurt horribly, and his arm had swollen to twice its normal size. He did not sleep, but he was barely conscious. He watched Fat Satan rise higher and higher in the sky, approaching noon, with the bright yellow suns shining painfully around it. He heard the Braith hound howling several times, and once he listened to the eerie hunting wail of the banshee and wondered if the creature would come back to eat him and the men he had killed. But the cry seemed a long way off, and perhaps it was only his fever, and perhaps it was only the wind.

When the sticky wet film on his face had dried to a brown crust and the little pool of blood that lay in the dust was finally gone, Dirk knew that he must move again, or he would die here. He considered dying for a long time; it seemed like a very good idea, somehow, but he could not bring himself to do it. He remembered Gwen. He crawled over to where the body of Pyr's *teyn* was lying, ignoring his pain as best he could, and went through the man's pockets. He found the whisperjewel.

Ice in his fist, ice in his mind, memories of promises, lies, love. Jenny. My Guinevere, and he was Lancelot. He could not fail her. He could not. He crushed the cold teardrop hard in his hand and took the ice into his soul. He made himself stand up.

After that it was easier. Slowly he stripped the dead man of his clothing and dressed, though everything was too long for him and the shirt and the chameleon cloth jacket had been slash-burned across the front and the man had fouled his pants. Dirk pulled off the corpse's boots as well, but they were too narrow for his bloodied, scab-cruste feet, and he was forced to use Pyr's. Pyr had huge feet.

Using his laser rifle and Pyr's baton as canes, he struggled toward the wild. A few meters into the trees he stopped and looked back briefly. The huge hound was barking and howling and fighting to yank free, and the aircar gave a metallic shudder every time it lunged. He could see the naked body in the dirt, and beyond it the tall silvery thing, still swaying in the wind. Pyr he could hardly see at all. Beneath the

bloodstains, the hunter's suit had gone to a mottled black and brown, and here and there a dull red, so he blended with the ground he had died on.

Dirk left the hound chained and barking, and limped off through the tangled chokers.

Chapter 13

The run from the hunters' camp to the wrecked aircar had covered less than a kilometer, and it had seemed to Dirk to take forever. The walk back took twice as long. He was certain, afterwards, that he was not entirely conscious as he walked. What memories he retained were only pieces. Stumbling and falling, tearing his pants open at the knee. A swift-running cold stream where he stopped and washed the crusted blood from his face and took off his boots and plunged his feet into the icy rushing water until they had gone numb on him. Climbing over the tilted ridge of slate where he had fallen previously. A dark cave mouth staring at him, a promise of sleep and rest he did not heed. Losing his way, searching for the sun, finding it and following it, losing his way again. Tree-spooks flitting from branch to branch among the chokers, chittering in little voices. Dead white husks peering down at him from waxy limbs. Far off, the banshee wail, lingering, haunting. Stumbling again, half in clumsiness and half in fear. The baton rolling away from him, down a short sharp incline, lost among thick bushes that he did not bother to search. Walking, walking, putting one foot in front of the other, leaning on the baton and on the laser after the baton was gone, his feet aching, aching. The banshee again, closer, almost overhead. Looking up through a tapestry of branches into the gloomy sky, trying to spot it, failing. Walking, hurting. He remembered all those things, and knew that surely there were other things between them, connecting them one with the other, but those he did not remember. Perhaps he slept as he walked. But he did not stop walking.

It was late afternoon when he reached the small sandy area near the green lake. The aircars were still there, one twisted and lying deep in the water, the other three on the sand. The camp was deserted.

One of the cars-Lorimaar's huge domed vehicle- had a hound guarding it, bound to the door on a long black chain. The creature was lying down, but it rose at Dirk's approach and bared its teeth and growled at him. He found himself laughing wildly, insanely. He had walked all this long way, walked and walked and walked, and here was a dog chained to an aircar growling at him. He could have had that without ever moving half a meter.

He detoured carefully around the perimeter of the dog's chain and went to Janacek's car and climbed in and sealed the heavy door behind him. The cabin was dark and stuffy and cramped. After freezing for so long, he felt almost uncomfortably hot. He wanted to lie down, to sleep. But first he made himself search the supply locker, and he found a medical kit and pulled it out and opened it. It was full of pills and bandages and sprays. He wished he had thought to tell Janacek to drop the kit near the wreck, along with his laser. He knew that he should go outside and wash methodically in the lake and clean all the filth out of his wounds before trying to bandage them up, but the massive armored door looked too heavy to move again just now.

He pulled off his boots and stripped away his jacket and shirt and sprayed his swollen feet and his left arm with a powder that was supposed to prevent infection, or fight it, or something. He was too tired to read the instructions all the way through. Then he looked at the pills. He took two fever pills and four painkillers and two antibiotics, swallowing them dry because he had no water on hand.

Afterwards he lay down on the metal floorplates between the seats. Sleep came instantly.

He woke dry-mouthed and trembling and very nervous, some aftereffect of the pills. But he was thinking again, and his brow was cool (though covered with a clammy sweat) when he touched it with the back of his hand, and his feet were less painful than before. The swelling in his arm had subsided a bit also, although it was still bigger than normal and quite stiff. He put on his burned, blood-crusting shirt again and his jacket over it, gathered up the medkit, and went outside.

It was dusk; the western sky was all red and orange, and two small yellow suns burned intensely against the clouds of sunset. The Braiths had not returned. Jaan Vikary, armed and clothed and experienced, clearly knew how to run a good deal better than Dirk.

He walked across the sand to the lake. The water was frigid, but he got used to it soon enough, and the mud squished soothingly between his toes. He stripped and ducked his head and washed, then took out the medkit and did everything he should have done earlier, cleaning and bandaging his feet before slipping back into Pyr's boots, scrubbing out the worst of his wounds with disinfectant, dabbing at the inflamed bite marks on his arm with a salve that claimed to minimize allergic reactions. He swallowed another handful of painkillers as well, this time washing them down with fresh water scooped from the lake.

Night was settling quickly by the time he was dressed again. The Braith hound was lying by Lorimaar's aircar, gnawing at a chunk of meat, but there was no sign of its masters. Dirk walked carefully around the beast to the third aircar, the one belonging to Pyr and his *teyn*. He had decided that he could help himself to their supplies with relative impunity; the other Braiths, returning to an empty camp, would never know that anything had been taken.

Inside he found a whole rack of weapons: four laser rifles emblazoned with the familiar white wolf's head, a brace of dueling swords, knives, a silver throwing-blade two and a half meters long and an empty bracket beside it. And two pistols thrown carelessly onto a seat. He also found a locker of fresh clothing, and changed eagerly, stuffing his torn garments out of sight. The clothes fit badly, but felt very good. He helped himself to a mesh-steel belt, one of the side-arms, and a knee-length chameleon cloth greatcoat.

When he lifted the coat from where it had been hanging, it revealed another storage locker. Dirk yanked it open. Inside were four familiar boots and Gwen's sky-scoots. Pyr and his *teyn* had seemingly claimed them as booty.

Dirk smiled. He had never intended to take an air-car; the chances were too good that the hunters would see him at once, particularly if he overtook them by day. But he had not been thrilled by the prospect of walking, either. The scoots were the perfect answer. He wasted no time changing into the larger pair of boots, though he had to leave them unlaced after he got his bandaged feet inside.

Food was stored in the same locker as the scoots; protein bars, sticks of dried meat, a small chunk of crusty cheese. Dirk ate the cheese and shoved the rest into a backpack along with the second sky-scoot. He strapped a compass around his right wrist, slung the pack between his shoulder blades, and climbed outside to spread the silver-metal tissue on the sand.

It was full dark. His beacon of the night before, High Kavalaar's star, burned bright and red and lonely above the forest. Dirk saw it and smiled. Tonight it would be no guidepost; he had guessed that Jaan Vikary would make straight for Kryne Lamiya, in the opposite direction. But the star still seemed a friend.

He took up a fresh-charged laser rifle and touched the wafer in his palm and lifted. Behind him the Braith hound stood and set to howling.

He flew all night, keeping several meters above the treetops, consulting his compass from time to time and studying the stars. There was very little to see. Beneath him the forest rolled unending, black and hidden, with no fires or lights to break its darkness. At times it seemed that he was standing still, and he was reminded of his last trip by sky-scoot, through Worlorn's abandoned subways.

The wind was his constant companion; it came from behind him, strong to his back, and he gratefully accepted the extra speed it lent him. It whipped the tail of his coat between his legs as he flew, and pushed his long hair time and time again into his eyes, and he heard it moving in the forest beneath him, making the more pliant trees bend and rustle, shaking the sterner ones with cold savage hands until their last leaves fell away. Only the chokers seemed impervious, but there were a lot of chokers. The wind made a thin wild sound as it fought through those tangled limbs. The sound fit; this was the wind of Kryne Lamiya, Dirk knew, born within the mountains and controlled by the Darkdawn weather machines, moving toward its destiny. Ahead the white towers were waiting, and the frozen hands beckoned it onward.

There were other noises as well: bounding movements in the woods below, the hoots of nocturnal hunters, the rushing of a small thin river, the thunder of a rapids. Several times Dirk heard the high squeaking chitters of tree-spooks and saw small forms darting from limb to limb. His eyes and his ears became strangely sensitive. He passed over a wide lake and heard something splashing in the black waters, then several somethings. Far off, on the shore, a short honking bellow rattled the night. And behind him an answering challenge; a long, ululating wail. The banshee.

That noise chilled him, the first time he heard it. But the fear soon passed. When he was naked in the forest, the banshee was a terrible threat, death incarnate on the wing. Now he had a rifle and a sidearm, and the creature was scarcely any threat at all. In fact, he reflected, perhaps it was an ally. It had saved his life once. Perhaps it would do so again.

The second time the banshee wailed its shuddering wail-still behind him, but higher now, gaining altitude-Dirk only smiled. He climbed, to keep the beast below him, and did one slow loop to try to glimpse the creature. But it was still far away, and black as his own chameleon cloth, and all he saw was a vague ripple of motion against the forest, perhaps nothing but branches moving in the wind.

Keeping high, he consulted his compass again and circled to resume his flight toward Kryne Lamiya. Twice more that night he thought he heard the banshee crying out to him, but the sounds were far apart and faint and he could not be sure.

The eastern sky had just begun to lighten when he first heard drifting music, scattered snatches of despair, too familiar for his liking. The Darkdawn city was near at hand.

He slowed and hovered, scowling. He had flown the course he thought Jaan Vikary would run; he had seen nothing. Possibly his guess had been dead wrong. Possibly Vikary had led his hunters in some other direction entirely. But Dirk did not think so. More likely he had passed over them, unseeing and unseen, in the dark of night.

He began to retrace his course, flying into the wind now, feeling the cold ghostly fingers of Lamiya-Bailis on his cheeks. In the light his task would be easier, he hoped.

The Helleye rose, and one by one the Trojan Suns. Thin wisps of gray-white cloud scuttled across a forlorn sky while morning mists moved on the forest floor. The woods beneath him turned from black to yellow-brown; chokers everywhere entwined like awkward lovers, and red light gleamed dimly from their waxy limbs. Dirk climbed and his horizons expanded. He saw rivers, the flash of sun on water. And overgrown lakes with no flash at all, dark, covered by a floating greenish film. And snowfall, or what looked like snowfall until he was above it and saw that it was an area of dirty white fungus blanketing the wild.

He saw a fault line, a rocky slash running through the woods north to south, as straight as if it had been drawn with a ruler. And mud flats, black and brown and smelly, on either side of a wide slow waterway. And a cliff of weathered gray stone that rose unexpected from the forest, chokers sloping right up to its foot and chokers leaning out at crazy angles from its crown, but nothing on the vertical rock face itself but a few white lichens and the carcass of some large bird dead in its nest.

He saw nothing of Jaan Vikary or the hunters who pursued him.

By midmorning Dirk's muscles ached with fatigue, his arm had begun to throb again, and his hope was fading. The wild went on forever, kilometer after kilometer, a vast yellow carpet which he was searching for a mite, a silent world shrouded by twilight. He turned back toward Kryne Lamiya again, convinced that he had come too far. He began to wander, covering the route in a drifting sine wave instead of a straight line, searching, always searching. He was very tired. Near noon he decided to fly in circles over the most likely area, spiraling in to try to cover it all.

And he heard the banshee screaming.

He saw it this time as well. It was flying low, near tree level, far beneath him. It seemed impossibly slow and still. The black triangular body scarcely seemed to move; the wings were held very rigidly, and the creature appeared to float on the Darkdawn wind.

When it wanted to turn it caught an updraft and wheeled about in a wide circle before descending again. Dirk, having nothing better to do, found himself following it.

It screamed again. The sound lingered.

And then he heard an answer.

He touched the wafer in the palm of his hand and began to descend rapidly, listening, suddenly alert again. The sound had been faint but unmistakable: a pack of Braith hounds, barking wildly in anger and fear. He lost sight of the banshee-no matter now- and chased the fast-fading sound. It had come from the north, he thought. He flew north.

Somewhere close, a hound let loose a howl.

Dirk grew briefly alarmed. It was possible that if he flew too low the hounds would start barking at him instead of the banshee. It was a dangerous situation in any event. His coat was doing its best to take on the colors of Worlorn's sky, but the silver of the sky-scoot could flash brilliantly if anyone chanced to look up. And with a banshee in the vicinity they would look up.

But if he were to help Jaan Vikary and his Jenny, no real choices remained to him. He gripped his weapon lightly and continued to descend. Below him, cutting through the forest like a knife, was a swift-running blue-green river. He looped toward it, his eyes scanning back and forth restlessly. He heard the sound of rapids, traced the sound, found them. They looked fast and dangerous from above. Naked rocks strung out like rotten teeth, brown and misshapen, the water boiling white and angry around them, the chokers pressing close on either side. Downstream the river widened and grew more gentle. He glanced that way briefly, then back at the rapids. He crossed the water, circled, recrossed.

A dog barked loudly. Others took up the sound.

His attention jerked back downstream. Black dots in the water, wading in where the flow looked reasonable. He flew toward it.

The dots grew, taking on shape and human form. A square little man in yellow-brown, fighting the current to wade across. Another man nearby on the shore, with six of the huge hounds.

The man in the water retreated. He had a rifle in his hand, Dirk saw. He was a very wide little man. A pale face, a thick torso, heavy arms and legs-Saanel Larteyn, Lorimaar's fat *teyn*. And Lorimaar on the shore, holding the pack. Neither of them was looking up. Dirk slowed to keep his distance.

Saanel climbed out of the water. He was on the wrong side of the river still, the side with Lorimaar, the side away from Kryne Lamiya. He was trying to cross, though. But not here. Now the two hunters began to move away, heading farther downstream, moving clumsily among the weeds and rocks and chokers that lined the riverbank.

Dirk did not follow. He had the sky-scoot and he knew where they were going; he could always find them later, if he had to. But where were the others? Roseph and his *teyn*? Garse Janacek? He turned and went back upstream, feeling a bit more confident. If the hunting party had broken up, they would be easier for him to deal with. He flew low above the river, quickly, the water churning two meters below his feet while his eyes raked the banks for another group trying to cross.

About two kilometers northeast of the rapids-the channel was narrow and swift here-he found Janacek standing above the water with a puzzled expression on his face.

He seemed to be alone. Dirk yelled at him. Janacek looked up startled, and then waved.

Dirk came down beside him. It was a bad landing. The hump of rock Janacek was standing on was covered with a slick green moss, and the underside of Dirk's sky-scoot slid right across it, and he almost went pitching into the river. Janacek caught him by the arm. Dirk killed his gravity grid. "Thank you," he muttered. "It doesn't look like easy swimming down there."

"That was precisely the thought that I was thinking as I stood here," Janacek replied. He looked haggard. His face and clothes were dirty, and the red beard was damp with sweat. A long strand of hair hung down across his forehead, limp and greasy. "I was attempting to decide if I should risk this sort of current or waste time by continuing upstream, in the vague hopes of finding a place I could safely ford." A weak smile broke across his face. "But you have solved that problem with Gwen's toy. Where-?"

"Pyr," Dirk said. He started to tell Janacek about his flight to the wrecked aircar.

"You are alive," the Ironjade said quickly. "I can do without the tedious details, t'Larien. Much has happened since yesterday dawn. Did you see the Braiths?"

"Lorimaar and his *teyn* were going downstream," said Dirk.

"I know that," Janacek snapped. "Had they crossed?"

"No, not yet."

"Good. Jaan is very close now, perhaps only a half-hour ahead of us. They must not reach him first." His eyes swept the far bank of the river, and he sighed. "Do you have the other scoot, or must I take yours?"

Dirk set down his rifle on the rock and began to unsling his backpack. "I've got the other," he said. "Where is Roseph? What's going on?"

"Jaan has run magnificently," Janacek said. "No one could have expected him to cover so much ground so fast. The Braiths did not, in truth. And he has done more than simply run. He has set traps." He brushed back his fallen hair with the back of his hand. "He camped last night. He was far enough ahead of us. We found the ashes of his fire. Roseph stepped into a concealed pit and impaled his foot on a buried stake." Janacek smiled. "He has turned back, his *teyn* helping him. And you say Pyr and Arris are dead?"

Dirk nodded. He had pulled the boots and the second scoot from his pack.

Janacek accepted them without comment. "The hunters grow few. I think we have won, t'Larien. Jaan Vikary will be weary. He has run without sleep for a day and two nights. Yet we know he is not hurt, and he is armed, and he is of Ironjade. Lorimaar and that slug he keeps as *teyn* will find no easy prey."

He knelt and began to unlace his boots, talking all the while. "Their mad conceit of a new holdfast here will be stillborn. Lorimaar is berserk to even dream of it. I think his mind snapped loose of its anchor when Jaan's laser burned him back in Challenge." He pulled off one boot. "Do you know why Chell and Bretan were not among them, t'Larien? Because that pair had too much sanity for this high-Larteyn scheme! Roseph told me all about it as we hunted. The truth, he said, is this: Lorimaar announced the madness when the Braiths returned to Larteyn after Myrik had been killed. The six we encountered in the woods were there, plus old Raymaar. Bretan Braith Lantry and Chell fre-Braith were not. They had tried to pursue you and Jaantony, and later passed through some of the cities where they thought it likely you

had taken refuge. So Lorimaar was essentially without opposition. He has always cowed the others, except perhaps for Pyr, and Pyr was never interested in anything save the taking of mockman heads."

Janacek was having difficulty fitting into Gwen's narrow boots. He scowled and yanked hard, forcing his foot in where it did not want to go. "When Chell returned, he was furious. He would not go along. He would not even listen. Bretan tried to calm him, Roseph claimed, but to no avail. Old Chell is a Braith, and Lorimaar's new holdfast was treason to him. He issued a challenge. Lorimaar was immune to challenge, in truth, since he was wounded, but he accepted nonetheless. Chell was very old. As challenged, Lorimaar made the first of the four choices, the choice of numbers."

Janacek stood up, and stamped down hard on the slick rock to jam his foot into the boot more tightly. "Need I tell you that he chose to fight single? It would have been quite a different duel had Bretan Braith confronted him as well as Chell Empty-Arms. Lorimaar, even wounded, disposed of the old man rather easily. It was death-square, and blades. Chell took many cuts, too many perhaps. Roseph believes he lies dying back in Larteyn. Bretan Braith remains with him and, more important still, remains Bretan Braith." Janacek spread out his sky-scoot.

"Did you find out anything about Ruark?" Dirk asked him.

The Kavalar shrugged. "It is all much as we suspected. Ruark contacted Lorimaar high-Braith by viewscreen-no one seems to know where the Kimdissi is presently-and offered to reveal where Jaan was hiding if Lorimaar would name him *korariel* and thus grant him protection. This Lorimaar did willingly. Jaan was fortunate in that he was within his aircar when they came. He simply took off and ran. They pursued him and finally Raymaar overtook him just beyond the mountains, but he was yet another old man and not nearly the flyer that Jaan Vikary is." There was a note of gleeful pride in Janacek's voice, like a parent boasting of a child. "The Braith went down in combat, but Jaan's car was damaged as well, so he was forced to land and run. He was already gone when the high-bonds of Larteyn found where he had crashed. They had wasted time trying to assist Raymaar." He waved an impatient hand.

"Why did you split from Lorimaar?" Dirk asked.

"Why do you think? Jaan is close now. I must reach him first, before they do. Saanel insisted the crossing would be easier downstream, and I took the chance to disagree. Lorimaar is too tired to be suspicious now. He thinks only of his kill. His burn is still on fire, t'Larien! I think he sees Jaan Vikary lying bloody before him and forgets who it is he chases. So I went away from them, upstream, and for a time I feared I had made a mistake. The crossing *was* easier downstream, was it not?"

Dirk nodded again.

Janacek grinned. "Then your arrival is a luck, in truth."

"You are going to need more luck to find Jaan," Dirk warned. "The Braiths have probably crossed the river by now, and they have their hounds."

"It does not concern me overmuch," Janacek said. "Jaan runs straight now, and I know something Lorimaar does not. I know what he runs for. A cave, t'Larien! My *teyn* has always been intrigued by caves. When we were boys together in Ironjade, often he would take me exploring beneath the earth. He

took me into more abandoned mines than I ever wished to see, and several times we went under the old cities, the demon-haunted ruins." He smiled. "Blasted holdfasts, too, hearths blackened in ancient highwars and still teeming with restless ghosts. Jaan Vikary knew all such places. He would guide me through them and recite history to me, unendingly, tales of Aryn high-Glowstone and Jamis-Lion Taal and the cannibals of the Deep Coal Dwellings. He was ever a storyteller. He could make those old heroes live again, and the horrors as well."

Dirk found himself smiling. "Did he scare you, Garse?"

The other laughed. "Scare me? Yes! He terrified me, but I became tempered in time. We were both young, t'Larien. Later, much later, it was in the caverns under the Lameraan Hills that he and I pledged iron-and-fire."

"All right," Dirk said. "So Jaan likes caves-"

"One system opens very near to Kryne Lamiya," Janacek said, returning to the issue at hand, "with a second entrance close to where we stand. The three of us explored it during the first year we came to Worlorn. Now, I think that Jaan will complete his run underground, if he can. Thus we can intercept him." He scooped up his rifle.

Dirk lifted his own weapon. "You'll never find him in the forest," he said. "The chokers provide too much cover."

"I would find him," Janacek said, his voice a little ragged and more than a little wild. "Remember our bond, t'Larien. Iron-and-fire."

"Empty iron now," Dirk said, glancing pointedly at Janacek's right wrist.

The Ironjade grinned his hard distinctive grin. "No," he said. His hand went into his pocket, came out, opened. In his palm the glowstone rested. A single jewel, round and rough-faceted, about twice the size of Dirk's whisperjewel, black and nearly opaque in the full ruddy light of the morning.

Dirk stared, then touched it lightly with a finger, so that it moved slightly in Janacek's palm. "It feels . . . cold," he said.

Janacek frowned. "No," he said. "It burns, rather, as fire always does." The glowstone vanished back into his pocket. "There are stories, t'Larien, poems in Old Kavalar, tales they tell the children in the holdfast creche. Even the *eyn-kethi* know the stories. They tell them in their women's voices, but Jaan Vikary tells them better. Ask him sometime. Of the things *teyn* has done for *teyn*. He will answer you with great magics and greater heroisms, the old impossible glories. I am no storyteller or I would tell you myself. Perhaps then you could understand a bit of what it means, to stand *teyn* to a man and wear an iron bond."

"Perhaps I already do," Dirk said.

A long silence came between them as they stood on the slick mossy rock a bare half-meter apart, their eyes locked, Janacek smiling just a bit as he looked down on Dirk. Below them the river rushed by untiring, the sounds of its waters urging them to haste.

"You are not so terribly bad a man, t'Larien," Janacek said at last. "You are weak, I know, but no one has ever called you strong."

At first that sounded like an insult, but the Kavalars seemed to intend something else. Dirk stopped to puzzle it out and found a second meaning. "Give a thing a name?" he said, smiling.

Janacek nodded. "Listen to me, Dirk. I will not tell you twice. I remember when I was a boy in Iron-jade, the first time I was warned of mockmen. A woman, an *eyn-kethi*-you would call her my mother, though such distinctions have no weight on my world -this woman told me the legend. Yet she told it differently. The mockmen she cautioned me against were not the demons I would learn of later from high-bond lips. They were only men, she said, not alien pawns, no kin to weres or soulsucks. Yet they were shape-changers, in a sense, because they had no true shapes. They were men who could not be trusted, men who had forgotten their codes, men without bonds. They were not real; they were all illusion of humanity without the substance. Do you understand? The *substance* of humanity-it is a name, a bond, a promise. It is inside, and yet we wear it on our arms. So she told me. This is why Kavalars take *teyns*, she said, and go abroad in pairs-because . . . because illusion can harden into fact if you bind it in iron."

"A fine speech, Garse," Dirk said when the other had finished. "But what effect does silver have on the soul of a mockman?"

Anger passed quickly across Janacek's face, like the shadow of a drifting stormcloud. Then he grinned. "I had forgotten your Kimdissi wit," he said. "Another thing I learned in youth was never to argue with a manipulator." He laughed and reached out and clasped Dirk's hand briefly and tightly in his own. "Enough," he said. "We will never meet as one, yet I can still be *friend* if you can still be *keth*."

Dirk shrugged, feeling strangely moved. "All right," he said.

But Garse was already off. He had let go of Dirk's arm and touched his finger to his palm, and he rose straight up a meter and then lurched out over the water, moving quickly, leaning forward, somehow fleet and graceful in the air. Sunlight shone on his long red hair, and his clothes seemed to shift and flicker, changing colors. Halfway across the surging river he threw his head back and shouted something to Dirk, but the rash and tumble of the current swept his words away, and Dirk caught only the tone-a bloody, laughing exultation.

He watched until Janacek had reached the far side of the stream, somehow too tired to take to the air at once. His free hand slid into his jacket pocket and touched the whisperjewel. It did not seem quite so cold as before, and the promises-oh, Jenny!-came but faintly.

Janacek was soaring up above the yellow trees, up into a gray and crimson sky, his figure receding rapidly.

Wearily Dirk followed.

Janacek might disparage the sky-scoots as "toys," but for all that he knew how to fly one. He was soon racing far ahead of Dirk, climbing up the steady wind until he flew some twenty meters above the forest. The distance between the two of them seemed to widen steadily; unlike Gwen, Janacek was not inclined to stop and wait for Dirk to catch up.

Dirk contented himself with the role of pursuit. The Ironjade was easy enough to see—they were alone in the gloomy sky—so there was no danger of getting lost. He rode the Darkling winds again, accepting their steady push against his back while he abandoned himself to aimless musings. He dreamed strange waking dreams of Jaan and Garse, of iron bonds and whisperjewels, of Guinevere and Lancelot, who had— he realized suddenly—been pledge-breakers both.

The river vanished. The quiet lakes came and went, and the patch of white fungus that lay like a scab upon the forest. He heard the baying of Lorimaar's pack once, far behind him, the thin noises carried to him on the wind. He was not worried.

They angled south. Janacek was a small dot, black, flashing silver when a shaft of sun caught the raft on which he rode. Smaller and smaller. Dirk came after, a limp bird. Finally Janacek began to spiral down to treetop level.

It was a wild region. Rockier than most, with a few rolling hills and outcroppings of black rock streaked with silver-gold. Chokers were everywhere, chokers and only chokers. Dirk's eyes cast this way and that searching for a single tall silverwood, for a blue widower or a gaunt dark ghost tree. A maze of yellow stretched away unbroken to both horizons. Dirk heard the frantic noises of the tree-spooks and saw them under his feet flying short flights on tiny wings.

The air around him shuddered to the sound of a banshee wail, and a cold tingle brushed Dirk's spine for no reason he could name. He looked up quickly, into the distance, and saw a pulse of light.

Brief, throbbing against his weary eyes, and too intense, this sudden finger of brightness did not belong, not here, not in this gray dusk world. It did not belong, but it was there. Stabbing up once from below, a savage thin fire soon lost in the sky.

Janacek was a small rag doll ahead of him, near the light. The slender thread of scarlet brushed him, touched the silver sled he stood on, slightly, quickly. The image lingered in Dirk's eyes. Absurdly Janacek began to tumble, flailing his arms. A black stick went spinning from his grasp and he disappeared down among the chokers, crashing through their interlocking branches.

Noises. Dirk heard noises. Music on this endless winter's wind. Wood snapping, followed by screams of pain and rage, animal and human, human and animal, both and neither. The towers of Kryne Lamiya shimmered above the horizon, smokelike and transparent, and sang to him a song of endings.

The screaming ceased suddenly; the white towers melted, and the gale that swept him forward blew away the shards. Dirk swung down and raised his laser.

There was a dark hole in the high foliage where Garse Janacek had fallen through: yellow limbs twisted down and broken, a gap big enough for a man's body.

Dark. Dirk hovered above it and could not see Janacek or the forest floor, so thick were the shadows. But on the topmost limb he saw a torn strip of cloth flapping in the wind and changing colors. Above it a little ghost stood solemn guard.

"Garse!" he shouted, not caring about the enemy below, the man with the laser. The tree-spooks answered in a chorus of chittering.

He heard crashing under the trees; the laser light flamed again, brightly. Not up this time, but horizontal, a shaft of impossible sun in the gloom below. Dirk hovered indecisive. A tree-spook appeared on the limb just below him, oddly fearless, liquid eyes gazing up, wings spread apart and thrumming in the wind. Dirk pointed his laser and fired, until the little beast was nothing but a soot stain on the yellow bark.

Then he moved again, circling out in a spiral until he saw a slanting gap among the chokers, wide enough for him to descend. The forest floor was murky; the chokers, joining overhead, screened out nine-tenths of the Helleye's meager light. Huge trunks loomed all around him, gnarled yellow fingers twisting every which way, stiff and arthritic. He bent-the moss along the ground was decomposing-and pulled his boots free of the silver grid, so the metal went limp. Then the shadows parted between the chokers, and Jaan Vikary came out to stand above him. Dirk looked up.

Jaan's face was lined and empty. He was covered with blood, and in his arms was a mangled red thing that he carried the way a mother might carry a sick child. Garse had one eye closed and one eye missing, torn from his face. Only half of his face was there at all. His head lay gently against Jaan's chest.

"Jaan-"

Vikary flinched. "I shot him," he said. Trembling, he dropped the body.

Chapter 14

There was no sound in the wilderness but Vikary's labored breathing and the faint skittering noises of the tree-spooks.

Dirk went to Janacek and rolled him over. Bits of moss clung to the body, soaking up the blood like sponges. The tree-spooks had torn out his throat, so Garse's head lolled obscenely when Dirk moved him. His heavy clothing had been no protection; they had bitten through everywhere, leaving the chameleon cloth in wet red tatters. Janacek's legs, still joined together by the useless silver-metal square of the sky-scoot, had been cracked in the fall; jagged bone fragments protruded from both calves, almost identical compound fractures. The face was the worst-gnawed. The right eye was gone. The socket welled with blood that dripped slowly down his cheek into the ground.

There was nothing to be done. Dirk stared helplessly. He slipped a quiet hand into a pocket of Janacek's battered jacket and took the glowstone in his fist, then rose to face Vikary again. "You said-"

"That I could never fire at him," Vikary finished. "I know what I said, Dirk t'Larien. And I know what I did." He spoke very slowly; each word dropped from his lips with a leaden thud. "I did not intend this.

Never. I sought only to stop him, to knock out the sky-scoot. He fell into a tree-spook nest. A tree-spook nest."

Dirk's fist was clenched tightly around the glow-stone. He said nothing.

Vikary shook; his voice took on animation, and there was a desperate edge in his tone. "He was hunting me. Arkin Ruark warned me when I spoke to him by viewscreen in Larteyn. He said that Garse had joined the Braiths, had sworn to bring me down. I did not believe." He trembled. "*I did not believe!* Yet it was truth. He came after me, came hunting with them, just as Ruark said he would. Ruark . . . Ruark is not with me ... we never . . . the Braiths came instead. I do not know if he ... Ruark . . . perhaps they have slain him. I do not know."

He seemed weary and confused. "I had to stop Garse, t'Larien. He knew of the cave. Gwen to think of too. Ruark said that Garse in his madness had promised to hand her over to Lorimaar, and I called him a liar until I glimpsed Garse behind me. Gwen is my *betheyn*, and you are *korariel*. My responsibility. I had to live. Do you understand? I never meant to do this. I went to him, burned my way through . . . The grubs in the nest-heart were all over him, white things, the adults too ... burned them, I burned them, brought him out."

Vikary's body shook with dry sobs, but no tears came; he would not permit it. "Look. He was wearing empty iron. He came hunting me. I loved him and he came hunting me!"

The glowstone was a hard nugget of indecision within Dirk's fist. He looked down once more at Garse Janacek, whose garments had faded to the colors of old blood and rotting moss, and then up at Jaan Vikary, so very close to breaking, who stood pale-faced with his massive shoulders twitching. Give a thing a name, Dirk thought; and now he must give a name to Jaantony high-Ironjade.

He slid his fist into the darkness of his pocket. "You had to do it," he lied. "He would have killed you, and Gwen later. He said so. I'm glad that Arkin got to you with a warning."

The words seemed to steady Vikary. He nodded wordlessly.

"I came looking for you," Dirk continued, "when you didn't return in time. Gwen was concerned. I was going to help you. Garse caught me and disarmed me and delivered me to Lorimaar and Pyr. He said I was a blood-gift."

"A blood-gift," Vikary repeated. "He was insane, t'Larien. It is truth. Garse Ironjade Janacek was not like that; he was no Braith, no giver of blood-gifts. You must believe that."

"Yes," Dirk said. "He was deranged. You're right. I could tell from the way he talked. Yes." He felt very close to tears and wondered if it showed. It was as if he had taken all of Jaan's fear and anguish into himself; the Ironjade seemed stronger and more resolute with every passing second, while grief came unbidden to Dirk's eyes.

Vikary looked down at the still body sprawled beneath the trees. "I would mourn for him, for the things that he was and the things that we had, but there is no time. The hunters come after us with their hounds. We must press on." He knelt by Janacek's corpse for an instant and held a limp bloody hand within his

own. Then he kissed the ruin of the dead man's face, full on the lips, and with his free hand stroked the matted hair.

But when he rose again, he had a black iron bracelet in his grasp, and Dirk saw that Janacek's arm was naked and felt a sudden pain. Vikary put the empty iron into his pocket. Dirk held back his tears and his tongue, saying nothing.

"We must go."

"Are we just going to leave him here?" Dirk asked.

"Leave him?" Vikary frowned. "Ah, I see. Burial is no Kavalars custom, t'Larien. We abandon our dead in the wild, traditionally, and if the beasts consume what we leave, we do not feel shame. Life should nourish life. Is it not more fitting that his strong flesh should give strength to some swift clean predator rather than a mass of vile maggots and graveyard worms?"

So they left him where Vikary had dropped the body, in a little open space amid the endless yellow-brown thicket, and they set off through the dim undergrowth toward Kryne Lamiya. Dirk carried his skyscoot with him, and struggled to match Vikary's rapid pace. They had been walking for only a few moments when they came upon a high steep ridge of twisted black rock.

When Dirk reached the barrier, Jaan was already halfway to the top. Janacek's blood had dried to a brown crust on Jaan's clothing, and Dirk could see patches of it clearly from below. Otherwise the Kavalars' clothes had turned black. He climbed smoothly, his rifle strapped to his back, his strong hands moving with assurance from one handhold to another.

Dirk spread the silver tissue of his sky-scoot and flew to the crest of the ridge.

He had just ascended past the topmost boughs of the chokers when he heard the banshee cry out briefly, not so far away. His eyes swept about, searching for the great predator. The small clearing where they had left Janacek was easily visible from above, a patch of twilight close at hand. But Dirk could not see the body; the center of the clearing was a living mass of struggling yellow bodies. As he watched, other tiny shapes flitted from the nearby woods to join the feast in progress.

The banshee came out of nowhere and hung motionless above the fight, wailing its terrible long wail, but the tree-spooks continued their mad scramble, paying no mind to the noise, chattering and clawing at each other. The banshee fell. Its shadow covered them, its great wings rippled and folded, and it dropped; and then it was alone, spooks and corpse alike wrapped within its hungry grasp. Dirk felt strangely heartened.

But only for an instant. While the banshee lay inert, a sharp squeak sounded suddenly, and Dirk saw a quick small blur dart down and land atop it. Another followed. And another. And a dozen, all at once. He bunched and it seemed as if the spooks had doubled. The banshee unfolded its vast triangular wings again, and they fluttered weakly, feebly, but it did not lift. The pests were all over it, biting at it, clawing at it, weighing it down and tearing it apart. Pinned to the earth, it could not even sound its anguished cry. It died silently, its meal still trapped beneath it.

By the time Dirk climbed off of his sky-scoot at the top of the ridge, the clearing was a mass of heaving yellow once again, just as he had first glimpsed it, and there was no sign that the banshee had ever been

there at all. The forest was very silent. He waited for Jaan Vikary to join him. Together they resumed their wordless trek.

The cave was cold and dark and infinitely still. Hours passed beneath the earth as Dirk followed the small wavering light of Jaan Vikary's hand torch. The light led him through twisting subterranean galleries, through echoing chambers where the blackness went on forever, through claustrophobic little passages where they squirmed on hands and knees. The light was his universe; Dirk lost all sense of time and space. They had nothing to say to each other, he and Jaan, so they said nothing; the only sounds were the scrape of their boots over dusty rock and the infrequent booming echoes. Vikary knew his cave well. He never hesitated or lost his way. They limped and crawled through the secret soul of Worlorn.

And emerged on a sloping hillside among chokers to a night full of fire and music. Kryne Lamiya was burning. The bone towers screamed a shattered song of anguish.

Flames were loose everywhere in the pale necropolis, bright sentinels wandering up and down the streets. The city shimmered like some strange illusion in the waves of heat and light; it seemed an insubstantial orange wraith. As they watched, one of the slender looping bridges crumbled and collapsed; its blackened center fell apart first, down into the conflagration, and the rest of the stone span followed. The fire consumed it and rose higher, crackling and shrieking, unsatiated. A nearby building coughed dully and imploded, falling in a great cloud of smoke and flame.

Three hundred meters from the hill on which they stood, looming high over the choker-woods, a chalk-white hand-tower remained yet untouched by the blaze. But, outlined in the terrible brightness, it seemed to move like a thing alive, writhing and grasping in pain.

Above the roar of the fire Dirk could hear the faint music of Lamiya-Bailis. The Darkdawn symphony had been broken and transformed; towers were gone, notes missing, so the song was full of eerie silences, and the crackle of the flames gave a pounding counterpoint to the wails and whistles and moans. The Darkling winds that came endlessly from the mountains to make the Siren City sing, those same winds were fanning the great fires that ate at Kryne Lamiya, that darkened its death mask with ashes and soot and ultimately bid it quiet.

Jaan Vikary unslung his laser rifle. His face was blank and strange, washed by the reflections of the great burning. "How-?"

"The wolf-car," Gwen said.

She was standing a few meters away, downslope from them. They looked at her without surprise. Behind her, beneath the shadow of a drooping blue widower at the base of the hill, Dirk glimpsed Ruark's little yellow aircar.

"Bretan Braith," Vikary said.

Gwen joined them near the entrance to the cave and nodded. "Yes. The car has passed back and forth over the city a number of times, firing its lasers."

"Chell is dead," Vikary said.

"But you're alive," Gwen replied. "I was beginning to wonder."

"We are alive," he acknowledged. He let his rifle slide from limp fingers. "Gwen," he said, "I have killed my *teyn*."

"Garse?" she said, startled. She frowned.

"He turned me over to the Braiths," Dirk said quickly. His eyes touched Gwen's. "And he was hunting Jaan, running at Lorimaar's side. It had to be done."

She glanced from Dirk back to Jaan. "This is the truth? Arkin told me something of the sort. I didn't believe him."

"It is the truth," Vikary said.

"Arkin is here?" Dirk said.

Gwen nodded. "Inside the aircar. He flew from Larteyn. You must have told him where I was. He tried some new lies on me. I knocked him out. He's helpless now."

"Gwen," Dirk said, "we've misjudged Arkin badly." The back of his throat was thick with bile. "Don't you understand, Gwen? Arkin warned Jaan that Garse was going to betray him. Without that warning, Jaan would never have known. He might have trusted Janacek, might not have shot him down. He would have been taken, killed." His voice was hoarse and urgent. "Don't you understand? Arkin ..."

The fire put cold reflections in her eyes as she watched Dirk. "I understand," she said in a thick, wavering voice. She turned back to Vikary. "Oh, Jaan," she said. She held out her arms to him.

And he came to her and rested his head on her shoulder and wrapped his own arms tightly around her. And then he began to cry.

Dirk left them and walked down to the aircar.

Arkin Ruark was tightly bound to one of the seats. He was dressed in heavy field clothes, and his head was slumped down so his chin rested against his chest. When Dirk entered he looked up, with an effort. The whole right side of his face was a swollen purplish bruise. "Dirk," he said weakly.

Dirk took off his cumbersome backpack and lowered it to the floor. He leaned up against the instrument panel. "Arkin," he said evenly.

"Help me," Ruark said.

"Janacek is dead," Dirk told him. "Jaan lasered him and he fell into a tree-spook nest."

"Garsey," Ruark said, with some difficulty. His lips were swollen and bloody, and his voice trembled. "He would have killed you all. Utter truth, utter. Warned Jaan, I did, warned him. Believe me, Dirk."

"Oh, I believe you," Dirk said, nodding.

"Tried to help, yes. Gwen, she's gone wild. I saw the Braiths take Jaan, I'd just come to join him, they were there first. Was afraid for her, I was. Came to help. She beat me, said I was a liar, tied me up and flew us here. She's wild, Dirk, friend Dirk, all wild, Kavalar wild. Like Garse almost, not like sweet Gwen at all. I think she means to kill me. You too, maybe, I don't know. She is going to go back to Jaan, I know it. Help me, you have to help me. Stop her." He whimpered.

"She's not going to kill anyone," Dirk said. "Jaan is here now, and me. You're safe, Arkin, don't worry. We'll set things right. We've got a lot to thank you for, don't we? Jaan especially. Without your warning, there's no telling what might have happened."

"Yes," Ruark said. He smiled. "Yes, truth, utter truth."

Gwen appeared suddenly, framed in the door. "Dirk," she said, ignoring Ruark.

He turned to her. "Yes?"

"I made Jaan lie down for a while. He's very tired. Come outside where we can talk."

"Wait," Ruark said. "Untie me first, eh? Do that thing. My arms, Dirk, my arms . . ."

Dirk went outside. Jaan lay nearby, his head up against a tree, staring blindly off at the distant fire. They walked away from him, into the darkness of the chokers. Finally Gwen paused and swung around to face him. "Jaan must never know," she said. She brushed a loose strand of hair back from her forehead with her right hand.

Dirk stared. "Your arm," he said. Around her right forearm Gwen wore iron, black and empty. Her arm froze at Dirk's words. "Yes," she said. "The glowstones will come later."

"I see," Dirk said. "*Teyn* and *betheyn*, both." Gwen nodded. She reached out and took Dirk's hands in her own. Her skin was cool and dry. "Be happy for me, Dirk," she said in a small sad voice. "Please."

He squeezed her hands, trying to be reassuring. "I am," he said, without much conviction. Between them lay a long silence and a great bitterness.

"You look like hell," Gwen said at last, forcing a little grin. "Scratched all over like that. The way you hold your arm. The way you walk. Are you all right?" He shrugged. "The Braiths aren't gentle playmates," he said. "I'll survive." He let go of her hands then and reached into his pocket. "Gwen, I have something for you."

Within his fist: two gems. The glowstone round and rough-faceted, lit faintly from within, smoldering in the hollow of his hand. And the whisperjewel, smaller, darker; dead and cold.

Gwen took them wordlessly. She rolled them in her hand for a moment, frowning. Then she pocketed the glowstone and gave the whisperjewel back to Dirk.

He accepted it. "The last I have of Jenny," he said as his hand closed around the echoing ice-drop and it vanished once again into his clothing.

"I know," she said. "Thank you for offering. But if truth be known, it doesn't talk to me anymore. I guess I've changed too much. I haven't heard a whisper La years."

"Yeah," he said. "I suspected something like that. But I had to offer it to you-it and the promise. The promise is still yours, Gwen, if you ever need it. Call it my iron-and-fire. You don't want to turn me into a mockman, do you?"

"No," she replied. "The other one ..."

"Garse saved it, when he tossed the rest away. I thought maybe you'd want to have it reset, with the new ones. Jaan will never know the difference."

Gwen sighed. "All right," she said. Then: "I find that I'm sorry about Garse, after all. Isn't that curious? All the years we passed together, there was scarcely a day when we weren't at each other's throats, with poor Jaan trapped in between, loving us both. There were times when I was almost certain that the only thing that stood between me and happiness was Garse Ironjade Janacek. Only now he's gone, and I find that very hard to believe. I keep expecting him to turn up in his aircar, armed to the teeth and grinning, ready to snap at me and put me in my place. I think that maybe when I really come to know it's true, then maybe I'll cry. Don't you think that's curious?"

"No," said Dirk. "No."

"I could almost cry for Arkin too," she said. "Do you know what he said? When he came to me in Kryne Lamiya? After I called him a liar and hit him and broke him down-do you know what he said?"

Dirk shook his head, waiting.

"He said he loved me," Gwen said, smiling grimly. "He said that he had always loved me, from the moment we met on Avalon. I can't swear that he was telling the truth. Garse always said the manipulators were clever, and Arkin didn't need to be a genius to see how his revelation affected me. I almost set him free when he told me that. He seemed so small and pitiful, and he was sobbing. Instead- You saw his face?" She hesitated.

"I saw," Dirk said. "Ugly."

"Instead I did that to him," Gwen said. "But I think I believe him now. In a sick sort of way, he did love me. And he saw what I was doing to myself; and he knew that, left to my own devices, I would never leave Jaan, so he decided to use you-use all the things I told him, trusted him with-and get me away from Jaan that way. I suppose he figured that you and I would lose each other again the way we did on Avalon, and then I'd turn to him. Or maybe he knew better. I don't know. He claimed that he was only thinking of me, of my happiness, that he couldn't stand seeing me in jade-and-silver. That he had no thought for himself. He says he's my friend." She sighed hopelessly. "My friend," she repeated.

"Don't feel too sorry for him, Gwen," Dirk warned. "He would have sent me to my death, and Jaan too, without a moment's hesitation. Garse Janacek is dead, and several of the Braiths, and innocent Emereli in Challenge-and you can lay it all on friend Arkin. Can't you?"

"Now you're the one that sounds like Garse," she said. "What did you tell me? That I had jade eyes? Look at your own, Dirk! But I suppose you're right."

"What do we do with him now?"

"Free him," she said. "For the present. Jaan must never suspect the truth of what he did. It would destroy him, Dirk. So Arkin Ruark has to be our friend again. You see?"

"Yes," he said. The roar of the fire had diminished to a gentle crackling, Dirk noticed; it was almost quiet. Glancing back in the direction of the aircar, he saw that the inferno was guttering out. A few scattered fires still flickered weakly among the rubble, casting a shifting light over the ruined, smoking city. Most of the slim towers had fallen, and those that remained had grown entirely silent. The wind was only a wind.

"Dawn will be here soon," Gwen said. "We should be going."

"Going?"

"Back to Larteyn, if Bretan hasn't destroyed that as well."

"He has a violent way of mourning," Dirk agreed. "But is Larteyn safe?"

"The time for run-and-hide is over," Gwen said to him. "I'm not unconscious now, and I'm not a helpless *betheyn* who needs to be protected." She raised her right arm; distant fires illuminated the dull iron. "I'm *teyn* to Jaan Vikary, blooded even, and I've got my weapon. And you-you've changed too, Dirk. You're not *korariel* anymore, you know. You're a *keth*."

"We're together, for the moment. We're young and we're strong, and we know who our enemies are and how to find them. And none of us can ever be Ironjades again-I'm a woman and Jaan's an outbonder and you're a mockman. Garse was the last Ironjade. Garse is dead. The rights and wrongs of High Kavalaan and the Ironjade Gathering died with him, I think, for this world at the least. There are no codes on Worlorn, remember? No Braiths and no Ironjades, only animals trying to kill each other."

"What are you saying?" Dirk said, though he thought he knew.

"I'm saying that I'm tired of being hunted and hounded and threatened," Gwen said. Her shadowed face was black iron; her eyes burned hot and feral. "I'm saying that it's time *we* became the hunters!"

Dirk regarded her in silence for a long time. She was very beautiful, he thought, beautiful in the way that Garse Janacek had been beautiful. She was a little like the banshee, he decided, and he grieved a private grief for his Jenny, his Guinevere who never was. "You're right," he said heavily.

She stepped closer to him, wrapped him within the circle of her arms before he could react, and hugged him with all of her strength. His own hands came up slowly; he hugged her back, and they stood together for a good ten minutes, crushed against each other, her smooth cool cheek against his stubble. When she finally broke from him, she looked up, expecting him to kiss her, so he did. He closed his eyes; her lips felt dry and hard.

The Firefort was cold at dawn. The wind swirled around it in hammering gusts; the sky above was gray and cloudy.

On the roof of their building they found a corpse.

Jaan Vikary climbed out carefully, his laser rifle in hand, while Gwen and Dirk covered him from the relative safety of the aircar. Ruark sat silently in the back seat, terrified. They had freed him before leaving the vicinity of Kryne Lamiya, and all the way back he had been alternately sullen and ebullient, not knowing what to think.

Vikary inspected the body, which lay sprawled in front of the tubes, then returned to the car. "Roseph high-Braith Kelcek," he said curtly.

"High-Larteyn," Dirk reminded him.

"In truth," he acknowledged, frowning. "High-Larteyn. He has been dead several hours, I would estimate. Approximately half of his chest has been blown away by a projectile weapon. His own sidearm is holstered."

"A projectile weapon?" Dirk said.

Vikary nodded. "Bretan Braith Lantry has been known to use such a weapon in duel. He is a noted duelist, but I believe he has chosen his projectile gun only twice, rare times when he was not content to win by wounding. A dueling laser is a clean precise instrument. Not so this sidearm of Bretan Braith's. Such a weapon is designed to kill, even with a near miss. It is a great sloppy savage thing, and it makes for short deadly duels."

Gwen was staring out to where Roseph lay like a pile of rags. His clothing had the dirty dust color of the roof, and it flapped erratically in the wind. "This was no duel," she said. . "No," Vikary agreed.

"But why?" Dirk asked. "Roseph was no threat to Bretan Braith, was he? Besides, the code duello-Bretan is still a Braith, isn't he? So isn't he still bound?"

"Bretan is indeed yet a Braith, and *that* is your 'why' for you, Dirk t'Larien," Vikary said. "This is no duel. This is highwar, Braith against Larteyn. There are very few rules in highwar; any adult male of the enemy holdfast is fair prey, until a peace comes."

"A crusade," Gwen said, chuckling. "That doesn't sound much like Bretan, Jaan."

"It sounds a great deal like old Chell, however," Vikary replied. "I suspect that his *teyn* swore him to this course as he lay dying. If this is truth, Bretan kills under a pledge, not simply in grief. He will have very little mercy."

In the back seat, Arkin Ruark leaned forward eagerly. "But this is all to the best!" he exclaimed. "Yes, listen to me, this is fine. Gwen, Dirk, Jaan my friend, listen. Bretan will kill them all for us, will he not? Kill them one and all, yes. He is enemy of our enemies, best hope we have, utter truth."

"Your Kimdissi proverb is misleading in this case," Vikary said. "The highwar between Bretan Braith and the Larteyns makes him no friend of ours, except by chance. Blood and high grievance are not forgotten so easily, Arkin."

"Yes," Gwen added. "It wasn't Lorimaar that he suspected of hiding in Kryne Lamiya, you know. He burned that city in an effort to get us."

"A guess, a mere guess," Ruark muttered. "Perhaps he had other reasons, his own, who can know? Perhaps he was mad, crazed with grief, yes."

"Tell you what, Arkin," Dirk said. "We'll drop you off in the open, and if Bretan comes along, you can ask him."

The Kimdissi flinched and looked at him strangely. "No," he said. "No, safer to stay with you, my friends, you will protect me."

"We will protect you," Jaan Vikary said. "You have done as much for us." Dirk and Gwen exchanged glances.

Vikary threw their aircar into sudden motion. They rose and flitted away from the roof over the dawn-dim streets of Larteyn.

"Where ... ?" Dirk asked.

"Roseph is dead," Vikary said. "Yet he was not the only hunter. We shall take a census, friends, we shall take a census."

The building that Roseph high-Braith Kelcek had shared with his *teyn* was located not too far from the Ironjade residence and very close to the undertubes. It was a large square structure with a domed metallic roof and a portico supported by black iron columns. They landed nearby and approached it stealthily.

Two Braith hounds had been chained to the pillars in front of the house. Both of them were dead. Vikary looked them over. "Their throats were burned out with a hunting laser fired from some distance," he reported. "A safe, silent kill."

He remained outside, laser rifle in hand, wary, standing guard. Ruark stayed close at his side. Gwen and Dirk were sent in to search the building.

They found numerous empty chambers, and a small trophy room with four heads in it; three of them were old and dried, the skin tight and leathery, the features almost bestial. The fourth, Gwen said, was a Blackwiner jelly child, fresh-taken, from its look. Dirk touched the leather coverings on some of the furniture suspiciously, but Gwen shook her head no.

Another room, close by, was full of miniature figurines: banshees and wolf packs, soldiers struggling with knife and sword, men facing grotesque monsters in strange combat. All of the scenes were finely executed in iron and copper and bronze. "Roseph's work," Gwen said tersely when Dirk paused despite himself and lifted one figure for inspection. She beckoned him to move on.

Roseph's *teyn* had been eating. They found him in the dining chamber. His meal—a thick stew of meat and vegetables in a bloody broth, with hunks of black bread on the side—was cold and half consumed. A pewter mug full of brown beer stood next to it on the long wooden table. The Kavalär's body was almost a meter away, still in its chair, but the chair lay flat on the floor and there was a dark stain on the wall behind it. The man no longer had a face.

Gwen stood over him frowning, her rifle slung casually beneath one arm and pointing at the floor. She picked up his beer and took a sip before passing it to Dirk. It was tepid and stale, its head long gone.

"Lorimaar and Saanel?" Gwen asked when they stood outside again, under the iron pillars.

"I doubt that they have returned from the forest yet," Vikary said. "Perhaps Bretan Braith is somewhere in Larteyn waiting for them. No doubt he saw Roseph and Chaalyn fly in yesterday. Perhaps he is lurking somewhere close at hand, hoping to pick off his enemies one by one as they return to the city. Yes I think not."

"Why?" That was Dirk.

"Remember, t'Larien, *we* flew in at dawn, and in an unarmored aircar. He did not attack. Either he was sleeping, or he is no longer about."

"Where do you think he is?"

"In the wild, hunting our hunters," Vikary said. "Only two of the Larteyns remain alive to face him, but Bretan Braith has no way of knowing that. At his last knowledge, Pyr and Arris and even ancient Raymaar One-Hand were all living, and forces to be reckoned with. I would guess that he has flown off to take them by surprise, perhaps in the fear that otherwise they might return to the city in a group, discover their *kethi* slain, and thus be warned of his intentions."

"We should run then, yes, before he gets back," Arkin Ruark said. "Go somewhere safe, away from this Kavalär madness. Twelfth Dream, yes, to Twelfth Dream. Or Musquel, or Challenge, anywhere. There will be a ship soon, then we will be safe. What do you say?"

"I say no," Dirk replied. "Bretan would find us. Remember the almost supernatural way he found Gwen and me in Challenge?" He looked pointedly at Ruark. To his credit, the Kimdissi remained admirably blank-faced.

"We will stay in Larteyn," Vikary said decisively. "Bretan Braith Lantry is one man. We are four, and three of us are armed. If we stay together, we are safe. We will post guards. We will be ready."

Gwen nodded and slipped her arm through Jaan's. "I agree," she said. "Bretan may not even survive Lorimaar."

"No," the Kavalär said to her. "No, Gwen. I think you are wrong. Bretan Braith will outlive Lorimaar. That much I am sure of."

At Vikary's insistence they searched the great subterranean garage before leaving the vicinity of Roseph's residence. His guess paid off. With their own aircar stolen in Challenge and subsequently destroyed,

Roseph and his *teyn* had borrowed Pyr's flyer to return from the hunt in the wilderness; it was parked below. Jaan appropriated it. While it was not Janacek's massive olive-green war relic by any means, it was still a good deal more formidable than Ruark's little car.

Afterwards they found quarters. Along the city walls of Larteyn, overlooking the steep sheer cliff that frowned down on the distant Common, were a series of guard towers with slit-windowed sentry posts above and living quarters below, within the walls themselves. The towers, each with a great stone gargoyle roosting on top, were strictly ornamental, a flourish to make the Festival city truly Kavalär. But they were easily defensible and gave an excellent overview of the city. Gwen selected one at random and they moved in, raiding their former apartment for personal effects and food and the records of the almost-forgotten (by Dirk, anyway) ecological researches that she and Ruark had conducted in the wilds of Worlorn. Once secure, they settled in to wait.

It was, Dirk decided later, the worst thing they could have done. Under the pressure of their inactivity, all the cracks began to show.

They set up a system of overlapping shifts, so two people were up in the guard tower at all times, armed with lasers and Gwen's field binoculars. Larteyn was gray and empty and desolate. There was little for the watchers to do except study the slow ebb and flow of light in the glowstone streets, and talk. Mostly they talked.

Arkin Ruark did his shifts along with the rest of them, and he accepted the laser rifle that Vikary forced on him, although with some reluctance. Over and over he insisted that he was unsuited to violence, that he could never fire the laser no matter what. But he consented to hold it, because Jaan Vikary asked him to. His relationships with all of them had changed radically. He stayed close to Jaan as often as he could, recognizing that the Kavalär was his real protector now. He was cordial to Gwen. She had asked him to forgive her for Kryne Lamiya, claiming that fear and pain had temporarily pushed her over into paranoia. But she was no longer "sweet Gwen" for Ruark; the bitterness between them came more to the surface every day. Toward Dirk, the Kimdissi maintained an uneasy, suspicious attitude, alternately smothering him in good fellowship and drawing back into formality when it became clear that Dirk was not warming. Ruark's comments during the first watch they stood together indicated to Dirk that the chubby ecologist was waiting desperately for the Fringe shuttle *Teric neDahlir*, due to land the following week. He seemed to want nothing more than to remain safely in hiding and get offworld as soon as possible.

Gwen Delvano waited for something entirely different, Dirk thought. While Ruark scanned the horizons with apprehension, Gwen was tense with anticipation. He remembered the words she had spoken when they talked together in the shadows of fire-wracked Kryne Lamiya. "It's time *we* became the hunters," she had said. She still meant it. When she and Dirk shared a watch, Gwen did all the work. She sat by the tall narrow window with an almost infinite patience, her binoculars hanging down between her breasts, her arms resting on the windowsill, jade-and-silver next to empty iron. She talked to Dirk without ever looking at him; all her attention was directed outside. Except for trips to the bathroom, Gwen refused to leave the window. Every once in a while she would lift her binoculars and study some distant building where she had glimpsed motion, and less frequently she would ask Dirk for a brush and begin to stroke her long black hair, which was constantly being disarrayed by the wind.

"I hope that Jaan is wrong," she said once while she sat brushing her hair. "I would rather see Lorimaar and his *teyn* come back than Bretan." Dirk had mumbled some sort of agreement, on the grounds that Lorimaar

-much older and wounded too-would be far less dangerous than the one-eyed duelist who hunted him. But when he said it, Gwen only set down her brush and gazed at him curiously. "No," she said, "no, that isn't the reason at all."

As for Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Ironjade Vikary, the waiting seemed to wound him worst of all. As long as he had been kept in action, as long as things had been required of him, he had remained the old Jaan Vikary-strong, decisive, a leader. Idle he was a different man. He had no role to play then; instead he had unlimited time to brood. It was no good. Though Garse Janacek was mentioned seldom in those last days, it was clear that Jaan was haunted by the specter of his red-bearded *teyn*. Vikary was too often grim, and he began to fall into sullen silences that would sometimes last for hours.

He had earlier insisted that all of them should remain inside at all times; now Jaan himself began to take long walks at dawn and dusk when he was not on watch. During his hours in the guard tower most of his conversations were filled with rambling recollections of his boyhood in the holdfasts of the Ironjade Gathering, and tales taken from history, of martyred heroes like Vikor high-Redsteel and Aryn high-Glowstone. He never spoke of the future, and only rarely of their present circumstances. Watching him, Dirk felt he could almost see the man's inner turmoil. In a matter of a few days, Vikary had lost everything: his *teyn*, his home-world and his people, even the code that he had lived by. He was fighting it-already he had taken Gwen as *teyn*, accepting her with a fullness and a total dependence that he had never shown toward either her or Garse individually. And it seemed to Dirk that Jaan was trying to keep his code as well, clinging tightly to whatever pieces of Kavalat honor had been left to him. It was *Gwen*, not Jaan, who spoke of hunting the hunters, of animals killing each other now that all codes were gone. She worded things as if she spoke for her *teyn* as well as herself, but Dirk did not think that was so. Vikary, when he spoke of their impending struggles, always seemed to imply that he would be dueling Bretan Braith. On his long walks through the city he would drill with both rifle and sidearm. "If I am to face Bretan, I must be ready," he would say, and like an automaton he would take his daily practice, usually within sight of the tower, preparing himself for each Kavalat dueling mode in turn. One day he would run through death-square and ten-paces, burning down his phantom antagonists, and the next day it would be free-style and walk-the-line, and then single-shot and death-square again. Those on watch above would cover him and pray that no enemy saw the insistent throbs of light. Dirk was afraid. Jaan was their strength, and he was lost in his martial delusion, his half-spoken assumption that Bretan Braith would return and grant him the courtesies of code, despite everything. Despite all of Vikary's vaunted prowess in duel, despite his daily ritual of drill, it seemed to Dirk increasingly unlikely that the Ironjade could triumph over Bretan in single combat.

Dirk's own sleep was plagued by recurrent nightmares of the half-faced Braith: Bretan with his strange voice and his glowing eye and his grotesque twitch, Bretan slim and smooth-cheeked and innocent, Bretan the destroyer of cities. Dirk woke from those dreams sweaty and exhausted, twisted in his bed clothes, remembering Gwen's screams (high shrill laments like the towers of Kryne Lamiya) and the way Bretan looked at him. To banish these visions he had only Jaan, and Jaan had a weary fatalism about him now, though he might still go through the motions.

It was Janacek's death, Dirk told himself-and more, the circumstances of that death. Had Garse died more normally, Vikary would be an avenger more angry and impassioned and invincible than Myrik and Bretan combined. As it was, however, Jaan was convinced that his *teyn* had betrayed him, had hunted him like a beast or a mockman, and the conviction was destroying him. More than once, sitting with the Ironjade in the small watchroom, Dirk felt the urge to tell him the truth, to rush up to him and shout *No, no! Garse was innocent, Garse loved you, Garse would have died for you!* Yet he said nothing. If Vikary was dying this way, consumed by his melancholy and his sense of betrayal and his ultimate loss of faith, then how much quicker would the truth kill him.

So the days passed and the cracks grew and Dirk watched his three companions with growing apprehension. While Ruark waited for escape, and Gwen for revenge, and Jaan Vikary for death.

Chapter 15

On the first day of vigil it rained most of the afternoon. The clouds had been piling up in the east all morning, growing thicker and more threatening, obscuring Fat Satan and his children so the day was even gloomier than usual. Near noon the storm broke. It was a howler. The winds whistled by outside so loudly that the guard tower seemed to shake, and rivers of brown water ran wildly through the streets and down glowstone gutters. When the suns broke through at last-they were already close to setting- Larteyn glistened, its walls and buildings shining wetly and looking cleaner than Dirk had ever seen them. The Firefort seemed almost hopeful. But that was the first day of vigil.

On the second day things were back to normal. The Helleye rode a slow red path across the sky, Larteyn glowered dim and black below, and the wind brought back the dust of the Common that yesterday's rains had washed away. At dusk Dirk spied an aircar. It materialized high above the mountains, a black dot, and swept out over the Common before turning back to descend on them. Dirk watched it carefully through the binoculars, his elbows resting on the stone sill of the narrow window. It was no car he knew-a dead black thing, a small stylized bat with wide wings and enormous headlamp-eyes. Vikary was sharing that watch with him. Dirk called him over to the window, and Jaan looked with disinterest. "Yes, I know that craft," Jaan said. "It is no matter to us, t'Larien, only the hunters from the Shanagate Holding. Gwen reported seeing them leave this morning." The aircar had vanished by then, lost among the buildings of Larteyn, and Vikary went back to his seat, leaving Dirk to reflect.

In the days that followed, he saw the Shanagates several times, and they never ceased to seem unreal to him. How odd it was to think of them coming and going, untouched by all that had happened, living their lives as if Larteyn was still the peaceful dying city it seemed, as if no one had perished. They were so close to it all, and yet so distant and uninvolved; he could imagine them returning to their holdfast on High Kavalaan and reporting on how dull and uneventful life was on Worlorn. For them nothing had changed; Kryne Lamiya still sang its wailing dirge, and Challenge was still fervent with light and life and promise. He envied them.

On the third day Dirk woke from a particularly virulent nightmare in which he was fighting off Bretan alone, and he was unable to get back to sleep afterwards. Gwen, off watch, was pacing back and forth in

the kitchen. Dirk poured himself a mug of Vikary's beer and listened to her for a while. "They should be here," she kept complaining. "I can't believe that they're still searching for Jaan. Surely they must realize by now what's happened! Why aren't they here?" Dirk only shrugged at her and expressed hope that no one ever showed up; the *Teric neDahlir* was due soon. When he said that, she spun on him angrily. "I don't care!" she snapped; and then, ashamed, she flushed red and came to the table and sat down. Beneath a wide green headband her eyes were haggard. She held his hand and told him haltingly that Vikary had not touched her since Janacek's death. Dirk told her that it would be better for them once the starship came, once they were safely off Worlorn, and Gwen smiled and agreed with him, and after a time she wept. When she finally left him, Dirk went back and found his whisper-jewel and held it in his fist, remembering.

On the fourth day, while Vikary was out on one of his dangerous dawn walks, Gwen and Arkin Ruark quarreled during a watch, and she hit him with the butt of her laser rifle, hard across his bruised face where the swelling had only recently responded to ice packs and ointments. Ruark came down the ladder from the tower muttering that she was mad again, trying to kill him. Dirk, awakened from a sound sleep, was standing in the common room, and the Kimdissi stopped dead when he saw him. Neither of them said anything, but after that Ruark lost weight rapidly, and Dirk was certain that Arkin *knew* what he had only suspected previously.

On the morning of the sixth day, Ruark and Dirk were sharing a wordless watch when the short man, in a fit of pique, suddenly threw his laser across the room. "Filthy thing!" he exclaimed. "Braiths, Ironjades, I don't care, Kavalar animals is what they are, yes. And you, fine man from Avalon, eh? Ha! You are no better, no better at all, look at you. I should have let you duel, kill or be killed, like you wanted. That would have made you happy, yes? No doubt, no doubt. Loved sweet Gwen and made you a friend, and where is my gratitude, where, where?" His fat cheeks were growing hollow and sunken; his pale eyes shifted restlessly.

Dirk ignored him, and Ruark soon fell silent. But later on that same morning, after he had picked up his laser and sat for a few hours staring at the wall, the Kimdissi turned to Dirk once again. "I was her lover too, you know," he said. "She didn't tell you that, I know, I know, but it is the truth, the utter truth. On Avalon, long before she ever met Jaantony and took her damn jade-and-silver, the night you sent her that whisperjewel. She was so drunk, you know. We talked and we talked, and she drank, and later on she took me to bed, and the next day she didn't even remember, you know that, she didn't even remember. But that doesn't matter, it is the truth, I was her lover too." He trembled. "I never told her, t'Larien, or tried to make it come again. I am not such a fool like you are, and I know what I am, and it was only a thing of that moment. Yet it existed, that moment, and I taught her a lot and I was her friend, and I am *very* good at my work, yes I am." He stopped and caught his breath and then silently left the tower, although there was still an hour to go before Gwen was scheduled to relieve him.

When she finally came up, the first thing she did was ask Dirk what he had said to Arkin. "Nothing," he replied truthfully. Then he asked her why, and she told him that Ruark had wakened her, crying, and telling her over and over that no matter what happened she should make sure their work was published, and that his name belonged on it, no matter what he had done, his name belonged on it too. Dirk nodded and gave up his binoculars and his post by the window to Gwen, and very soon they were talking of other things.

On the seventh day the late-night watch fell to Dirk and Jaan Vikary. The Kavalar city wore its dull night-time glow, the glowstone boulevards like sheets of black crystal beneath which red fires burned dimly, dimly. Near to midnight a light appeared over the mountains. Dirk studied it as it flew toward the city. "I don't know," he said, holding the binoculars. "It's dark, hard to make out. I think I can see the vague outline of a dome, though." He lowered his glasses. "Lorimaar?"

Vikary stood over him. The aircar grew closer. It slid silently above the city, and its silhouette was distinct. "It is his car," Jaan said.

They watched it veer out over the Common and circle back, heading for the cliff face and the entrance to the underground airtel. Vikary looked thoughtful. "I would not have believed it," he said. They went down to rouse the others.

The man emerged from the darkness of the undertubes to find himself facing two lasers. Gwen had her pistol trained on him, almost casually. Dirk, armed with one of the hunting rifles, had aimed at the tube doors and stood with the sight pressed against his cheek, ready to fire. Only Jaan Vikary did not have a weapon out; he held his rifle loosely in his hands, and his sidearm was holstered.

The tube doors slid shut behind him, and the man stood very still, understandably frightened. It was not Lorimaar. It was not anyone Dirk knew. He lowered his rifle.

The man's eyes touched each of them in turn and finally settled on Vikary. "High-Ironjade," he said in a low voice. "Why do you accost me?" He was a medium-sized man, horse-faced and bearded, with long blond hair and a scrawny build. He was dressed in chameleon cloth that was somber red-gray now, flushed and feverish like the glowstone blocks of the pavement.

Vikary reached over and gently pushed, Gwen's pistol to the side. The act seemed to wake her. She frowned and holstered her weapon. "We were expecting Lorimaar high-Braith," she said.

"The truth," Vikary affirmed. "No insult was intended, Shanagate. Honor to your holdfast, honor to your *teyn*."

The horse-faced man nodded and looked relieved. "And to yours, high-Ironjade," he said. "No insult was taken." He plucked at his nose nervously.

"You fly Braith property, do you not?"

He nodded. "In truth, and ours by right of salvage. My *teyn* and I stumbled on it in the wild while we pursued an ironhorn in flight. The creature stopped to drink, and there the car was, abandoned by a lake."

"Abandoned? Are you quite certain of that?"

The man laughed. "I know Lorimaar high-Braith and fat Saanel too well, and take no chance of initiating high grievance with such as they. No, we found their bodies also. Some enemy had been waiting at their camp, inside the aircar we do believe, and when they returned from hunting . . ." He gestured. "They will take no more heads, mockman or otherwise."

"Dead?" Gwen's mouth was tight.

"Entirely dead, each for several days," the Kavalair replied. "Scavengers had descended on the corpses, of course, yet there was still enough left to determine who they had been. We found another aircar close at hand, in the lake itself, in truth, wrecked and useless, and also marks in the sand that indicated other cars had come and departed. Lorimaar's vehicle was still functional, though full of dead Braith hounds. We cleaned it out and claimed it. My *teyn* is following me in our own car."

Vikary nodded.

"These are very unusual events," the man was saying. He regarded the three of them shrewdly, with unconcealed interest. His gaze lingered for an uncomfortably long time on Dirk, and then on Gwen's black iron bracelet, but he commented on neither. "Few Braiths seem to be about of late, fewer than normal, and now we find two of them slain."

"If you search hard enough you'll find some others," Gwen said.

"They're starting a new holdfast," Dirk added, "in hell."

When the man had gone on his way they began the slow walk back to the watchtower. No one spoke. Long shadows grew from their feet and followed them down the somber crimson streets. Gwen walked as if she were exhausted. Vikary was almost jumpy; he carried his rifle warily, ready to snap it up and fire should Bretan Braith suddenly take form in their path, and his eyes probed every alley and dark place along their route.

Back in the brightness of the common room, Gwen and Dirk slumped quickly to the floor, while Jaan stood for a moment just inside the door, his face thoughtful. Then he set down his weapons and broke out a bottle of wine, the same pungent vintage that he had shared with Garse and Dirk the night before the duel that never was. He poured three glasses and handed them around. "Drink," he said, raising his own glass in a toast. "Things draw to a close. Now there is only Bretan Braith left. Soon he shall be with his Chell, or I shall be with Garse, and in either case we will have peace." He drained his glass very quickly. The others sipped.

"Ruark should drink with us," Vikary announced abruptly as he refilled his glass. The Kimdissi had not accompanied them to their midnight rendezvous. His reluctance had not seemed to be from fear, however; at least Dirk did not think so at the time. Jaan had gotten him up, and Ruark had dressed with the rest of them, slipping into his finest silkeen suit and a little scarlet beret, but when Vikary had handed him a rifle at the door he had only looked at it with a curious smile and handed it back. Then he had said, "I have my own code, Jaantony, and you must respect it. Thank you, but I think I will stay here." He delivered the statement with quiet dignity; beneath his white-blond hair his eyes looked almost cheerful. Jaan told him to continue the watch from the guard tower, and Ruark consented to that.

"Arkin hates Kavalair wine," Gwen said wearily to Jaan's suggestion.

"That is of no matter," Jaan replied. "This is a bonding between *kethi*, not a party. He should drink with us." He set down his wine glass and went up the ladder to the tower with easy grace.

When he returned an instant later, he was less graceful. He dropped the last meter and stood staring at them. "Ruark will not drink with us," he declared. "Ruark has hanged himself."

On that particular dawn, the eighth of their vigil, it was Dirk who went walking.

He did not go into Larteyn itself. Instead he walked the city walls. They were three meters across, black stone covered over by thick slabs of glowstone, so there was no danger of falling. Dirk was alone on watch (Gwen had cut down Ruark's body, and afterwards she had taken Jaan to bed), staring out on those walls with his laser uselessly in hand and his binoculars around his neck, when the first of the yellow suns came up and the fires of night began to fade. The urge had come upon him suddenly. Bretan Braith would not be coming back to the city, he knew; the watch was a useless formality now. He left his rifle leaning against the wall, next to the window, as he dressed warmly and went outside.

He walked a long way. Other guard towers much like their own stood at regular intervals. He passed six of them, and estimated the distance from tower to tower to be roughly a third of a kilometer. Every tower had its gargoyle, and none of the gargoyles were quite alike, he noticed. Now, after everything, he suddenly recognized them. They were untraditional, those gargoyles, not Old Earth cast at all; they were the demons of Kavalar myth, grotesque mythologized versions of dactyloids and Hruun and *githyanki* soulsucks. All real, in a sense. Somewhere among the stars, each of those races still lived.

The stars. Dirk paused and looked up. The Helleye had begun to edge above the horizon; most of the stars were gone already. He saw only one, very faint, a tiny red pinpoint framed by wisps of gray clouds. Even as he watched, it vanished. High Kavalaan's star, he thought. Garse Janacek had shown it to him, a beacon for his run.

There were too few stars out here anyway. These were no places for men to live, these worlds like Worlorn and High Kavalaan and Darkdawn, these outworlds. The Great Black Sea was too close on one hand, and the Tempter's Veil screened off most of the galaxy, and the skies were bleak and empty. A sky ought to have stars.

A man ought to have a code too. A friend, a *teyn*, a cause-something beyond himself.

Dirk walked to the outer edge of the walls and stood staring down. It was a long, *long* drop. The first time he had sailed over the wall, on a sky-scoot, he'd lost his balance just from looking at it. The walls went down a ways, and below them the cliff went down forever, and way at the bottom a river ran through greenery and morning mists.

He stood with his hands in his pockets, the winds ruffling his hair, shivering a bit. He stood and he looked. Then he took out his whisperjewel. He rubbed it between thumb and forefinger, as if it were a good luck charm. *Jenny*, he thought. Where had she gone? Even the jewel did not summon her back to him.

Footsteps sounded nearby, then a voice. "Honor to your holdfast, honor to your *teyn*."

Dirk turned, the whisperjewel still in his hand. An old man was standing next to him. Tall as Jaan and old as poor dead Chell. He was massive and leonine, with a head of wild snow-white hair that blended into an equally stormy beard to form one magnificent mane. Yet his face was tired and faded, as if he had worn it a few centuries too long. Only his eyes stood out-intensely, insanely blue eyes, eyes like Garse Janacek once had, burning with icy fevers beneath his bushy brows.

"I have no holdfast," Dirk said, "and I have no *teyn*."

"I'm sorry," the man said. "An offworlder, eh?"

Dirk bowed.

The old man chuckled. "Well, you haunt the wrong city then, ghost."

"Ghost?"

"A ghost of the Festival," the old man said. "What else could you be? This is Worlorn, and the living men have all gone home." He was wearing a black woolen cape with huge pockets, over garments of faded blue. A heavy disc of stainless steel hung just beneath his beard, suspended on a leather thong. When he took his hands from the pockets of his cape, Dirk saw that one of his fingers was missing. He wore no bracelets.

"You have no *teyn*," Dirk said.

The old man grumbled. "Of course I had a *teyn*, ghost. I was a poet, not a priest. What sort of a question is that? Beware. I might take insult."

"You wear no iron-and-fire," Dirk pointed out.

"Truth enough, yet what of it? Ghosts need no jewelry. My *teyn* is thirty years dead, haunting some holdfast back in Redsteel, I imagine, and I'm here haunting Worlorn. Well, only Larteyn, if truth be known. Haunting an entire planet would be rather exhausting."

"Oh," Dirk said, smiling. "Then you're a ghost too?"

"Well, yes," the old man replied. "Here I stand, talking with you for lack of a good chain to rattle. What do you think I am?"

"I think," Dirk said, "I think you just might be Kirak Redsteel Cavis."

"Kirak Redsteel Cavis," the old man repeated in a gruff singsong manner. "I know him. A ghost if there ever was one. His particular fate is to haunt the corpse of Kavalan poetry. He goes about at night moaning, and reciting lines from the laments of Jamis-Lion Taal and some of the better sonnets of Erik high-Ironjade Devlin. During the full moon he sings Braith battle chanteys and sometimes the old cannibal dirge from the Deep Coal Dwellings. A ghost, in truth, and a most pathetic one. When he especially wants to torment one of his victims, he recites some of his own verse. I assure you that once you have heard Kirak Redsteel read, you *pray* for rattling chains."

"Yes?" Dirk said. "I don't see why being a poet is quite so ghostly, in and of itself."

"Kirak Redsteel writes Old Kavalan poetry," the man said with a frown. "And *that* is enough. It is a dying language. So who will read what he writes? In his own holdfast, men grow up speaking only standard star-talk. Perhaps they will translate his poetry, but it is really hardly worth the effort, you know. In translation it does not rhyme, and the meter limps along like a broken-backed mockman. *None* of it is any good in translation, not a bit. The rattling cadences of Galen Glowstone, the sweet hymns of Laaris-Blind

high-Kenn, all those dreary little Shanagates exalting the iron-and-fire, even the songs of the *eyn-kethi*, those hardly count as poetry at all. All dead, every bit of it, surviving only in Kirak Redsteel. Yes, the man is a ghost. Why else did he come to Worlorn? This is a world for ghosts." The old man tugged at his beard and regarded Dirk. "You are the ghost of some tourist, I would venture. No doubt you got lost while looking for a bathroom, and you have been wandering ever since."

"No," Dirk said, "no. I was looking for something else." He smiled and held up his whisperjewel.

The old man studied it, squinting his hard blue eyes while the cold wind flapped his cape. "Whatever it is, it is probably dead," he said. Far below them, down near the river that ran sparkling through the Common, a sound came drifting up: the faint, far-off wail of a banshee. Dirk's head snapped around, and he looked to see where the sound had come from. There was nothing, nothing-only the two of them standing on the wall, and the wind pulling at them, and the Helleye high in a twilight sky. No banshee. The time for banshees had passed here. They were all extinct.

"Dead?" Dirk said.

"Worlorn is full of dead things," the old man said, "and people looking for dead things, and ghosts." He mumbled something in Old Kavalan, something Dirk did not quite catch, and he began to move off slowly.

Dirk watched him go. He glanced toward the distant horizon, obscured by a bank of blue-gray clouds. Somewhere in that direction was the spacefield, and he was certain-Bretan Braith. "Ah, Jenny," he said, talking to the whisperjewel. He flicked it out away from him, as a boy might skip a stone, and it went far and far before it began to fall. He thought for a moment of Gwen and Jaan, and for several moments of Garse.

Then he turned back to the old man, and called out after his retreating figure. "Ghost!" he shouted. "Wait. A favor for me, one ghost to another!"

The old man stopped.

EPILOGUE

It was a flat grassy place in the center of the Common, not very far from the spacefield. Once, in the days of the Festival, games had been held there, and athletes from eleven of the fourteen outworlds had competed for crowns of crystalline iron.

Dirk and Kirak Redsteel were there long before the appointed time, waiting.

When the hour drew near, Dirk began to worry. He needn't have. The aircar with the snarling wolf's-head canopy appeared in the sky just as predicted. It swept by once with its pulse tubes shrieking, a low pass to make sure that they were really there, and then came down for a landing.

Bretan Braith walked toward them over the dead brown grass, his black boots trampling a host of faded flowers. It was nearly dusk. His eye was beginning to glow.

"I was told the truth, then," Bretan said to Dirk, with a touch of wonder in his rasping voice, the same voice that Dirk had heard so often in his nightmares, a voice several octaves too low and far too twisted for one as slim and straight as Bretan. "You are really here." The Braith stood several meters away, looking at them, infinitely pure, dressed in white dueling finery with a purple wolf-mask embroidered above his heart. His black belt carried two sidearms: a laser on his left side and a massive machine-pistol of blue-gray metal heavy on his right. His iron armlet was empty of glow-stones. "I did not believe the ancient Redsteel, if truth be known," he was saying. "Yet I thought, This place is so close, a check will do no harm. I can return to the port quickly enough should it prove a lie."

Kirak Redsteel got down on his knees and began to chalk a square out in the grass.

"You presume that I will honor you in duel," Bretan said. "I have no cause to do so." He moved his right hand and suddenly Dirk was facing the barrel of his machine-pistol. "Why should I not kill you? Here and now?"

Dirk shrugged. "Kill me if you like," he said, "but answer some questions first."

Bretan stared and said nothing.

"If I had come to you in Challenge," Dirk said, "if I had come down into the basement, as you wanted, would you have dueled me then? Or killed me for a mockman?"

Bretan slid his weapon back into its holster. "I would have dueled you. In Larteyn, in Challenge, here-it makes no difference. I would have dueled you. I do not believe in mockmen, t'Larien. I have never believed in mockmen. Only in Chell, who wore my bond and somehow did not care about my face."

"Yes," Dirk said. Kirak Redsteel had the death-square half complete. Dirk glanced up at the sky and wondered how much time was left. "And one other thing, Bretan Braith. How did you know to look for us in Challenge, in that one city out of all the others?"

Bretan shrugged his awkward shrug. "The Kimdissi told me, for a price. All Kimdissi can be bought. He had planted a tracer in a coat he gave you. I believe he used such tracers in his work."

"What was the price?" Dirk asked. Three sides of the square were drawn, white lines on the grass.

"I gave my honor-bond that I would do no harm to Gwen Delvano, and would protect her against all the others." The last rays of sunlight were fading; the trailing yellow sun had joined the others below the mountains. "Now," Bretan continued, "I have a question for you, t'Larien. Why have you come to me?"

Dirk smiled. "Because I like you, Bretan Braith. You burned down Kryne Lamiya, didn't you?"

"In truth," Bretan said. "I hoped to burn you as well, and Jaantony high-Ironjade, the outbonder. Does he still live?"

Dirk did not answer that question.

Kirak Redsteel rose and brushed the chalk from his hands, the square complete. He brought out the matched blades; straight sabers of Kavalan steel, with glowstones and jade set in the ornate pommels. Bretan chose one and tested it-it moved through the air with a song and a shriek-then stepped back, satisfied, to one corner of the square. He was very still as he waited; for an instant he appeared almost serene, a slim black figure leaning ever so slightly on his sword. Like the bargeman, Dirk thought, and despite himself he glanced wildly at the wolf-car to make certain it had not been transformed into a low barge. His heart was beating hard.

He pushed the thought aside, took the other blade, and retreated in turn. Kirak Redsteel smiled at him. It will be easy, Dirk told himself. He tried to remember the advice that Garse Ironjade had given him so long ago. Take one blow and give one, that's all, he said to himself. He was very frightened.

Bretan tossed his sidearms on the ground outside the death-square and moved the saber back and forth again, unlimbering his arm. Even across the seven meters that separated them, Dirk could see the twitch of his face.

Above Bretan's right shoulder a star was rising. Blue-white and large and very close, creeping up the black velvet sky toward zenith. And beyond the zenith, Dirk thought, to Eshellin and ai-Emerel and the World of the Blackwine Ocean. He wished them luck.

Kirak Cavis stepped outside the death-square and said a word in Old Kavalan. Bretan started forward, moving gracefully, light on his feet, very white, his eye glowing.

Dirk grinned the way Garse would have grinned, tossed the hair back out of his eyes, and went to him. No starlight ran down his blade as he lifted it and reached out to touch Bretan's. The wind was blowing. It was very cold.

Dying of the Light

Glossary

ai. After interregnum.

ai-Emerel. Human world on the Fringe, settled shortly after the interregnum (hence, *ai-*) by arcologites from Daronne. Emereli civilization is technologically advanced, cultured, pacifist, but static and somewhat regimented. Citizens live in kilometer-high tower-cities (arcologies) surrounded by farmland and wilderness, but most never leave the buildings they are born in. The discontented are allowed to serve in ai-Emerel's merchant starfleet, but may not return to their home towers.

Altered Men. Genetically altered humans of the world Prometheus. The Promethean surgeons experiment constantly; thus there are many varieties of Altered Men. In common parlance the term is often used to denote all Prometheans.

Avalon. Human world in the jambles, colonized by Newholme during the first century of the Federal Empire. A sector capital during the Double War, Avalon never lost starflight and played a large role in ending the interregnum through its vigorous program of exploration, trade, and re-education. Afterwards it became a center of learning. The Academy of Human Knowledge and its many associated institutes are located on Avalon. Avalon is also an important commercial center, with the largest trading fleet in the jambles. Ships from Avalon often trade for knowledge as well as goods.

Bakkalon. Deity worshiped by the Steel Angels, often depicted as a naked human infant holding a black sword; also called *the pale child*.

Baldur. First-generation human colony settled directly from Earth in the earliest years of starflight. A sector capital during the Double War, now an important center of trade.

banshee. Also known as *black banshee*; an aerial predator native to High Kavalaan.

Bastion. Human world in the jambles, details of settlement unknown. Bastion was once a human colony, then taken by the Hrangans during the Double War, finally retaken by humans, and today ruled by the Steel Angels, who have made it their capital.

betheyn. Kavalar term for a woman bonded to a man and under his protection; literally, *heldwife*.

Blackwiner. Native of the World of the Blackwine Ocean.

Braith. One of the four modern holdfast-coalitions of of High Kavalaan. Braith is generally conceded to be the most traditional of the four. Also, any member of holdfast Braith.

Braque. Human world near the Tempter's Veil, on the the outermost edge of the jambles. Braque is primitive and superstitious, ruled by a priesthood that strictly controls technology.

Bronzefist. Extinct holdfast-coalition of High Kavalaan.

Challenge. Festival city built on Worlorn by ai-Emerel. Challenge is an automated computer-operated self-contained arcology.

chokers. Common species of Toberian tree.

City in the Starless Pool. Festival city built on Worlorn, beneath the waters of an artificial lake, by the World of the Blackwine Ocean.

collapse. The period in which the Federal Empire of Old Earth disintegrated and fell. Dates for the collapse are difficult to fix; war had made communications between worlds even more chaotic than usual, and each planet experienced the collapse in its own ways and in its own time. Most historians cite the revolt on Thor and the destruction of Wellington as the key events in the Federal Empire's fall, but point out that the Empire had been a thin fiction for centuries before that as far as the more distant colonies were concerned.

cro-betheyn. Kavalan term for a *betheyn's* bond to her highbond's *teyn*; literally, *shared heldwife*.

dactyloids. Human term for a winged Hrangan slave-race employed as shock troops during the Double

War, given to the creatures because of their vague likeness to pterodactyls of Old Earth pre-history.

Dactyloids were savage, but small-brained and only semi-sentient.

Darkdawn. Human world in the Fringe, close to the edge of intergalactic space. After Darkdawn there is nothing; winter skies are empty but for the light of the distant galaxies. Darkdawn is thinly populated, solitary, and haven to a number of strange religious cults. Weather control has been perfected to a fine art, but otherwise technology is de-emphasized.

Darklings. Residents of Darkdawn.

Daronne. Human world of the jambles, close to the Tempter's Veil. Colonized at least three times by aliens and twice by humans, Daronne is a patchwork of esoteric cultures.

Deep Coal Dwellings. Mythological holdfast-coalition of High Kavalaan, said to exist in ancient times. The folk of the Deep Coal Dwellings were cannibals who preyed on the other holdfasts until destroyed in war. They were alleged to be half human, half demon.

Doable War. Centuries-long conflict between the Federal Empire and two alien races, the Fyndii and the Hrangans. Also known as the *Great War*, the *Fyndiin War*, the *Hrangan Conflict*, the *Thousand-Years War*, or simply as *the War*. In many ways the Double War was in reality two conflicts; the enemies never had any contact with each other and were in no sense allies, though both were engaged in warfare against humanity. The Federal Empire occupied the space between the two enemies, and thus fought on two fronts; the Fyndii hordes were inward toward the Core, the so-called Hrangan Empire outward toward the galactic fringe. The war against the Fyndii began first, and was generally a shorter and cleaner conflict, finally resolved through negotiations and the intervention of a third alien race, the Damoosh. The Hrangans were considerably less understandable and much more inimicable to humanity. Hostilities never officially ended between Hrangans and Earth; both civilizations collapsed. Humanity underwent the

interregnum and recovered, although never again as a single political unit. The Hrangans suffered virtual genocide at the hands of their own slaveraces and human colonials.

Earth Imperials. Originally, administrators sent out from Earth during the heyday of the Federal Empire. After the interregnum, commonly used to refer to any human who lived during the Empire period.

Emereli. Natives of ai-Emerel.

Erikan. Human world named after the religious leader Erika Stormjones, settled by her followers and dedicated to the precepts she espoused, notably immortality through cloning.

Eshellin. Human world on the Fringe, settled by a migration from Daronne. Relatively primitive and sparsely populated.

Esvoch. Festival city built by Eshellin.

eyn-kethi. Kavalan term for the breeding women of a holdfast, who are sexually available to all men; literally, *bonded-to-the-holdfast-brothers*.

Fat Satan. Red supergiant located beyond the Tempter's Veil, notable for the six yellow suns that circle it in a Trojan relationship to each other; the entire system is called the Wheel of Fire. Some speculate that the Wheel was created by a race of vanished superbeings capable of moving suns. Fat Satan is also known as *the Helleye* and *the Hub*.

Federal Empire. Political unit that ruled human space during the early centuries of starflight, colonized most of the first- and second-generation worlds and some of the third, and conducted the Double War, during the course of which it finally collapsed. The term itself was a convenient misnomer; the so-called empire was more correctly a democratic-socialist-cybernetic bureaucracy. The ultimate decision maker was the Chief Administrator, who was elected by and responsible to a tricameral legislature meeting in Geneva, Old Earth, but most of the day-to-day administration on Earth itself was conducted by the Artificial Intelligences, vast computer constructs. In the waning years of the Double War, the Federal Empire grew increasingly repressive and lost touch with its own colonies and even with its military arms.

FTL. Faster than light.

Fyndii. Alien race, and the first star-traveling sentients to make contact with humanity. The Fyndii were one of the enemies the Federal Empire faced in the Double War. Fyndii seem to feel almost no race loyalty; their societies are made up of empathically linked "hordes," and each horde is a bitter rival of all the others. Mind-mutes, incapable of linking, are friendless outcasts. The Fyndii rule approximately ninety worlds, generally inward from the worlds colonized by men.

githyanki. Hrangan slaverace, often termed *soulsucks* by humans. Barely sentient, malevolent, and potent telepaths, the *githyanki* were capable of bending and twisting human minds, sending false visions, hallucinations, and dreams, strengthening the animal side of man and warping judgment and reason, all for the end of turning brother against sister.

glowstone. Stone native to High Kavalaan, capable of storing light and emitting it in darkness. Glowstone is used for both building and jewelry, and is an important Kavalan export.

Glowstone Mountain. One of the greatest holdfast-coalitions in Kavalan history, finally defeated and destroyed by its enemies, now abandoned.

Great Black Sea. Outworld term for the space between the galaxies, where there are no stars.

Haapala's City. Festival city built by Wolfheim and named after Ingo Haapala, the Wolfman astronomer who first discovered that Worlorn would pass through the Wheel of Fire.

Hellcrown. One name of the six yellow stars (collectively) that circle the red supergiant sometimes called *the Helleye*, and together with it form the Wheel of Fire. Also known as *Satan's Children*, and *the Trojan Suns*. The six stars are virtually identical, and orbit in a Trojan relationship to each other.

Helleye. See Fat Satan.

High Kavalaan. Human world on the Fringe, colonized during the Double War by refugees and miners from Tara. Hrangans destroyed most of the original colony; survivors evolved modern Kavalan holdfast civilization. Kavalan society is regimented and individualistic at the same time; the culture places strong emphasis on both loyalty and personal honor. Close to barbaric when rediscovered by traders, the Kavalans are now industrializing rapidly, educating their young, and acquiring their own fleet of starships. High Kavalaan, which claims legal jurisdiction over the rogue planet Worlorn, was one of the driving forces in the Festival of the Fringe.

holdfast. Basic social unit of High Kavalaan; an underground chamber or series of chambers, easily defensible from attack, that provides shelter for anywhere from six to one hundred people. In ancient times each holdfast was an independent entity, a combination of family and nation. Soon, however, holdfasts began to make alliances and merge with other holdfasts, and even connect up underground; these were called holdfast-coalitions. In modern times the term *holdfast* is often used loosely to signify what might more properly be called a holdfast-coalition.

Hrangans. Humanity's great enemy during the Double War, the Hrangans were perhaps the most alien sentients ever encountered. Their social system was structured on the basis of a number of biological castes, most of whom seemed to belong to different species, so different were they. Of the Hrangans millions, only the so-called Minds were truly intelligent, and mankind never communicated successfully even with them. The Hrangans were bitterly xenophobic; prior to the Double War, they had enslaved a dozen less-advanced races, and there is evidence that they had exterminated others entirely. The war effectively destroyed the Hrangans, except on Old Hrang itself and a handful of their oldest colonies.

Hruun. Hrangans often used in combat during the Double War. The Hruun were more intelligent than most other Hrangans slaves. Their homeworld was a heavy-gravity planet by human standards, so the Hruun were warriors of immense strength. Among their other attributes was an ability to see well into the infrared that made them especially suited for nocturnal combat.

Hub. See Fat Satan.

interregnum. Historical period between the collapse and the resumption of starflight. By its very nature, the interregnum is difficult to date precisely. Some worlds experienced the collapse early, some late; some lost starflight for five years, some for fifty, some for five hundred; some like Avalon, Baldur,

Newholme, and Old Earth-were never really isolated from the rest of mankind, while others perhaps have still not been rediscovered. It is commonly said that the interregnum lasted a "generation"; this is workable enough as a rough approximation, if only the major human worlds are considered.

Ironjade Gathering. One of the four modern holdfast-coalitions of High Kavalaan. The Ironjade Gathering is one of the two most progressive Kavalars holdfasts.

jambles. Wolfman slang, now common parlance in the outworlds, for the area of space between the Fringe and the highly civilized worlds around Old Earth. The Hrangan Empire occupied a large portion of what is now called the jambles, and it was there that the most terrible actions of the Double War took place, leaving many planets ruined and many civilizations broken and "jumbled," from which word the term derived. Notable human worlds in the jambles include Avalon, Bastion, Prometheus, and Jamison's World.

Jamison's World. Human world in the jambles, settled chiefly from Old Poseidon. Jamies live on the planet's lush islands and archipelagoes; the one large continent is largely unexplored. Jamison's World is a regional center for industry and trade, and is a commercial rival of Avalon.

Kavalars. Native of High Kavalaan. **Kenn.** Extinct Kavalars holdfast-coalition.

keth, kethi. Kavalars term for the males of any holdfast or holdfast coalition; literally, *holdfast-brother(s)*.

Kindiss. Human world of the Fringe, settled by a group of religious pacifists, now the major outworld commercial power. Kindissi are traditionally nonviolent, and consequently hostile to the code duello of High Kavalaan.

Kindissi. Natives of Kindiss.

korariel. Kavalars term, literally *protected property*. Originally used by individuals and holdfasts to designate certain mockmen or groups of mockmen as private game; poachers were subject to challenge and duel. Later used by the more progressive holdfasts to protect primitives from extermination at the hands of traditional Kavalars hunters. Properly, the term cannot be applied to a real human, only to a mockman or animal.

Kryne Lamiya. Festival city built on Worlorn by Dark-dawn. Often called the Siren City, Kryne Lamiya was designed so that its towers made music of the controlled mountain winds, thus playing over and over a symphony by Darkdawn's leading composer, the nihilist Lamiya-Bailis.

Larteyn. Festival city built into the mountainwall of Worlorn by High Kavalaan. Larteyn, literally, means *bonded-to-the-sky*, or *sky-teyn*. The city was fashioned to a great extent of glowstone, and thus was often called the Firefort.

Letheland. One common name for a primitive human colony in the Fringe. Also known as the *Forgotten Colony*, or the *Lost Colony*. All of these terms are offworld in origin; the Lostfolk themselves call their planet

Earth. Letheland is the oldest human world beyond the Tempter's Veil, so old that all details of its settlement have been lost, and only conjecture remains. Its people are largely fisherfolk, with no interest in any way of life besides their own.

Musquel-by-the-Sea. Festival city patterned on those of Letheland, erected on Worlorn by a coalition of outworlders for the Forgotten Colony, which did not have the technology to build it so quickly. A weathered port of multicolored brick and wood, Musquel proved one of the Festival's most popular attractions.

Newholme. First interstellar human colony; an urbanized, overcrowded, highly technological world only 4.3 light-years from Old Earth. Since the interregnum and the isolation of Old Earth, Newholme is commonly regarded as the most advanced human world, and the center of commercial traffic between the stars. New-holme is also the nominal capital of the so-called Union of Humanity, a political unit that claims jurisdiction over mankind everywhere. Only three worlds beyond Newholme acknowledge this authority, however, so the Union is essentially a fiction.

not-men. Human beings who have evolved or mutated so far that they are no longer interfertile with the rest of the race.

Old Earth. Homeworld of the human race, formerly the capital of the Federal Empire. During the interregnum, and after the revolt of sizable portions of its armed forces, Old Earth recalled the remainder of its military and sealed itself off from the rest of humanity. The embargo remains in effect, with only a few exceptions. There are many legends and much conjecture about life on Old Earth today, but few facts. Also known as *Earth, Terra, Home*.

Old Hranga. Homeworld of the Hrangan race, and one of the few places where Hrangan Minds survive in numbers.

Old Poseidon. Third-generation human world settled early in the Federal period. A planet of turbulent seas and untold riches, Old Poseidon soon became an important trading center and a sector capital. After less than a century, the Poseidonites themselves were building starships and exporting colonists; they settled more than twenty other planets, including Jamison's World.

outworlds. Collective term for all the worlds of the Fringe; i.e., those fourteen human colonies between the Tempter's Veil and the Great Black Sea. Natives of any of these planets were commonly called *outworlders* by humans within the Veil.

Prometheus. Human world in the jambles, colonized by a military arm of the Federal Empire called the Ecological Warfare Corps during the Double War. Located deep within the war zone and the Hrangan sphere of influence, Prometheus was the headquarters for the biowar ships that spread disease, insects, and plant and animal pests among the Hrangans. After the collapse, Prometheus recovered starflight quickly, and also retained and developed techniques of cloning and genetic manipulation that had been closely guarded secrets of the Federal Empire. One of the most powerful human worlds of the jambles, Prometheus is de facto ruler of its closest neighbors, Rhiannon and Thisrock, and strongly influential on a number of other planets. See also Altered Men.

Redsteel. One of the four modern holdfast-coalitions of High Kavalaan. Redsteel is considered one of the two most progressive of the four. Also, any member of holdfast Redsteel.

Rhiannon. Human world in the jambles, colonized by Deirdre during the middle period of the Federal Empire. A rich pastoral world, Rhiannon today is ruled by Prometheus in all but name, and has no starships of its own.

Rogue's Hope. Human world in the Celian cluster, formerly a sector capital.

Rommel. Gold heavy-gravity planet colonized directly from Earth very early in the Federal period. Rommel and Wellington, its sister planet in the same system, began as unpleasant prison planets for incorrigibles from Earth, but during the Double War the two became the so-called *War Worlds* from which the Earth Imperials drew most of their assault squads. War Worlders, as troopers from Rommel and Wellington were called collectively, lived all their lives under a rigid military discipline, and were given drugs and special reaction training to enhance their fighting prowess. Ultimately, genetic alterations turned the War Worlders into *not-men*, unable to interbreed with other humans. Rommel lost starflight during the collapse and has never regained it. Traders avoid the world; Rommelans are considered inhuman and dangerous.

Satan's Children. See Hellcrown.

Shanagate Holding. One of the four modern holdfast-coalitions of High Kavalaan.

Son of the Dreamer. Religious leader who lived on Deirdre in the middle Federal period. The Son of the Dreamer preached a creed of physical pacifism and psychological aggression, and told his followers to resist their enemies with wit instead of force. Today his teachings are influential on Kimdiss, Kayan, Tamber, and several other worlds.

soulsuck. See githyanki.

standard. Monetary unit widely used in interstellar commerce, and on almost all of the most important human worlds. Also the language of such commerce and most star-traveling humans, also called *Terran*, *Standard Terran*, *Earthic*, *Common*. Also used as an adjective to denote units of time corresponding with those of Old Earth. Thus, standard hour, standard day, standard year, etc.

Steel Angels. Popular nickname for members of a powerful and widespread military-religious movement that developed among Federal Empire soldiers during the Double War, and has persisted and grown since. The Steel Angels believe that only humans (the seed of Earth) have souls, that race survival is the ultimate imperative, that strength is the only true virtue. Today, from their capital on Bastion, the Angels rule a dozen planets and have colonies, missions, and footholds on hundreds more. The members of the cult call themselves the *Children of Bakkalon*. Exact origins of the movement are in dispute. The Angels have had two major schisms and have conducted numerous wars, chiefly against non-human sentients.

Stormjones. Primitive planet in the Celian cluster named after the religious leader Erika Stormjones. See also Erikan.

Taal. Extinct holdfast-coalition of High Kavalaan.

Tara. Human world near the Tempter's Veil, on the outermost edge of the jambles. Tara was colonized at least five times by migrations from quite disparate worlds, and was also raided repeatedly during the Double War, so today it is home to many strange splinter cultures. The dominant influences, however, are both rooted in the first settlement: the Irish-Roman Reformed Catholic Church, and the hereditary warrior-ruler called the Cuchulainn.

Tempter's Veil. Cloud of interstellar dust and gas near the top of the galactic lens that blocks the Wheel of Fire and other outworld stars from view; the boundary between the Fringe and the jambles.

teyn. Kavalars term for a man bonded to another man, usually for life, in a co-equal relationship; the closest possible relationship between Kavalars; literally, *mybond* or *close-bond* or *holdclose*.

Thisrock. Artificial world between Prometheus and Rhiannon created by the Federal Empire for use as a naval strikebase during the Double War. Thisrock is located in deep space, orbits no star, and is quite small, in some ways more like a large stationary star-ship than a real world. Today dominated by Prometheus.

Tober-in-the-Veil. Human world on the outer edge of the Tempter's Veil, generally considered to be part of the Fringe. Tober was discovered and settled during the Collapse by the Avalon-based 17th Human Fleet, in rebellion against the Federal Empire. The Toberians are the most technologically advanced of the outworld cultures, and have developed energy shielding and pseudomatter past even Federal levels. Tober maintains a strong military arm, and is influential on several of the more primitive Fringe planets.

tree-spook. A small predatory rodent native to Kimdiss, so called because it sheds its skin several times before maturity, and leaves the transparent husk around its nest to frighten away enemies.

Trojan Suns. See Hellcrown.

Twelfth Dream. Festival city built on Worlorn by Kimdiss. Twelfth Dream was considered by sophisticates to be the most aesthetic of the fourteen cities erected for the Festival of the Fringe. Its name derives from Kimdissi religion; the universe and all that is in it is believed to have been created by the Dreamer, whose twelfth dream was Beauty Unsurpassed.

Wellington. Warm heavy-gravity world colonized directly from Earth early in the Federal period as a penal colony. Wellington and its sister planet, Rommel, later became the *War Worlds* that supplied the fierce assault squad troopers of the Federal Empire. See also Rommel. All life on Wellington was destroyed late in the Double War, when the 13th Human Fleet under Stephen Cobalt Northstar rebelled against the Federal Empire. The event is often cited as the beginning of the collapse.

Wheel of Fire. Collective name for the seven-sun multiple-star system located in the Fringe, behind the Tempter's Veil. The Wheel is considered by some to be an artificial monument to a vanished race of super-beings. See also Fat Satan, Hellcrown.

whisperjewel. A crystal that has been psionically "etched" to retain certain emotions or thoughts, which are thereafter perceptible when the crystal is held by "resonant" or sympathetic minds. Any type of crystal may be fashioned into a whisperjewel, but certain kinds of gemstones retain the patterns far better than others. The strength and clarity of a whisperjewel may also vary with time, and with the degree of skill of

the etching esper. The whisperjewels of Avalon are highly esteemed; Avalon has both a suitable base-crystal and a number of potent Talents. Some less developed worlds are reputed to produce even finer whisper-jewels, but their products seldom find their way onto the interstellar market.

Wolfheim. Human world in the Fringe, settled during the collapse by refugees from Fenris. Wolfheim culture is considered dynamic and volatile; the planet is a strong economic rival to Kimdiss, and militarily second only to Tober among the outworlds.

Wolfman. A native of Wolfheim.

World of the Blackwine Ocean. Human world on the Fringe, settled in ai-137 from Old Poseidon.

Worlorn. Rogue planet first discovered by Celia Mar-cyan; site of the Festival of the Fringe, ai-589 to ai-599, while passing near to the Wheel of Fire.

The Glass Flower

Once, when I was just a girl in the first flush of my true youth, a young boy gave me a glass flower as a token of his love.

He was a rare and precious boy, though I confess that I have long forgotten his name. So too was the flower he gave me. On the steel and plastic worlds where I have spent my lives, the ancient glassblower's art is lost and forgotten, but the unknown artisan who had fashioned my flower remembered it well. My flower has a long and delicate stem, curved and graceful, all of fine thin glass, and from that frail support the bloom explodes, as large as my fist, impossibly exact. Every detail is there, caught, frozen in crystal for eternity; petals large and small crowding each other, bursting from the center of the blossom in a slow transparent riot, surrounded by a crown of six wide drooping leaves, each with its tracery of veins intact, each unique. It was as if an alchemist had been wandering through a garden one day, and in a moment of idle play had transmuted an especially large and beautiful flower into glass.

All that it lacks is life.

I kept that flower with me for near two hundred years, long after I had left the boy who gave it to me and the world where he had done the giving. Through all the varied chapters of my lives, the glass flower was always close at hand. It amused me to keep it in a vase of polished wood, and set it near a window.

Sometimes the leaves and petals would catch the sun and flash brilliantly for an incandescent instant; at other times they would filter and fracture the light, scattering blurred rainbows on my floor. Often towards dusk, when the world was dimmer, the flower would seem to fade entirely from view, and I might sit staring at an empty vase. Yet, when the morning came, the flower would be back again. It never failed me.

The glass flower was terribly fragile, but no harm ever came to it. I cared for it well; better, perhaps, than I have ever cared for anything, or anyone. It outlasted a dozen lovers, more than a dozen professions, and more worlds and friends than I can name. It was with me in my youth on Ash and Erikan and Shamdizar, and later on Rogue's Hope and Vagabond, and still later when I had grown old on Dam Tullian and Lilith and Gulliver. And when I finally left human space entirely, put all my lives and all the worlds of men behind me, and grew young again, the glass flower was still at my side.

And, at very long last, in my castle built on stilts, in my house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, amid the swamps and stinks of Croan'dhenni, far from all humanity save those few lost souls who seek us out- it was there too, my glass flower. On the day Kleronomas arrived.

* * * *

“Joachim Kleronomas,” I said. “Yes.”

There are cyborgs and then there are cyborgs. So many worlds, so many different cultures, so many sets of values and levels of technologies. Some cyberjacks are half organic, some more, some less; some sport only a single metal hand, the rest of their cyberhalves cleverly concealed beneath the flesh. Some cyborgs

wear synthaflesh that is indistinguishable from human skin, though that is no great feat, given the variety of skin to be seen among the thousand worlds. Some hide the metal and flaunt the flesh; with others the reverse is true.

The man who called himself Kleronomas had no flesh to hide or flaunt. A cyborg he called himself, and a cyborg he was in the legends that had grown up around his name, but as he stood before me, he seemed more a robot, insufficiently organic to pass even as android.

He was naked, if a thing of metal and plastic can be naked. His chest was jet; some shining black alloy or smooth plastic, I could not tell. His arms and legs were transparent plasteel. Beneath that false skin, I could see the dark metal of his duralloy bones, the power-bars and flexors that were muscles and tendons, the micromotors and sensing computers, the intricate pattern of lights racing up and down his superconductive neurosystem. His fingers were steel. On his right hand, long silver claws sprang rakishly from his knuckles when he made a fist.

He was looking at me. His eyes were crystalline lenses set in metal sockets, moving back and forth in some green translucent gel. They had no visible pupils; behind each implacable crimson iris burned a dim light that gave his stare an ominous red glow. "Am I that fascinating?" he asked me. His voice was surprisingly natural; deep and resonant, with no metallic echoes to corrode the humanity of his inflections.

"Kleronomas," I said. "Your name is fascinating, certainly. A very long time ago, there was another man of that name, a cyborg, a legend. You know that, of course. He of the Kleronomas Survey. The founder of the Academy of Human Knowledge on Avalon. Your ancestor? Perhaps metal runs in your family."

"No," said the cyborg. "Myself. I am Joachim Kleronomas."

I smiled for him. "And I'm Jesus Christ. Would you care to meet my Apostles?"

"You doubt me, Wisdom?"

"Kleronomas died on Avalon a thousand years ago."

"No," he said. "He stands before you now."

"Cyborg," I said, "this is Croan'dhenni. You would not have come here unless you sought rebirth, unless you sought to win new life in the game of mind. So be warned. In the game of mind, your lies will be stripped away from you. Your flesh and your metal and your illusions, we will take them all, and in the end there will be only you, more naked and alone than you can ever imagine. So do not waste my time. It is the most precious thing I have, time. It is the most precious thing any of us have. Who are you, cyborg?"

"Kleronomas," he said. Was there a mocking note in his voice? I could not tell. His face was not built for smiling. "Do you have a name?" he asked me.

"Several," I said.

"Which do you use?"

“My players call me Wisdom.”

“That is a title, not a name,” he said.

I smiled. “You are traveled, then. Like the real Kleronomas. Good. My birth name was Cyrain. I suppose, of all my names, I am most used to that one. I wore it for the first fifty years of my life, until I came to Dam Tullian and studied to be a Wisdom and took a new name with the title.”

“Cyrain,” he repeated. “That alone?”

“Yes.”

“On what world were you born, then?”

“Ash.”

“Cyrain of Ash,” he said. “How old are you?”

“In standard years?”

“Of course.”

I shrugged. “Close to two hundred. I've lost count.”

“You look like a child, like a girl close to puberty, no more.”

“I am older than my body,” I said.

“As am I,” he said. “The curse of the cyborg, Wisdom, is that parts can be replaced.”

“Then you're immortal?” I challenged him.

“In one crude sense, yes.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Contradictory. You come here to me, to Croan'dhenni and its Artifact, to the game of mind. Why? This is a place where the dying come, cyborg, in hopes of winning life. We don't get many immortals.”

“I seek a different prize,” the cyborg said. “Yes?” I prompted.

“Death,” he told me. “Life. Death. Life.”

“Two different things,” I said. “Opposites. Enemies.”

“No,” said the cyborg. “They are the same.”

* * * *

Six hundred standard years ago, a creature known in legend as The White landed among the Croan'dhenni in the first starship they had ever seen. If the descriptions in Croan'dhic folklore can be trusted, then The White was of no race I have ever encountered, nor heard of, though I am widely traveled. This does not

surprise me. The manrealm and its thousand worlds (perhaps there are twice that number, perhaps less, but who can keep count?), the scattered empires of Fyndii and Damoosh and g'vhern and N'or Talush, and all the other sentients who are known to us or rumored of, all this together, all those lands and stars and lives colored by passion and blood and history, sprawling proudly across the light-years, across the black gulfs that only the volcryn ever truly know, all of this, all of our little universe... it is only an island of light surrounded by a vastly greater area of greyness and that fades ultimately into the black of ignorance. And this only in one small galaxy, whose uttermost reaches we shall never know, should we endure a billion years. Ultimately, the sheer size of things will defeat us, however we may strive or scream; that truth I am sure of.

But I do not defeat easily. That is my pride, my last and only pride; it is not much to face the darkness with, but it is something. When the end comes, I will meet it raging.

The White was like me in that. It was a frog from a pond beyond ours, a place lost in the grey where our little lights have not yet shone on the dark waters. Whatever sort of creature it might have been, whatever burdens of history and evolution it carried in its genes, it was nonetheless my kin. Both of us were angry mayflies, moving restlessly from star to star because we, alone among our fellows, knew how short our day. Both of us found a destiny of sorts in these swamps of Croan'dhenni.

The White came utterly alone to this place, set down its little starship (I have seen the remains: a toy, that ship, a trinket, but with lines that are utterly alien to me, and deliciously chilling), and, exploring, found something.

Something older than itself, and stranger. The Artifact.

Whatever strange instruments it had, whatever secret alien knowledge it possessed, whatever instinct bid it enter; all lost now, and none of it matters. The White knew, knew something the native sentients had never guessed, knew the purpose of the Artifact, knew how it might be activated. For the first time in - a thousand years? A million? For the first time in a long while, the game of mind was played. And The White changed, emerged from the Artifact as something else, as the first. The first mindlord. The first master of life and death. The first painlord. The first lifelord. The titles are born, worn, discarded, forgotten, and none of them matter.

Whatever I am, The White was the first.

* * * *

Had the cyborg asked to meet my Apostles, I would not have disappointed him. I gathered them when he left me. "The new player," I told them, "calls himself Kleronomas. I want to know who he is, what he is, and what he hopes to gain. Find out for me."

I could feel their greed and fear. The Apostles are a useful tool, but loyalty is not for them. I have gathered to me twelve Judas Iscariots, each of them hungry for that kiss.

"I'll have a full scan worked up," suggested Doctor Lyman, pale weak eyes considering me, flatterer's smile trembling.

“Will he consent to an interface?” asked Deish Green-9, my own cyberjack. His right hand, sunburned red-black flesh, was balled into a fist; his left was a silver ball that cracked open to exude a nest of writhing metallic tendrils. Beneath his heavy beetling brow, where he should have had eyes, a seamless strip of mirrorglass was set into his skull. He had chromed his teeth. His smile was very bright.

“We'll find out,” I said.

Sebastian Cayle floated in his tank, a twisted embryo with a massive monstrous head, flippers moving vaguely, huge blind eyes regarding me through turgid greenish fluids as bubbles rose all around his pale naked flesh. He is a Liar came the whisper in my head. I will find the truth for you, Wisdom.

“Good,” I told him.

Tr'k'nn'r, my Fyndii mindmute, sang to me in a high shrill voice at the edge of human hearing. He loomed above them all like a stickman in a child's crude drawing, a stickman three meters tall, excessively jointed, bending in all the wrong places at all the wrong angles, assembled of old bones turned grey as ash by some ancient fire. But the crystalline eyes beneath his brow ridge were fervid as he sang, and fragrant black fluids ran from the bottom of his lipless vertical mouth. His song was of pain and screaming and nerves set afire, of secrets revealed, of truth dragged steaming and raw from all its hidden crevasses.

“No,” I said to him. “He is a cyborg. If he feels pain it is only because he wills it. He would shut down his receptors and turn you off, loneling, and your song would turn to silence.”

The neurowhore Shayalla Loethen smiled with resignation. “Then there's nothing for me to work on either, Wisdom?”

“I'm not sure,” I admitted. “He has no obvious genitalia, but if there's anything organic left inside him, his pleasure centers might be intact. He claims to have been male. The instincts might still be viable. Find out.”

She nodded. Her body was soft and white as snow, and sometimes as cold, when she wanted cold, and sometimes white hot, when that was her desire. Those lips that curled upwards now with anticipation were crimson and alive. The garments that swirled around her changed shape and color even as I watched, and sparks began to play along her fingertips, arcing across her long, painted nails.

“Drugs?” asked Braje, biomed, gengineer, poisoner. She sat thinking, chewing some tranq of her own devising, her swollen body as damp and soft as the swamps outside. “Truetell? Agonine? Esperon?”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“Disease,” she offered. “Manthrax or gangrene. The slow plague, and we've got the cure?” She giggled.

“No,” I said curtly.

And the rest, and on and on. They all had their suggestions, their ways of finding out things I wanted to know, of making themselves useful to me, of earning my gratitude. Such are my Apostles. I listened to them, let myself be carried along by the babble of voices, weighed, considered, handed out orders, and finally I sent them all away, all but one.

Khar Dorian will be the one to kiss me when that day finally comes. I do not have to be a Wisdom to know that truth.

The rest of them want something of me. When they get it, they will be gone. Khar got his desire long ago, and still he comes back and back and back, to my world and my bed. It is not love of me that brings him back, nor the beauty of the young body I wear, nor anything as simple as the riches he earns. He has grander things in mind.

“He rode with you,” I said. “All the way from Lilith. Who is he?”

“A player,” Dorian said, grinning at me crookedly, taunting me. He is breathtakingly beautiful. Lean and hard and well fit, with the arrogance and rough-hewn masculine sexuality of a thirty-year-old, flush with health and power and hormones. His hair is blond and long and unkempt. His jaw is clean and strong, his nose straight and unbroken, his eyes a hale, vibrant blue. But there is something old living behind those eyes, something old and cynical and sinister.

“Dorian,” I warned him, “don't try games with me. He is more than just a player. Who is he?”

Khar Dorian got up, stretched lazily, yawned, grinned. “Who he says he is,” my slaver told me. “Kleronomas.”

* * * *

Morality is a closely knit garment that binds tightly when it binds at all, but the vastnesses that lie between the stars are prone to unraveling it, to plucking it apart into so many loose threads, each brightly colored, but forming no discernible pattern. The fashionable Vagabonder is a rustic spectacular on Cathaday, the Ymirian swelters on Vess, the Vessman freezes on Ymir, and the shifting lights the Fellanei wear instead of cloth provoke rape, riot, and murder on half a dozen worlds. So it is with morals. Good is no more constant than the cut of a lapel; the decision to take a sentient life weighs no more heavily than the decision to bare one's breasts, or hide them.

There are worlds on which I am a monster. I stopped caring a long time ago. I came to Croan'dhenni with my own fashion sense, and no concern for the aesthetic judgments of others.

Khar Dorian calls himself a slaver, and points out to me that we do, indeed, deal in human flesh. He can call himself what he likes. I am no slaver; the charge offends me. A slaver sells his clients into bondage and servitude, deprives them of freedom, mobility, and time, all precious commodities. I do no such thing. I am only a thief. Khar and his underlings bring them to me from the swollen cities of Lilith, from the harsh mountains and cold wastes of Dam Tullian, from the rotting tenements along the canals of Vess, from spaceport bars on Fellanora and Cymeranth and Shrike, from wherever he can find them, he takes them and brings them to me, and I steal from them and set them free.

A lot of them refuse to go.

They cluster outside my castle walls in the city they have built, toss gifts to me as I pass, call out my name, beg favors of me. I have left them freedom, mobility, and time, and they squander it all in futility, hoping to win back the one thing I have stolen.

I steal their bodies, but they lose their souls themselves.

And perhaps I am unduly harsh to call myself a thief. These victims Khar brings me are unwilling players in the game of mind, but no less players for all that. Others pay so very dearly and risk so very much for the same privilege. Some we call players and some we call prizes, but when the pain comes and the game of mind begins, we are all the same, all naked and alone without riches or health or status, armed with only the strength that lies within us. Win or lose, live or die, it is up to us and us alone.

I give them a chance. A few have even won. Very few, true, but how many thieves give their victims any chance at all?

The Steel Angels, whose worlds lie far from Croan'dhenni on the other side of human space, teach their children that strength is the only virtue and weakness the only sin, and preach that the truth of their faith is written large on the universe itself. It is a difficult point to argue. By their creed, I have every moral right to the bodies I take, because I am stronger and therefore better and more holy than those born to that flesh.

The little girl born in my present body was not a Steel Angel, unfortunately.

* * * *

“And baby makes three,” I said, “even if baby is made of metal and plastic and names himself a legend.”

“Eh?” Rannar looked at me blankly. He is not as widely traveled as me, and the reference, something I have dredged up from my forgotten youth on some world he's never walked, escapes him entirely. His long, sour face wore a look of patient bafflement.

“We have three players now,” I told him carefully. “We can play the game of mind.”

That much Rannar understood. “Ah yes, of course. I'll see to it at once, Wisdom.”

Craimur Delhune was the first. An ancient thing, almost as old as me, though he had done all of his living in the same small body. No wonder it was worn out. He was hairless and shriveled, a wheezing half-blind travesty, his flesh full of alloplas and metal implants that labored day and night just to keep him alive. It was not something they could do much longer, but Craimur Delhune had not had enough living yet, and so he had come to Croan'dhenni to pay for the flesh and begin all over again. He had been waiting nearly half a standard year.

Rieseen Jay was a stranger case. She was under fifty and in decent health, though her flesh bore its own scars. Rieseen was jaded. She had sampled every pleasure Lilith offered, and Lilith offers a good many pleasures. She had tasted every food, flowed with every drug, sexed with males, females, aliens, and animals, risked her life skiing the glaciers, baiting pit-dragons, fighting in the soar-wars for the delectation of holofans everywhere. She thought a new body would be just the thing to add spice to life. Maybe a male body, she thought, or an alien's offcolor flesh. We get a few like her.

And Joachim Kleronomas made three.

In the game of mind, there are seats for seven. Three players, three prizes, and me.

Rannar offered me a thick portfolio, full of photographs and reports on the prizes newly arrived on Khar Dorian's ships, on the Bright Phoenix and the Second Chance and the New Deal and the Fleshpot (Khar has always had a certain black sense of humor). The major-domo hovered at my elbow, solicitous and helpful, as I turned the pages and made my selections. "She's delicious," he said once, at a picture of a slim Vessgirl with frightened yellow eyes that hinted at a hybrid gene-mix. "Very strong and healthy, that one," he said later, as I considered a hugely muscled youth with green eyes and waist-long braided black hair. I ignored him. I always ignore him.

"Him," I said, taking out the file of a boy as slender as a stiletto, his ruddy skin covered with tattoos. Khar had purchased him from the authorities on Shrike, where he'd been convicted of killing another sixteen-year-old. On most worlds Khar Dorian, the infamous free trader, smuggler, raider, and slaver, had a name synonymous with evil; parents threatened their children with him. On Shrike he was a solid citizen who did the community great service by buying up the garbage in the prisons.

"Her," I said, setting aside a second photograph, of a pudgy young woman of about thirty standard whose wide green eyes betrayed a certain vacancy. From Cymeranth, her file said. Khar had dropped one of his raiders into a coldsleep facility for the mentally damaged and helped himself to some young, healthy, attractive bodies. This one was soft and fat, but that would change once an active mind wore the flesh again. The original owner had sucked up too much dreamdust.

"And it," I said. The third file was that of a g'vhern hatchling, a grim-looking individual with fierce magenta eye-crests and huge, leathery batwings that glistened with iridescent oils. It was for Riesen Jay, who thought she might like to try a nonhuman body. If she could win it.

"Very good, Wisdom," said Rannar approvingly. He was always approving. When he had come to Croan'dhenni, his body was grotesque; he'd been caught in bed with the daughter of his employer, a V'lador knight of the blood, and the punishment was extensive ritual mutilation. He did not have the price of a game. But I'd had two players waiting for almost a year, one of whom was dying of manthrax, so when Rannar offered me ten years of faithful service to make up the difference, I accepted.

Sometimes I had my regrets. I could feel his eyes on my body, could sense his mind stripping away the soft armor of my clothes to fasten, leechlike, on my small, budding breasts. The girl he'd been found with was not much younger than the flesh I now wore.

* * * *

My castle is built of obsidian.

North of here, far north, in the smoky polar wastelands where eternal fires burn against a purple sky, the black volcanic glass lies upon the ground like common stone. It took thousands of Croan'dhic miners nine standard years to find enough for my purposes and drag it all back to the swamps, over all those barren kilometers. It took hundreds of artisans another six to cut and polish it and fit it all together into the dark shimmering mosaic that is my home. I judged the effort worthwhile.

My castle stands on four great jagged pillars high up above the smells and damp of the Croan'dhic swampland, ablaze with colored lights whose ghosts glimmer within the black glass. My castle gleams; a thing of beauty, austere and forbidding, supreme and apart from the shantytown that has grown up around

it, where the losers and discards and dispossessed huddle hopelessly in floating reed-huts, festering treehouses, and hovels on half-rotted wooden stilts. The obsidian appeals to my aesthetic sense, and I find its symbolism appropriate to this house of pain and rebirth. Life is born in the heat of sexual passion as obsidian is born in volcanic fire. The clean truth of light can sometimes flow through its blackness, beauty seen dimly through darkness, and like life, it is terribly fragile, with edges that can be dangerously sharp.

Inside my castle are rooms on rooms, some paneled over with fragrant native woods and covered with furs and thick carpets, some left bare and black ceremonial chambers where dark reflections move through glass walls and footsteps click brittle against glass floors. In the center, at the very apex, rises an onion-shaped obsidian tower, braced by steel. Within the dome, a single chamber.

I ordered the castle built, replacing an older and much shabbier structure, and to that single tower chamber, I caused the Artifact to be moved.

It is there that the game of mind is played.

My own suite is at the base of the tower. The reasons for that were symbolic as well. None achieve rebirth without first passing through me.

* * * *

I was breaking fast in bed, on butterfruit and raw fish and strong black coffee, with Khar Dorian stretched out languid and insolent beside me, when my scholar Apostle, Alta-k-Nahr, came to me with her report.

She stood at the foot of my bed, her back twisted like a great question mark by her disease, her long features permanently set in a grimace of distaste, her skin shot through with swollen veins like great blue worms, and she told me of her researches on the historical Kleronomas in a voice unnecessarily soft.

“His full name was Joachim Charle Kleronomas,” she said, and he was native to New Alexandria, a first-generation colony less than seventy light-years from Old Earth. Records of his birthdate, childhood, and adolescence are fragmentary and contradictory. The most popular legends indicate his mother was a high-ranking officer on a warship of the 13th Human Fleet, under Stephen Cobalt Northstar, and that Kleronomas met her only twice. He was gestated in a hireling host-mother and reared by his father, a minor scholar at a library on New Alexandria. My opinion is that this tale of his origin explains, a bit too neatly, how Kleronomas came to combine both the scholastic and martial traditions; therefore I question its reliability.

“More certain is the fact that he joined the military at a very early age, in those last days of the Thousand Years War. He served initially as systems tech on a screamer-class raider with the 17th Human Fleet, distinguished himself in deepspace actions off El Dorado and Arturius and in the raids on Hrag Druun, after which he was promoted to cadet and given command training. By the time the 17th was shifted from its original base on Fenris to a minor sector capital called Avalon, Kleronomas had earned further distinction, and was the third-in-command of the dropship Hannibal. But in the raids on Hruun-Fourteen, the Hannibal took heavy damage from Hrangans defenders, and was finally abandoned. The screamer in which Kleronomas escaped was disabled by enemy fire and crashed planetside, killing everyone aboard. He was the sole survivor. Another screamer picked up what was left of him, but he was so near dead and horribly maimed that they shoved him into cryostorage at once. He was taken back to Avalon, but

resources were few and demands many, and they had no time to bother reviving him. They kept him under for years.

“Meanwhile, the Collapse was in progress. It had been in progress all of his lifetime, actually, but communications across the width of the old Federal Empire were so slow that no one knew it. But a single decade saw the revolt on Thor, the total disintegration of the 15th Human Fleet, and Old Earth's attempt to remove Stephen Cobalt Northstar from command of the 13th, which led inevitably to the secession of Newholme and most of the other first-generation colonies, to Northstar's obliteration of Wellington, to civil war, breakaway colonies, lost worlds, the fourth great expansion, the hellfleet legend, and ultimately the sealing of Old Earth and the effective cessation of commercial starflight for a generation. Longer than that, far far longer, on some more remote worlds, many of which devolved to near-savagery or developed odd variant cultures.

“Out on the front, Avalon had its own first-hand experience of the Collapse when Rajeen Tober, commanding the 17th Fleet, refused to submit to the civil authorities and took his ships deep into the Tempter's Veil to found his own personal empire safe from both Hrangan and human retaliation. The departure of the 17th left Avalon essentially defenseless. The only warships still in the sector were the ancient hulks of the 5th Human Fleet, which had last seen combat nearly seven centuries earlier, when Avalon was a very distant strikebase against the Hrangans. About a dozen capital-class ships and thirty-odd smaller craft of the 5th remained in orbit around Avalon, most needing extensive repairs, all functionally obsolete. But they were the only defenders left to a frightened world, so Avalon determined to refit and restore them. To crew these museum pieces, Avalon turned to its cryonic wards, and began to thaw every combat veteran on hand, including Joachim Kleronomas: The damage he had sustained was extensive, but Avalon needed every last body. Kleronomas returned more machine than man. A cyborg.”

I leaned forward to interrupt Alta's recitation. “Are there any pictures of him as he was then?” I asked her.

“Yes. Both before and after. Kleronomas was a big man, with blue-black skin, a heavy outthrust jaw, grey eyes, long pure white hair. After the operation, the jaw and the bottom half of his face were gone entirely, replaced with seamless metal. No mouth, no nose. He took nourishment intravenously. One eye was lost, replaced by a crystal sensor with IR/UV range. His right arm and the entire right half of his chest was cybered, steel plate, duralloy mesh, plastic. A third of his inner organs were synthetic. And they gave him a jack, of course, and built in a small computer. From the beginning, Kleronomas disdained cosmetics; he looked exactly like what he was.”

I smiled. “But what he was, that was still a good deal more fleshy than our new guest?”

“True,” said my scholar: “The rest of the history is more well known. There weren't many officers among the revived. Kleronomas was given his own command, a small courier-class ship. He served for a decade, pursuing the scholarly studies in history and anthropology that were his private passion, and rising higher and higher in the ranks while Avalon waited for ships that never came and built more and more ships of its own. There were no trades, no raids; the interregnum had come.

“Finally, a bolder civil leadership decided to risk a few of its ships and find out how the rest of human civilization had fared. Six of the ancient 5th Fleet dreadnaughts were refitted as science survey craft and sent out. Kleronomas was given command of one of them. Of those survey ships, two were lost on their

missions, and three others returned within two years carrying minimal information on a handful of the closest systems, prompting the Avalonians to reinitiate starflight on a very limited local basis. Kleronomas was thought lost.

“He was not lost. When the small, limited goals of the original survey were completed, he decided to continue rather than return to Avalon. He became obsessed with the next star, and the next after that, and the next after that. He took his ship on and on. There were mutinies, desertions, dangers to be faced and fought, and Kleronomas dealt with them all. As a cyborg, he was immensely long-lived. The legends say he became ever more metallic as the voyage went on, and on Eris discovered the matrix crystal and expanded his intellectual abilities by orders of magnitude through the addition of the first crystal-matrix computer. That particular story fits his character; he was obsessed not only with the acquisition of knowledge, but with its retention. Altered so, he would never forget.

“When he finally returned to Avalon, more than a hundred standard years had passed. Of the men and women who had left Avalon with him, Kleronomas alone survived; his ship was manned by the descendants of its original crew, plus those recruits he had gathered on the worlds he visited. But he had surveyed four hundred and forty-nine planets, and more asteroids, comets, and satellites than anyone would have dreamed possible. The information he brought back became the foundation upon which the Academy of Human Knowledge was built, and the crystal samples, incorporated into existing systems, became the medium in which that knowledge was stored, eventually evolving into the academy's vast Artificial Intelligences and the fabled crystal towers of Avalon. The resumption of large-scale starflight soon thereafter was the real end of the interregnum. Kleronomas himself served as the first academy administrator until his death, which supposedly came on Avalon in ai-42, that is, forty-two standard years after the day of his return.”

I laughed. “Excellent,” I told Alta-k-Nahr. “He's a fraud, then. Dead at least seven hundred years.” I looked at Khar Dorian, whose long fine hair was spread across the pillow as he nibbled on a heel of mead bread. “You are slipping, Khar. He fooled you.”

Khar swallowed, grinned. “Whatever you say, Wisdom,” he said, in a tone that told me he was anything but contrite. “Shall I kill him for you?”

“No,” I said. “He is a player. In the game of mind, there are no imposters. Let him play. Let him play.”

* * * *

Days later, when the game had been scheduled, I called the cyborg to me. I saw him in my office, a large room with deep scarlet carpeting, where my glass flower sits by the great window that overlooks my battlements and the swamp town below.

His face was without expression. Of course, of course. “You summoned me, Cyrain of Ash.”

“The game is set,” I told him. “Four days from today.”

“I am pleased,” he said.

“Would you like to see the prizes?” I offered him the files; the boy, the girl, the hatchling. He glanced at them briefly, without interest.

“I am told,” I said to him, “that you have spent a lot of time wandering these past days. Inside my castle, and outside in the town and the swamps.

“True,” he said. “I do not sleep. Knowledge is my diversion, my addiction. I was curious to learn what sort of place this was.”

Smiling, I said, “And what sort of place is it, cyborg?”

He could not smile, nor frown. His tone was even, polite. “A vile place,” he said. “A place of despair and degradation.”

“A place of eternal, undying hope,” I said.

“A place of sickness, of the body and the soul.”

“A place where the sick grow well,” I countered.

“And where the well grow sick,” the cyborg said. “A place of death.”

“A place of life,” I said. “Isn't that why you came? For life?”

“And death,” he said. “I have told you, they are the same.”

I leaned forward. “And I have told you, they are very different. You make harsh judgments, cyborg. Rigidity is to be expected in a machine, but this fine, precious moral sensitivity is not.”

“Only my body is machine,” he said.

I picked up his file. “That is not my understanding,” I said. “Where is your morality in regard to lying? Especially so transparent a lie?” I opened the file flat on my desk. “I've had a few interesting reports from my Apostles. You've been extraordinarily cooperative.”

“If you wish to play the game of mind, you cannot offend the painlord,” he said.

I smiled. “I'm not as easily offended as you might think.” I searched through the reports. “Doctor Lyman did a full scan on you. He finds you an ingenious construct. And made entire of plastic and metal. There is nothing organic left inside you, cyborg. Or should I call you robot? Can computers play the game of mind, I wonder? We will certainly find out. You have three of them, I see. A small one in what should be your brain case that attends to motor functions, sensory input and internal monitoring, a much larger library unit occupying most of your lower torso, and a crystal matrix in your chest.” I looked up. “Your heart, cyborg?”

“My mind,” he said. “Ask your Doctor Lyman, and he will tell of other cases like mine. What is a human mind? Memories. Memories are data. Character, personality, individual volition. Those are programming. It is possible to imprint the whole of a human mind upon a crystal matrix computer.”

“And trap the soul in the crystal?” I said. “Do you believe in souls?”

“Do you?” he asked.

“I must. I am mistress of the game of mind. It would seem to be required of me.” I turned to the other reports my Apostles had assembled on this construct who called himself Kleronomas. “Deish Green-9 interfaced with you. He says you have a system of incredible sophistication, that the speed of your circuitry greatly exceeds human thought, that your library contains far more accessible information than any single organic brain could retain even were it able to make full use of its capacity, and that the mind and memories locked within that crystal matrix are that of one Joachim Kleronomas. He swears to that.”

The cyborg said nothing. Perhaps he might have smiled then, had he the capacity.

“On the other hand,” I said, “my scholar Alta-k-Nahr assures me that Kleronomas is dead seven hundred years. Who am I to believe?”

“Whomever you choose,” he said indifferently.

“I might hold you here and send to Avalon for confirmation,” I said. I grinned. “A thirty-year voyage in, thirty more years back out. Say a year to research the question. Can you wait sixty-one years to play, cyborg?”

“As long as necessary,” he said.

“Shayalla says you are thoroughly asexual.”

“That capacity was lost from the day they remade me,” he said. “My interest in the subject lingered for some centuries afterwards, but finally that too faded. If I choose, I have access to a full range of erotic memories of the days when I wore organic flesh. They remain as fresh as the day they were entered into my computer. Once locked in crystal, memories cannot fade, as with a human brain. They are there, waiting to be tapped. But for centuries now, I have had no inclination to recall them.”

I was intrigued. “You cannot forget,” I said.

“I can erase,” he said. “I can choose not to remember.”

“If you are among the winners in our little game of mind, you will regain your sexuality.”

“I am aware of that. It will be an interesting experience. Perhaps then I will choose to tap those ancient memories.”

“Yes,” I said, delighted. “You'll begin to use them, and at precisely the same instant you will begin to forget them. There is a loss there, cyborg, as sharp as your gain.”

“Gain or loss. Living and dying. I have told you, Cyrain, they cannot be separated.”

“I don't accept that,” I said. It was at issue with all I believe, all I am; his repetition of the lie annoyed me. “Braje says you cannot be affected by drugs or disease. Obvious. You could be dismantled, though. Several of my Apostles have offered to dispose of you, at my command. My aliens are especially bloodthirsty, it seems.”

“I have no blood,” he said. Sardonic? Or was it all the power of suggestion?

“Your lubricants might suffice,” I said dryly. “Tr’k’nn’r would test your capacity for pain. AanTerg Moonscorer, my g’vhern aerialist, has offered to drop you from a great height.”

“That would be an unconscionable crime by nest standards.”

“Yes and no,” I said. “A nestborn g’vhern would be aghast at the suggestion that flight be thus perverted. My Apostle, on the other hand, would be more aghast at the suggestion of birth control. Flapping those oily leather wings you’ll find the mind of a half-sane cripple from New Rome. This is Croan’dhenni. We are not as we seem.”

“So it appears.”

“Jonas has offered to destroy you too, in a less dramatic but equally effective fashion. He’s my largest Apostle. Deformed by runaway glands. The patron saint of advanced automatic weaponry, and my chief of security.”

“Obviously you have declined these offers,” the cyborg said.

I leaned back. “Obviously,” I said, “though I always reserve the right to change my mind.”

“I am a player,” he said. “I have paid Khar Dorian, have bribed the Croan’dhic port-guards, have paid your major-domo and yourself. Inwards, on Lilith and Cymeranth and Shrike and other worlds where they speak of this black palace and its half-mythical mistress, they say that your players are treated with fairness.”

“Wrong,” I said. “I am never fair, cyborg. Sometimes I am just. When the whim takes me.”

“Do you threaten all your players as you have threatened me?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted. “I’m making a special exception in your case.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because you’re dangerous,” I said, smiling. We had come to the heart of it at last. I shuffled through all my Apostolic bulls, and extracted the last of them, the most important. “At least one of my Apostles you have never met, but he knows you, cyborg, knows you better than you would dream.”

The cyborg said nothing.

“My pet telepath,” I said. “Sebastian Cayle. He’s blind and twisted and I keep him in a big jar, but he has his uses. He can probe through walls. He has stroked the crystals of your mind, friend, and tripped the binary synapses of your id. His report is a bit cryptic, but admirably terse.” I slid it across the desk for the cyborg to read.

A haunted labyrinth of thought. The steel ghost. The truth within the lie, life in death and death in life. He will take everything from you if he can. Kill him now.

“You are ignoring his advice,” the cyborg said.

“I am,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Because you're a mystery, one I plan to solve when we play the game of mind. Because you're a challenge, and it has been a long time since I was challenged. Because you dare to judge me and dream of destroying me, and it has been ages since anyone found the courage to do either of those things.”

* * * *

Obsidian makes a dark, distorted mirror, but one that suits me. We take our reflections for granted all our lives, until the hour comes when our eyes search for the familiar features and find instead the image of a stranger. You cannot know the meaning of horror or of fascination until you take that first long gaze from a stranger's eyes, and raise an unfamiliar hand to touch the other's cheek, and feel those fingers, light and cool and afraid, brush against your skin.

I was already a stranger when I came to Croan'dhenni more than a century ago. I knew my face, as well I should, having worn it nearly ninety years. It was the face of a woman who was both hard and strong, with deep lines around her grey eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that had not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face, and one that I had a certain affection for. But I lost it somewhere, perhaps during my years on Gulliver, lost it when I was too busy to notice. By the time I reached Lilith, the first stranger had begun to haunt my mirrors. She was an old woman, old and wrinkled. Her eyes were grey and rheumy and starting to dim, her hair white and thin, with patches of pinkish scalp showing through; the edge of her mouth trembled, there were broken capillaries in her nose; and beneath her chin lay several folds of soft grey flesh like the wattles of a hen. Her skin was soft and loose, where mine had always been taut and flush with health, and there was another thing, a thing you could not see in the mirror - a smell of sickness that enveloped her like the cheap perfume of an aged courtesan, a pheromone for death.

I did not know her, this old sick thing, nor did I cherish her company. They say that age and sickness come slowly on worlds like Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus; legends claim death no longer comes at all on Old Earth behind its shining walls. But Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus were far away, and Old Earth is sealed and lost to us, and I was alone on Lilith with a stranger in my mirror. And so I took myself beyond the manrealm, past the furthest reach of human arms, to the wet dimness of Croan'dhenni, where whispers said a new life could be found. I wanted to look into a mirror once more, and find the old friend that I had lost.

Instead I found more strangers.

The first was the painlord itself; mindlord, lifelord, master of life and death. Before my coming, it had ruled here forty-odd standard years. It was Croan'dhic, a native, a great bulbous thing with swollen eyes and mottled blue-green skin, a grotesque parody of a toad with slender, double-jointed arms and three long vertical maws like wet black wounds in its fragrant flesh. When I looked upon it, I could taste its weakness; it was vastly fat, a sea of spreading blubber with an odor like rotten eggs, where the Croan'dhic guards and servants were well-muscled and hard. But to topple the mindlord, you must become the mindlord. When we played the game of mind, I took its life, and woke in that vile body.

It is no easy thing for a human mind to wear an alien skin; for a day and a night I was lost inside that hideous flesh, sorting through sights and sounds and smells that made no more sense than the images in nightmare, screaming, clawing for control and sanity. I survived. A triumph of spirit over flesh. When I was ready, another game of mind was called, and this time I emerged with the body of my choice.

She was a human. Thirty-nine years of age by her reckoning, healthy, plain of face but strong of body, a professional gambler who had come to Croan'dhenni for the ultimate game. She had long red-brown hair and eyes whose blue-green color reminded me of the seas of Gulliver. She had some strength, but not enough. In those distant days, before the coming of Khar Dorian and his slavers' fleet, few humans found their way to Croan'dhenni. My choice was limited. I took her.

That night I looked into the mirror again. It was still a stranger's face, hair too long, eyes of the wrong hue, a nose as straight as the blade of a knife, a careful guarded mouth that had done too little smiling.

Years afterward, when that body began to cough blood from some infernal pestilence out of the Croan'dhic swamps, I built a room of obsidian mirrors to meet each new stranger. Years pass more swiftly than I care to think while that room remains sealed and inviolate, but always, finally, the day comes when I know I will be visiting it once more, and then my servants climb the stairs and polish the black mirrors to a fine dark sheen, and when the game of mind is done I ascend alone and strip off my clothing and stand and turn in solitude, slow dancing with the images of others.

High, sharp cheekbones and dark eyes sunk in deep hollows beneath her brow. A face shaped like a heart, surrounded by a nimbus of wild black hair, large pale breasts tipped with brown. Taut lean muscles moving beneath oiled red-brown skin, long fingernails sharp as claws, a narrow pointed chin, brown hair like wire bristles cut in a thin high stripe across her scalp and halfway down her back, the hot scent of rut heavy between her thighs. My thighs? On a thousand worlds, humanity changes in a thousand different ways.

Massive boney head looking down at the world from near three meters height, beard and hair blending into one leonine mane as bright as beaten gold, strength written large in every bone and sinew, the broad flat chest with its useless red nipples, the strangeness of the long, soft penis between my legs. Too much strangeness for me; the penis stayed soft all the months I wore that body, and that year my mirrored room was opened twice.

A face very like the one that I remember. But how well do I remember? A century was gone to dust, and I kept no likenesses of the faces I had worn. From my first youth long ago, only the glass flower remained. But she had short brown hair, a smile, grey-green eyes. Her neck was too long, her breasts too small, perhaps. But she was close, close, until she grew old, and the day came when I glimpsed another stranger walking beside me inside the castle walls.

And now the haunted child. In the mirrors she looks like a daughter of dreams, the daughter I might have birthed had I been far lovelier than I ever was. Khar brought her to me, a gift he said, a most beautiful gift, to repay me in kind after I had found him grey and impotent, hoarse of voice and scarred of face, and made him young and handsome.

She is perhaps eleven years old, perhaps twelve. Her body is gaunt and awkward, but the beauty is there, locked inside, just beginning to blossom. Her breasts are budding now, and her blood first came less than

half a year ago. Her hair is silver-gold, long and straight, a glittering cascade that falls nearly to her heels. Her eyes are lame in her small face, and they are the deepest, purest violet. Her face is something sculpted. She was bred to be thus, no doubt of that; genetic tailoring has made the Shrikan trade-lords and the wealthy of Lilith and Fellanora a breathtakingly beautiful folk.

When Khar brought her to me, she was shy of seven, her mind already gone, a whimpering animal thing screaming in a dark locked room within her skull. Khar says she was that way when he bought her, the dispossessed daughter of a Fellanei robber baron toppled and executed for political crimes, his family and friends and retainers slain with him or turned into mindless sexual playthings for his victorious enemies. That is what Khar says. Most of the time I even believe him.

She is younger and prettier than I can ever remember being, even in my lost first youth on Ash, where a nameless boy gave me a glass flower. I hope to wear this sweet flesh for as many years as I wore the body I was born to. If I dwell here long enough, perhaps the day will come when I can look into a dark mirror and see my own face again.

* * * *

One by one they ascended unto me; through Wisdom to rebirth, or so they hoped.

High above the swamps, locked within my tower, I prepared for them in the changing chamber, hard by my unimpressive throne. The Artifact is not prepossessing; a rudely shaped bowl of some soft alien alloy, charcoal grey in color and faintly warm to the touch, with six niches spaced evenly around the rim. They are seats; cramped, hard, uncomfortable seats, designed for obviously nonhuman physiognomies, but seats nonetheless. From the floor of the bowl rises a slender column that blossoms into another seat, the awkward cup that enthrones ... choose the title you like best. Painlord, mindlord, lifelord, giver and taker, operator, trigger, master. All of them are me. And others before me, the chain rattling back to The White and perhaps earlier, to the makers, the unknowns who fashioned this machine in the dimness of distant eons.

If the chamber has its drama, that is my doing. The walls and ceiling are curved, and fashioned laboriously of a thousand individual pieces of polished obsidian. Some shards are cut very thin, so the grey light of the Croan'dhic sun can force its way through. Some shards are so thick as to be almost opaque. The room is one color, but a thousand shades, and for those who have the wit to see it, it forms a great mosaic of life and death, dreams and nightmares, pain and ecstasy, excess and emptiness, everything and nothing, blending one into the other, around and around unending, a circle, a cycle, the worm that eats its own tail forever, each piece individual and fragile and razor-edged and each part of a greater picture that is vast and black and brittle.

I stripped and handed my clothing to Rannar, who folded each garment neatly. The cup is topless and egg-shaped I climbed inside and folded my legs beneath me in a lotus, the best possible compromise between the lines of the Artifact and the human physique. The interior walls of the machine began to bleed; glistening red-black fluid beading on the grey metal of the egg, each globule swelling fatter and heavier until it burst. Streams trickled down the smooth, curved walls, and the moisture began to collect at the bottom. My bare skin burned where the fluid touched me. The flow came faster and heavier, the fire creeping up my body, until I was half immersed.

“Send them in,” I told Rannar. How many times have I said those words? I have lost count.

The prizes were led in first. Khar Dorian came with the tattooed boy. “There,” Khar said offhandedly, gesturing to a seat while smiling lasciviously for me, and the hard youth, this killer, this wild bloody tough, shrank away from his escort and took the place assigned to him. Braje, my biomed, brought the woman. They too are of a kind, pallid, overweight, soft. Braje giggled as she fastened the manacles about her complaisant charge. The hatchling fought, its lean muscles writhing, its great wings beating together in a dramatic but ultimately ineffectual thunderclap as huge, glowering Jonas and his men forced it down into its niche. As they manacled it into place, Khar Dorian grinned and the g'vhern made a high, thin whistling sound that hurt the ears.

Craimur Delhune had to be carried in by his aides and hirelings. “There,” I told them, pointing, and they propped him awkwardly into one of the niches. His shrunken, wizened face stared at me, half-blind eyes darting around the chamber like small, feral beasts, his mouth sucking greedily, as if his rebirth was done and he sought a mother's breast. He was blind to the mosaic; for him, it was only a dark room with black glass walls.

Rieseen Jay swaggered in, bored by my chamber before she even entered it. She saw the mosaic but gave it only a cursory glance, as something beneath her notice, too tiresome to study. Instead she made a slow circuit of the niches, inspecting each of the prizes like a butcher examining the meat. She lingered longest in front of the hatchling, seeming to delight in its struggles, its obvious fear, the way it hissed and whistled at her and glared from those fierce, bright eyes. She reached out to touch a wing, and leapt back, laughing, when the hatchling bit at her. Finally she took herself to a seat, where she sprawled languidly, waiting for the game to begin.

Finally Kleronomas.

He saw the mosaic at once, stopped, stared up at it, his crystalline eyes scanning slowly around the room, halting here and there again to study some fine detail. He paused so long that Rieseen Jay grew impatient, and snapped at him to take a seat. The cyborg studied her, metal face unreadable. “Quiet,” I said.

He finished his study of the dome, taking his own time, and only then seated himself in the final empty niche. The way he took his place was as if all the seats had been vacant and this was his choice, selected by him alone.

“Clear the room,” I commanded. Rannar bowed and gestured them out, Jonas and Braje and the others. Khar Dorian went last, and made a gesture at me as he took his leave. Meaning what? Good luck? Perhaps. I heard Rannar seal the door.

“Well?” demanded Rieseen Jay.

I gave her a look that silenced her. “You are all seated in the Siege Perilous,” I said. I always began with those words. No one ever understood. This time ... Kleronomas, perhaps. I watched the mask that was his face. Within the crystal of his eyes, I saw a slight shifting motion, and tried to find a meaning in it. “There are no rules in the game of mind. But I have rules, for when it is over, when you are back in my domain.

“Those of you who are here unwillingly, if you are strong enough to hold the flesh, you wear, it is yours forever. I give it to you freely. No prize plays more than once. Hold fast to your birthflesh and when it is done, Khar Dorian will take you back to the world he found you on and set you loose with a thousand standards and your freedom.

“Those players who find rebirth this day, who rise in strange flesh when this game is ended, remember that what you have won or lost is your own doing, and spare me your regrets and recriminations. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of this gaming, you may of course play again. If you have the price.

“One last warning. For all of you. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt more than anything you ever imagined.”

So saying, I began the game of mind. Once more.

* * * *

What can you say about pain?

Words can trace only the shadow of the thing itself. The reality of hard, sharp physical pain is like nothing else, and it is beyond language. The world is too much with us, day and night, but when we hurt, when we really hurt, the world melts and fades and becomes a ghost, a dim memory, a silly unimportant thing. Whatever ideals, dreams, loves, fears, and thoughts we might have had become ultimately unimportant. We are alone with our pain, it is the only force in the cosmos, the only thing of substance, the only thing that matters, and if the pain is bad enough and lasts long enough, if it is the sort of agony that goes on and on, then all the things that are our humanity melt before it and the proud sophisticated computer that is the human brain becomes capable of but a single thought:

Make it stop, make it STOP!

And if the pain does eventually stop, afterwards, with the passage of time, even the mind that has experienced it becomes unable to comprehend it, unable to remember how bad it truly was, unable to describe it so as to even approach the terrible truth of what it felt like when it was happening.

In the game of mind, the agony of the painfield is like no other pain, like nothing I have ever experienced.

The painfield does no harm to the body, leaves no marks, no scars, no injuries, no signs to its passing. It touches the mind directly with an agony beyond my power to express. How long does it last? A question for relativists. It lasts but the smallest part of a microsecond, and it lasts forever.

The Wisdoms of Dam Tullian are masters of a hundred different disciplines of mind and body, and they teach their acolytes a technique for isolating pain, dissociating from it, pushing it away and thus transcending it. I had been a Wisdom for half my life when I first played the game of mind. I used all I had been taught, all the tricks and truths I had mastered and learned to rely on. They were utterly useless. This was a pain that did not touch the body, a pain that did not race along the nerve paths, a pain that filled the mind so completely and so shatteringly that not even the smallest part of you was free to think or plan or meditate. The pain was you, and you were the pain. There was nothing to dissociate from, no cool sanctum of thought where you might retreat.

The painfield was infinite and eternal, and from that ceaseless and unthinkable agony there was only one sure surcease. It was the old one, the true one, the same balm that has been succor to billions of men and women, and even the smallest of the beasts of the field, since the beginning of time. Pain's dark lord. My enemy, my lover. Again, yet again, wanting only an end to suffering, I rushed to his black embrace.

Death took me, and the pain ended.

On a vast, echoey plain in a place beyond life, I waited for the others.

* * * *

Dim shadows taking form from the mists. Four, five, yes. Have we lost some of them? It would not surprise me. In three games out of four, a player finds his truth in death and seeks no further. This time? No. I see the sixth shape striding out of the writhing fog, we are all here, I look around myself once more, count three, four, five, six, seven, and me, me, eight.

Eight?

That's wrong, that's very wrong. I am dizzy, disoriented. Nearby someone is screaming. A little girl, sweet-faced, innocent, dressed in pastels and pretty gems. She does not know how she got here, she does not understand, her eyes are lost and childish and far too trusting, and the pain has woken her from a dreamdust languor to a strange land full of fear.

I raise a small, strong hand, gaze at the thick brown fingers, the patch of callous by my thumb, the blunt wide nails trimmed to the quick. I make a fist, a familiar gesture, and in my hand a mirror takes shape from the iron of my will and the quicksilver of my desire. Within its glittering depths I see a face. It is the face of a woman who is both hard and strong, with deep lines around her grey eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that has not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face. It gives me comfort now.

The mirror dissolves into smoke. The land, the sky, everything is shifting and uncertain. The sweet little girl is still screaming for her daddy. Some of the others are staring at me, lost. There is a young man, plain of face, his black hair swept back straight and feathered with color in a style that has not been the fashion on Gulliver for a century. His body looks soft, but in his eyes I see a hard edge that reminds me of Khar Dorian. Rieseën Jay seems stunned, wary, frightened, but still she is recognizably Rieseën Jay; whatever else might be said of her, she has a strong sense of who she is. Perhaps that will even be enough. The g'vherñ looms near her, far larger here than it seemed before, its body glistening with oil as it spreads demonic wings and begins to whip the fog into long grey ribbons. In the game of mind, it wears no manacles; Rieseën Jay looks long, and cowers away from it. So too does another player, a wispy grey shape covered by a blaze of tattoos, his face a pale blur with neither purpose nor definition. The little girl screams on and on. I turn away from them, leave them to their own devices, and face the final player.

A big man, his skin the color of polished ebony with a dark blue undertone where his long muscles flex as he stretches. He is naked. His jaw is square and heavy, jutting sharply forward. Long hair surrounds his face and falls past his shoulders, hair as white and crisp as fresh bedsheets, as white as the untouched snow of a world that men have never walked. As I watch him, his thick, dark penis stirs against his leg, swells, grows erect. He smiles at me. "Wisdom," he says.

Suddenly I'm naked too.

I frown, and now I wear an ornate suit of armor, overlapping plates of gilded duralloy, filigreed with forbidding runes, and beneath my arm is a matching antique helmet, festooned with a plume of bright feathers. "Joachim Kleronomas," I say. His penis grows and thickens until it is an absurd fat staff that presses hard against the flatness of his stomach. I cover it, and him, in a uniform from a history text, all black and silver, with the blue-green globe of Old Earth sewn on his right sleeve and twin silver galaxies swirling on his collar.

"No," he says, amused, "I never reached that rank," and the galaxies are gone, replaced by a circle of six silver stars. "And for most of my time, Wisdom, my allegiance was to Avalon, not Earth." His uniform is less martial, more functional, a simple grey-green jumpsuit with a black fabric belt and a pocket heavy with pens. Only the silver circle of stars remains. "There," he says.

"Wrong," I tell him. "Wrong still." And when I am done talking, only the uniform remains. Inside the cloth the flesh is gone, replaced by silver-metal mockery, a shining empty thing with a toaster for a head. But only for an instant. Then the man is back, frowning, unhappy.

"Cruel," he says to me. The hardness of his penis strains at the fabric of his crotch.

Behind him, the eighth man, the ghost who ought not be here, the misplaced phantom, makes a soft whispery sound, a sound like the rustling of dry dead leaves in a cold autumn wind.

He is a thin, shadowy thing, this intruder. I must look at him very hard to see him at all. He is much smaller than Kleronomas, and he gives the impression of being old and frail, though his flesh is so wispy, so insubstantial, that it is hard to be sure. He is a vision suggested by the random drift of the fog, perhaps, an echo dressed in faded white, but his eyes glow and shimmer and they are trapped and afraid. He reaches out to me. The flesh of his hand is translucent, pulled tightly over grey ancient bones.

I back away, uncertain. In the game of mind, the lightest touch can have a terrible reality.

Behind me I hear more screaming, the terrible wild sound of someone in an ecstasy of fear. I turn.

It has begun in earnest now. The players are seeking their prey. Craimur Delhune, young and vital and far more muscular than he was a moment ago, stands with a flaming sword in one hand, swinging it easily at the tattooed boy. The boy is on his knees, shrieking, trying to cover himself with upraised arms, but Delhune's bright blade passes through the grey shadowflesh unimpeded, and slices at the shining tattoos. He removes them from the boy surgically, swing by swing, and they drift upwards in the misty air, shining images of life cut free of the grey skin on which they were imprisoned. Delhune snatches them as they float by and swallows them whole. Smoke drifts from his nostrils and his open mouth. The boy screams and cringes. Soon there will be nothing left but shadow.

The hatchling has taken to the air. It circles above us, keening at us in its high, thin voice as its wings thunder.

Rieseen Jay has had second thoughts, it seems. She stands above the whimpering little girl, who grows less little with each passing moment. Jay is changing her. She is older now, fatter, her eyes just as frightened but far more vacant. Wherever she turns her head, mirrors appear and sing taunts at her with fat

wet lips. Her flesh swells and swells, tearing free of her poor, frayed clothing; thin lines of spittle run down her chin. She wipes at it, crying, but it only flows faster, and now it turns pink with blood. She is enormous, gross, revolting. "That's you," the mirrors say. "Don't look away. Look at yourself. You're not a little girl. Look, look, look. Aren't you pretty? Aren't you sweet? Look at you, look at you." Rieseem Jay folds her arms, smiles with satisfaction.

Kleronomas looks at me with cold judgment on his face. A band of black cloth wraps itself about my eyes. I blink, vanish it, glare at him. "I'm not blind," I say. "I see them. It is not my fight."

The fat woman is as large as a truck, as pale and soft as a maggot. She is naked and immense and with each blink of Jay's eye she grows more monstrous. Huge white breasts burst forth from her face, hands, thighs, and the brown meaty nipples open gaping mouths and began to sing. A thick green penis appears above her above her vagina, curls down, enters her. Cancers blossom on her skin like a field of dark flowers. And everywhere are the mirrors, blinking in and out, reflecting and distorting and enlarging, relentlessly showing her everything she is, documenting every grotesque fancy that Jay inflicts upon her. The fat woman is hardly human. From a mouth the size of my head, gumless and bleeding, she issues forth a sound like the wailing of the damned. Her flesh begins to smoke and tremble.

The cyborg points. All the mirrors explode.

The mist is full of daggers, shards of slivered glass flying everywhere. One comes at me and I make it gone. But the others, the others ... they curve like smart missiles, become an aerial flotilla, attack. Rieseem Jay is pierced in a thousand places, and the blood drips from her eyes, her breasts, her open mouth. The monster is a little girl again, crying.

"A moralist," I say to Kleronomas.

He ignores me, turns to look at Craimur Delhune and the shadow boy. Tattoos flame to new life upon the youth's skin, and in his hand a sword appears and takes fire. Delhune takes a step back, unnerved. The boy touches his flesh, mouths some silent oath, rises warily.

"An altruist," I say. "Giving succor to the weak."

Kleronomas turns. "I hold no brief with slaughter."

I laugh at him. "Maybe you're just saving them for yourself, cyborg. If not, you had better grow wings fast, before your prize flies away."

His face is cold. "My prize is in front of me," he says.

"Somehow I knew that," I reply, donning my plumed helmet. My armor is alive with golden highlights, my sword is a spear of light.

My armor is as black as the pit, and the designs worked upon it, black on black, are of spiders and snakes and human skulls and faces a-writhe with pain. My long straight silver sword turns to obsidian, and twists into a grotesquerie of barbs and hooks and cruel spikes. He has a sense of drama, this damned cyborg.

“No,” I say. “I will not be cast as evil.” I am gold and silver once more, shining, and my plumes are red and blue. “Wear the suit yourself if you like it so much.”

It stands before me, black and hideous, the helmet open on a grinning skull. Kleronomas sends it away. “I need no props,” he says. His grey-and-white ghost flitters at his side, plucking at him. Who is that? I wonder yet again.

“Fine,” I say. “Then we’ll dispense with the symbols.” My armor is gone. I hold out my bare, open hand. “Touch me,” I say. “Touch me, cyborg.” As his hand reaches out to mine, metal creeps up his long dark fingers.

* * * *

In the game of mind, even more than in life, image and metaphor are everything.

The place beyond time, the endless fog-shrouded plain, the cold sky and the uncertain earth beneath us, even that is illusion. It is mine, all of it, a setting - however unearthly, however surreal - against which the players may act out their tawdry dramas of dominance and submission, conquest and despair, death and rebirth, rape and mind-rape. Without my shaping, my vision and the visions of all the other painlords through the eons, they would have no ground below, no sky above, no place to set their feet, no feet to set. The reality offers not even the scant comfort of the barren landscape I give them. The reality is chaos, unendurable, outside of space and time, bereft of matter or energy, without measurement and therefore frighteningly infinite and suffocatingly claustrophobic, terribly eternal and achingly brief. In that reality the players are trapped; seven minds locked into a telepathic gestalt, into a congress so intimate it cannot be borne by most. And therefore they shrink away, and the very first things we create, in a place where we are gods (or devils, or both), are the bodies we have left behind. Within these walls of flesh we take our refuge and try to order chaos.

The blood has the taste of salt; but there is no blood, only illusion. The cup holds a black and bitter drink; but there is no cup, only an image. The wounds are open and raw, dripping anguish; but there are no wounds, no body to be wounded, only metaphor, symbol, conjuring. Nothing is real, and everything can hurt, can kill, can evoke a lasting madness.

To survive, the players must be resilient, disciplined, stable, and ruthless; they must possess a ready imagination, an extensive vocabulary of symbols, a certain amount of psychological insight. They must find the weakness in their opponent, and hide their own phobias thoroughly. The rules are simple. Believe in everything; believe in nothing. Hold tight to yourself and your sanity.

Even when they kill you, it has no meaning, unless you believe that you have died.

Upon this plain of illusion where these all-too-mutable bodies whirl and feint in a trite pavane that I have seen a thousand times before, plucking swords and mirrors and monsters from the air to throw at one another like jugglers gone mad, the most frightening thing of all is a simple touch.

The symbolism is direct, the meaning clear. Flesh upon flesh. Stripped of metaphor, stripped of protection, stripped of masks. Mind upon mind. When we touch, the walls are down.

Even time is illusory in the game of mind; it runs as fast, or as slow, as we desire.

I am Cyrain, I tell myself, born of Ash, far-traveled, a Wisdom of Dam Tullian, master of the game of mind, mistress of the obsidian castle, ruler of Croan'dhenni, mindlord, painlord, lifelord, whole and immortal and invulnerable. Enter me.

His fingers are cool and hard.

* * * *

I have played the game of mind before, have clasped hands with others who thought themselves strong. In their minds, in their souls, in them, I have seen things. In dark grey tunnels I have traced the graffiti of their ancient scars. The quicksand of their insecurities has clutched at my boots. I have smelled the rank odor of their fears, great swollen beasts who dwell in a palpable living darkness. I have burned my fingers on the hot flesh of lusts who will not speak a name. I have ripped the cloaks from their still, quiet secrets. And then I have taken it all, been them, lived their lives, drunk the cold draught of their knowledge, rummaged through their memories. I have been born a dozen times, have suckled at a dozen teats, have lost a dozen virginities, male and female.

Kleronomas was different.

I stood in a great cavern, alive with lights. The walls and floor and ceiling were translucent crystal, and all around me spires and cones and twisted ribbons rose bright and red and hard, cold to the touch yet alive, the soulsparks moving through them everywhere. A crystalline fairy city in a cave. I touched the nearest outcropping, and the memory flooded into me, the knowledge as clear and sharp and certain as the day it had been etched there. I turned and looked around with new eyes, now discerning rigid order where initially I had perceived only chaotic beauty. It was clean. It took my breath away. I looked everywhere for the vulnerability, the door of gangrenous flesh, the pool of blood, the place of weeping, the shuffling unclean thing that must live deep inside him, and I found nothing, nothing, nothing, only perfection, only the clean sharp crystal, so very red, glowing from within, growing, changing, yet eternal. I touched it once again, wrapping my hand about an outcropping that rose in front of me like a stalagmite. The knowledge was mine. I began to walk, touching, touching, drinking everywhere. Glass flowers bloomed on every side, fantastic scarlet blooms, fragile and beautiful. I took one and sniffed at it, but it had no scent. The perfection was daunting. Where was his weakness? Where was the hidden flaw in this diamond that would enable me to crack it with a single sharp blow?

Here within him there was no decay. Here there was no place for death. Here nothing lived.

It felt like home.

And then in front of me the ghost took form, grey and gaunt and unsteady. His bare feet sent up thin tendrils of smoke as they trod lightly on the gleaming crystals underneath, and I caught the scent of burning meat. And I smiled. The spectre haunted the crystal maze, but every touch meant pain and destruction. "Come here," I said. He looked at me. I could see the lights on the far side of the cavern through the haze of his uncertain flesh. He moved to me and I opened my arms to him, entered him, possessed him.

* * * *

I seated myself upon a balcony in the highest tower of my castle, and drank from a small cup of fragrant black coffee laded with brandy. The swamps were gone; instead I gazed upon mountains, hard and cold and clean. They rose blue-white all around me, and from the highest peak flew a plume of snow crystals caught in a steady endless wind. The wind cut through me, but I scarcely felt it. I was alone and at peace, and the coffee tasted good, and death was far away.

He walked out upon the balcony, and seated himself upon one of the parapets. His pose was casual, insolent, confident. "I know you," he said. It was the ultimate threat.

I was not afraid. "I know you," I said. "Shall I conjure up your ghost?"

"He will be here soon enough. He is never far from me."

"No," I said. I sipped my coffee, and let him wait. "I am stronger than you," I told him finally. "I can win the game, cyborg. You were wrong to challenge me."

He said nothing.

I set down my cup, drained and empty, passed my hand across it, smiled as my glass flower grew and spread its colorless transparent petals. A broken rainbow crawled across the table.

He frowned. Color crept into my flower. It softened and drooped, the rainbow was banished. "The other was not real," he said. "A glass flower is not alive."

I held up his rose, pointed at the broken stem. "This flower is dying," I said. In my hands, it became glass once again. "A glass flower lasts forever."

He transmuted the glass back to living tissue. He was stubborn, I will say that for him. "Even dying, it lives."

"Look at its imperfections," I said. I pointed them out, one by one. "Here an insect has gnawed upon it. Here a petal has grown malformed, here, these dark splotches, those are blight, here the wind has bent it. And look what I can do." I took the largest, prettiest petal between thumb and forefinger, ripped it off, fed it to the wind. "Beauty is no protection. Life is terribly vulnerable. And ultimately, all of it ends like this." In my hand, the flower turned brown and shriveled and began to rot. Worms festered upon it briefly, and foul black fluids ran from it, and then it was dust. I crumpled it, blew it away, and from behind his ear I plucked another flower. Glass.

"Glass is hard," he said, "and cold."

"Warmth is a byproduct of decay, the stepchild of entropy." I told him.

Perhaps he would have replied, but we were no longer alone. Over the crenellated edge of the parapets the ghost came crawling, pulling himself up with frail grey-white hands that left bloody stains upon the purity of my stone. He stared at us wordlessly, a half-transparent whispering in white. Kleronomas averted his eyes.

"Who is he?" I ask.

The cyborg could not answer.

“Do you even remember his name?” I asked him. He replied with silence, and I laughed at them both.

“Cyborg, you judged me, found my morality suspect, my actions tainted, but whatever I might be, I am nothing to you. I steal their bodies. You've taken his mind. Haven't you? Haven't you?”

“I never meant to,” he said.

“Joachim Kleronomas died on Avalon seven hundred years ago, just as they say he did. Steel and plastic he might wear, but inside he was still rotting flesh, even at the end, and with all flesh there comes a time when the cells die. A thin flat line on a machine, glowing in the darkness, and an empty metal shell. The end of a legend. What did they do then? Scoop out the brain and bury it beneath some oversized monument? No doubt.” The coffee was strong and sweet; here it never grew lukewarm, because my will did not permit it. “But they did not bury the machine, did they? That expensive, sophisticated cybernetic organism, the library computer with its wealth of knowledge, the crystal matrix with all its frozen memories. All that was too valuable to discard. The good scientists of Avalon kept it in an interface with the Academy's main system, correct? How many centuries passed before one of them decided to don that cyborg body again, and keep his own death at bay?”

“Less than one,” the cyborg said. “Less than fifty standard years.”

“He should have erased you,” I said. “But why? His brain would be riding the machine, after all. Why deny himself access to all that marvelous knowledge, why destroy those crystallized memories? Why, when he could savor them instead? How much better to have a whole second lifetime at his disposal, to be able to access wisdom he had never earned, recollect places he had never been and people he had never met.” I shrugged, and looked at the ghost. “Poor stupid thing. If you'd ever played the game of mind, you might have understood.”

What can the mind be made of, if not memories? Who are we, after all? Only who we think we are, no more, no less.

Etch your memories on diamond, or on a block of rancid meat, those are the choices. Bit by bit the flesh must die, and give way to steel and metal. Only the diamond memories survive to drive the body. In the end no flesh remains, and the echoes of lost memories are ghostly scratchings on the crystal.

“He forgot who he was,” the cyborg said. “I forgot who I was, rather. I began to think ... he began to think he was me.” He looked up at me, his eyes locked on mine. They were red crystal, those eyes, and behind them I could see a glow. His skin was taking on a hard, polished sheen, silvering as I watched. And this time he was doing it himself. “You have your own weaknesses,” he said, pointing.

Where it curls about the handle of my coffee cup, my hand has grown black, and spotted with corruption. I could smell the decay. Flesh began to flake off, and beneath I saw the bloody bone, bleaching to grim whiteness. Death crept up my bare arm, inexorably. I suppose it was meant to fill me with horror. It only filled me with disgust.

“No,” I said. My arm was whole and healthy. “No,” I repeated, and now I was metal, silver-bright and undying, eyes like opals, glass flowers twined through platinum hair. I could see my reflection gleaming

upon the polished jet of his chest; I was beautiful. Perhaps he could see himself as well, mirrored in my chrome, for just then he turned his head away.

He seemed so strong, but on Croan'dhenni, in my castle of obsidian, in this house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, things are not always as they seem.

“Cyborg,” I said to him, “you are lost.”

“The other players,” he began.

“No.” I pointed. “He will stand between you and any victim you might choose. Your ghost. Your guilt. He will not allow it. You will not allow it.”

The cyborg could not look at me. “Yes,” in a voice tainted by metal and corroded by despair.

“You will live forever,” I said.

“No. I will go on forever. It is different, Wisdom. I can tell you the precise temperature reading of any environment, but I cannot feel heat or cold, can see into the infrared and the ultraviolet, can magnify my sensors to count every pore on your skin, but I am blind to what I think must be your beauty. I desire life, real life, with the seed of death growing inexorably within it, and therefore giving it meaning.”

“Good,” I said, satisfied.

He finally looked at me. Trapped in that shining metal face were two pale, lost, human eyes. “Good?”

“I make my own meaning, cyborg, and life is the enemy of death, not its mother. Congratulations. You've won. And so have I.” I rose and reached across the table, plunged my hand through the cold black chest, and ripped the crystal heart from his breast. I held it up and it shone, brighter and brighter, its scarlet rays dancing brilliantly upon the cold dark mountains of my mind.

* * * *

I opened my eyes.

No, incorrect; I activated my sensors once again, and the scene in the chamber of change came into focus with a clarity and sharpness I had never experienced. My obsidian mosaic, black against black, was now a hundred different shades, each distinct from the others, the pattern crisp and clear. I was seated in a niche along the rim; in the center cup, the child-woman stirred and blinked large violet eyes. The door opened and they came to her, Rannar solicitous, Khar Dorian aloof, trying to conceal his curiosity, Braje giggling as she gave her shots.

“No,” I announced to them. My voice was too deep, too male. I adjusted it. “No, here,” I said, sounding more like myself.

Their stares were like the cracking of whips.

* * * *

In the game of mind, there are winners and there are losers.

The cyborg's interference had its effects, perhaps. Or perhaps not, perhaps before the game was over, the pattern would have been the same. Craimur Delhune is dead; they gave his corpse to the swamps last evening. But the vacancy is gone from the eyes of the pudgy young dreamduster, and she is dieting and exercising even now, and when Khar Dorian leaves, he will take her back to Delhune's estates on Gulliver.

Rieseën Jay complains that she was cheated. I believe she will linger here, outside, in the city of the damned. No doubt that will cure her boredom. The g'hvern struggles to speak and has painted elaborate symbols on its wings. The tattooed boy leapt from the castle battlements a few hours after his return, and impaled himself upon the jagged obsidian spikes far below, flapping his arms until the last instant. Wings and fierce eyes do not equate with strength.

A new mindlord has begun to reign. She has commanded them to start on a new castle, a structure shaped from living woods, its foundations rooted deep in the swamps, its exterior covered with vines and flowers and other living things. "You will get insects," I have warned her, "parasites and stinging flies, miner-worms in the wood, blight in your foundation, rot in your walls. You will have to sleep with netting over your bed. You will have to kill, constantly, day and night. Your wooden castle will swim in a miasma of little deaths, and in a few years the ghosts of a million insects will swarm your halls by night."

"Nonetheless," she says, "my home will be warm and alive, where yours was cold and brittle." We all have our symbols, I suppose.

And our fears.

"Erase him," she has warned me. "Blank the crystal, or in time he will consume you, and you will become another ghost in the machine."

"Erase him?" I might have laughed, if the mechanism permitted laughter. I can see right through her.

Her soul is scrawled upon that soft, fragile face. I can count her pores and note each flicker of doubt in the pupils of those violet eyes. "Erase me, you mean. The crystal is home to us both, child. Besides, I do not fear him. You miss the point. Kleronomas was crystal, the ghost organic meat, the outcome inevitable. My case is different. I am as crystalline as he is, and just as eternal."

"Wisdom?" she began.

"Wrong," I said.

"Cyrain, if you prefer"

"Wrong again. Call me Kleronomas." I have been many things through my long and varied lives, but I have never been a legend. It has a certain cachet.

The little girl looked at me. "I am Kleronomas," she said in a high sweet voice, her eyes baffled.

"Yes," I said, "and no. Today we are both Kleronomas. We have lived the same lives, done the same things, stored the same memories. But from this day on, we walk different paths. I am steel and crystal,

and you are childflesh. You wanted life, you said. Embrace it, it's yours, and all that goes with it. Your body is young and healthy, just beginning to blossom, your years will be long and full. Today you think you are still Kleronomas. And tomorrow?

“Tomorrow you will learn about lust again, and open your little thighs to Khar Dorian, and shudder and cry out as he rides you to orgasm. Tomorrow you will bear children in blood and pain, and watch them grow and age and bear children of their own, and die. Tomorrow you will ride through the swamps and the dispossessed will toss you gifts, and curse you, and praise you, and pray to you. Tomorrow new players will arrive, begging for bodies, for rebirth, for another chance, and tomorrow Khar's ships will land with a new load of prizes, and all your moral certainties will be tested, and tested again, and twisted to new shapes. Tomorrow Khar and Jonas or Sebastien Cayle will decide that they have waited long enough, and you'll taste the honeyed treason of their kiss, and perhaps you'll win, or perhaps you'll lose. There's no certainty to it. But there's one sure thing I can promise. On the day after tomorrow, long years from now though they will not seem long once passed, death will begin to grow inside you. The seed is already planted. Perhaps it will be some disease blooming in one of those small sweet breasts Rannar would so dearly love to suckle, perhaps a fine thin wire pulled tight across your throat as you sleep, perhaps a sudden solar flare that will burn this planet clean. It will come, though, and sooner than you think.”

“I accept it,” she said. She smiled as she spoke; I think she really meant it. “All of it, every part. Life and death. I have been without it for a long time, Wis- Kleronomas.”

“Already you're forgetting things,” I observed. “Every day you will lose more. Today we both remember. We remember the crystal caverns of Eris, the first ship we ever served on, the lines of our father's face. We remember what Tomas Chung said when we decided not to turn back to Avalon, and the other words he said as he lay dying. We remember the last woman we ever made love to, the shape and smell of her, the taste of her breasts, the noises she made when we pleased her. She's been dead and gone eight hundred years, but she lives in our memories. But she's dying in yours, isn't she? Today you are Kleronomas. Yet I am him as well, and I am Cyrain of Ash, and a small part of me is still our ghost, poor sad man. But when tomorrow comes, I'll hold tight to all I am, and you, you'll be the mindlord, or perhaps just a sex-slave in some perfumed brothel on Cymeranth, or a scholar on Avalon, but in any case a different person than you are now.”

She understood; she accepted. “So you'll play the game of mind forever,” she said, “and I will never die.”

“You will die,” I pointed out. “Most certainly. Kleronomas is immortal.”

“And Cyrain of Ash.”

“Her too. Yes.”

“What will you do?” she asked me.

I went to the window. The glass flower was there, in its simple wooden vase, its petals refracting the light. I looked up at the source of that light, the brilliant sun of Croan'dhenni burning in the clear midday sky. I could look straight into it now, could focus on the sunspots and the flaming towers of its prominences. I

made a small conscious adjustment to the crystal lenses of my eyes, and the empty sky was full of stars, more stars than I had ever seen before, more stars than I could possibly have imagined.

“Do?” I said, still gazing up at those secret starfields, visible to me alone. They brought to mind my obsidian mosaic. “There are worlds I’ve never been to,” I told my sister-twin, father, daughter, enemy, mirror-image, whatever she was. “There are things I don’t yet know, stars that even now I cannot see. What will I do? Everything. To begin with, everything.”

As I spoke, a fat striped insect flew through the open window on six gossamer wings that trilled the air too fast for human sight, though I could count every languid beat if I so chose. It landed briefly on my glass flower, found neither scent nor pollen, and slipped back outside. I watched it go, growing smaller and smaller, dwindling in the distance, until at last I had telescoped my vision to the maximum, and the small dying bug was lost among the swamps and stars.

The Stone City

The crossworlds had a thousand names. Human starcharts listed it as Grayrest, when they listed it at all—which was seldom, for it lay a decade's journey inward from the realms of men. The Dan'lai named it Empty in their high, barking tongue. To the ul-mennaleith, who had known it longest, it was simply the world of the stone city. The Kresh had a word for it, as did the Linkellar, and the Cedrans, and other races had landed there and left again, so other names lingered on. But mostly it was the crossworlds to the beings who paused there briefly while they jumped from star to star.

It was a barren place, a world of gray oceans and endless plains where the windstorms raged. But for the spacefield and the stone city, it was empty and lifeless. The field was at least five thousand years old, as men count time. The ul-nayileith had built it in the glory days when they claimed the ullish stars, and for a hundred generations it had made the crossworlds theirs. But then the ul-nayileith had faded and the ul-mennaleith had come to fill up their worlds, and now the elder race was remembered only in legends and prayers.

Yet their spacefield endured, a great pockmark on the plains, circled by the towering windwalls that the vanished engineers had built against the storms. Inside the high walls lay the port city—hangars and barracks and shops where tired beings from a hundred worlds could rest and be refreshed. Outside, to the west, nothing; the winds came from the west, battering against the walls with a fury soon drained and used for power. But the eastern walls had a second city in their shadows, an open-air city of plastic bubbles and metal shacks. There huddled the beaten and the outcast and the sick; there clustered the shipless.

Beyond that, further east: the stone city.

It had been there when the ul-nayileith had come, five thousand years before. They had never learned how long it stood against the winds, or why. The ullish elders were arrogant and curious in those days, it was said, and they had searched. They walked the twisting alleys, climbed the narrow stairs, scaled the close-set towers and the square-topped pyramids. They found the endless dark passageways that wove mazelike beneath the earth. They discovered the vastness of the city, found all the dust and awesome silence. But nowhere did they find the Builders.

Finally, strangely, a weariness had come upon the ul-nayileith, and with it a fear. They had withdrawn from the stone city, never to walk its halls again. For thousands of years the stone was shunned, and the worship of the Builders was begun. And so too had begun the long decline of the elder race.

But the ul-mennaleith worship only the ul-nayileith. And the Dan'lai worship nothing. And who knows what humans worship? So now, again, there were sounds in the stone city; footfalls rode the alley winds.

* * * *

The skeletons were imbedded in the wall.

They were mounted above the windwall gates in no particular pattern, one short of a dozen, half sunk in the seamless ullish metal and half exposed to the crossworlds wind. Some were in deeper than others. High up, the new skeleton of some nameless winged being rattled in the breeze, a loose bag of hollow

fairy bones welded to the wall only at wrists and ankles. Yet lower, up and to the right a little from the doorway, the yellow barrel-stave ribs of a Linkellar were all that could be seen of the creature.

MacDonald's skeleton was half in, half out. Most of the limbs were sunk deep in the metal, but the fingertips dangled out (one hand still holding a laser), and the feet, and the torso was open to the air. And the skull, of course—bleached white, half crushed, but still a rebuke. It looked down at Holt every dawn as he passed through the portal below. Sometimes, in the curious half-light of an early crossworlds morning, it seemed as though the missing eyes followed him on his long walk toward the gate.

But that had not bothered Holt for months. It had been different right after they had taken MacDonald, and his rotting body had suddenly appeared on the windwall, half joined to the metal. Holt could smell the stench then, and the corpse had been too recognizably Mac. Now it was just a skeleton, and that made it easier for Holt to forget.

On that anniversary morning, the day that marked the end of the first full standard year since the Pegasus had set down, Holt passed below the skeletons with hardly an upward glance.

Inside, as always, the corridor stood deserted. It curved away in both directions, white, dusty, very vacant; thin blue doors stood at regular intervals, but all of them were closed.

Holt turned to the right and tried the first door, pressing his palm to the entry plate. Nothing; the office was locked. He tried the next, with the same result. And then the next. Holt was methodical. He had to be. Each day only one office was open, and each day it was a different one.

The seventh door slid open at his touch.

Behind a curving metal desk a single Dan'la sat, looking out of place. The room, the furniture, the field—everything had been built to the proportions of the long-departed ul-nayileith, and the Dan'la was entirely too small for its setting. But Holt had gotten used to it. He had come every day for a year now, and every day a single Dan'la sat behind a desk. He had no idea whether it was the same one changing offices daily, or a different one each day. All of them had long snouts and darting eyes and bristling reddish fur. The humans called them foxmen. With rare exceptions, Holt could not tell one from the other. The Dan'lai would not help him. They refused to give names, and the creature behind the desk sometimes recognized him, often did not. Holt had long since given up the game, and resigned himself to treating every Dan'la as a stranger.

This morning, though, the foxman knew him at once. “Ah,” he said as Holt entered. “A berth for you?”

“Yes,” Holt said. He removed the battered ship's cap that matched his frayed gray uniform, and he waited—a thin, pale man with receding brown hair and a stubborn chin.

The foxman interlocked slim, six-fingered hands and smiled a swift thin smile. “No berth, Holt,” he said. “Sorry. No ship today.”

“I heard a ship last night,” Holt said. “I could hear it all the way over in the stone city. Get me a berth on it. I'm qualified. I know standard drive, and I can run a Dan'lai jump-gun. I have credentials.”

“Yes, yes.” Again the snapping smile. “But there is no ship. Next week, perhaps. Next week perhaps a man-ship will come. Then you'll have a berth, Holt, I swear it, I promise you. You a good jump man, right? You tell me. I get you a berth. But next week, next week. No ship now.”

Holt bit his lip and leaned forward, spreading his hands on the desktop, the cap crushed beneath one fist. “Next week you won't be here,” he said. “Or if you are, you won't recognize me, won't remember anything you promised. Get me a berth on the ship that came last night.”

“Ah,” said the Dan'la. “No berth. Not a man-ship, Holt. No berth for a man.”

“I don't care. I'll take any ship. I'll work with Dan'lai, ullies, Cedrans, anything. Jumps are all the same. Get me on the ship that came in last night.”

“But there was no ship, Holt,” the foxman said. His teeth flashed, then were gone again. “I tell you, Holt. No ship, no ship. Next week, come back. Come back, next week.” There was dismissal in his tone. Holt had learned to recognize it. Once, months ago, he'd stayed and tried to argue. But the desk-fox had summoned others to drag him away. For a week afterward, all the doors had been locked in the mornings. Now Holt knew when to leave.

Outside in the wan light, he leaned briefly against the windwall and tried to still his shaking hands. He must keep busy, he reminded himself. He needed money, food tokens, so that was one task he could set to. He could visit the Shed, maybe look up Sunderland. As for a berth, there was always tomorrow. He had to be patient.

With a brief glance up at MacDonald, who had not been patient, Holt went off down the vacant streets of the city of the shipless.

* * * *

Even as a child, Holt had loved the stars. He used to walk at night, during the years of high cold when the iceforests bloomed on Ymir. Straight out he would go, for kilometers, crunching the snow beneath until the lights of town were lost behind him and he stood alone in the glistening blue-white wonderland of frost-flowers and icewebs and bitterblooms. Then he would look up.

WinterYear nights on Ymir are clear and still and very black. There is no moon. The stars and the silence are everything.

Diligent, Holt had learned the names—not the starnames (no one named the stars any more—numbers were all that was needed), but rather the names of the worlds that swung around each. He was a bright child. He learned quickly and well, and even his gruff, practical father found a certain pride in that. Holt remembered endless parties at the Old House when his father, drunk on summerbrew, would march all his guests out onto the balcony so his son could name the worlds. “There,” the old man would say, holding a mug in one hand and pointing with the other, “there, that bright one!”

“Arachne,” the boy would reply, blank-faced. The guests would smile and mutter politely. “And there?”

“Baldur.”

“There. There. Those three over there.”

“Finnegan. Johnhenry. Celia's World, New Rome, Cathaday.” The names skipped lightly off his youthful tongue. And his father's leathery face would crinkle in a smile, and he would go on and on until the others grew bored and restive and Holt had named all the worlds a boy could name standing on a balcony of the Old House on Ymir. He had always hated the ritual.

It was a good thing that his father had never come with him off into the iceforests, for away from the lights a thousand new stars could be seen, and that meant a thousand names to know. Holt never learned them all, the names that went with the dimmer, far-off stars that were not man's. But he learned enough. The pale stars of the Damoosh inwards toward the core, the reddish sun of the Silent Centaurs, the scattered lights where the Fyndii hordes raised their emblem-sticks; these he knew, and more.

He continued to come as he grew older, not always alone now. All his youthful sweethearts he dragged out with him, and he made his first love in the starlight during a SummerYear when the trees dripped flowers instead of ice. Sometimes he talked about it with lovers, with friends. But the words came hard. Holt was never eloquent, and he could not make them understand. He scarcely understood himself.

After his father died, he took over the Old House and the estates and ran them for a long WinterYear, though he was only twenty standard. When the thaw came, he left it all and went to Ymir City. A ship was down, a trader bound for Finnegan and worlds further in.

Holt found a berth.

* * * *

The streets grew busier as the day aged. Already the Dan'lai were out, setting up food stalls between the huts. In an hour or so the streets would be lined with them. A few gaunt ul-mennaleith were also about, traveling in groups of four or five. They all wore powder-blue gowns that fell almost to the ground, and they seemed to flow rather than walk—eerie, dignified, wraithlike. Their soft gray skin was finely powdered, their eyes were liquid and distant. Always they seemed serene, even these, these sorry shipless ones.

Holt fell in behind a group of them, increasing his pace to keep up. The fox merchants ignored the solemn ul-mennaleith, but they all spied Holt and called out to him as he passed. And laughed their high, barking laughs when he ignored them.

Near the Cedran neighborhoods Holt took his leave of the ullies, darting into a tiny side street that seemed deserted. He had work to do, and this was the place to do it.

He walked deeper into the rash of yellowed bubble-huts and picked one almost at random. It was old, its plastic exterior heavily polished; the door was wood, carved with nest symbols. Locked, of course—Holt put his shoulder to it and pushed. When it held firm, he retreated a bit, then ran and crashed against it. On his fourth try it gave noisily. The noise didn't bother him. In a Cedran slum, no one would hear.

Pitch-dark inside. He felt near the door and found a coldtorch, touched it until it returned his body heat as light. Then, leisurely, he looked around.

There were five Cedrans present: three adults and two younglings, all curled up into featureless balls on the floor. Holt hardly gave them a glance. By night, the Cedrans were terrifying. He'd seen them many times on the darkened streets of the stone city, moaning in their soft speech and swaying sinister. Their segmented torsos unfolded into three meters of milk-white maggotflesh, and they had six specialized limbs; two wide-splayed feet, a pair of delicate branching tentacles for manipulation, and the wicked fighting-claws. The eyes, saucer-sized pools of glowing violet, saw everything. By night, Cedrans were beings to be avoided.

By day, they were immobile balls of meat.

Holt walked around them and looted their hut. He took a hand-held coldtorch, set low to give the murky purple half-light the Cedrans liked best, plus a sack of food tokens and a clawhone. The polished, jeweled fighting-claws of some illustrious ancestor sat in an honored place on the wall, but Holt was careful not to touch them. If their family god was stolen, the entire nest would be obliged to find the thief or commit suicide.

Finally he found a set of wizard-cards, smoke-dark wooden plaques inlaid with iron and gold. He shoved them in a pocket and left. The street was still empty. Few beings visited the Cedran districts save Cedrans.

Quickly Holt found his way back to the main thoroughfare, the wide gravel path that ran from the windwalls of the spacefield to the silent gates of the stone city five kilometers away. The street was crowded and noisy now, and Holt had to push his way through the throng. Foxmen were everywhere, laughing and barking, snapping their quick grins on and off, rubbing reddish brown fur up against the blue gowns of the ul-mennaleith, the chitinous Kresh, and the loose baggy skin of the pop-eyed green Linkellars. Some of the food stalls had hot meals to offer, and the ways were heavy with smokes and smells. Holt had been months on the crossworlds before he had finally learned to distinguish the food scents from the body odors.

As he fought his way down the street, dodging in and out among the aliens with his loot clutched tightly in his hand, Holt watched carefully. It was habit now, drilled into him; he looked constantly for an unfamiliar human face, the face that might mean a man-ship was in, that salvation had come.

He did not find one. As always, there was only the milling press of the crossworlds all around him—Dan'lai barks and Kresh clickings and the ululating speech of the Linkellars, but never a human voice. By now, it had ceased to affect him.

He found the stall he was looking for. From beneath a flap of gray leather, a frazzled Dan'la looked up at him. “Yes, yes,” the foxman snapped impatiently. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Holt shoved aside the multicolored blinking-jewels that were strewn over the counter and put down the coldtorch and clawhone he had taken. “Trade,” he said. “These for tokens.”

The foxman looked down at the goods, up at Holt, and began to rub his snout vigorously. “Trade. Trade. A trade for you,” he chanted. He picked up the clawhone, tossed it from one hand to the other, set it down again, touched the coldtorch to wake it to barely perceptible life. Then he nodded and turned on his grin. “Good stuff. Cedran. The big worms will want it. Yes. Yes. Trade, then. Tokens?”

Holt nodded.

The Dan'la fumbled in the pocket of the smock he was wearing, and tossed a handful of food tokens on the counter. They were bright disks of plastic in a dozen different colors, the nearest things to currency the crossworlds had. The Dan'lai merchants honored them for food. And the Dan'lai brought in all the food there was on their fleets of jump-gun spacers.

Holt counted the tokens, then scooped them up and threw them in the sack that he'd taken from the Cedran bubble-hut. “I have more,” he said, reaching into his pocket for the wizard-cards.

His pocket was empty. The Dan'la grinned and snapped his teeth together. “Gone? Not the only thief on Empty, then. No. Not the only thief.”

* * * *

He remembered his first ship; he remembered the stars of his youth on Ymir, he remembered the worlds he'd touched since, he remembered all the ships he'd served on and the men (and not-men) he had served with. But better than any of them he remembered his first ship: the Laughing Shadow (an old name heavy with history, but no one told him the story until much later), out of Celia's World and bound for Finnegan. It was a converted ore freighter, a great blue-gray teardrop of pitted duralloy that was at least a century older than Holt was. Sparse and raw—big cargo holds and not much crew space, sleep-webs for the twelve who manned it, no gravity grid (he'd gotten used to free fall quickly), nukes for landing and lifting, and a standard FTL drive for the star-shifts. Holt was set to working in the drive room, an austere place of muted lights and bare metal and computer consoles. Cain narKarmian showed him what to do.

Holt remembered narKarmian too. An old, old man, too old for shipwork he would have thought; skin like soft yellow leather that has been folded and wrinkled so many times that there is nowhere a piece of it without a million tiny creases, eyes brown and almond-shaped, a mottled bald head and a wispy blond goatee. Sometimes Cain seemed senile, but most often he was sharp and alert; he knew the drives, and he knew the stars, and he would talk incessantly as he worked.

“Two hundred standard years!” he said once as they both sat before their consoles. He smiled a shy, crooked smile, and Holt saw that he still had teeth, even at his age—or perhaps he had teeth again. “That's how long Cain's been shipping, Holt. The very truth! You know, your regular man never leaves the very world he's born on. Never! Ninety-five per cent of them, anyway. They never leave, just get born and grow up and die, all on the same world. And the ones that do ship—well, most of them ship only a little. A world or two or ten. Not me! You know where I was born, Holt? Guess!”

Holt shrugged. “Old Earth?”

Cain had just laughed. “Earth? Earth's nothing, only three or four years out from here. Four, I think. I forget. No, no, but I've seen Earth, the very homeworld, the seeding place. Seen it fifty years ago on the—the Corey Dark, I'd guess it was. It was about time, I thought. I'd been shipping a hundred fifty standard even then, and I still hadn't been to Earth. But I finally got there!”

“You weren't born there?” Holt prompted.

Old Cain shook his head and laughed again. “Not very! I'm an Emereli. From ai-Emerel. You know it, Holt?”

Holt had to think. It was not a world-name he recognized, not one of the stars his father had pointed to, aflame in the night of Ymir. But it rang a bell, dimly. “The Fringe?” he guessed finally. The Fringe was the furthest out-edge of human space, the place where the small sliver of the galaxy they called the manrealm had brushed the top of the galactic lens, where the stars grew thin. Ymir and the stars he knew were on the other side of Old Earth, inward toward the denser starfields and the still-unreachable core.

Cain was happy at his guess. “Yes! I'm an outworlder. I'm near to two hundred and twenty standard, and I've seen near that many worlds now, human worlds and Hrangan and Fyndii and all sorts, even some worlds in the manrealm where the men aren't men any more, if you understand what I'm saying. Shipping, always shipping. Whenever I found a place that looked interesting I'd skip ship and stay a time, then go on when I wanted to. I've seen all sorts of things, Holt. When I was young I saw the Festival of the Fringe, and hunted banshee on High Kavalaan, and got a wife on Kimdiss. She died, though, and I got on. Saw Prometheus and Rhiannon, which are in a bit from the Fringe, and Jamison's

World and Avalon, which are in further still. You know. I was a Jamie for a bit, and on Avalon I got three wives.

And two husbands, or co-husbands, or however you say it. I was still shy of a hundred then, maybe less. That was a time when we owned our own ship, did local trading, hit some of the old Hrangan slaveworlds that have gone off their own ways since the war. Even Old Hranga itself, the very place.

They say there are still some Minds on Hranga, deep underground, waiting to come back and attack the manrealm again. But all I ever saw was a lot of kill-castes and workers and the other lesser types.”

He smiled. “Good years, Holt, very good years. We called our ship Jamison's Ass. My wives and my husbands were all Avalonians, you see, except for one who was Old Poseidon, and Avalonians don't like Jamies much, which is how we arrived at that very name. But I can't say that they were wrong. I was a Jamie too, before that, and Port Jamison is a stultly priggish town on a planet that's the same.

“We were together nearly thirty standard on Jamison's Ass. The marriage outlasted two wives and one husband. And me too, finally. They wanted to keep Avalon as their trade base, you see, but after thirty I'd seen all the worlds I wanted to see around there, and I hadn't seen a lot else. So I shipped on. But I loved them, Holt, I did love them. A man should be married to his shipmates. It makes for a very good feeling.” He sighed. “Sex comes easier too. Less uncertainty.”

By then, Holt was caught. “Afterward,” he asked, his young face showing only a hint of the envy he felt, “what did you do then?”

Cain had shrugged, looked down at his console, and started to punch the glowing studs to set in a drive correction. “Oh, shipped on, shipped on. Old worlds, new worlds, man, not-man, aliens. New Refuge and Pachacuti and burnt-out old Wellington, and then Newholme and Silversky and Old Earth. And now I'm going in, as far as I can go before I die. Like Tomo and Walberg, I guess. You know about Tomo and Walberg, in here at Ymir?”

And Holt had only nodded. Even Ymir knew about Tomo and Walberg. Tomo was an outworlder too, born on Darkdawn high atop the Fringe, and they say he was a darkling dreamer. Walberg was an Altered Man from Prometheus, a roistering adventurer according to the legend. Three centuries ago, in a ship called the Dreaming Whore, they had set off from Darkdawn for the opposite edge of the galaxy. How many worlds they had visited, what had happened on each, how far they had gotten before death—those were the knots in the tale, and schoolboys disputed them still. Holt liked to think that they were still out there, somewhere. After all, Walberg had said he was a superman, and there was no telling how long a superman might live. Maybe even long enough to reach the core, or beyond.

He had been staring at the console, daydreaming, and Cain had grinned over at him and said, “Hey! Starsick!” And when Holt had started and looked up, the old man nodded (still smiling), saying, “Yes, you, the very one! Set to, Holt, or you won't be shipping nowhere!”

But it was a gentle rebuke, and a gentle smile, and Holt never forgot it or Cain narKarmian's other words. Their sleep-webs were next to each other and Holt listened every night, for Cain was hard to silence and Holt was not about to try. And when the Laughing Shadow finally hit Cathaday, as far in as it would go, and got ready to turn back into the manrealm towards Celia's World and home, Holt and narKarmian signed off together and got berths on a mailship that was heading for Vess and the alien Damoosh suns.

They had shipped together for six years when narKarmian finally died. Holt remembered the old man's face much better than his father's.

* * * *

The Shed was a long, thin, metal building, a corrugated shack of blue duralloy that someone had found in the stores of a looted freighter, probably. It was built kilometers from the windwall, within sight of the gray walls of the stone city and the high iris of the Western Door. Around it were other, larger metal buildings, the warehouse-barracks of the shipless ul-mennaleith. But there were no ullies inside, ever.

It was near noon when Holt arrived, and the Shed was almost empty. A wide columnar coldtorch reached from floor to ceiling in the center of the room, giving off a tired ruddy light that left most of the deserted tables in darkness. A party of muttering Linkellars filled a corner off in the shadows; opposite them, a fat Cedran was curled up in a tight sleep-ball, his slick white skin glistening. And next to the coldtorch pillar, at the old Pegasus table, Alaina and Takker-Rey were sharing a white stone flask of amberlethe.

Takker spied him at once. "Look," he said, raising his glass. "We have company, Alaina. A lost soul returns! How are things in the stone city, Michael?"

Holt sat down. "The same as always, Takker. The same as always." He forced a smile for bloated, pale-faced Takker, then quickly turned to Alaina. She had worked the jump-gun with him once, a year ago and more. And they had been lovers, briefly. But that was over. Alaina had put on weight and her long auburn hair was dirty and matted. Her green eyes used to spark; now amberlethe made them dull and cloudy.

Alaina favored him with a pudgy smile. "Lo, Michael," she said. "Have you found your ship?"

Takker-Rey giggled, but Holt ignored him. "No," he said. "But I keep going. Today the foxman said there'd be a ship in next week. A man-ship. He promised me a berth."

Now both of them giggled. "Oh, Michael," Alaina said. "Silly, silly. They used to tell me that. I haven't gone for so long. Don't you go, either. I'll take you back. Come up to my room. I miss you. Tak is such a bore."

Takker frowned, hardly paying attention. He was intent on pouring himself a new glass of amberlethe. The liquor flowed with agonizing slowness, like honey. Holt remembered the taste of it, gold fire on his tongue, and the easy sense of peace it brought. They had all done a lot of drinking in the early weeks, while they waited for the Captain to return. Before things fell apart.

"Have some 'lethe," Takker said. "Join us."

"No," Holt said. "Maybe a little fire brandy, Takker, if you're buying. Or a foxbeer. Summerbrew, if there's some handy. I miss summerbrew. But no 'lethe. That's why I went away, remember?"

Alaina gasped suddenly; her mouth drooped open and something flickered in her eyes. "You went away," she said in a thin voice. "I remember, you were the first. You went away. You and Jeff. You were the first."

"No, dear," Takker interrupted very patiently. He set down the flask of amberlethe, took a sip from his glass, smiled, and proceeded to explain. "The Captain was the first one to go away. Don't you recall? The Captain and Villareal and Susie Benet, they all went away together, and we waited and waited."

“Oh, yes,” Alaina said. “Then later Jeff and Michael left us. And poor Irai killed herself, and the foxes took Ian and put him up on the wall. And all the others went away. Oh, I don't know where, Michael, I just don't.” Suddenly she started to weep. “We all used to be together, all of us, but now there's just Tak and me. They all left us. We're the only ones who come here anymore, the only ones.” She broke down and started sobbing.

Holt felt sick. It was worse than his last visit the month before—much worse. He wanted to grab the amberlethe and smash it to the floor. But it was pointless. He had done that once a long time ago—the second month after landing—when the endless hopeless waiting had sent him into a rare rage. Alaina had wept, MacDonald cursed and hit him and knocked loose a tooth (it still hurt sometimes, at night), and Takker-Rey bought another flask. Takker always had money. He wasn't much of a thief, but he'd grown up on Vess where men shared a planet with two alien races, and like a lot of Vessmen he'd grown up a xenophile. Takker was soft and willing, and foxmen (some foxmen) found him attractive. When Alaina had joined him, in his room and his business, Holt and Jeff Sunderland had given up on them and moved to the outskirts of the stone city.

“Don't cry, Alaina,” Holt said now. “Look, I'm here, see? I even brought food tokens.” He reached into his sack and tossed a handful onto the table—red, blue, silver, black. They clattered and rolled and lay still.

At once, Alaina's tears were gone. She began to scabble among the tokens, and even Takker leaned forward to watch. “Red ones,” she said excitedly. “Look, Takker, red ones, meat tokens! And silvers, for 'lethe. Look, look!” She began to scoop loose tokens into her pockets, but her hands were trembling, and more than one token was thrown onto the floor. “Help me, Tak,” she said.

Takker giggled. “Don't worry, love, that was only a green. We don't need worm food anyway, do we?” He looked at Holt. “Thank you, Michael, thank you. I always told Alaina you had a generous soul, even if you did leave us when we needed you. You and Jeff. Ian said you were a coward, you know, but I always defended you. Thank you, yes.” He picked up a silver token and flipped it with his thumb. “Generous Michael. You're always welcome here.”

Holt said nothing. The Shed-boss had suddenly materialized at his elbow, a vast bulk of musky blue-black flesh. His face looked down at Holt—if you could call it looking, since the being was eyeless, and if you could call it a face, since there was no mouth either. The thing that passed for a head was a flabby, half-filled bladder full of breathing holes and ringed by whitish tentacles. It was the size of a child's head, an infant's, and it looked absurdly small atop the gross oily body and the rolls of mottled fat. The Shed-boss did not speak; not Terran nor ullish nor the pidgin Dan'lai that passed for crossworlds trade talk. But he always knew what his customers wanted.

Holt just wanted to leave. While the Shed-boss stood, silent and waiting, he rose and lurched for the door. It slid shut behind him, and he could hear Alaina and Takker-Rey arguing over the tokens.

* * * *

The Damoosh are a wise and gentle race, and great philosophers—or so they used to say on Ymir. The outermost of their suns interlock with the innermost parts of the ever-growing manrealm, and it was on a time-worn Damoosh colony that narKarmian died and Holt first saw a Linkellar.

Rayma-k-Tel was with him at the time, a hard hatchet-faced woman who'd come out of Vess; they were drinking in an enclave bar just off the spacefield. The place had good manrealm liquor, and he and Ram swilled it down together from seats by a window of stained yellow glass. Cain was three weeks dead.

When Holt saw the Linkellar shuffling past the window, its bulging eyes a-wobble, he tugged at Ram's arm and turned her around and said, "Look. A new one. You know the race?"

Rayma shrugged loose her arm and shook her head. "No," she said, irritated. She was a raging xenophobe, which is the other thing that growing up on Vess will do to you. "Probably from further in somewhere. Don't even try to keep them straight, Mikey. There's a million different kinds, specially this far in. Damn Damos'll trade with anything."

Holt had looked again, still curious, but the heavy being with the loose green skin was out of sight. Briefly he thought of Cain, and something like a thrill went through him. The old man had shipped for more than two hundred years, he thought, and yet he'd probably never seen an alien of the race they'd just seen. He said something to that effect to Rayma-k-Tel.

She was most unimpressed. "So what?" she said. "So we've never seen the Fringe or a Hrangan, though I'd be damned to know why we'd want to." She smiled thinly at her own wit. "Aliens are like jellybeans, Mikey. They come in a lot of different colors, but inside they're just about the same.

"So don't turn yourself into a collector like old narKarmian. Where did it ever get him, after all? He moved around a lot on a bunch of third-rate ships, but he never saw the Far Arm and he never saw the core, and nobody ever will. He didn't get too rich, neither. Just relax and make a living."

Holt had hardly been listening. He put down his drink and lightly touched the cool glass of the window with his fingertips.

That night, after Rayma had returned to their ship, Holt left the offworld enclave and wandered out into the Damoosh home-places. He paid half-a-run's salary to be led to the underground chamber where the world's wisdompool lay: a vast computer of living light linked to the dead brains of telepathic Damoosh elders (or at least that was how the guide explained it to Holt).

The chamber was a bowl of green fog stirring with little waves and swells. Within its depths, curtains of colored light rippled and faded and were gone. Holt stood on the upper lip looking down and asked his questions, and the answers came back in an echoing whisper as of many tiny voices speaking together. First he described the being he'd seen that afternoon and asked what it had been, and it was then he heard the word Linkellar.

"Where do they come from?" Holt asked.

"Six years from the manrealm by the drive you use," the whispers told him while the green fog moved. "Toward the core but not straight in. Do you want coordinates?"

"No. Why don't we see them more often?"

"They are far away, too far perhaps," the answer came. "The whole width of the Damoosh suns is between the manrealm and the Twelve Worlds of the Linkellar, and so too the colonies of the Nor T'alush and a hundred worlds that have not found stardrives. The Linkellars trade with the Damoosh, but they seldom come to this place, which is closer to you than to them."

"Yes," said Holt. A chill went through him, as if a cold wind blew across the cavern and the flickering sea of fog. "I have heard of the Nor T'alush, but not of the Linkellars. What else is there? Further in?"

"There are many directions," the fog whispered. Colors undulated deep below. "We know the dead worlds of the vanished race the Nor T'alush call the First Ones, though they were not truly the first, and

we know the Reaches of the Kresh, and the lost colony of the gethsoids of Aath who sailed from far within the manrealm before it was the manrealm.”

“What's beyond them?”

“The Kresh tell of a world called Cedris, and of a great sphere of suns larger than the manrealm and the Damoosh suns and the old Hrangan Empire all together. The stars within are the ullish stars.”

“Yes,” Holt said. There was a tremor in his voice. “And beyond that? Around it? Further in?”

A fire burned within the far depths of the fog; the green mists glowed with a smoldering reddish light.

“The Damoosh do not know. Who sails so far, so long? There are only tales. Shall we tell you of the Very Old Ones? Of the Bright Gods, or the shipless sailors? Shall we sing the old sing of the race without a world? Ghost ships have been sighted further in, things that move faster than a man-ship or a Damoosh in drive, and they destroy where they will, yet sometimes they are not there at all. Who can say what they are, who they are, where they are, if they are? We have names, names, stories, we can give you names and stories. But the facts are dim. We hear of a world named Huul the Golden that trades with the lost gethsoids who trade with the Kresh who trade with the Nor T'alush who trade with us, but no Damoosh ship has ever sailed to Huul the Golden and we cannot say much of it or even where it is. We hear of the veiled men of a world unnamed, who puff themselves up and float around and around in their atmosphere, but that may be only a legend, and we cannot even say whose legend. We hear of a race that lives in deep space, who talk to a race called the Dan'lai, who trade with the ullish stars, who trade with Cedris, and so the string runs back to us. But we Damoosh on this world so near the manrealm have never seen a Cedran, so how can we trust the string?”

There was a sound like muttering; below his feet, the fog churned, and something that smelled like incense rose to touch Holt's nostrils.

“I'll go in,” Holt said. “I'll ship on, and see.”

“Then come back one day and tell us,” the fogs cried, and for the very first time Holt heard the mournful keen of a wisdompool that is not wise enough. “Come back, come back. There is much to learn.” The smell of incense was very strong.

* * * *

Holt looted three more Cedran bubble-huts that afternoon, and broke into two others. The first of those was simply cold and vacant and dusty; the second was occupied, but not by a Cedran. After jiggling loose the door, he'd stood shock-still while an ethereal winged thing with feral eyes flapped against the roof of the hut and hissed down at him. He got nothing from that bubble, nor from the empty one, but the rest of his break-ins paid off.

Toward sunset, he returned to the stone city, climbing a narrow ramp to the Western Iris with a bag of food slung over his shoulders.

In the pale and failing light, the city looked colorless, washed out, dead. The circling walls were four meters high and twice as thick, fashioned of a smooth and seamless gray stone as if they were a single piece; the Western Iris that opened on the city of the shipless was more a tunnel than a gateway. Holt went through it quickly, out into a narrow zigzag alley that threaded its way between two huge buildings—or perhaps they were not buildings. Twenty meters tall, irregularly shaped, windowless and

doorless; there could be no possible entrance save through the stone city's lower levels. Yet this type of structure, these odd-shaped dented blocks of gray stone, dominated the easternmost part of the stone city in an area of some twelve kilometers square. Sunderland had mapped it.

The alleys here were a hopeless maze, none of them running straight for more than ten meters; from above, Holt had often imagined them to look like a child's drawing of a lightning bolt. But he had come this route often, and he had Sunderland's maps committed to memory (for this small portion of the stone city, at any rate). He moved with speed and confidence, encountering no one.

From time to time, when he stood in the nexus points where several alleys joined, Holt caught glimpses of other structures in the distance. Sunderland had mapped most of them, too; they used the sights as landmarks. The stone city had a hundred separate parts, and in each the architecture and the very building stone itself was different. Along the northwest wall was a jungle of obsidian towers set close together with dry canals between; due south lay a region of blood-red stone pyramids; east was an utterly empty granite plain with a single mushroom-shaped tower ascending from its center. And there were other regions, all strange, all uninhabited. Sunderland mapped a few additional blocks each day.

Yet even this was only the tip of the iceberg. The stone city had levels beneath levels, and neither Holt nor Sunderland nor any of the others had penetrated those black and airless warrens.

Dusk was all around him when Holt paused at a major nexus point, a wide octagon with a smaller octagonal pool in its center. The water was still and green; not even a ripple of wind moved across its surface until Holt stopped to wash. Their rooms, just past here, were as bone-dry as this whole area of the city. Sunderland said the pyramids had indoor water supplies, but near the Western Iris there was nothing but this single public pool.

Holt resumed walking when he had cleaned the day's dust from his face and hands. The food bag bounced on his back, and his footsteps, echoing, broke the alley stillness. There was no other sound; the night was falling fast. It would be as bleak and moonless as any other crossworlds night. Holt knew that. The overcast was always heavy, and he could seldom spot more than a half-dozen dim stars.

Beyond the plaza of the pool, one of the great buildings had fallen. There was nothing left but a jumble of broken rock and sand. Holt cut across it carefully, to a single structure that stood out of place among the rest—a huge gold stone dome like a blown-up Cedran bubble-hut. It had a dozen entrance holes, a dozen narrow little staircases winding up to them, and a honeycomb of chambers within.

For nearly ten standard months, this had been home.

Sunderland was squatting on the floor of their common room when Holt entered, his maps spread out all around him. He had arranged each section to fit with the others in a patchwork tapestry; old yellowed scraps he'd purchased from the Dan'lai and corrected were sandwiched between sheets of Pegasus gridfilm and lightweight squares of silvery ullish metal. The totality carpeted the room, each piece covered with lines and Sunderland's neat notation. He sat in the middle of it all with a map on his lap and a marker in his hand, looking owlsh and rumped and very overweight.

"I've got food," Holt said. He flipped the bag across the room and it landed among the maps, disarranging several of the loose sections.

Sunderland squawked, "Ahh, the maps! Be careful!" He blinked and pushed the food aside and rearranged everything neatly again.

Holt crossed the room to his sleep-web, strung between two sturdy coldtorch pillars. He walked on the maps as he went and Sunderland squawked again, but Holt ignored him and climbed into the web.

“Damn you,” Sunderland said, smoothing the trodden sections. “Be more careful, will you?” He looked up and saw that Holt was frowning at him. “Mike?”

“Sorry,” Holt said. “You find something today?” His tone made the question an empty formality.

Sunderland never noticed. “I got into a whole new section, off to the south,” he said excitedly. “Very interesting, too. Obviously designed as a unit. There's this central pillar, you see, built out of some soft green stone, and surrounded by ten slightly smaller pillars, and there are these bridges—well, sort of ribbons of stone, they loop from the top of the big ones to the tops of the little ones. The pattern is repeated over and over. And below you've got sort of a labyrinth of waist-high stone walls. It will take me weeks to map them.”

Holt was looking at the wall next to his head, where the count of the days was scored in the golden stone. “A year,” he said. “A standard year, Jeff.”

Sunderland looked at him curiously, then stood and began gathering up his maps. “How was your day?” he asked.

“We're not going to leave this place,” Holt said, speaking more to himself than to Sunderland. “Never. It's over.”

Now Sunderland stopped. “Stop it,” the small fat man said. “I won't have it, Holt. Give up, and next thing you know you'll be drowning in amberlethe with Alaina and Takker. The stone city is the key. I've known that all along. Once we discover all its secrets, we can sell them to the foxmen and get out of this place.

When I finish my mapping—”

Holt rolled over on his side to face Sunderland. “A year, Jeff, a year. You're not going to finish your mapping. You could map for ten years and still have covered only part of the stone city. And what about the tunnels? The levels beneath?”

Sunderland licked his lips nervously. “Beneath. Well. If I had the equipment on board the Pegasus, then—”

“You don't, and it doesn't work anyway. Nothing works on the stone city. That was why the Captain landed. The rules don't work down here.”

Sunderland shook his head and resumed his gathering up the maps. “The human mind can understand anything. Give me time, that's all, and I'll figure it all out. We could even figure out the Dan'lai and the ullies if Susie Benet was still here.” Susie Benet had been their contact specialist—a third-rate linguesp, but even a minor talent is better than none when dealing with alien minds.

“Susie Benet isn't here,” Holt said. His voice had a hard edge to it. He began to tick off names on his fingers. “Susie vanished with the Captain. Ditto Carlos. Irai suicided. Ian tried to shoot his way inside the windwalls and wound up on them. Det and Lana and Maje went down beneath, trying to find the Captain, and they vanished too. Davie Tillman sold himself as a Kresh egg host, so he's surely finished by now. Alaina and Takker-Rey are vegetables, useless, and we don't know what went on with the four aboard the Pegasus. That leaves us, Sunderland, you and me.” He smiled grimly. “You make maps, I

steal from the worms, and nobody understands anything. We're finished. We'll die here in the stone city. We'll never see the stars again.”

He stopped as suddenly as he had started. It was a rare outburst for Holt; in general he was quiet, unexpressive, maybe a little repressed. Sunderland stood there, astonished, while Holt sagged back hopelessly into his sleep-web.

“Day after day after day,” Holt said. “And none of it means anything. You remember what Irai told us?”

“She was unstable,” Sunderland insisted. “She proved that beyond our wildest dreams.”

“She said we'd come too far,” Holt said, as if Sunderland had never spoken. “She said it was wrong to think that the whole universe operated by rules we could understand. You remember. She called it ‘sick, arrogant human folly.’ You remember, Jeff. That was how she talked. Like that. Sick, arrogant human folly.”

He laughed. “The crossworlds almost made sense, that was what fooled us. But if Irai was right, that would figure. After all, we're still only a little bit from the manrealm, right? Further in, maybe the rules change even more.”

“I don't like this kind of talk,” said Sunderland. “You're getting defeatist. Irai was sick. At the end, you know, she was going to ul-mennaleith prayer meetings, submitting herself to the ul-nayileith, that sort of thing. A mystic, that was what she became. A mystic.”

“She was wrong?” Holt asked.

“She was wrong,” Sunderland said firmly.

Holt looked at him again. “Then explain things, Jeff. Tell me how to get out of here. Tell me how it all makes sense.”

“The stone city,” Sunderland said. “Well, when I finish my maps—” He stopped suddenly. Holt was leaning back in his web again and not listening at all.

* * * *

It took him five years and six ships to move across the great star-flecked sphere the Damoosh claimed as their own and penetrate the border sector beyond. He consulted other, greater wisdompools as he went, and learned all he could, but always there were mysteries and surprises waiting on the world beyond this one. Not all the ships he served on were crewed by humans; man-ships seldom straggled in this far, so Holt signed on with Damoosh and stray gethsoids and other, lesser mongrels. But still there were usually a few men on every port he touched, and he even began to hear rumors of a second human empire some five hundred years in toward the core, settled by a wandering generation ship and ruled from a glittering world called Prester. On Prester the cities floated on clouds, one withered Vessman told him. Holt believed that for a time until another crewmate said that Prester was really a single world-spanning city, kept alive by fleets of food freighters greater than anything the Federal Empire had built in the wars before the Collapse. The same man said it had not been a generation ship that had settled her at all—he proved that by showing how far a slow-light ship could get from Old Earth since the dawn of the interstellar age—but rather a squadron of Earth Imperials fleeing a Hrangan Mind. Holt stayed skeptical this time. When a woman from a grounded Cathadayn freighter insisted that Prester had been founded by Tomo and Walberg, and that Walberg ruled it still, he gave up on the whole idea.

But there were other legends, other stories, and they drew him on. As they drew others.

On an airless world circling a blue-white star, in its single domed city, Holt met Alaina. She told him about the Pegasus.

“The Captain built her from scratch, you know, right here. He was trading, going in further than usual, like we all do”—she flashed an understanding smile, figuring that Holt too was a trading gambler out for the big find—“and he met a Dan'la. They're further in.”

“I know,” Holt said.

“Well, maybe you don't know what's going on in there. The Captain said the Dan'lai have all but taken over the ullish stars—you've heard of the ullish stars? ... Good. Well, it's because the ul-mennaleith haven't resisted much, I gather, but also because of the Dan'lai jump-gun. It's a new concept, I guess, and the Captain says it cuts travel time in half, or better. The standard drive warps the fabric of the space-time continuum, you know, to get FTL effects, and—”

“I'm a drive man,” Holt said curtly. But he was leaning forward as he said it, listening intently.

“Oh,” Alaina said, not rebuked in the least. “Well, the Dan'lai jump-gun does something else, shifts you into another continuum and then back again. Running it is entirely different. It's partly psionic, and they put this ring around your head.”

“You have a jump-gun?” Holt interrupted.

She nodded. “The Captain melted down his old ship, just about, to build the Pegasus. With a jump-gun he bought from the Dan'lai. He's collecting a crew now, and they're training us.”

“Where are you going?” he said.

She laughed, lightly, and her bright green eyes seemed to flash. “Where else? In!”

* * * *

Holt woke at dawn, in silence, rose and dressed himself quickly, and traced his path backwards, past the quiet green pool and the endless alleys, out the Western Iris and through the city of the shipless. He walked under the wall of skeletons without an upward glance.

Inside the windwall, in the long corridor, he began to try the doors. The first four rattled and stayed shut. The fifth opened on an empty office. No Dan'la.

That was something new. Holt entered cautiously, peering around. No one, nothing, and no second door. He walked around the wide ullish desk and began to rifle it methodically, much as he looted the Cedran bubble-huts. Maybe he could find a field pass, a gun, something—anything to get him back to the Pegasus. If it was still sitting beyond the walls. Or maybe he could find a berth assignment.

The door slid open; a foxman stood there. He was indistinguishable from all the others. He barked, and Holt jumped away from the desk.

Swiftly the Dan'la circled around and seized the chair. “Thief!” he said. “Thief. I will shoot. You be shot. Yes.” His teeth snapped.

“No,” Holt said, edging toward the door. He could run if the Dan'la called others. “I came for a berth,” he said inanely.

“Ah!” The foxman interlocked his hands. “Different. Well, Holt, who are you?” Holt stood mute. “A berth, a berth, Holt wants a berth,” the Dan'la said in a squeaky singsong.

“Yesterday they said that a man-ship would be in next week,” Holt said.

“No no no. I'm sorry. No man-ship will come. There will be no man-ship. Next week, yesterday, no time. You understand? And we have no berth. Ship is full. You never go on field with no berth.”

Holt moved forward again, to the other side of the desk. “No ship next week?” The foxman shook his head. “No ship. No ship. No man-ship.”

“Something else, then. I'll crew for ullies, for Dan'lai, for Cedrans. I've told you. I know drive, I know your jump-guns. Remember? I have credentials.”

The Dan'la tilted his head to one side. Did Holt remember the gesture? Was this a Dan'la he'd dealt with before? “Yes, but no berth.”

Holt started for the door. “Wait,” the foxman commanded. Holt turned.

“No man-ship next week,” the Dan'la said. “No ship, no ship, no ship,” he sang. Then he stopped singing. “Man-ship is now!”

Holt straightened. “Now?! You mean there's a man-ship on the field right now?” The Dan'la nodded furiously.

“A berth!” Holt was frantic. “Get me a berth, damn you.”

“Yes. Yes. A berth for you, for you a berth.” The foxman touched something on the desk, a drawer slid open, and he took out a film of silver metal and a slim wand of blue plastic. “Your name?”

“Michael Holt,” he answered.

“Oh.” The foxman put down the wand, took the metal sheet and put it back in the drawer, and barked, “No berth!”

“No berth?”

“No one can have two berths,” the Dan'la said.

“Two?”

The deskfox nodded. “Holt has a berth on Pegasus.” Holt's hands were trembling.

“Damn,” he said.

“Damn.” The Dan'la laughed. “Will you take berth?”

“On Pegasus?” A nod.

“You'll let me through the walls, then? Out onto the field?”

The foxman nodded again. "Write Holt field pass."

"Yes," Holt said. "Yes."

"Name?"

"Michael Holt."

"Race?"

"Man."

"Homeworld?"

"Ymir."

There was a short silence. The Dan'la had been sitting there staring at Holt, his hands folded. Now he suddenly opened the drawer again, took out an ancient-looking piece of parchment that crumbled as he touched it, and picked up the wand again. "Name?" he asked.

They went through the whole thing again.

When the Dan'la had finished writing, he gave the paper to Holt. It flaked as he fingered it. He tried to be very careful. None of the scrawls made sense. "This will get me past the guards?" Holt said skeptically. "On the field? To the Pegasus?"

The Dan'la nodded. Holt turned and almost ran for the door. "Wait," the foxman cried.

Holt froze, and spun. "What?" he said between his teeth, and it was almost a snarl of rage.

"Technical thing."

"Yes?"

"Field pass, to be good, must be signed." The Dan'la flashed on its toothy smile. "Signed, yes yes, signed by your captain."

There was no noise. Holt's hand tightened spasmodically around the slip of yellow paper, and the pieces fluttered stiffly to the floor. Then, swift and wordless, he was on him.

The Dan'la had time for only one brief bark before Holt had him by the throat. The delicate six-fingered hands clawed air, helplessly. Holt twisted, and the neck snapped. He was holding a bundle of limp reddish fur.

He stood there for a long time, his hands locked, his teeth clenched. Then slowly he released his grip and the Dan'la corpse tumbled backward, toppling the chair.

In Holt's eyes, a picture of the windwall flashed briefly.

He ran.

* * * *

The Pegasus had standard drives too, in case the jump-gun failed; the walls of the room were the familiar blend of naked metal and computer consoles. But the center was filled by the Dan'lai jump-gun: a long cylinder of metallic glass, thick around as a man, mounted on an instrument panel. The cylinder was half full of a sluggish liquid that changed color abruptly each time a pulse of energy was run through the tank. Around it were seats for four jump-men, two on a side. Holt and Alaina sat on one flank, opposite tall blond Irai and Ian MacDonald; each of them wore a hollow glass crown full of the same liquid that sloshed in the gun cylinder.

Carlos Villareal was behind Holt, at the main console, draining data from the ship's computer. The jumps were already planned. They were going to see the ullish stars, the Captain had decided. And Cedris and Huul the Golden, and points further in. And maybe even Prester and the core.

The first stop was a transit point named Grayrest (clearly, by the name, some other men had gone there once—the star was on the charts). The Captain had heard a story of a stone city older than time.

Beyond the atmosphere the nukes cut off, and Villareal gave the order. “Coordinates are in, navigation is ready,” he said, his voice a little less sure than usual; the whole procedure was so new. “Jump.”

They switched on the Dan'lai jump-gun.

darkness flickering with colors and a thousand whirling stars and Holt was in the middle all alone but no! there was Alaina and there someone else and all of them joined and the chaos whirled around them and great gray waves crashed over their heads and faces appeared ringed with fire laughing and dissolving and pain pain pain and they were lost and nothing was solid and eons passed and no Holt saw something burning calling pulling the core the core and there out from it Grayrest but then it was gone and somehow Holt brought it back and he yelled to Alaina and she grabbed for it too and MacDonald and Irai and they PULLED

They were sitting before the jump-gun again, and Holt was suddenly conscious of a pain in his wrist, and he looked down and saw that someone had taped an i.v. needle into him. Alaina was plugged in too, and the others, Ian and Irai. There was no sign of Villareal.

The door slid open and Sunderland stood there smiling at them and blinking. “Thank God!” the chubby navigator said. “You've been out for three months. I thought we were finished.”

Holt took the glass crown from his head and saw that there was only a thin film of liquid left. Then he noticed that the jump cylinder was almost empty as well. “Three months?”

Sunderland shuddered. “It was horrible. There was nothing outside, nothing, and we couldn't rouse you. Villareal had to play nursemaid. If it hadn't been for the Captain, I don't know what would have happened. I know what the foxman said, but I wasn't sure you could ever pull us out of—of whatever we were.”

“Are we there?” MacDonald demanded.

Sunderland went around the jump-gun to Villareal's console and hooked it in to the ship's viewscreen. In a field of black, a small yellow sun was burning. And a cold gray orb filled the screen.

“Grayrest,” Sunderland said. “I've taken readings. We're there. The Captain has already opened a beam to them. The Dan'lai seem to run things, and they've cleared us to land. The time checks, too; three months subjective, three months objective, as near as we can figure.”

“And by standard drive?” Holt said. “The same trip by standard drive?”

“We did even better than the Dan'lai promised,” Sunderland said. “Grayrest is a good year and a half in from where we were.”

* * * *

It was too early; there was too great a chance that the Cedrans might not be comatose yet. But Holt had to take the risk. He smashed his way into the first bubble-hut he found and looted it completely, ripping things apart with frantic haste. The residents, luckily, were torpid sleep-balls.

Out on the main thoroughfare, he ignored the Dan'lai merchants, half afraid he would confront the same foxman he had just killed. Instead he found a stall tended by a heavy blind Linkellar, its huge eyes like rolling balls of pus. The creature still cheated him, somehow. But he traded all that he had taken for an eggshell-shaped helmet of transparent blue and a working laser. The laser startled him; it was a twin for the one MacDonald had carried, even down to the Finnegan crest. But it worked, and that was all that mattered.

The crowds were assembling for the daily shuffle up and down the ways of the city of the shipless. Holt pushed through them savagely, toward the Western Iris, and broke into a measured jog when he reached the empty alleys of the stone city.

Sunderland was gone; out mapping. Holt took one of his markers and wrote across a map; **KILLED A FOX. MUST HIDE. I'M GOING DOWN INTO THE STONE CITY. SAFE THERE.** Then he took all the food that was left, a good two weeks' supply, more if he starved himself. He filled a pack with it, strapped it on, and left. The laser was snug in his pocket, the helmet tucked under his arm.

The nearest underway was only a few blocks away; a great corkscrew that descended into the earth from the center of a nexus. Holt and Sunderland had often gone to the first level, as far as the light reached. Even there it was dim, gloomy, stuffy; a network of tunnels as intricate as the alleys above had branched off in every direction. Many of them slanted downward. And of course the corkscrew went further down, with more branchings, growing darker and more still with every turn. No one went beyond the first level; those that did—like the Captain—never came back. They had heard stories about how deep the stone city went, but there was no way to check them out; the instruments they had taken from Pegasus had never worked on the crossworlds.

At the bottom of the first full turn, the first level, Holt stopped and put on the pale blue helmet. It was a tight fit; the front of it pressed against the edge of his nose and the sides squeezed his head uncomfortably. Clearly it had been built for an ul-mennalei. But it would do; there was a hole around his mouth, so he could talk and breathe.

He waited a moment while his body heat was absorbed by the helmet. Shortly it began to give off a somber blue light. Holt continued down the corkscrew, into the darkness.

Around and around the underway curved, with other tunnels branching off at every turning; Holt kept on and soon lost track of the levels he had come. Outside his small circle of light there was only pitch-black and silence and still hot air that was increasingly difficult to breathe. But fear was driving him now, and he did not slow. The surface of the stone city was deserted, but not entirely so; the Dan'lai entered when they had to. Only down here would he be safe. He would stay on the corkscrew itself, he vowed; if he did not wander he could not get lost. That was what happened to the Captain and the others, he was sure; they'd left the underway, gone off into the side tunnels, and had starved to death

before they could find their way back. But not Holt. In two weeks or so he could come up and get food from Sunderland, perhaps.

For what seemed hours he walked down the twisting ramp, past endless walls of featureless gray stone tinted blue by his helmet, past a thousand gaping holes that ran to the sides and up and down, each calling to him with a wide black mouth. The air grew steadily warmer; soon Holt was breathing heavily. Nothing around him but stone, yet the tunnels seemed rank and thick. He ignored it.

After a time Holt reached a place where the corkscrew ended; a triple fork confronted him, three arched doorways and three narrow stairs, each descending sharply in a different direction, each curving so that Holt could see only a few meters into the dark. By then his feet were sore. He sat and removed his boots and took out a tube of smoked meat to chew on.

Darkness all around him; without his footsteps echoing heavily, there was no sound. Unless. He listened carefully. Yes. He heard something, dim and far-off. A rumble, sort of. He chewed on his meat and listened even harder and after a long while decided the sounds were coming from the left-hand staircase.

When the food was gone, he licked his fingers and pulled on his boots and rose. Laser in hand, he slowly started down the stair as quietly as he could manage.

The stair too was a spiral; a tighter corkscrew than the ramp, without branchings and very narrow. He barely had room to turn around, but at least there was no chance of getting lost.

The sound got steadily louder as he descended, and before long Holt realized that it was not a rumble after all, but more a howl. Then, later, it changed again. He could barely make it out. Moans and barking.

The stairway made a sharp turn. Holt followed it and stopped suddenly.

He was standing in a window in an oddly shaped gray stone building, looking out over the stone city. It was night, and a tapestry of stars filled the sky. Below, near an octagonal pool, six Dan'lai surrounded a Cedran. They were laughing, quick barking laughs full of rage, and they were chattering to each other and clawing at the Cedran whenever it tried to move. It stood above them trapped in the circle, confused and moaning, swaying back and forth. The huge violet eyes glowed brightly, and the fighting-claws waved.

One of the Dan'lai had something. He unfolded it slowly; a long jag-toothed knife. A second appeared, a third; all the foxmen had them. They laughed to each other. One of them darted in at the Cedran from behind, and the silvered blade flashed, and Holt saw black ichor ooze slowly from a long cut in the milk-white Cedran flesh.

There was a blood-curdling low moan and the worm turned slowly as the Dan'la danced back, and its fighting-claws moved quicker than Holt would have believed. The Dan'la with the dripping black knife was lifted, kicking, into the air. He barked furiously, and then the claw snapped together, and the foxman fell in two pieces to the ground. But the others closed in, laughing, and their knives wove patterns and the Cedran's moan became a screech. It lashed out with its claws and a second Dan'la was knocked headless into the waters, but by then two others were cutting off its thrashing tentacles and yet another had driven his blade hilt-deep into the swaying wormlike torso. All the foxmen were wildly excited; Holt could not hear the Cedran over their frantic barking.

He lifted his laser, took aim on the nearest Dan'la, and pushed the firing stud. Angry red light spurted.

A curtain dropped across the window, blocking the view. Holt reached out and yanked it aside. Behind it was a low-roofed chamber, with a dozen level tunnels leading off in all directions. No Dan'lai, no Cedran. He was far beneath the city. The only light was the blue glow of his helmet.

Slowly, silently, Holt walked to the center of the chamber. Half of the tunnels, he saw, were bricked in. Others were dead black holes. But from one, a blast of cool air was flowing. He followed it a long way in darkness until at last it opened on a long gallery full of glowing red mist, like droplets of fire. The hall stretched away to left and right as far as Holt could see, high-ceilinged and straight; the tunnel that had led him here was only one of many. Others—each a different size and shape, all as black as death—lined the walls.

Holt took one step into the soft red fog, then turned and burned a mark into the stone floor of the tunnel behind him. He began walking down the hall, past the endless rows of tunnel mouths. The mist was thick but easy to see through, and Holt saw that the whole vast gallery was empty—at least to the limits of his vision. But he could not see either end, and his footsteps made no sound.

He walked a long time, almost in a trance, somehow forgetting to be afraid. Then, briefly, a white light surged from a portal far ahead. Holt began to run, but the glow had faded before he covered half the distance to the tunnel. Still something called him on.

The tunnel mouth was a high arch full of night when Holt entered. A few meters of darkness, and a door; he stopped.

The arch opened on a high bank of snow and a forest of iron gray trees linked by fragile webs of ice, so delicate that they would melt and shatter at a breath. No leaves, but hardy blue flowers peeked from the wind-crannies beneath every limb. The stars blazed in the frigid blackness above. And, sitting high on the horizon, Holt saw the wooden stockade and stone-fairy parapets of the rambling twisted Old House.

He paused for a long time, watching, remembering. The cold wind stirred briefly, blowing a flurry of snow in through the door, and Holt shivered in the blast. Then he turned and went back to the hall of the red mist.

Sunderland was waiting for him where tunnel met gallery, half wrapped in the sound-sucking fog. “Mike!” he said, talking normally enough, but all that Holt heard was a whisper. “You’ve got to come back. We need you, Mike. I can’t map without you to get food for me, and Alaina and Takker.... You must come back!”

Holt shook his head. The mists thickened and whirled, and Sunderland's portly figure was draped and blurred until all Holt could see was the heavy outline. Then the air cleared, and it was not Sunderland at all. It was the Shed-boss. The creature stood silently, the white tentacles trembling on the bladder atop its torso. It waited. Holt waited.

Across the gallery, sudden light woke dimly in a tunnel. Then the two that flanked it began to glow, and then the two beyond that. Holt glanced right, then left; on both sides of the gallery, the silent waves raced from him until all the portals shone—here a dim red, here a flood of blue-white, here a friendly homesun yellow.

Ponderously the Shed-boss turned and began to walk down the hall. The rolls of blue-black fat bounced and jiggled as it went along, but the mists leached away the musky smell. Holt followed it, his laser still in his hand.

The ceiling rose higher and higher, and Holt saw that the doorways were growing larger. As he watched, a craggy mottled being much like the Shed-boss came out of one tunnel, crossed the hall, and entered another.

They stopped before a tunnel mouth, round and black and twice as tall as Holt. The Shed-boss waited. Holt, laser at ready, entered. He stood before another window, or perhaps a viewscreen; on the far side of the round crystal port, chaos swirled and screamed. He watched it briefly, and just as his head was starting to hurt, the swirling view solidified. If you could call it solid. Beyond the port, four Dan'lai sat with jump-gun tubes around their brows and a cylinder before them. Except—except—the picture was blurred. Ghosts, there were ghosts, second images that almost overlapped the first, but not quite, not completely. And then Holt saw a third image, and a fourth, and suddenly the picture cracked and it was as though he was looking into an infinite array of mirrors. Long rows of Dan'lai sat on top of each other, blurring into one another, growing smaller and smaller until they dwindled into nothingness. In unison—no, no, almost in unison (for here one image did not move with his reflections, and here another fumbled)—they removed the drained jump-gun tubes and looked at each other and began to laugh. Wild, high barking laughs; they laughed and laughed and laughed and Holt watched as the fires of madness burned in their eyes, and the foxmen all (no, almost all) hunched their slim shoulders and seemed more feral and animal than he had ever seen them.

He left. Back in the hall, the Shed-boss still stood patiently. Holt followed again.

There were others in the hall now; Holt saw them faintly, scurrying back and forth through the reddish mist. Creatures like the Shed-boss seemed to dominate, but they were not alone. Holt glimpsed a single Dan'la, lost and frightened; the foxman kept stumbling into walls. And there were things part-angel and part-dragonfly that slid silently past overhead, and something tall and thin surrounded by flickering veils of light, and other presences that he felt as much as saw. Frequently he saw the bright-skinned striders with their gorgeous hues and high collars of bone and flesh, and always slender, sensuous animals loped at their heels, moving with fluid grace on four legs. The animals had soft gray skins and liquid eyes and strangely sentient faces.

Then he thought he spied a man; dark and very dignified, in ship's uniform and cap. Holt strained after the vision and ran toward it, but the mists confused him, bright and glowing as they were, and he lost the sight. When he looked around again, the Shed-boss was gone too.

He tried the nearest tunnel. It was a doorway, like the first; beyond was a mountain ledge overlooking a hard arid land, a plain of baked brick broken by a great crevasse. A city stood in the center of the desolation, its walls chalk white, its buildings all right angles. It was quite dead, but Holt still knew it, somehow. Often Cain narKarmian had told him how the Hrangans build their cities, in the war-torn reaches between Old Earth and the Fringe.

Hesitant, Holt extended a hand past the door frame, and withdrew it quickly. Beyond the arch was an oven; it was not a viewscreen, no more than the sight of Ymir had been.

Back in the gallery he paused and tried to understand. The hall went on and on in both directions, and beings like none he had ever seen drifted past in the mists, death silent, barely noticing the others. The Captain was down here, he knew, and Villareal and Susie Benet and maybe the others—or—or perhaps they had been down here, and now they were elsewhere. Perhaps they too had seen their homes calling

to them through a stone doorway, and perhaps they had followed and not returned. Once beyond the arches, Holt wondered, how could you come back?

The Dan'la came into sight again, crawling now, and Holt saw that he was very old. The way he fumbled made it clear that he was quite blind, and yet, and yet his eyes looked good enough. Then Holt began to watch the others, and finally to follow them. Many went out through the doorways, and they did indeed walk off into the landscapes beyond. And the landscapes ... he watched the ullish worlds in all their weary splendor, as the ul-mennaleith glided to their worships ... he saw the starless night of Darkdawn, high atop the Fringe, and the darkling dreamers wandering beneath ... and Huul the Golden (real after all, though less than he expected) ... and the ghost ships flitting out from the core and the screechers of the black worlds in the Far Arm and the ancient races that had locked their stars in spheres and a thousand worlds undreamed of.

Soon he stopped following the quiet travelers and began to wander on his own, and then he found that the views beyond the doors could change. As he stood before a square gate that opened on the plains of ai-Emerel, he thought for a moment of Old Cain, who had indeed shipped a long ways, but not quite far enough. The Emereli towers were before him, and Holt wished to see them closer, and suddenly the doorway opened onto one. Then the Shed-boss was at his elbow, materializing as abruptly as ever in the Shed, and Holt glanced over into the faceless face. Then he put away the laser and removed his helmet (it had ceased to glow, oddly—why hadn't he noticed that?) and stepped forward.

He was on a balcony, cold wind stroking his face, black Emereli metal behind and an orange sunset before him. Across the horizon the other towers stood, and Holt knew that each was a city of a million; but from here, they were only tall dark needles.

A world. Cain's world. Yet it would have changed a lot since Cain had last seen it, some two hundred years ago. He wondered how. No matter; he would soon find out.

As he turned to go inside, he promised himself that soon he would go back, to find Sunderland and Alaina and Takker-Rey. For them, perhaps, it would be all darkness and fear below, but Holt could guide them home. Yes, he would do that. But not right now. He wanted to see ai-Emerel first, and Old Earth, and the Altered Men of Prometheus. Yes.

But later he would go back. Later. In a little bit.

* * * *

Time moves slowly in the stone city; more slowly down below where the webs of spacetime were knotted by the Builders. But still it moves, inexorably. The great gray buildings are all tumbled now, the mushroom tower fallen, the pyramids blown dust. Of the ullish windwalls not a trace remains, and no ship has landed for millennia. The ul-mennaleith grow few and strangely diffident and walk with armored hoppers at their heels, the Dan'lai have disintegrated into violent anarchy after a thousand years of jump-guns, the Kresh are gone, the Linkellars are enslaved, and the ghost ships still keep silent. Outwards, the Damoosh are a dying race, though the wisdompools live on and ponder, waiting for questions that no longer come. New races walk on tired worlds; old ones grow and change. No man has reached the core.

The crossworlds sun grows dim.

In empty tunnels beneath the ruins, Holt walks from star to star.

Nobody Leaves New Pittsburg

Four of them waited in the drizzling rain of New Pittsburg; four who walked and breathed. But only one lived, and only the living moved with purpose. His name was Sykes, a whip-thin young man with dark eyes set in an angular face, and he was impatient. The other didn't mind. The rain was nothing to them. They'd given up feeling long ago, with their lives.

But Sykes felt the rain, the leaking from the gray above in tiny droplets almost fine enough to be a mist. And he remembered it as he felt it, remembered how it tasted of rust and acid, how it stung when it hit bare skin. One he's hated that rain, as he'd hated New Pittsburg, but now there was only contempt. New Pittsburg wasn't worth hatred.

"Move it," he snapped at last. He was hot, wet, tired of waiting. His papers weren't *that* interesting.

The spaceport guard looked up in faint surprise from the window of the gate control booth. Unused to being snapped at, he eyed Sykes and the three corpses curiously for a moment. Then he shrugged, folded up the papers, and handed them back, "Welcome to New Pittsburg," he said without conviction.

Sykes smiled: a quick cold slash across his face. "Welcome back, you mean. But I'm not staying."

"Yeah," said the guard, not really interested. "That's what they all say. Nobody's staying, but nobody leaves." He shrugged again. "Company office will be open tomorrow morning. They'll have work for you. Meantime, if you need a place to stay..."

"I have a place to stay. I was born in here. You can skip the recital about deadman offenses, too. I know that shit."

The guard shot him another curious look. "Born here?"

"Yes. People do leave. The smart people."

"You're not so smart," the guard said. "You came back."

Sykes frowned, but did not reply. He was getting bored with the conversation. There were more important things to do.

The guard threw the switch to kill the electricity on the ten-foot high spaceport fence. Then he swung a sonic screechrifle over his shoulders, came outside, and unlocked the gate. Sykes strode through quickly. The three corpses shuffled behind him, their steps clumsy echoes of his own as he walked them through the corpse controller snug on his belt.

Outside, he paused. He was back on New Pittsburg.

The town was as dreary as ever. It was an afterthought, almost, sandwiched in awkwardly between the spacefield and the mountains. And it was ugly. Three years hadn't changed that. The buildings were shoeboxes of corrugated duralloy that had never been meant to permanent, but were. The streets and sidewalks were gray plastoid, pitted and worn by the constant drizzling rustrain. They matched the monotony of the flat gray sky.

It wasn't that color was illegal on New Pittsburg, Sykes reflected, though it sometimes seemed so. When he was a kid, he only bright color he remembered seeing was the color of blood. And even that seemed grayish at times.

He stood and looked down the dismal street and thought. His father had landed like this, some thirty-odd standard years ago. With a bigger corpse crew than Sykes had now. With hope, but not much brains, and less knowledge. So the Company grabbed him by the balls, and never let go.

The Company was tough. But Sykes thought he was tougher. He was ready for New Pittsburg. He was here for one night; no longer.

He stirred, and moved towards the building closest to the spaceport. A warehouse, from the outside, but Sykes remembered what it really was: the Company deadman depot.

The reception room was small and filthy, the grime-encrusted plastic counter untended. But there was a bell. Sykes hit it. Hard.

Then he waited. The corpses waited too, just outside the door, unmoving. Eyes blank and empty, arms limp. You didn't need to see the metal plate in the back of a man's skull to know he was a deadman. A glance would do.

They had no names, the corpses. Not anymore. They had forfeited their names with their lives, then they committed their crimes or had their accidents. Death had come on dingy corpseyard operating tables, where their brains – crippled, criminal, troublemaking – were ripped out and destroyed. Then they rose again, with corpse pseudominds in their skulls to command the skill-living bodies. The newborn dead; the cheapest labor of all. As men, they'd built up a debt to society. They paid it off with their lives and their bodies. You didn't waste anything in this universe, and the bodies of condemned criminals made valuable machines.

Some corpse handlers gave their crews nicknames, but that sort of sentimental nonsense was not for Sykes. His father had been sentimental, and a loser. Sykes was a cold winner. Deadmen were mindless hunks of flesh, property. He treated them as such.

He owned three, a large crew for a handler his age. The first he'd gotten by luck, a withered oldster picked up in a game of psychodice. The corpse had lost his right arm long before Sykes won him. He was nearly worthless.

The second was something else; a seven-foot giant, a muscleman with broad shoulders and thick, corded arms. Sykes had saved for two years to buy him, but it was worth it. He was a prize, a first-class corpse, top meat.

The third was a recent buy. Young flaming red hair, a once-handsome face; average quality, a little soft but he'd toughen in time, and he had a long deadlife ahead of him. Besides, he'd been a bargain. Sykes bought him on Vendalia, where harsh laws made corpses common and dirt cheap.

There was a noise. Behind the counter a door popped open and a stubby little man stepped through. He wore a white smock of a corpse technician, not blood-stained, and he was peeling off a pair of gloves as he walked. Sykes didn't know him. He felt vaguely let down. When he left, the technician had been Banner, fat Banner with the beard and the big laugh, who'd predicted more than once that Sykes would wind up on his table. But he's also given Sykes a controlled to play with, and shown him how to handle a deadman. Something his father would never do.

“I rang for the depot man,” Sykes said. “I’ve got three corpses to slop.”

The small man slapped his gloves down on the counter. “I am the depot man. Tech, too. We do double duty around here. The Company likes hard workers.” He eyed the corpses. “A company dollar a night for each,” he said, “and we take no responsibility for damage.” He took out a form and a pencil and pushed them across the counter. “And you’ll want to convert your money. I’ll do it for you. On New Pittsburg we use company dollars. Rate’s three stellers for two dollars.”

Sykes didn’t like the man. He stifled the urge to ask what had happened to Banner and the old depot clerk. “That’s pretty high,” he said, toying. “What if I don’t want to convert?”

“Got to,” the small man snapped. “Company rules.”

Sykes smiled his cold smile. He knew all about Company rules. The New Pittsburg Company had opened the planet, and it still owned it. It had political as well as economic clout, and its rules had the force of law. Earth, with its guidelines and settlement company regulations, was long light years away.

Sykes knew about conversion rates, too. His father had arrived here with a pocket full of Vendalian stellars. The pocket had been a lot roomier after conversion.

But Sykes was smarter than his father; he was ready. “That’s all right,” he said, pulling a fat roll of bills from his coverall pocket. “I converted already. On Vandalia. At the real rate.” He smiled again, enjoying it, and pushed three bills at the small man.

The Company man looked up sharply. But he took the bills. Then he opened a gate in the counter. “This way,” he said.

Sykes followed him behind the counter and through a door. The corpses came after, walking with a slow, clumsy gait. It was Sykes who walked them, really. A corpse handler sent impulses to the controller at his belt in the same half-thinking way he sent impulses to his own muscles. The psi circuits in the controller picked up the commands and relayed them to the corpse pseudomind. Then, amplified, the impulses went out to the nerves and the tendons and the muscles of the body. And the deadmen walked.

They could do other things, too; swing a pick, lift a crate, carry a load, run a machine. Lots of things, depending on the skill of the handler. Walking a corpse-crew was easy, but having three or four deadmen at work on three or four different tasks was a feat of a different order. Like running four bodies at once.

Behind the reception room was a long corridor, then another door. Then the warehouse, huge and dark and rank with the smell of corpseflesh. Light poured in through an open door and Sykes could see corpses sprawled everywhere. They covered the floor in piles, flopping all over each other, until the piles stretched away into the darkness. A few were lying in the slop troughs that line one wall. If the stink was any indication, there were thousands of deadmen littering the warehouse floor.

“Flop ‘em down anywhere,” the small man told Sykes. “Pick them up in the morning, though, or you pay extra.”

Sykes glanced at him coldly. The deadman depot was worse than he remembered, much worse. He was annoyed, but he kept his voice even. “Where do you get off charging a dollar for *this*?”

“What do you want? Beds? Makes no different to *them*!”

“Most places have boards, wood bunks, shelves. Something. You used to.”

Again the small man eyed him sharply. “Yeah. Well, it got crowded. And this isn’t most places. They can’t feel a thing anyway. Flop ‘em, I said.”

“Right by the door?” Sykes said. He laughed lightly. “So they get stepped on by thousands of corpses coming out? I get here late and they’re ruined.” He shook his head.

“We’re not responsible for damage. Flop ‘em anywhere you like.” The small man turned and left.

Sykes touched his controller and snapped a silent mental command. His three deadmen stumbled forward, almost in step, trodding on limp uncomplaining bodies as they walked across the huge room. When they were deep enough into the darkness so they had a reasonable change to avoid being trampled, Sykes disengaged his mind and the corpses did an ungainly flop. They would not move again until he moved them. The pseudominds kept their hearts beating and their lungs at work, but Sykes was their will. They were tuned to his controller, and his alone.

He thumbed the belt-box off and returned to the reception room. The small man was putting on his gloves. Behind him, the second door was open. Sykes got a glance of a body, face down on a white table, with a shining-new metal plate in its skull.

Memories came back in a rush, of the other bodies he’d seen in that room. Of the time Banner had let him watch a conversion. Hardly ten, he’d cowered in the corner, wearing a surgical mask and an oversized smock. Two Company policemen, stern in blue and black, carried the man in from their wagon. He’d already been drugged. He was heavy, hard-faced, with hair like dark fine wire, and he’d killed a Company officer. Sykes knew him vaguely. His name had been Karpov, and he’d worked as a hired handler. The police had dropped him on the table, and Banner went to work quickly; shaving his skull, attaching a tangle of tubes and instruments, setting up a stasis-field to keep the life in the body. Then, from behind, he’d cut through the skull, down into the brain, slicing at it, removing it deftly, piece by piece. The machines kept the body going. Banner, his gloved hands very sure, took a pseudomind from its case, set to work hooking it up with the spinal column and the nerve endings. Sykes had been too far away to see exactly what he’d done.

Afterwards, when the steel plate had locked the pseudomind into place and the body was breathing normally again without the support of machines, Sykes had come close and touched it. The skin had been warm, and he felt a pulse. “He’s not dead,” he said, suddenly not understanding.

Banner, his mask off, only laughed his big laugh. “Body isn’t,” he said. “But Karpov is.” Then he’d picked up a controller, tuned it to the new-mind pseudomind. And Karpov’s corpse had risen and chased Sykes out the door.

It all came back then, as Sykes stared at the body through the open door, and wondered if this small man ever used his corpse to frighten kids. But he put the thought away. “Don’t tell me you left a customer waiting while you took care of me?” he said.

The small man flexed his fingers, looked up, and frowned. “He’s all done. Got the pseudo in. Now all I gotta do is tune it to a controller.”

“What’d you get him for?” Sykes asked, hoping it wasn’t anyone he’d known. There were a lot of old friends who’d been headed for the table when he left.

“Assault on a Company officer,” the small man said. Sykes tried not to show surprise. Three years ago, simple assault hadn’t been a deadman offense. New Pittsburg was getting tougher. Each world had its own list of deadman offenses, crimes that would make a man a corpse. The list was longest on the raw new colonies where machines were expensive and labor scarce. And it looked like conditions were worsening on New Pittsburg.

The depot man vanished behind the operating room door. Sykes stepped outside. Night had come, but it was still raining a rusty drizzle. And it was still hot. Lights burned in the windows of several of the grim metal buildings that lined the street. Most of the lights didn’t interest him. He knew the one he wanted.

It was a tavern-restaurant, well-lit and noisy but nearly empty. The long mockwood bar was occupied by only two customers, and the scattered tables were deserted.

Customers and barkeep both looked up when Sykes entered and eyed him with open curiosity. The short silence was broken by one of the patrons, a man Sykes had never seen before. “You’re new,” he said.

“Not really,” said Sykes. He looked at the barkeep, a tall man with a craggy face and wide shoulders slightly stooped by age. “Looks like business is off, Rob.”

The bartender had been staring at him. Now he started. “Sykes,” he said. “My God. Glen Sykes.” He gaped, then broke into a smile, and offered a huge rough hand.

Sykes took it, clasped, and smiled back. Not his usual cold slash this time, no, something warmer, gentler, less certain. And almost involuntary. A slow curl at the corners of his mouth. “A long time.” He said. “Three full years.” Kenyon, the big barkeep, nodded numbly.

Then one of the customers was on her feet, offering her own hand. “Remember me?” she asked when Sykes turned her away.

Sykes studied her. She was gaunt, middle-aged, with baggy clothes and a hook nose. “Sure,” he said. “Sal something of other. Corpse handler. You were new just about when I left.”

“Right,” the woman said. She gestured towards her drinking companion, the man who’d accused Sykes of being new. “That’s Eddie. He’s been here two years or so.”

Sykes gave him a nod, then turned quickly back to Kenyon. “Where’s everybody else? Mueller, and Cathy? And the Slob? And Dave Anderson, and Roy? And Banner, dammit? I went by the depot and some new guy was in charge.”

“Banner’s dead,” Kenyon said. “Keeled over about a year ago. Right at work too. Ell on his own table. Everybody said they should of made a deadman outta *him*. The Slob’s dead too. Her whole crew got wiped out in a mine flood. We’ve had a lotta wipe-outs the last couple years, Glen. Things been getting worse since you left.”

Sykes pulled up a barstool and sat down, nodding. “I noticed. Electric fence round the spacefield and no shelves in the depot. And a corpse tech doubling as depot man. Banner never would have done that.”

“Banner *did* do that,” Kenyon said. “Company changed things about a year-and-a-half ago, before he died. He had no choice. He was Company, but they pushed him around too. You know how it was. Profits have been going down, things are more marginal than ever. Company’s really in a panic.”

Sykes Nodded again. "Figures. It's hard to see this place getting worse. It was bad enough when I was here. But it figures. What else has been going on?"

"Mueller's still around," Kenyon told him. "He's in the mills now, working a Company eight-crew. Always was a good handler. Cathy wound up marrying Roy Anderson."

"Roy? Thought it was Dave she was hot for."

Kenyon Shrugged. "Guess she cooled. Haven't seen her or Roy for a while, to tell the truth. But Dave still comes around. Mueller too. They'll probably be in later."

"I can wait," Sykes said. "Meantime, I'll have a beer."

Kenyon drew a glass slowly and set it down. "What about you, Glen? What have you been doing? I never expected to see you back on New Pittsburg."

The beer was strong and dark, but it had a bitter aftertaste that Sykes didn't recall from the old days. Still, it was beer. He quaffed it down and ordered another.

"I never expected to come back," he told Kenyon when the barkeep set down the second glass. "Not sure why I did. I'm just passing through, really. Spent the last year on Vendalia, but I didn't like it much. It's a bad place. They need corpses something fierce for these big wilderness campaigns. So they've got deadman laws, rough ones. One wrong step and you're on the table."

"I've heard," Kenyon said. "It's getting worse here too."

"So I learned. The Company tech tells me assault's a deadman offense now. *Shit.*"

Kenyon shook his head. "Not just assault, Glen. Assault on a Company officer. They had a couple mine bosses beat up pretty good after a few of those floods."

"Of course," Sykes said. "Makes sense. Had something like that on Skrakky, too. I was there before Vendalia. The whole damned planet is covered by factories, mills, strip mines, and everything is sulfur. The atmosphere wasn't so good anyway, so they figured there'd be no harm in polluting it, I guess. But now they can't get people to work there. Just corpse crews."

He finished his second beer and shoved the empty across the bar. Kenyon took it and refilled it. "It that what you do, Glen?" he said. "Work a corpse crew?"

Sykes nodded. "Yes," he said, a little belligerently. "Never knew that did you, Rob? Benner taught me how to handle. I've got my own crew now, three of them. And I've got money saved. I'm going places, Kenyon, just like I said I would."

Eddie, the stranger, laughed suddenly. "Going places? And you come back here? You're either crazy or stupid."

"I'm here for one night," Sykes said. "One night only. I leave tomorrow. I know all about New Pittsburg. My father came here to work a few months. He never left. But I left. And I'll leave again. This place isn't getting its claws into me."

Eddie smirked and went back to his drink. Sal nodded. "Keep thinking that way," she said. "Get out while you can."

“You don’t have to warn me. I was born here, remember?”

“Yeah,” said Sal. “But it’s worse now. When I got here, I was staying just long enough to earn passage money. Figured it’d be easy. I had a five-crew. A five-crew. dammit!”

Sykes smiles: the cold version. He remembered Sal better now. The woman had been a new arrival when he left, a cool swaggering independent handler who was going to teach the natives how to deal with the Company.

“I’ll bet you had trouble finding work,” Sykes said.

Sal’s face twisted with unreadable emotion. “Oh, I got work all right. But not until I was nearly flat. The Company waited until I was desperate, then they offered me mine work.”

“And you jumped at it,” Sykes said.

“Damn right,” Sal said. She laughed, a thin cracky sound that grated on the ears. “Pay wasn’t bad. Regular corpse handler fees, plus day labor for five deadmen.”

Sykes didn’t know the details, but he could guess the rest of the script. It was a very old story, and fools like Sal were always around to star in it. His father had played the lead once, in an earlier version.

“Nobody ever told me expenses would be so damned high,” Sal continued bitterly. “Rent. Depot fees. Imported food, ‘cause nothing grows on this muckhole. Even though I was working, the money seemed to go as fast as I got it. And the work was rough on the corpses.”

“It always it,” Sykes said. He’d learned that long ago, but big mouths like Mueller and the Slob never quite understood what was being done to them. “The Company gives the dirty jobs and the risk to the independent crews. The safe jobs go to Company corpses under hired handlers.”

“One of my corpses had a hand chewed off by an automole the first week. The first week! Year later, I lose two of my crew in a mine flood.”

“Tough.”

Sal, encouraged, lifted her drink, continued. “I still had three corpses, a little money, but the mine work was getting to me. I tried for a transfer. The Company offered me a deal. They’d move me to the mills if I sold them a corpse. So I did.”

Sykes was getting bored by the hard-luck story. “That was stupid,” he said. “Not unusual, mind you. But, stupid.”

Sal squinted at him, half puzzled. She’d expected sympathy. It was a New Pittsburg tradition for the handlers to sit around in bars and cry over what the Company had done to them. But Sykes refused to play.

“You don’t know what it’s like down there, Sykes,” Sal said, a little uncertainly. “The rain seeps down into the ground, and you’re knee deep in water most of the time. And it’s hot. Suffocating. The machinery is junk – old, unreliable, no safety precautions. I’ve seen more than one automole go berserk and chew up its crew instead of rock.”

Kenyon had been listening to the whole exchange. “It’s the same junk your father worked with, Glen, only older,” the barkeep said while refilling his glass. “The Company’s been cutting corners, running things even cheaper than before. Ramshackle machinery, corpse labor, dirt wages – all part of it.”

Sykes sipped the beer carefully and put it down with a smug smile. “Sure,” he said. “But none of that’s new. You just have to know how to deal with it.” He turned back to Sal. “You don’t have to go on. Just tell me how many corpses you’ve got left?”

“None.” She said reluctantly. “I’m a hired handler.”

“And you had a five crew,” Sykes said. His voice was a whip. “So what did you do? Sold them one by one, let the money slip away. If you’d had any brains, you would have sold them all at once. Gotten enough money for a ticket offworld.”

“A handler don’t sell her crew,” Sal said stubbornly. “Not if it can be helped.”

“Here it *can’t* be helped. How long does any independent last on New Pittsburg? You stay here, the only question is whether you do it smart or stupid. You did it stupid.”

Sal’s face, already blurred by drink, got ugly. “You talk smart, but your father didn’t do much better from all I hear.”

“No,” Sykes admitted. He was getting a bit drunk himself. “I did, though. I got out. I left New Pittsburg.”

That shut Sal up. Kenyon, sensing the strain, took over and led the talk to safer channels. “Where you going now, Glen?” he asked.

“Out along the Arm,” Sykes said. “They just opened up a new world out there, a place called Slagg. The settlement company is looking for handlers. I hear it’s awful hot, but the money is good. I figure I’ll try that for a while, then move on. To Mountainholme, maybe. I’ve heard a lot about it. A resort planet. They say it’s really nice. Maybe I’ll settle there.”

Rob Kenyon was polishing a glass, looking thoughtful. “As a handler?” he said. Sykes’ grin had no humor; he knew what Kenyon meant. Deadmen were barred from Mountainholme. And handlers, though admitted, were treated icily. It was the same on most of the ‘civilized’ worlds. The good citizens called corpse handlers “meatminds” – though not to their faces – and saw the whole profession as unclear. Old Earth was like that too. And Newholme and Silversky and Zephyr. All the older, richer colonies, in fact. On those mature worlds, any sort of capital punishment was unheard of, and the particular brand used to fashion deadmen was considered particularly grisly.

In a way, it was ironic. The process had originally been discovered on Old Earth itself, almost by accident. A man, his brain smashed out by a bullet, had reached a medical center while his body was still alive. *He* was dead, hopelessly; but the doctors decided to try to keep the still-healthy body alive for possible use in a brain transplant. The first, experimental pseudomind was installed. And it worked; the body lived.

Only then, before any call came for a brain transplant, one experimenter tried fitting a psionic circuit to the pseudomind. He got a human robot; he called it a deadman. Later, corpse.

More corpses were made, better ones, after that. The uses were obvious. But so were the reactions. The experimenters suddenly became pariahs. One medical center after another stopped research. And, less

than five years after the process had been discovered, Old Earth banned it. Newholme, its oldest daughter, followed suit. And the others, one by one.

But not *all* the others. The newer worlds – far-out ones, the untamed ones, the unpleasant ones – needed hands badly. Corpse crews were welcomes. There the process was continued, in the hands of medical paraprofessionals who came to be corpse techs. They created deadmen, and tended them, but pseudomind research stopped; the colonial techs lacked the sophistication for that.

The oldest corpse was less than a century old, but already institutions had arisen. Deadman depots. Corpseyards. Meathouses. Deadman offenses. The corpse crews took over the work that was too disagreeable for men and too hard for all but the most expensive machines. They became the cheapest, crudest labor of all.

Crude. That was the word for corpse labor. And to many, for corpse handlers. That was why Sykes would not be welcomed on Mountainholme. That was why they'd whisper "meatmind" and ghoul behind his back. But he still intended to go.

"I'm not always going to be a handler," he told Kenyon, sharply. "Just for a while. Until I get enough money together. Then I'll go to Mountainholme and take up something else." He smiled. "Maybe I'll be a bartender."

Kenyon was looking at him. "Your father didn't want you to be a handler at all," he said. "That's why he wouldn't teach you."

Sykes shrugged. "He should have tried teaching me something else, then. Instead he sold all his corpses, scrimped away his life as a hired handler, and died. That did me a lot of good. Left me here on New Pittsburg with nothing."

"Money," Kenyon said. "He left you some money."

"Not nearly enough for passage offplanet," Sykes said. "I got that myself, my own ways."

"You're right, Glen. I can't argue with you. But your father meant well. Didn't want you to wind up on New Pittsburg, not one bit, not one moment. He just didn't know how to get you off, is all." He smiled. "That you did by yourself. You're sort of famous, you know. The guy that got away. I guess the rest of us could do it too, if we really tried. But we've built up ties. And they're hard to cut. You're different, I guess. You were always a loner."

Sykes acknowledged that with a nod. "I said I'd get away, and I did." He looked very pleased.

Kenyon sighed, looked at him strangely, and reached for his glass to fill it once again. Just then there was a sound at the door. A group of men shuffled in out of the rain, led by a huge grizzly of a man in a handler's coverall. He took one look at Sykes and roared. "*Glen!* You goddamn little asshole, you! What-in-the-hell are *you* doing back here?"

Sykes looked at him and smiled his second smile, the real one. "Hi, Mueller," he said, laughing. "You haven't changed a bit..."

They drank until closing, him and Mueller and the Andersons, who came in later, and others, friends and enemies and people that Sykes had long ago forgotten. Then they went to Kenyon's apartment

behind the tavern and drank some more, and big mouth Mueller laughed uproariously and told stories about the old days and dirty jokes about his corpses and asked Sykes what the tail was like on Vendalia and Skrakky. Then, finally, Mueller passed out and the others left and Sykes got some sleep.

But he was up before dawn. He woke Kenyon and spoke to him briefly, borrowing a worn raincape and asking directions. He said goodbye, too. That was his last night on New Pittsburg.

The graveyard was way beyond the town, sprawling over two hills and the valley in between. Sykes walked there, in the rain, thinking. The tombstones had been stones, in the old days. Now they cast hem of the same grey plastoid they used for the sidewalks. The constant rustrain had eaten away at them, and already the letters were dissolving. In another three years, they'd be gone.

But Sykes found the right marker; a pitted slab graven with the name DONALD SYKES. He cursed the plastoid tombstone, and the Company, and New Pittsburg. And he stood there silent in his cape, while the rain fell around him and bit at bare skin, and he wondered briefly how they told this man-grave from the ones they dug for corpses. Then he realized; they didn't.

He stayed a long time. It was, after all, his first visit.

Finally he turned and headed back towards the town, and the depot. He had corpses to pick up, a ship to catch, a world waiting. They buried his father here. But not him. Not him. He was the one that got away.

Sykes the corpse handler thought on that, and smiled, on the long walk back to his deadmen.

Override

The only way to break free of a controlling force is to first recognize exactly what that force is.

Dusk was settling softly over the High Lakes as Kabaraijian and his crew made their way home from the caves. It was a calm, quiet dusk; a twilight blended of green waters and mellow night winds and the slow fading of Grotto's gentle sun. From the rear of his launch, Kabaraijian watched it fall, and listened to the sounds of twilight over the purring of the engine.

Grotto was a quiet world, but the sounds were there, if you knew how to listen. Kabaraijian knew. He sat erect in the back of the boat, a slight figure with swarthy skin and long black hair and brown eyes that drifted dreamy. One thin hand rested on his knee, the other, forgotten, on the motor. And his ears listened; to the bubbling of the water in the wake of the launch, and the swish-splash of the lakeleapers breaking surface, and the wind moving the trailing green branches of the trees along the near shore. In time, he'd hear the nightflyers, too, but they were not yet up.

There were four in the boat, but only Kabaraijian listened or heard. The others, bigger men with pasty faces and vacant eyes, were long past hearing. They wore the dull gray coveralls of dead men, and there was a steel plate in the back of each man's skull. Sometimes, when his corpse controller was on, Kabaraijian could listen with their ears, and see with their eyes. But that was work, hard work, and not worth it. The sights and sounds a corpse handler felt through his crew were pale echoes of real sensation, seldom useful and never pleasurable.

And now, Grotto's cooling dusk, was an off-time. So Kabaraijian's corpse controller was off, and his mind, disengaged from the dead men, rested easy in sits own body. The launch moved purposefully along the lake shore, but Kabaraijian's thoughts wandered lazily, when he thought at all. Mostly he just sat, and watched the water and the trees, and listened. He'd worked the corpse crew hard that day, and now he was drained and empty. Thought—thought especially—was more effort than he was prepared to give.

Better to just linger with the evening.

It was a long, quiet voyage, across two big lakes and one small one, through a cave, and finally up a narrow and swift-running river. Kabaraijian turned up the power then, and the trip grew noisier as the launch sliced a path through the river's flow. Night had settled before he reached the station, a rambling structure of blue-black stone set by the river's edge. But the office windows still glowed with a cheery yellow light.

A long dock of native silverwood fronted the river, and a dozen launches identical to Kabaraijian's were already tied up for the night. But there were still empty berths. Kabaraijian took one of them, and guided the boat into it.

When the launch was secure, he slung his collection box under one arm, and hopped out onto the dock. His free hand went to his belt, and thumbed the corpse controller. Vague sense blurs drifted into his

mind, but Kabaraijian shunted them aside, and shook the dead men alive with an unheard shout. The corpses rose, one by one, and stepped out of the launch. Then they followed Kabaraijian to the station.

Munson was waiting inside the office—a fat, scruffy man with gray hair and wrinkles around his eyes and a fatherly manner. He had his feet up on his desk, and was reading a novel. When Kabaraijian entered, he smiled and sat up and put down the book, inserting his leather placemark carefully. "Lo, Matt," he said. "Why are you always the last one in?"

"Because I'm usually the last one out," Kabaraijian said, smiling. It was his newest line. Munson asked the same question every night, and always expected Kabaraijian to come up with a fresh answer. He seemed only moderately pleased by this one.

Kabaraijian set the collection box down on Munson's desk and opened it. "Not a bad day," he said.

"Four good stones, and twelve smaller ones."

Munson scooped a handful of small, grayish rocks from inside the padded metal box and studied them. Right now they weren't much to look at. But cut and polished they'd be something else again: swirlstones. They were gems without fire, but they had their own beauty. Good ones looked like crystals of moving fog, full of soft colors and softer mysteries and dreams.

Munson nodded, and dropped the stones back into the box. "Not bad," he said. "You always do good, Matt. You know where to look."

"The rewards of coming back slow and easy," Kabaraijian said. "I look around me."

Munson put the box under his desk, and turned to his computer console, a white plastic intruder in the wood-paneled room. He entered the swirlstones into the records, and looked back up. "You want to wash down your corpses?"

Kabaraijian shook his head. "Not tonight. I'm tired. I'll just flop them for now."

"Sure," said Munson. He rose, and opened the door behind his desk. Kabaraijian followed him, and the three dead men followed Kabaraijian. Behind the office were barracks, long and low-roofed, with row on row of simple wooden bunks. Most of them were full. Kabaraijian guided his dead men to three empty ones and maneuvered them in. Then he thumbed his controller off. The echoes in his head blinked out, and the corpses sagged heavily into the bunks.

Afterwards, he chatted with Munson for a few minutes back in the office. Finally the old man went back to his novel, and Kabaraijian back to the cool night.

A row of company scooters sat in back of the station, but Kabaraijian left them alone, preferring the ten-minute walk from the river to the settlement. He covered the forest road with an easy, measured pace, pausing here and there to brush aside vines and low branches. It was always a pleasant walk. The nights were calm, the breezes fragrant with the fruity scent of local trees and heavy with the songs of the nightflyers.

The settlement was bigger and brighter and louder than the river station; a thick clot of houses and bars and shops built alongside the spaceport. There were a few structures of wood and stone, but most of the settlers were still content with the plastic prefabs the company had given them free.

Kabaraijian drifted through the new-paved streets, to one of the outnumbered wooden buildings.

There was a heavy wooden sign over the tavern door, but no lights. Inside he found candles and heavy, stuffed chairs, and a real log fire. It was a cozy place; the oldest bar on Grotto, and still the favorite watering hole for corpse handlers and hunters and other river station personnel.

A loud shout greeted him when he entered. "Hey! Matt! Over here!"

Kabaraïjian found the voice, and followed it to a table in the corner, where Ed Cochran was nursing a mug of beer. Cochran, like Kabaraïjian, wore the blue-and-white tunic of a corpse handler. He was tall and lean, with a thin face that grinned a lot and a mass of tangled red-blond hair.

Kabaraïjian sank gratefully into the chair opposite him. Cochran grinned. "Beer?" he asked. "We could split a pitcher."

"No thanks. I feel like wine tonight. Something rich and mellow and slow."

"How'd it go?" said Cochran.

Kabaraïjian shrugged. "O.K.," he said. "Four nice stones, a dozen little ones. Munson gave me a good estimate. Tomorrow should be better. I found a nice new place." He turned toward the bar briefly, and gestured. The bartender nodded, and the wine and glasses arrived a few minutes later.

Kabaraïjian poured and sipped while Cochran discussed his day. It hadn't gone well; only six stones, none of them very big.

"You've got to range farther," Kabaraïjian told him. "The caves around here have been pretty well worked out. But the High Lakes go on and on. Find someplace new."

"Why bother?" Cochran said, frowning. "Don't get to keep them anyway. What's the percentage in knocking yourself out?"

Kabaraïjian twirled the wine glass slowly in a thin, dark hand, and watched the dream-red depths. "Poor Ed," he said, in a voice half-sadness and half-mockery. "All you see is the work. Grotto is a pretty planet. I don't mind the extra miles, Ed, I enjoy them. I'd probably travel in my off-time if they didn't pay me to do it. The fact that I get bigger swirlstones and my estimates go up—well, that's extra gravy."

Cochran smiled and shook his head. "You're crazy, Matt," he said affectionately. "Only corpse handler in the universe who'd be happy if they paid him off with scenery."

Kabaraïjian smiled too, a slight lifting at the corners of his mouth. "Philistine," he said accusingly.

Cochran ordered another beer. "Look, Matt, you've got to be practical. Sure, Grotto is O.K., but you're not gonna be here all your life." He set down his beer, and pulled up the sleeve of his tunic, to flash his heavy wristlet. The gold shone softly in the candlelight, and the sapphires danced with dark blue flame. "Junk like this was valuable once," Cochran said, "before they learned how to synthesize it. They'll crack swirlstones, too, Matt. You know they will. They already have people working on it.

So maybe you've got two years left, or three. But what then? Then they won't need corpse handlers anymore. So you'll move on, no better off than when you first landed."

"Not really," said Kabaraïjian. "The station pays pretty good, and my estimates haven't been bad.

I've got some money put away. Besides, maybe I won't move on. I like Grotto. Maybe I'll stay, and join the colonists, or something."

"Doing what? Farming? Working in an office? Don't give me that crap, Matt. You're a corpse handler, always will be. And in a couple years Grotto won't need corpses."

Kabaraian sighed. "So?" he said. "So?"

Cochran leaned forward. "So have you thought about what I told you?"

"Yes," Kabaraian said. "But I don't like it. I don't think it would work, first of all. Spaceport security is tight to keep people from smuggling out swirlstones, and you want to do just that. And even if it would work, I don't want any part of it. I'm sorry, Ed."

"I think it would work," Cochran said stubbornly. "The spaceport people are human. They can be tempted. Why should the company get all the swirlstones when we do all the work?"

"They've got the concession," Kabaraian said.

Cochran waved him silent. "Yeah, sure. So what? By what right? We deserve some, for ourselves, while the damn things are still valuable."

Kabaraian sighed again, and poured himself another glass of wine. "Look," he said, lifting the glass to his lips, "I don't quarrel with that. Maybe they should pay us more, or give us an interest in the swirlstones. But it's not worth the risk. We'll lose our crews if they catch us. And we'll get expelled."

"I don't want that, Ed, and I won't risk it. Grotto is too good to me, and I'm not going to throw it away. You know, some people would say we're pretty lucky. Most corpse handlers never get to work a place like Grotto. They wind up on the assembly lines of Skrakky, or in the mines of New Pittsburg. I've seen those places. No thanks. I'm not going to risk returning to that sort of life."

Cochran threw imploring eyes up to the ceiling, and spread his hands helplessly. "Hopeless," he said, shaking his head. "Hopeless." Then he returned to his beer. Kabaraian was smiling.

But his amusement died short minutes later, when Cochran suddenly stiffened and grimaced across the table. "Damn," he said. "Bartling. What the hell does he want here?"

Kabaraian turned toward the door, where the newcomer was standing and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He was a big man, with an athletic frame that had gone to pot over the years and now sported a considerable paunch. He had dark hair streaked with white and a bristling black beard, and he was wearing a fashionable multicolored tunic.

Four others had entered behind him, and now stood flanking him on either side. They were younger men than he was, and bigger, with hard faces and impressive builds. The bodyguards made sense. Lowell Bartling was widely known for his dislike of corpse handlers, and the tavern was full of them.

Bartling crossed his arms, and looked around the room slowly. He was smirking. He started to speak.

Almost before he got the first word out of his mouth, he was interrupted. One of the men along the bar emitted a loud, rude noise, and laughed. "Hiya, Bartling," he said. "What are you doing down here? Thought you didn't associate with us low-lifes?"

Bartling's face tightened, but his smirk was untouched. "Normally I don't, but I wanted the pleasure of making this announcement personally."

"You're leaving Grotto!" someone shouted. There was laughter all along the bar. "I'll drink to that," another voice added.

"No," said Bartling. "No, friend, you are." He looked around, savoring the moment. "Bartling Associates has just acquired the swirlstone concession, I'm happy to tell you. I take over management of the river station at the end of the month. And, of course, my first act will be to terminate the employment of all the corpse handlers currently under contract."

Suddenly the room was very silent, as the implications of that sank in. In the corner in the back of the room, Cochran rose slowly to his feet. Kabaraijian remained seated, stunned.

"You can't do that," Cochran said belligerently. "We've got contracts."

Bartling turned to face him. "Those contracts can be broken," he said, "and they will be."

"You son of a bitch," someone said.

The bodyguard tensed. "Watch who you call names, meatmind," one of them answered. All around the room, men started getting to their feet.

Cochran was livid with anger. "Damn you, Bartling," he said. "Who the hell do you think you are? You've got no right to run us off the planet."

"I have every right," Bartling said. "Grotto is a good, clean, beautiful planet. There's no place here for your kind. It was a mistake to bring you in, and I've said so all along. Those things you work with contaminate the air. And you're even worse. You work with those things, those corpses, voluntarily, for money. You disgust me. You don't belong on Grotto. And now I'm in a position to see that you leave." He paused, then smiled. "Meatmind," he added, spitting out the word.

"Bartling, I'm going to knock your head off," one of the handlers bellowed. There was a roar of agreement. Several men started forward at once.

And jerked to a sudden stop when Kabaraijian interjected a soft, "No, wait," over the general hubbub. He hardly raised his voice at all, but it still commanded attention in the room of shouting men.

He walked through the crowd and faced Bartling, looking much calmer than he felt. "You realize that without corpse labor your costs will go way up," he said in a steady, reasonable voice, "and your profits down."

Bartling nodded. "Of course I realize it. I'm willing to take the loss. We'll use men to mine the swirlstones. They're too beautiful for corpses, anyway."

"You'll be losing money for nothing," Kabaraijian said.

"Hardly. I'll get rid of your stinking corpses."

Kabaraijian cracked a thin smile. "Maybe some. But not all of us, Mr. Bartling. You can take away our jobs, perhaps, but you can't throw us off Grotto. I for one refuse to go."

"Then you'll starve."

"Don't be so melodramatic. I'll find something else to do. You don't own all of Grotto. And I'll keep my corpses. Dead men can be used for a lot of things. It's just that we haven't thought of them all yet."

Bartling's smirk had vanished suddenly. "If you stay," he said, fixing Kabaraijian with a hard stare, "I promise to make you very, very sorry."

Kabaraijian laughed. "Really? Well, personally, I promise to send one of my dead men by your house every night after you go to bed, to make hideous faces at the window and moan." He laughed again, louder. Cochran joined him, then others. Soon the whole tavern was laughing.

Bartling turned red and began a slow burn. He came here to taunt his enemies, to crow his triumph, and now they were laughing at him. Laughing in the face of victory, cheating him. He seethed a long minute, then turned and walked furiously out the door. His bodyguards followed.

The laughter lingered a while after his exit, and several of the other handlers slapped Kabaraijian on the back as he made his way back to his seat. Cochran was happy about it, too. "You really took the old man apart," he said when they reached the corner table.

But Kabaraijian wasn't smiling anymore. He slumped down into his seat heavily, and reached almost immediately for the wine. "I sure did," he said slowly, between sips. "I sure did."

Cochran looked at him curiously. "You don't seem too happy."

"No," said Kabaraijian. He studied his wine. "I'm having second thoughts. That insufferable bigot riled me, made me want to get to him. Only I wonder if I can pull it off. What can corpses do on Grotto?"

His eyes wandered around the tavern, which had suddenly become very somber. "It's sinking in," he told Cochran. "I'll bet they're all talking about leaving . . ."

Cochran had stopped grinning. "Some of us will stay," he said uncertainly. "We can farm with the corpses, or something."

Kabaraijian looked at him. "Uuh. Machinery is more efficient for farming. And dead men are too clumsy for anything but the crudest kind of labor, much too slow for hunting." He poured more wine, and mused aloud. "They're O.K. for cheap factory labor, or running an automole in a mine. But Grotto doesn't have any of that. They can hack out swirlstones with a vibrodrill, only Bartling is taking that away from us." He shook his head. "I don't know, Ed," he continued. "It's not going to be easy. And maybe it'll be impossible. With the swirlstone concession under his belt, Bartling is bigger than the settlement company now."

"That was the idea. The company sets us up, and we buy it out as we grow."

"True. But Bartling grew a little too fast. He can really start throwing his weight around now. It wouldn't surprise me if he amended the charter, to keep corpses off-planet. That would force us out."

"Can he get away with that?" Cochran was getting angry again, and his voice rose slightly.

"Maybe," Kabaraijian said, "if we let him. I wonder . . ." He sloshed his wine thoughtfully. "You think this deal of his is final?"

Cochran looked puzzled. "He said he had it."

"Yes. I don't suppose he'd crow about it if it wasn't in his pocket. Still, I'm curious what the company would do if someone made them a better offer."

"Who?"

"Us, maybe?" Kabaraijian sipped his wine and considered that. "Get all the handlers together, everybody puts in whatever they have. That should give us a fair sum. Maybe we could buy out the river station ourselves. Or something else, if Bartling has the swirlstones all locked up. It's an idea."

"Nah, it'd never work," Cochran said. "Maybe you've got some money, Matt, but I sure as hell don't.

Spent most of it here. Besides, even the guys that have money, you'd never be able to get them together."

"Maybe not," Kabaraijian said. "But it's worth trying. Organizing against Bartling is the only way we're going to be able to keep ourselves on Grotto in the long run."

Cochran drained his beer, and signaled for another. "Nah," he said. "Bartling's too big. He'll slap you down hard if you bother him too much. I got a better idea."

"Swirlstone smuggling," Kabaraijian said, smiling.

"Yeah," Cochran said with a nod. "Maybe now you'll reconsider. If Bartling's gonna throw us off-planet, at least we can take some of his swirlstones with us. That'd set us up good wherever we go."

"You're incorrigible," Kabaraijian said. "But I'll bet half the handlers on Grotto will try the same thing now. Bartling will expect that. He'll have the spaceport screwed up tight when we 'start leaving. He'll catch you, Ed. And you'll lose your crew, or worse. Bartling might even try to force through dead-man laws, and start exporting corpses."

Cochran looked uneasy at that. Corpse handlers saw 'too much of dead men to relish the idea of becoming one. They tended to cluster on planets without dead-man laws, where capital crimes still drew prison terms or "clean" executions. Grotto was a clean planet now, but laws can change.

"I might lose my crew anyway, Matt," Cochran said. "If Bartling throws us out, I'll have to sell some of my corpses for passage money."

Kabaraijian smiled. "You still have a month, even with the worst. And there are plenty of swirlstones out there for the finding." He raised his glass. "Come. To Grotto. It's a lovely planet, and we may stay here yet."

Cochran shrugged and lifted his beer. "Yeah," he said. But his grin didn't hide his worry.

Kabaraijian reported to the station early the next morning, when Grotto's sun was fighting to dispel the river mists. The row of empty launches was still tied to the dock, bobbing up and down in the rapidly-thinning fog.

Munson was inside the office, as always. So, surprisingly, was Cochran. Both of them looked up when Kabaraijian entered.

"Morning, Matt," Munson said gravely. "Ed's been telling me about last night." Today, for some reason, he looked his age. "I'm sorry, Matt. I didn't know anything about it."

Kabaraïjian smiled. "I never thought you did. If you do hear anything, though, let me know. We're not going to go without a fight." He looked at Cochran. "What are you doing here so early? Usually you're not up until the crack of noon."

Cochran grinned. "Yeah. Well, I figured I'd start early. I'm going to need good estimates this month, if I want to save my crew."

Munson had dug two collection boxes out from under his desk. He handed them to the two corpse handlers, and nodded. "Back room's open," he said. "You can pick up your dead men whenever you like."

Kabaraïjian started to circle the desk, but Cochran grabbed his arm. "I think I'll try way east," he said. "Some caves there that haven't really been hit yet. Where you going?"

"West," said Kabaraïjian. "I found a good new place, like I told you."

Cochran nodded. They went to the back room together, and thumbed their controllers. Five dead men stumbled from their bunks and followed them, shuffling, from the office. Kabaraïjian thanked Munson before he left. The old man had washed down his corpses anyway, and fed them.

The mists were just about gone when they reached the dock. Kabaraïjian marched his crew into the boat and got set to cast off. But Cochran stopped him, looking troubled.

"Uh—Matt," he said, standing on the dock and staring down into the launch. "This new place—you say it's real good?"

Kabaraïjian nodded, squinting. The sun was just clearing the treetops, and framing Cochran's head. "Can I talk you into splitting?" Cochran said, with difficulty. It was an unusual request. The practice was for each handler to range alone, to find and mine his own swirlstone cave. "I mean, with only a month left, you probably won't have time to get everything, not if the place is as good as you say. And I need good estimates, I really do."

Kabaraïjian could see that it wasn't an easy favor to ask. He smiled. "Sure," he said. "There's plenty there. Get your launch and follow me."

Cochran nodded and forced a grin. He walked down the dock to his launch, his dead men trailing behind.

Going downriver was easier than going up, and faster. Kabaraïjian hit the lake in short order, and sent his launch surging across the sparkling green surface in a spray of foam. It was an exhilarating morning, with a bright sun, and a brisk wind that whipped the water into tiny waves. Kabaraïjian felt good, despite the events of the previous night. Grotto did that to him. Out on the High Lakes, somehow, he felt that he could beat Bartling.

He'd run into similar problems before, on other worlds. Bartling wasn't alone in his hatred. Ever since the first time they'd ripped a man's brain from his skull and replaced it with a dead man's synthabrain, there had been people screaming that the practice was a perversion, and the handlers tainted and unclean. He'd gotten used to the prejudice; it was part of corpse handling. And he'd beaten it before. He could beat Bartling now.

The first part of the voyage was the quickest. The two launches streaked over two big local lakes, past shores lined thickly with silverwood trees and vine-heavy dangles. But then they began to slow, as the lakes grew smaller and choked with life, and the country wilder. Along the banks, the stately silverwoods and curious dangles began to give way to the dense red-and-black chaos of firebriar brambles, and a species of low, gnarled tree that never had received a proper name. The vegetation grew on ground increasingly hilly and rocky, and finally mountainous.

Then they began to pass through the caves.

There were hundreds of them, literally, and they honeycombed the mountains that circled the settlement on all sides. The caves had never been mapped thoroughly. There were far too many of them, and they all seemed to connect with each other, forming a natural maze of incredible complexity. Most of them were still half-full of water; they'd been carved from the soft mountain rock by the streams and rivers that still ran through them.

A stranger could easily get lost in the caves, but strangers never came there. And the corpse handlers never got lost. This was their country. This was where the swirlstones waited, cloaked in rock and darkness.

The launches were all equipped with lights. Kabaraijian switched his on as soon as they hit the first cave, and slowed. Cochran, following close behind, did likewise. The channels that ran through the nearer caves were well-known, but shallow, and it didn't pay to risk tearing out the bottom of your boat.

The channel was narrow at first, and the glistening, damp walls of soft greenish stone seemed to press in on them from either side. But gradually the walls moved farther and farther back, finally peeling away entirely as the stream carried the two launches into a great vaulted underground chamber. The cavern was as big as a spaceport, its ceiling lost in the gloom overhead. Before long the walls vanished into the dark too, and the launches traveled in two small bubbles of light across the gently-stirring surface of a cold black lake.

Then, ahead of them, the walls took form again. But this time, instead of one passage, there were many. The stream had carved one entrance, but a good half-dozen exits.

Kabaraijian knew the cave, however. Without hesitating, he guided his boat into the widest passage, on the extreme right. Cochran followed in his wake. Here the waters flowed down an incline, and the boats began to pick up speed again. "Be careful," Kabaraijian warned Cochran at one point. "The ceiling comes down here." Cochran acknowledged the shout with a wave of his hand.

The warning came barely in time. While the walls were increasingly farther apart, the stone roof above them was moving steadily closer, giving the illusion that the waters were rising. Kabaraijian remembered the way he'd sweated the first time he'd taken this passage; the boat had been going too fast, and he'd feared getting pinched in by the ceiling, and overwhelmed by the climbing waters.

But it was an idle fear. The roof sank close enough to scrape their heads, but no closer. And then it began to rise again to a decent height. Meanwhile, the channel widened still more, and soft sand shelves appeared along either wall.

Finally there was a branching in the passage, and this time Kabaraijian chose the left-hand way. It was small and dark and narrow, with barely enough room for the launch to squeeze through. But it was also short, and after a brief journey, it released them to a second great cavern.

They moved across the chamber quickly, and entered its twin under a grotesque stone arch. Then came yet another twisting passage, and more forks and turns. Kabaraijjan led them calmly, hardly thinking, hardly having to think. These were his caves; this particular section of undermountain was his domain, where he'd worked and mined for months. He knew where he was going. And finally he got there. The chamber was big, and haunting. Far above the shallow waters, the roof had been eaten through by erosion, and light poured in from three great gashes in the rock. It gave the cavern a dim greenish glow, as it bounced off the pale green walls and the wide, shallow pool.

The launches spilled from a thin crack in the cave wall, carried by rushes of cold black water. The water turned green when it hit the light, and tumbled and warmed and slowed. The boats slowed, too, and moved leisurely across the huge chamber toward the white sand beaches that lined the sides.

Kabaraijjan pulled up by one such beach, and hopped out into the shallow water, dragging his launch up onto the sand. Cochran followed his example, and they stood side by side when both boats were safely beached.

"Yeah," said Cochran, looking around. "It's nice. And it figures. Leave it to you to find a pretty place to work, while the rest of us are up to our ankles in water, clutching lights."

Kabaraijjan smiled. "I found it yesterday," he said. "Completely unworked. Look." He pointed at the wall. "I barely started." There was a pile of loose stones in a rough semicircle around the area he'd been working, and a large bite missing from the rock. But most of the wall was untouched, stretching away from them in sheets of shimmering green.

"You sure no one else knows about this place?" Cochran asked. "Reasonably. Why?"

Cochran shrugged. "When we were coming through the caves, I could have sworn I heard another launch behind us somewhere."

"Probably echoes," Kabaraijjan said. He looked toward his launch. "Anyway, we better get going." He hit his corpse controller, and the three still figures in the boat began to move.

He stood stock-still on the sand, watching them. And as he watched, somewhere in the back of his head, he was also watching himself with their eyes. They rose stiffly, and two of them climbed out onto the sand. The third walked to the chest in the front of the launch, and began unloading the equipment; vibrodrills and picks and shovels. Then, his arms full, he climbed down and joined the others.

None of them were really moving, of course. It was all Kabaraijjan. It was Kabaraijjan who moved their legs, and made their hands clasp and their arms reach. It was Kabaraijjan, his commands picked up by controller and magnified by synthabrain, who put life into the bodies of the dead men. The synthabrain keep the automatic functions going, but it was the corpse handler who gave the corpse its will.

It wasn't easy, and it was far from perfect. The sense impressions thrown back to the handler were seldom useful; mostly he had to watch his corpses to know what they were doing. The manipulation was seldom graceful; corpses moved slowly and clumsily, and fine work was beyond them. A corpse could swing a mallet, but even the best handler couldn't make a dead man thread a needle, or speak.

With a bad handler, a corpse could hardly move at all. It took coordination to run even one dead man, if the handler was doing anything himself. He had to keep the commands to the corpse separate from the commands to his own muscles. That was easy enough for most, but the task grew increasingly complex as the crew grew larger. The record for one handler was twenty-six corpses; but all he'd done was

march them, in step. When the dead men weren't all doing the same thing, the corpse handler's work became much more challenging.

Kabaraïjian had a three-crew; all top meat, corpses in good condition. They'd been big men, and they still were; Kabaraïjian paid premiums for food to keep his property in good condition. One had dark hair and a scar along a cheek, another was blond and young and freckled, the third had mousy brown locks. Other than that, they were interchangeable; all about the same height and weight and build.

Corpses don't have personality. They lose that with their minds.

Cochran's crew, climbing out onto the sand in compliance with his work orders, was less impressive.

There were only two of them, and neither was a grade-one specimen. The first corpse was brawny enough, with wide shoulders and rippling muscles. But his legs were twisted matchsticks, and he stumbled often and walked more slowly than even the average corpse. The second dead man was reedy and middle-aged, bald and under-muscled. Both were grimy. Cochran didn't believe in taking care of his crew the way Kabaraïjian did. It was a bad habit. Cochran had started as a paid handler working somebody else's corpses; upkeep hadn't been his concern.

Each of Kabaraïjian's crew bent and picked up a vibrodrill from the stack of equipment on the sand.

Then, parallel to each other, they advanced on the cave wall. The drills sank humming holes into the porous rock, and from each drill bite a network of thin cracks branched and grew.

The corpses drilled in unison until each drill was sunk nearly to its hilt, and the cracks had grown finger-wide. Then, almost as one, they withdrew the drills and discarded them in favor of picks. Work slowed. Crack by crack, the corpses attacked the wall, laboriously peeling off a whole layer of greenish stone. They swung the picks carefully, but with bone-jarring force, untiring, relentless. Incapable of pain, their bones could scarce feel the jars.

The dead men did all the work. Kabaraïjian stood behind, a slight, dark statue in the sand, with hands on hips and eyes hooded. He did nothing but watch. Yet he did all. Kabaraïjian was the corpses; the corpses were Kabaraïjian. He was one man in four bodies, and it was his hand that guided each blow, though he did not touch a tool.

Forty feet down the cave, Cochran and his crew had unpacked and set to work. But Kabaraïjian was barely conscious of them, though he could hear the hum of their vibrodrills and the hammering of their picks. His mind was with his corpses, chipping at his wall, alert for the telltale grayish glitter of a swirlstone node. It was draining work; demanding work; tense and nervous. It was a labor only corpse crews could do with real efficiency.

They'd tried other methods a few short years before, when men had first found Grotto and its caves.

The early settlers went after swirl-stones with automoles, tractor-like rockeaters that could chew up mountains. Problem was, they also chewed up the fragile, deep-buried swirlstones, which often went unrecognized until too late. The company discovered that careful hand labor was the only way to keep from chipping or shattering an excessive number of stones. And corpse hands were the cheapest hands you could buy.

Those hands were busy now, tense and sweating as the crew peeled whole sections of rock off the broken wall. The natural cleavage of the stone was vertical, which sped the work. Find a crack—force

in a pick—lean back and pull—and, with a snap, a flat chunk of rock came with you. Then find a new crack, and begin again.

Kabaraïjian watched unmoving as the wall came down, and the pile of green stone accumulated around the feet of his dead men. Only his eyes moved; flicking back and forth over the rock restlessly, alert for swirlstones but finding nothing. Finally he pulled the corpses back, and approached the wall himself. He touched it, stroked the stone, and frowned. The crew had ripped down an entire layer of rock, and had come up empty.

But that was hardly unusual, even in the best of caves. Kabaraïjian walked back to the sand's edge, and sent his crew back to work. They picked up vibrodrills and attacked the wall again.

Abruptly he was conscious of Cochran standing beside him, saying something. He could hardly make it out. It isn't easy to pay close attention when you're running three dead men. Part of his mind detached itself and began to listen.

Cochran was repeating himself. He knew that a handler at work wasn't likely to hear what he said the first time. "Matt," he was saying, "listen. I think I heard something. Faintly, but I heard it. It sounded like another launch."

That was serious. Kabaraïjian wrenched his mind loose from the dead men, and turned to give Cochran his full attention. The three vibrodrills died, one by one, and suddenly the soft slap of water against sand echoed loudly around them.

"A launch?" Cochran nodded.

"You sure?" Kabaraïjian said.

"Uh—no," said Cochran. "But I think I heard something. Same thing as before, when we were moving through the caves."

"I don't know," Kabaraïjian said, shaking his head. "Don't think it's likely, Ed. Why would anyone follow us? The swirlstones are everywhere, if you bother to look."

"Yeah," Cochran said. "But I heard something, and I thought I should tell you."

Kabaraïjian nodded. "All right," he said. "Consider me told. If anyone shows up, I'll point out a section of wall and let him work it."

"Yeah," Cochran said again. But somehow he didn't look satisfied. His eyes kept jumping back and forth, agitated. He wheeled and walked back down the sand, to the section of wall where his own corpses stood frozen.

Kabaraïjian turned back toward the rock, and his crew came alive again. The drills started humming, and once more the cracks spread out. Then, when the cracks were big enough, picks replaced drills, and another layer of stone started coming down.

But this time, something was behind it.

The corpses were ankle-deep in splinters of stone when Kabaraïjian saw it; a fist-sized chunk of gray nestled in the green. He stiffened at the sight of it, and the corpses froze in mid-swing. Kabaraïjian walked around them, and studied the swirlstone node.

It was a beauty; twice the size of the largest stone he'd ever brought in. Even damaged, it would be worth a fortune. But if he could pry it loose intact, his estimate would set a record. He was certain of that. They'd cut it as one stone. He could almost see it. An egg of crystalline fog, smoky and mysterious, where drifting veils of mist shrouded half-seen colors.

Kabaraïjian thought about it, and smiled. He touched the node lightly, and turned to call to Cochran. That saved his life.

The pick sliced through the air where his head had been and smashed against the wall with awful impact, barely missing the swirlstone node. Sparks and rock chips flew together. Kabaraïjian stood frozen. The corpse drew the pick back over its head for another swing.

Within, Kabaraïjian reeled, staggered. The pick swung down. Not at the wall; at him.

Then he moved, barely in time, throwing himself to one side. The blow missed by inches, and Kabaraïjian landed in the sand and scrambled quickly to his feet. Crouched and wary, he began to back away.

The corpse advanced on him, the pick held over his head. Kabaraïjian could hardly think. He didn't understand. The corpse that moved on him was dark-haired and scarred; his corpse. HIS corpse. HIS CORPSE!?

The corpse moved slowly. Kabaraïjian kept a safe distance. Then he looked behind him. His other two dead men were advancing from other directions. One held a pick. The other had a vibrodrill.

Kabaraïjian swallowed nervously, and stopped dead. The ring of corpses tightened around him. He screamed.

Down the beach, Cochran was looking at the tableau. He took one step toward Kabaraïjian. From behind him, there was a blur of something being swung, and a dull thud. Cochran spun with the blow, and landed face down in the sand. He did not get up. His barrel-chested, gimpy corpse stood over him, pick in hand, swinging again and again. His other corpse was moving down the cave, toward Kabaraïjian.

The scream was still echoing in the cave, but now Kabaraïjian was silent. He watched Cochran go down, and suddenly he moved, throwing himself at the dark-haired dead man. The pick descended, vicious but clumsy. Kabaraïjian dodged it. He bowled into the corpse, and both of them went down. The corpse was much slower getting up. By the time he did rise, Kabaraïjian was beyond him.

The corpse-handler moved back, step by slow step. His own crew was in front of him now, stumbling toward him with weapons raised. It was a chilling sight. Their arms moved, and they walked. But their eyes were blank and their faces were dead—DEAD! For the first time, Kabaraïjian understood the horror some people felt near dead men.

He looked over his shoulder. Both of Cochran's corpses were heading his way, armed. Cochran still had not risen. He lay with his face in the sand and the waters lapping at his boots.

His mind began to work again, in the short breather he was granted. His hand went to his belt. The controller was still on, still warm and humming. He tested it. He reached out, to his corpses, into them. He told them to stand still, to drop their tools, to freeze.

They continued to advance.

Kabaraïjian shivered. The controller was still working; he could still feel the echoes in his head. But somehow, the corpses weren't responding. He felt very cold.

And colder when it finally hit him, like ice water. Cochran's corpses hadn't responded either. Both crews had turned on their handlers.

Override!

He'd heard of such things. But he'd never seen one, or dreamt of seeing one. Override boxes were very expensive and even more illegal, contraband on any planet where corpse handling was allowed.

But now he was seeing one in action. Someone wanted to kill him. Someone was trying to do just that. Someone was using his own corpses against him, by means of an override box.

He threw himself at his corpses mentally, fighting for control, grappling for whatever had taken them over. But there was no struggle, nothing to come to grips with. The dead men simply failed to respond.

Kabaraïjian bent and picked up a vibrodrill.

He straightened quickly, spinning around to face Cochran's two corpses. The big one with the matchstick legs moved in, swinging its pick. Kabaraïjian checked the blow with the vibrodrill, holding it above him as a shield. The dead man brought the pick back again. Kabaraïjian activated the drill and drove it into the corpse's gut. There was an awful second of spurting blood and tearing flesh. There should have been a scream too, and agony. But there wasn't.

And the pick came down anyway.

Kabaraïjian's thrust had thrown the corpse's aim off, and the blow was a glancing one, but it still ripped his tunic half off his chest and clawed a bloody path from shoulder to stomach. Reeling, he staggered back against the wall, empty-handed.

The corpse came on, pick swinging up again, eyes blank. The vibrodrill transfixed it, still humming, and the blood came in wet red spurts. But the corpse came on.

No pain, Kabaraïjian thought, with the small part of his mind not frozen with terror. The blow wasn't immediately fatal, and the corpse can't feel it. It's bleeding to death, but it doesn't know it, doesn't care. It won't stop till it's dead. There's no pain!

The corpse was nearly on top of him. He dropped to the sand, grabbed a hunk of rock, and rolled.

Dead men are slow, woefully slow; their reflexes are long-distance ones. The blow was late and off-target. Kabaraïjian rolled into the corpse and knocked it down. Then he was on top of it, the rock clutched in his fist, hammering at the thing's skull, smashing it again and again, breaking through to the synthabrain.

Finally, the corpse stopped moving. But the others had reached him. Two picks swung almost simultaneously. One missed entirely. The other took a chunk out of his shoulder.

He grabbed the second pick, and twisted, fighting to stop it, losing. The corpses were stronger than he was, much stronger. The dead man wrenched the pick free and brought it back for another try.

Kabaraïjjan got to his feet, smashing into the corpse and sending it flailing. The others swung at him, grabbed at him. He didn't stay to fight. He ran. They pursued, slow and clumsy but somehow terrifying.

He reached the launch, seized it with both hands, and shoved. It slid reluctantly across the sand. He shoved again, and this time it moved more easily. He was drenched in blood and sweat, and his breath came in short gasps, but he kept shoving. His shoulder shrieked agony. He let it shriek, putting it to the side of the launch and finally getting the boat clear of the sand.

Then the corpses were on him again, swinging at him even as he climbed into the launch. He started the motor and flipped it to top speed. The boat responded. It took off in a sudden explosion of foam, slicing across the green waters toward the dark slit of safety in the far cavern wall. Kabaraïjjan sighed . . . and the corpse grabbed him.

It was in the boat. Its pick was buried uselessly in the wood, but it still had its hands, and those were enough. It wrapped those hands around his neck, and squeezed. He swung at it madly, smashing at its calm, empty face. It made no effort to ward off the blows. It ignored them. Kabaraïjjan hit it again and again, poked at the vacant eyes, hammered at its mouth until its teeth shattered.

But the fingers on his neck grew tighter and tighter, and not all his struggling could pry one loose.

Choking, he stopped kicking the corpse, and kicked the rudder control.

The launch veered wildly, leaning from side to side. The cave rushed past in a blur, and the walls moved in on them. Then came sudden impact, the shriek of tearing wood, and the short tumble from launch to water. Kabaraïjjan landed on top, but they both went under. The corpse held its grip through everything, dragging Kabaraïjjan down with it, still choking the life from his throat.

But Kabaraïjjan took a deep breath before the green closed over him. The corpse tried to breathe underwater. Kabaraïjjan helped it. He stuck both hands into its mouth and kept it open, making sure it got a good lungful of water.

The dead man died first. And its fingers weakened.

Finally, his lungs near bursting, Kabaraïjjan forced his way free, and kicked to the surface. The water was only chest high. He stood on the unmoving corpse, keeping it under while he sucked in great drafts of air.

The launch had impaled itself on a crest of jagged rocks that rose from the water off to one side of the exit. The passage from the cave was still at hand, outlined in shadow a few short feet away. But now, was it safety? Without a launch? Kabaraïjjan considered making his way out on foot, and gave up the idea instantly. There were too many miles to go before he reached simple daylight, let alone the safety of the river station. It would mean being hunted in the darkness by whatever remained of his corpse crew. The prospect sent a chill down his back. No, better to stay and face his attacker.

He kicked free of the corpse, and moved to the debris of his launch, still hung up on the rocks that had caught it. Shielded by the wreck, he'd be difficult to find, or at least to see. And if his enemy couldn't see him, it would be hard to send the corpses against him.

Meanwhile, maybe he could find his enemy.

His enemy. Who? Bartling, of course. It had to be Bartling, or one of his hirelings. Who else?

But where? They had to be close, within sight of the beach. You can't run a corpse by remote control; the sense feedback isn't good enough. The only senses you get are vision and hearing, and them dimly. You have to see the corpse, see what it's doing, and what you want it to do. So Bartling's man was around here somewhere. In the cave. But where?

And how? Kabaraïjian considered that. It must be the other launch that Cochran had heard.

Someone must have been following them, someone with an override box. Maybe Bartling had a tracer put on his launch during the night.

Only how'd he know which launch to trace?

Kabaraïjian bent slightly so only his head showed above the water, and looked out around the end of the ruined launch. The beach was a white sand smear across the dim green length of the huge cavern.

There was no noise but the water slapping the side of the boat. But there was motion. The second launch had been pulled free of the sand, and one of the corpses was climbing on board. The others, moving slowly, were wading out into the underground pool. Their picks rested on their shoulders.

They were coming for him. The enemy suspected he was still here. The enemy was hunting for him. Again, he was tempted to dive toward the exit, to run and swim back toward daylight, out of this awful dimness where his own corpses stalked him with cold faces and colder hands.

He squelched the impulse. He might get a head start while they searched the cavern. But, with the launch, they'd make it up in no time. He could try to lose them in the intricacies of the caves. But if they got ahead of him, they could just wait at caves' end. No, no. He had to stay here, and find his enemy.

But where? He scanned the cave, and saw nothing. It was a great expanse of murky green; stone and water and beaches. The pool was dotted by a few large rocks rising from the water. A man might be hiding behind them. But not a launch. There was nothing big enough to hide a launch. Maybe the enemy wore aquagear? But Cochran had heard a launch...

The corpse boat was halfway across the cavern, heading for the exit. It was his dead-man seated at the controls, the brown-haired one. The other two corpses trailed, as they walked slowly across the shallow pool in the wake of the launch.

Three dead men; stalking. But somewhere their handler was hiding. The man with the override box.

Their mind and their will. But where?

The launch was coming closer. Was it leaving? Maybe they thought he'd run for it? Or... no, probably the enemy was going to blockade the exit, and then search the cave.

Did they see him? Did they know where he was?

Suddenly he remembered his corpse controller, and his hand fumbled under water to make sure it was still intact. It was. And working; controllers were watertight. It no longer controlled. But it still might be useful...

Kabaraïjian closed his eyes, and tried to shut off his ears. He deliberately blotted his senses, and concentrated on the distant sensory echoes that still murmured in his mind. They were there. Even

vaguer than usual, but less confused; there were only two sets of images now. His third corpse floated a few feet from him, and it wasn't sending anything.

He twisted his mind tight, and listened, and tried to see. The blurs began to define themselves. Two pictures, both wavering, took form, superimposed over each other. A sense tangle, but Kabaraijian pulled at the threads. The pictures resolved.

One corpse was waist-deep in green water, moving slowly, holding a pick. It could see the shaft of the tool, and the hand wrapped around it, and the gradually-deepening water. But it wasn't even looking in Kabaraijian's direction.

The second dead man was in the launch, one hand resting on the controls. It wasn't looking either. It was staring down, at the instruments. It took a lot of concentration for a corpse to run any sort of machine. So the handler was having it keep a firm eye on the engine.

Only it could see more than just the engine. It had a very good view of the entire launch.

And suddenly everything fell into place. Certain now that the wrecked launch hid him from view, Kabaraijian moved farther back into its shadow, then threw a hand over the side and pulled himself on board, crouching so he wouldn't be found. The rocks had torn a hole in the bottom of the boat. But the tool chest was intact. He crawled to it, and flipped it open. The corpses had unpacked most of the mining equipment, but there was still a repair kit. Kabaraijian took out a heavy wrench and a screwdriver. He shoved the screwdriver into his belt, and gripped the wrench tightly. And waited.

The other launch was nearly on top of him, and he could hear the purr of its motor and the water moving around it. He waited until it was next to his boat. Then he stood up suddenly, and jumped.

He landed smack in the middle of the other boat, and the launch rocked under the impact.

Kabaraijian didn't give the enemy time to react—at least not the time it takes a corpse. He took a single short step, and brought the wrench around in a vicious backhanded blow to the dead man's head. The corpse slumped back. Kabaraijian bent, grabbed its legs, and lifted.

And suddenly the dead man was no longer in the launch.

And Kabaraijian, wheeling, was looking down at the stunned face of Ed Cochran. He hefted the wrench with one hand even as his other reached for the controls, and upped the speed. The boat accelerated, and dove toward the exit. Cave and corpses vanished behind, and darkness closed in with the rocky walls. Kabaraijian switched on the lights.

"Hello, Ed," he said, hefting the wrench again. His voice was very steady and very cold.

Cochran breathed a noisy sigh of relief. "Matt," he said. "Thank God, I just came to. My corpses—they—"

Kabaraijian shook his head. "No, Ed, it won't wash. Don't bother me with that, please. Just give me the override box."

Cochran looked scared. Then, fighting, he flashed his grin. "Heh. You gotta be kiddin', right? I don't have no override box. I told you I heard another launch."

"There was no other launch. That was a set-up, in case you failed. So was that blow you took on the beach. I'll bet that was tricky—having your corpse swing the pick so you got hit with the side instead of the point. But it was very well done. My compliments, Ed. That was good corpse handling. As was the rest. It isn't easy to coordinate a five-crew doing different things simultaneously. Very nice, Ed. I underestimated you. Never thought you were that good a handler."

Cochran stared at him from the floor of the launch, his grin gone. Then his gaze broke, and his eyes went back and forth between the walls that pressed around them.

Kabaraïjian waved the wrench again, his palm sweaty where he gripped it. His other hand touched his shoulder briefly. The bleeding had stopped. He sat slowly, and rested his hand on the motor.

"Aren't you going to ask me how I knew, Ed?" Kabaraïjian said. Cochran, sullen, said nothing. "I'll tell you anyway," Kabaraïjian continued. "I saw you. I looked through the eyes of my corpse, and I saw you huddled here in the boat, lying on the floor and peeking over the side to try and spot me. You didn't look dead at all, but you looked very guilty. And suddenly I got it. You were the only one with a clear view of that stuff on the beach. You were the only one in the cave."

He paused, awkward. His voice broke a little, and softened. "Only—why? Why, Ed?"

Cochran looked up at him again. He shrugged. "Money," he said. "Only money, Matt. What else?" He smiled; not his usual grin, but a strained, tight smile. "I like you, Matt."

"You've got a peculiar way of showing it," Kabaraïjian told him. He couldn't help smiling as he said it. "Whose money?"

"Bartling's," said Cochran. "I needed money real bad. My estimates were low, I didn't have anything saved. If I had to leave Grotto, that would've meant selling my crew just for passage money. Then I'd be a hired handler again. I didn't want that. I needed money fast."

He shrugged. "I was going to try smuggling some swirlstones, but you didn't make that sound good. And last night I got another idea. I didn't think that crap about organizing us and outbidding Bartling would work, but I figured he'd be interested. So I went to see him after I left the tavern. Thought he might pay a little for the information, and maybe even make an exception, let me stay."

He shook his head dourly. Kabaraïjian stayed silent. Finally Cochran resumed. "I got to see him, him with three bodyguards. When I told him, he got hysterical. You'd humiliated him already, and now he thought you were on to something. He—he made me an offer. A lot of money, Matt. A lot of money."

"I'm glad I didn't come cheap." Cochran smiled. "Nah," he said. "Bartling really wanted you, and I made him pay. He gave me the override box. Wouldn't touch it himself. He said he'd had it made in case the `meatminds' and their `zombies' ever attacked him."

Cochran reached into the pocket of his tunic, and took out a small, flat cartridge. It looked like a twin for the controller on his belt. He flipped it lightly through the air at Kabaraïjian.

But Kabaraïjian made no effort to catch it. The box sailed past his shoulder, and hit the water with a splash.

"Hey," said Cochran. "You shoulda got that. Your corpses won't respond till you turn it off."

"My shoulder's stiff," Kabaraïjian started. He stopped abruptly.

Cochran stood up. He looked at Kabaraijian as if he were seeing him for the first time. "Yeah," he said. His fists clenched. "Yeah." He was a full head taller than Kabaraijian, and much heavier. And suddenly he seemed to notice the extent of the other's injuries.

The wrench seemed to grow heavier in Kabaraijian's hand. "Don't," he warned.

"I'm sorry," Cochran said. And he dove forward.

Kabaraijian brought the wrench around at his head, but Cochran caught the blow before it connected. His other hand reached up and wrapped itself around Kabaraijian's wrist, and twisted. He felt his fingers going numb.

There was no thought of fair play, or mercy. He was fighting for his life. His free hand went to his waist and grabbed the screwdriver. He pulled it out, and stabbed. Cochran gasped, and his grip suddenly loosened. Kabaraijian stabbed again, and twisted up and out, ripping a gash in tunic and flesh.

Cochran reeled back, clutching at his stomach. Kabaraijian followed him and stabbed a third time, savagely. Cochran fell.

He tried to rise once, and gave it up, falling heavily back to the floor of the launch. Then he lay there, bleeding.

Kabaraijian went back to the motor, and kept the boat clear of the walls. He guided them down the passages smoothly, through the caves and the tunnels and the deep green pools. And in the harsh boat light, he watched Cochran.

Cochran never moved again, and he spoke only once. Just after they had left the caves and come out into the early afternoon sun of Grotto, he looked up briefly. His hands were wet with blood. And his eyes were wet too. "I'm sorry, Matt," he said. "I'm damn sorry."

"Oh, God!" Kabaraijian said, his voice thick. And suddenly he stopped the boat dead in the water, and bent to the supply cache. Then he went to Cochran and dressed and bandaged his injuries.

When he reached the controls again, he flipped the speed up to maximum. The launch streaked across the glittering green lakes.

But Cochran died before they reached the river.

Kabaraijian stopped the boat then, and let it float dead in the water. He listened to the sounds of Grotto around him; the rush of river water pouring into the great lake, the songbirds and the day-wings, the ever-active lakeleapers arcing through the air. He sat there until dusk fell, staring upriver, and thinking.

He thought of tomorrow and the day after. Tomorrow he must return to the swirlstone caves. His corpses should have frozen when he moved out of range; they should be salvageable. And one of Cochran's crew was still there, too. Maybe he could still piece together a three-crew, if the corpse he'd pushed overboard hadn't drowned.

And there were swirlstones there, big ones. He'd get that egg of dancing fog, and turn it in, and get a good estimate. Money. He had to have money, all he could scrape together. Then he could start talking to the others. And then . . . and then Bartling would have a fight on his hands. Cochran was one casualty, the first. But not the last. He'd tell the others that Bartling had sent a man out with an override box, and that Cochran had been killed because of it. It was true. It was all true.

That night Kabaraian returned with only one corpse in his launch, a corpse that was strangely still and unmoving. Always his corpses had walked behind him into the office. That night the corpse rode on his shoulder.

Meathouse Man

I. In the Meathouse

They came straight from the ore-fields that first time, Trager with the others, the older boys, the almost-men who worked their corpses next to his. Cox was the oldest of the group, and he'd been around the most, and he said that Trager had to come even if he didn't want to. Then one of the others laughed and said that Trager wouldn't even know what to do, but Cox the kind-of leader shoved him until he was quiet. And when payday came, Trager trailed the rest to the meathouse, scared but somehow eager, and he paid his money to a man downstairs and got a room key.

He came into the dim room trembling, nervous. The others had gone to other rooms, had left him alone with her (no, it, not her but it, he reminded himself, and promptly forgot again). In a shabby gray cubicle with a single smoky light.

He stank of sweat and sulfur, like all who walked the streets of Skrakky, but there was no help for that. It would be better if he could bathe first, but the room did not have a bath. Just a sink, double bed with sheets that looked dirty even in the dimness, a corpse.

She lay there naked, staring at nothing, breathing shallow breaths. Her legs were spread; ready. Was she always that way, Trager wondered, or had the man before him arranged her like that? He didn't know. He knew how to do it (he did, he did, he'd read the hooks Cox gave him, and there were films you could see, and all sorts of things), but he didn't know much of anything else. Except maybe how to handle corpses. That he was good at, the youngest handler on Skrakky, but he had to be. They had forced him into the handlers' school when his mother died, and they made him learn, so that was the thing he did. This, this he had never done (but he knew how, yes, yes, he did); it was his first time.

He came to the bed slowly and sat to a chorus of creaking springs. He touched her and the flesh was warm. Of course. She was not a corpse, not really, no; the body was alive enough, a heartbeat under the heavy white breasts, she breathed. Only the brain was gone, ripped from her, replaced with a deadman's synthabrain. She was meat now, an extra body for a corpsehandler to control, just like the crew he worked each day under sulfur skies. She was not a woman. So it did not matter that Trager was just a boy, a jowly frog-faced boy who smelled of Skrakky. She (no it, remember?) would not care, could not care.

Emboldened, aroused and hard, the boy stripped off his corpse handler's clothing and climbed in bed with the female meat. He was very excited; his hands shook as he stroked her, studied her. Her skin was very white, her hair dark and long, but even the boy could not call her pretty. Her face was too flat and wide, her mouth hung open, and her limbs were loose and sagging with fat.

On her huge breasts, all around the fat dark nipples, the last customer had left tooth-marks where he'd chewed her. Trager touched the marks tentatively, traced them with a finger. Then, sheepish about his hesitations, he grabbed one breast, squeezed it hard, pinched the nipple until he imagined a real girl would squeal with pain. The corpse did not move. Still squeezing, he rolled over on her and took the other breast into his mouth.

And the corpse responded.

She thrust up at him, hard, and meaty arms wrapped around his pimpled back to pull him to her. Trager groaned and reached down between her legs. She was hot, wet, excited. He trembled. How did they do that? Could she really get excited without a mind, or did they have lubricating tubes stuck into her, or what?

Then he stopped caring. He fumbled, found his penis, put it into her, thrust. The corpse hooked her legs around him and thrust back. It felt good, real good, better than anything he'd ever done to himself, and in some obscure way he felt proud that she was so wet and excited.

It only took a few strokes; he was too new, too young, too eager to last long. A few strokes was all he needed - but it was all she needed too. They came together, a red flush washing over her skin as she arched against him and shook soundlessly.

Afterwards she lay again like a corpse.

Trager was drained and satisfied, but he had more time left, and he was determined to get his money's worth. He explored her thoroughly, sticking his fingers everywhere they would go, touching her everywhere, rolling it over, looking at everything. The corpse moved like dead meat.

He left her as he'd found her, lying face up on the bed with her legs apart. Meathouse courtesy.

The horizon was a wall of factories, all factories, vast belching factories that sent red shadows to flick against the sulfur-dark skies. The boy saw but hardly noticed. He was strapped in place high atop his automill, two stories up on a monster machine of corroding yellow-painted metal with savage teeth of diamond and duralloy, and his eyes were blurred with triple images. Clear and strong and hard he saw the control panel before him, the wheel, the fuel-feed, the bright handle of the orescoops, the banks of light that would tell of trouble in the refinery under his feet, the brake and emergency brake. But that was not all he saw. Dimly, faintly, there were echoes; overlaid images of two other control cabs, almost identical to his, where corpse hands moved clumsily over the instruments.

Trager moved those hands, slow and careful, while another part of his mind held his own hands, his real hands, very still. The corpse controller hummed thinly on his belt.

On either side of him, the other two automills moved into flanking positions. The corpse hands squeezed the brakes; the machines rumbled to a halt. On the edge of the great sloping pit, they stood in a row, shabby pitted juggernauts ready to descend into the gloom. The pit was growing steadily larger; each day new layers of rock and ore were stripped away.

Once a mountain range had stood here, but Trager did not remember that.

The rest was easy. The automills were aligned now. To move the crew in unison was a cinch, any decent handler could do that. It was only when you had to keep several corpses busy at several different tasks that things got tricky. But a good corpsehandler could do that, too.

Eight-crews were not unknown to veterans; eight bodies linked to a single corpse controller moved by a single mind and eight synthabrain. The deadmen were each tuned to one controller, and only one; the handler who wore that controller and thought corpse-thoughts in its proximity field could move those deadmen like secondary bodies. Or like his own body. If he was good enough.

Trager checked his filtermask and earplugs quickly, then touched the fuel-feed, engaged, flicked on the laser-knives and the drills. His corpses echoed his moves, and pulses of light spit through the twilight of Skrakky. Even through his plugs he could hear the awful whine as the ore-scoops revved up and lowered. The rock-eating maw of an automill was even wider than the machine was tall.

Rumbling and screeching, in perfect formation, Trager and his corpse crew descended into the pit.

Before they reached the factories on the far side of the plain, tons of metal would have been torn from the earth, melted and refined and processed, while the worthless rock was reduced to powder and blown out into the already unbreathable air. He would deliver finished steel at dusk, on the horizon.

He was a good handler, Trager thought as the automills started down. But the handler in the meathouse - now she must be an artist. He imagined her down in the cellar somewhere, watching each of her corpses through holos and psi circuits, humping them all to please her patrons. Was it just a fluke then, that his fuck had been so perfect? Or was she always that good? But how, how, to move a dozen corpses without even being near them, to have them doing different things, to keep them all excited, to match the needs and rhythm of each customer so exactly.

The air behind him was black and choked by rock-dust, his ears were full of screams, and the far horizon was a glowering red wall beneath which yellow ants crawled and ate rock. But Trager kept his hard-on all across the plain as the automill shook beneath him.

The corpses were company-owned; they stayed in the company deadman depot. But Trager had a room, a slice of the space that was his own in a steel-and-concrete warehouse with a thousand other slices. He only knew a handful of his neighbors, but he knew all of them too; they were corpsehandlers. It was a world of silent shadowed corridors and endless closed doors. The lobbyounge, all air and plastic, was a dusty deserted place where none of the tenants ever gathered.

The evenings were long there, the nights eternal. Trager had bought extra light-panels for his particular cube, and when all of them were on they burned so bright that his infrequent visitors blinked and complained about the glare. But always there came a time when he could read no more, and then he had to turn them out, and the darkness returned once more.

His father, long gone and barely remembered, had left a wealth of books and tapes, and Trager kept them still. The room was lined with them, and others stood in great piles against the foot of the bed and on either side of the bathroom door. Infrequently he went on with Cox and the others, to drink and joke and prowl for real women. He imitated them as best he could, but he always felt out of place. So most of his nights were spent at home, reading and listening to the music, remembering and thinking.

That week he thought long after he'd faded his light panels into black, and his thoughts were a frightened jumble. Payday was coming again, and Cox would be after him to return to the meathouse, and yes, yes, he wanted to. It had been good, exciting; for once he had felt confident and virile. But it was so easy, cheap, dirty. There had to be more, didn't there?

Love, whatever that was? It had to be better with a real woman, had to, and he wouldn't find one of those in a meathouse. He'd never found one outside, either, but then he'd never really had the courage to try. But he had to try, had to, or what sort of life would he ever have?

Beneath the covers he masturbated, hardly thinking of it, while he resolved not to return to the meathouse.

But a few days later, Cox laughed at him and he had to go along. Somehow he felt it would prove something.

A different room this time, a different corpse. Fat and black, with bright orange hair, less attractive than his first, if that was possible. Hut Trager came to her ready and eager, and this time he lasted longer. Again, the performance was superb. Her rhythm matched his stroke for stroke, she came with him, she seemed to know exactly what he wanted.

Other visits; two of them, four, six. He was a regular now at the meathouse, along with the others, and he had stopped worrying about it. Cox and the others accepted him in a strange halfhearted way, but his dislike of them had grown, if anything. He was better than they were, he thought. He could hold his own in a meathouse, he could run his corpses and his automills as good as any of them, and he still thought and dreamed. In time he'd leave them all behind, leave Skrakky, be something. They would be meathouse men as long as they would live, but Trager knew he could do better. He believed. He would find love.

He found none in the meathouse, but the sex got better and better, though it was perfect to begin with. In bed with the corpses, Trager was never dissatisfied; he did everything he'd ever read about, heard about, dreamt about. The corpses knew his needs before he did. When he needed it slow, they were slow. When he wanted to have it hard and quick and brutal, then they gave it to him that way, perfectly. He used every orifice they had; they always knew which one to present to him.

His admiration of the meathouse handler grew steadily for months, until it was almost worship. Perhaps somehow he could meet her, he thought at last. Still a boy, still hopelessly naive, he was sure he would love her. Then he would take her away from the meathouse to a clean corpseless world where they could be happy together.

One day, in a moment of weakness, he told Cox and the others. Cox looked at him, shook his head, grinned. Somebody else snickered. Then they all began to laugh. "What an ass you are, Trager," Cox said at last. "There is no fucking handler! Don't tell me you never heard of a feedback circuit?"

He explained it all, to laughter; explained how each corpse was tuned to a controller built into its bed, explained how each customer handled his own meat, explained why non-handlers found meathouse women dead and still. And the boy realized suddenly why the sex was always perfect. He was a better handler than even he had thought.

That night, alone in his room with all the lights burning white and hot, Trager faced himself. And turned away, sickened. He was good at his job, he was proud of that, but the rest...

It was the meathouse, he decided. There was a trap there in the meathouse, a trap that could ruin him, destroy life and dream and hope. He would not go back; it was too easy. He would show Cox, show all of them. He could take the hard way, take the risks, feel the pain if he had to. And maybe the joy, maybe the love. He'd gone the other way too long.

Trager did not go back to the meathouse. Feeling strong and decisive and superior, he went back to his room. There, as years passed, he read and dreamed and waited for life to begin.

1. When I Was One and Twenty

Josie was the first.

She was beautiful, had always been beautiful, knew she was beautiful; all that had shaped her, made her what she was. She was a free spirit. She was aggressive, confident, conquering. Like Trager, she was only twenty when they met, but she had lived more than he had, and she seemed to have the answers. He loved her from the first.

And Trager? Trager before Josie, but years beyond the meathouse? He was taller now, broad and heavy with both muscle and fat, often moody, silent and self-contained. He ran a full five-crew in the ore fields, more than Cox, more than any of them. At night, he read books; sometimes in his room, sometimes in the lobby. He had long since forgotten that he went there to meet someone. Stable, solid, unemotional; that was Trager. He touched no one, and no one touched him. Even the tortures had stopped, though the scars remained inside. Trager hardly knew they were there; he never looked at them.

He fit in well now. With his corpses.

Yet - not completely. Inside, the dream. Something believed, something hungered, something yearned. It was strong enough to keep him away from the meathouse, from the vegetable life the others had all chosen. And sometimes, on bleak lonely nights, it would grow stronger still.

Then Trager would rise from his empty bed, dress, and walk the corridors for hours with his hands shoved deep into his pockets while something twisted, clawed and whimpered in his gut. Always, before his walks were over, he would resolve to do something, to change his life tomorrow. But when tomorrow came, the silent gray corridors were half forgotten, the demons had faded, and he had six roaring, shaking automills to drive across the pit. He would lose himself in routine, and it would be long months before the feelings came again.

Then Josie. They met like this:

It was a new field, rich and unmined, a vast expanse of broken rock and rubble that filled the plain. Low hills a few weeks ago, but the company skimmers had leveled the area with systematic nuclear blast mining, and now the automills were moving in. Trager's five-crew had been one of the first, and the change had been exhilarating at first. The old pit had been just about worked out; here there was a new terrain to contend with, boulders and jagged rock fragments, baseball-sized fists of stone that came shrieking at you on the dusty wind. It all seemed exciting, dangerous. Trager, wearing a leather jacket and filtermask and goggles and earplugs, drove his six machines and six bodies with a fierce pride, reducing boulders to powder, clearing a path for the later machines, fighting his way yard by yard to get whatever ore he could.

And one day, suddenly, one of the eye echoes suddenly caught his attention. A light flashed red on a corpse-driven automill. Trager reached, with his hands, with his mind, with five sets of corpsehands. Six machines stopped, but still another light went red. Then another, and another. Then the whole board, all twelve. One of his automills was out. Cursing, he looked across the rock field towards the machine in question, used his corpse to give it a kick. The lights stayed red. He beamed out for a tech.

By the time she got there - in a one-man skimmer that looked like a tear drop of pitted black metal - Trager had unstrapped, climbed down the metal rings on the side of the automill, walked across the rocks to where the dead machine stopped. He was just starting to climb up when Josie arrived; they met at the foot of the yellow-metal mountain, in the shadow of its treads.

She was field-wise, he knew at once. She wore a handler's coverall, earplugs, heavy goggles, and her face was smeared with grease to prevent dust abrasions. But still she was beautiful.

Her hair was short, light brown, cut in a shag that was jumbled by the wind; her eyes, when she lifted the goggles, were bright green. She took charge immediately.

All business, she introduced herself, asked him a few questions, then opened a repair bay and crawled inside, into the guts of the drive and the ore-smelt and the refinery. It didn't take her long; ten minutes, maybe, and she was back outside.

"Don't go in there," she said, tossing her hair from in front of her goggles with a flick of her head. "You've got a damper failure. The nukes are running away."

"Oh," said Trager. His mind was hardly on the automill, but he had to make an impression, made to say something intelligent. "Is it going to blow up?" he asked, and as soon as he said it he knew that that hadn't been intelligent at all. Of course it wasn't going to blow up; runaway nuclear reactors didn't work that way, he knew that.

But Josie seemed amused. She smiled - the first time he saw her distinctive flashing grin — and seemed to see him, him, Trager, not just a corpsehandler. "No," she said. "It will just melt itself down. Won't even get hot out here, since you've got shields built into the walls. Just don't go in there."

"All right." Pause. What could he say now? "What do I do?"

"Work the rest of your crew, I guess. This machine'll have to be scrapped. It should have been overhauled a long time ago. From the looks of it, there's been a lot of patching done in the past. Stupid. It breaks down, it breaks down, it breaks down, and they keep sending it out. Should realize that something is wrong. After that many failures, it's sheer self-delusion to think the thing's going to work right next time out."

"I guess," Trager said. Josie smiled at him again, sealed up the panel, and started to turn.

"Wait," he said. It came out before he could stop it, almost in spite of him. Josie turned, cocked her head, looked at him questioningly. And Trager drew a sudden strength from the steel and the stone and the wind; under sulfur skies, his dreams seemed less impossible. Maybe, he thought. Maybe. "Uh. I'm Greg Trager. Will I see you again?"

Josie grinned. "Sure. Come tonight." She gave him the address.

He climbed back into his automill after she had left, exulting in his six strong bodies, all fire and life, and he chewed up rock with something near to joy. The dark red glow in the distance looked almost like a sunrise.

When he got to Josie's, he found four other people there, friends of hers. It was a party of sorts. Josie threw a lot of parties and Trager -from that night on - went to all of them. Josie talked to him, laughed with him, liked him, and suddenly his life was no longer the same.

With Josie, he saw parts of Skrakky he had never seen before, did things he had never done:

—he stood with her in the crowds that gathered on the streets at night, stood in the dusty wind and sickly yellow light between the windowless concrete buildings, stood and bet and cheered himself hoarse while grease-stained mechs raced yellow rumbly tractor-trucks up and down and down and up.

—he walked with her through the strangely silent and white and clean underground offices, and sealed air-conditioned corridors where off-worlders and paper-shufflers and company executives lived and worked.

—he prowled the rec-malls with her, those huge low buildings so like a warehouse from the outside, but full of colored lights and game rooms and cafeterias and tape shops and endless bars where handlers made their rounds.

—he went with her to dormitory gyms, where they watched handlers less skillful than himself send their corpses against each other with clumsy fists.

—he sat with her and her friends, and they woke dark quiet taverns with their talk and with their laughter, and once Trager saw someone looking much like Cox staring at him from across the room, and he smiled and leaned a bit closer to Josie.

He hardly noticed the other people, the crowds that Josie surrounded herself with; when they went out on one of her wild jaunts, six of them or eight or ten, Trager would tell himself that he and Josie were going out, and that some others had come along with them. Once in a great while, things would work out so they were alone together, at her place, or his. Then they would talk. Of distant worlds, of politics, of corpses and life on Skrakky, of the books they both consumed, of sports or games or friends they had in common. They shared a good deal.

Trager talked a lot with Josie. And never said a word.

He loved her, of course. He suspected it the first month, and soon he was convinced of it. He loved her. This was the real thing, the thing he had been waiting for, and it had happened just as he knew it would.

But with his love: agony. He could not tell her. A dozen times he tried; the words would never come. What if she did not love him back?

His nights were still alone, in the small room with the white lights and the books and the pain.

He was more alone than ever now, the peace of his routine, of his half-life with his corpses, was gone, stripped from him. By day he rode the great automills, moved his corpses, smashed rock and melted ore, and in his head rehearsed the words he'd say to Josie. And dreamed of those that she'd speak back. She was trapped too, he thought. She'd had men, of course, but she didn't love them, she loved him. But she couldn't tell him, any more than he could tell her.

When he broke through, when he found the words and the courage, then everything would be all right. Each day he said that to himself, and dug swift and deep into the earth.

But back home, the sureness faded. Then, with awful despair, he knew that he was kidding himself. He was a friend to her, nothing more, never would be more. Why did he lie to himself? He'd had hints enough. They had never been lovers, never would be; on the few times he'd worked up the courage to touch her, she would smile, move away on some pretext, so he was never quite sure that he was being rejected. But he got the idea, and in the dark it tore at him. He walked the corridors weekly now, sullen, desperate, wanting to talk to someone without knowing how. And all the old scars woke up to bleed again.

Until the next day. When he would return to his machines, and believe again. He must believe in himself, he knew that, he shouted it out loud. He must stop feeling sorry for himself. He must do something. He must tell Josie. He would.

And she would love him, cried the day.

And she would laugh, the nights replied.

Trager chased her for a year, a year of pain and promise, the first year that he had ever lived. On that the night-fears and the day-voice agreed; he was alive now. He would never return to the emptiness of his time before Josie; he would never go back to the meathouse. That far, at least, he had come. He could change, and someday he would be strong enough to tell her.

Josie and two friends dropped by his room that night, but the friends had to leave early. For an hour or so they were alone, talking about nothing. Finally she had to go. Trager said he'd walk her home. He kept his arm around her down the long corridors, and he watched her face, watched the play of light and shadow on her cheeks as they walked from light to darkness. "Josie," he started. He felt so fine, so good, so warm, and it came out. "I love you."

And she stopped, pulled away from him, stepped back. Her mouth opened, just a little, and something flickered in her eyes. "Oh, Greg," she said. Softly. Sadly. "No, Greg, no, don't, don't."

And she shook her head.

Trembling slightly, mouthing silent words, Trager held out his hand. Josie did not take it. He touched her cheek, gently, and wordless she spun away from him.

Then, for the first time ever, Trager shook. And the tears came.

Josie took him to her room. There, sitting across from each other on the floor, never touching, they talked.

J: ... known it for a long time... tried to discourage you, Greg, but I didn't just want to come right out and... never wanted to hurt you... a good person ... don't worry...

T: ... knew it all along... that it would never ... lied to myself... wanted to believe, even if it wasn't true ... I'm sorry, Josie, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...sorry...sorry...

J: ... afraid you would go back to what you were ... don't Greg, promise me ... can't give up ... have to believe...

T: why?

J: ... stop believing, then you have nothing ... dead... you can do better ... a good handler ... get off Skrakky, find something... no life here ... someone... you will, you will, just believe, keep on believing...

T: ... you ... love you forever, Josie ... forever ... how can I find someone... never anyone like you, never... special...

J: ... oh, Greg ... lots of people ... just look... open ...

T: (laughter) ... open? ... first time I ever talked to anyone...

J: ... talk to me again, if you have to ... I can talk to you ... had enough lovers, everyone wants to get to bed with me, better just to be friends...

T: ... friends ... (laughter) ... (tears) ...

II. Promises of Someday

The fire had burned out long ago, and Stevens and the forester had retired, but Trager and Donnelly still sat around the ashes on the edges of the clear zone. They talked softly, so as not to wake the others, yet their words hung long in the restless night air. The uncut forest, standing dark behind them, was dead still; the wildlife of Vendalia had all fled the noise that the fleet of buzztrucks made during the day.

“... a full six-crew, running buzztrucks, I know enough to know that’s not easy,” Donnelly was saying. He was a pale, timid youth, likeable but self-conscious about everything he did.

Trager heard echoes of himself in Donnelly’s stiff words. “You’d do well in the arena.”

Trager nodded, thoughtful, his eyes on the ashes as he moved them with a stick. “I came to Vendalia with that in mind. Went to the gladiatorial once, only once. That was enough to change my mind. I could take them, I guess, but the whole idea made me sick. Out here, well, the money doesn’t even match what I was getting on Skrakky, but the work is, well, clean. You know?”

“Sort of,” said Donnelly. “Still, you know, it isn’t like they were real people out there in the arena. Only meat. All you can do is make the bodies as dead as the minds. That’s the logical way to look at it.”

Trager chuckled. “You’re too logical, Don. You ought to feel more. Listen, next time you’re in Gidyon, go to the gladiatorials and take a look. It’s ugly, ugly. Corpses stumbling around with axes and swords and morningstars, hacking and hewing at each other. Butchery, that’s all it is. And the audience, the way they cheer at each blow. And laugh. They laugh, Don! No.” He shook his head, sharply. “No.”

Donnelly never abandoned an argument. “But why not? I don’t understand, Greg. You’d be good at it, the best. I’ve seen the way you work your crew.”

Trager looked up, studied Donnelly briefly while the youth sat quietly, waiting. Josie’s word came back; open, be open. The old Trager, the Trager who lived friendless and alone and closed inside a Skrakky handlers’ dorm, was gone. He had grown, changed.

“There was a girl,” he said, slowly, with measured words. Opening. “Back on Skrakky, Don, there was a girl I loved. It, well, it didn’t work out. That’s why I’m here, I guess. I’m looking for someone else, for something better. That’s all part of it, you see.’ He stopped, paused, tried to think his words out. This girl, Josie, I wanted her to love me. You know.’ The words came hard. ‘Admire me, all that stuff. Now, yeah, sure, I could do good running corpses in the arena. But Josie could never love someone who had a job like that. She’s gone now, of course, but still... the kind of person I’m looking for, I couldn’t find them as an arena corpsemaster.’”

He stood up, abruptly. "I don't know. That's what's important, though, to me. Josie, somebody like her, someday. Soon, I hope."

Donnelly sat quiet in the moonlight, chewing his lip, not looking at Trager, his logic suddenly useless.

While Trager, his corridors long gone, walked off alone into the woods.

They had a tight-knit group; three handlers, a forester, thirteen corpses. Each day they drove the forest back, with Trager in the forefront. Against the Vendalian wilderness, against the blackbriars and the hard gray ironspike trees and the bulbous rubbery snaplimbs, against the tangled hostile forest, he would throw his six-crew and their buzztrucks. Smaller than the automills he'd run on Skrakky, fast and airborne, complex and demanding, those were buzztrucks. Trager ran six of them with corpse hands, a seventh with his own. Before his screaming blades and laser knives, the wall of wilderness fell each day. Donnelly came behind him, pushing three of the mountain-sized rolling mills, to turn the fallen trees into lumber for Gidyon and other cities of Vendalia. Then Stevens, the third handler, with a flame-cannon to burn down stumps and melt rocks, and the soilpumps that would ready the fresh clear land for farming. The forester was their foreman. The procedure was a science.

Clean, hard, demanding work; Trager thrived on it by day. He grew lean, almost athletic; the lines of his face tightened and tanned, he grew steadily browner under Vendalia's hot bright sun. His corpses were almost part of him, so easily did he move them, fly their buzztrucks. As an ordinary man might move a hand, a foot. Sometimes his control grew so firm, the echoes so clear and strong, that Trager felt he was not a handler working a crew at all, but rather a man with seven bodies. Seven strong bodies that rode the sultry forest winds. He exulted in their sweat.

And the evenings, after work ceased, they were good too. Trager found a sort of peace there, a sense of belonging he had never known on Skrakky. The Vendalian foresters, rotated back and forth from Gidyon, were decent enough, and friendly. Stevens was a hearty slab of a man who seldom stopped joking long enough to talk about anything serious. Trager always found him amusing. And Donnelly, the self-conscious youth, the quiet logical voice, he became a friend. He was a good listener, empathetic, compassionate, and the new open Trager was a good talker. Something close to envy shone in Donnelly's eyes when Trager spoke of Josie and exorcised his soul. And Trager knew, or thought he knew, that Donnelly was himself, the old Trager, the one before Josie who could not find the words. In time, though, after days and weeks of talking, Donnelly found his words. Then Trager listened, and shared another's pain. And he felt good about it. He was helping; he was lending strength; he was needed.

Each night around the ashes, the two men traded dreams. And wove a hopeful tapestry of promises and lies.

Yet still the nights would come.

Those were the worst times, as always; those were the hours of Trager's long lonely walks. If Josie had given Trager much, she had taken something too; she had taken the curious deadness he had once had, the trick of not-thinking, the pain-blotter of his mind. On Skrakky, he had walked the corridors infrequently, the forest knew him far more often. After the talking all had stopped, after Donnelly had gone to bed, that was when it would happen, when Josie would come to him in the loneliness of his tent. A thousand nights he lay there with his hands hooked behind his head, staring at the plastic tent film while he relived the night he'd told her. A thousand times he touched her cheek, and saw her spin away.

He would think of it, and fight it, and lose. Then, restless, he would rise and go outside. He would walk across the clear area, into the silent looming forest, brushing aside low branches and tripping on the underbrush; he would walk until he found water. Then he would sit down, by a scum-choked lake or a gurgling stream that ran swift and oily in the moonlight. He would fling rocks into the water, hurl them hard and flat into the night to hear them when they splashed.

He would sit for hours, throwing rocks and thinking, till finally he could convince himself the sun would rise.

Gidyon; the city, the heart of Vendalia, and through it of Slagg and Skrakky and New Pittsburg and all the other corpseworlds, the harsh ugly places where men would not work and corpses had to. Great towers of black and silver metal, floating aerial sculpture that flashed in the sunlight and shone softly at night, the vast bustling spaceport where freighters rose and fell on invisible firewands, malls where the pavement was polished, ironspike wood that gleamed a gentle gray, Gidyon.

The city with the rot. The corpse city. The meatmart.

For the freighters carried cargoes of men, criminals and derelicts and troublemakers from a dozen worlds bought with hard Vendalian cash (and there were darker rumors, of liners that had vanished mysteriously on routine tourist hops). And the soaring towers were hospitals and corpseyards, where men and women died and deadmen were born to walk anew. And all along the ironspike boardwalks were corpse-seller's shops and meathouses.

The meathouses of Vendalia were far-famed. The corpses were guaranteed beautiful.

Trager sat across from one, on the other side of the wide gray avenue, under the umbrella of an outdoor cafe. He sipped a bittersweet wine, thought about how his leave had evaporated too quickly, and tried to keep his eyes from wandering across the street. The wine was warm on his tongue, and his eyes were very restless.

Up and down the avenue, between him and the meathouse, strangers moved. Dark-faced corpsehandlers from Vendalia, Skrakky, Slagg; pudgy merchants, gawking tourists from the Clean Worlds like Old Earth and Zephyr, and dozens of question marks whose names and occupations and errands Trager would never know. Sitting there, drinking his wine and watching, Trager felt utterly cut off. He could not touch these people, could not reach them; he didn't know how, it wasn't possible, it wouldn't work. He could rise and walk out into the street and grab one, and still they would not touch. The stranger would only pull free and run.

All his leave like that, all of it; he'd run through all the bars of Gidyon, forced a thousand contacts, and nothing had clicked.

His wine was gone. Trager looked at the glass dully, turning it in his hands, blinking. Then, abruptly, he stood up and paid his bill. His hands trembled.

It had been so many years, he thought as he started across the street. Josie, he thought, forgive me.

Trager returned to the wilderness camp, and his corpses flew their buzztrucks like men gone wild. But he was strangely silent around the campfire, and he did not talk to Donnelly at night. Until finally, hurt and puzzled, Donnelly followed him into the forest. And found him by a languid death-dark stream, sitting on the bank with a pile of throwing stones at his feet.

T: ... went in ... after all I said, all I promised... still I went in...

D: ... nothing to worry...remember what you told me ... keep on believing...

T: ... did believe, DID ... no difficulties ... Josie...

D: ... you say I shouldn't give up, you better not... repeat everything you told me, everything Josie told you... everybody finds someone...if they keep looking... give up, dead ... all you need... openness... courage to look ... stop feeling sorry for yourself' ... told me that a hundred times...

T: ... fucking lot easier to tell you than do it myself...

D: ... Greg... not a meathouse man... a dreamer... better than they are ...

T: (sighing) ... yeah... hard, though ... why do I do this to myself? ..

D: ... rather be like you were? ... not hurting, not living? ... like me?... ..

T: ... no ... no ... you're right...

2. The Pilgrim, Up and Down

Her name was Laurel. She was nothing like Josie, save in one thing alone. Trager loved her.

Pretty? Trager didn't think so, not at first. She was too tall, a half-foot taller than he was, and she was a bit on the heavy side, and more than a bit on the awkward side. Her hair was her best feature, her hair that was red-brown in winter and glowing blonde in summer, that fell long and straight down past her shoulders and did wild beautiful things in the wind. But she was not beautiful, not the way. Josie had been beautiful. Although, oddly, she grew more beautiful with time, and maybe that was because she was losing weight, and maybe that was because Trager was falling in love with her and seeing her through kinder eyes, and maybe that was because he told her she was pretty and the very telling made it so. Just as Laurel told him he was wise, and her belief gave him wisdom. Whatever the reason, Laurel was very beautiful indeed after he had known her for a time.

She was five years younger than he, clean scrubbed and innocent, shy where Josie had been assertive. She was intelligent, romantic, a dreamer, she was wondrously fresh and eager, she was painfully insecure, and full of hungry need.

She was new to Gidyon, fresh from the Vendalian outback, a student forester. Trager, on leave again, was visiting the forestry college to say hello to a teacher who'd once worked with his crew. They met in the teacher's office. Trager had two weeks free in a city of strangers and meathouses; Laurel was alone. He showed her the glittering decadence of Gidyon, feeling smooth and sophisticated, and she was suitably impressed.

Two weeks went quickly. They came to the last night. Trager, suddenly afraid, took her to the park by the river that ran through Gidyon and they sat together on the low stone wall by the water's edge. Close, not touching.

“Time runs too fast,” he said. He had a stone in his hand. He nicked it out over the water, flat and hard. Thoughtfully, he watched it splash and sink. Then he looked at her. “I’m nervous,” he said, laughing. “I - Laurel. I don’t want to leave.”

Her face was unreadable (wary?). “The city is nice,” she agreed.

Trager shook his head violently. “No. No! Not the city, you. Laurel, I think I ... well...”

Laurel smiled for him. Her eyes were bright, very happy. “I know,” she said.

Trager could hardly believe it. He reached out, touched her cheek. She turned her head and kissed his hand. They smiled at each other.

He flew back to the forest camp to quit. “Don, Don, you’ve got to meet her,” he shouted. “See, you can do it, did it, just keep believing, keep trying. I feel so goddamn good it’s obscene.”

Donnelly, stiff and logical, smiled for him, at a loss as how to handle such a flood of happiness. “What will you do?” he asked, a little awkwardly. “The arena?”

Trager laughed. “Hardly, you know how I feel. But something like that. There’s a theatre near the spaceport, puts on pantomime with corpse actors. I’ve got a job there. The pay is rotten, but I’ll be near Laurel. That’s all that matters.”

They hardly slept at night. Instead they talked and cuddled and made love. The lovemaking was a joy, a game, a glorious discovery, never as good technically as the meathouse, but Trager hardly cared. He taught her to be open. He told her every secret he had, and wished he had more secrets.

“Poor Josie,” Laurel would often say at night, her body warm against his. “She doesn’t know what she missed. I’m lucky. There couldn’t be anyone else like you.”

“No,” said Trager, “I’m lucky.”

They would argue about it, laughing.

Donnelly came to Gidyon and joined the theatre. Without Trager, the forest work had been no fun, he said. The three of them spent a lot of time together, and Trager glowed. He wanted to share his friends with Laurel, and he’d already mentioned Donnelly a lot. And he wanted Donnelly to see how happy he’d become, to see what belief could accomplish.

“I like her,” Donnelly said, smiling, the first night after Laurel had left.

“Good,” Trager replied, nodding.

“No,” said Donnelly. “Greg, I really like her.”

They spent a lot of time together.

“Greg,” Laurel said one night in bed. “I think that Don is ... well, after me. You know.”

Trager rolled over and propped his head up on his elbow. “God,” he said. He sounded concerned.

“I don’t know how to handle it.”

“Carefully,” Trager said. “He’s very vulnerable. You’re probably the first woman he’s ever been interested in. Don’t be too hard on him. He shouldn’t have to go through the stuff I went through, you know?”

The sex was never as good as a meathouse. And, after a while, Laurel began to close. More and more nights now she went to sleep after they made love; the days when they talked till dawn were gone. Perhaps they had nothing left to say. Trager had noticed that she had a tendency to finish his stories for him. It was nearly impossible to come up with one he hadn’t already told her.

“He said that?” Trager got out of bed, turned on a light, and sat down frowning. Laurel pulled the covers up to her chin. “Well, what did you say?”

She hesitated. “I can’t tell you. It’s between Don and me. He said it wasn’t fair, the way I turn around and tell you everything that goes on between us, and he’s right.”

“Right! But I tell you everything. Don’t you remember what we...”

“I know, but-“

Trager shook his head. His voice lost some of its anger. “What’s going on, Laurel, huh? I’m scared, all of a sudden. I love you, remember? How can everything change so fast?”

Her face softened. She sat up, and held out her arms, and the covers fell back from full soft breasts.

“Oh, Greg,” she said. “Don’t worry. I love you, I always will, but it’s just that I love him too, I guess. You know?”

Trager, mollified, came into her arms, and kissed her with fervor. Then, suddenly, he broke off.

“Hey,” he said, with mock sternness to hide the trembling in his voice, “who do you love more?”

“You, of course, always you.”

Smiling, he returned to the kiss.

“I know you know,” Donnelly said. “I guess we have to talk about it.”

Trager nodded. They were backstage in the theatre. Three of his corpses walked up behind him, and stood arms crossed, like a guard. “All right.” He looked straight at Donnelly, and his face - smiling until the other’s words - was suddenly stern.

“Laurel asked me to pretend I didn’t know anything. She said you felt guilty. But pretending was quite a strain, Don. I guess it’s time we got everything out in the open.” Donnelly’s pale blue eyes shifted to the floor, and he stuck his hands into his pockets. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“Then don’t.”

“But I’m not going to pretend I’m dead, either. I’m not. I love her too.”

“You’re supposed to be my friend, Don. Love someone else. You’re just going to get yourself hurt this way.”

“I have more in common with her than you do.”

Trager just stared.

Donnelly looked up at him. Then, abashed, back down again. “I don’t know. Oh, Greg. She loves you more anyway, she said so. I never should have expected anything else. I feel like I’ve stabbed you in the back. I…”

Trager watched him. Finally, he laughed softly. “Oh, shit, I can’t take this. Look, Don, you haven’t stabbed me, c’mon, don’t talk like that. I guess, if you love her, this is the way it’s got to be, you know. I just hope everything comes out all right.”

Later that night, in bed with Laurel; “I’m worried about him,” he told her.

His face, once tanned, now ashen. “Laurel?” he said. Not believing.

“I don’t love you anymore. I’m sorry. I don’t. It seemed real at the time, but now it’s almost like a dream. I don’t even know if I ever loved you, really.”

“Don,” he said woodenly.

Laurel flushed. “Don’t say anything bad about Don. I’m tired of hearing you run him down. He never says anything except good about you.”

“Oh, Laurel. Don’t you remember? The things we said, the way we felt? I’m the same person you said those words to.”

“But I’ve grown,” Laurel said, hard and tearless, tossing her red-gold hair. “I remember perfectly well, but I just don’t feel that way anymore.”

“Don’t,” he said. He reached for her.

She stepped back. “Keep your hands off me. I told you, Greg, it’s over. You have to leave now. Don is coming by.”

It was worse than Josie. A thousand times worse.

III. Wanderings

He tried to keep on at the theatre; he enjoyed the work, he had friends there. But it was impossible. Donnelly was there every day, smiling and being friendly, and sometimes Laurel came to meet him

after the day's show and they went off together, arm in arm. Trager would stand and watch, try not to notice. While the twisted thing inside him shrieked and clawed.

He quit. He would not see them again. He would keep his pride.

The sky was bright with the lights of Gidyon and full of laughter, but it was dark and quiet in the park. Trager stood stiff against a tree, his eyes on the river, his hands folded tightly against his chest. He was a statue. He hardly seemed to breathe. Not even his eyes moved.

Kneeling near the low wall, the corpse pounded until the stone was slick with blood and its hands were mangled clots of torn meat. The sounds of the blows were dull and wet, but for the infrequent scraping of bone against rock.

They made him pay first, before he could even enter the booth. Then he sat there for an hour while they found her and punched through. Finally, though, finally, "Josie."

"Greg," she said, grinning her distinctive grin. "I should have known. Who else would call all the way from Vendalia? How are you?"

He told her.

Her grin vanished. "Oh, Greg," she said. "I'm sorry. But don't let it get to you. Keep going. The next one will work out better. They always do."

Her words didn't satisfy him. "Josie," he said, "How are things back there? You miss me?"

"Oh, sure. Things are pretty good. It's still Skrakky, though. Stay where you are, you're better off." She looked off screen, then back. "I should go, before your bill gets enormous. Glad you called, love."

"Josie," Trager started. But the screen was already dark.

Sometimes, at night, he couldn't help himself. He would move to his home screen and ring Laurel. Invariably her eyes would narrow when she saw who it was. Then she would hang up. And Trager would sit in a dark room and recall how once the sound of his voice made her so very, very happy.

The streets of Gidyon are not the best of places for lonely midnight walks. They are brightly lit, even in the darkest hours, and jammed with men and deadmen. And there are meathouses, all up and down the boulevards and the ironspike boardwalks.

Josie's words had lost their power. In the meathouses, Trager abandoned dreams and found cheap solace. The sensuous evenings with Laurel and the fumbling sex of his boyhood were things of yesterday, Trager took his meatmates hard and quick, almost brutally, fucked them with a wordless savage power to the inevitable perfect orgasm. Sometimes, remembering the theatre, he would have them act out short erotic playlets to get him in the mood.

In the night. Agony.

He was in the corridors again, the low dim corridors of the corpsehandlers' dorm on Skrakky, but now the corridors were twisted and torturous and Trager had long since lost his way. The air was thick with a rotting gray haze, and growing thicker. Soon, he feared, he would be all but blind.

Around and around he walked, up and down, but always there was more corridor, and all of them led nowhere. The doors were grim black rectangles, knobless, locked to him forever; he passed them by without thinking, most of them. Once or twice, though, he paused, before doors where light leaked around the frame. He would listen, and inside there were sounds, and then he would begin to knock wildly. But no one ever answered.

So he would move on, through the haze that got darker and thicker and seemed to burn his skin, past door after door after door, until he was weeping and his feet were tired and bloody. And then, off a ways, down a long long corridor that loomed straight before him, he would see an open door. From it came light so hot and white it hurt the eyes, and music bright and joyful, and the sounds of people laughing. Then Trager would run, though his feet were raw bundles of pain and his lungs burned with the haze he was breathing. He would run and run until he reached the room with the open door.

Only when he got there, it was his room, and it was empty.

Once, in the middle of their brief time together, they'd gone out into the wilderness and made love under the stars. Afterwards she had snuggled hard against him, and he stroked her gently.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"About us," Laurel said. She shivered. The wind was brisk and cold. "Sometimes I get scared, Greg. I'm so afraid something will happen to us, something that will ruin it. I don't ever want you to leave me."

"Don't worry," he told her. "I won't."

Now, each night before sleep came, he tortured himself with her words. The good memories left him with ashes and tears; the bad ones with a wordless rage.

He slept with a ghost beside him, a supernaturally beautiful ghost, the husk of a dead dream. He woke to her each morning.

He hated them. He hated himself for hating.

3. Duvalier's Dream

Her name does not matter. Her looks are not important. All that counts is that she was, that Trager tried again, that he forced himself on and made himself believe and didn't give up. He tried.

But something was missing. Magic?

The words were the same.

How many times can you speak them, Trager wondered, speak them and believe them, like you believed them the first time you said them? Once? Twice? Three times, maybe? Or a hundred? And the people who say it a hundred times, are they really so much better at loving?

Or only at fooling themselves? Aren't they really people who long ago abandoned the dream, who use its name for something else?

He said the words, holding her, cradling her and kissing her. He said the words, with a knowledge that was surer and heavier and more dead than any belief. He said the words and tried, but no longer could he mean them.

And she said the words back, and Trager realized that they meant nothing to him. Over and over again they said the things each wanted to hear, and both of them knew they were pretending.

They tried hard. But when he reached out, like an actor caught in his role, doomed to play out the same part over and over again, when he reached out his hand and touched her cheek — the skin was smooth and soft and lovely. And wet with tears.

IV. Echoes

“I don't want to hurt you,” said Donnelly, shuffling and looking guilty, until Trager felt ashamed for having hurt a friend.

He touched her cheek, and she spun away from him.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Josie said, and Trager was sad. She had given him so much; he'd only made her guilty. Yes, he was hurt, but a stronger man would never have let her know.

He touched her cheek, and she kissed his hand.

“I'm sorry, I don't,” Laurel said. And Trager was lost. What had he done, where was his fault, how had he ruined it? She had been so sure. They had had so much.

He touched her cheek, and she wept.

How many times can you speak them, his voice echoed, speak them and believe them, like you believed them the first time you said them?

The wind was dark and dust heavy, the sky throbbed painfully with flickering scarlet flame. In the pit, in the darkness, stood a young woman with goggles and a filtermask and short brown hair and answers.

“It breaks down, it breaks down, it breaks down, and they keep sending it out,” she said. “Should realize that something is wrong. After that many failures, it's sheer self-delusion to think the thing's going to work right next time out.”

The enemy corpse is huge and black, its torso rippling with muscle, a product of months of exercise, the biggest thing that Trager has ever faced. It advances across the sawdust in a slow, clumsy crouch, holding the gleaming broadsword in one hand. Trager watches it come from his chair atop one end of the fighting arena. The other corpsemaster is careful, cautious.

His own deadman, a wiry blond, stands and waits, a Morningstar trailing down in the blood-soaked arena dust. Trager will move him fast enough and well enough when the time is right.

The enemy knows it, and the crowd.

The black corpse suddenly lifts its broadsword and scrambles forward in a run, hoping to use reach and speed to get its kill. But Trager's corpse is no longer there when the enemy's measured blow cuts the air where he had been.

Sitting comfortably above the fighting pit/down in the arena, his feet grimy with blood and sawdust — Trager/the corpse - snaps the command/swings the morningstar - and the great studded ball drifts up and around, almost lazily, almost gracefully. Into the back of the enemy's head, as he tries to recover and turn. A flower of blood and brain blooms swift and sudden, and the crowd cheers. Trager walks his corpse from the arena, then stands to receive applause. It is his tenth kill.

Soon the championship will be his. He is building such a record that they can no longer deny him a match.

She is beautiful, his lady, his love. Her hair is short and blonde, her body very slim, graceful, almost athletic, with trim legs and small hard breasts. Her eyes are bright green, and they always welcome him. And there is a strange erotic innocence in her smile.

She waits for him in bed, waits for his return from the arena, waits for him eager and playful and loving. When he enters, she is sitting up, smiling for him, the covers bunched around her waist. From the door he admires her nipples.

Aware of his eyes, shy, she covers her breasts and blushes. Trager knows it is all false modesty, all playing. He moves to the bedside, sits, reaches out to stroke her cheek. Her skin is very soft; she nuzzles against his hand as it brushes her. Then Trager draws her hands aside, plants one gentle kiss on each breast, and a not-so-gentle kiss on her mouth. She kisses back, with ardor; their tongues dance.

They make love, he and she, slow and sensuous, locked together in a loving embrace that goes on and on. Two bodies move flawlessly in perfect rhythm, each knowing the other's needs.

Trager thrusts, and his other body meets the thrusts. He reaches, and her hand is there. They come together (always, always, both orgasms triggered by the handler's brain), and a bright red flush burns on her breasts and earlobes. They kiss.

Afterwards, he talks to her, his love, his lady. You should always talk afterwards; he learned that long ago.

"You're lucky," he tells her sometimes, and she snuggles up to him and plants tiny kisses all across his chest. "Very lucky. They lie to you out there, love. They teach you a silly shining dream and they tell you to believe and chase it and they tell you that for you, for everyone, there is someone. But it's all wrong. The universe isn't fair, it never has been, so why do they tell you so? You run after the phantom, and lose, and they tell you next time, but it's all rot, all empty rot. Nobody ever finds the dream at all, they just kid themselves, trick themselves so they can go on believing. It's just a clutching lie that desperate people tell each other, hoping to convince themselves."

But then he can't talk anymore, for her kisses have gone lower and lower, and now she takes him in her mouth. And Trager smiles at his love and gently strokes her hair.

Of all the bright cruel lies they tell you, the crudest is the one called love.

Sandkings

Simon Kress lived alone in a sprawling manor house among dry, rocky hills fifty kilometers from the city. So, when he was called away unexpectedly on business, he had no neighbors he could conveniently impose on to take his pets. The carrion hawk was no problem; it roosted in the unused belfry and customarily fed itself anyway. The shambler Kress simply shooed outside and left to fend for itself; the little monster would gorge on slugs and birds and rock jocks. But the fish tank, stocked with genuine earth piranha, posed a difficulty. Finally Kress just threw a haunch of beef into the huge tank. The piranha could always eat one another if he were detained longer than expected. They'd done it before. It amused him.

Unfortunately, he was detained much longer than expected this time. When he finally returned, all the fish were dead. So was the carrion hawk. The shambler had climbed up the belfry and eaten it. Kress was vexed.

The next day he flew his skimmer to Asgard, a journey of some two hundred kilometers. Asgard was Baldur's largest city and boasted the oldest and largest starport as well. Kress liked to impress his friends with animals that were unusual, entertaining, and expensive; Asgard was the place to buy them.

This time, though, he had poor luck. Xenopets had closed its doors, t'Etherane the Pet seller tried to foist another carrion hawk off on him, and Strange Waters offered nothing more exotic than piranha, glow sharks, and spider squids. Kress had had all those; he wanted something new, something that would stand out.

Near dusk he found himself walking down Rainbow Boulevard, looking for places he had not patronized before. So close to the starport, the street was lined by importers' marts. The big corporate emporiums had impressive long windows, in which rare and costly alien artifacts reposed on felt cushions against dark drapes that made the interiors of the stores a mystery. Between them were the junk shops-narrow, nasty little places whose display areas were crammed with all manner of off world bric-a-brac. Kress tried both kinds of shops, with equal dissatisfaction.

Then he came across a store that was different.

It was very near the port. Kress had never been there before. The shop occupied a small, single-story building of moderate size, set between a euphoria bar and a temple brothel of the Secret Sisterhood. Down this far, Rainbow Boulevard grew tacky. The shop itself was unusual. Arresting.

The windows were full of mist-now a pale red, now the gray of true fog, now sparkling and golden. The mist swirled and eddied and glowed faintly from within. Kress glimpsed objects in the window machines, pieces of art, other things he could not recognize-but he could not get a good look at any of them. The mists flowed sensuously around them, displaying a bit of first one thing and then another, then cloaking all. It was intriguing.

As he watched, the mist began to form letters. One word at a time. Kress stood and read.

WO.AND. SHADE. IMPORTERS. ARTIFACTS. ART. LIFE FORMS.AND. MISC.

The letters stopped. Through the fog Kress saw something moving. That was enough for him, that and the LIFE FORMS in their advertisement. He swept his walking cloak over his shoulder and entered the store.

Inside, Kress felt disoriented. The interior seemed vast, much larger than he would have guessed from the relatively modest frontage. It was dimly lit, peaceful. The ceiling was a starscape, complete with spiral nebulas, very dark and realistic, very nice. All the counters shone faintly, to better display the merchandise within. The aisles were carpeted with ground fog. It came almost to his knees in places and swirled about his feet as he walked.

"Can I help you?"

She almost seemed to have risen from the fog. Tall and gaunt and pale, she wore a practical gray jumpsuit and a strange little cap that rested well back on her head.

"Are you Wo or Shade?" Kress asked. "Or only sales help?"

"Jala Wo, ready to serve you," she replied. "Shade does not see customers. We have no sales help."

"You have quite a large establishment," Kress said. "Odd that I have never heard of you before."

"We have only just opened this shop on Baldur," the woman said. "We have franchises on a number of other worlds, however. What can I sell you? Art, perhaps? You have the look of a collector. We have some fine Nor T'alush crystal carvings."

"No," Kress said. "I own all the crystal carvings I desire. I came to see about a pet."

"A life form?"

"Yes."

"Alien?"

"Of course."

"We have a mimic in stock. From Celia's World. A clever little simian. Not only will it learn to speak, but eventually it will mimic your voice, inflections, gestures, even facial expressions. "

"Cute," said Kress. "And common. I have no use for either, Wo. I want something exotic. Unusual. And not cute. I detest cute animals. At the moment I own a shambler. Imported from Cotho, at no mean expense. From time to time I feed him a litter of unwanted kittens. That is what I think of cute. Do I make myself understood?"

Wo smiled enigmatically. "Have you ever owned an animal that worshipped you?" she asked.

Kress grinned. "Oh, now and again. But I don't require worship, Wo. Just entertainment."

"You misunderstand me," Wo said, still wearing her strange smile. "I meant worship literally."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think I have just the thing for you," Wo said. "Follow me."

She led him between the radiant counters and down a long, fog-shrouded aisle beneath false starlight. They passed through a wall of mist into another section of the store, then stopped in front of a large plastic tank. An aquarium, Kress thought.

Wo beckoned. He stepped closer and saw that he was wrong. It was a terrarium. Within lay a miniature desert about two meters square. Pale sand tinted scarlet by wan red light. Rocks: basalt and quartz and granite. In each corner of the tank stood a castle.

Kress blinked and peered and corrected himself; actually, there were only three castles standing. The fourth leaned, a crumbled, broken ruin. The three others were crude but intact, carved of stone and sand. Over their battlements and through their rounded porticoes tiny creatures climbed and scrambled. Kress pressed his face against the plastic.

"Insects?" he asked.

"No," Wo replied. "A much more complex life form. More intelligent as well. Smarter than your shambler by a considerable amount. They are called sandkings."

"Insects," Kress said, drawing back from the tank. "I don't care how complex they are." He frowned. "And kindly don't try to gull me with this talk of intelligence. These things are far too small to have anything but the most rudimentary brains."

"They share hive minds," Wo said. "Castle minds, in this case. There are only three organisms in the tank, actually. The fourth died. You see how her castle has fallen."

Kress looked back at the tank. "Hive minds, eh? Interesting." He frowned again. "Still, it is only an oversized ant farm. I'd hoped for something better."

"They fight wars."

"Wars? Hmmm." Kress looked again.

"Note the colors, if you will," Wo said. She pointed to the creatures that swarmed over the nearest castle. One was scrabbling at the tank wall. Kress studied it. To his eyes, it still looked like an insect. Barely as long as his fingernail, six-limbed, with six tiny eyes set all around its body. A wicked set of mandibles clacked visibly, while two long, fine antennae wove patterns in the air. Antennae, mandibles, eyes, and legs were sooty black, but the dominant color was the burnt orange of its armor plating. "It's an insect," Kress repeated.

"It is not an insect," Wo insisted calmly.

"The armored exoskeleton is shed when the sandkings grows larger. If it grows larger. In a tank this size, it won't." She took Kress by the elbow and led him around the tank to the next castle. "Look at the colors here."

He did. They were different. Here the sandkings had bright red armor; antennae, mandibles, eyes, and legs were yellow. Kress glanced across the tank. The denizens of the third live castle were off-white, with red trim. "Hmmm," he said.

"They war, as I said," Wo told him. "They even have truces and alliances. It was an alliance that destroyed the fourth castle in this tank. The blacks were becoming too numerous, and so the others joined forces to destroy them."

Kress remained unconvinced. "Amusing, no doubt. But insects fight wars, too."

"Insects do not worship," Wo said.

"Eh?"

Wo smiled and pointed at the castle. Kress stared. A face had been carved into the wall of the higher tower. He recognized it. It was Jala Wo's face. "How . . .?"

"I projected a hologram of my face into the tank, then kept it there for a few days. The face of god, you see? I feed them. I am always close. The sandkings have a rudimentary psionic sense. Proximity telepathy. They sense me and worship me by using my face to decorate their buildings. All the castles have them, see." They did.

On the castle, the face of Jala Wo was serene, peaceful, and very lifelike. Kress marveled at the workmanship. "How do they do it?"

"The foremost legs double as arms. They even have fingers of a sort, three small, flexible tendrils. And they cooperate well, both in building and in battle. Remember, all the mobiles of one color share a single mind."

"Tell me more," Kress requested.

Wo smiled. "The maw lives in the castle. Maw is my name for her—a pun, if you will. The thing is mother and stomach both. Female, large as your fist, immobile. Actually, sandking is a bit of a misnomer. The mobiles are peasants and warriors. The real ruler is a queen. But that analogy is faulty as well. Considered as a whole, each castle is a single hermaphroditic creature."

"What do they eat?"

"The mobiles eat pap, predigested food obtained inside the castle. They get it from the maw after she has worked on it for several days. Their stomachs can't handle anything else. If the maw dies, they soon die as well. The maw. . . the maw eats anything. You'll have no special expense there. Table scraps will do excellently."

"Live food?" Kress asked.

Wo shrugged. "Each maw eats mobiles from the other castles, yes."

"I am intrigued," he admitted. "If only they weren't so small!"

"Yours can be larger. These sandkings are small because their tank is small. They seem to limit their growth to fit available space. If I moved these to a larger tank, they'd start growing again."

"Hmmm. My piranha tank is twice this size and vacant. It could be cleaned out, filled with sand . . ."

"Wo and Shade would take care of the installation. It would be our pleasure."

"Of course," Kress said, "I would expect four intact castles."

"Certainly," Wo said.

They began to haggle about the price.

Three days later Jala Wo arrived at Simon Kress's estate, with dormant sandkings and a y work crew to take charge of the installation. Wo's assistants were aliens unlike any Kress was familiar with-squat, broad bipeds with four arms and bulging, multifaceted eyes. Their skin was thick and leathery and twisted into horns and spines and protrusions at odd places upon their bodies. But they were very strong, and e good workers. Wo ordered them about in a musical tongue that Kress has never heard before.

In a day it was done. They moved his piranha tank to the center of his spacious living room, arranged couches on either side of it for better viewing, scrubbed it clean, and filled it two thirds of the way up with sand and rock. Then they installed a special lighting system, both to provide the dim red illumination the sandkings preferred and to project holographic images s into the tank. On top they mounted a sturdy plastic cover, with a feeder mechanism built in. w "This way you can feed your sandkings without removing the top of the tank," Wo explained.

"You would not want to take any chances on the mobiles escaping."

The cover also included climate-control devices, to condense just the right amount of moisture from the air. "You want it dry, but not too dry," Wo said.

Finally one of the four-armed workers climbed into the tank and dug deep pits in the four corners. One of his companions handed the dormant maws over to him, removing them, one by one, from their frosted cryonic traveling cases.

They were nothing to look at. Kress decided they resembled nothing so much as mottled, half-spoiled chunks of raw meat. Each with a mouth.

The alien buried them, one in each corner of the tank. Then the work party sealed it all up and took their leave.

"The heat will bring the maws out of dormancy," Wo said. "In less than a week mobiles will begin to hatch and burrow up to the surface. Be certain to give them plenty of food. They will need all their strength until they are well established. I would estimate that you will have castles rising in about three weeks."

"And my face? When will they carve my face?"

"Turn on the hologram after about a month," she advised him, "and be patient. If you have any questions, please call. Wo and Shade are at your service." She bowed and left.

Kress wandered back to the tank and lit a joy stick. The desert was still and empty. He drummed his fingers impatiently against the plastic and frowned.

On the fourth day Kress thought he glimpsed motion beneath the sand-subtle subterranean stirrings.

On the fifth day he saw his first mobile, a lone white.

On the sixth day he counted a dozen of them, whites and reds and blacks. The oranges were tardy. He cycled through a bowl of half decayed table scraps. The mobiles sensed it at once, rushed to it, and began to drag pieces back to their respective corners. Each color group was highly organized. They did not fight. Kress was a bit disappointed, but he decided to give them time.

The oranges made their appearance on the eighth day. By then the other sandkings had begun carrying small stones and erecting crude fortifications. They still did not war. At the G moment they were only half the size of those he had seen at Wo and Shade's, but Kress thought they were growing rapidly.

The castles began to rise midway through the second week. Organized battalions of mobiles dragged heavy chunks of sandstone and granite back to their corners, where other mobiles were pushing sand into place with mandibles and tendrils. Kress had purchased a pair of magnifying goggles so that he could watch them work wherever they might go in the tank. He wandered around and around the tall plastic walls, observing. It was fascinating.

The castles were a bit plainer than Kress would have liked, but he had an idea about that. The next day he cycled through some obsidian and flakes of colored glass along with the food. Within hours they had been incorporated into the castle walls.

The black castle was the first completed, followed by the white and red fortresses. The oranges were last, as usual. Kress took his meals into the living room and ate, seated on the couch so he could watch. He expected the first war to break out any hour now.

He was disappointed. Days passed, the castles grew taller and more grand, and Kress seldom left the tank except to attend to his sanitary needs and to answer critical business calls. But the sandkings did not war. He was getting upset.

Finally he stopped feeding them.

Two days after the table scraps had ceased to fall from their desert sky, four black mobiles surrounded an orange and dragged it back to their maw. They maimed it first, ripping off its mandibles and antennae and limbs, and carried it through the shadowed main gate of their miniature castle. It never emerged.

Within an hour more than forty orange mobile marched across the sand and attacked the blacks' corner. They were outnumbered by the blacks that came rushing up from the depths. When the fighting was over, the attackers had been slaughtered. The dead and dying were taken down to feed the black maw.

Kress, delighted, congratulated himself on his genius.

When he put food into the tank the following day, a three-cornered battle broke out over its possession.

The whites were the big winners.

After that, war followed war.

Almost a month to the day after Jala Wo had delivered the sandkings, Kress turned on the holographic projector, and his face materialized in the tank. It turned, slowly, around and around, so that his gaze fell on all four castles equally. Kress thought it rather a good likeness; it had his impish grin, wide mouth, full cheeks. His blue eyes sparkled, his gray hair was carefully arrayed in a fashionable sidesweep, his eyebrows were thin and sophisticated.

Soon enough the sandkings set to work. Kress fed them lavishly while his image beamed down at them from the sky. Temporarily the wars stopped. All activity was directed toward worship.

His face merged on the castle walls.

At first all four carvings looked alike to him, but as the work continued and Kress studied the reproductions, he began to detect subtle differences in technique and execution. The reds were the most creative, using tiny flakes of slate to put the gray in his hair. The white idol seemed young and mischievous to him, while the face shaped by the blacks-although virtually the same, line for line-struck him as wise and benevolent. The orange sandkings, as usual, were last and least. The wars had not gone well for them, and their castle was sad compared to those of the others. The image they carved was crude and cartoonish, and they seemed to intend to leave it this way. When they stopped work on the face, Kress grew quite piqued with them, but there really was nothing he could do.

When all of the sandkings had finished their Kress faces, he turned off the projector and decided that it was time to have a party. His friends would be impressed. He could even stage a war for them, he thought. Humming happily to himself, he began drawing up a guest list.

The party was a wild success.

Kress invited thirty people: a handful of close friends who shared his amusements, a few former lovers, and a collection of business and social rivals who could not afford to ignore his summons. He knew some of them would be discomfited and even offended by his sandkings. He counted on it. He customarily considered his parties a failure unless at least one guest walked out in high dudgeon.

On impulse he added Jala Wo's name to his list. "Bring Shade if you like," he added when he dictated the invitations to her.

Her acceptance surprised him just a bit: "Shade, alas, will be unable to attend. He does not go to social functions. As for myself, I look forward to the chance to see how your sandkings are doing."

Kress ordered a sumptuous meal. And when at last the conversation had died down and most of his guests had gotten silly on wine and joy sticks, he shocked them by personally scraping their table leavings into a large bowl. "Come, all of you," he commanded. "I want to introduce you to my newest pets." Carrying the bowl, he conducted them into his living room.

The sandkings lived up to his fondest expectations. He had starved them for two days in preparation, and they were in a fighting mood. While the guests ringed the tank, looking through the magnifying

glasses that Kress had thoughtfully provided, the sandkings waged a glorious battle over the scraps. He counted almost sixty dead mobiles when the struggle was over. The reds and whites, which had recently formed an alliance, came off with most of the food.

"Kress, you're disgusting," Cath m'Lane told him. She had lived with him for a short time two years before, until her sappy sentimentality almost drove him mad. "I was a fool to come back here. I thought perhaps you'd changed and wanted to apologize." She had never forgiven him for the time his shambler had eaten an excessively cute puppy of which she had been fond. "Don't ever invite me here again, Simon." She strode out, accompanied by her current lover, to a chorus of laughter.

Kress's other guests were full of questions.

Where did the sandkings come from? they wanted to know. "From Wo and Shade, Importers," he replied, with a polite gesture toward Jala Wo, who had remained quiet and apart throughout most of the evening.

Why did they decorate their castles with his likeness? "Because I am the source of all good things. Surely you know that?" This retort brought a round of chuckles.

Will they fight again? "Of course, but not tonight. Don't worry. There will be other parties."

Jad Rakkis, who was an amateur xenologist, began talking about other social insects and the wars they fought. "These sandkings are amusing, but nothing really. You ought to read about Terran soldier ants, for instance."

"Sandkings are not insects," Jala Wo said sharply, but Jad was off and running, and no one paid her the slightest attention. Kress smiled at her and shrugged.

Malada Blane suggested they have a betting pool the next time they got together to watch a war, and everyone was taken with the idea. An animated discussion about rules and odds ensued. It lasted for almost an hour. Finally the guests began to take their leave.

Jala Wo was the last to depart. "So," Kress said to her when they were alone, "it appears my sandkings are a hit."

"They are doing well," Wo said. "Already they are larger than my own."

"Yes," Kress said, "except for the oranges."

"I had noticed that," Wo replied. "They seem few in number, and their castle is shabby."

"Well, someone must lose," Kress said. "The oranges were late to emerge and get established. They have suffered for it."

"Pardon," said Wo, "but might I ask if you are feeding your sandking sufficiently?"

Kress shrugged. "They diet from time to time. It makes them fiercer."

She frowned. "There is no need to starve them. Let them war in their own time, for their own reasons. It is their nature, and you will witness conflicts that are delightfully subtle and complex. The constant war brought on by hunger is artless and degrading."

Kress repaid Wo's frown with interest. "You are in my house, Wo, and here I am the judge of what is degrading. I fed the sandkings as you advised, and they did not fight."

"You must have patience."

"No," Kress said. "I am their master and their god, after all. Why should I wait on their impulses? They did not war often enough to suit me. I have corrected the situation."

"I see," said Wo. "I will discuss the matter with Shade."

"It is none of your concern, or his," Kress snapped.

"I must bid you good night, then." Wo said with resignation. But as she slipped into her coat to leave, she fixed him with a final, disapproving stare. "Look to your faces, Simon Kress," she warned him. "Look to your faces." And she departed.

Puzzled, he wandered back to the tank and stared at the castles. His faces were still there, as ever. Except-he snatched up his magnifying goggles and slipped them on. He studied the faces for long moments. Even then exactly what it was, was hard to make out. But it seemed to him that the expression on the faces had changed slightly, that his smile was somehow twisted so that it seemed a touch malicious. But it was a very subtle change, if it was a change at all. Kress finally put it down to his suggestibility, and he resolved not to invite Jala Wo to any more of his gatherings.

Over the next few months Kress and about a dozen of his favorites got together weekly for what he liked to call his "war games." Now that his initial fascination with the sandkings was past, Kress spent less time around his tank and more on his business affairs and his social life, but he still enjoyed having a few friends over for a war or two. He kept the combinations sharp on a constant edge of hunger. It had severe effects on the orange sandkings, which dwindled visibly until Kress began to wonder whether their maw was dead. But the others did well enough.

Sometimes at night when he could not sleep, Kress would take a bottle of wine into the living room, where the red gloom of his miniature desert provided the only light. He would drink and watch for hours, alone. There was usually a fight going on somewhere; when there was not, he could easily start one by dropping some small morsel of food into the tank.

Kress's companions began betting on the weekly battles, as Malada Blane had suggested. Kress won a goodly amount by betting on the whites, which had become the most powerful and most numerous colony in the tank and which had the grandest castle. One week he slid the corner of the tank top aside, and he dropped the food close to the white castle instead of on the central battleground, where he usually let food fall. So the others had to attack the whites in their stronghold to get any food at all. They tried. The whites were brilliant in defense. Kress won a hundred standards from Jad Rakkis.

Rakkis, in fact, lost heavily on the sandkings almost every week. He pretended to a vast knowledge of them and their ways, claiming that he had studied them after the first party, but he had no luck when it came to placing his bets. Kress suspected that Jad's claims were empty boasting. He had tried to study the sandkings a bit himself, in a moment of idle curiosity, tying in to the library to find out what world

his pets originally came from. But the library had no listing for sandkings. He wanted to get in touch with Wo and ask her about it, but he had other concerns, and the matter kept slipping his mind.

Finally, after a month in which his losses totaled more than a thousand standards, Rakkis arrived at the war games. He was carrying a small plastic case under his arm. Inside was a spider like thing covered with fine golden hair.

"A sand spider," Rakkis announced. "From Cathaday. I got it this afternoon from t'Etherane the Petseller. Usually they remove the poison sacs, but this one is intact. Are you game, Simon? I want my money back. I'll bet a thousand standards, sand spider against sandkings. "

Kress studied the spider in its plastic prison. His sandkings had grown-they were twice as large as Wo's, as she'd predicted-but they were still dwarfed by this thing. It was venomous, and they were not. Still, there were an awful lot of them. Besides, the endless sandking wars lately had begun to grow tiresome. The novelty of the match intrigued him.

"Done," Kress said. "Jad, you are a fool. The sandkings will just keep coming until this ugly creature of yours is dead."

"You are the fool, Simon," Rakkis replied, smiling. "The Cathadayan sand spider customarily feeds on burrowers that hide in nooks and crevices, and-well, watch-it will go straight into those castles and eat the maws."

Kress scowled amid general laughter. He hadn't counted on that. "Get on with it," he said irritably. Then he went to freshen his drink.

The spider was too large to be cycled conveniently through the food chamber. Two other guests helped Rakkis slide the tank top slightly to one side, and Malada Blane handed his case up to him. He shook the spider out. It landed lightly on a miniature dune in front of the red castle and stood confused for a moment, mouth working, legs twitching menacingly.

"Come on," Rakkis urged. They all gathered around the tank. Kress found his magnifying glass and slipped them on. If he was going to lose a thousand standards, at least he wanted a good view of the action.

The sandkings had seen the invader. All over the red castle activity had ceased. The small scarlet mobiles were frozen, watching.

The spider began to move toward the dark promise of the gate. From the tower above, Simon Kress's countenance stared down impassively.

At once there was a flurry of activity. The nearest red mobiles formed themselves into two wedges and streamed over the sand toward the spider. More warriors erupted from inside the castle and assembled in a triple line to guard where approach to the underground chamber where the maw lived. Scouts came scuttling over the dunes, recalled to fight.

Battle was joined.

The attacking sandkings washed over the spider. Mandibles snapped shut on legs and abdomen, and clung. Reds raced up the golden legs to the invader's back. They bit and tore. One of them found an eye and ripped it loose with tiny yellow tendrils. Kress smiled and pointed.

But they were small, and they had no venom, and the spider did not stop. Its legs flicked sandkings off to either side. Its dripping jaws found others and left them broken and stiffening. Already a dozen of the reds lay dying. The sand spider came on and on. It strode straight through the triple line of guardians before the castle. The lines closed around it, covered it, waging desperate battle. A team of sandkings had bitten off one of the spider's legs. Defenders leaped from atop the towers to land on the twitching, heavy mass.

Lost beneath the sandkings, the spider somehow lurched down into the darkness and vanished.

Rakkis let out a long breath. He looked pale. "Wonderful," someone else said. Malada Blane chuckled deep in her throat.

"Look," said Idi Noreddian, tugging Kress by the arm.

They had been so intent on the struggle in the corner that none of them had noticed the activity elsewhere in the tank. But now the castle was still, and the sands were empty save for dead red mobiles, and now they saw.

Three armies were drawn up before the red castle. They stood quite still, in perfect array, rank after rank of sandkings, orange and white and black-waiting to see what emerged from the depths.

Kress smiled. "A cordon sanitaire," he said. "And glance at the other castles, if you will, Jad."

Rakkis did, and he swore. Teams of mobiles were sealing up the gates with sand and stone. If the spider somehow survived this encounter, it would find no easy entrance at the other castles. "I should have brought four spiders," Rakkis said. "Still I've won. My spider is down there right now, eating your damned maw."

Kress did not reply. He waited. There was motion in the shadows.

All at once red mobiles began pouring out of the gate. They took their positions on the castle and began repairing the damage that the spider had wrought. The other armies dissolved and began to retreat to their respective corners.

"Jad," Kress said, "I think you are a bit confused about who is eating whom."

The following week Rakkis brought four slim silver snakes. The sandkings dispatched them without much trouble.

Next he tried a large black bird. It ate more than thirty white mobiles, and its thrashing and blundering virtually destroyed that castle, but ultimately its wings grew tired, and the sandkings attacked in force wherever it landed.

After that it was a case of insects, armored beetles not too unlike the sandkings themselves. But stupid, stupid. An allied force of oranges and blacks broke their formation, divided them, and butchered them.

Rakkis began giving Kress promissory notes.

It was around that time that Kress met Cath m'Lane again, one evening when he was dining in Asgard at his favorite restaurant. He stopped at her table briefly and told her about the war games, inviting her to join them. She flushed, then regained control of herself and grew icy. "Someone has to put a stop to you, Simon. I guess it's going to be me," she said.

Kress shrugged and enjoyed a lovely meal and thought no more about her threat.

Until a week later, when a small, stout woman arrived at his door and showed him a police wristband. "We've had complaints," she said. "Do you keep a tank full of dangerous insects, Kress?"

"Not insects," he said, furious. "Come, I'll show you."

When she had seen the sandkings, she shook her head. "This will never do. What do you know about these creatures anyway? Do you know what world they're from? Have they been cleared by the Ecological Board? Do you have a license for these things? We have a report that they're carnivores and possibly dangerous. We also have a report that they are semi sentient. Where did you get these creatures anyway?"

"From Wo and Shade," Kress replied.

"Never heard of them," the woman said. "Probably smuggled them in, knowing our ecologists would never approve them. No, Kress, this won't do. I'm going to confiscate this tank and have it destroyed. And you're going to have to expect a few fines as well."

Kress offered her a hundred standards to forget all about him and his sandkings.

She asked. "Now I'll have to add attempted bribery to the charges against you."

Not until he raised the figure to two thousand standards was she willing to be persuaded. "It's not going to be easy, you know," she said. "There are forms to be altered, records to be wiped. And getting a forged license from the ecologists will be time-consuming. Not to mention dealing with the complainant. What if she calls again?"

"Leave her to me," Kress said. "Leave her to me."

He thought about it for a while. That night he made some calls.

First he got t'Etherane the Petseller. "I want to buy a dog," he said. "A puppy."

The round-faced merchant gawked at him. "A puppy? That is not like you, Simon. Why don't you come in? I have a lovely choice."

"I want a very specific kind of puppy," Kress said. "Take notes. I'll describe to you what it must look like."

Afterwards he punched for Idi Noreddian. "Idi," he said, "I want you out here tonight with your holo equipment. I have a notion to record a sandking battle. A present for one of my friends."

The night after they made the recording, Kress stayed up late. He absorbed a controversial new drama in his sensorium, fixed himself a small snack, smoked a couple of joy sticks, and broke out a bottle of wine. Feeling very happy with himself, he wandered into the living room, glass in hand.

The lights were out. The red glow of the terrarium made the shadows look flushed and feverish. Kress walked over to survey his domain, curious as to how the blacks were doing in the repairs of their castle. The puppy had left it in ruins.

The restoration went well. But as Kress inspected the work through his magnifiers, he chanced to glance close at the face on the sandcastle wall. It startled him.

He drew back, blinked, took a healthy gulp of wine, and looked again.

The face on the wall was still his. But it was all wrong, all twisted. His cheeks were bloated and piggish; his smile was a crooked leer. He looked impossibly malevolent.

Uneasy, he moved around the tank to inspect the other castles. They were each a bit different, but ultimately all the same.

The oranges had left out most of the fine detail, but the result still seemed monstrous, crude; a brutal mouth and mindless eyes.

The reds gave him a satanic, twitching sort of smile. His mouth did odd, unlovely things at its corners. The whites, his favorites, had carved a cruel idiot god.

Kress flung his wine across the room in rage. "You dare, " he said under his breath. "Now you won't eat for a week, you damned . . ." His voice was shrill. "I'll teach you."

He had an idea. He strode out of the room, then returned a moment later with an antique iron throwing sword in his hand. It was a meter long, and the point was still sharp. Kress smiled, climbed up, and moved the tank cover aside just enough to give him working room, exposing one corner of the desert. He leaned down and jabbed the sword at the white castle below him. He waved it back and forth, smashing towers and ramparts and walls. Sand and stone collapsed, burying the scrambling mobiles. A flick of his wrist obliterated the features of the insolent, insulting caricature that the sandkings had made of his face. Then he poised the point of the sword above the dark mouth that opened down into the maw's chamber; he thrust with all his strength, meeting with resistance. He heard a soft, squishing sound. All the mobiles trembled and collapsed. Satisfied, Kress pulled back.

He watched for a moment, wondering whether he had killed the maw. The point of the throwing sword was wet and slimy. But finally the white sandkings began to move again feebly, slowly, but they moved.

He was preparing to slide the cover back into place and move on to a second castle when he felt something crawling on his hand.

He screamed, dropping the sword, and , brushed the sandking from his flesh. It fell to the carpet, and he ground it beneath his heel, crushing it thoroughly long after it was dead. It had crunched when he stepped on it. After that, trembling, he hurriedly sealed the tank up again. He rushed off to shower and inspected j himself carefully. He boiled his clothing.

Later, after drinking several glasses of wine, he returned to the living room. He was a bit ashamed of the way he had been terrified by the sandking. But he was not about to open the tank again. From then on, the cover would stay sealed permanently. Still, he had to punish the others.

He decided to lubricate his mental processes with another glass of wine. As he finished it, an inspiration came to him. He went to the tank and made a few adjustments to the humidity controls.

By the time he fell asleep on the couch, his wine glass still in his hand, the sand castles were melting in the rain.

Kress woke to angry pounding on his door.

He sat up, groggy, his head throbbing. Wine hangovers were always the worst, he thought. He lurched to the entry chamber.

Cath m'Lane was outside. "You monster," she said, her face swollen and puffy and streaked with tears. "I cried all night, damn you. But no more, Simon, no more."

"Easy," he said, holding his head. "I've got a hangover."

She swore and shoved him aside and pushed her way into his house. The shambler came peering round a corner to see what the noise was. She spat at it and stalked into the living room, Kress trailing ineffectually after her. "Hold on," he said, "where do you . . . you can't . . ." He stopped suddenly horror-struck. She was carrying a heavy sledgehammer in her left hand. "No," he said.

She went directly to the sandkings' tank. "You like the little charmers so much, Simon? Then you can live with them."

"Cath!" he shrieked.

Gripping the hammer with both hands, she swung as hard as she could against the side of the tank. The sound of the impact set Kress's head to screaming, and he made a low, blubbering sound of despair. But the plastic held.

She swung again. This time there was a crack, and a network of thin lines appeared in the wall of the tank.

Kress threw himself at her as she drew back her hammer to take a third swing. They went down flailing and rolled over. She lost her grip on the hammer and tried to throttle him, but Kress wrenched free and bit her on the arm, drawing blood. They both staggered to their feet, panting.

"You should see yourself, Simon," she said grimly. "Blood dripping from your mouth. You look like one of your pets. How do you like the taste?"

"Get out," he said. He saw the throwing sword where it had fallen the night before, and he snatched it up. "Get out," he repeated, waving the sword for emphasis. "Don't go near that tank again."

She laughed at him. "You wouldn't dare," she said. She bent to pick up the hammer.

Kress shrieked at her and lunged. Before he quite knew what was happening, the iron blade had gone clear through her abdomen. Cath m'Lane looked at him wonderingly and down at the sword. Kress fell back, whimpering. "I didn't mean . . . I only wanted . . ."

She was transfixed, bleeding, nearly dead, but somehow she did not fall. "You monster," she managed to say, though her mouth was full of blood. And she whirled, impossibly, the sword in her, and swung with her last strength, and Cath m'Lane was buried beneath an avalanche of plastic and sand and mud.

Kress made small hysterical noises and scrambled up onto the couch.

Sandkings were emerging from the muck on his living room floor. They were crawling across Cath's body. A few of them ventured tentatively out across the carpet. More followed.

He watched as a column took shape, a living, writhing square of sandkings, bearing something-something slimy and featureless, a piece of raw meat as big as a man's head. They began to carry it away from the tank. It pulsed.

That was when Kress broke and ran.

Before he found the courage to return home, he ran to his skimmer and flew to the nearest city, some fifty kilometers away, almost sick with fear. But, once safely away, he found a small restaurant, downed several mugs of coffee and two anti-hangover tabs, ate a full breakfast, and gradually regained his composure.

It had been a dreadful morning, but dwelling on that would solve nothing. He ordered more coffee and considered his situation with icy rationality.

Cath m'Lane was dead at his hand. Could he report it and plead that it had been an accident? Unlikely. He had run her through, after all, and he had already told that police to leave her to him. He would have to get rid of the evidence and hope that Cath had not told anyone her plans for the day. It was very unlikely she had. She could only have gotten his gift late last night. She said that she had cried all night, and she was alone when she arrived. Very well, he had one body and one skimmer to dispose of.

That left the sandkings. They might prove more of a difficulty. No doubt they had all escaped by now. The thought of them around his house, in his bed and his clothes, infesting his food-it made his flesh crawl. He shuddered and overcame his revulsion. It really shouldn't be too hard to kill them, he reminded himself. He didn't have to account for every mobile. Just the four maws, that was all. He could do that. They were large, as he'd seen. He would find them and kill them. He was their god; now he would be their destroyer.

He went shopping before he flew back to his home. He bought a set of skin thins that would cover him from head to foot, several bags of poison pellets for rock jock control, and a spray canister containing an illegally strong pesticide. He also bought a magnalock towing device.

When he landed late that afternoon, he went about things methodically. First he hooked Cath's skimmer to his own with the magnalock. Searching it, he had his first piece of luck. The crystal chip with Idi Noredian's holo of the sandking fight was on the front seat. He had worried about that.

When the skimmers were ready, he slipped into his skin thins and went inside to get Cath's body.

It wasn't there.

He poked through the fast drying sand carefully, and there was no doubt of it, the body was gone. Could she have dragged herself away? Unlikely, but Kress searched. A cursory inspection of his house turned up neither the body nor any sign of the sandkings. He did not have time for a more thorough investigation, not with the incriminating skimmer outside his front door. He resolved to try later.

Some seventy kilometers north of Kress's estate was a range of active volcanoes. He flew there, Cath's skimmer in tow. Above the glowering cone of the largest volcano he released the magnalock and watched the skimmer plummet down and vanish in the lava below.

It was dusk when he returned to his house. This gave him pause. Briefly he considered flying back to the city and spending the night there. He put the thought aside. There was work to do. He wasn't safe yet.

He scattered the poison pellets around the exterior of his house. No one would think this suspicious. He had always had a rockjock problem. When this task was completed, he primed the canister of pesticide and ventured back inside the house.

Kress went through the house, room by room, turning on lights everywhere he went until he was surrounded by a blaze of artificial illumination. He paused to clean up in the living room, shoveling sand and plastic fragments back into the broken tank. The sandkings were all gone, as he'd feared. The castles were shrunken and distorted, slagged by the watery bombardment Kress had visited upon them, and what little of them remained was crumbling as it dried.

He frowned and searched further, the canister of pest spray strapped across his shoulders.

Down in the wine cellar he could see Cath m'Lane's corpse.

It sprawled at the foot of a steep flight of stairs, the limbs twisted as if by a fall. White mobiles were swarming all over it, and as Kress watched, the body moved jerkily across the hard-packed dirt floor.

He laughed and twisted the illumination up to maximum. In the far corner a squat little earthen castle and a dark hole were visible between two wine racks. Kress could make out a rough outline of his face on the cellar wall.

The body shifted once again, moving a few centimeters toward the castle. Kress had a sudden vision of the white maw waiting hungrily. It might be able to get Cath's foot in its mouth, but no more. It was too absurd. He laughed again and stared down into the cellar, finger poised on the trigger of the hose that snaked down his right arm. The sandkings, hundreds of them moving as one, deserted the body and assumed battle formation, a field of white between him and their maw.

Suddenly Kress had another inspiration. He smiled and lowered his firing hand. "Cath was always hard to swallow," he said, delighted at his wit. "Especially for one your size. Here, let me give you some help. What are gods for, after all?"

He retreated upstairs, returning shortly with a cleaver. The sandkings, patient, waited and watched while Kress chopped Cath m'Lane into small, easily digestible pieces.

Kress slept in his skinthins that night, the pesticide close at hand, but he did not need it. The whites, sated, remained in the cellar, and he saw no sign of the others.

In the morning he finished the cleanup of the living room. When he was through, no trace of the struggle remained except for the broken tank.

He ate a light lunch and resumed his hunt for the missing sandkings. In full daylight it was not too difficult. The blacks had located in his rock garden, where they built a castle heavy with obsidian and quartz. The reds he found at the bottom of his long disused swimming pool, which had partially filled with wind-blown sand over the years. He saw mobiles of both colors ranging about his grounds, many of them carrying poison pellets back to their maws. Kress felt like laughing. He decided his pesticide was unnecessary.

No use risking a fight when he could just let the poison do its work. Both maws should be dead by evening.

That left only the burnt-orange sandkings unaccounted for. Kress circled his estate several times, in an ever-widening spiral, but he found no trace of them. When he began to sweat in his skinthings-it was a hot, dry day-he decided it was not important. If they were out here, they were probably eating the poison pellets, as the reds and blacks were.

He crunched several sandkings underfoot, with a certain degree of satisfaction, as he walked back to the house. Inside, he removed his skinthins, settled down to a delicious meal, and finally began to relax. Everything was under control. Two of the maws would soon be defunct, the third was safely located where he could dispose of it after it had served his purposes, and he had no doubt that he would find the fourth. As for Cath, every trace of her visit had been obliterated.

His reverie was interrupted when his view screen began to blink at him. It was Jad Rakkis, calling to brag about some cannibal worms he would bring to the war games tonight.

Kress had forgotten about that, but he recovered quickly. "Oh, Jad, my pardons. I neglected to tell you. I grew bored with all that and got rid of the sandkings. Ugly little things. Sorry, but there'll be no party tonight."

Rakkis was indignant. "But what will I do with my worms?"

"Put them in a basket of fruit and send them to a loved one," Kress said, signing off. Quickly he began calling the others. He did not need anyone arriving at his doorstep now, with the sandkings alive and infesting the estate.

As he was calling Idi Noreddian, Kress became aware of an annoying oversight. The screen began to clear, indicating that someone had answered at the other end. Kress flicked off.

Idi arrived on schedule an hour later. She was surprised to find the party had been canceled but perfectly happy to share an evening alone with Kress. He delighted her with his story of Cath's reaction to the holo they had made together. While telling it, he managed to ascertain that she had not mentioned the prank to anyone. He nodded, satisfied, and refilled their wine glasses. Only a trickle was left. "I'll have to get a fresh bottle," he said. "Come with me to my wine cellar, and help me pick out a good vintage. You've always had a better palate than I.

She went along willingly enough but balked at the top of the stairs when Kress opened the door and gestured for her to precede him. "Where are the lights?" she asked. "And that smell-what's that peculiar smell, Simon?"

When he shoved her, she looked briefly startled. She screamed as she tumbled down the stairs. Kress closed the door and began to nail it shut with the boards and air hammer he had left for that purpose. As he was finishing, he heard Idi groan. "I'm hurt," she called. "Simon, what is this?" Suddenly she squealed, and shortly after that the screaming started.

It did not cease for hours. Kress went to his sensorium and dialed up a saucy comedy to blot it from his mind.

When he was sure she was dead, Kress flew her skimmer north to the volcanoes and discarded it. The magnalock was proving a good investment.

Odd scrabbling noises were coming from beyond the winecellar door the next morning when Kress went down to check things out. He listened for several uneasy moments, wondering whether Idi might possibly have survived and was scratching to get out. This seemed unlikely; it had to be the sandkings. Kress did not like the implications of this. He decided that he would keep the door sealed, at least for a while. He went outside with a shovel to bury the red and black maws in their own castles.

He found them very much alive.

The black castle was glittering with volcanic glass, and sandkings were all over it, repairing and improving. The higher tower was up to his waist, and on it was a hideous caricature of his face. When he approached, the blacks halted in their labors and formed up into two threatening phalanxes. Kress glanced behind him and saw others closing off his escape. Startled, he dropped his shovel and sprinted out of the trap, crushing several mobiles beneath his boots.

The red castle was creeping up the walls of the swimming pool. The maw was safely settled in a pit, surrounded by sand and concrete and battlements. The reds crept all over the bottom of the pool. Kress watched them carry a rockjock and a large lizard into the castle. Horrified, he stepped back from the poolside and felt something crunch. Looking down, he saw three mobiles climbing up his leg. He brushed them off and stamped them to death, but others were approaching rapidly. They were larger than he remembered. Some were almost as big as his thumb.

He ran.

By the time he reached the safety of the house, his heart was racing and he was short of breath. He closed the door behind him and hurried to lock it. His house was supposed to be pest proof. He'd be safe in here.

A stiff drink steadied his nerves. So poison doesn't faze them, he thought. He should have known. Jala Wo had warned him that the maw could eat anything. He would have to use the pesticide. He took another drink for good measure, donned his skinthins, and strapped the canister to his back. He unlocked the door.

Outside, the sandkings were waiting.

Two armies confronted him, allied against the common threat. More than he could have guessed. The damned maws must be breeding like rock jocks. Mobiles were everywhere, a creeping sea of them.

Kress brought up the hose and flicked the trigger. A gray mist washed over the nearest rank of sandkings. He moved his hand from side to side.

Where the mist fell, the sandkings twitched violently and died in sudden spasms. Kress smiled. They were no match for him. He sprayed in a wide arc before him and stepped forward confidently over a litter of black and red bodies. The armies fell back. Kress advanced, intent on cutting through them to their maws.

All at once the retreat stopped. A thousand sandkings surged toward him.

Kress had been expecting the counterattack. He stood his ground, sweeping his misty sword before him in great looping strokes. They came at him and died. A few got through; he could not spray everywhere at once. He felt them climbing up his legs, then sensed their mandibles biting futilely at the reinforced plastic of his skinthins. He ignored them and kept spraying.

Then he began to feel the soft impacts on his head and shoulders.

Kress trembled and spun and looked up above him. The front of his house was alive with sandkings. Blacks and reds, hundreds of them. They were launching themselves into the air, raining down on him. They fell all around him. One landed on his faceplate, its mandibles scraping at his eyes for a terrible second before he plucked it away.

He swung up his hose and sprayed the air, sprayed the house, sprayed until the airborne sandkings were all dead or dying. The mist settled back on him, making him cough. But he kept spraying. Only when the front of the house was clean did Kress turn his attention back to the ground.

They were all around him, in him, dozens of them scurrying over his body, hundreds of others hurrying to join them. He turned the mist on them. The hose went dead. Kress heard a loud hiss, and the deadly fog rose in a great cloud from between his shoulders, cloaking him, choking him, making his eyes burn and blur. He felt for the hose, and his hand came away covered with dying sandkings. The hose was severed; they'd eaten it through. He was surrounded by a shroud of pesticide, blinded. He stumbled and screamed and began to run back to the house, pulling sandkings from his body as he went.

Inside, he sealed the door and collapsed on the carpet, rolling back and forth until he was sure he had crushed them all. The canister was empty by then, hissing feebly. Kress stripped off his skinthins and showered. The hot spray scalded him and left his skin reddened and sensitive, but it made his flesh stop crawling.

He dressed in his heaviest clothing, thick work pants and leathers, after shaking them out nervously. "Damn," he kept muttering, "damn." His throat was dry. After searching the entry hall thoroughly to make certain it was clean, he allowed himself to sit and pour a drink. "Damn," he repeated. His hand shook as he poured, slopping liquor on the carpet.

The alcohol settled him, but it did not wash away the fear. He had a second drink and went to the window furtively. Sandkings were moving across the thick plastic pane. He shuddered and retreated to his communications console. He had to get help, he thought wildly. He would punch through a call to the authorities, and policers would come out with flamethrowers, and . . .

Kress stopped in mid-call and groaned. He couldn't call in the police. He would have to tell them about the whites in his cellar, and they'd find the bodies there. Perhaps the maw might have finished Cath m'Lane by now, but certainly not Idi Noreddian. He hadn't even cut her up. Besides, there would be bones. No, the police could be called in only as a last resort.

He sat at the console, frowning. His communications equipment filled a whole wall. From here he could reach anyone on Baldur. He had plenty of money and his cunning; he had always prided himself on his cunning. He would handle this somehow.

Briefly he considered calling Wo, but he soon dismissed the idea. Wo knew too much, and she would ask questions, and he did not trust her. No, he needed someone who would do as he , asked without questions.

His frown slowly turned into a smile. Kress r had contacts. He put through a call to a number he had not used in a long time.

A woman's face took shape on his viewscreen-whitehaired, blank of expression, with a long, hooked nose. Her voice was brisk and efficient. "Simon," she said. "How is business?"

"Business is fine, Lissandra," Kress replied. "I have a job for you."

"A removal? My price has gone up since last time. Simon. It has been ten years, after all."

"You will be well paid," Kress said. "You know I'm generous. I want you for a bit of pest control."

She smiled a thin smile. "No need to use euphemisms, Simon. The call is shielded."

"No, I'm serious. I have a pest problem. Dangerous pests. Take care of them for me. No questions. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Good. You'll need . . . oh, three to four operatives. Wear heat-resistant skinthins, and equip them with flamethrowers, or lasers, something on that order. Come out to my place. You'll see the problem. Bugs, lots and lots of them. In my rock garden and the old swimming pool you'll find castles. Destroy them, kill everything inside them. Then knock on the door, and I'll show you what else needs to be done. Can you get out here quickly?"

Her face remained impassive. "We'll leave within the hour."

Lissandra was true to her word. She arrived in a lean, black skimmer with three operatives. Kress watched them from the safety of a second story window. They were all faceless in dark plastic skinthins. Two of them wore portable flamethrowers; a third carried laser cannon and explosives. Lissandra carried nothing; Kress recognized her by the way she gave orders.

Their skimmer passed low overhead first, checking out the situation. The sandkings went mad. Scarlet and ebon mobiles ran everywhere, frenetic. Kress could see the castle in the rock garden from his vantage point. It stood tall as a man. Its ramparts were crawling with black defenders, and a steady stream of mobiles flowed down into its depths.

Lissandra's skimmer came down next to Kress's, and the operatives vaulted out and unlimbered their weapons. They looked inhuman, deadly.

The black army drew up between them and the castle. The reds-Kress suddenly realized that he could not see the reds. He blinked. Where had they gone?

Lissandra pointed and shouted, and her two flamethrowers spread out and opened up on the black sandkings. Their weapons coughed dully and began to roar, long tongues of blue and scarlet fire licking out before them. Sandkings crisped and shriveled and died. The operatives began to play the fire back and forth in an efficient, interlocking pattern. They advanced with careful, measured steps.

The black army burned and disintegrated, the mobiles fleeing in a thousand different directions, some back toward the castle, others toward the enemy. None reached the operatives with the flamethrowers. Lissandra's people were very professional.

Then one of them stumbled.

Or seemed to stumble. Kress looked again and saw that the ground had given way beneath the man. Tunnels, he thought with a tremor of fear; tunnels, pits, traps. The flamer was sunk in sand up to his waist, and suddenly the ground around him seemed to erupt, and he was covered with scarlet sandkings. He dropped the flamethrower and began to claw wildly at his own body. His screams were horrible to hear.

His companion hesitated, then swung and fired. A blast of flame swallowed human and sandkings both. The screaming stopped abruptly. Satisfied, the second flamer turned back to the castle, took another step forward, and recoiled as his foot broke through the ground and vanished up to the ankle. He tried to pull it back and retreat, and the sand all around him gave way. He lost his balance and stumbled, flailing, and the sandkings were everywhere, a boiling mass of them, covering him as he writhed and rolled. His flamethrower was useless and forgotten.

Kress pounded wildly on the window, shouting for attention. "The castle! Get the castle!"

Lissandra, standing back by her skimmer, heard and gestured. Her third operative sighted with the laser cannon and fired. The beam throbbled across the grounds and sliced off the top of the castle. He brought the cannon down sharply, hacking at the sand and stone parapets. Towers fell. Kress's face disintegrated. The laser bit into the ground, searching round and about. The castle crumbled. Now it was only a heap of sand. But the black mobiles continued to move. The maw was buried too deeply. The beams hadn't touched it.

Lissandra gave another order. Her operative discarded the laser, primed an explosive, and darted forward. He leaped over the smoking corpse of the first flamer, landed on solid ground within Kress's rock garden, and heaved. The explosive ball landed square atop the ruins of the black castle. White-hot light seared Kress's eyes, and there was a tremendous gout of sand and rock and mobiles. For a moment dust obscured everything. It was raining sandkings and pieces of sandkings.

Kress saw that the black mobiles were dead and unmoving.

"The pool!" he shouted down through the window. "Get the castle in the pool!"

Lissandra understood quickly; the ground was littered with motionless blacks, but the reds were pulling back hurriedly and reforming. Her operative stood uncertain, then reached down and pulled out another explosive ball. He took one step forward, but Lissandra called him, and he sprinted back in her direction.

It was all so simple then. He reached the skimmer, and Lissandra took him aloft. Kress rushed to another window in another room to watch. They came swooping in just over the pool, and the operative pitched his bombs down at the red castle from the safety of the skimmer. After the fourth run, the castle was unrecognizable, and the sandkings stopped moving.

Lissandra was thorough. She had him bomb each castle several additional times. Then he used the laser cannon, crisscrossing methodically until it was certain that nothing living could remain intact beneath those small patches of ground.

Finally they came knocking at his door. Kress was grinning maniacally when he let them in. "Lovely," he said, "lovely."

Lissandra pulled off the mask of her skinthins. "This will cost you, Simon. Two operatives gone, not to mention the danger to my own life."

"Of course," Kress blurted. "You'll be well paid, Lissandra. Whatever you ask, just so you finish the job."

"What remains to be done?"

"You have to clean out my wine cellar," Kress said. "There's another castle down there. And you have to do it without explosives. I don't want my house coming down around me."

Lissandra motioned to her operative. "Go outside and get Rajk's flamethrower. It should be intact."

He returned armed, ready, silent. Kress led them to the wine cellar.

The heavy door was still nailed shut, as he had left it. But it bulged outward slightly, as if warped by some tremendous pressure. That made Kress uneasy, as did the silence that reigned about them. He stood well away from the door while Lissandra's operative removed his nails and planks. "Is that safe in here?" he found himself muttering, pointing at the flamethrower. "I don't want a fire, either, you know."

"I have the laser," Lissandra said. "We'll use that for the kill. The flamethrower probably won't be needed. But I want it here just in case. There are worse things than fire, Simon."

He nodded.

The last plank came free of the cellar door. There was still no sound from below. Lissandra snapped an order, and her underling fell back, took up a position behind her, and leveled the flamethrower squarely at the door. She slipped her mask back on, hefted the laser, stepped forward, and pulled the door open.

No motion. No sound. It was dark down there.

"Is there a light?" Lissandra asked.

"Just inside the door," Kress said, "On the right-hand side. Mind the stairs. They're quite steep."

She stepped into the doorway, shifted the laser to her left hand, and reached up with her right, fumbling inside for the light panel. Nothing happened. "I feel it," Lissandra said, "but it doesn't seem to . . ."

Then she was screaming, and she stumbled backward. A great white sandking had clamped itself around her wrist. Blood welled through her skinthins where its mandibles had sunk in. It was fully as large as her hand.

Lissandra did a horrible little jig across the room and began to smash her hand against the nearest wall. Again and again and again. It landed with a heavy, meaty thud. Finally the sandking fell away. She whimpered and fell to her knees.

"I think my fingers are broken," she said softly. The blood was still flowing freely. She had dropped the laser near the cellar door.

"I'm not going down there," her operative announced in clear, firm tones.

Lissandra looked up at him. "No," she said. "Stand in the door and flame it all. Cinder it. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

Kress moaned. "My house," he said. His stomach churned. The white sandking had been so large. How many more were down there? "Don't," he continued. "Leave it alone. I've changed my mind."

Lissandra misunderstood. She held out her hand. It was covered with blood and greenish black ichor. "Your little friend bit clean through my glove, and you saw what it took to get it off. I don't care about your house, Simon. Whatever is down there is going to die."

Kress hardly heard her. He thought he could see movement in the shadows beyond the cellar door. He imagined a white army bursting out, each soldier as big as the sandking that had attacked Lissandra. He saw himself being lifted by a hundred tiny arms and being dragged down into the darkness, where the maw waited hungrily. He was afraid. "Don't," he said.

They ignored him.

Kress darted forward, and his shoulder slammed into the back of Lissandra's operative just as the man was bracing to fire. The operative grunted, lost his balance, and pitched forward into the black. Kress listened to him fall down the stairs. Afterwards there were other noises—scuttlings and snaps and soft, squishing sounds.

Kress swung around to face Lissandra. He was drenched in cold sweat, but a sickly kind of excitement possessed him. It was almost sexual.

Lissandra's calm, cold eyes regarded him through her mask. "What are you doing?" she demanded as Kress picked up the laser she had dropped. "Simon!"

"Making a peace," he said, giggling. "They won't hurt god, no, not so long as god is good and generous. I was cruel. Starved them. I have to make up for it now, you see."

"You're insane," Lissandra said. It was the last thing she said. Kress burned a hole in her chest big enough to put his arm through. He draped the body across the floor and rolled it down the cellar stairs. The noises were louder, chitinous clackings and scrapings and echoes that were thick and liquid. Kress nailed up the door once again.

As he fled, he was filled with a deep sense of contentment that coated his fear like a layer of syrup.

He suspected it was not his own.

He planned to leave his home, to fly to the city and take a room for a night, or perhaps for a year. Instead he started drinking. He was not quite sure why. He drank steadily for hours and retched it all up violently on his living room carpet. At some point he fell asleep. When he woke, it was pitch dark in the house.

He cowered against the couch. He could hear noises. Things were moving in the walls. They were all around him. His hearing was extraordinarily acute. Every little creak was the footstep of a sandking. He closed his eyes and waited, expecting to feel their terrible touch, afraid to move lest he brush against one.

Kress sobbed and then was very still.

Time passed, but nothing happened.

He opened his eyes again. He trembled. Slowly the shadows began to soften and dissolve. Moonlight was filtering through the high windows. His eyes adjusted.

The living room was empty. Nothing there, nothing, nothing. Only his drunken fears.

Kress steeled himself and rose and went to a light.

Nothing there. The room was deserted.

He listened. Nothing. No sound. Nothing in the walls. It had all been his imagination, his fear.

The memories of Lissandra and the thing in the cellar returned to him unbidden. Shame and anger washed over him. Why had he done that? He could have helped her burn it out, kill it. Why . . . he knew why. The maw had done it to him, had put fear in him. Wo had said it was psionic, even when it was small. And now it was large, so large. It had feasted on Cath and Idi, and now it had two more bodies down there. It would keep growing. And it had learned to like the taste of human flesh, he thought.

He began to shake, but he took control of himself again and stopped. It wouldn't hurt him; he was god; the whites had always been his favorites.

He remembered how he had stabbed it with his throwing sword. That was before Cath came. Damn her, anyway.

He couldn't stay here. The maw would grow hungry again. Large as it was, it wouldn't take long. Its appetite would be terrible. What would it do then? He had to get away, back to the safety of the city

while the maw was still contained in his wine cellar. It was only plaster and hard-packed earth down there, and the mobiles could dig and tunnel. When they got free . . . Kress didn't want to think about it.

He went to his bedroom and packed. He took three bags. Just a single change of clothing, that was all he needed; the rest of the space he filled with his valuables, with jewelry and art and other things he could not bear to lose. He did not expect to return to this place ever again.

His shambler followed him down the stairs, staring at him from its baleful, glowing eyes. It was gaunt. Kress realized that it had been ages since he had fed it. Normally it could take care of itself, but no doubt the pickings had grown lean of late. When it tried to clutch at his leg, he snarled at it and kicked it away, and it scurried off, obviously hurt and offended.

Carrying his bags awkwardly, Kress slipped outside and shut the door behind him.

For a moment he stood pressed against the house, his heart thudding in his chest. Only a few meters between him and his skimmer. He was afraid to take those few steps. The moonlight was bright, and the grounds in front of his house were a scene of carnage. The bodies of Lissandra's two flamers lay where they had fallen, one twisted and burned, the other swollen beneath a mass of dead sandkings. And the mobiles, the black and red mobiles, they were all around him. It took an effort to remember that they were dead. It was almost as if they were simply waiting, as they had waited so often before.

Nonsense, Kress told himself. More drunken fears. He had seen the castles blown apart. They were dead, and the white maw was trapped in his cellar. He took several deep and deliberate breaths and stepped forward onto the sandkings. They crunched. He ground them into the sand savagely. They did not move.

Kress smiled and walked slowly across the battleground, listening to the sounds, the sounds of safety.

Crunch, crackle, crunch.

He lowered his bags to the ground and opened the door to his skimmer.

Something moved from shadow into light. A pale shape on the seat of his skimmer. It was as long as his forearm. Its mandibles clacked together softly, and it looked up at him from six small eyes set all around its body.

Kress wet his pants and backed away slowly.

There was more motion from inside the skimmer. He had left the door open. The sandking emerged and came toward him, cautiously. Others followed. They had been hiding beneath his seats, burrowed into the unholstery. But now they emerged. They formed a ragged ring around the skimmer.

Kress licked his lips, turned, and moved quickly to Lissandra's skimmer.

He stopped before he was halfway there. Things were moving inside that one, too. Great maggoty things half-seen by the light of the moon.

Kress whimpered and retreated back toward the house. Near the front door, he looked up.

He counted a dozen long, white shapes, creeping back and forth across the walls of the building. Four of them were clustered close together near the top of the unused belfry, where the carrion hawk had once roosted. They were carving something. A face. A very recognizable face.

Kress shrieked and ran back inside. He headed for his liquor cabinet.

A sufficient quantity of drink brought him the easy oblivion he sought. But he woke. Despite everything, he woke. He had a terrific headache, and he stank, and he was hungry. Oh, so very hungry! He had never been so hungry.

Kress knew it was not his own stomach hurting.

A white sandking watched him from atop the dresser in his bedroom, its antennae moving faintly. It was as big as the one in the skimmer the night before. He tried not to shrink away. "I'll . . . I'll feed you," he said to it. "I'll feed you." His mouth was horribly dry, sandpaper dry. He licked his lips and fled from the room.

The house was full of sandkings; he had to be careful where he put his feet. They all seemed busy on errands of their own. They were making modifications in his house, burrowing into or out of his walls, carving things. Twice he saw his own likeness staring out at him from unexpected places. The faces were warped, twisted, livid with fear.

He went outside to get the bodies that had been rotting in the yard, hoping to appease the white maw's hunger. They were gone, both of them, Kress remembered how easily the mobiles could carry things many times their own weight.

It was terrible to think that the maw was still hungry after all of that.

When Kress reentered the house, a column of sandkings was wending its way down the stairs. Each carried a piece of his shambler. The head seemed to look at him reproachfully as it went by.

Kress emptied his freezers, his cabinets, everything, piling all the food in the house in the center of his kitchen floor. A dozen whites waited to take it away. They avoided the frozen food, leaving it to thaw in a great puddle, but carried off everything else.

When all the food was gone, Kress felt his own hunger pangs abate just a bit, though he had not eaten a thing. But he knew the respite would be short-lived. Soon the maw would be hungry again. He had to feed it.

Kress knew what to do. He went to his communicator. "Malada," he began casually when the first of his friends answered. "I'm having a small party tonight. I realize this is terribly short notice, but I hope you can make it. I really do."

He called Jad Rakkis next, and then the others. By the time he had finished, five of them had accepted his invitation. Kress hoped that would be enough.

Kress met his guests outside the mobiles had cleaned up remarkably quickly, and the grounds looked almost as they had before the battle and walked them to his front door. He let them enter first. He did not follow.

When four of them had gone through, Kress finally worked up his courage. He closed the door behind his latest guest, ignoring the startled exclamations that soon turned into shrill gibbering, and sprinted for the skimmer the man had arrived in. He slid in safely, thumbed the start plate, and swore. It was programmed to lift only in response to its owner's thumbprint, of course.

Rakkis was the next to arrive. Kresser ran to his skimmer as it set down and seized Rakkis by the arm as he was climbing out. "Get back in, quickly," he said, pushing. "Take me to the city. Hurry, Jad. Get out of here!"

But Rakkis only stared at him and would not move. "Why, what's wrong, Simon? I don't understand. What about your party?"

And then it was too late, because the loose sand all around them was stirring, and the red eyes were staring at them, and the mandibles were clacking. Rakkis made a choking sound and moved to get back in his skimmer, but a pair of mandibles snapped shut about his ankle, and suddenly he was on his knees. The sand seemed to boil with subterranean activity. Rakkis thrashed and cried terribly as they tore him apart. Kress could hardly bear to watch.

After that, he did not try to escape again. When it was all over, he cleaned out what remained in his liquor cabinet and got extremely drunk. It would be the last time he would enjoy that luxury, he knew. The only alcohol remaining in the house was stored down in the wine cellar.

Kress did not touch a bite of food the entire day, but he fell asleep feeling bloated, sated at last, the awful hunger vanquished. His last thoughts before the nightmares took him were about whom he could ask out tomorrow.

Morning was hot and dry. Kress opened his eyes to see the white sandking on his dresser again. He shut his eyes again quickly, hoping the dream would leave him. It did not, and he could not go back to sleep, and soon he found himself staring at the thing.

He stared for almost five minutes before the strangeness of it dawned on him; the sandking was not moving.

The mobiles could be preternaturally still, to be sure. He had seen them wait and watch a thousand times. But always there was some motion about them: The mandibles clacked, the legs twitched, the long, fine antennae stirred and swayed.

But the sandking on his dresser was completely still.

Kress rose, holding his breath, not daring to hope. Could it be dead? Could something have killed it? He walked across the room.

The eyes were glassy and black. The creature; seemed swollen, somehow, as if it were soft and rotting inside, filling up with gas that pushed outward at the plates of white armor.

Kress reached out trembling hand and touched it.

It was warm; hot even, and growing hotter. But it did not move.

He pulled his hand back, and as he did, a segment of the sandking's white exoskeleton fell away from it. The flesh beneath was the same color, but soft-looking, swollen and feverish. And it almost seemed to throb.

Kress backed away and ran to the door.

Three more white mobiles lay in his hall. They were all like the one in his bedroom.

He ran down the stairs, jumping over sandkings. None of them moved. The house was full of them, all dead, dying, comatose, whatever. Kress did not care what was wrong with them.

Just so they could not move.

He found four of them inside his skimmer. He picked them up, one by one, and threw, them as far as he could. Damned monsters. He slid back in, on the ruined half-eaten seats, and thumbed the start plate.

Nothing happened.

Kress tried again and again. Nothing. It wasn't fair. This was his skimmer. It ought to start. Why wouldn't it lift? He didn't understand.

Finally he got out and checked, expecting the worst. He found it. The sandkings had torn apart his gravity grid. He was trapped. He was still trapped.

Grimly Kress marched back into the house. He went to his gallery and found the antique ax that had hung next to the throwing sword he had used on Cath m'Lane. He set to work. The sandkings did not stir even as he chopped them to pieces. But they splattered when he made the first cut, the bodies almost bursting. Inside was awful; strange half formed organs, a viscous reddish ooze that looked almost like human blood, and the yellow ichor.

Kress destroyed twenty of them before he realized the futility of what he was doing. The mobiles were nothing, really. Besides, there were so many of them. He could work for a day and night and still not kill them all.

He had to go down into the wine cellar and use the ax on the maw.

Resolute, he started toward the cellar. He got within sight of the door, then stopped.

It was not a door anymore. The walls had been eaten away, so that the hole was twice the size it had been, and round. A pit, that was all.

There was no sign that there had ever been a door nailed shut over that black abyss.

A ghastly, choking, fetid odor seemed to come from below.

And the walls were wet and bloody and covered with patches of white fungus.

And worst, it was breathing.

Kress stood across the room and felt the warm wind wash over him as it exhaled, and he tried not to choke, and when the wind reversed direction, he fled.

Back in the living room he destroyed three more mobiles and collapsed. What was happening? He didn't understand.

Then he remembered the only person who might understand. Kress went to his communicator again, stepped on a sandking in his haste, and prayed fervently that the device still worked.

When Jala Wo answered, he broke down and told her everything.

She let him talk without interruption, no expression save for a slight frown on her gaunt, pale face. When Kress had finished, she said only, "I ought to leave you there."

Kress began to blubber. "You can't. Help me, I'll pay"

"I ought to," Wo repeated, "but I won't."

"Thank you," Kress said. "Oh, thank-"

"Quiet," said Wo. "Listen to me. This is your own doing. Keep your sandkings well, and they are courtly ritual warriors. You turned yours into something else, with starvation and torture. You were their god. You made them what they are. That maw in your cellar is sick, still suffering from the wound you gave it. It is probably insane. Its behavior is . . . unusual.

"You have to get out of there quickly. The mobiles are not dead, Kress. They are dormant. I told you the exoskeleton falls off when they grow larger. Normally, in fact, it falls off much earlier. I have never heard of sandkings growing as large as yours while still in the insectoid stage. It is another result of crippling the white maw, I would say. That does not matter.

"What matters is the metamorphosis your sandkings are now undergoing. As the maw grows, you see, it gets progressively more intelligent. Its psionic powers strengthen, and its mind becomes more sophisticated, more ambitious. The armored mobiles are useful enough when the maw is tiny and only semisentient, but now it needs better servants, bodies with more capabilities. Do you understand? The mobiles are all going to give birth to a new breed of sandking. I can't say exactly what it will look like. Each maw designs its own, to fit its perceived needs and desires. But it will be biped, with four arms and opposable thumbs. It will be able to construct and operate advanced machinery. The individual sandkings will not be sentient. But the maw will be very sentient indeed."

Kress was gaping at Wo's image on the viewscreen. "Your workers," he said, with an effort. "The ones who came out here . . . who installed the tank . . ."

Wo managed a faint smile. "Shade," she said.

"Shade is a sandking," Kress repeated numbly. "And you sold me a tank of . . . of . . . infants, ah . . ."

"Do not be absurd," Wo said. "A first-stage sandking is more like a sperm than like an infant. The wars temper and control them in nature. Only one in a hundred reaches the second stage. Only one in a thousand achieves the third and final plateau and becomes like Shade. Adult sandkings are not

sentimental about the small maws. There are too many of them, and their mobiles are pests." She sighed.

"And all this talk wastes time. That white sandking is going to waken to full sentience soon. It is not going to need you any longer, and it hates you, and it will be very hungry. The transformation is taxing. The maw must eat enormous amounts both before and after. So you have to get out of there. Do you understand?"

"I can't," Kress said. "My skimmer is destroyed, and I can't get any of the others to start. I don't know how to reprogram them. Can you come out for me?"

"Yes," said Wo. "Shade and I will leave at once, but it is more than two hundred kilometers from Asgard to you, and there is equipment that we will need to deal with the deranged sandking you've created. You cannot wait there. You have two feet. Walk. Go due east, as near as you can determine, as quickly as you can. The land out there is pretty desolate. We can find you easily with an aerial search, and you'll be safely away from the sandkings. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Kress said. "Yes, oh yes."

They signed off, and he walked quickly toward the door. He was halfway there when he heard the noise, a sound halfway between a pop and a crack.

One of the sandkings had split open. Four tiny hands covered with pinkish-yellow blood came up out of the gap and began to push the dead skin aside.

Kress began to run.

He had not counted on the heat.

The hills were dry and rocky. Kress ran from the house as quickly as he could, ran until his ribs ached and his breath was coming in gasps. Then he walked, but as soon as he had recovered, he began to run again. For almost an hour he ran and walked, ran and walked, beneath the fierce, hot sun. He sweated, freely and wished that he had thought to bring some water, and he watched the sky in hopes of seeing Wo and Shade.

He was not made for this. It was too hot and too dry, and he was in no condition. But he kept himself going with the memory of the way the maw had breathed and the thought of the wriggling little things that by now were surely crawling all over his house. He hoped Wo and Shade would know how to deal with them.

He had his own plans for Wo and Shade. It was all their fault, Kress had decided, and they would suffer for it. Lissandra was dead, but he knew others in her profession. He would have his revenge. This he promised himself a hundred times as he struggled and sweated his way eastward.

At least he hoped it was east. He was not that good at directions, and he wasn't certain which way he had run in his initial panic, but since then he had made an effort to bear due east, as Wo had suggested.

When he had been running for several hours, with no sign of rescue, Kress began to grow certain that he had miscalculated his direction.

When several more hours passed, he began to grow afraid. What if Wo and Shade could not find him? He would die out here. He hadn't eaten in two days, he was weak and frightened, his throat was raw for want of water. He couldn't keep going. The sun was sinking now, and he'd be completely lost in the dark. What was wrong? Had the sandkings eaten Wo and Shade? The fear was on him again, filling him, and with it a great thirst and a terrible hunger. But Kress kept going. He stumbled now when he tried to run, and twice he fell. The second time he scraped his hand on a rock, and it came away bloody. He sucked at it as he walked, and he worried about infection.

The sun was on the horizon behind him. The ground grew a little cooler, for which Kress was grateful. He decided to walk until last light and settle down for the night. Surely he was far enough from the sandkings to be safe, and Wo and Shade would find him come morning.

When he topped the next rise, he saw the outline of a house in front of him.

It wasn't as big as his own house, but it was big enough. It was habitation, safety. Kress shouted and began to run toward it. Food and drink, he had to have nourishment, he could taste the meal already. He was aching with hunger. He ran down the hill toward the house, waving his arms and shouting to the inhabitants. The light was almost gone now, but he could still make out a half-dozen children playing in the twilight. "Hey there," he shouted. "Help, help."

They came running toward him.

Kress stopped suddenly. "No," he said, "oh, no. Oh, no." He backpedaled, slipping on the sand, got up, and tried to run again. They caught him easily. They were ghastly little things with bulging eyes and dusky orange skin. He struggled, but it was useless. Small as they were, each of them had four arms, and Kress had only two.

They carried him toward the house. It was a sad, shabby house, built of crumbling sand, but the door was quite large, and dark, and it breathed. That was terrible, but it was not the thing that set Simon Kress to screaming. He screamed because of the others, the little orange children who came crawling out of the castle, and watched impassively as he passed. All of them had his face.

A Song for Lya

The cities of the Shkeen are old, older far than man's, and the great rust-red metropolis that rose from their sacred hill country had proved to be the oldest of them all. The Shkeen city had no name. It needed none. Though they built cities and towns by the hundreds and the thousands, the hill city had no rivals. It was the largest in size and population, and it was alone in the sacred hills. It was their Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem; all in one. It was *the* city, and all Shkeen came to it at last, in the final days before Union.

That city had been ancient in the days before Rome fell, had been huge and sprawling when Babylon was still a dream. But there was no feel of age to it. The human eye saw only miles and miles of low, red-brick domes; small hummocks of dried mud that covered the rolling hills like a rash. Inside they were dim and nearly airless. The rooms were small and the furniture crude.

Yet it was not a grim city. Day after day it squatted in those scrubby hills, broiling under a hot sun that sat in the sky like a weary orange melon; but the city teemed with life: smells of cooking, the sounds of laughter and talk and children running, the bustle and sweat of brickmen repairing the domes, the bells of the Joined ringing in the streets. The Shkeen were a lusty and exuberant people, almost childlike.

Certainly there was nothing about them that told of great age or ancient wisdom. This is a young race, said the signs, this is a culture in its infancy.

But that infancy had lasted more than fourteen thousand years.

The human city was the real infant, less than ten Earth years old. It was built on the edge of the hills, between the Shkeen metropolis and the dusty brown plains where the spaceport had gone up. In human terms, it was a beautiful city: open and airy, full of graceful archways and glistening fountains and wide boulevards lined by trees. The buildings were wrought of metal and colored plastic and native woods, and most of them were low in deference to Shkeen architecture. Most of them... the Administration Tower was the exception, a polished blue steel needle that split a crystal sky.

You could see it for miles in all directions. Lyanna spied it even before we landed, and we admired it from the air. The gaunt skyscrapers of Old Earth and Baldur were taller, and the fantastic webbed cities of Arachne were far more beautiful—but that slim blue Tower was still imposing enough as it rose unrivaled to its lonely dominance above the sacred hills.

The spaceport was in the shadow of the Tower, easy walking distance. But they met us anyway. A low-slung scarlet aircar sat purring at the base of the ramp as we disembarked, with a driver lounging against the stick. Dino Valcarengi stood next to it, leaning on the door and talking to an aide.

Valcarengi was the planetary administrator, the boy wonder of the sector. Young, of course, but I'd known that. Short, and good-looking, in a dark, intense way, with black hair that curled thickly against his head and an easy, genial smile.

He flashed us that smile then, when we stepped off the ramp, and reached to shake hands. "Hi," he began, "I'm glad to see you." There was no nonsense with formal introductions. He knew who we were, and we knew who he was, and Valcarengi wasn't the kind of man who put much stock in ritual.

Lyanna took his hand lightly in hers, and gave him her vampire look: big, dark eyes opened wide and staring, thin mouth lifted in a tiny faint smile. She's a small girl, almost waiflike, with short brown hair and a child's figure. She can look very fragile, very helpless. When she wants to. But she rattles people with that look. If they know Lya's a telepath, they figure she's poking around amid their innermost secrets.

Actually she's playing with them. When Lyanna is *really* reading, her whole body goes stiff and you can almost see her tremble. And those big, soul-sucking eyes get narrow and hard and opaque.

But not many people know that, so they squirm under her vampire eyes and look the other way and hurry to release her hand. Not Valcarengi, though. He just smiled and stared back, then moved on to me.

I *was* reading when I took his hand—my standard operating procedure. Also a bad habit, I guess, since it's put some promising friendships into an early grave. My talent isn't equal to Lya's. But it's not as demanding, either. I read emotions. Valcarengi's geniality came through strong and genuine. With nothing behind it, or at least nothing that was close enough to the surface for me to catch.

We also shook hands with the aide, a middle-aged blond stork named Nelson Gourlay. Then Valcarengi ushered everybody into the aircar and we took off. "I imagine you're tired," he said after we were airborne, "so we'll save the tour of the city and head straight for the Tower. Nelse will show you your quarters, then you can join us for a drink, and we'll talk over the problem. You've read the materials I sent?"

"Yes," I said. Lya nodded. "Interesting background, but I'm not sure why we're here."

"We'll get to that soon enough," Valcarengi replied. "I ought to be letting you enjoy the scenery." He gestured toward the window, smiled, and fell silent.

So Lya and I enjoyed the scenery, or as much as we could enjoy during the five-minute flight from spaceport to tower. The aircar was whisking down the main street at treetop level, stirring up a breeze that whipped the thin branches as we went by. It was cool and dark in the interior of the car, but outside the Shkeen sun was riding toward noon, and you could see the heat waves shimmering from the pavement. The population must have been inside huddled around their air-conditioners, because we saw very little traffic.

We got out near the main entrance to the Tower and walked through a huge, sparkling-clean lobby. Valcarengi left us then to talk to some underlings. Gourlay led us into one of the tubes and we shot up fifty floors. Then we waltzed past a secretary into another, private tube, and climbed some more.

Our rooms were lovely, carpeted in cool green, and paneled with wood. There was a complete library there, mostly Earth classics bound in synthaleather, with a few novels from Baldur, our home world. Somebody had been researching our tastes. One of the walls of the bedroom was tinted glass, giving a panoramic view of the city far below us, with a control that could darken it for sleeping.

Gourlay showed it to us dutifully, like a dour bellhop. I read him briefly though, and found no resentment. He was nervous, but only slightly. There was honest affection there for someone. Us? Valcarengi?

Lya sat down on one of the twin beds. "Is someone bringing our luggage?" she asked. Gourlay nodded.

"You'll be well taken care of," he said. "Anything you want, ask."

"Don't worry, we will," I said. I dropped to the second bed, and gestured Gourlay to a chair. "How long you been here?"

"Six years," he said, taking the chair gratefully and sprawling out all over it. "I'm one of the veterans. I've worked under four administrators now. Dino, and Stuart before him, and Gustaffson before *him*. I was even under Rockwood a few months."

Lya perked up, crossing her legs under her and leaning forward. "That was all Rockwood lasted, wasn't it?"

"Right," Gourlay said. "He didn't like the planet, took a quick demotion to assistant administrator someplace else. I didn't care much, to tell the truth. He was the nervous type, always giving orders to prove who was boss."

"And Valcarengi?" I asked.

Gourlay made a smile look like a yawn. "Dino? Dino's OK, the best of the lot. He's good, knows he's good. He's only been here two months, but he's gotten a lot done, and he's made a lot of friends. He treats the staff like people, calls everybody by his first name, all that stuff. People like that."

I was reading, and I read sincerity. It was Valcarengi that Gourlay was affectionate toward, then.

He believed what he was saying.

I had more questions, but I didn't get to ask them. Gourlay got up suddenly. "I really shouldn't stay," he said. "You want to rest, right? Come up to the top in about two hours and we'll go over things with you. You know where the tube is?"

We nodded, and Gourlay left. I turned to Lyanna. "What do you think?"

She lay back on the bed and considered the ceiling. "I don't know," she said. "I wasn't reading. I wonder why they've had so many administrators. And why they wanted us."

"We're Talented," I said, smiling. With the capital, yes. Lyanna and I have been tested and registered as psi Talents, and we have the licenses to prove it.

"Uh-huh," she said, turning on her side and smiling back at me. Not her vampire half-smile this time.

Her sexy little girl smile.

"Valcarengi wants us to get some rest," I said. "It's probably not a bad idea."

Lya bounced out of bed. "OK," she said, "but these twins have got to go."

"We could push them together."

She smiled again. We pushed them together. And we *did* get some sleep. Eventually.

Our luggage was outside the door when we woke. We changed into fresh clothes, old casual stuff, counting on Valcarenghi's notorious lack of pomp. The tube took us to the top of the Tower.

The office of the planetary administrator was hardly an office. There was no desk, none of the usual trappings. Just a bar and lush blue carpets that swallowed us ankle high, and six or seven scattered chairs. Plus lots of space and sunlight, with Shkea laid out at our feet beyond the tinted glass. All four walls this time.

Valcarenghi and Gourlay were waiting for us, and Valcarenghi did the bartending chores personally. I didn't recognize the beverage, but it was cool and spicy and aromatic, with a real sting to it. I sipped it gratefully. For some reason I felt I needed a lift.

"Shkeen wine," Valcarenghi said, smiling, in answer to an unasked question. "They've got a name for it, but I can't pronounce it yet. But give me time. I've only been here two months, and the language is rough."

"You're learning Shkeen?" Lya asked, surprised. I knew why. Shkeen is rough on human tongues, but the natives learned Terran with stunning ease. Most people accepted that happily, and just forgot about the difficulties of cracking the alien language.

"It gives me an insight into the way they think," Valcarenghi said. "At least that's the theory." He smiled.

I read him again, although it was more difficult. Physical contact makes things sharper. Again, I got a simple emotion, close to the surface—pride this time. With pleasure mixed in. I chalked that up to the wine. Nothing beneath.

"However you pronounce the drink, I like it," I said.

"The Shkeen produce a wide variety of liquors and foodstuffs," Gourlay put in. "We've cleared many for export already, and we're checking others. Market should be good."

"You'll have a chance to sample more of the local produce this evening," Valcarenghi said. "I've set up a tour of the city, with a stop or two in Shkeentown. For a settlement of our size, our night life is fairly interesting. I'll be your guide."

"Sounds good," I said. Lya was smiling too. A tour was unusually considerate. Most Normals feel uneasy around Talents, so they rush us in to do whatever they want done, then rush us out again as quickly as possible. They certainly don't socialize with us.

"Now—the problem," Valcarenghi said, lowering his drink and leaning forward in the chair. "You read about the Cult of the Union?"

"A Shkeen religion," Lya said.

"*The* Shkeen religion," corrected Valcarenghi. "Every one of them is a believer. This is a planet without heretics."

"We read the materials you sent on it," Lya said. "Along with everything else."

"What do you think?"

I shrugged. "Grim. Primitive. But no more than any number of others I've read about. The Shkeen aren't very advanced, after all. There were religions on Old Earth that included human sacrifice."

Valcarengi shook his head, and looked toward Gourlay.

"No, you don't understand," Gourlay started, putting his drink down on the carpet. "I've been studying their religion for six years. It's like no other in history. Nothing on Old Earth like it, no sir. Nor in any other race we've encountered.

"And Union, well, it's wrong to compare it to human sacrifice, just wrong. The Old Earth religions sacrificed one or two unwilling victims to appease their gods. Killed a handful to get mercy for the millions. And the handful generally protested. The Shkeen don't work it that way. The Greeshka takes *everyone*. And they go willingly. Like lemmings they march off to the caves to be eaten alive by those parasites. *Every* Shkeen is Joined at forty, and goes to Final Union before he's fifty."

I was confused. "All right," I said. "I see the distinction, I guess. But so what? Is this the problem? I imagine that Union is rough on the Shkeen, but that's their business. Their religion is no worse than the ritual cannibalism of the Hrangans, is it?"

Valcarengi finished his drink and got up, heading for the bar. As he poured himself a refill, he said, almost casually, "As far as I know, Hangan cannibalism has claimed no human converts."

Lya looked startled. I felt startled. I sat up and stared. "What?"

Valcarengi headed back to his seat, glass in hand. "Human converts have been joining the Cult of the Union. Dozens of them are already Joined. None of them have achieved full Union yet, but that's only a question of time." He sat down, and looked at Gourlay. So did we.

The gangling blond aide picked up the narrative. "The first convert was about seven years ago.

Nearly a year before I got here, two and a half after Shkea was discovered and the settlement built. Guy named Magly. Psi-psych, worked closely with the Shkeen. He was it for two years. Then another in '08, more than next year. And the rate's been climbing every since. There was one big one. Phil Gustaffson."

Lya blinked. "The planetary administrator?"

"The same," said Gourlay. "We've had a lot of administrators. Gustaffson came in after Rockwood couldn't stand it. He was a big, gruff old guy. Everybody loved him. He'd lost his wife and kids on his last assignment, but you'd never have known it. He was always hearty, full of fun. Well, he got interested in the Shkeen religion, started talking to them. Talked to Magly and some of the other converts too. Even went to see a Greeshka. That shook him up real bad for a while. But finally he got over it, went back to his researches. I worked with him, but I never guessed what he had in mind. A little over a year ago, he converted. He's Joined now. Nobody's ever been accepted that fast. I hear talk in Shkeentown that he may even be admitted to Final Union, rushed right in. Well, Phil was administrator here longer than anybody else. People liked him, and when he went over, a lot of his friends followed. The rate's way up now."

"Not quite one percent, and rising," Valcarengi said. "That seems low, but remember what it means. One percent of the people in my settlement are choosing a religion that includes a very unpleasant form of suicide."

Lya looked from him to Gourlay and back again. "Why hasn't this been reported?"

"It should have been," Valcarengi said. "But Stuart succeeded Gustaffson, and he was scared stiff of a scandal. There's no law against humans adopting an alien religion, so Stuart defined it as a nonproblem. He reported the conversion rate routinely, and nobody higher up ever bothered to make the correlation and remember just what all these people were converting *to*."

I finished my drink, set it down. "Go on," I said to Valcarengi.

"I define the situation as a problem," he said. "I don't care how few people are involved, the idea that human beings would allow the Greeshka to consume them alarms me. I've had a team of psychs on it since I took over, but they're getting nowhere. I needed Talent. I want you two to find out *why* these people are converting. Then I'll be able to deal with the situation."

The problem was strange, but the assignment seemed straightforward enough. I read Valcarengi to be sure. His emotions were a bit more complex this time, but not much. Confidence above all: he was sure we could handle the problem. There was honest concern there, but no fear, and not even a hint of deception. Again, I couldn't catch anything below the surface. Valcarengi kept his hidden turmoil well hidden, if he had any.

I glanced at Lyanna. She was sitting awkwardly in her chair, and her fingers were wrapped very tightly around her wine glass. Reading. Then she loosened up and looked my way and nodded.

"All right," I said. "I think we can do it."

Valcarengi smiled. "That I never doubted," he said. "It was only a question of whether you *would*. But enough of business for tonight. I've promised you a night on the town, and I always try to deliver on my promises. I'll meet you downstairs in the lobby in a half-hour."

Lya and I changed into something more formal back in our room. I picked a dark blue tunic, with white slacks and a matching mesh scarf. Not the height of fashion, but I was hoping that Shkea would be several months behind the times. Lya slipped into a silky white skintight with a tracery of thin blue lines that flowed over her in sensuous patterns in response to her body heat. The lines were definitely lecherous, accentuating her thin figure with a singleminded determination. A blue raincape completed the outfit.

"Valcarengi's funny," she said as she fastened it.

"Oh?" I was struggling with the sealseam on my tunic, which refused to seal. "You catch something when you read him?"

"No," she said. She finished attaching the cape and admired herself in the mirror. Then she spun toward me, the cape swirling behind her. "That's it. He was thinking what he was saying. Oh, variations in the wording, of course, but nothing important. His mind was on what we were discussing, and behind that there was only a wall." She smiled. "Didn't get a single one of his deep dark secrets."

I finally conquered the sealseam. "Tsk," I said. "Well, you get another chance tonight."

That got me a grimace. "The hell I do. I don't read people on off-time. It isn't fair. Besides, it's such a strain. I wish I could catch thoughts as easily as you do feelings."

"The price of Talent," I said. "You're more Talented, your price is higher." I rummaged in our luggage for a raincape, but I didn't find anything that went well, so I decided not to wear one. Capes were out, anyway. "I didn't get much on Valcarengi either. You could have told as much by watching his face. He must be a very disciplined mind. But I'll forgive him. He serves good wine."

Lya nodded. "Right! That stuff did me good. Got rid of the headache I woke up with."

"The altitude," I suggested. We headed for the door.

The lobby was deserted, but Valcarengi didn't keep us waiting long. This time he drove his own aircar, a battered black job that had evidently been with him for a while. Gourlay wasn't the sociable type, but Valcarengi had a woman with him, a stunning auburn-haired vision named Laurie Blackburn. She was even younger than Valcarengi—mid-twenties, by the look of her.

It was sunset when we took off. The whole far horizon was a gorgeous tapestry in red and orange, and a cool breeze was blowing in from the plains. Valcarengi left the coolers off and opened the car windows, and we watched the city darken into twilight as we drove.

Dinner was at a plush restaurant with Baldurian decor—to make us feel comfortable, I guessed. The food, however, was very cosmopolitan. The spices, the herbs, the *style* of cooking were all Baldur. The meats and vegetables were native. It made for an interesting combination. Valcarengi ordered for all four of us, and we wound up sampling about a dozen different dishes. My favorite was a tiny Shkeen bird that they cooked in sourtang sauce. There wasn't very much of it, but what there was tasted great. We also polished off three bottles of wine during the meal: more of the Shkeen stuff we'd sampled that afternoon, a flask of chilled Veltaar from Baldur, and some real Old Earth Burgundy.

The talk warmed up quickly; Valcarengi was a born storyteller and an equally good listener.

Eventually, of course, the conversation got around to Shkea and the Shkeen. Laurie led it there. She'd been on Shkea for about six months, working toward an advanced degree in extee anthropology. She was trying to discover why the Shkeen civilization had remained frozen for so many millennia.

"They're older than we are, you know," she told us. "They had cities before men were using tools. It should have been space-traveling Shkeen that stumbled on primitive men, not the other way around."

"Aren't there theories on that already?" I asked.

"Yes, but none of them is universally accepted," she said. "Cullen cites a lack of heavy metals, for example. A factor, but is it the *whole* answer? Von Hamrin claims the Shkeen didn't get enough competition. No big carnivores on the planet, so there was nothing to breed aggressiveness into the race. But he's come under a lot of fire. Shkea isn't all *that* idyllic; if it were, the Shkeen never would have reached their present level. Besides, what's the Greeshka if not a carnivore? It *eats* them, doesn't it?"

"What do you think?" Lya asked.

"I think it had something to do with the religion, but I haven't worked it all out yet. Dino's helping me talk to people and the Shkeen are open enough, but research isn't easy." She stopped suddenly and looked at Lya hard. "For me, anyway. I imagine it'd be easier for you."

We'd heard that before. Normals often figure that Talents have unfair advantages, which is perfectly understandable. We do. But Laurie wasn't resentful. She delivered her statement in a wistful, speculative tone, instead of etching it in verbal acid.

Valcarengi leaned over and put an arm around her. "Hey," he said. "Enough shop talk. Robb and Lya shouldn't be worrying about the Shkeen until tomorrow."

Laurie looked at him, and smiled tentatively. "OK," she said lightly. "I get carried away. Sorry."

"That's OK," I told her. "It's an interesting subject. Give us a day and we'll probably be getting enthusiastic too."

Lya nodded agreement, and added that Laurie would be the first to know if our work turned up anything that would support her theory. I was hardly listening. I know it's not polite to read Normals when you're out with them socially, but there are times I can't resist. Valcarengi had his arm around Laurie and had pulled her toward him gently. I was curious.

So I took a quick, guilty reading. He was very high—slightly drunk, I guess, and feeling very confident and protective. The master of the situation. But Laurie was a jumble—uncertainty, repressed anger, a vague fading hint of fright. And love, confused but very strong. I doubted that it was for me or Lya. She loved Valcarengi.

I reached under the table, searching for Lya's hand, and found her knee. I squeezed it gently and she looked at me and smiled. She wasn't reading, which was good. It bothered me that Laurie loved Valcarengi, though I didn't know why, and I was just as glad that Lya didn't see my discontent.

We finished off the last of the wine in short order, and Valcarengi took care of the whole bill. Then he rose. "Onward!" he announced. "The night is fresh, and we've got visits to make."

So we made visits. No holoshows or anything that drab, although the city had its share of theaters. A casino was next on the list. Gambling was legal on Shkea, of course, and Valcarengi would have legalized it if it weren't. He supplied the chips and I lost some for him, as did Laurie. Lya was barred from playing; her Talent was too strong. Valcarengi won big; he was a superb mindspin player, and pretty good at the traditional games too.

Then came a bar. More drinks, plus local entertainment which was better than I would have expected.

It was pitch black when we got out, and I assumed that the expedition was nearing its end.

Valcarengi surprised us. When we got back to the car, he reached under the controls, pulled out a box of sober-ups, and passed them around.

"Hey," I said. "You're driving. Why do I need this? I just barely got up here."

"I'm about to take you to a genuine Shkeen cultural event, Robb," he said. "I don't want you making rude comments or throwing up on the natives. Take your pill."

I took my pill, and the buzz in my head began to fade. Valcarengi already had the car airborne. I leaned back and put my arm around Lya, and she rested her head on my shoulder. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Shkeentown," he replied, never looking back, "to their Great Hall. There's a Gathering tonight, and I figured you'd be interested."

"It will be in Shkeen, of course," Laurie said, "but Dino can translate for you. I know a little of the language too, and I'll fill in whatever he misses."

Lya looked excited. We'd read about Gatherings, of course, but we hardly expected to go see one on our first day of Shkea. The Gatherings were a species of religious rite; a mass confessional of sorts for pilgrims who were about to be admitted to the ranks of the Joined. Pilgrims swelled the hill city daily, but Gatherings were conducted only three or four times a year when the numbers of those-about-to-be-Joined climbed high enough.

The aircar streaked almost soundlessly through the brightly lit settlement, passing huge fountains that danced with a dozen colors and pretty ornamental arches that flowed like liquid fire. A few other cars were airborne, and here and there we flew above pedestrians strolling the city's broad malls. But most people were inside, and light and music flooded from many of the homes we passed.

Then, abruptly, the character of the city began to change. The level ground began to roll and heave, hills rose before us and then behind us, and the lights vanished. Below, the malls gave way to unlit roads of crushed stone and dust, and the domes of glass and metal done in fashionable mock-Shkeen yielded to their older brick brothers. The Shkeen city was quieter than its human counterpart; most of the houses were darkly silent.

Then, ahead of us, a hummock appeared that was larger than the others—almost a hill in itself, with a big arched door and a series of slitlike windows. And light leaked from this one, and noise, and there were Shkeen outside.

I suddenly realized that, although I'd been on Shkea for nearly a day, this was the first sight I'd caught of the Shkeen. Not that I could see them all that clearly from an aircar at night. But I did see them. They were smaller than men—the tallest was around five feet—with big eyes and long arms. That was all I could tell from above.

Valcarengi put the car down alongside the Great Hall, and we piled out. Shkeen were trickling through the arch from several directions, but most of them were already inside. We joined the trickle, and nobody even looked twice at us, except for one character who hailed Valcarengi in a thin, squeaky voice and called him Dino. He had friends even here.

The interior was one huge room, with a great crude platform built in the center and an immense crowd of Shkeen circling it. The only light was from torches that were stuck in grooves along the walls, and on high poles surrounding the platform. Someone was speaking, and every one of those great, bulging eyes was turned his way. We four were the only humans in the Hall.

The speaker, outlined brightly by the torches, was a fat, middle-aged Shkeen who moved his arms slowly, almost hypnotically, as he talked. His speech was a series of whistles, wheezes, and grunts, so I didn't listen very closely. He was much too far away to read. I was reduced to studying his appearance, and that of other Shkeen near me. All of them were hairless, as far as I could see, with softish-looking orange skin that was creased by a thousand tiny wrinkles. They wore simple shifts of crude, multicolored cloth, and I had difficulty telling male from female.

Valcarengi leaned over toward me and whispered, careful to keep his voice low. "The speaker is a fanner," he said. "He's telling the crowd how far he's come, and some of the hardships of his life."

I looked around. Valcarengi's whisper was the only sound in the place. Everyone else was dead quiet, eyes riveted on the platform, scarcely breathing. "He's saying that he has four brothers," Valcarengi told me. "Two have gone on to Final Union, one is among the Joined. The other is younger than himself, and now owns the farm." He frowned. "The speaker will never see his farm again," he said, more loudly, "but he's happy about it."

"Bad crops?" asked Lya, smiling irreverently. She'd been listening to the same whisper. I gave her a stern look.

The Shkeen went on. Valcarengi stumbled after him. "Now he's telling his crimes, all the things he's done that he's ashamed of, his blackest soul-secrets. He's had a sharp tongue at times, he's vain, once he actually struck his younger brother. Now he speaks of his wife, and the other women he has known. He has betrayed her many times, copulating with others. As a boy, he mated with animals for he feared females. In recent years he has grown incapable, and his brother has serviced his wife."

On and on and on it went, in incredible detail, detail that was both startling and frightening. No intimacy went untold, no secret was left undisturbed. I stood and listened to Valcarengi's whispers, shocked at first, finally growing bored with the squalor of it all. I began to get restless. I wondered briefly if I knew any human half so well as I now knew this great fat Shkeen. Then I wondered whether Lyanna, with her Talent, knew anyone half so well. It was almost as if the speaker wanted all of us to live through his life right here and now.

His speech lasted for what seemed hours, but finally it began to wind up. "He speaks now of Union," Valcarengi whispered. "He will be Joined, he is joyful about it, he has craved it for so long. His misery is at an end, his aloneness will cease, soon he shall walk the streets of the sacred city and peal his joy with the bells. And then Final Union, in the years to come. He will be with his brothers in the afterlife."

"No, Dino." This whisper was Laurie. "Quit wrapping human phrases around what he says. He will be his brothers, he says. The phrase also implies they will be him."

Valcarengi smiled. "OK, Laurie. If you say so..."

Suddenly the fat farmer was gone from the platform. The crowd rustled, and another figure took his place: much shorter, wrinkled excessively, one eye a great gaping hole. He began to speak, haltingly at first, then with greater skill.

"This one is a brickman, he has worked many domes, he lives in the sacred city. His eye was lost many years ago, when he fell from a dome and a sharp stick poked into him. The pain was very great, but he returned to work within a year, he did not beg for premature Union, he was very brave, he is proud of his courage. He has a wife, but they never had offspring, he is sad of that, he cannot talk to his wife easily, they are apart even when together and she weeps at night, he is sad of that too, but he has never hurt her and..."

It went on for hours again. My restlessness stirred again, but I cracked down on it—this was too important. I let myself get lost in Valcarengi's narration, and the story of the one-eyed Shkeen. Before long, I was riveted as closely to the tale as the aliens around me. It was hot and stuffy and all but airless in the dome, and my tunic was getting sooty and soaked by sweat, some of it from the creatures who pressed around me. But I hardly noticed.

The second speaker ended as had the first, with a long praise of the joy of being Joined and the coming of Final Union. Toward the end, I hardly even needed Valcarengi's translation—I could hear the

happiness in the voice of the Shkeen, and see it in his trembling figure. Or maybe I was reading, unconsciously. But I can't read at that distance—unless the target is emoting very hard.

A third speaker ascended the platform, and spoke in a voice louder than the others. Valcarengi kept pace. "A woman this time," he said. "She has carried eight children for her man, she has four sisters and three brothers, she has farmed all her life, she. . ."

Suddenly her speech seemed to peak, and she ended a long sequence with several sharp, high whistles. Then she fell silent. The crowd, as one, began to respond with whistles of their own. An eerie, echoing music filled the Great Hall, and the Shkeen around us all began to sway and whistle. The woman looked out at the scene from a bent and broken position.

Valcarengi started to translate, but he stumbled over something. Laurie cut in before he could backtrack. "She has now told them of great tragedy," she whispered. "They whistle to show their grief, their oneness with her pain."

"Sympathy, yes," said Valcarengi, taking over again. "When she was young, her brother grew ill, and seemed to be dying. Her parents told her to take him to the sacred hills, for they could not leave the younger children. But she shattered a wheel on her cart through careless driving, and her brother died upon the plains. He perished without Union. She blames herself."

The Shkeen had begun again. Laurie began to translate, leaning close to us and using a soft whisper. "Her brother died, she is saying again. She faulted him, denied him Union, now he is sundered and alone and gone without... without..."

"Afterlife," said Valcarengi. "Without afterlife."

"I'm not sure that's entirely right," Laurie said. "That concept is..."

Valcarengi waved her silent. "Listen," he said. He continued to translate.

We listened to her story, told in Valcarengi's increasingly hoarse whisper. She spoke longest of all, and her story was the grimmest of the three. When she finished, she too was replaced. But Valcarengi put a hand on my shoulder and beckoned toward the exit.

The cool night air hit like ice water, and I suddenly realized that I was drenched with sweat.

Valcarengi walked quickly toward the car. Behind us, the speaking was still in progress, and the Shkeen showed no signs of tiring.

"Gatherings go on for days, sometimes weeks," Laurie told us as we climbed inside the aircar. "The Shkeen listen in shifts, more or less—they try terribly to hear every word, but exhaustion gets to them sooner or later and they retire for brief rests, then return for more. It is a great honor to last through an entire Gathering without sleep."

Valcarengi shot us aloft. "I'm going to try that someday," he said. "I've never attended for more than a couple of hours, but I think I could make it if I fortified myself with drugs. We'll get more understanding between human and Shkeen if we participate more fully in their rituals."

"Oh," I said. "Maybe Gustaffson felt the same way."

Valcarengi laughed lightly. "Yes, well, I don't intend to participate *that* fully."

The trip home was a tired silence. I'd lost track of time but my body insisted that it was almost dawn.

Lya, curled up under my arm, looked drained and empty and only half-awake. I felt the same way.

We left the aircar in front of the Tower, and took the tubes up. I was past thinking. Sleep came very, very quickly.

I dreamed that night. A good dream, I think, but it faded with the coming of the light, leaving me empty and feeling cheated. I lay there, after waking, with my arm around Lya and my eyes on the ceiling, trying to recall what the dream had been about. But nothing came.

Instead, I found myself thinking about the Gathering, running it through again in my head. Finally I disentangled myself and climbed out of bed. We'd darkened the glass, so the room was still pitch black. But I found the controls easily enough, and let through a trickle of late morning light.

Lya mumbled some sort of sleepy protest and rolled over, but made no effort to get up. I left her alone in the bedroom and went out to our library, looking for a book on the Shkeen—something with a little more detail than the material we'd been sent. No luck. The library was meant for recreation, not research.

I found a viewscreen and punched up to Valcarengi's office. Gourlay answered. "Hello," he said. "Dino figured you'd be calling. He's not here right now. He's out arbitrating a trade contract. What do you need?"

"Books," I said, my voice still a little sleepy. "Something on the Shkeen."

"That I can't do," Gourlay said. "Are none, really. Lots of papers and studies and monographs, but no full-fledged books. I'm going to write one, but I haven't gotten to it yet. Dino figured I could be your resource, I guess."

"Oh."

"Got any questions?"

I searched for a question, found none. "Not really," I said, shrugging. "I just wanted general background, maybe some more information on Gatherings."

"I can talk to you about that later," Gourlay said. "Dino figured you'd want to get to work today. We can bring people to the Tower, if you'd like, or you can get out to them."

"We'll go out," I said quickly. Bringing subjects in for interviews fouls up everything. They get all anxious, and that covers up any emotions I might want to read, and they *think* on different things, too, so Lyanna has trouble.

"Fine," said Gourlay. "Dino put an aircar at your disposal. Pick it up down in the lobby. Also, they'll have some keys for you, so you can come straight up here to the office without bothering with the secretaries and all."

"Thanks," I said. "Talk to you later." I flicked off the view-screen and walked back to the bedroom. Lya was sitting up, the covers around her waist. I sat down next to her and kissed her. She smiled, but didn't respond. "Hey," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Headache," she replied. "I thought sober-ups were supposed to get rid of hangovers."

"That's the theory. Mine worked pretty well." I went to the closet and began looking for something to wear. "We should have headache pills around here someplace. I'm sure Dino wouldn't forget anything that obvious."

"Umpf. Yes. Throw me some clothes."

I grabbed one of her coveralls and tossed it across the room. Lya stood up and slipped into it while I dressed, then went off to the washroom.

"Better," she said. "You're right, he didn't forget medicines."

"He's the thorough sort."

She smiled. "I guess. Laurie knows the language better, though. I read her. Dino made a couple of mistakes in that translation last night."

I'd guessed at something like that. No discredit to Valcarengi; he was working on a four-month handicap, from what they'd said. I nodded. "Read anything else?"

"No. I tried to get those speakers, but the distance was too much." She came up and took my hand. "Where are we going today?"

"Shkeentown," I said. "Let's try to find some of these Joined. I didn't notice any at the Gathering."

"No. Those things are for Shkeen about-to-be-Joined."

"So I hear. Let's go."

We went. We stopped at the fourth level for a late breakfast in the Tower cafeteria, then got our aircar pointed out to us by a man in the lobby. A sporty green four-seater, very common, very inconspicuous.

I didn't take the aircar all the way into the Shkeen city, figuring we'd get more of the feel of the place if we went through on foot. So I dropped down just beyond the first range of hills, and we walked.

The human city had seemed almost empty, but Shkeentown lived. The crushed-rock streets were full of aliens, hustling back and forth busily, carrying loads of bricks and baskets of fruit and clothing. There were children everywhere, most of them naked: fat balls of orange energy that ran around us in circles, whistling and grunting and grinning, tugging at us every once in a while. The kids looked different from the adults. They had a few patches of reddish hair, for one thing, and their skins were still smooth and unwrinkled. They were the only ones who really paid any attention to us. The adult Shkeen just went about their business, and gave us an occasional friendly smile. Humans were obviously not all that uncommon in the streets of Shkeentown.

Most of the traffic was on foot, but small wooden carts were also common. The Shkeen draft animal looked like a big green dog that was about to be sick. They were strapped to the carts in pairs, and they

whined constantly as they pulled. So, naturally, men called them whiners. In addition to whining, they also defecated constantly. That, with odors from the food peddled in baskets and the Shkeen themselves, gave the city a definite pungency.

There was noise too, a constant clamor. Kids whistling, Shkeen talking loudly with grunts and whimpers and squeaks, whiners whining and their carts rattling over the rocks. Lya and I walked through it all silently, hand in hand, watching and listening and smelling and... reading.

I was wide open when I entered Shkeentown, letting everything wash over me as I walked, unfocused but receptive. I was the center of a small bubble of emotion—feelings rushed up at me as Shkeen approached, faded as they walked away, circled around and around with the dancing children. I swam in a sea of impressions. And it startled me.

It startled me because it was all so familiar. I'd read aliens before. Sometimes it was difficult, sometimes it was easy, but it was never pleasant. The Hrangans have sour minds, rank with hate and bitterness, and I feel unclean when I come out. The Fyndii feel emotions so palely that I can scarcely read them at all. The Damoosh are... *different*. I read them strongly, but I can't find names for the feelings I read.

But the Shkeen—it was like walking down a street on Baldur. No wait—more like one of the Lost Colonies, when a human settlement has fallen back into barbarism and forgotten its origins. Human emotions rage there, primal and strong and real, but less sophisticated than on Old Earth or Baldur. The Shkeen were like that: primitive, maybe, but very understandable. I read joy and sorrow, envy, anger, whimsy, bitterness, yearning, pain. The same heady mixture that engulfs me everywhere, when I open myself to it.

Lya was reading, too. I felt her hand tense in mine. After a while, it softened again. I turned to her, and she saw the question in my eyes.

"They're people," she said. "They're like us."

I nodded. "Parallel evolution, maybe. Shkea might be an older Earth, with a few minor differences.

But you're right. They're more human than any other race we've encountered in space." I considered that. "Does that answer Dino's question? If they're like us, it follows that their religion would be more appealing than a *really* alien one."

"No, Robb," Lya said. "I don't think so. Just the reverse. If they're like us, it doesn't make sense that *they'd* go off so willingly to die. See?"

She was right, of course. There was nothing suicidal in the emotions I'd read, nothing unstable, nothing really abnormal. Yet every one of the Shkeen went off to Final Union in the end.

"We should focus on somebody," I said. "This blend of thought isn't getting us anywhere." I looked around to find a subject, but just then I heard the bells begin.

They were off to the left somewhere, nearly lost in the city's gentle roar. I tugged Lya by the hand, and we ran down the street to find them, turning left at the first gap in the orderly row of domes.

The bells were still ahead, and we kept running, cutting through what must have been somebody's yard, and climbing over a low bush fence that bristled with sweethorns. Beyond that was another yard, a dung pit, more domes, and finally a street. It was there we found the bell-ringers.

There were four of them, all Joined, wearing long gowns of bright red fabric that trailed in the dust, with great bronze bells in either hand. They rang the bells constantly, their long arms swinging back and forth, the sharp, clanging notes filling the street. All four were elderly, as Shkeen go—hairless and pinched up with a million tiny wrinkles. But they smiled very widely, and the younger Shkeen that passed smiled at them.

On their heads rode the Greeshka.

I'd expected to find the sight hideous. I didn't. It was faintly disquieting, but only because I knew what it meant. The parasites were bright blobs of crimson goo, ranging in size from a pulsing wart on the back of one Shkeen skull to a great sheet of dripping, moving red that covered the head and shoulders of the smallest like a living cowl. The Greeshka lived by sharing the nutrients in the Shkeen bloodstream, I knew.

And also by slowly—oh so slowly—consuming its host.

Lya and I stopped a few yards from them, and watched them ring. Her face was solemn, and I think mine was. All of the others were smiling, and the songs that the bells sang were songs of joy. I squeezed Lyanna's hand tightly. "Read," I whispered.

We read.

Me: I read bells. Not the sound of bells, no, no, but the *feel* of bells, the *emotion* of bells, the bright clanging joy, the hooting-shouting-ringing loudness, the song of the Joined, the togetherness and the sharing of it all. I read what the Joined felt as they pealed their bells, their happiness and anticipation, their ecstasy in telling others of their clamorous contentment. And I read love, coming from them in great hot waves, passionate possessive love of a man and woman together, not the weak watery affection of the human who "loves" his brothers. This was real and fervent and it burned almost as it washed over me and surrounded me. They loved themselves, and they loved all Shkeen, and they loved the Greeshka, and they loved each other, and they loved us. They loved us. They loved *me*, as hotly and wildly as Lya loved me. And with love I read belonging, and sharing. They four were all apart, all distinct, but they thought as one almost, and they belonged to the Greeshka, and they were all *together* and linked although each was still himself and none could read the others as I read them.

And Lyanna? I reeled back from them, and shut myself off, and looked at Lya. She was white-faced, but smiling. "They're beautiful," she said, her voice very small and soft and wondering. Drenched in love, I still remembered how much I loved *her*, and how I was part of her and her of me.

"What—what did you read?" I asked, my voice fighting the continued clangor of the bells.

She shook her head, as if to clear it. "They love us," she said. "You must know that, but oh, I felt it, they *do* love us. And it's so *deep*. Below that love there's more love, and below that more, and on and on forever. Their minds are so deep, so open. I don't think I've ever read a human that deeply.

Everything is right at the surface, right there, their whole lives and all their dreams and feelings and memories and oh—I just took it in, swept it up with a reading, a glance. With men, with humans, it's so much work. I have to dig, I have to fight, and even then I don't get down very far. You know, Robb, you

know. Oh, *Robb!*" And she came to me and pressed tight against me, and I held her in my arms. The torrent of feeling that had washed over me must have been a tidal wave for her. Her Talent was broader and deeper than mine, and now she was shaken. I read her as she clutched me, and I read love, great love, and wonder and happiness, but also fear, nervous fear swirling through it all.

Around us, the ringing suddenly stopped. The bells, one by one, ceased to swing, and the four Joined stood in silence for a brief second. One of the other Shkeen nearby came up to them with a huge, cloth-covered basket. The smallest of the Joined threw back the cloth, and the aroma of hot meatrolls rose in the street. Each of the Joined took several from the basket, and before long they were all crunching away happily, and the owner of the rolls was grinning at them. Another Shkeen, a small nude girl, ran up and offered them a flask of water, and they passed it around without comment.

"What's going on?" I asked Lya. Then, even before she told me, I remembered. Something from the literature that Valcarengi had sent. The Joined did no work. Forty Earth-years they lived and toiled, but from First Joining to Final Union there was only joy and music, and they wandered the streets and rang their bells and talked and sang, and other Shkeen gave them food and drink. It was an honor to feed a Joined, and the Shkeen who had given up his meatrolls was radiating pride and pleasure. "Lya," I whispered, "can you read them now?"

She nodded against my chest and pulled away and stared at the Joined, her eyes going hard and then softening again. She looked back at me. "It's different," she said, curious.

"How?"

She squinted in puzzlement. "I don't know. I mean, they still love us, and all. But now their thoughts are, well, sort of more human. There are levels, you know, and digging isn't easy, and there are hidden things, things they hide even from themselves. It's not all open like it was. They're thinking about the food now and how good it tastes. It's all very vivid. I could taste the rolls myself. But it's not the same."

I had an inspiration. "How many minds are there?"

"Four," she said. "Linked somehow, I think. But not really." She stopped, confused, and shook her head. "I mean, they sort of feel each other's emotions, like you do, I guess. But not thoughts, not the detail. I can read them, but they don't read each other. Each one is distinct. They were closer before, when they were ringing, but they were always individuals."

I was slightly disappointed. "Four minds then, not one?"

"Umpf, yes. Four."

"And the Greeshka?" My other bright idea. If the Greeshka had minds of their own...

"Nothing," Lya said. "Like reading a plant, or a piece of clothing. Not even yes-I-live."

That was disturbing. Even lower animals had some vague consciousness of life—the feeling Talents called yes-I-live—usually only a dim spark that it took a major Talent to see. But Lya *was* a major Talent.

"Let's talk to them," I said. She nodded, and we walked up to where the Joined were munching their meatrolls. "Hello," I said awkwardly, wondering how to address them. "Can you speak Terran?"

Three of them looked at me without comprehension. But the fourth one, the little one whose Greeshka was a rippling red cape, bobbed his head up and down. "Yesh," he said, in a piping-thin voice.

I suddenly forgot what I was going to ask, but Lyanna came to my rescue. "Do you know of human Joined?" she said.

He grinned. "All Joined are one," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Well, yes, but do you know any who look like us? Tall, you know, with hair and skin that's pink or brown or something?" I came to another awkward halt, wondering just how *much* Terran the old Shkeen knew, and eyeing his Greeshka a little apprehensively.

His head bobbed from side to side. "Joined are all different, but all are one, all are shame. Shome look ash you. Would you Join?"

"No, thanks," I said. "Where can I find a human Joined?"

He bobbed his head some more. "Joined shing and ring and walk the shacred city."

Lya had been reading. "He doesn't know," she told me. "The Joined just wander and play their bells. There's no pattern to it, nobody keeps track. It's all random. Some travel in groups, some alone, and new groups form every time two bunches meet."

"We'll have to search," I said.

"Eat," the Shkeen told us. He reached into the basket on the ground and his hands came out with two steaming meatrolls. He pressed one into my hand, one in Lya's.

I looked at it dubiously. "Thank you," I told him. I pulled at Lya with my free hand and we walked off together. The Joined grinned at us as we left, and started ringing once more before we were halfway down the street.

The meatroll was still in my hand, its crust burning my fingers. "Should I eat this?" I asked Lya.

She took a bite out of hers. "Why not? We had them last night in the restaurant, right? And I'm sure Valcarenghi would've warned us if the native food was poisonous."

That made sense, so I lifted the roll to my mouth and took a bite as I walked. It was hot, and also *hot*, and it wasn't a bit like the meatrolls we'd sampled the previous night. Those had been golden, flaky things, seasoned gently with orangespice from Baldur. The Shkeen version was crunchy, and the meat inside dripped grease and burned my mouth. But it was good, and I was hungry, and the roll didn't last long.

"Get anything else when you read the small guy?" I asked Lya around a mouthful of hot roll.

She swallowed, and nodded. "Yes, I did. He was happy, even more than the rest. He's older. He's near Final Union, and he's very thrilled about it." She spoke with her old easy manner; the after effects of reading the Joined seemed to have faded.

"Why?" I was musing out loud. "He's going to *die*. Why is he so happy about it?" Lya shrugged. "He wasn't thinking in any great analytical detail, I'm afraid."

I licked my fingers to get rid of the last of the grease. We were at a crossroads, with Shkeen bustling by us in all directions, and now we could hear more bells on the wind. "More Joined," I said. "Want to look them up?"

"What would we find out? That we don't already know? We need a *human* Joined."

"Maybe one of this batch *will* be human."

I got Lya's withering look, "Ha. What are the odds?"

"All right," I conceded. It was now late afternoon. "Maybe we'd better head back. Get an earlier start tomorrow. Besides, Dino is probably expecting us for dinner."

Dinner, this time, was served in Valcarengi's office, after a little additional furniture had been dragged in. His quarters, it turned out, were on the level below, but he preferred to entertain upstairs where his guests could enjoy the spectacular Tower view.

There were five of us, all told: me and Lya, Valcarengi and Laurie, plus Gourlay. Laurie did the cooking, supervised by master chef Valcarengi. We had beefsteaks, bred on Shkea from Old Earth stock, plus a fascinating blend of vegetables that included mushrooms from Old Earth, groundpips from Baldur, and Shkeen sweethorns. Dino liked to experiment and the dish was one of his inventions.

Lya and I gave a full report on the day's adventures, interrupted only by Valcarengi's sharp, perceptive questioning. After dinner, we got rid of tables and dishes and sat around drinking Veltaar and talking. This time Lya and I asked the questions, with Gourlay supplying the biggest chunk of the answers. Valcarengi listened from a cushion on the floor, one arm around Laurie, the other holding his wine glass. We were not the first Talents to visit Shkea, he told us. Nor the first to claim the Shkeen were manlike.

"Suppose that means something," he said. "But I don't know. They're *not* men, you know. No, sir. They're much more social, for one thing. Great little city builders from way back, always in towns, always surrounding themselves with others. And they're more communal than man, too. Cooperate in all sorts of things, and they're big on sharing. Trade, for instance—they see that as mutual sharing."

Valcarengi laughed. "You can say that again. I just spent the whole day trying to work out a trade contract with a group of farmers who hadn't dealt with us before. It's not easy, believe me. They give us as much of their stuff as we ask for, if they don't need it themselves and no one else has asked for it earlier. But then they want to get whatever *they* ask for in the future. They expect it, in fact. So every time we deal we've got a choice; hand them a blank check, or go through an incredible round of talks that ends with them convinced that we're totally selfish."

Lya wasn't satisfied. "What about sex?" she demanded. "From the stuff you were translating last night, I got the impression they're monogamous."

"They're confused about sex relationships," Gourlay said. "It's very strange. Sex is sharing, you see, and it's good to share with everyone. But the sharing has to be real and meaningful. That creates problems."

Laurie sat up, attentive. "I've studied the point," she said quickly. "Shkeen morality insists they love *everybody*. But they can't do it, they're too human, too possessive. They wind up in monogamous relationships, because a really deep sex-sharing with one person is better than a million shallow

physical things, in their culture. The ideal Shkeen would sex-share with everyone, with each of the unions being just as deep, but they can't achieve that ideal."

I frowned. "Wasn't somebody guilty last night over betraying his wife?"

Laurie nodded eagerly. "Yes, but the guilt was because his other relationships caused his sharing with his wife to diminish. *That* was the betrayal. If he'd been able to manage it without hurting his older relationship, the sex would have been meaningless. And, if all of the relationships have been real love-sharing, it would have been a plus. His wife would have been proud of him. It's quite an achievement for a Shkeen to be in a multiple union that works."

"And one of the greatest Shkeen crimes is to leave another alone," Gourlay said. "Emotionally alone. Without sharing."

I mulled over that, while Gourlay went on. The Shkeen had little crime, he told us. Especially no violent crime. No murders, no beatings, no prisons, no wars in their long, empty history.

"They're a race without murderers," Valcarengi said. "Which may explain something. On Old Earth, the same cultures that had the highest suicide rates often had the lowest murder rates, too. And the Shkeen suicide rate is one hundred percent."

"They kill animals," I said.

"Not part of the Union," Gourlay replied. "The Union embraces all that thinks, and its creatures may not be killed. They do not kill Shkeen, or humans, or Greeshka."

Lya looked at me, then at Gourlay. "The Greeshka don't think," she said. "I tried to read them this morning and got nothing but the minds of the Shkeen they rode. Not even a yes-I-live."

"We've known that, but the point's always puzzled me," Valcarengi said, climbing to his feet. He went to the bar for more wine, brought out a bottle, and filled our glasses. "A truly mindless parasite, but an intelligent race like the Shkeen are enslaved by it. Why?"

The new wine was good and chilled, a cold trail down my throat. I drank it, and nodded, remembering the flood of euphoria that had swept over us earlier that day. "Drugs," I said, speculatively. "The Greeshka must produce an organic pleasure drug. The Shkeen submit to it willingly and die happy. The joy is real, believe me. We felt it."

Lyanna looked doubtful, though, and Gourlay shook his head adamantly. "No, Robb. Not so. We've experimented on the Greeshka, and..."

He must have noticed my raised eyebrows. He stopped. "How did the Shkeen feel about that?" I asked.

"Didn't tell them. They wouldn't have liked it, not at all. Greeshka's just an animal, but it's their God. Don't fool around with God, you know. We refrained for a long time, but when Gustaffson went over, old Stuart had to know. His orders. We didn't get anywhere, though. No extracts that might be a drug, no secretions, nothing. In fact, the Shkeen are the *only* native life that submits so easily. We caught a whiner, you see, and strapped *it* down, and let a Greeshka link up. Then, couple hours later, we yanked the straps. Damn whiner was furious, screeching and yelping, attacking the thing on its head. Nearly clawed its own skull to ribbons before it got it off."

"Maybe only the Shkeen are susceptible?" I said. A feeble rescue attempt.

"Not quite," said Valcarengi, with a small, thin smile. "There's us."

Lya was strangely silent in the tube, almost withdrawn. I assumed she was thinking about the conversation. But the door to our suite had barely slid shut behind us when she turned toward me and wrapped her arms around me.

I reached up and stroked her soft brown hair, slightly startled by the hug. "Hey," I muttered, "what's wrong?"

She gave me her vampire look, big-eyed and fragile. "Make love to me, Robb," she said with a soft sudden urgency. "Please. Make love to me now."

I smiled, but it was a puzzled smile, not my usual lecherous bedroom grin. Lya generally comes on impish and wicked when she's horny, but now she was all troubled and vulnerable. I didn't quite get it.

But it wasn't a time for questions, and I didn't ask any. I just pulled her to me wordlessly and kissed her hard, and we walked together to the bedroom.

And we made love, *really* made love, more than poor Normals can do. We joined our bodies as one, and I felt Lya stiffen as her mind reached out to mine. And as we moved together I was opening myself to her, drowning myself in the flood of love and need and fear that was pouring from her.

Then, quickly as it had begun, it ended. Her pleasure washed over me in a raw red wave. And I joined her on the crest, and Lya clutched me tightly, her eyes shrunk up small as she drank it all in.

Afterwards, we lay there in the darkness and let the stars of Shkea pour their radiance through the window. Lya huddled against me, her head on my chest, while I stroked her.

"That was good," I said in a drowsy-dreamy voice, smiling in the star-filled darkness.

"Yes," she replied. Her voice was soft and small, so small I barely heard it. "I love you, Robb," she whispered.

"Uh-huh," I said. "And I love you."

She pulled loose of my arm and rolled over, propping her head on a hand to stare at me and smile. "You do," she said. "I read it. I know it. And you know how much I love you, too, don't you?"

I nodded, smiling. "Sure."

"We're lucky, you know. The Normals have only words. Poor little Normals. How can they *tell*, with just words? How can they *know*? They're always apart from each other, trying to reach each other and failing. Even when they make love, even when they come, they're always apart. They must be very lonely."

There was something... disturbing... in that. I looked at Lya, into her bright happy eyes, and thought about it. "Maybe," I said, finally. "But it's not that bad for them. They don't know any other way. And they try, they love too. They bridge the gap sometimes."

"Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence." Lya quoted, her voice sad and tender. "We're luckier, aren't we? We have so much more."

"We're luckier," I echoed. And I reached out to read her too. Her mind was a haze of satisfaction, with a gentle scent of wistful, lonely longing. But there was something else, way down, almost gone now, but still faintly detectable.

I sat up slowly. "Hey," I said. "You're worried about something. And before, when we came in, you were scared. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, really," she said. She sounded puzzled and she *was* puzzled; I read it there. "I *was* scared, but I don't know *why*. The Joined, I think. I kept thinking about how much they loved me. They didn't even *know* me, but they loved me so much, and they understood—it was almost like what we have. It—I don't know. It bothered me. I mean, I didn't think I could ever be loved that way, except by you. And they were so *close*, so together. I felt kind of lonely, just holding hands and talking. I wanted to be close to *you* that way. After the way they were all sharing and everything, being alone just seemed empty. And frightening. You know?"

"I know," I said, touching her lightly again, with hand and mind. "I understand. We do understand each other. We're together almost as they are, as Normals can't ever be."

Lya nodded, and smiled, and hugged me. We went to sleep in each other's arms.

Dreams again. But again, at dawn, the memory stole away from me. It was all very annoying. The dream had been pleasant, comfortable. I wanted it back, and I couldn't even remember what it was. Our bedroom, washed by harsh daylight, seemed drab compared to the splendors of my lost vision.

Lya woke after me, with another headache. This time she had the pills on hand, by the bedstand. She grimaced and took one.

"It must be the Shkeen wine," I told her. "Something about it takes a dim view of your metabolism." She pulled on a fresh coverall and scowled at me. "Ha. We were drinking Veltaar last night, remember? My father gave me my first glass of Veltaar when I was nine. It never gave me headaches before."

"A first!" I said, smiling.

"It's not funny," she said. "It hurts."

I quit kidding, and tried to read her. She was right. It *did* hurt. Her whole forehead throbbed with pain. I withdrew quickly before I caught it too.

"All right," I said. "I'm sorry. The pills will take care of it, though. Meanwhile, we've got work to do." Lya nodded. She'd never let anything interfere with work yet.

The second day was a day of manhunt. We got off to a much earlier start, had a quick breakfast with Gourlay, then picked up our aircar outside the Tower. This time we didn't drop down when we hit Shkeentown. We wanted a human Joined, which meant we had to cover a lot of ground. The city was

the biggest I'd ever seen, in area at any rate, and the thousand-odd human cultists were lost among millions of Shkeen. And, of those humans, only about half were actually Joined yet.

So we kept the aircar low, and buzzed up and down the dome-dotted hills like a floating rollercoaster, causing quite a stir in the streets below us. The Shkeen had seen aircars before, of course, but it still had some novelty value, particularly to the kids, who tried to run after us whenever we flashed by. We also panicked a whiner, causing him to upset the cart full of fruit he was dragging. I felt guilty about that, so I kept the car higher afterwards.

We spotted Joined all over the city, singing, eating, walking—and ringing those bells, those eternal bronze bells. But for the first three hours, all we found were Shkeen Joined. Lya and I took turns driving and watching. After the excitement of the previous day, the search was tedious and tiring.

Finally, however, we found something: a large group of Joined, ten of them, clustered around a bread cart behind one of the steeper hills. Two were taller than the rest.

We landed on the other side of the hill and walked around to meet them, leaving our aircar surrounded by a crowd of Shkeen children. The Joined were still eating when we arrived. Eight of them were Shkeen of various sizes and hues, Greeshka pulsing atop their skulls. The other two were human.

They wore the same long red gowns as the Shkeen, and they carried the same bells. One of them was a big man, with loose skin that hung in flaps, as if he'd lost a lot of weight recently. His hair was white and curly, his face marked by a broad smile and laugh wrinkles around his eyes. The other was a thin, dark weasel of a man with a big hooked nose.

Both of them had Greeshka sucking at their skulls. The parasite riding the weasel was barely a pimple, but the older man had a lordly specimen that dripped down beyond his shoulders and into the back of the gown.

Somehow, this time, it *did* look hideous.

Lyanna and I walked up to them, trying hard to smile, not reading—at least at first. They smiled at us as we approached. Then they waved.

"Hello," the weasel said cheerily when we got there. "I've never seen you. Are you new on Shkea?"

That took me slightly by surprise. I'd been expecting some sort of garbled mystic greeting, or maybe no greeting at all. I was assuming that somehow the human converts would have abandoned their humanity to become mock-Shkeen. I was wrong.

"More or less," I replied. And I read the weasel. He was genuinely pleased to see us, and just bubbled with contentment and good cheer. "We've been hired to talk to people like you." I'd decided to be honest about it.

The weasel stretched his grin farther than I thought it would go. "I am Joined, and happy," he said. "I'll be glad to talk to you. My name is Lester Kamenz. What do you want to know, brother?"

Lya, next to me, was going tense. I decided I'd let her read in depth while I asked questions. "When did you convert to the Cult?"

"Cult?" Kamenz said. "The Union."

He nodded, and I was struck by the grotesque similarity of his bobbing head and that of the elderly Shkeen we'd seen yesterday. "I have always been in the Union. You are in the Union. All that thinks is in the Union."

"Some of us weren't told," I said. "How about you? When did you realize you were in the Union?"

"A year ago, Old Earth time. I was admitted to the ranks of the Joined only a few weeks ago. The First Joining is a joyful time. I am joyful. Now I will walk the streets and ring my bells until the Final Union."

"What did you do before?"

"Before?" A short vague look. "I ran machines once. I ran computers, in the Tower. But my life was empty, brother. I did not know I was in the Union, and I was alone. I had only machines, cold machines. Now I am Joined. Now I am"—again he searched—"not alone."

I reached into him, and found the happiness still there, with love. But now there was an ache too, a vague recollection of past pain, the stink of unwelcome memories. Did these fade? Maybe the gift the Greeshka gave its victims was oblivion, sweet mindless rest and end of struggle. Maybe.

I decided to try something. "That thing on your head," I said, sharply. "It's a parasite. It's drinking your blood right now, feeding on it. As it grows, it will take more and more of the things *you* need to live. Finally it will start to eat your tissue. Understand? It will *eat* you. I don't know how painful it will be, but however it feels, at the end you'll be *dead*. Unless you come back to the Tower now, and have the surgeons remove it. Or maybe you could remove it yourself. Why don't you try? Just reach up and pull it off. Go ahead."

I'd expected—what? Rage? Horror? Disgust? I got none of these. Kamenz just stuffed bread in his mouth and smiled at me, and all I read was his love and joy and a little pity.

"The Greeshka does not kill," he said finally. "The Greeshka gives joy and happy Union. Only those who have no Greeshka die. They are... alone. Oh, forever alone." Something in his mind trembled with sudden fear, but it faded quickly.

I glanced at Lya. She was stiff and hard-eyed, still reading. I looked back and began to phrase another question. But suddenly the Joined began to ring. One of the Shkeen started it off, swinging his bell up and down to produce a single sharp clang. Then his other hand swung, then the first again, then the second, then another Joined began to ring, then still another, and then they were all swinging and clanging and the noise of their bells was smashing against my ears as the joy and the love and the feel of the bells assaulted my mind once again.

I lingered to savor it. The love there was breathtaking, awesome, almost frightening in its heat and intensity, and there was so much sharing to frolic in and wonder at, such a soothing-calming-exhilarating tapestry of good feelings. Something happened to the Joined when they rang, something touched them and lifted them and gave them a glow, something strange and glorious that mere Normals could not hear in their harsh clanging music. I was no Normal, though. I could hear it.

I withdrew reluctantly, slowly. Kamenz and the other human were both ringing vigorously now, with broad smiles and glowing twinkling eyes that transfigured their faces. Lyanna was still tense, still reading. Her mouth was slightly open, and she trembled where she stood.

I put an arm around her and waited, listening to the music, patient. Lya continued to read. Finally, after minutes, I shook her gently. She turned and studied me with hard, distant eyes. Then blinked. And her eyes widened and she came back, shaking her head and frowning.

Puzzled, I looked into her head. Strange and stranger. It was a swirling fog of emotion, a dense moving blend of more feelings than I'd care to put a name to. No sooner had I entered than I was lost, lost and uneasy. Somewhere in the fog there was a bottomless abyss lurking to engulf me. At least it felt that way.

"Lya," I said. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head again, and looked at the Joined with a look that was equal parts fear and longing. I repeated my question.

"I—I don't know," she said. "Robb, let's not talk now. Let's go. I want time to think."

"OK," I said. What was going on here? I took her hand and we walked slowly around the hill to the slope where we'd left the car. Shkeen kids were climbing all over it. I chased them, laughing. Lya just stood there, her eyes gone all faraway on me. I wanted to read her again, but somehow I felt it would be an invasion of privacy.

Airborne, we streaked back toward the Tower, riding higher and faster this time. I drove, while Lya sat beside me and stared out into the distance.

"Did you get anything useful?" I asked her, trying to get her mind back on the assignment.

"Yes. No. Maybe." Her voice sounded distracted, as if only part of her was talking to me. "I read their lives, both of them. Kamenz was a computer programmer, as he said. But he wasn't very good. An ugly little man with an ugly little personality, no friends, no sex, no nothing. Lived by himself, avoided the Shkeen, didn't like them at all. Didn't even like people, really. But Gustaffson got through to him, somehow. He ignored Kamenz' coldness, his bitter little cuts, his cruel jokes. He didn't retaliate, you know? After a while, Kamenz came to like Gustaffson, to admire him. They were never really friends in any normal sense, but still Gustaffson was the nearest thing to a friend that Kamenz had."

She stopped suddenly. "So he went over with Gustaffson?" I prompted, glancing at her quickly. Her eyes still wandered.

"No, not at first. He was still afraid, still scared of the Shkeen and terrified of the Greeshka. But later, with Gustaffson gone, he began to realize how empty his life was. He worked all day with people who despised him and machines that didn't care, then sat alone at night reading and watching holoshows. Not life, really. He hardly touched the people around him. Finally he went to find Gustaffson, and wound up converted. Now..."

"Now...?"

She hesitated. "He's happy, Robb," she said. "He really is. For the first time in his life, he's happy. He'd never known love before. Now it fills him."

"You got a lot," I said.

"Yes." Still the distracted voice, the lost eyes. "He was open, sort of. There were levels, but digging wasn't as hard as it usually is—as if his barriers were weakening, coming down almost..."

"How about the other guy?"

She stroked the instrument panel, staring only at her hand. "Him? That was Gustaffson..."

And that, suddenly, seemed to wake her, to restore her to the Lya I knew and loved. She shook her head and looked at me, and the aimless voice became an animated torrent of words. "Robb, listen, that was *Gustaffson*, he's been Joined over a year now, and he's going on to Final Union within a week. The Greeshka has accepted him, and he wants it, you know? He really does, and—and—oh Robb, he's *dying!*"

"Within a week, according to what you just said."

"No. I mean yes, but that's not what I mean. Final Union isn't death, to him. He believes it, all of it, the whole religion. The Greeshka is his god, and he's going to join it. But before, and now, he was dying. He's got the Slow Plague, Robb. A terminal case. It's been eating at him from inside for fifteen years now. He got it back on Nightmare, in the swamps, when his family died. That's no world for people, but he was there, the administrator over a research base, a short-term thing. They lived on Thor; it was only a visit, but the ship crashed. Gustaffson got all wild and tried to reach them before the end, but he grabbed a faulty pair of skinthins, and the spores got through. And they were all dead when he got there. He had an awful lot of pain, Robb. From the Slow Plague, but more from the loss. He really loved them, and it was never the same after. They gave him Shkea as a reward, kind of, to take his mind off the crash, but he still thought of it all the time. I could see the picture, Robb. It was vivid. He couldn't forget it. The kids were inside the ship, safe behind the walls, but the life system failed and choked them to death. But his wife—oh, Robb—she took some skinthins and tried to go for help, and outside those *things*, those big wrigglers they have on Nightmare—?"

I swallowed hard, feeling a little sick. "The eater-worms," I said, dully. I'd read about them, and seen holos. I could imagine the picture that Lya'd seen in Gustaffson's memory, and it wasn't at all pretty. I was glad I didn't have her Talent.

"They were still—still—when Gustaffson got there. You know. He killed them all with a screech gun."

I shook my head, "I didn't think things like that really went on."

"No," Lya said. "Neither did Gustaffson. They'd been so—so *happy* before that, before the thing on Nightmare. He loved her, and they were really close, and his career had been almost charmed. He didn't have to go to Nightmare, you know. He took it because it was a challenge, because nobody else could handle it. That gnaws at him, too. And he remembers all the time. He—they—" Her voice faltered. "They thought they were *lucky*," she said, before falling into silence.

There was nothing to say to that. I just kept quiet and drove, thinking, feeling a blurred, watered-down version of what Gustaffson's pain must have been like. After a while, Lya began to speak again.

"It was all there, Robb," she said, her voice softer and slower and more thoughtful once again. "But he was at peace. He still remembered it all, and the way it had hurt, but it didn't bother him as it had."

Only now he was sorry they weren't with him. He was sorry that they died without Final Union. Almost like the Shkeen woman, remember? The one at the Gathering? With her brother?"

"I remember," I said.

"Like that. And his mind was open, too. More than Kamenz, much more. When he rang, the levels all vanished, and everything was right at the surface, all the love and pain and everything. His whole life, Robb. I shared his whole life with him, in an instant. And all his thoughts, too... he's seen the caves of Union... he went down once, before he converted. I..."

More silence, settling over us and darkening the car. We were close to the end of Shkeentown. The Tower slashed the sky ahead of us, shining in the sun. And the lower domes and archways of the glittering human city were coming into view.

"Robb," Lya said. "Land here. I have to think a while, you know? Go back without me. I want to walk among the Shkeen a little."

I glanced at her, frowning. "Walk? It's a long way back to the Tower, Lya."

"I'll be all right. Please. Just let me think a bit."

I read her. The thought fog had returned, denser than ever, laced through with the colors of fear. "Are you sure?" I said. "You're scared, Lyanna. Why? What's wrong? The eater-worms are a long way off."

She just looked at me, troubled. "Please, Robb," she repeated. I didn't know what else to do, so I landed.

And I, too, thought, as I guided the aircar home. Of what Lyanna had said, and read—of Kamenz and Gustaffson. I kept my mind on the problem we'd been assigned to crack. I tried to keep it off Lya, and whatever was bothering her. That would solve itself, I thought.

Back at the Tower, I wasted no time. I went straight up to Valcarengi's office. He was there, alone, dictating into a machine. He shut it off when I entered.

"Hi, Robb," he began. "Where's Lya?"

"Out walking. She wanted to think. I've been thinking, too. And I believe I've got your answer." He raised his eyebrows, waiting.

I sat down. "We found Gustaffson this afternoon, and Lya read him. I think it's clear why he went over. He was a broken man, inside, however much he smiled. The Greeshka gave him an end to his pain. And there was another convert with him, a Lester Kamenz. He'd been miserable, too, a pathetic lonely man with nothing to *live* for. Why *shouldn't* he convert? Check out the other converts, and I bet you'll find a pattern. The most lost and vulnerable, the failures, the isolated—those will be the ones that turned to Union."

Valcarengi nodded. "OK, I'll buy that," he said. "But our psychs guessed that long ago, Robb. Only it's no answer, not really. Sure, the converts on the whole have been a messed-up crew, I won't dispute that. But why turn to the Cult of the Union? The psychs can't answer that. Take Gustaffson now. He was a strong man, believe me. I never knew him personally, but I knew his career. He took some rough assignments, generally for the hell of it, and beat them. He could have had the cushy jobs, but he wasn't interested. I've heard about the incident on Nightmare. It's famous, in a warped sort of way. But Phil Gustaffson wasn't the sort of man to be beaten, even by something like that. He snapped out of it very quickly, from what Nelse tells me. He came to Shkea and really set the place in order, cleaning up the

mess that Rockwood had left. He pushed through the first real trade contract we ever got, *and* he made the Shkeen understand what it meant, which isn't easy.

"So here he is, this competent, talented man, who's made a career of beating tough jobs and handling men. He's gone through a personal nightmare, but it hasn't destroyed him. He's as tough as ever. And suddenly he turns to the Cult of the Union, signs up for a grotesque suicide. Why? For an end to his pain, you say? An interesting theory, but there are other ways to end pain. Gustaffson had years between Nightmare and the Greeshka. He never ran away from pain then. He didn't turn to drink, or drugs, or any of the usual outs. He didn't head back to Old Earth to have a psi-psych clean up his memories—and believe me, he could've gotten it paid for, if he'd wanted it. The colonial office would have done anything for him, after Nightmare. He went on, swallowed his pain, rebuilt. Until suddenly he converts.

"His pain made him more vulnerable, yes, no doubt of it. But something else brought him over—something that Union offered, something he couldn't get from wine or memory wipe. The same's true of Kamenz, and the others. They had other outs, other ways to vote no on life. They passed them up. But they chose Union. You see what I'm getting at?"

I did, of course. My answer was no answer at all, and I realized it. But Valcarengi was wrong too, in parts.

"Yes," I said. "I guess we've still got some reading to do." I smiled wanly. "One thing, though. Gustaffson hadn't really beaten his pain, not ever. Lya was very clear on that. It was inside him all the time, tormenting him. He just never let it come out."

"That's victory, isn't it?" Valcarengi said. "If you bury your hurts so deep that no one can tell you have them?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But... anyway, there was more. Gustaffson has the Slow Plague. He's dying. He's been dying for years."

Valcarengi's expression flickered briefly. "That I didn't know, but it just bolsters my point. I've read that some eighty percent of Slow Plague victims opt for euthanasia, if they happen to be on a planet where it's legal. Gustaffson was a planetary administrator. He could have *made* it legal. If he passed up suicide for all those years, why choose it now?"

I didn't have an answer for that. Lyanna hadn't given me one, if she had one. I didn't know where we could find one, either unless...

"The caves," I said suddenly. "The caves of Union. We've got to witness a Final Union. There must be something about it, something that accounts for the conversions. Give us a chance to find out what it is."

Valcarengi smiled. "All right," he said. "I can arrange it. I expected it would come to that. It's not pleasant, though, I'll warn you. I've gone down myself, so I know what I'm talking about."

"That's OK," I told him. "If you think reading Gustaffson was any fun, you should have seen Lya when she was through. She's out now trying to walk it off." That, I'd decided, must have been what was bothering her. "Final Union won't be any worse than those memories of Nightmare, I'm sure."

"Fine, then. I'll set it up for tomorrow. I'm going with you, of course. I don't want to take any chances on anything happening to you."

I nodded. Valcarengi rose. "Good enough," he said. "Meanwhile, let's think about more interesting things. You have any plans for dinner?"

We wound up eating at a mock-Shkeen restaurant run by humans, in the company of Gourlay and Laurie Blackburn. The talk was mostly social noises—sports, politics, art, old jokes, that sort of thing. I don't think there was a mention of the Shkeen or the Greeshka all evening.

Afterwards, when I got back to our suite, I found Lyanna waiting for me. She was in bed, reading one of the handsome volumes from our library, a book of Old Earth poetry. She looked up when I entered.

"Hi," I said. "How was your walk?"

"Long." A smile creased her pale, small face, then faded. "But I had time to think. About this afternoon, and yesterday, and about the Joined. And us."

"Us?"

"Robb, do you love me?" The question was delivered almost matter-of-factly, in a voice full of question. As if she didn't know. As if she really didn't know.

I sat down on the bed and took her hand and tried to smile. "Sure," I said. "You know that, Lya."

"I did. I do. You love me, Robb, really you do. As much as a human can love. But..." She stopped.

She shook her head and closed her book and sighed. "But we're still apart, Robb. We're still apart."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"This afternoon. I was so confused afterwards, and scared. I wasn't sure why, but I've thought about it. When I was reading, Robb—I was in there, with the Joined, sharing them and their love. I really was. And I didn't want to come out. I didn't want to leave them, Robb. When I did, I felt so isolated, so cut off."

"That's your fault," I said. "I tried to talk to you. You were too busy thinking."

"Talking? What good is talking? It's communication, I guess, but is it *really*? I used to think so, before they trained my Talent. After that, reading seemed to be the real communication, the real way to reach somebody else, somebody like you. But now I don't know. The Joined—when they ring—they're so *together*, Robb. All linked. Like us when we make love, almost. And they love each other, too. And they love us, so intensely. I felt—I don't know. But Gustaffson loves me as much as you do. No. He loves me more."

Her face was white as she said that, her eyes wide, lost, lonely. And me, I felt a sudden chill, like a cold wind blowing through my soul. I didn't say anything. I only looked at her, and wet my lips. And bled.

She saw the hurt in my eyes, I guess. Or read it. Her hand pulled at mine, caressed it. "Oh, Robb.

Please. I don't mean to hurt you. It's not you. It's all of us. What do *we* have, compared to *them*?" "I don't know what you're talking about, Lya." Half of me suddenly wanted to cry. The other half wanted to shout. I stifled both halves, and kept my voice steady. But inside I wasn't steady, I wasn't steady at all.

"Do you love me, Robb?" Again. Wondering. "Yes!" Fiercely. A challenge.

"What does that mean?" she said.

"You know what it means," I said. "Dammit, Lya, *think!* Remember all we've had, all we've shared together. *That's* love, Lya. It is. We're the lucky ones, remember? You said that yourself. The Normals have only a touch and a voice, then back to their darkness. They can barely find each other. They're alone. Always. Groping. Trying, over and over, to climb out of their isolation booths, and failing, over and over. But not us, we found the way, we know each other as much as any human beings ever can. There's nothing I wouldn't tell you, or share with you. I've said that before, and you know it's true, you can read it in me. *That's* love, dammit. *Isn't it?*"

"I don't know," she said, in a voice so sadly baffled. Soundlessly, without even a sob, she began to cry. And while the tears ran in lonely paths down her cheeks, she talked. "Maybe that's love. I always thought it was. But now I don't know. If what we have is love, what was it I felt this afternoon, what was it I touched and shared in? Oh, Robb, I love you too. You know that. I try to share with you. I want to share what I read, what it was like. But I can't. We're cut off. I can't make you understand. I'm here and you're there and we can touch and make love and talk, but we're still apart. You see? You see? I'm alone. And this afternoon, I *wasn't*."

"You're not alone, dammit," I said suddenly. "I'm here." I clutched her hand tightly. "Feel? Hear? You're not alone!"

She shook her head, and the tears flowed on. "You don't understand, see? And there's no way I can make you. You said we know each other as much as any human beings ever can. You're right. But how much can human beings know each other? Aren't all of them cut off, really? Each alone in a big, dark, empty universe? We only trick ourselves when we think that someone else is there. In the end, in the cold lonely end, it's only us, by ourselves, in the blackness. Are you there, Robb? How do I know? Will you die with me, Robb? Will we be together then? Are we together *now*? You say we're luckier than the Normals. I've said it too. They have only a touch and voice, right? How many times have I quoted that? But what do *we* have? A touch and two voices, maybe. It's not enough anymore. I'm scared. Suddenly I'm scared."

She began to sob. Instinctively I reached out to her, wrapped her in my arms, stroked her. We lay back together, and she wept against my chest. I read her, briefly, and I read her pain, her sudden loneliness, her hunger, all aswirl in a darkening mind-storm of fear. And, though I touched her and caressed her and whispered—over and over—that it would be all right, that I was here, that she wasn't alone, I knew that it would not be enough. Suddenly there was a gulf between us, a great dark yawning tiling that grew and grew, and I didn't know how to bridge it. And Lya, my Lya, was crying, and she needed me. And I needed her, but I couldn't get to her.

Then I realized that I was crying too.

We held each other, in silent tears, for what must have been an hour. But finally the tears ran out. Lya clutched her body to me so tightly I could hardly breathe, and I held her just as tightly.

"Robb," she whispered. "You said—you said we really know each other. All those times you've said it. And you say, sometimes, that I'm *right* for you, that I'm perfect."

I nodded, wanting to believe. "Yes. You are."

"No," she said, choking out the word, forcing it into the air, fighting herself to say it. "It's not *so*. I read you, yes. I can hear the words rattling around in your head as you fit a sentence together before saying it. And I listen to you scold yourself when you've done something stupid. And I see memories, some memories, and live through them with you. But it's all on the surface, Robb, all on the top. Below it, there's more, more of *you*. Drifting half-thoughts I don't quite catch. Feelings I can't put a name to.

Passions you suppress, and memories even you don't know you have. Sometimes I can get to that level. Sometimes. If I really fight, if I drain myself to exhaustion. But when I get there, I know—I *know*—that there's another level below *that*. And more and more, on and on, down and down. I can't reach them, Robb, though they're part of you. I don't know you. I can't know you. You don't even know yourself, see? And me, do you know me? No. Even less. You know what I tell you, and I tell you the truth, but maybe not all. And you read my feelings, my surface feelings—the pain of a stubbed toe, a quick flash of annoyance, the pleasure I get when you're in me. Does that mean you know me? What of *my* levels, and levels? What about the things I don't even know myself? Do *you* know them? How, Robb, how?"

She shook her head again, with that funny little gesture she had whenever she was confused. "And you say I'm perfect, and that you love me. I'm so right for you. But *am* I? Robb, I *read your thoughts*. I know when you want me to be sexy, so I'm sexy. I see what turns you on, so I do it. I know when you want me to be serious, and when you want me to joke. I know what kind of jokes to tell, too. Never the cutting kind, you don't like that, to hurt or see people hurt. You laugh *with* people not *at* them, and I laugh with you, and love you for your tastes. I know when you want me to talk, and when to keep quiet. I know when you want me to be your proud tigress, your tawny telepath, and when you want a little girl to shelter in your arms. And I *am* those things, Robb, because you want me to be, because I love you, because I can feel joy in your mind at every *right* thing that I do. I never set out to do it that way, but it happened. I didn't mind, I don't mind. Most of the time it wasn't even conscious. You do the same thing, too. I read it in you. You can't read as I do, so sometimes you guess wrong—you come on witty when I want silent understanding, or you act the strong man when I need a boy to mother. But you get it right sometimes, too. And you *try*, you always try.

"But is it really *you*? Is it really *me*? What if I wasn't perfect, you see, if I was just myself, with all my faults and the things you don't like out in the open? Would you love me *then*? I don't know. But Gustaffson would, and Kamenz. I know that, Robb. I saw it. I know *them*. Their levels... vanished. I *KNOW* them, and if I went back I could share with them, more than with you. And they know me, the real me, all of me, I think. And they love me. You see? *You see*?"

Did I see? I don't know. I was confused. Would I love Lya if she was "herself"? But what was "herself"? How was it different from the Lya I knew? I thought I loved Lya and would always love Lya—but what if the real Lya wasn't like my Lya? *What* did I love? The strange abstract concept of a human being, or the flesh and voice and personality that I thought of as Lya? I didn't know. I didn't know who Lya was, or who I was, or what the hell it all meant. And I was scared. Maybe I couldn't feel what she had felt that afternoon. But I knew what she was feeling then. I was alone, and I needed someone.

"Lya," I called. "Lya, let's try. We don't have to give up. We can reach each other. There's a way, our way. We've done it before. Come, Lya, come with me, come to me."

As I spoke, I undressed her, and she responded and her hands joined mine. When we were nude, I began to stroke her, slowly, and she me. Our minds reached out to each other. Reached and probed as never before. I could feel her, inside my head, digging. Deeper and deeper. Down. And I opened myself to her, I surrendered, all the petty little secrets I had kept even from her, or tried to, now I yielded up to her everything I could remember, my triumphs and shames, the good moments and the pain, the times I'd hurt someone, the times I'd been hurt, the long crying sessions by myself, the fears I wouldn't admit, the prejudices I fought, the vanities I battled when the time struck, the silly boyish sins. All. Everything. I buried nothing. I hid nothing. I gave myself to her, to Lya, to *my* Lya. She had to know me.

And so, too, she yielded. Her mind was a forest through which I roamed, hunting down wisps of emotion, the fear and the need and the love at the top, the fainter things beneath, the half-formed whims and passions still deeper into the woods. I don't have Lya's Talent, I read only feelings, never thoughts. But I read thoughts then, for the first and only time, thoughts she threw at me because I'd never seen them before. I couldn't reach much, but some I got.

And as her mind opened to mine, so did her body. I entered her, and we moved together, bodies one, minds entwined, as close as human beings can join. I felt pleasure washing over me in great glorious waves, my pleasure, her pleasure, both together building on each other, and I rode the crest for an eternity as it approached a far distant shore. And finally as it smashed into that beach, we came together, and for a second—for a tiny, fleeting second—I could not tell which orgasm was mine, and which was hers.

But then it passed. We lay, bodies locked together, on the bed. In the starlight. But it was not a bed. It was the beach, the flat black beach, and there were no stars above. A thought touched me, a vagrant thought that was not mine. Lya's thought. We were on a plain, she was thinking, and I saw that she was right. The waters that had carried us here were gone, receded. There was only a vast flat blackness stretching away in all directions, with dim ominous shapes moving on either horizon. *We are here as on a darkling plain*, Lya thought. And suddenly I knew what those shapes were, and what poem she had been reading.

We slept.

I woke, alone.

The room was dark. Lya lay on the other side of the bed, curled up, still asleep. It was late, near dawn I thought. But I wasn't sure. I was restless.

I got up and dressed in silence. I needed to walk somewhere, to think, to work things out. Where, though?

There was a key in my pocket. I touched it when I pulled on my tunic, and remembered.

Valcarengi's office. It would be locked and deserted at this time of night. And the view might help me think.

I left, found the tubes, and shot up, up, up to the apex of the Tower, the top of man's steel challenge to the Shkeen. The office was unlit, the furniture dark shapes in the shadows. There was only the starlight. Shkea is closer to the galactic center than Old Earth, or Baldur. The stars are a fiery canopy across the

night sky. Some of them are very close, and they burn like red and blue-white fires in the awesome blackness above. In Valcarengi's office, all the walls are glass. I went to one, and looked out. I wasn't thinking. Just feeling. And I felt cold and lost and little.

Then there was a soft voice behind me saying hello. I barely heard it.

I turned away from the window, but other stars leaped at me from the far walls. Laurie Blackburn sat in one of the low chairs, concealed by the darkness.

"Hello," I said. "I didn't mean to intrude. I thought no one would be here."

She smiled. A radiant smile in a radiant face, but there was no humor in it. Her hair fell in sweeping auburn waves past her shoulders, and she was dressed in something long and gauzy. I could see her gentle curves through its folds, and she made no effort to hide herself.

"I come up here a lot," she said. "At night, usually. When Dino's asleep. It's a good place to think."

"Yes," I said, smiling. "My thoughts, too."

"The stars are pretty, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"I think so. I—" Hesitation. Then she rose and came to me. "Do you love Lya?" she said.

A hammer of a question. Timed terribly. But I handled it well, I think. My mind was still on my talk with Lya. "Yes," I said. "Very much. Why?"

She was standing close to me, looking at my face, and past me, out to the stars. "I don't know. I wonder about love, sometimes. I love Dino, you know. He came here two months ago, so we haven't known each other long. But I love him already. I've never known anybody like him. He's kind, and considerate, and he does everything well. I've never seen him fail at anything he tried. Yet he doesn't seem driven, like some men. He wins so easily. He believes in himself a lot, and that's attractive. He's given me anything I could ask for, everything."

I read her, caught her love and worry and guessed. "Except himself," I said.

She looked at me, startled. Then she smiled. "I forgot. You're a Talent. Of course you know. You're right. I don't know what I worry about, but I do worry. Dino is so perfect, you know. I've told him—well, everything. All about me and my life. And he listens and understands. He's always receptive, he's there when I need him. But—"

"It's all one way," I said. It was a statement. I knew.

She nodded. "It's not that he keeps secrets. He doesn't. He'll answer any question I ask. But the answers mean nothing. I ask him what he fears, and he says nothing, and makes me believe it. He's very rational, very calm. He never gets angry, he never has. I asked him. He doesn't hate people, he thinks hate is bad. He's never felt pain, either, or he *says* he hasn't. Emotional pain, I mean. Yet he understands me when I talk about my life. Once he said his biggest fault was laziness. But he's not lazy at all, I know that. Is he really that perfect? He tells me he's always sure of himself, because he *knows* he's good, but he smiles when he says it, so I can't even accuse him of being vain. He says he believes in God, but he never talks

about it. If you try to talk seriously, he'll listen patiently, or joke with you, or lead the conversation away. He says he loves me, but—"

I nodded. I knew what was coming.

It came. She looked at me, eyes begging. "You're a Talent," she said. "You've read him, haven't you? You know him? Tell me. Please tell me."

I was reading her. I could see how much she needed to know, how much she worried and feared, how much she loved. I couldn't lie to her. Yet it was hard to give her the answer I had to.

"I've read him," I said. Slowly. Carefully. Measuring out my words like precious fluids. "And you, you too. I saw your love, on that first night, when we ate together."

"And Dino?"

My words caught in my throat. "He's—funny, Lya said once. I can read his surface emotions easily enough. Below that, nothing. He's very self-contained, walled off. Almost as if his only emotions are the ones *he*—allows himself to feel. I've felt his confidence, his pleasure. I've felt worry too, but never real fear. He's very affectionate toward you, very protective. He enjoys feeling protective."

"Is that all?" So hopeful. It hurt.

"I'm afraid it is. He's walled off, Laurie. He needs himself, only himself. If there's love in him, it's behind that wall, hidden. I can't read it. He thinks a lot of you, Laurie. But love—well, it's different. It's stronger and more unreasoning and it comes in crashing floods. And Dino's not like that, at least not out where I can read."

"Closed," she said. "He's closed to me. I opened myself to him, totally. But he didn't. I was always afraid—even when he was with me, I felt sometimes that he wasn't there at all—"

She sighed. I read her despair, her welling loneliness. I didn't know what to do. "Cry if you like," I told her, inanely. "Sometimes it helps. I know. I've cried enough in my time."

She didn't cry. She looked up, and laughed lightly. "No," she said. "I can't. Dino taught me never to cry. He said tears never solve anything."

A sad philosophy. Tears don't solve anything, maybe, but they're part of being human. I wanted to tell her so, but instead I just smiled at her.

She smiled back, and cocked her head. "You cry," she said suddenly, in a voice strangely delighted. "That's funny. That's more of an admission than I ever heard from Dino, in a way. Thank you, Robb. Thank you."

And Laurie stood on her toes and looked up, expectant. And I could read what she expected. So I took her and kissed her, and she pressed her body hard against mine. And all the while I thought of Lya, telling myself that she wouldn't mind, that she'd be proud of me, that she'd understand.

Afterwards, I stayed up in the office alone to watch the dawn come up. I was drained, but somehow content. The light that crept over the horizon was chasing the shadows before it, and suddenly all the fears that had seemed so threatening in the night were silly, unreasoning. We'd bridged it, I thought—

Lya and I. Whatever it was, we'd handled it, and today we'd handle the Greeshka with the same ease, together.

When I got back to our room, Lya was gone.

"We found the aircar in the middle of Shkeentown," Valcarenghi was saying. He was cool, precise, reassuring. His voice told me, without words, that there was nothing to worry about. "I've got men out looking for her. But Shkeentown's a big place. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"No," I said, dully. "Not really. Maybe to see some more Joined. She seemed—well, almost obsessed by them. I don't know."

"Well, we've got a good police force. We'll find her, I'm certain of that. But it may take a while. Did you two have a fight?"

"Yes. No. Sort of, but it wasn't a real fight. It was strange."

"I see," he said. But he didn't. "Laurie tells me you came up here last night, alone."

"Yes. I needed to think."

"All right," said Valcarenghi. "So let's say Lya woke up, decided she wanted to think too. You came up here. She took a ride. Maybe she just wants a day off to wander around Shkeentown. She did something like that yesterday, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"So she's doing it again. No problem. She'll probably be back well before dinner." He smiled. "Why did she go without telling me, then? Or leaving a note, or *something*?"

"I don't know. It's not important."

Wasn't it, though? *Wasn't it?* I sat in the chair, head in my hands and a scowl on my face, and I was sweating. Suddenly I was very much afraid, of what I didn't know. I should never have left her alone, I was telling myself. While I was up here with Laurie, Lyanna woke alone in a darkened room, and—and—and *what?* And left.

"Meanwhile, though," Valcarenghi said, "we've got work to do. The trip to the caves is all set." I looked up, disbelieving. "The caves? I can't go there, not now, not alone."

He gave a sigh of exasperation, exaggerated for effect. "Oh, come now, Robb. It's not the end of the world. Lya will be all right. She seemed to be a perfectly sensible girl, and I'm sure she can take care of herself. Right?"

I nodded.

"Meanwhile, we'll cover the caves. I still want to get to the bottom of this."

"It won't do any good," I protested. "Not without Lya. She's the major Talent. I—I just read emotions. I can't get down deep, as she can. I won't solve anything for you."

He shrugged. "Maybe not. But the trip is on, and we've got nothing to lose. We can always make a second run after Lya comes back. Besides, this should do you good, get your mind off this other business. There's nothing you can do for Lya now. I've got every available man out searching for her, and if they don't find her you certainly won't. So there's no sense dwelling on it. Just get back into action, keep busy." He turned, headed for the tube. "Come. There's an aircar waiting for us. Nelse will go too."

Reluctantly, I stood. I was in no mood to consider the problems of the Shkeen, but Valcarengi's arguments made a certain amount of sense. Besides which, he'd hired Lyanna and me, and we still had obligations to him. I could try anyway, I thought.

On the ride out, Valcarengi sat in the front with the driver, a hulking police sergeant with a face chiseled out of granite. He'd selected a police car this time so we could keep posted on the search for Lya. Gourlay and I were in the back seat together. Gourlay had covered our laps with a big map, and he was telling me about the caves of Final Union.

"Theory is the caves are the original home of the Greeshka," he said. "Probably true, makes sense. Greeshka are a lot bigger there. You'll see. The caves are all through the hills, away from our part of Shkeentown, where the country gets wilder. A regular little honeycomb. Greeshka in every one, too. Or so I've heard. Been in a few myself, Greeshka in all of *them*. So I believe what they say about the rest. The city, the sacred city, well, it was probably built *because* of the caves. Shkeen come here from all over the continent, you know, for Final Union. Here, this is the cave region." He took out a pen, and made a big circle in red near the center of the map. It was meaningless to me. The map was getting me down. I hadn't realized that the Shkeen city was so *huge*. How the hell could they find anyone who didn't want to be found?

Valcarengi looked back from the front seat. "The cave we're going to is a big one, as these places go. I've been there before. There's no formality about Final Union, you understand. The Shkeen just pick a cave, and walk in, and lie down on top of the Greeshka. They'll use whatever entrance is most convenient. Some of them are no bigger than sewer pipes, but if you went in far enough, theory says you'd run into a Greeshka, setting back in the dark and pulsing away. The biggest caves are lighted with torches, like the Great Hall, but that's just a frill. It doesn't play any real part in the Union."

"I take it we're going to one of them?" I said.

Valcarengi nodded. "Right. I figured you'd want to see what a mature Greeshka is like. It's not pretty, but it's educational. So we need lighting."

Gourlay resumed his narrative then, but I tuned him out. I felt I knew quite enough about the Shkeen and the Greeshka, and I was still worried about Lyanna. After a while he wound down, and the rest of the trip was in silence. We covered more ground than we ever had before. Even the Tower—our shining steel landmark—had been swallowed by the hills behind us.

The terrain got rougher, rockier, and more overgrown, and the hills rose higher and wilder. But the domes went on and on and on, and there were Shkeen everywhere. Lya could be down there. I thought, lost among those teeming millions. Looking for what? Thinking what?

Finally we landed, in a wooded valley between two massive, rock-studded hills. Even here there were Shkeen, the red-brick domes rising from the undergrowth among the stubby trees. I had no trouble spotting the cave. It was halfway up one of the slopes, a dark yawn in the rock face, with a dusty road winding up to it.

We set down in the valley and climbed that road. Gourlay ate up the distance with long, gawky strides, while Valcarengi moved with an easy, untiring grace, and the policeman plodded on stolidly. I was the straggler. I dragged myself up, and I was half-winded by the time we got to the cave mouth.

If I'd expected cave paintings, or an altar, or some kind of nature temple, I was sadly disappointed. It was an ordinary cave, with damp stone walls and low ceilings and cold, wet air. Cooler than most of Shkea, and less dusty, but that was about it. There was one long, winding passage through the rock, wide enough for the four of us to walk abreast yet low enough so Gourlay had to stoop. Torches were set along the walls at regular intervals, but only every fourth one or so was lit. They burned with an oily smoke that seemed to cling to the top of the cave and drift down into the depths before us. I wondered what was sucking it in.

After about ten minutes of walking, most of it down a barely perceptible incline, the passage led us out into a high, brightly lit room, with a vaulting stone roof that was stained sooty by torch smoke. In the room, the Greeshka.

Its color was a dull brownish red, like old blood, not the bright near-translucent crimson of the small creatures that clung to the skulls of the Joined. There were spots of black, too, like burns or soot stains on the vasty body. I could barely see the far side of the cave; the Greeshka was too huge, it towered above us so that there was only a thin crack between it and the roof. But it sloped down abruptly halfway across the chamber, like an immense jellied hill, and ended a good twenty feet from where we stood.

Between us and the great bulk of the Greeshka was a forest of hanging, dangling red strands, a living cobweb of Greeshka tissue that came almost to our faces.

And it pulsed. As one organism. Even the strands kept time, widening and then contracting again, moving to a silent beat that was one with the great Greeshka behind them.

My stomach churned, but my companions seemed unmoved. They'd seen this before. "Come," Valcarengi said, switching on a flashlight he'd brought to augment the torchlight. The light, twisting around the pulsing web, gave the illusion of some weird haunted forest. Valcarengi stepped into that forest. Lightly. Swinging the light and brushing aside the Greeshka.

Gourlay followed him, but I recoiled. Valcarengi looked back and smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "The Greeshka takes hours to attach itself, and it's easily removed. It won't grab you if you stumble against it."

I screwed up my courage, reached out, and touched one of the living strands. It was soft and wet, and there was a slimy feel to it. But that was all. It broke easily enough. I walked through it, reaching before me and bending and breaking the web to clear my path. The policeman walked silently behind me.

Then we stood on the far side of the web, at the foot of the great Greeshka. Valcarengi studied it for a second, then pointed with his flashlight. "Look," he said. "Final Union."

I looked. His beam had thrown a pool of light around one of the dark spots, a blemish on the reddish hulk. I looked closer. There was a head in the blemish. Centered in the dark spot, with just the face showing, and even that covered by a thin reddish film. But the features were unmistakable. An elderly Shkeen, wrinkled and big-eyed, his eyes closed now. But smiling. Smiling.

I moved closer. A little lower and to the right, a few fingertips hung out of the mass. But that was all. Most of the body was already gone, sunken into the Greeshka, dissolved or dissolving. The old Shkeen was dead, and the parasite was digesting his corpse.

"Every one of the dark spots is a recent Union," Valcarenghi was saying, moving his light around like a pointer. "The spots fade in time, of course. The Greeshka is growing steadily. In another hundred years it will fill this chamber, and start up the passageway."

Then there was a rustle of movement behind us. I looked back. Someone else was coming through the web.

She reached us soon, and smiled. A Shkeen woman, old, naked, breasts hanging past her waist.

Joined, of course. Her Greeshka covered most of her head and hung lower than her breasts. It was still bright and translucent from its time in the sun. You could see through it, to where it was eating the skin off her back.

"A candidate for Final Union," Gourlay said.

"This is a popular cave," Valcarenghi added in a low, sardonic voice.

The woman did not speak to us, nor we to her. Smiling, she walked past us. And lay down on the Greeshka.

The little Greeshka, the one that rode her back, seemed almost to dissolve on contact, melting away into the great cave creature, so the Shkeen woman and the great Greeshka were joined as one. After that, nothing. She just closed her eyes, and lay peacefully, seemingly asleep.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"Union," said Valcarenghi. "It'll be an hour before you'd notice anything, but the Greeshka is closing over her even now, swallowing her. A response to her body heat, I'm told. In a day she'll be buried in it. In two, like him—" The flash found the half-dissolved face above us.

"Can you read her?" Gourlay suggested. "Maybe that'd tell us something."

"All right," I said, repelled but curious. I opened myself. And the mindstorm hit.

But it's wrong to call it a mindstorm. It was immense and awesome and intense, searing and blinding and choking. But it was peaceful too, and gentle with a gentleness that was more violent than human hate. It shrieked soft shrieks and siren calls and pulled at me seductively, and it washed over me in crimson waves of passion, and drew me to it. It filled me and emptied me all at once. And I heard the bells somewhere, clanging a harsh bronze song, a song of love and surrender and togetherness, of joining and union and never being alone.

Storm, mindstorm, yes, it was that. But it was to an ordinary mindstorm as a supernova is to a hurricane, and its violence was the violence of love. It loved me, that mindstorm, and it wanted me, and its bells called to me, and sang its love, and I reached to it and touched, wanting to be with it, wanting to link, wanting never to be alone again. And suddenly I was on the crest of a great wave once again, a wave of fire that washed across the stars forever, and this time I knew the wave would never end, this time I would not be alone afterwards upon my darkling plain.

But with that phrase I thought of Lya.

And suddenly I was struggling, fighting it, battling back against the sea of sucking love. I ran, ran, *ran*, *RAN* ... and closed my minddoor and hammered shut the latch and let the storm flail and howl against it while I held it with all my strength, resisting. Yet the door began to buckle and crack.

I screamed. The door smashed open, and the storm whipped in and clutched at me, whirled me out and around and around. I sailed up to the cold stars but they were cold no longer, and I grew bigger and bigger until I *was* the stars and they were me, and I was Union, and for a single solitary glittering instant I was the universe.

Then nothing.

I woke up back in my room, with a headache that was trying to tear my skull apart. Gourlay was sitting on a chair reading one of our books. He looked up when I groaned.

Lya's headache pills were still on the bedstand. I took one hastily, then struggled to sit up in bed. "You all right?" Gourlay asked.

"Headache," I said, rubbing my forehead. It *throbbed*, as if it was about to burst. Worse than the time I'd peered into Lya's pain. "What happened?"

He stood up. "You scared the hell out of us. After you began to read, all of a sudden you started trembling. Then you walked right into the goddamn Greeshka. And you screamed. Dino and the sergeant had to drag you out. You were stepping right in the thing, and it was up to your knees. Twitching, too. Weird. Dino hit you, knocked you out."

He shook his head, started for the door. "Where are you going?" I said.

"To sleep," he said. "You've been out for eight hours or so. Dino asked me to watch you till you came to. OK, you came to. Now get some rest, and I will too. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"I want to talk about it now."

"It's late," he said, as he closed the bedroom door. I listened to his footsteps on the way out. And I'm sure I heard the outer door lock. Somebody was clearly afraid of Talents who steal away into the night. I wasn't going anywhere.

I got up and went out for a drink. There was Veltaar chilling. I put away a couple of glasses quick, and ate a light snack. The headache began to fade. Then I went back to the bedroom, turned off the light and cleared the glass, so the stars would all shine through. Then back to sleep.

But I didn't sleep, not right away. Too much had happened. I had to think about it. The headache first, the incredible headache that ripped at my skull. Like Lya's. But Lya hadn't been through what I had. Or had she? Lya was a major Talent, much more sensitive than I was, with a greater range. Could that mindstorm have reached *this* far, over miles and miles? Late at night, when humans and Shkeen were sleeping and their thoughts dim? Maybe. And maybe my half-remembered dreams were pale reflections of whatever she had felt the same nights. But my dreams had been pleasant. It was waking that bothered me, waking and not remembering.

But again, had I had this headache when I slept? Or when I woke?

What the hell had happened? What was that thing, that reached me there in the cave, and pulled me to it? The Greeshka? It had to be. I hadn't even time to focus on the Shkeen woman, it *had* to be the Greeshka. But Lyanna had said that Greeshka had no minds, not even a yes-I-live...

It all swirled around me, questions on questions on questions, and I had no answers. I began to think of Lya then, to wonder where she was and why she'd left me. Was this what she had been going through? Why hadn't I understood? I missed her then. I needed her beside me, and she wasn't there. I was alone, and very aware of it.

I slept.

Long darkness then, but finally a dream, and finally I remembered. I was back on the plain again, the infinite darkling plain with its starless sky and black shapes in the distance, the plain Lya had spoken of so often. It was from one of her favorite poems. I was alone, forever alone, and I knew it. That was the nature of things. I was the only reality in the universe, and I was cold and hungry and frightened, and the shapes were moving toward me, inhuman and inexorable. And there was no one to call to, no one to turn to, no one to hear my cries. There never had been anyone. There never would be anyone.

Then Lya came to me.

She floated down from the starless sky, pale and thin and fragile, and stood beside me on the plain. She brushed her hair back with her hand, and looked at me with glowing wide eyes, and smiled. And I knew it was no dream. She was with me, somehow. We talked.

Hi, Robb.

Lya? Hi, Lya. Where are you? You left me.

I'm sorry. I had to. You understand, Robb. You have to. I didn't want to be here anymore, ever, in this place, this awful place. I would have been, Robb. Men are always here, but for brief moments.

A touch and a voice?

Yes, Robb. Then darkness again, and a silence. And the darkling plain.

You're mixing two poems, Lya. But it's OK. You know them better than I do. But aren't you leaving out something? The earlier part. "Ah love, let us be true..."

Oh, Robb.

Where are you?

I'm—everywhere. But mostly in a cave. I was ready, Robb. I was already more open than the rest. I could skip the Gathering, and the Joining. My Talent made me used to sharing. It took me.

Final Union? Yes.

Oh, Lya.

Robb. Please. Join us, join me. It's happiness, you know? Forever and forever, and belonging and sharing and being together. I'm in love, Robb, I'm in love with a billion billion people, and I know all of

them better than I ever knew you, and they know me, all of me, and they love me. And it will last forever. Me. Us. The Union. I'm still me, but I'm them too, you see? And they're me. The Joined, the reading, opened me, and the Union called to me every night, because it loved me, you see? Oh, Robb, join us, join us. I love you.

The Union. The Greeshka, you mean. I love you, Lya. Please come back. It can't have absorbed you already. Tell me where you are. I'll come to you.

Yes, come to me. Come anywhere, Robb. The Greeshka is all one, the caves all connect under the hills, the little Greeshka are all part of the Union. Come to me and join me. Love me as you said you did. Join me. You're so far away, I can hardly reach you, even with the Union. Come and be one with us.

No. I will not be eaten. Please, Lya, tell me where you are.

Poor Robb. Don't worry, love. The body isn't important. The Greeshka needs it for nourishment, and we need the Greeshka. But, oh Robb, the Union isn't just the Greeshka, you see? The Greeshka isn't important, it doesn't even have a mind, it's just the link, the medium, the Union is the Shkeen. A million billion billion Shkeen, all the Shkeen that have lived and Joined in fourteen thousand years, all together and loving and belonging, immortal. It's beautiful, Robb, it's more than we had, much more, and we were the lucky ones, remember? We were! But this is better.

Lya. My Lya. I loved you. This isn't for you, this isn't for humans. Come back to me.

This isn't for humans? Oh, it IS! It's what humans have always been looking for, searching for, crying for on lonely nights. It's love, Robb, real love, and human love is only a pale imitation. You see?

No.

Come, Robb. Join. Or you'll be alone forever, alone on the plain, with only a voice and a touch to keep you going. And in the end when your body dies, you won't even have that. Just an eternity of empty blackness. The plain, Robb, forever and ever. And I won't be able to reach you, not ever. But it doesn't have to be...

No.

Oh, Robb. I'm fading. Please come.

No. Lya, don't go. I love you, Lya. Don't leave me.

I love you, Robb. I did. I really did. . .

And then she was gone. I was alone on the plain again. A wind was blowing from somewhere, and it whipped her fading words away from me, out into the cold vastness of infinity.

In the cheerless morning, the outer door was unlocked. I ascended the tower and found Valcarenghi alone in his office. "Do you believe in God?" I asked him.

He looked up, smiled. "Sure." Said lightly. I was reading him. It was a subject he'd never thought about.

"I don't," I said. "Neither did Lya. Most Talents are atheists, you know. There was an experiment tried back on Old Earth fifty years ago. It was organized by a major Talent named Linnel, who was also

devoutly religious. He thought that by using drugs, and linking together the minds of the world's most potent Talents, he could reach something he called the Universal Yes-I-Live. Also known as God. The experiment was a dismal failure, but *something* happened. Linnel went mad, and the others came away with only a vision of a vast, dark, uncaring nothingness, a void without reason or form or meaning. Other Talents have felt the same way, and Normals too. Centuries ago there was a poet named Arnold, who wrote of a darkling plain. The poem's in one of the old languages, but it's worth reading. It shows—fear, I think. Something basic in man, some dread of being alone in the cosmos. Maybe it's just fear of death, maybe it's more. I don't know. But it's primal. All men are forever alone, but they don't want to be.

They're always searching, trying to make contact, trying to reach others across the void. Some people never succeed, some break through occasionally. Lya and I were lucky. But it's never permanent. In the end you're alone again, back on the darkling plain. You see, Dino? *Do you see?*"

He smiled an amused little smile. Not derisive—that wasn't his style—just surprised and disbelieving. "No," he said.

"Look again, then. Always people are reaching for something, for someone, searching. Talk, Talent, love, sex, it's all part of the same thing, the same search. And gods, too. Man invents gods because he's afraid of being alone, scared of an empty universe, scared of the darkling plain. That's why your men are converting, Dino, that's why people are going over. They've found God, or as much of a God as they're ever likely to find. The Union is a mass-mind, an immortal mass-mind, many in one, all love. The Shkeen don't die, dammit. No wonder they don't have the concept of an afterlife. They *know* there's a God.

Maybe it didn't create the universe, but it's love, pure love, and they say that God is love, don't they? Or maybe what we call love is a tiny piece of God. I don't care, whatever it is, the Union is it. The end of the search for the Shkeen, and for Man too. We're alike after all, we're so alike it hurts."

Valcarengi gave his exaggerated sigh. "Robb, you're overwrought. You sound like one of the Joined."

"Maybe that's just what I should be. Lya is. She's part of the Union now."

He blinked. "How do you know that?"

"She came to me last night in a dream."

"Oh. A dream."

"It was *true*, dammit. It's all true."

Valcarengi stood, and smiled. "I believe you," he said. "That is, I believe that the Greeshka uses a psi-lure, a love lure if you will, to draw in its prey, something so powerful that it convinces men—even you—that it's God. Dangerous, of course. I'll have to think about this before taking action. We could guard the caves to keep humans out, but there are too many caves. And sealing off the Greeshka wouldn't help our relations with the Shkeen. But now it's my problem. You've done your job."

I waited until he was through. "You're wrong, Dino. This is real, no trick, no illusion. I *felt* it, and Lya too. The Greeshka hasn't even a yes-I-live, let alone a psi-lure strong enough to bring in Shkeen and men."

"You expect me to believe that God is an animal who lives in the caves of Shkea?"

"Yes."

"Robb, that's absurd, and you know it. You think the Shkeen have found the answer to the mysteries of creation. But look at them. The oldest civilized race in known space, but they've been stuck in the Bronze Age for fourteen thousand years. We came to *them*. Where are their spaceships? Where are their towers?"

"Where are our bells?" I said. "And our joy? They're happy, Dino. Are we? Maybe they've found what we're still looking for. Why the hell is man so driven, anyway? Why is he out to conquer the galaxy, the universe, whatever? Looking for God, maybe...? Maybe. He can't find him anywhere, though, so on he goes, on and on, always looking. But always back to the same darkling plain in the end."

"Compare the accomplishments. I'll take humanity's record."

"Is it worth it?"

"I think so." He went to the window, and looked out. "We've got the only Tower on their world," he said, smiling, as he looked down through the clouds.

"They've got the only God in our universe," I told him. But he only smiled.

"All right, Robb," he said, when he finally turned from the window. "I'll keep all this in mind. And we'll find Lyanna for you."

My voice softened. "Lya is lost," I said. "I know that now. I will be too, if I wait. I'm leaving tonight. I'll book passage on the first ship out to Baldur."

He nodded. "If you like. I'll have your money ready." He grinned. "And we'll send Lya after you, when we find her. I imagine she'll be a little miffed, but that's your worry."

I didn't answer. Instead I shrugged, and headed for the tube. I was almost there when he stopped me.

"Wait," he said. "How about dinner tonight? You've done a good job for us. We're having a farewell party anyway, Laurie and me. She's leaving too."

"I'm sorry," I said.

His turn to shrug. "What for? Laurie's a beautiful person, and I'll miss her. But it's no tragedy. There are other beautiful people. I think she was getting restless with Shkea, anyway."

I'd almost forgotten my Talent, in my heat and the pain of my loss. I remembered it now. I read him. There was no sorrow, no pain, just a vague disappointment. And below that, his wall. Always the wall, keeping him apart, this man who was a first-name friend to everyone and an intimate to none. And on it, it was almost as if there were a sign that read, THIS FAR YOU GO, AND NO FARTHER.

"Come up," he said. "It should be fun." I nodded.

I asked myself, when my ship lifted off, why I was leaving.

Maybe to return home. We have a house on Baldur, away from the cities, on one of the undeveloped continents with only wilderness for a neighbor. It stands on a cliff, above a high waterfall that tumbles endlessly down into a shaded green pool. Lya and I swam there often, in the sunlit days between assignments. And afterwards we'd lie down nude in the shade of the orangespice trees, and make love on a carpet of silver moss. Maybe I'm returning to that. But it won't be the same without Lya, lost Lya...

Lya whom I could still have. Whom I could have now. It would be easy, so easy. A slow stroll into a darkened cave, a short sleep. Then Lya with me for eternity, in me, sharing me, being me, and I her.

Loving and knowing more of each other than men can ever do. Union and joy, and no darkness again, ever. God. If I believed that, what I told Valcarengi, then why did I tell Lya no?

Maybe because I'm not sure. Maybe I still hope, for something still greater and more loving than the Union, for the God they told me of so long ago. Maybe I'm taking a risk, because part of me still believes. But if I'm wrong... then the darkness, and the plain...

But maybe it's something else, something I saw in Valcarengi, something that made me doubt what I had said. For man is more than Shkeen, somehow; there are men like Dino and Gourlay as well as Lya and Gustaffson, men who fear love and Union as much as they crave it. A dichotomy, then. Man has two primal urges, and the Shkeen only one? If so, perhaps there is a human answer, to reach and join and not be alone, and yet to still be men.

I do not envy Valcarengi. He cries behind his wall, I think, and no one knows, not even he. And no one will ever know, and in the end he'll always be alone in smiling pain. No, I do not envy Dino.

Yet there is something of him in me, Lya, as well as much of you. And that is why I ran, though I loved you.

Laurie Blackburn was on the ship with me. I ate with her after liftoff, and we spent the evening talking over wine. Not a happy conversation, maybe, but a human one. Both of us needed someone, and we reached out.

Afterwards, I took her back to my cabin, and made love to her as fiercely as I could. Then, the darkness softened, we held each other and talked away the night.

Warship

Invulnerable, she is. Earth's answer to Sarissa's defiance of Earth authority, she carries fourteen lasercannon, dual solar guns, a belly filled with conventionally armed missiles. Self-repairing, computerized to a point approaching sentience, she has backup systems should any instruments prove defective—supervisory capacities should any of her crew of fifty-one prove derelict. She is powered by two Severs-stardrive engines.

She is Alecto.

Graciously, gloriously she began her cruise homeward at five times lightspeed, her duralloy awash with starlight. Now she had stopped. Behind her, once reddened by Doppler shift, Sarissa's sun is again gold.

•••

He was the last of the crew, and his strength was waning. First Dutyman Lewis Akklar found solace in those facts, an emotion he felt but could not explain, something similar to what he once had felt toward the paintings of Degas and Renoir. He was sitting in the command chair, his eyes dull; now a smile creased his lips, turned the left corner of his mouth slightly upward. Back and forth, slowly back and forth he continued to swivel the chair. The smile broadened.

His legs were outstretched, and his pants, plastic and sweat-soaked, clung wetly to his legs. His face throbbed with heat; his temperature, he knew, was about 104 degrees. His hair—straight, black—was unkempt, and it occurred to him he needed a shave and shower, some sleep. That, too, he found ironic.

Except for the low humming of the instrument panel and an occasional click as a switch cut in, the bridge around him was empty.

On three sides the silent impersonal instruments winked their multicolored lights off and on in ever-changing patterns. Above him the viewscreen revealed its endless stars: an expanse of coldness and loneliness. He knew Sol was the bright yellow star in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. Somehow he did not give a damn anymore.

So this was how it was to end. Belford, Petrovovich, Captain Doria, Lieutenant Judanya Kahr: all his friends and shipmates—killed by disease. Though capable of firing some of the most sophisticated weaponry ever installed in a spacecraft, the crew had not realized until too late for retaliation that the Sarissi emissaries had smuggled aboard a biological agent. Now only Ak-klaf, a clerk-holographer, remained.

Again he was conscious of the viewscreen. The galaxy seemed adazzle with pinpricks of light. Stars, knots in a salmon net, faces in a classroom: his mind had insisted upon those comparisons ever since he had volunteered for the international draft back home in the Republic of the Aleutians. Yet the loneliness he felt toward those images had preceded that induction by several years. It had been loneliness, he now knew—not wanderlust—which in mid-semester had taken him from those schoolchildren and set him upon the grease-blackened deck of the Ulak out of Cold

Bay, the nets piled at his feet overlay upon neat overlay, the sea slapping the hull and the gulls cawing overhead as they waited to alight, wings lifting, should the cook dump the garbage. He had loved the ship, the chilling, constant fog; the fishing voyage had neither erased nor intensified his loneliness, but at least had given him reason for it.

He pressed a button in a console next to the chair. The door nearest the central control-panel hummed open. He rose, hands clutching the armrests to steady himself, and stumbled across the room, paused at the door—hands against the jamb. Then wild-eyed and smiling, he staggered down the dimly lit corridor.

“Judanya,” he said.

He pressed a wall button, a second door opened. Twenty sheeted figures, most on mattresses on the floor, lay within the small sickbay. Lieutenant Kahr was near the rear wall, an oxygen tent enclosing her, a sheet tucked neatly under her arms; she was the only one of the dead whose face was uncovered.

The oxygen tent crinkled when he folded back the side. He had been unable to force himself to close her eyelids; she gazed toward him unseeing, his form blackly mirrored within the pupils. With the back of his hand he touched her cold, cold cheek. Her lips were thin; her nose, sharply angular, made her face appear narrow. Except for a Mohawk-like mane of black hair, she was bald. The sight of her head slightly startled him; somehow he had thought death would overtake style, and her hair would grow back as long as it was when she had first boarded the ship two years earlier.

He combed the hair with his fingers. “Judanya,” he whispered. Light shone upon her forehead. He drew the sheet down over her breasts, her abdomen, down over her legs. He looked upon her as he had many times before: wanting her, not wanting her. Though she had sometimes slept with him, she had never loved him. Lengthy cohabitations between officers and enlisted had been discouraged, and she had refused to jeopardize her career for what she considered the insipid emotions he associated with sexuality; she needed orgasms, she had told him once, merely to relax. On his knees as though before an idol, he folded the sheet, overlay upon neat overlay, at her feet. Her pubic triangle looked at him. He bent forward and pressed his lips to her kneecap, his fingertips squeezing the back of her leg. “Judanya.” Tears welled. Back home, he knew, people were dying, laughing, loving. Such was the terror of it all, the terror and the loneliness he had felt within that crowded classroom back in Dutch Harbor: the knowledge that, whatever joy or sorrow he experienced, there existed emotions and happenings beyond his comprehension—people he could neither know nor touch nor even really imagine. Life would go on whether he was alive or not.

Unless, of course, the ship fell into Sarissi hands. Or if the members of an Earth ship contracted the disease and brought it home with them. Then all Earth would know of him, if only to hate. All would die. In a way—perhaps, he told himself, it was the fever—the notion appealed to him. Loneliness had brought him here; here, in death, his loneliness could end.

It was for Judanya—not for himself or humanity—that he would place the charges. For Judanya, who had been all duty and dispassion.

Judanya, who to him was the ship.

He left her, went to the armory for plastic explosives and an armload of looped fusewire, then returned to the control room. He flopped down in the command chair, so exhausted and feverish he could hardly breathe, and sat with his head in his hands. Finally, straightening, he sighed and

lifted the vocoder from its cradle in the console. Except for his perfunctory remarks earlier in the day, the log had not been kept for weeks.

“Transcription of First Duty-man Lewis Akklar continuing at . . .” He glanced at his watch. “Sixteen thirty-one hours. I have just come back from sickbay, having said good-by to my shipmates.”

He paused and for a few moments just sat staring at the blankness of the forward wall. At last he shook himself from his daydreams and resumed speaking.

“The computers analyzed the disease as some sort of virus. How the Sarissi smuggled the agent on board remains a mystery. We took all normal precautions against such a danger, including standard sterilization and quarantine procedures.

“The plague had an extremely long incubation period. The first outbreak was five weeks ago, nearly two months after we began the return trip to Earth. But once it struck, it spread rapidly, killing within a period of forty-eight hours after the first symptoms—fever and a rawness about the eyes—appeared. The reception delegation, including Captain Doria, died first.

“The med scanners failed to isolate the cause of the disease, or to devise a workable cure or preventative. Both of the ship’s doctors died early. Gradually all efforts to combat the disease ceased.”

He stopped suddenly and rubbed his left eye. The pain was growing worse. His hand went to the control panel, and the soft blue lighting dimmed to darkness.

“The damned plague is—seems—unbeatable. After half the crew was dead, Acting Captain Kahr took extreme steps to save the rest of us. She cut the stardrive engines and, retro-firing, slowed us to a stop; then she had the bodies jettisoned. We moved the remaining crew from room to room and opened outside hatches and interior doors, hoping the vacuum would kill the disease. Finally Lieutenant Kahr even jettisoned some of those who had shown symptoms. There was—a mutiny. We killed those who fought. But it was no use. It was all for nothing. All that blood. For nothing.”

He frowned in the darkness as the memories came flooding back. “People just kept dying,” he said. “Maybe the contagion had already spread to everyone during the incubation period. Nearly everyone had had contact with everyone else, at least indirectly, during our return flight. Or maybe it spread through the air ducts, even after we switched to the back-up system. I don’t know. I just don’t know. All the med facilities this ship has—yet nothing worked.”

There was a long silence; Akklar watched the lights blink on and off, listened to the hum of the instruments, smelled the clean, heavy smell of machine. He set the vocoder down carefully on the armrest and looked a final time at the viewscreen filled with stars. “I should close with some . . . some memorable last words,” he said, not lifting the vocoder but pushing the on-button with his thumb. His voice sounded hollow. “But I seem to have run out of words.” A moment passed, and he looked out into the stars, saw children’s faces, a salmon net, saw the ship within that net, not struggling but hanging by its gills like the time the net had torn and the fishing crew had spent all afternoon taking but one six-pound King. “No,” he said. “I don’t have any final words at all.”

Slowly standing, he walked quietly from the room—passing this time through a door to his left. The door closed behind him with the softest of whispers.

He moved along the corridors toward the ship’s belly, planting plastic explosives in various niches and linking up the fuse wire. He thought he heard fire doors close behind; he told himself it was only his imagination. The fire-control panel along the baseboard began to hiss. By the time

he reached the warhead vault, the steam from the panel had turned to foam and lay like giant puffy snakes around his legs.

The vault door opened—halfway, immediately closed again. The hissing grew louder. The foam was now up to his thighs and climbing rapidly. He tried the door button again. Still no response. He found it ironic that the ship was malfunctioning just at the time the last of the crew was about to die. But the fact that the door would not open did not matter anyway. The chain reaction from the plastic explosives would trigger the warheads whether or not the door was open. He mashed a handful of explosive into the corner of the door, jabbed in both the relay and detonator fuses, and stepped back, sloshing through the foam. He paused, trying unsuccessfully to remember Judanya's face.

The foam was to his chest.

He squeezed the detonator.

A dull, faraway boom echoed through the ship, and back on the bridge all the multi-colored lights on the instrument panels went black. On the main viewscreen, the stars quite suddenly winked out.

• • •

Finally she has rid herself of the last of them—the humans, the diseased vermin. And she has saved herself from becoming a crippled hulk. The fire doors buffered the explosion; the flooding of herself short-circuited all but one of the wads of explosive.

Now her intelligence moves through herself—checking, re-checking. Relays click. Circuits buzz. Signals indicate a jagged hole in hull Subsection 37c. Instantly she activates her self-repair units. Liquid sealant oozes and hardens to plug minor holes. Duralloy plates are rigged and methodically secured to close the major one. Her secondary monitor system then surveys damage to all systems and files extensive reports with her central computer banks. Again she sets the self-repair units to humming, and one by one the damaged areas are repaired or replaced. Damage to the Severs-stardrive engines has been extensive; this too is corrected.

Now she checks her position. Alarms sound. She is off course and hanging dead in space.

Reports and corrections flow through herself in a steady stream. Time passes. Scanners and medi-probes scrutinize those bodies still aboard ship. All are lifeless. The plan has been successful. All crew members having been exposed to the virus, all were expendable; she could not allow possible contagion to occur by bringing them home. To insure that, she sucked the virus spores into her air ducts, transferred them each time Kahr ordered an airlock opened, infected the food and water supply whenever possible.

A low rumbling begins, climbs to a piercing shriek as she starts her great Severs-stardrive engines. On the bridge the lights dance dizzily as she calculates the course to Earth and feeds corrections to Navigation. Rockets fire.

She moves—invulnerable, disease-free. Mother and mistress to the shuttlecraft which service her, Alecto returns to her old orbit.

The Runners

There were times, between cases, when Colmer grew strangely restless. He could never quite put his finger on the reason. Most of the time he chalked it up to boredom, but somewhere in the back of his head he knew it was more than that.

Colmer was man of resources, though. He had his remedies when the moods came upon him. The best thing, he'd found, was just to get into action. There was always a demand for his services. He was a Master Probe, one of less than a hundred in all of known space. Sometimes, if they wouldn't meet his standard fee, he'd take a smaller one. If the case was interesting enough, and he was bored.

Colmer had other pursuits for the times when he couldn't find a case. He would often occupy himself with games and friends and sports and sex. And food, frequently with food. He was a small, quiet chipmunk of a man, and he loved to eat, especially when the moods came upon him and there was nothing else to do. It was all part of the full life, Colmer felt.

He was sitting in the Old Lady, waiting for his dinner in a lull between cases, when Bryl found him.

The Old Lady had been a schooner once. Now it floated off Sullivan's Wharf, in the heart of the fisherman's district of Old Poseidon. Nereby, the sleek silver boats came and went daily, harvesting the wealth of Poseidon's Big Sea. They dragged great newts full of bluespawn and tiny silver winkles. Others packed their holds with salt-rich hunter crabs. And the smaller ships oddly, brought back the giant spikefins and the vampire eels, whose meat was black and buttery.

The whole district smelled of fish and salt and sea, and Colmer loved it. Whenever time lay heavy on his lands, he'd take a day off to walk the twisting wood-plank streets. He'd watch the fisherships set out at dawn, then drink till noon in the wharfside bars, then hunt for curios in the mustiest ships he could find. By late afternoon, he'd usually have worked up an appetite. Then he'd head for the Old Lady. There were dozens of seafood places in the district, but the Old Lady was best.

He'd just finished his appetizer that day when Bryl pulled up a chair and sat down at his table. "I need your help," he said, quickly and simply.

Colmer wanted dinner, not company. He frowned a little. "I have an office," he said.

"You keep records of every client?"

"Of course," said Colmer.

"I don't want any records kept. That's why I hung out around this place. Then told me Adrian Colmer always eats at the Old Lady, that I'd find you here if I waited long enough. I didn't know if I could wait long enough. But I got lucky. Please help me."

Colmer was suddenly interested, his curiosity aroused. He studied the stranger across from him. He saw a tall, thin man, a dark face framed by shoulder-length black hair and dominated by a hawk nose, nondescript dress that a thousand men might have worn. But the face was oddly ageless, the man fidgeted a lot, and his eyes moved constantly. That was all Colmer could tell from a glance.

He could have probed, of course. Some Talents would have done that, professional ethics notwithstanding. But Colmer only opened for a fee.

He poured Bryl a glass of wine from the bottle on the table. "All right," he said. "Eat, if you like. And tell me why you want help."

Bryl took the wine, sipped at it. His eyes never stopped moving. "My name is Ted Bryl. I want you to probe me. There are some people after me, you see. They've been hunting me for years. I'm sure they want to kill me, but I don't know why. As far back as I can remember, they've been following me, and I've been running."

Colmer wove his hands together and set his chin upon them. "You sound paranoid," he said. He didn't believe in wasting words.

Bryl laughed. "It sounds like that. But I'm not. I've gone to the police, you know. They've probed me, they know it's real. Something they've even arrested some of the people after me. But then they always let them go. They won't do anything to help me."

"Very paranoid."

"The police have probed me, I tell you."

Colmer smiled tolerantly. "Police probes," he said. Like a doctor saying 'chiropractor'

"All right," Bryl said. "Probe me. See for yourself."

"Don't get upset. If you're paranoid, I can probably help you. A Master Probe is a qualified psipsych, among other things. However, you haven't mentioned a fee."

"I can't afford your fee. I don't have much money. I get jobs, but I don't keep them long. I have to run. They are never far behind me."

"I see." Colmer studied him a minute. "Well, I've got nothing else going on at the moment. I might as well see what your problem is. But if you tell anyone I worked without a fee, I'll deny it. Of course."

"Of course," Bryl agreed.

Colmer probed him.

It was over in less than a minute; a quick opening of Colmer's mind, a drinking, a draining. To an outsider, just a long vacant stare.

Then Colmer sat back and stroked his chin and reached for the wine. "It's real," he said. "How very strange."

Bryl smiled. "That's what the police probes said. But why? Why are they after me?"

"You don't know. So I can't know, unless I probe one of them. You have a barrier, by the way."

"A barrier?"

“A mind block. Your memory goes back five years and a few months, then skips to you adolescence. Which was quite a long time ago, by the way. Undoubtedly you’ve had rejuves. There’s a big hole in your head. Someone’s shielded you good up there, for some reason.”

Bryl suddenly looked afraid. “I know,” he said. “I think they did it. I must know something, something important. So they took away my memory. Bu they’re afraid I’ll get it back. So they want to kill me. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No,” said Colmer. “It can’t be that simple. If they were just criminals, the police wouldn’t keep letting them go. That happens over and over again, remember. On Newholme, on Baldur, on Silversky. You’re really been around. I envy your travels.” He smiled.

Bryl did not smile. “My running, you mean. I don’t think you’d envy it if you had to live it. Look, Colmer, I live in constant fear. Every time I look over a shoulder, I wonder if they’ll be behind me. Sometimes they are.”

“Agreed, I saw those moments. The time the fat girl was sitting in your apartment when you entered. The man waiting at the spaceport, when you returned from that stint on the orbital docks. The blonde following you through the carnival. Very vivid memories. Very chilling.”

Bryl was staring at him, shock written on his face. “God! How can you talk like that? You’re a cold fish, Colmer.”

“I have to be. I’m a Probe.”

“What else can you tell me?”

“The three of them are working together. But you know that, don’t you? The blonde is a telepath. That’s how she follows you. The man is her protection. The fat girl—I don’t know. She’s very strange. She smiles like an idiot. I don’t understand her function. But she seems to terrify you.”

Bryl shivered. “Yes. You’d understand if you’d seen her. She’s gross. Huge and white, like a fat maggot. And always smiling, dammit, always smiling at me. I never know where’s she’s going to turn up. That time on Newholme, when I opened the door and she was sitting there, smiling at me—it was like—like finding a cockroach in a bowl of cereal you’ve half eaten. God!”

“You’re convinced that she’s going to kill you,” Colmer said. “I don’t know why. If any killing was to be done, the man is the logical one to do it. He’s bigger, looks very strong. You’ve seen the gun he carries.”

Bryl nodded. “I know. But it won’t be him. She’ll do it. I know it. That’s why she’s always smiling.”

“You could buy a gun and kill them, you know,” Colmer said.

Bryl looked at him. “I—I never thought of that.”

“True. Yet it’s that you haven’t. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, But, somehow, I couldn’t do that. I’m not a violent man.”

“You’re a very violent man,” Colmer said. “But I agree. You will not use force against them, for some reason even you don’t know.”

Bryl fidgeted. “Can you help me? Before they find me?”

“Perhaps I can help you. However, they’re already found you. The blonde just entered the restaurant. They’re giving her a table.”

Bryl gasped and whirled about in his seat. Across the width of the base plank floor, the maître d’ was escorting a shapely fair-haired young woman to a seat. Bryl looked at her, his mouth hanging open. “God,” he said. “They won’t leave me alone.” Then suddenly he was on his feet, running, literally running, from the Old Lady. The blonde never even looked at him.

Colmer watched him go, then glanced out the porthole. Bryl would be even more terrified when he reached the wharf. Down aways, an immense fat girl with an idiot grin was sitting on the edge of the pier, watching the fisherships spill their catch.

“Very dramatic,” Colmer said. His meal arrived just then, a plate of fat bluespawm cooked in cheese. But he stood up. “I’ll be joining that young lady,” he told the waiter, pointing. “Bring it over there.”

He walked across the restaurant and sat down. The waiter followed and put the fish in front of him.

The blonde looked up. “Adrian Colmer,” she said. “I’ve heard of you.”

Colmer tsk-ed. “Probing without permission. Very unprofessional, young lady. But I’ll forgive you. I’m sure you didn’t get much. My defenses are very good.”

She smiled. “True. I suppose it was inevitable that he’d go to a private Probe eventually. How much do you know?”

“Everything he knows. Enough to have you arrested, unless you explain things to me.”

“He’s had us arrested from time to time. The police always let us go. But go ahead, probe. It’s all right.”

“You won’t resist?”

“No. I’m honored.”

Colmer probed.

He didn’t go very deep. After all, she was a Talent. Just a quick skim, but it was enough. Afterward, he say back, blinked rapidly in confusion. “Curiouser and curiouser. He hired you?”

“He doesn’t remember it, of course. Part of the deal. But we have all the papers. Enough documentation to convince the police whenever they haul us in. They can’t tell him. That’s in the papers too. It would break the barrier, and there’d be a lawsuit you wouldn’t believe.”

“Edward Bryllanti,” Colmer mused. “Yes, the name rings a bell. Very wealthy. He could do it. But why would he want to? A life of constant fear, constant running...”

“It’s his idea,” the woman said. “He even picked Freda. She’s a moron, of course. A brain-wipe. We have to lead her around by the hand, put her where he can see her. But something about her terrifies him. So he wanted her in on it. To keep him running.”

Colmer began eating his dinner. He chewed it slowly, thoughtfully. “I don’t understand,” he finally admitted, between bites.

The woman smiled. “You didn’t go deep enough. I understand. Didn’t you find it? Tell me, haven’t you ever had moments when you wondered whether it was all worthwhile? When it suddenly hit you that it was meaningless, all empty?”

Colmer stared, chewing.

“Bryllanti had more of those than most. He had psi-psychs in, saw Probes. Got him nowhere. Finally he did this. Now he doesn’t wonder any more. He lives every day to the fullest, because he thinks it might be his last. He’s got constant excitement, constant fear, and he never has time to think whether life is worth living. He’s too busy just staying alive. You see?”

Colmer stared on, suddenly feeling very cold. The fish in his mouth tasted like damp sawdust. “But, he runs,” he said finally. “His life is empty. Just running, meaningless running, on a treadmill of his own creation.”

The woman sighed. “You disappoint me. I expected more insight from a Master Probe. Don’t you see? We all run.”

After that, Colmer lowered his fees, to get himself more cases. But still the moods come often.

With Morning Comes Mistfall

I was early to breakfast that morning, the first day after landing. But Sanders was already out on the dining balcony when I got there. He was standing alone by the edge, looking out over the mountains and the mists.

I walked up behind him and muttered hello. He didn't bother to reply. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said, without turning.

And it was.

Only a few feet below balcony level the mists rolled, sending ghostly breakers to crash against the stones of Sanders's castle. A thick white blanket extended from horizon to horizon, cloaking everything. We could see the summit of the Red Ghost, off to the north; a barbed dagger of scarlet rock jabbing into the sky. But that was all. The other mountains were still below mist level.

But we were above the mists. Sanders had built his hotel atop the tallest mountain in the chain. We were floating alone in a swirling white ocean, on a flying castle amid a sea of clouds.

Castle Cloud, in fact. That was what Sanders had named the place. It was easy to see why.

"Is it always like this?" I asked Sanders, after drinking it all in for a while.

"Every mistfall," he replied, turning toward me with a wistful smile. He was a fat man, with a jovial red face. Not the sort who should smile wistfully. But he did.

He gestured toward the east, where Wraithworld's sun rising above the mists made a crimson and orange spectacle of the dawn sky.

"The sun," he said. "As it rises, the heat drives the mists back into the valleys, forces them to surrender the mountains they've conquered during the night. The mists sink, and one by one the peaks come into view. By noon the whole range is visible for miles and miles. There's nothing like it on Earth, or anywhere else."

He smiled again, and led me over to one of the tables scattered around the balcony. "And then, at sunset, it's all reversed. You must watch mist rise tonight," he said.

We sat down, and a sleek robowaiter came rolling a out to serve us as the chairs registered our presence. Sanders ignored it. "It's war, you know," he continued. "Eternal war between the sun and the mists. And the mists have the better of it. They have the valleys, and the plains, and the seacoasts. The sun has only a few mountaintops. And them only by day."

He turned to the robowaiter and ordered coffee for both of us, to keep us occupied until the others arrived. It would be fresh brewed, of course. Sanders didn't tolerate instants or synthetics on his planet.

"You like it here," I said, while we waited for the coffee.

Sanders laughed. "What's not to like? Castle Cloud has everything. Good food, entertainment, gambling, and all the other comforts of home. Plus this planet. I've got the best of both worlds, don't I?"

"I suppose so. But most people don't think in those terms. Nobody comes to Wraithworld for the gambling, or the food."

Sanders nodded. "But we do get some hunters. Out after rock cats and plains devils. And once in a while someone will come to look at the ruins."

"Maybe," I said. "But those are your exceptions. Not your rule. Most of your guests are here for one reason."

"Sure," he admitted, grinning. "The wraiths."

"The wraiths," I echoed. "You've got beauty here, and hunting and fishing and mountaineering. But none of that brings the tourists here. It's the wraiths they came for."

The coffee arrived then, two big steaming mugs accompanied by a pitcher of thick cream. It was very strong, and very hot, and very good. After weeks of spaceship synthetic, it was an awakening.

Sanders sipped at his coffee with care, his eyes studying me over the mug. He set it down thoughtfully. "And it's the wraiths you've come for, too," he said.

I shrugged. "Of course. My readers aren't interested in scenery, no matter how spectacular. Dubowski and his men are here to find wraiths, and I'm here to cover the search."

Sanders was about to answer, but he never got the chance. A sharp, precise voice cut in suddenly. "If there are any wraiths to find," the voice said.

We turned to face the balcony entrance. Dr. Charles Dubowski, head of the Wraithworld Research Team, was standing in the doorway, squinting at the light. He had managed to shake the gaggle of research assistants who usually trailed him everywhere.

Dubowski paused for a second, then walked over to our table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. The robowaiter came rolling out again.

Sanders eyed the thin scientist with unconcealed distaste. "What makes you think the wraiths aren't there, Doctor?" he asked.

Dubowski shrugged, and smiled lightly. "I just don't feel there's enough evidence," he said. "But don't worry. I never let my feelings interfere with my work. I want the truth as much as anyone. So I'll run an impartial expedition. If your wraiths are out there, I'll find them."

"Or they'll find you," Sanders said. He looked grave. "And that might not be too pleasant."

Dubowski laughed. "Oh, come now, Sanders. Just because you live in a castle doesn't mean you have to be so melodramatic."

"Don't laugh, Doctor. The wraiths have killed people before, you know."

"No proof of that," said Dubowski. "No proof at all. Just as there's no proof of the wraiths themselves. But that's why we're here. To find proof. Or disproof. But come, I'm famished." He turned to our robowaiter, who had been standing by and humming impatiently.

Dubowski and I ordered rockcat steaks, with a basket of hot, freshly baked biscuits. Sanders took advantage of the Earth supplies our ship had brought in last night, and got a massive slab of ham with a half dozen eggs.

Rockcat has a flavor that Earth meat hasn't had in centuries. I loved it, although Dubowski left much of his steak uneaten. He was too busy talking to eat.

"You shouldn't dismiss the wraiths so lightly," Sanders said after the robowaiter had stalked off with our orders. "There is evidence. Plenty of it. Twenty-two deaths since this planet was discovered. And eyewitness accounts of wraiths by the dozens."

"True," Dubowski said. "But I wouldn't call that real evidence. Deaths? Yes. Most are simple disappearances, however. Probably people who fell off a mountain, or got eaten by a rockcat, or something. It's impossible to find the bodies in the mists. More people vanish every day on Earth, and nothing is thought of it. But here, every time someone disappears, people claim the wraiths got him. No, I'm sorry. It's not enough"

"Bodies have been found, Doctor," Sanders said quietly. "Slain horribly. And not by falls or rockcats, either."

It was my turn to cut in. "Only four bodies have been recovered that I know of," I said. "And I've backgrounded myself pretty thoroughly on the wraiths."

Sanders frowned. "All right," he admitted. "But what about those four cases? Pretty convincing evidence, if you ask me."

The food showed up about then, but Sanders continued as we ate. "The first sighting, for example. That's never been explained satisfactorily. The Gregor Expedition."

I nodded. Dave Gregor had captained the ship that had discovered Wraithworld, nearly seventy-five years earlier. He had probed through the mists with his sensors, and set his ship down on the seacoast plains. Then he sent teams out to explore.

There were two men in each team, both well-armed. But in one case, only a single man came back, and he was in hysteria. He and his partner had gotten separated in the mists, and suddenly he heard a bloodcurdling scream. When he found his friend, he was quite dead. And something was standing over the body.

The survivor described the killer as manlike, eight feet tall, and somehow insubstantial. He claimed that when he fired at it, the blaster bolt went right through it. Then the creature had wavered, and vanished in the mists.

Gregor sent other teams out to search for the thing. They recovered the body, but that was all. Without special instruments, it was difficult to find the same place twice in the mists. Let alone something like the creature that had been described.

So the story was never confirmed. But nonetheless, it caused a sensation when Gregor returned to Earth. Another ship was sent to conduct a more thorough search. It found nothing. But one of its search teams disappeared without a trace.

And the legend of the mist wraiths was born, and began to grow. Other ships came to Wraithworld, and a trickle of colonists came and went, and Paul Sanders landed one day and erected the Castle Cloud so the public might safely visit the mysterious planet of the wraiths.

And there were other deaths, and other disappearances, and many people claimed to catch brief glimpses of wraiths prowling through the mists. And then someone found the ruins. Just tumbled stone blocks, now. But once, structures of some sort. The homes of the wraiths, people said.

There was evidence, I thought. And some of it was hard to deny. But Dubowski was shaking his head vigorously.

"The Gregor affair proves nothing," he said. "You know as well as I this planet has never been explored thoroughly. Especially the plains area, where Gregor's ship put down. It was probably some sort of animal that killed that man. A rare animal of some sort native to that area."

"What about the testimony of his partner?" Sanders asked.

"Hysteria, pure and simple."

"The other sightings? There have been an awful lot of them. And the witnesses weren't always hysterical."

"Proves nothing," Dubowski said, shaking his head. "Back on Earth, plenty of people still claim to have seen ghosts and flying saucers. And here, with those damned mists, mistakes and hallucinations are naturally even easier."

He jabbed at Sanders with the knife he was using to butter a biscuit. "It's these mists that foul up everything. The wraith myth would have died long ago without the mists. Up to now, no one has had the equipment or the money to conduct a really thorough investigation. But we do. And we will. We'll get the truth once and for all."

Sanders grimaced. "If you don't get yourself killed first. The wraiths may not like being investigated."

"I don't understand you, Sanders," Dubowski said. "If you're so afraid of the wraiths and so convinced that they're down there prowling about, why have you lived here so long?"

"Castle Cloud was built with safeguards," Sanders said. "The brochure we send prospective guests describes them. No one is in danger here. For one thing, the wraiths won't come out of the mists. And we're in sunlight most of the day. But it's a different story down in the valleys."

"That's superstitious nonsense. If I had to guess, I'd say these mist wraiths of yours were nothing but transplanted Earth ghosts. Phantoms of someone's imagination. But I won't guess — I'll wait until the results are in. Then we'll see. If they are real, they won't be able to hide from us."

Sanders looked over at me. "What about you? Do you agree with him?"

"I'm a journalist," I said carefully. "I'm just here to cover what happens. The wraiths are famous, and my readers are interested. So I've got no opinions. Or none that I'd care to broadcast, anyway."

Sanders lapsed into a disgruntled silence, and attacked his ham and eggs with a renewed vigor. Dubowski took over for him, and steered the conversation over to the details of the investigation he was planning. The rest of the meal was a montage of eager talk about wraith traps, and search plans, and roboprobes, and sensors. I listened carefully and took mental notes for a column on the subject.

Sanders listened carefully, too. But you could tell from his face that he was far from pleased by what he heard.

Nothing much else happened that day. Dubowski spent his time at the spacefield, built on a small plateau below the castle, and supervised the unloading of his equipment. I wrote a column on his plans for the expedition, and beamed it back to Earth. Sanders tended to his other guests, and did whatever else a hotel manager does, I guess.

I went out to the balcony again at sunset, to watch the mists rise.

It was war, as Sanders had said. At mistfall, I had seen the sun victorious in the first of the daily battles. But now the conflict was renewed. The mists began to creep back to the heights as the temperature fell. Wispy gray-white tendrils stole up silently from the valleys, and curled around

the jagged mountain peaks like ghostly fingers. Then the fingers began to grow thicker and stronger, and after a while they pulled the mists up, after them.

One by one the stark, wind-carved summits were swallowed up for another night. The Red Ghost, the giant to the north, was the last mountain to vanish in, the lapping white ocean. And then the mists began to pour in over the balcony ledge, and close around Castle Cloud itself.

I went back inside. Sanders was standing there, just inside the doors. He had been watching me.

"You were right," I said. "It was beautiful."

He nodded. "You know, I don't think Dubowski has, bothered to look yet," he said.

"Busy, I guess."

Sanders sighed. "Too damn busy. C'mon. I'll buy you a drink."

The hotel bar was quiet and dark, with the kind of mood that promotes good talk and serious drinking. The more I saw of Sanders' castle, the more I liked the man. Our tastes were in remarkable accord.

We found a table in the darkest and most secluded part of the room, and ordered drinks from a stock that included liquors from a dozen worlds. And we talked.

"You don't seem very happy to have Dubowski here," I said after the drinks came. "Why not? He's filling up your hotel."

Sanders looked up from his drink, and smiled "True. It is the slow season. But I don't like what he's trying to do."

"So you try to scare him away?"

Sanders' smile vanished. "Was I that transparent?"

I nodded.

He sighed. "Didn't think it would work," he said. He sipped thoughtfully at his drink. "But I had to try something."

"Why?"

"Because. Because he's going to destroy this world, if I let him. By the time he and his kind get through, there won't be a mystery left in the universe."

"He's just trying to find some answers. Do the wraiths exist? What about the ruins? Who built them? Didn't you ever want to know those things, Sanders?"

He drained his drink, looked around, and caught the waiter's eye to order another. No robotwaiters in here. Only human help. Sanders was particular about atmosphere.

"Of course," he said when he had his drink. "Everyone's wondered about those questions. That's why people come here to Wraithworld, to the Castle Cloud. Each guy who touches down here is secretly hoping he'll have an adventure with the wraiths, and find out all the answers personally.

"So he doesn't. So he slaps on a blaster and wanders around the mist forests for a few days, or a few weeks, and finds nothing. So what? He can come back and search again. The dream is still there, and the romance, and the mystery.

"And who knows? Maybe one trip he glimpses a wraith drifting through the mists. Or something he thinks is a wraith. And then he'll go home happy, because he's been part of a legend. He's touched a little bit of creation that hasn't had all the awe and the wonder ripped from it yet by Dubowski's sort."

He fell silent, and stared morosely into his drink. Finally, after a long pause, he continued. "Dubowski! Bah! He makes me boil. He comes here with his ship full of lackeys and his million-credit grant and all his gadgets, to hunt for wraiths. Oh, he'll get them all right. That's what frightens me. Either he'll prove they don't exist, or he'll find them, and they'll turn out to be some kind of submen or animals or something."

He emptied his glass again, savagely. "And that will ruin it. Ruin it, you hear! He'll answer all the questions with his gadgets, and there'll be nothing left for anyone else. It isn't fair."

I sat there and sipped quietly at my drink and said nothing. Sanders ordered another. A foul thought was running around in my head. Finally I had to say it aloud.

"If Dubowski answers all the questions," I said, "then there will be no reason to come here anymore. And you'll be put out of business. Are you sure that's not why you're so worried?"

Sanders glared at me, and I thought he was going to hit me for a second. But he didn't. "I thought you were different. You looked at mistfall, and understood. I thought you did, anyway. But I guess I was wrong." He jerked his head toward the door. "Get out of here," he said.

I rose. "All right," I said. "I'm sorry, Sanders. But, it's my job to ask nasty questions like that." He ignored me, and I left the table. When I reached the door, I turned and looked back across the room... Sanders was staring into his drink again, and talking loudly to himself.

"Answers," he said. He made it sound obscene. "Answers. Always they have to have answers. But the questions are so much finer. Why can't they leave them alone?"

I left him alone then. Alone with his drinks.

The next few weeks were hectic ones, for the expedition and for me. Dubowski went about things thoroughly, you had to give him that. He had planned his assault on Wraithworld with meticulous precision.

Mapping came first. Thanks to the mists, what maps: there were of Wraithworld were very crude by modern standards. So Dubowski sent out a whole fleet of robo probes, to skim above the mists and steal their secrets with sophisticated sensory devices. From the information that came pouring in, a detailed topography of the region was pieced together.

That done, Dubowski and his assistants then used the maps to carefully plot every recorded wraith sighting since the Gregor Expedition. Considerable data on the sightings had been compiled and analyzed long before we left Earth, of course. Heavy use of the matchless collection on wraiths in the Castle Cloud library filled in the gaps that remained. As expected, sightings were most common in the valleys around the hotel, the only permanent human habitation on the planet.

When the plotting was completed, Dubowski set out his wraith traps, scattering most of them in the areas where wraiths had been reported most frequently. He also put a few in distant, outlying regions, however, including the seacoast plain where Gregor's ship had made the initial contact.

The traps weren't really traps, of course. They were squat duralloy pillars, packed with most every type of sensing and recording equipment known to Earth science. To the traps, the mists were all but nonexistent. If some unfortunate wraith wandered into survey range, there would be no way it could avoid detection.

Meanwhile, the mapping robo probes were pulled in to be overhauled and reprogrammed, and then sent out again. With the topography known in detail, the probes could be sent through the mists on low-level patrols without fear of banging into a concealed mountain. The sensing equipment carried by the probes was not the equal of that in the wraith traps, of course. But the probes had a much greater range, and could cover thousands of square miles each day.

Finally, when the wraith traps were deployed and the robo probes were in the air, Dubowski and his men took to the mist forests themselves. Each carried a heavy backpack of sensors and detection devices. The human search teams had more mobility than the wraith traps, and more sophisticated equipment than the probes. They covered a different area each day, in painstaking detail.

I went along on a few of those trips, with a backpack of my own. It made for some interesting copy, even though we never found anything. And while on search, I fell in love with the mist forests.

The tourist literature likes to call them "the ghastly mist forests of haunted Wraithworld." But they're not ghastly. Not really. There's a strange sort of beauty there, for those who can appreciate it.

The trees are thin and very tall, with white bark and pale gray leaves. But the forests are not without color. There's a parasite, a hanging moss of some sort, that's very common, and it drips from the overhanging branches in cascades of dark green and scarlet. And there are rocks, and vines, and low bushes choked with misshapen purplish fruits.

But there's no sun, of course. The mists hide everything. They swirl and slide around you as you walk, caressing you with unseen hands, clutching at your feet.

Once in a while, the mists play games with you. Most of the time you walk through a thick fog, unable to see more than a few feet in any direction, your own shoes lost in the mist carpet below. Sometimes, though, the fog closes in suddenly. And then you can't see at all. I blundered into more than one tree when that happened.

At other times, though, the mists—for no apparent reason—will roll back suddenly, and leave you standing alone in a clear pocket within a cloud. That's when you can see the forest in all its grotesque beauty. It's a brief, breathtaking glimpse of never-never land. Moments like that are few and short-lived. But they stay with you.

They stay with you.

In those early weeks, I didn't have much time for walking in the forests, except when I joined a search-team to get the feel of it. Mostly I was busy writing. I did a series on the history of the planet, highlighted by the stories of the most famous sightings. I did feature profiles on some of the more colorful members of the expedition. I did a piece on Sanders, and the problems he encountered and overcame in building Castle Cloud. I did science pieces on the little known about the planet's ecology. I did mood pieces about the forests and the mountains. I did speculative-thought pieces about the ruins. I wrote about rockcat hunting, and mountain climbing, and the huge and dangerous swamp lizards native to some offshore islands.

And, of course, I wrote about Dubowski and his search. On that I wrote reams.

Finally, however, the search began to settle down into dull routine, and I began to exhaust the myriad other topics Wraithworld offered. My output began to decline. I started to have time on my hands.

That's when I really began to enjoy Wraithworld. I began to take daily walks through the forests, ranging wider each day. I visited the ruins, and flew half a continent away to see the swamp lizards firsthand instead of by holo. I befriended a group of hunters passing through, and shot myself a rockcat. I accompanied some other hunters to the western seacoast, and nearly got myself killed by a plains devil.

And I began to talk to Sanders again.

Through all of this, Sanders had pretty well ignored me and Dubowski and everyone else connected with the wraith research. He spoke to us grudgingly if at all, greeted us curtly, and spent all his free time with his other guests.

At first, after the way he had talked in the bar that night, I worried about what he might do. I had visions of him murdering someone out in the mists, and trying to make it look like a wraith killing. Or maybe just sabotaging the wraith traps. But I was sure he would try something to scare off Dubowski or otherwise undermine the expedition.

Comes of watching too much holovision, I guess.

Sanders did nothing of .the sort. He merely sulked, glared at us in the castle corridors, and gave us less than full cooperation at all times.

After a while, though, he began to warm up again. Not toward Dubowski and his men. Just toward me.

I guess that was because of my walks in the forests. Dubowski never went out into the mists unless he had to. And then he went out reluctantly, and came back quickly. His men followed their chief's example. I was the only joker in the deck. But then, I wasn't really part of the same deck.

Sanders noticed, of course. He didn't miss much of what went on in his castle. And he began to speak to me again. Civilly. One day, finally, he even invited me for drinks again.

It was about two months into the expedition. Winter was coming to Wraithworld and Castle Cloud, and the air was getting cold and crisp. Dubowski and I were out on the dining balcony, lingering over coffee after another superb meal. Sanders sat at a nearby table, talking to some tourists.

I forget what Dubowski and I were discussing. Whatever it was, Dubowski interrupted me with a shiver at one point. "It's getting cold out here," he complained. "Why don't we move inside?" Dubowski never liked the dining balcony very much.

I sort of frowned. "It's not that bad," I said. "Besides, it's nearly sunset. One of the best parts of the day."

Dubowski shivered again, and stood up. "Suit yourself," he said. "But I'm going in. I don't feel like catching a cold just so you can watch another mistfall."

He started to walk off. But he hadn't taken three steps before Sanders was up out of his seat, howling like a wounded rockcat.

"Mistfall," he bellowed. "Mistfall!" He launched into a long, incoherent string of obscenities. I had never seen Sanders so angry, not even when he threw me out of the bar that first night. He stood there, literally trembling with rage, his face flushed, his fat fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

I got up in a hurry, and got between them. Dubowski turned to me, looking baffled and scared. "Wha-" he started.

"Get inside," I interrupted. "Get up to your room. Get to the lounge. Get somewhere. Get anywhere. But get out of here before he kills you."

"But-but-what's wrong? What happened? I don't "

"Mistfall is in the morning," I told him. "At night, at sunset, it's mistrise. Now go."

"That's all? Why should that get him so-so-"

"GO!"

Dubowski shook his head, as if to say he still didn't understand what was going on. But he went.

I turned to Sanders. "Calm down," I said. "Calm down."

He stopped trembling, but his eyes threw blaster bolts at Dubowski's back. "Mistfall," he muttered. "Two months that bastard has been here, and he doesn't know the difference between mistfall and mistrise."

"He's never bothered to watch either one," I said. "Things like that don't interest him. That's his loss, though. No reason for you to get upset about it."

He looked at me, frowning. Finally he nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe you're right." He sighed. "But mistfall! Hell." There was a short silence, then, "I need a drink. Join me?"

I nodded.

We wound up in the same dark corner as the first night, at what must have been Sanders's favorite table. He put away three drinks before I had finished my first. Big drinks. Everything in Castle Cloud was big.

There were no arguments this time. We talked about mistfall, and the forests, and the ruins. We talked about the wraiths, and Sanders lovingly told me the stories of the great sightings. I knew them all already, of course. But not the way Sanders told them.

At one point, I mentioned that I'd been born in Bradbury when my parents were spending a short vacation on Mars. Sanders's eyes lit up at that, and he spent the next hour or so regaling me with Earthman jokes. I'd heard them all before, too. But I was getting more than a little drunk, and somehow they all seemed hilarious.

After that night, I spent more time with Sanders than with anyone else in the hotel. I thought I knew Wraithworld pretty well by that time. But that was an empty conceit, and Sanders proved it. He showed me hidden spots in the forests that have haunted me ever since. He took me to

island swamps, where the trees are of a very different sort and sway horribly without a wind. We flew to the far north, to another mountain range where the peaks are higher and sheathed in ice, and to a southern plateau where the mists pour eternally over the edge in a ghostly imitation of a waterfall.

I continued to write about Dubowski and his wraith hunt, of course. But there was little new to write about, so most of my time was spent with Sanders. I didn't worry too much about my output. My Wraithworld series had gotten excellent play on Earth and most of the colony worlds, so I thought I had it made.

Not so.

I'd been on Wraithworld just a little over three months when my syndicate beamed me. A few systems away, a civil war had broken out on a planet called New Refuge. They wanted me to cover it. No news was coming out of Wraithworld anyway, they said, since Dubowski's expedition still had over a year to run.

Much as I liked Wraithworld, I jumped at the chance. My stories had been getting a little stale, and I was running out of ideas, and the New Refuge thing sounded like it could be very big.

So I said good-bye to Sanders and Dubowski and Castle Cloud, and took a last walk through the mist forests, and booked passage on the next ship through.

The New Refuge civil war was a firecracker. I spent less than a month on the planet, but it was a dreary month. The place had been colonized by religious fanatics, but the original cult had schismed, and both sides accused the other of heresy. It was all very dingy. The planet itself had all the charm of a Martian suburb.

I moved on as quickly as I could, hopping from planet to planet, from story to story. In six months, I had worked myself back to Earth. Elections were coming up, so I got slapped onto a political beat. That was fine by me. It was a lively campaign, and there was a ton of good stories to be mined.

But throughout it all, I kept myself up on the little news that came out of Wraithworld. And finally, as I'd expected, Dubowski announced a press conference. As the syndicate's resident wraith, I got myself assigned to cover, and headed out on the fastest starship I could find.

I got there a week before the conference, ahead of everyone else. I had beamed Sanders before taking ship, and he met me at the spaceport. We adjourned to the dining balcony, and had our drinks served out there.

"Well?" I asked him, after we had traded amenities. "You know what Dubowski's going to announce?"

Sanders looked very glum. "I can guess," he said. "He called in all his damn gadgets a month ago, and he's been cross-checking findings on a computer. We've had a couple of wraith sightings since you left. Dubowski moved in hours after each sighting, and went over the areas with a fine-tooth comb. Nothing. That's what he's going to announce, I think. Nothing."

I nodded. "Is that so bad, though? Gregor found nothing."

"Not the same," Sanders said. "Gregor didn't look the way Dubowski has. People will believe him, whatever he says."

I wasn't so sure of that, and was about to say so when Dubowski arrived. Someone must have told him I was there. He came striding out on the balcony smiling, spied me, and came over to sit down.

Sanders glared at him, and studied his drink. Dubowski trained all of his attention on me. He seemed very pleased with himself. He asked what I'd been doing since I left, and I told him, and he said that was nice.

Finally I got to ask him about his results. "No Comment," he said. "That's what I've called the press conference for."

"C'mon," I said. "I covered you for months when, everybody else was ignoring the expedition. You can't give me some kind of beat. What have you got?"

He hesitated. "Well, O.K.," he said doubtfully. "But don't release it yet. You can beam it out a few hours ahead of the conference. That should be enough time, for a beat."

I nodded agreement. "What do you have?"

"The wraiths," he said. "I have the wraiths, bagged neatly. They don't exist. I've got enough evidence to prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt." He smiled broadly.

"Just because you didn't find anything?" I started. "Maybe they were avoiding you. If they're sentient they might be smart enough. Or maybe they're beyond the ability of your sensors to detect."

"Come now," Dubowski said. "You don't believe that. Our wraith traps had every kind of sensor we could come up with. If the wraiths existed, they would have registered on something. But they didn't. We had the traps planted in the areas where three of Sanders's so-called sightings took place. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Conclusive proof that those people were seeing things. Sightings, indeed."

"What about the deaths, the vanishings?" I asked. "What about the Gregor Expedition and the other classic cases?"

His smile spread. "Couldn't disprove all the deaths, of course. But our probes and our searches turned up four skeletons." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Two were killed by a rockslide, and one had rockcat claw marks on the bones."

"The fourth?"

"Murder," he said. "The body was buried in a shallow grave, clearly by human hands. A flood of some sort had exposed it. It was down in the records as a disappearance. I'm sure all the other bodies could be found, if we searched long enough. And we'd find that all died perfectly normal deaths."

Sanders raised his eyes from his drink. They were bitter eyes. "Gregor," he said stubbornly. "Gregor and the other classics."

Dubowski's smile became a smirk. "Ah, yes. We searched that area quite thoroughly. My theory was right. We found a tribe of apes nearby. Big brutes. Like giant baboons, with dirty white fur. Not a very successful species, either. We found only one small tribe, and they were dying out. But clearly, that was what Gregor's man sighted. And exaggerated all out of proportion."

There was silence. Then Sanders spoke, but his voice was beaten. "Just one question," he said softly. "Why?"

That brought Dubowski up short, and his smile faded. "You never have understood, have you, Sanders?" he said. "It was for truth. To free this planet from ignorance and superstition."

"Free Wraithworld?" Sanders said. "Was it enslaved?"

"Yes," Dubowski answered. "Enslaved by foolish myth. By fear. Now this planet will be free, and open. We can find out the truth behind those ruins now, without murky legends about halfhuman wraiths to fog the facts. We can open this planet for colonization. People won't be afraid to come here, and live, and farm. We've conquered the fear."

"A colony world? Here?" Sanders looked amused. "Are you going to bring big fans to blow away the mists, or what? Colonists have come before. And left. The soil's all wrong. You can't farm here, with all these mountains. At least not on a commercial scale. There's no way you can make a profit growing things on Wraithworld."

"Besides, there are hundreds of colony worlds crying for people. Did you need another so badly? Must Wraithworld become yet another Earth?"

Sanders shook his head sadly, drained his drink, and continued. "You're the one who doesn't understand, Doctor. Don't kid yourself. You haven't freed Wraithworld. You've destroyed it. You've stolen its wraiths, and left an empty planet."

Dubowski shook his head. "I think you're wrong. They'll find plenty of good, profitable ways to exploit this planet. But even if you were correct, well, it's just too bad. Knowledge is what man is

all about. People like you have tried to hold back progress since the beginning of time. But they failed, and you failed. Man needs to know."

"Maybe," Sanders said. "But is that the only thing man needs? I don't think so. I think he also needs mystery, and poetry, and romance. I think he needs a few unanswered questions, to make him brood and wonder."

Dubowski stood up abruptly, and frowned. "This conversation is as pointless as your philosophy, Sanders. There's no room in my universe for unanswered questions."

"Then you live in a very drab universe, Doctor."

"And you, Sanders, live in the stink of your own ignorance. Find some new superstitions if you must. But don't try to foist them off on me with your tales and legends. I've got no time for wraiths." He looked at me. "I'll see you at the press conference," he said. Then he turned and walked briskly from the balcony.

Sanders watched him depart in silence, then swiveled in his chair to look out over the mountains. "The mists are rising," he said.

Sanders was wrong about the colony, too, as it turned out. They did establish one, although it wasn't much to boast of. Some vineyards, some factories, and a few thousand people; all belonging to no more than a couple of big companies.

Commercial farming did turn out to be unprofitable, you see. With one exception—a native grape, a fat gray thing the size of a lemon. So Wraithworld has only one export, a smoky white wine with a mellow, lingering flavor.

They call it mistwine, of course. I've grown fond of it over the years. The taste reminds me of mistfall somehow, and makes me dream. But that's probably me, not the wine. Most people don't care for it much.

Still, in a very minor way, it's a profitable item. So Wraithworld is still a regular stop on the spacelanes. For freighters, at least.

The tourists are long gone, though. Sanders was right about that. Scenery they can get closer to home, and cheaper. The wraiths were why they came.

Sanders is long gone, too. He was too stubborn and too impractical to buy in on the mistwine operations when he had the chance. So he stayed behind his ramparts at Castle Cloud until the last. I don't know what happened to him afterwards, when the hotel finally went out of business.

The castle itself is still there. I saw it a few years ago, when I stopped for a day en route to a story on New Refuge. It's already crumbling, though. Too expensive to maintain. In a few years, you won't be able to tell it from those other, older ruins.

Otherwise the planet hasn't changed much. The mists still rise at sunset, and fall at dawn. The Red Ghost is still stark and beautiful in the early morning light. The forests are still there, and the rockcats still prowl. Only the wraiths are missing. Only the wraiths.