

Shadow of the Warmaster

Jo Clayton

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Spacing and headings. 0 and 1. Spell-checked.

THE WARMASTER ..

Equipped with the deadliest weapons of devastation, the huge battleship holds a world enslaved by its very presence. With it, the Emperor and his forces have no need to fire a shot, no need to fill the jails. For who would risk the destruction of the entire world to bring the Emperor down?

Yet still the rebels gather, plotting their near hopeless plans, driven by the cruelty of their conquerors to the very brink of desperate action. And now they have an unexpected ally, an offworlder with skills far beyond their own, Adelaar aici Arash, a woman out to rescue her daughter and claim revenge on those who have wronged her.

But can even an offworlder's advanced technology defeat that most powerful of sky fortresses—the dreaded Warmaster?

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The Skeen Trilogy

Skeen's Leap

Skeen's Return

Skeen's Search

and

A Bait Of Dreams

Shadow of the Warmaster

I.

1. *Two hours before zeropoint—the meeting of Swardheld Quale and Adelaar aici Arash (from which events will be dated, backward and forward as circumstances warrant).*
Prin Daruze/Telffer.

Sometime round midmorning on the third day of the second week in the spring month *Calftime*, Nuba Treviglio, Freetrader and free soul, set her ship down on the stretch of metacrete Telffer laughingly calls its star port, discharged one passenger and droned into town on the ship's flit to see what the world had to offer her.

Adelaar aici Arash watched her leave. To the ground, Treviglio said, what you do after that is your business and by god, she meant it. Adelaar bent over her case and thumbed on the a/g-lift, straightened and looked for some means of transport.

Metacrete, flat, filthy, chalk white, seemed like there were kilometers of it on every side, reaching out to touch the mountains in the west, the blue glitter of the sea in the east, and the long dark line in front of her, the city that serviced this desolation. A brisk wind blew from the distant seashore, dragging with it pun-gent sea smells (seawrack, dead fish, iodine and brine); it lifted off the 'crete a heavy white grit that it drove hissssing against half a dozen shuttles and a massive barge, against a battered wreck being stripped for parts, against two tenth-hand stingships snugged close like link-twins, against some ancient flickits gray and vaguely insectile, against Adelaar's boots in a soft continual patter, against her tan twill trousers, the close-fitting tan twill jacket, against her face, forcing tears from her half-closed eyes. She flattened her shoulders, tugged on the case's tether and started walking, moving with an easy contained stride toward the city ahead. Except for the diminishing dot that was Treviglio on the flit, nothing but the wind and the grit moved in all that shimmery white glare.

She was short, slight, neatly made, hovering about early middle age with the help of ananile drugs. She wore her tan hair trimmed close to her head so she could run a comb through it and forget it; the wind was teasing it, twisting it into a ragged halo about her face, angering her though she wouldn't permit her annoyance to show except in the slight deepening of the shallow crows'-feet at the corners of her eyes, large eyes, gentian blue, cold eyes in a face adept at concealing what went on behind it.

After twenty minutes of brisk walking, she reached the edge of the field and stepped onto Telffer's StarStreet.

StarStreet/Prin Daruze/Telffer had a fuel dump, a shipsupply store that from the look of it operated by appointment only, a short stretch of pavement and a very tall fence. Adelaar angled toward the Gate and stopped before a wooden kiosk painted black with a battered plastic window so scratched by windborne grit it had lost any transparency it had ever had. The Gate was shut, there were eyes and heat sensors soldered to the fencewire, melters perched on swivelposts atop the wire.. She looked from them to the kiosk. "T'k t'k, sweet sweet."

She located the outside palmer, a dullmetal oval freckled with old black paint, slapped her hand against it. A wall section shuddered, squealed, pleated itself until there was an opening wide enough for her to edge through. Tugging the case inside with her, she crossed to the heavyduty comset screwed onto the back wall and inspected it as the door squealed shut behind her, closing her in with an unpleasant smell, a mix of ancient sweat, dead moss and dryrot. Fungus grew in scaly patches on the greasy metal of the comset; there was an ugly olive-ocher film on the corn's thumbglass.

She touched the glass, her face rigid with distaste, rubbed her thumb repeatedly along her side as she watched a hold-pattern shiver over the plate. A min-ute passed. She glanced at the ringchron on her left hand, glanced again. Again. "If I was paying you, you'd be out on your ass yesterday."

Two minutes, three, five.... A loud ting. A face in the plate, male functionary, a slash of a mouth, a thin nose so long it approached the grotesque.

"Name, origin, ship, purpose of visit." A bored monotone.

"Adelaar aid Arash. Droom in the Heggars." She slipped her diCarx from her belt, touched it to the reader, slid it back in its squeeze pocket when the pinlight flashed red. "Passenger tradeship Niyit-Nit, owner/captain Nuba Treviglio. Business with a resi-dent of Telffer."

"What business? Who?"

Adelaar hesitated; as she'd built up her client list, she'd dealt with men like this and knew how unproductive annoyance was; push at them and they set their feet like mules. On the other hand, she wanted to say as little as possible to local authorities, she didn't know what their under-the-table ties were. There was a man on Aggerdom asking questions about her the day she closed with Treviglio for passage here; the Niyit-Nit lifted before she learned more, but she had little doubt who he worked for, less doubt that there were people in Prin Daruze with the same ties. Bolodo had stringers wherever there was a market for their contractees and raw worlds like Telffer always needed more hands. Hmm, throw him Quale's name if he keeps pushing me, no point trying to keep that quiet, soon as I hit the Directory, who wants to know will.

"That's my concern, not yours," she said, her voice neutral, nonaggressive, despite the implicit challenge of the words. "Should licenses be necessary, I will apply at the proper time and place."

"What business? Who?" He wasn't going to drop it though he knew and she knew he was going beyond his instructions.

"Swardheld Quale. I'll let him know your interest in him. I'm sure he'll be delighted someone cares."

Conceding defeat with a malevolent glower, he gab-bled another setspeech. "Qualified access granted, downtime coincident downtime Niyit-Nit, overstay downtime, fine one thousand telfs minimum assessed per day, business, full disclosure liabilities required on penalty locktime, locktime set complaint Telff, flake evidence, no recourse offworlder, locktime possibility conversion to fine by Camar Prin Daruze, schedule fines determined Camar, warning, altercation with Telff, presumed guilty, onus on offworlder t' prove case, congel, madura, olhon, grao, ebeche, viuvar, tendrij woods consensual monopoly, license required for ex-port, severe penalty for attempted removal, any questions?"

"None."

"Gate open." The com went dark.

"T'k t'k, sweet sweet."

She tugged on the case's tether, slapped her hand against the interior palmer; when the panel shuddered without budging, she gave it a kick with her boot heel that sent it sliding open, squealing and whimpering as the pleats formed. Wanting to kick the functionary where he'd feel it, she booted the door again, then swore at her folly as it died on her, the opening barely wide enough to let her waggle the case through and squeeze after it.

Outside, she brushed at herself, tucked away her annoyance and strode through the Gate.

As it clanked shut behind her, she looked about. She was on the outskirts of a gridded cluster of low, blocky, windowless buildings, gray and brown, scratched, dingy, not a bush or blade of grass to break the monotony. Automated factories. Deliveries of raw materials al-ready made, production in process, everything tucked neatly out of sight and sound. The patched, dusty streets were empty; as far as she could see there wasn't an intelligent entity within kilometers of her. No transport. He hadn't given her the chance to call a cab. "T'k, animated spleen."

She started walking.

There was a tall octagonal tower lifting like a raised finger over the city, a flagpole stuck in the top with half a dozen tattered banners flapping in the wind. She assumed it marked some sort of official center and used it to guide her through the factory section.

After another twenty minutes without seeing any-one, a ground car like a black beetle hummed around a corner and sped past her; its driver stared at her, but went on without stopping.

"Friendly."

More of the humpy little vehicles zipped past, driv-ers and passengers staring, no one offering a ride, a word, a favor. Great little world. Uh-huh! Bolodo would have a market here, selling closed contracts that took the laborers away when the job was done. Probably why the settlers came way out here in the

first place, five generations of hermits, misanthropes and social inadequates whose idea of a good time had to be something like masturbation in a hot tub. Solitary masturbation. Hah! might as well put out a sign saying stay away, we don't want you. Leave your coin, but leave. She fumed a while longer, then laughed, shook her head. Eh-eh, Adelaar, you're just annoyed be-cause your feet hurt. Multiple maledictions on those perfidious perjurous unprincipled bootmakers who foisted these instruments of torture on me.

The streets widened, lost their rule-drawn rigor as they turned and twisted among lush greenery, trees, shrubs, grasses, flowers, a thousand versions of fern from great, graceful clumps fanning overhead, their shadows a dark lace on the pale gray pavement, to gossamer cilia hanging from the trees. In this tangle, tossed down haphazardly, she saw bits and pieces of small free-standing structures, some domed, some with peaked roofs, some like tumbled toy blocks. Living places. The silence of the factories was gone; she heard birdsong and bug hum, children's laughter and their screams as they played among the ferns, voices of men and women talking, a man's shout. Now and then she saw the Telffs. They stopped what they were doing and stared at her, but no one spoke. The beetle cars came more frequently and were no friendlier than before; several times she had to jump for the gutter when a driver swerved at her, shouting obscenities. Sweat beaded on her skin and stayed there, adding to the discomforts this world laid on her the moment she set foot on it. If it had been anything else but Aslan that'd brought her here.... Aaah! he'd better be good, Quale damn well better be good.

The streets straightened and grew wider, the vegeta-tion thinned. She glanced up, kinking her neck to see the top of the tower, stood watching the banners flut-ter as she smiled in weary anticipation of a bed and a bath and food in her belly. Traffic was heavier and less aggressive, the drivers too involved with their own concerns to let their xenophobia loose on her. She went round a final curve and found herself trudging up a short ramp onto a raised walkway. "A real live sidewalk. Civilization at last."

She moved past a clutch of small stores offering everything from stacks of fruit to electronic gadgets. The stores changed to eating houses, then taverns, then she was in a grimy rundown area, stepping over men sprawled sleeping on the walkway, around vomit and splatters of urine; she jumped down into the street several times to avoid clusters of lounging idle males who, when they saw her, whistled, popped their lips, made suggestive sucking noises, groped their crotches and shouted offers of assorted body parts. Twice a man grabbed at her, but she managed to avoid his hand and move on without having to damage him; they were Telffs and by functionary's warning, onus would be on her to justify whatever she did and she knew from frustrating experiences elsewhere that her presence here unaccompanied would be excuse enough for whatever they tried on her. Despite her growing fatigue, she set a quick pace for herself, her heels clicking briskly on the boards; she looked directly ahead of her, her face impassive, ignoring the taunts, counting on her peripheral vision to warn her of anything coming at her from the side, on her ears to warn her of an attack from behind.

"Drop." Female voice, loud, coming from the street. Without hesitation Adelaar went down, curling round as she dropped, landing on hip and elbow, shenli darter out and ready.

She didn't need it. Two men lay crumpled on the walkway some five or six meters off. She swung her legs under her and was on her feet a breath later. A flit curved over to her, its offside door open.

"Jump." Same voice.

She grabbed the case's tether and jumped. As soon as she was inside, before she'd sorted herself out, the driver slapped in the lever and the flit took off as if she'd goosed it. Adelaar straightened up, clipped the darter back under her arm and arranged the case by her feet. "Thanks."

"Nada."

"Ahhmm, kill them?"

"Nope. Stunned 'em. Didn't know maybe they were friends of yours playing a prank."

"Not."

"Takes all types." The driver swung the flit round a corner and slowed to a more decorous pace. "That should be enough to keep us clear of lice. You just in? Thought so. You want to believe the shit they tell you at the Gate, mess with a local and you lose. You got credit, they suck blood, no credit, Bolodo gets you. Reason I yelled, one of your unfriends had what looked like an Ifklii yagamouche; if he

was a pro, he could've fried your brain 'fore he went down. I *loathe* those things."

Adelaar shivered. "I owe you. Let me ..." Moving her hand slowly so she wouldn't startle her rescuer, she eased a business card from her belt. "Here. Give me a call sometime."

"Shove it in the abdit there in front of you, no need, though."

"I know. Nonetheless .." She dropped the card into the hollow, "That's a quiet stunner you've got, I didn't hear a thing."

"Built it myself. Any place you want to go?"

"City Center, the Directory. You're not a local."

"Sweet lot, aren't they. No. But I've a friend here and a map on call. Center Directory it is. Or ... mmmm ... nothing like a long hot bath after hard traveling, there's an ottotel not too far from Center, got a corn plate in the more expensive rooms, these're tapped into the Main Directory, you can bypass most of the hassle that way, let your fingers do the talking." She grinned, dropping more years off her absurdly childlike face. Barely past puberty, if looks counted. A pretty child, kafolay skin, kaff brown eyes, light brown-gold hair in an exuberant halo of tiny curls. There was a brown tattoo on the cheek nearest Adelaar, a detailed drawing of a hawk's head. A sudden dimple made the hawk dance as the girl broadened her grin when she caught Adelaar staring at her.

Adelaar drew her hand down the side of her face, looked at the smear of mud in the palm. "Ottotel," she said. "Please."

"Know what you mean. Shadith. My name."

"Adelaar aici Arash. Mine."

"Pleased to."

"And I."

2

Adelaar locked the door, activated a sweep from the case to ensure her privacy (local authorities legal and otherwise tended to ignore regulations when it suited them). Calling blessings on Shadith's head from every god, saint and holy force she knew, she scrub-bed off Telffer's grit, grime and sticky sweat and with them the greater part of her irritation, pulled on a robe tailored from midnight silk, dialed up a pot of Nara tea and settled in front of the plate. Whistling a snatch of an old song, she fed tokens into the slot.

"Quale, Quale, where are you when you're home? If you're home ..."

She scrolled through the directory.

"Let Treviglio be right, let him *be* home, wherever that is. Wherever ... ah! here we are. Swardheld Quale/ Quale's Nest. T'k t'k, how cute. God help me, suppose his mind really works like that. Lat 2 deg 31 min W, Long 48 deg 53 min N. In residence, open for offers. Blessed be whatever. I'm running out of time and money. Damn. If I could handle this myself ..." She thumbed off the directory and sat sipping at the tea, taking a moment to relax before she dressed and looked for transport out to Quale's Nest.

II

1. *A short while before the meeting, less than an hour.*

Quale's Nest/Telffer.

I was out in the back yard working on a harpframe, lovely wood, dark and resonant, didn't have a name, Herby snagged the tree out of the river and took it to his curing shed. Herby's a neighbor upstream, he be-longs to one of the settlement families, his land's tax free so long as he or his kin own it; got the tempera-ment and habits of a mudweasel, but he keeps to himself unless he scavenges something he thinks he can sell me, so he's not all that bad as a neighbor. Where was. I? Ah. The harp. The shape sang under my hands and looked like music; whether it would sound as good, well, I was hoping. It was almost ready for stringing; I was carving a design into it, most complex pattern I've attempted, double

spirals and woven lacings, amarelo buds and leaves in oval car-touches, took concentration and more patience than I thought I had until I started working on it. I'd put together frames before this one, trying one thing and another, different shapes, different woods, you get the idea; I wanted to make the sound as perfect as the shape. Far as I could tell. My ear's not so bad, but my fingers are all thumbs. The last one before this had a warm rich tone, I was quite pleased with it. When Shadith sent word she was coming, I got it out with a couple more and tuned them, I wanted to know what she thought.

Back yard's a comfortable place. I spend a lot of time here, working, reading, contemplating my navel, whatever. Got a plank fence around it to keep the vermin out. Flowering thornbushes grow in stripbeds against the planks. A sight to see, they are, come spring when every cane is-thick with bloom. No roof, but there's a deflector field for when it rains, keeps the wet out without ruining the skyview, which can be spectacular during summer storms. One of them was blowing up the day I'm talking about, clouds were gathering over Stormbringer's peak, they'd be down on us in an hour or so. I've got the ground under my worktable paved with roughcut slabs of slate. Some of them are cracked; griza grass grows in these cracks and between the slabs, that's a native grass, dusty looking gray-green, puts out seedheads in the spring, not the fall, they stand up over the blades like minute denuded umbrella ribs. Beyond the stone there's mute clover, griza doesn't have a chance against it. There are stacks of wood sitting around, some roughcut planks, some stripped logs. I've got a largish workshed in the south corner, the roof is mostly skylight; I store my tools in there but don't work inside except in winter when it's too cold to sit in the garden. Or when I need to use the lathe or one of the saws. There are two viuvvars (like short fat willows) growing beside the shed and a tendrij in the north corner. The tendrij was here on my mountainside before I built my house. The trunk's a pewter column a hundred meters tall and thirty around; branches start about fifty meters up, black spikes spiraling around the bole; the leaves if you can call them that look like ten meter strips of gray-green and blue-green cellophane. When the storm winds blow them straight out, they roar loud enough to deafen you; on lazy warm spring days like this one, they shimmer and whisper and throw patches of shift-ing greens and blues in place of shadow.

My worktable is a built-up slab of congel wood. Tough, that wood, takes a molecular edge to work it, but it lasts forever; a benefit to living on Telffer, you pay in blood for congel offworld. Mottled medium brown with patches of gold like a pale tortoiseshell.

Pretty stuff, which is a good thing because it won't take stain any way you try it and even paint peels off, something about the oil, they say. I had the gouges I was using laid out on a patch of leather close to hand, the tool kit beside it, the frame I was working on set in padded clamps, the finished harps down at the far end waiting for Shadith to try them.

Butterflies fluttered about, lighting on the thornflowers, feeding on their pollen; a sight to add pleasure to the day, but it meant I'd got worms in the wood and I was going to have to fumigate the yard. There were quilos squealing in the viuvvars. Quilos are furry mats with skinny black legs, six of them, and deft little black fingers on their paws. Never been able to find any sign of eyes, ears or nose on them, though they're fine gliders and can skitter about on the ground like drops of water on a greased griddle. They drive the cats crazy, how can you prowl downwind of a thing that's got no nose or chase something that can switch direc-tion without caring which end is front? I had five cats last time I counted and they're all neutered, so that should be that, but none of them are black and two days ago I saw this black body creeping low to the ground, going after a quilo who was chewing on a beetle it picked off a thornbush, it's why I tolerate a few of the things about, they keep the bug population down. I threw a chunk of wood at the cat and it streaked off. A young black tom. Pels says he thinks there's something mystical about black toms, there's never an assemblage of cats without one of them show-ing up, he says he's convinced they're born out of the collective unconscious of cats, structures of unbridled libido created to assuage cat lust. He may be right.

Pels kurk-Orso. Let's see. He's my com off and aux pilot. He's got a thing with plants and keeps my Slancy green; he's heavyworld born and bred, Mevvyaurang; not many have heard of it, Aurrangers aren't much for company or traveling. 2.85 g. Where they have three sexes. Sperm carrier (Rau), seed carrier (Arra), womb-nurse (Maung). He's Rau. Hmm. There's a heavy burden he has to bear. Drives him into craziness some-times. Females of every sentient species I've come across, even the reptilids,

want to cuddle him, they all think he's devastatingly cute. Fluffy little teddy bear with big brown eyes. Barely up to my belt which is small even among his own people. Talking about the Aurrangers, they're agoraphobes in a big way, live in huddles underground. Funny, they're frightened of just about everything and they're the best damn predators I've met. You ought to see Pels stalking something. That fuzz of his isn't fur at all, when he's up for hunting, it kicks over into a shifting camouflage that beats hell out of a chameleon web. Thing is, he was born a misfit, always going out on the surface, fasci-nated by space and the stars that gave the night sky a frosty sheen; he was different enough to be miserable with his own people. He applied for a work-study grant to University and got it, being very very bright, but once he got his degree, with an honors list a km long, no one took him seriously enough to hire him. He was too damn cute.

When his money ran out, he had a choice between scavenging for scraps and a life of little crimes or living in luxury as a family pet. He was a reasonably compe-tent burglar by the time I put my Slancy Orza into orbit park over Admin/University.

I was finishing a job for some xenobiologists, deliv-ering a cargo of rare plants. The corn off I had on that trip, she had a sweet paper trail and was a golden goddess for looks, but she was a whiner. Kumari and me, we came close to strangling her, but we held off till we reached University. We fired her without rec-ommendation; it was safer than pushing her out a lock if not so satisfying. We turned over the plants and went out to celebrate our freedom from that rockdrill whine.

Sometime round dawn we got tangled up with Pels who was committing mayhem on what looked to be half the thugs on StarStreet. Amazing thing to watch. We hauled him loose and took him home with us because Kumari was curious about him. No, she wasn't about to go motherly over him. I talk about her as *she*, because she looks female, but she's a neuter, got the sex drive of a rock and her maternal instincts could be engraved on a neutrino with a number ten nail. Most of her energy goes into curiosity.

We needed a com off, he needed a job. We took him on for one trip to see how he fit in. That was seven years ago.

Pels was digging around the thornbushes, pulling weeds, cleaning away sawdust and bits of paper and old leaves, loosening the earth about the roots. He keeps after me about the plants in the back yard, says I'm neglecting them, but those thornbushes could use a little neglect, they're volunteers blown in by the hefty winds we get in the thaw storms. If I pampered them the way he wants they'd take over the yard, hey, they'd take over the world. He was about three-quarters finished with the thorns, baroom-brooming along, happy as he could get on a miserable one-g world.

Kumari was stretched out on a padded recliner, leafing through a book of poems composed in inter-lingue and interlarded with local idiom. She read snatches of them to me when she came across some-thing she thought I ought to like. Mostly I ignored her, being too concentrated on gouge and wood to have much mind left for other things. All the same it was a pleasant noise. Shadith came about an hour after lunch....

2

Shadith brushed aside curls and chips of wood, swung onto the table; she set her hands on her thighs, waited until I finished the cut and ran my thumb along the line. "I need a sneaky lander," she said. "Lend me Slider."

"Hmm. See what you think of those harps. You like one, you can have it."

She laughed at me. "Old Bear, put down your ax." Hooking a foot around a table leg, she leaned back, ran her eyes over the three harps, chose one, not the best, I thought, but a start. With a treble grunt, she straightened, settled the harp against her shoulder and drew her fingers along the strings. "Interesting tuning. Well?"

"Why d'you want it?"

She wrinkled her nose at me, concentrated on her playing. Even I could tell the tone was dull; the song was dying on her. One dud. I think the wood was the problem there, no resonance to it. "Gray's disap-peared," she said, "I'm off to see what happened."

"I see. Want help?"

"This is a loser, Bear." She did her lean again, switched harps, straightened. "Don't think so." It was my favorite she had this time, she smiled at the sound of it, played a snatch of some tune or other, moved on to another, then another. "My first chance to go off on my own," she said after some minutes of noodling about. "In my own body. Got a tuning wrench around? I want to try something."

"In the kit." I lifted the tool kit over the harpframe I was working on and pushed it toward her. "Keep it if you want, easy enough for me to pick up another, you might be too busy where you're going." I watched her as she began retuning the harp. This was the first time I'd got a good look at that new body, couldn't really count the web signal, the picture flats out here on Telffer, it's a long way from anywhere. And the color bleeds, runs round the image like lectrify jelly. Lot of dumps and glitches around us. I found myself think-ing, what's a baby doing jumping into something hairy as that? Then I had to laugh; Shadow, little Shadith sitting inside that head, she was what? three, four thousand years older than me? Thing is, it's hard to remember that looking at her. I was glad I'd had the nous to keep my mouth shut. I doubt having a body has changed her that much; she had a nasty turn of speech when she was annoyed.

She finished the tuning, began to play. Weird reso-nances. Tried to do things to my head. If I'd listened harder, I might've had visions, like some flaked out holyman. Hmm. Nice, once you got used to it. I went back to carving, the music made the cuts seem easier. Kumari closed her eyes, laid her book open facedown on her stomach. Pets stopped his humming but kept on with his digging. Remember his ears? They were up as high as they went, spread out and quivering, he had them turned toward the table.

"I like the tone of this 'n," she said.

"That's the one I thought came out best, but try the other."

"Why not."

She traded harps, played with the new one a little, set it aside. "You're right, the second one's by far the best."

"You needn't sound so surprised."

"Poor old Bear, that rubbed at you, eh? Put your fur down, I didn't mean it that way. The lander?"

I looked at Kumari. She managed to shrug without moving. Pels sat on his haunches and gave me a slitted look. He didn't say anything, but I got the point. "Take it, Shadow. Anything happens, the cost comes out of my share of profits."

Kumari has a sound she makes when she's amused. It isn't quite laughter, it's a combined rattle and hiss like the noises a kettle makes when the water's about to boil. "Damn right," she said.

Pels grinned, baring a pair of fangs that almost made him uncute. "Yes," he said, "if anything's sure in this unsure universe, .that is." He voices his sibilants and shifts or drops his plosives; it's those teeth, but I'm not going to try to reproduce how he sounds. "Shadow, be sure you get the Sikkul Paems to run you through the basic finger patterns. The Paems and me, we haven't finished working on her, so the coding's a nightmare. Don't get yourself in a spot where you have to switch about fast."

"Slow and sneaky. Gotcha."

"Grr." He went back to fiddling in the dirt.

She slid off the table. "This harp have any kind of case?"

"In the workshed, on the table by the lathe."

"Thanks, Old Bear."

"Call it a coming-out present."

She laughed and went trotting to the workshed. Kumari raised a brow. "A bit young to be running loose, isn't she?"

Crew knows my history, makes things easier when I get down and dark, so they knew what I was talking about when I said, "She's older than me."

"Coming-out." Kumari pinched her nose. "Shame, Swar."

Before I could answer that, the incom tinged and the housekeep came on. "One Adelaar aici Arash to see Swardheld Quale, business, no appointment." The plate showed a small woman with a determined face while housekeep waited for me to decide what I wanted to do.

"Eh, I know her." Shadith came to stand beside me, swinging the harp case. "When I was coming

from the port, I saw her walking along Sterado Street. Two men were going after her. Locals, I think.”

“On the street? Not pros then.”

“Well, one of them had a yagamouche, so they were serious about it. I stunned ’em, took her to that ottotel on Fejimaos, her business card’s in my flit if you want an extra check on her. Um, I got fots of the men, they’re in the flit’s memory. You want, you can have them.” She frowned. “If this is business coming up, won’t you be needing Slider?”

“A deal’s a deal. The lander’s yours long as you need her. What we can’t finagle, we’ll fake. Mind her seeing you here?”

“Course not. Why?”

“I’ve got to call Kinok about Slider, ve’ll want a look at you so ve knows who to let in. Best do that in the office. While we’re up there, you can give me the access code, I’ll have housekeep tap your flit. If there’s local talent after her,” I nodded at the plate, “I can use the fots to place them, might even recognize them myself, who knows. Better I have some idea what we’d be getting into before I close with her.”

I told the housekeep to let the woman in and take her to the living room, I wiped my hands off, brushed at the wood chips on my shirt and trousers and for maybe ten seconds thought about changing my clothes. Decided if she wanted a three piece suit she could buy one.

“Kumari, Pels, I’ll open the com, you keep an eye on what happens, give me a call if you see something I’m missing.”

“Aukma Harree’s blessing on her little head.” Kumari yawned. “I was getting bored doing nothing. Lean on her, Swar; someone that close to being offed should have a strong idea of how much her life is worth.” She made her happy noise. “A lean for a lien; the one on your share.”

“That’s not even worth a groan. You finished, Shadow? Come on, let’s find some air without verbal farts in it.”

I like towers so I built myself one; taller than the tendrij it is, faced with fieldstone and paneled with the finest wood on Telffer. Makes you want to reach out and caress it and I’m not saying I don’t if I’m alone so I don’t embarrass myself. My office is on the top floor of the tower, got a desk and all the gadgets I need to keep my peace unruffled, a pair of tupple chairs for my clients, a stunner or two in the walls in case one of ’em gets ambitious. A droptube under my chair, same reason. Handknotted rug from Gomirik, couple of paintings I like, a stone sculpture by a man on Univer-sity, what’s his name ... ah! Sarmaylen. Place looks nice if I say it myself. The tower’s tucked into the southeast corner of the main house, you get to it through the living room, there’s no outside entrance, at least not one I show an ordinary visitor. The guest rooms are freestanding, connected by a walkway; they’ve all got outside doors, for my privacy and theirs.

Harpcase bumping against her backside, strap over her shoulder, Shadith followed me in.

3

The woman was standing in the middle of the living room, prissy disapproval in the curve of her downturned mouth. Hmm. There was a bit of a mess in there, so what. Nothing to do with her. Her eyes flickered when she saw Shadith, but the expression on her face didn’t change. Looked like she was plated with stainless steel, a lot of anger underneath, though; no passion, no warmth, only anger and a hard control as if she’d explode if she let go her grip a single instant.

“Come,” I said, and palmed the tube open. “My office is the tower’s top floor.”

She nodded, a taut economical jerk of her head, then followed Shadow and me into the lift tube.

III

1. *Approaching zero.*

Quale’s Nest/Telffer.

The flickit was battered, rusty, with an intermittent eructation in its field generator that jolted a grunt

out of Adelaar every time because it wasn't regular enough to let her get set for the drop. The seat she sat on was dusty, streaked with ancient grease and sweat, polished to a high gloss by years and years of antsy behinds. When the driver pulled open the door for her and she smelled the interior for the first time, her stomach lurched and she couldn't help flinching from the filth, but she climbed in without comment. She couldn't afford to antagonize the driver/owner; he was the only one willing to take her out of Prin Daruze, the *only* one. If he dumped her, she'd have to do her negotiating over the com circuit and that would be like broadcasting her woes to the world. Specifically, to Bolodo Neyuregg Ltd. Besides, she had to see Quale, to know him. So much depended on him.

The driver was a dour and silent man. Pressed to go faster, he slowed to a crawl; she recognized defeat and kept her fuming internal. The trip wasn't all that long, only about an hour, but his stubborn silence meant there was nothing to distract her from her fretting.

The past three plus years had been a heavy drain on her resources; she'd taken her best researcher off mar-kets and tech breaks, set him hunting out mercenaries, she'd put in escrow a sum for hiring the most reliable of them once she located her daughter, she'd left Adelaris Ltd. in Halash's hands. He was a good man-ager, he'd keep things going, but he wasn't up to finding new markets or people, the company would be treading in place. She'd drawn her travel and research expenses from Adelaris' current account; the search had taken far longer and was more costly than she'd expected, the account was dangerously low now, she really couldn't pull more out without destroying her business, bankrupting herself and her partners; they'd been patient with her. They more or less had to be, she was Adelaris. Without her patents and processes, without her energies, Adelaris Security Systems wouldn't exist, but there was a limit to how much she could ask of them. If Quale didn't work out, she'd have to tap into the escrow fund and that might start a hemor-rhage that would kill all chance of getting Aslan back. The driver's fee was one more stone on the pile, which didn't make it easier for her to tolerate his sour misogyny.

The flickit flew west and a little south, labored along a steep-walled river gorge which cut deep into mountains that rose and subsided like waves of stone, each wave higher than the last, narrow grassy valleys dividing them, mountains thick with trees and brush, with fortress houses scattered widely along the slopes. It labored through a pass and came out into a broad valley, turned several degrees farther south and followed the river to a house on a mountainside, a ram-bling structure with scattered suites like nodes on an angular vine, a tower at a corner of the largest node.

The Telff circled wide round the house, set down at a detached landing pad at least two hundred meters off, clanked the door open for her and settled himself to sleep while he waited for her to finish her business or send him away. Whether she went back with him or not, he'd gotten a roundtrip fee from her. When she was out, he cracked an eye. "Stay on the path," he said. "You won't like what happens, you go off it."

"Thanks." She shut the door, looked around. There was a sleek black flickit on the pad, a ship's flit beside it. She frowned, walked over to the flit, nodded. That girl, Shadith. Tick's Blood, was that a setup? She shivered, feeling trapped and loathing it, banged her fist against the side of the flit, shivered again, with rage this time. Impatient with herself, she shoved away her apprehension and went striding off along the me-tailed pathway. There was no time for this nonsense; she was here, she'd know what she needed to do once she met the man. Everything else was unimportant. Aslan, ayyy, three years gone, she could be dead, no! I won't think that, she's a survivor, she let herself be trapped, but killed? No!

2

She followed a small floating serviteur along a hall-way; past several closed doors. The wood of the walls and ceiling had a deep shimmering glow, the grain was a subtle calligraphy flowing like music under the but-tery shine of lightberries on golden bronze stalks. She narrowed her eyes at the serviteur, eased closer to the leftside wall, drew her fingers along the wood. After a few steps she dropped her hand and walked faster.

The serviteur led her into a room full of light, gray light from the gathering storm, spidery with distant lightning, a room without corners, irregularly shaped with a bite out of one side where the tower was.

Huge windows ran from floor to ceiling, a ceiling more than ten meters high with cathedral beams a distant richness of texture and line; polarizing glass in them, pale now, the windows looked out across the valley or up toward the mountain's peak. Chairs were clustered about these windows, comfortable, leather covered, ancient design. Trays on the floor, remnants of today's noon meal congealing on plates and bowls. Books and papers piled haphazardly about, drifts of them next to the chairs. Set into the wall opposite the door there was a huge fireplace meant to take logs, not limbs or splits, a table in front of it littered with several pieces of wood and some gouges, chips and curls of wood scattered about, a glass with a sticky residue coating the sides and hardening in the bottom, a bowl of fruit with a half-eaten apple turning brown, a tea tray with a plain pot and drinking bowls.

Tea set, windows, walls, chairs, the nubbly dark green rug on the floor, stone and wood sculptures scattered about, tapestries, paintings—from the moment she came through the outer door, she'd been bombarded with texture and color; that said something about the man, she wasn't quite sure what.

Also clutter. She looked around and silently sneered at the debris of living in what might have been an elegant room. He had serviteurs, he wouldn't have to lift a finger to clean up after himself once he'd properly programmed them, that he didn't could mean he was comfortable with this mess, maybe even preferred it to order. Cluttered mind. Cutesy mind. Quale's Nest. She began to feel a little sick.

He came into the room followed by the young girl who may or may not have rescued her.

A tall man. Thick black hair, a streak of white running through it, extending the line of a scar which touched his eyebrow with a dot of white, skimmed past his eye and swung down to the corner of his mouth. Pale gray-green eyes, droopy eyelids, nose like a predator's beak, mustache, beard, both clipped short. Broad shoulders, long arms, a loose, easy body. Easy body, easy man, if you left him alone, at least that was her first response to him. He wore scuffed old sandals with bronze buckles, heavy tan trousers, cut off above the knees, a shirt made from the same cloth, sleeves ripped out. Faded, softer than velvet after many washings, wrinkle on wrinkle, frayed at the seams and edges. Unimpressive, she told herself. Unprofessional. She didn't believe it. He moved like a man comfortable in his body, not an athlete or a dancer, nothing so self-conscious, just one who expected it to do whatever he required of it without fuss or lagging.

He crossed to the bulge of the tower, looked over his shoulder at her. "Come," he said and palmed open the entrance to a lift tube. "My office is the tower's top floor."

At least the office was neat. He gestured to a tupples chair hanging soft and shapeless beside a tall window, waited until she was seated before rounding the desk and settling himself. "A moment," he said, "there's some business I have to finish."

He beckoned Shadith to him, tipped up a sensor plate, touched a sound barrier between Adelaar and them. He looked up at the girl, raised a brow, said something, his mouth blurring so Adelaar couldn't read it. Shadith smiled, made a quick curving gesture with one hand, spoke rapidly, leaned on his shoulder as he worked the sensor plate. Adelaar watched his hands. They moved with the controlled clumsiness of a craftsman, no flash to them, easy, slow, sure. Long scarred fingers, tapering to spatulate tips, nails cut short, clean but scratched, he didn't take care of his hands. Too bad. They were the best part of him as far as she was concerned. She sighed and looked away. The storm had broken outside, rain streaked the window glass. The valley was green swept with silver, the river cloud-black and rain-silver. Soundless rain, the office was too insulated from the outside to let the patter through. Too bad. Still, the storm gave the room a cozy feel, especially when she looked around again and saw the girl was gone, ambiguous uncertain figure that reminded Adelaar how little real control she had over events.

Quale leaned forward, forearms on the desktop (another of Telfer's jewel woods), hands clasped, watching her, waiting for her to tell him what she wanted from him.

She touched the controls and brought the tupples chair humming closer to the desk, slipped the diCarx from her belt, laid it in front of him. "Adelaar aici Arash. Droom. In the Hegger Combine."

He collected the diCarx and fed it into the Evaluator, glanced at the plate. "Ah. Adelaar Security Systems. He looked up, his eyes laughing. "I've heard about you, never could afford you."

She lifted a hand, let it fall. "I have a daughter," she said. "Tenured Associate. University. Xenobiologist. Awarded a Grant, permission to study the Unntoualar on Kavela Styerna. Framed.

Torture of a subject. Perversion. Sentenced, death. Sentence commuted to thirty years Contract Labor. Bolodo Neyuregg Ltd. the Contractor. I want her out of that. What's it going to cost me?"

"Depends on where she is. Do you know that?"

"No. I know how to find out. It took me more than three years to get that far."

"Those men Shadith stunned, the Directory placed them. Looks like you annoyed Bolodo sometime during those three years and they managed to ID you. Shame, that." He drew his thumb along his bearded jawline, ruffling the short black hair. "They're not too worried yet, or they'd 've sent pros instead of depend-ing on local talent." The ends of his mustache lifted, subsided, a shadowed smile. "Assuming there's some-thing they're twitchy about that involves your daugh-ter. Otherwise they'd ignore you. It doesn't cost them anything if you peel her loose, they've got their fee. Looks to me like Bolodo's up to something that'd give them big trouble if it came out. Give us trouble if they think we're getting close. Hmm." He sat back, his eyes fixed on her face. "You know what it is. No? You've got some idea?"

"Yes."

He lifted a brow. "Terse."

"So?"

"Hmm." His eyelids drooped until his eyes were slits, he brushed the tip of his forefinger slowly back and forth across his mustache as he thought that over. After a moment he leaned forward, tapped in a code that brought a large viewplate unfolding from a slot in the desk top. "Kink," he said, "Kumari, Pels, Con-ference." He looked up. "Bring your chair round here," he told Adelaar, "but keep your mouth shut, if you don't, mind, unless you're asked something."

The plate split into three cells. Furry cuddly type with twitchy ears set high on its head. She didn't know the species. Milkglass maiden, pale hair thick and silky, pale skin, pale gray eyes cool and intelligent.

Hadn't come across that kind either, interesting. Ropy coils, clusters of succulent black eyes, colored pulse patches, hairy exoskeleton, Sikkul Paems, them she knew. Adult with a yearling bud crouching by ve's head. Quale's Crew?

"Bolodo Neyuregg," Quale said. "You heard. We start this thing, we'd better be prepared to dodge a lot."

What's this? Adelaar thought, Tick's Blood, do I have to sell all of them? Multiple maledictions on my miserable luck, I hadn't planned on letting any of this out. Not until after we closed the deal anyway. Why did that girl have to be tied up with him?

The milkglass maiden opened her pale pink mouth (what species? not one of the cousin races, must be some backwater bunch that never made space). "Snatch-ing." She had a husky purring voice, more life in that than in her face. "Slaving undisguised. What else. Considering what Jaszaca ti Vnok told us." Her voice was cool, her cool eyes distant. "Spotchals has to suspect something chancy is going on, but they won't press it as long as no one rubs Spotchallix noses in the mess. I'd say the trade is small but enormously profit-able, otherwise Bolodo wouldn't risk it. They've got a strong base in Spotchals, but they've got to be careful; they own some pols and some career functionaries; even so, they've got potential for problems, remember?"

The fuzzy one lifted a black lip, exposed a yellowed tearing tooth four centimeters long (carnivore, she thought, deceptive little thing). "Yeah, I was in this bar the night before we left. Couple of Bolodo secu-rity come in. Hunh. One minute you wouldn't 've noticed a grenade go off in your lap, next you could hear your hair grow. Spotchallix, they like the taxes Bolodo pays, but they hold their noses when they hear the name. If it came out Bolodo was slaving, I'd give them a year at most before they were gone.

Quale brushed at his mustache, nodded. (Why doesn't he just ask? Is this meant to impress me? Pompous idiot. Oh god, how long do I have to sit here keeping my face straight?) "Kinok," he said, "you know them the hard way, what do you think?"

The bud Kahat skittered along a heavy tentacle, perched on the voice box; ve's umbilical pulsed, ve's hairfine digits manipulated the minute sensorboard.

"They are very careful." The synthesized voice was a sweetly musical tenor, quietly absurd (a Paem playing gentle jokes on vself, the heavens should open). "They hold records on the meat back to creation or as close as they can get. Keep it legal, keep the record trail clean, if there's anything gray, wash it white or bury it deep. Ve-who-speaks was sold and sold again without diminishing ve's debt one ounce gold, they charge for air, they charge for transport, food, sewage removal, soilage, anything they can imagine and their imaginations are vast. Ve-who-speaks must agree with Kumari; the profit is beyond conjecture great to tempt Bolodo across the line. Ve-who-speaks also believes very few, an inner circle of execs, know of this operation and this circle will not allow information about it to escape their hands; even their nervousness they will clutch tight to their bosoms; for beings who suspect trouble such urgency would be damning. Ve-who-speaks thinks that is why aici Arash has escaped serious difficulty till now. This is speculation, Swar, errors are likely. Say it is this way, in her search for her daughter, aid Arash leaves traces behind that are used to ID her after she is gone; if such happened before she went, she would be dead. So the circle knows her name, connects her with her daughter, realizes her daughter is involved with the secret thing. They do not know precisely what she has discovered, but they must fear she had enough to go looking and that is dangerous. They send word to their stringers to locate and remove her as a matter of swatting a nuisance, no great urgency in it, only a chance for an ambitious outerling to earn company points. They woo Luck but will not trust Her. Ve-who-speaks believes they are now organizing something more serious. Ve-who-speaks says deal with aici Arash, it is no longer possible to stand aside." The bud Kahat went still, Kinok turned his eye clusters from the screen, turned them back, jolted Kahat into renewed activity. "Shadow comes. Byol tok, Swar. Consider."

The cell went dark.

Kumari nodded. "I agree. Active or passive, we're in it. I prefer to be paid for working."

Pels said nothing, showed his teeth in a feral grin that unfortunately made him look like a naughty cub.

Quale tapped off the screen, sent it folding into the desk, turned to face Adelaar. "You pay fuel and reasonable expenses. That is not negotiable. My base fee is fifty thousand Helvetian gelders. You being Adelaar, I have a proposition. Ten thousand only, escrowed, the rest I'll take in trade, Adelaar systems for my house and my ship, supposing we come out of this with skins intact and brain in working order."

"Generous, I don't think. Two thousand, house or ship, not both."

"Mmmh, think of it as a professional discount. The ship gets a complete workover, the house an appraisal with suggestions for improvement, I do the actual work. Five thousand gelders."

"Three thousand."

"Done. You like storms?"

"What?"

"Storms." He waved a hand at the window where the rain was sheeting across the glass.

She looked from him to the shifting silvery streaks. "I suppose I do. As long as it's not raining down my neck."

"Then we'll have tea in the garden." He came out of his chair with that loose ease that continued to stir things in her she didn't want stirred; she didn't like him, he was too chaotic and cluttered for her taste, too wild, undisciplined, a weed, too young. She kept thinking of negatives, but as she gave him her hand and he lifted her from the clinging tuppel chair, they kept fading on her. "A serviteur will take you there," he said, "if you don't mind. I'll start shutting the house down, be with you shortly. Pels and Kumari are there, ask them anything you want. We'll be leaving soon as the rain quits." He walked with her to the tube, opened it for her, twitched his mustache at her as she stepped silently into the tube. Damn the man, he had to know the effect he had on women. That creature Kumari, his leman?

The serviteur was waiting for her in the living room; the debris from the meal was gone, but the rest of the clutter was untouched, was likely to stay untouched for however long it took to find Aslan. Shaking her head, she followed the small bot as it hummed away, gliding a meter off the floor.

Pels and Kumari sat at a table in an open structure of stressed wood molded into a round of arches with a circular roof of roughcut shakes. Its floor was raised shoulder high off the grass and looked out

over scat-tered beds of brilliantly colored flowers and convo-luted, variously textured banks of fern. The deflector field shunted aside the rain as the clouds boiled black and wild overhead and lightning walked along the valley floor some distance below the house. Adelaar smiled with pleasure as she heard the hoom of the wind, the steady hiss of the rain, the crack of thunder and lightning. Quale said the storms were spectacular; that was rather an understatement. She climbed the steps, gave Pels and Kumari a nod, a stiff impersonal smile, and settled into the chair Kumari pulled out for her. "Quale said something about closing down the house."

Up close Kumari looked less human; her skin was white and translucent as milkglass (milkglass maiden) and delicately scaled, no eyebrows, her nose was a low knife blade slightly turned up at the tip with narrow nostrils, small mouth a pale pale bluish pink, narrow jaw, pointed chin; she was narrow and angular as a primitive sculpture, her hands were extravagantly long and thin; there was a faint drag on her flesh that suggested she'd been born and reared on a lighter world than this. "He means we'll probably get away clean, but Bolodo is apt to slag the place out of sheer snittishness. He's setting the automatics. May work, may not, depends on what they send."

"Planetaries won't keep them out?"

"What planetaries?"

"Oh." Adelaar looked round. "Then why ..."

"Don't worry about it." Kumari made an odd little sound, a rattling hiss that Adelaar eventually interpre-ted as laughter. "He spent half a dozen years building the place, he was worse than a wounded auglauk when he had to admit it was finished. He's been walking around muttering to himself about redoing this or that, but he can't convince himself he could do better; if Bolodo levels it, he'll have the fun of rebuilding. Right, Pels?"

The furry person produced a rumbling chuckle. "Im-prove his temper no end."

Adelaar watched the storm a while; she was in-tensely curious about these two, but couldn't in cour-tesy ask for their life histories; courtesy aside, they were not likely to bare their souls for her, a stranger and a mere client. "You're Quale's Crew?"

Pels answered her. "Two thirds ..."

Kumari broke in, "One half. You're forgetting Kahat."

"Shoosh, Kri, Kahat? That's the third Kahat ve's had since ve came." He dug into his face fur with short black claws that looked as formidable as his tearing teeth, explained to Adelaar what he meant. "Kinok eats the current Kahat every two years when the bud's about to complete separation. Sacrifice to the drives, ve says. You know Sikkul Paems?"

"I know."

"Me, I'm com off and Kumari, she's Ship's Mom; she knows everything about everything."

"Fool!" Kumari patted him on the cheek. "Cute-ness has warped your pea brain."

He growled at her, fell silent as a pair of serviteurs came humming up with large trays. Spice tea, crisp wafers, small glass bowls with sections of local fruit, glass skewers to eat them with. The tea service was native clay, rough glazed, a warm dark brown with hints of rust and a deep blue shadow where the glaze was smooth, the drinking bowls generous with a re-strained elegance-of form.

Adelaar lifted one of the bowls, cupped it in her hand, enjoying its weight and texture. "Local?"

"One of my neighbors downstream, she's got a patch of kaolin she's been working for the past thirty years." Quale came through an arch and dropped into the fourth chair. "Do anything for thirty years and you tend to get good at it. Pour for us, Kumari."

He sat sipping at the tea and watching the storm. Adelaar skewered a slice of ruby fruit, ate it. It was good, a mix of bloodheart plum and citrus, firm, fleshy, full of juice; she closed her eyes, swallowed the fruit, savoring the blend of flavors in her mouth and the drama of the storm against her ears. She thrust the skewer through a rose-pink wedge, sniffed at it, crunched her teeth into it, smiled at the spurt of sweet tart flavor. Alternating bites of wafer and fruit, wash-ing them down with sips of tea, she took the edge off a hunger she hadn't noticed before.

After several minutes of silence, Quale turned his head. "You send your driver off?"

"T'k, I forgot him, I left him sleeping in his flickit." She grimaced at the rain. "I hope the thing doesn't

leak.”

“Who?”

“Sour type called Oormy, Sounds unlikely, but that’s what I made of his mutter.”

“Ha! the Worm. No one else would bring you?”

“No.” She smoothed her fingers over the textured glaze of her bowl. “What do you want me to do? Go back to Daruze and wait? I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“No. Of course not. Ship’s lander is coming down here, we’re not going anywhere near the city. Unless you have something there you need to retrieve?”

“My case in the flickit, that’s all I have.”

“Hmm. Let Worm sleep till the storm’s over. He can’t fly in that stuff anyway.” He reached under the table, pulled up a servitriage, ordered the housekeep to fetch Adelaar’s case the moment the rain stopped and tell the driver Oormy to go home. After he clipped the trage away, he set his elbows on the table, clasped his hands. “About time you did some talking, mmm?”

“Time ... how much longer will this storm last?”

“An hour, maybe a little more.”

“Ah.” She closed her eyes, weariness sweeping through her, three plus years working alone, never knowing if the next day, next hour, next minute would see her banging her head against a barrier even she couldn’t get through or around, or in a trap that got her ashed, three plus years until Quale said Done and the deal was closed. Three plus years stretched taut, then the elastic broke. It hadn’t hit her up there in the office, but now.... Now, soothed by the sounds of the storm, the tea and fruit a warm comfortably heavy lump in her middle, a need to talk washed over her, frightening her, at the same time luring her to say things she’d never said even to herself, to say more than she’d said to anyone since Churri the Bard. She understood what was happening to her, the euphoria that came from a sudden release of tension, but under-standing was no help at all. “Mind if I ramble a bit?”

“Why not. I need to get the feel of things.” His voice was distant, almost lost in the storm noises, as seductive as her exhaustion. “Just talk, whatever you feel like saying.”

“Mmm.” Eyes still closed, she slid down in the chair until her head rested on the back; she never sat like this in public, never, but she was too tired to care, just moving a finger made her body ache. “You know anything about the Saber worlds? I can understand that. Still, people did go there, especially to Sonchéren, sunsets and opal mines, chasm falls and tantserbok, hunters came from all over to hunt the tantserbok. I never understood those types, going after beasts no one could eat or use; their flesh was poison, their skin wouldn’t tan, it rotted in three days no matter what you tried. And more hunters died than tantserboks, five hunters out, one back. The ratio changed now and then, never in favor of the hunters, but all those dead seemed to make the next ones more eager. Can you explain that to me, Quale? Can you make it make sense? I think stupidity can’t be genetic, it has to be a birth defect or something like that. Why else with the kill rate like it is are there so many idiots around? Ah, that was a long time ago. Churri came to see the sunsets. Churri the Bard he called himself, a poet of sorts, I’m no judge; he moved me, but my brothers laughed at him. He was a little man, I’m not tall and he’d tuck under my chin, he got me so messed up, I didn’t know which end was where, god I hate that phrase, I don’t know why I use it, one of my brothers caught us, nearly killed Chard, he took off and didn’t stop till he was on a ship going somewhere else. A month later I was being sick in the morning and bloating up like a milaqq in a cloudburst....”

Her voice trailed off, she opened her eyes a slit and examined Quale. There was something about him that reminded her of Churri, she couldn’t decide what it was, but then she wasn’t all that good at reading people. Not his looks, Churri’d been bald as an egg and dark amber all over, with bronze cat eyes that laughed a lot though never at himself. A streak of cruelty with little malice in it, like the cruelty of a cat, a spinoff of the curiosity, passion, detachment that fueled his poetry. Aslan had inherited the curiosity and the passion, but hadn’t yet acquired that detach-ment, probably never would. Quale, what was it about him, something of that same detachment? that playful painful digging into the other’s, well, call it soul? Quale had an easy way of moving, but Churri was made of springsteel. and sunfire, to look at him made her shiver. Quale was amiable, competent enough but low in energy. Tepid, that was the word. Churri

was restless and unpredictable, he seemed easily seduced into tangents but was not, no, that was his cunning; he was a stubborn little git, when he wanted something, he got it, her for one. That was something else their daughter had inherited; she was about as biddable as a black hole before she could walk or talk. Ahh, it didn't matter, probably just a question of hormones. I was upset and tired, let my guard down. She shut her eyes.

"My father was a man of great honor, hmm! He shut me in a cell and brought in whores to tend me because no decent woman should have to look at me.

It's a miracle or good genes, take your pick, that I lived through that time and Aslan was born healthy. My father left her with me till she was weaned, then he gave her to a baby, market. If she'd been a boy he might have kept her though I don't think so, she looked too different, skin was too dark, eyes were gold-like Churri's, not washy blue like his. Me, he sold into contract labor. Not to Bolodo, to a smaller Con-tractor, one you could get loose from if you had the brains and drive. I don't like thinking about that time, but it taught me what it took to survive when you didn't have a family back of you. After three years I managed to buy out and I went looking for Aslan. Seems to be a habit, that. Found her too. Things were fine for a while, I was doing this and that, pulling in enough credit to keep us comfortable. Apprenticed myself to a minor genius and learned everything he wanted to teach me and a lot he didn't want out of his hands. Until Aslan hit puberty. And I turned into my father. T'k. We had some royal fights. Aslan was smarter than I'd been, ho roving poets for her, but she didn't like my friends, she found them boring, nauseating, unethical, she had an obsession about ethics, don't know where she picked it up, it was bad as a deformity for scaring people off, she didn't like what I was doing, ethics again, she wanted no part of my friends or my business. The rows got worse, nothing physical, we weren't that sort, but we were clawing at each other with words and she was very good with words, better than I was, I sputtered and yelled and got frustrated, but she never lost her tongue. We loved each other, but we couldn't live together. So Aslan went to University." Adelaar sighed.

"She couldn't stand my friends, but she took up with some of the worst nannys there, flatulent bores, maybe intelligent but ignorant of anything to do with real life. I'd visit her, she'd visit me, we'd be polite a while about each other's friends and oh everything until the facade broke and we had another row. We'd give it a rest till next time, but we kept in fairly close touch by submail. Funny, we had our best conversations on faxsheets, though maybe not the most private. We set up a code of sorts, words that meant *trouble but I can handle it, trouble help fast*, that kind of thing. She has this fixation about recording cultures for the poor destroyed native species who'd probably skin her and roast her if they got the chance, she was always poking into places no sane trader would go near; we had rows about that, paranoid mama she called me, you get what you expect, she said, expect people to be nice, you get nice. I told her she was an idiot. She just laughed. Then this Unntoualar thing came up, a chance to be the first researcher into Kavelda Styernna. She stopped by Droom on the way there, she was full of it, the first time she'd gone in alone; she'd got five student assistants and a manager, Duncan Shears, she said he was the best there was at handling logistics, University was going all out for her.

I was scared out of my mind for her, I'd heard nasty rumors about the Styernnese and the Unntoualar, I warned her she wouldn't like what she was going to find out and she should be damn careful what she looked at, University was no good to her if the Oligarchy decided to off her, what could they do about an accident however fatal? I told her to yell if things looked murky, I'd come and get her, hell with Styernna and everything. This time she didn't argue, she knew it was going to be touchy, the Oligarchy was only letting her in because of long hard pressure from their homeworld Bradjeen Kiell and from University and they were going to watch every move she made. It's a filthy universe and we're about the filthiest things in it. If it was up to me, I'd say sweep the debris into the nearest sun and get on with today's business. Knowing how sick and perverse we can be is useless, doesn't change anything except maybe it encourages the freaks. I told her that, I don't know how many times, but she's a passionate creature, Aslan, and she believes time can repair the damage we do if given material to work with and it's her mission to collect that material. I said that, didn't I, ah well, my mind's not tracking, I'm too tired. So she went. I got a submail letter from her a month later, bright and chatty, saying how helpful the Styernnese were, no doubt for benefit of the censor she expected to read it, but she worked

the code in and that told me it was a bigger mess than even I thought and she was scared but hanging on and if I didn't hear from her by the last third of each month I should come get her. Come quiet and careful. I started tying knots in things so I could go as soon as the mail didn't come.

"It happened so fast. Got a letter one day where the undertext said she was picking up stories that nauseated her, that she was nervous but coping, three weeks later University subbed over a transcript of her trial and an apology because they couldn't do anything directly for her, but she was still alive; there'd been a death sentence, but it had been commuted to thirty years contract labor. Alive! Under involuntary contract, you aren't alive, you're walking dead. The time I was under contract I was tougher than Aslan'd ever be, but those three years came close to killing me. Be damned if I left her in that mess. She'd been trashed, University said as much, but I didn't need them telling me. They were going to try buying her clear if they could find out who had her, and they were going after Styernna; oh, they were hot against Styernna, gnash-ing their bitty teeth, shuh! I didn't care what they did, I wanted my daughter. Besides, that lot of nannys couldn't find their assholes without a map.

"Getting into Styernna wasn't easy. They'd closed down the ports, not even homeworld types could land, and they had the satellites on alert for snoopers, but given the coin, anything's available. I knew this smug-gler, he put me down and arranged to lift me off a month later. I nosed around Kay Strenn, that's the capital, trying to sniff out what they'd done with Aslan. It wasn't easy, Aslan calls me paranoid mama, but I'm a lamb beside those shits. I have this medkit which is probably illegal on just about every world I know of, but it's useful at times like this, I suppose I shouldn't tell you that, what the hell. I went after the trial judge, he was the only one I could get at without more preparation than I had time for and local muscle which I had no access to. He didn't know much, except that Aslan must have found out something really ugly because the Oligarchy wanted her dead and ordered him to take care of it. Like always, he did what he was told and drowned what qualms he had in the local version of hi-po brandy. He was involved in the commutation, he had to sign the papers; I got Bolodo's name from him and something peculiar. If the Oligarchy wanted Aslan dead, why sell her to a Contractor who might take what he learned from her and blackmail them? Didn't make sense. Officially my babbling judge knew nothing about why it happened, but he'd picked up rumors. Bolodo had paid certain members of the Oligarchy bribes and promised them Aslan would disappear so thoroughly she'd be better than dead. Why Aslan? Not for her body, shuh! she's my daughter and I love her, but even I wouldn't call her a beauty. She's attractive enough, but there are thousands of women more so. Not all that sexy either, she's more interested in scrungy natives and putting together culture flakes than she is in men, they're for recreation when she's not busy with something else and that shows. To be honest, Quale, she's a very boring person. Secrets? Everything she's done has been published one way or another. She's a xenoethnologist, for god's sake, who'd pay a pile of coin for a xenoethnologist? There it is. What it says to me is this, Bolodo had an order from some crawly who has the hots for a scholar and Aslan dropped into their fingers. Scholars do tend to have a lot of backing, colleagues and so on who yelp when something happens to one of them, I give the nannys that.

"I dumped the judge and got off Styernna with lice hot after me ready to do me worse than they did Aslan. That must have been when Bolodo discovered someone was snooping into their business; there was enough left of the judge for that. I suppose I should have of-fed him, but the easy life I've had the last few decades has made me soft. Couldn't do it. He was such a miserable little worm, I just couldn't squash him.

"I went home for tools,, visited some old friends; by the time I reached Spotchals, I wasn't me, had distort-ers on my bone structure and twisters on my body stinks. Justus well, Bolodo had spotters out, bloodoons looping over every port, sniffoons trundling through the streets, don't know if they were looking for me or what they thought they were doing, but it was a nuisance. Local lice were irritated by all this, that was points for me, they tended to knock down the 'oons whenever they came across them. After I got dug in, I didn't have too much trouble keeping hid. You know Spotchals, the police there are nothing special, they do what they have to and not much more and the govern-ment's less corrupt than most, and there are thousands of ships going in and out, busy place, and a huge population.

"Getting through security around the Bolodo compound was something else. It took me three years

of digging, slow tedious dangerous digging, dancing tip-toe around the sleeping tiger to get close enough to work the mainbrain. You don't know how many dead ends I banged into, but I finally wormed a way through perimeter security and set up a protected corridor that would let me nest in the walls each night and gnaw away at the records hunting for Aslan's file. In and out, living on my nerves, feeling for traps, moving a hair at a time, day by day, week by week, month by month. Twice I juggled something; it wasn't exactly a trap, but it alerted Security and there was a general alarm, I stopped breathing, didn't move and they missed me; they ran all around me, but they didn't find me. And I started again hair by hair, looking for Aslan. They were tense for weeks after each of those brushes, jumping at shadows, it made things easier and harder for me; all that activity covered a lot I was doing, on the other hand someone could stumble on me any time if my Luck went bad, it was enough to give me permanent shakes. After two more months of this, I found her. She was listed as part of a special shipment to a world so secret it wasn't identified except by a code name. This was in a limited access file, you needed five keys entered simultaneously to release it if you didn't have a shortcut like my crazyquilt. And still that worldname was coded. I duped a part of the file, the part about Aslan. All the shipments were there, fifty years of kidnapping and slaving; I thought about duping the whole thing, but I was afraid of staying in there too long, besides, I didn't care about those oth-ers, what I wanted was Aslan. Oh. Yes. I got some-thing else, note this, Quale, this is important. Those shipments are assembled at a substation off Weersyll, they go out roughly twice a year. There's one sched-uled for three months from now, I hope you can follow it. Lyggad says you can, he's the one researched you for me, you know you've got a very odd history, dumb, I don't have to tell you about your life, where that ship is going is where we'll find Aslan. I've got the flakes with me, I thought you might need to see them. That night I didn't try for the code, I took the flakes out of the compound and stowed them in my case. I gave myself three more nights to break the code and identify the destination, I set up passage off Spotchals, didn't care where to, on half a dozen ships each night, different hours, I wanted to be out and off fast, you know Spotchals, there are what, fifty? a hundred? ships leaving every night, if I was quick enough, slippery enough, I'd get ahead of the guards, the 'oons, even if I tripped alarms all over the place. As long as I got clear of the compound. That was the trick. Getting clear. Security hadn't come close to my corridor, not once in all those months. It was worth taking the chance. I went in, set things up to collapse behind me if I had to run, slipped into the limited files and started hunting for the key to the code that con-cealed the world and its location. I thought I was being very very careful, but that particular line was loaded with traps, almost the first move I made set off alarms, turned the compound into a bomb waiting to blow. This time they knew they had a rat in the walls and they weren't going to quit till they got it."

"I jerked my taps and went away fast, the corridor shutting down behind me, erasing my backtrail. I thought I got away clean. I collected my case and was offworld before Bolodo Security finished flushing the compound and turned their search on the ports. I dodged about for several months, shifting IDs until I was me again. There was no sign of interest in me before Aggerdorn, that was where I got passage here with Treviglio. I shouldn't be surprised, though, should I. It isn't that big a step to tie the agitator on Kavelda Styernna to Aslan and Aslan to me and given what happened on Spotchals, adding in Adelaris, well, there I was. Kinok and Kumari were right, Bolodo's little sideline is nasty, dangerous and profitable; the net on Aslan's shipment was close to a billion gelders and remember there've been two shipments a year for more than five decades."

She opened her eyes, yawned. The storm was still yowling outside the deflectors, though the winds were dying down, the rain slackening. "You know the most frustrating thing? I was on Spotchals two months before Aslan's shipment left Weersyll. Two damn months." She glanced at the storm with impatience, all pleasure in it gone, sat up and ran her hands over her hair, pulling control like a coat around her. "You can fol-low that ship?"

"If we can set some ticks. We'll know more about that shortly. Pels, get on to Kinok, have him start a run on Weersyll, then you get hold of some of your dubious friends, see what they can give you. If they need time, have them message you at our drop on Helvetia. Kumari, see if you can get through to ti Vnok; say we'll make Helvetia three weeks on. If he wants to meet, have him leave time and place at the drop." Quale got to his feet, stood back to let the others move past him. He glanced after them, turned to

look down at Adelaar. "Helvetia first. We have to settle the escrow and register the services contract." His mustache lifted in a smile reflected in his pale eyes. "Even Bolodo won't mess with Helvetia."

"They could wait beyond the Limit, jump us there."

"Slancy Orza has a trick or two. Hmm. Give you a few hours' sleep and the world won't be so grim." He bent, reached under the table. "I'll have a serviteur clear the table. Anything you'd like?"

"The storm to end."

"Won't be long now. Relax."

She made an impatient gesture. "If your lander can't work through this little disturbance, what good is it?"

"It's being droned down, no use taking chances for a miserable half hour that we can make up with no trouble once we're resplitted." A brow lifted, another smile, then he too was gone.

She sat and watched the rain thrum down, watched it diminish abruptly to a trickle. The clouds raveled, paling, thinning; patches of sky appeared, vividly blue in contrast to the shadowed whites and pale grays of the vanishing clouds. Shafts of sunlight shot down, touching droplets of rain into blinding glitters; the greens outside the garden shimmered like polished jade. Quale read her too well, curse the man, her gloom dissipated with the storm. Her ambivalence re-mained. Action was on hold for the moment, once it began it'd go with a rush. Out of her control. Before, she'd been in charge, now he'd be. Quale.

Enigmatic man. She smiled, a wry tight thinning of her lips, as she remembered Lyggad stroking his pile of faxsheets, wrinkled atomy, big-eyed elf. The first part of his life Quale was a violent brute with a strong skilled body and enough intelligence, or maybe it was cunning laced with Luck, to acquire a ship and hold together a motley crew of scavs, a sleazy, crude scav-enger whose idea of subtle attack was rip and run, then he'd tangled with the Hunter Aleytys and sud-denly he was something more. A clever man, quiet, calm, cutting ties to his former ... well, you couldn't call them friends, say associates, pals, buddies, what-ever. A man who kept clear of trouble. Lyggad said it was like Aleytys gave him a brain transplant. He gig-gled when he said it, but obviously more than half-believed it, Aleytys was part Vryhh and who knew what those types could do when they put their minds to it? He said some of Quale's ex-buddies got nosy and demanded to know what happened, implying in forceful though limited language (that was Lyggad being prissy) that the woman had castrated him. They didn't ask twice. In that, Quale hadn't changed, he was fast and nasty when the occasion required. So Lyggad said.

Slancy Orza. Rummul empire trooper, Lyggad said, mostly shell and drives when Quale acquired it, a wreck flying on kicks and curses. The drives used to be huge clunkers that ate fuel like it was free. Quale yanked those and put in new drives; they were nothing standard according to the few folk who got a look at them and were willing to talk. Huge, sleek, powerful Slancy Orza (Lyggad's voice went wistful, his tongue caressed the words), she can outrace a Sutt Aviso, sit down on a 3g world without bursting a seam and lift cargo nearly equal to her own weight.

She heard a quiet rumble, went down the stairs to stand, on the grass looking up at a small lander as it dropped toward the ground. The pad, she thought, Worm must be gone by now. She drew her hand down over her face, sighed, started for the house.

IV

1. *Three years std. earlier.*

Aslan aici Adlaar daughter to Adelaar aici Arash riding to an unknown destination In the hold of a Salado transport.

Aslan muttered and blinked as she came out of a dragged sleep. She lifted her head, let it fall back as pain lanced from ear to ear. "Stinking ... what now?"

Dim blue light. A cylinder. She was on a cot inside a tincan, cots spreading out on either side, above and below. She was catheterized but was not uncomf-ort-able with it, the appliance was more resilient than most; there were restraints on her wrists and ankles, but they had sufficient play to let her sit up,

even hang her legs over the cot's edge. She was surprised that she wasn't under full automatic care, her body processes reduced to a low hum. This waking restraint was waste-ful and from what she knew of contract labor trans-ports, unusual. She tried again and this time made it up. When her head stopped pounding, she looked around.

The other contractees ... no, she thought, don't funk the name ... slaves, some of the slaves were stretched out sleeping, some were sitting up, staring morosely into the blue gloom, others were talking together, still others had books and were reading or earphones, listening to flake players. She hadn't seen any of them before, Bolodo had kept her in solitary for months, probably so she'd have no chance to pass on anything about the Oligarchy and what they were doing to the Unntoualar; she had two coveralls, one clean each day, whatever flakes or books she asked for, but nothing from her own gear. She'd asked for that, but no one bothered to listen to her and she decided they'd ashed her things, just another paranoid precaution. Hmm. My own personal paranoid was too too right, mama'll beat me over the head with that for the next hundred years. She clicked her tongue, smiled as she remembered her mother's habitual t'k t'k that used to irritate her so much when she was a teener.

She went back to inspecting her companions. They were past adolescence, none of them old (making al-lowances for ananiles and mutational differences). All of them seemed to be sprouts on the cousin stem and there was a more intangible likeness—they were all professionals or artisans (no slogworkers in the mix) wearing the kind of gear experienced travelers chose, plenty of zippered pockets and easy to take care of. She looked down. She was back in her own tans, boots and all, the Ridaar unit in its belt case. Evidently they hadn't ashed everything. Refusing to think about that, she slid off the cot, stretched, the tethers stretching with her, the catheter giving her no trouble.

Her equipment cases were strapped beneath the cot where she could get at them if she wanted to.

She edged around and stared at them, despair cold inside her. They are by god sure I'm not going to get back, unless.... She uncased the Ridaar, ran through the overt index, then called up the last of the hidden files.

Report: deepfile Ridaar: re: Unntoualar

Code: icy eagle's child damn you Tamarralda I am not 324sub e minus one one half.

... I'm sure of it now, subject Zed has opened up enough to feed me some songs. It's the usual thing, they've made an accommodation with the new powercenters and they're not about to endan-ger their survival to help a transient female of more or less the same species as the invaders who took their world from them. The Unntoualar I'm living with are confused, on the one hand I seem to be here with the blessing of the invaders, on the other they've been quick to see the not-so-hidden hostil-ity to me. I've been careful to limit my inquiries to their songs and the story tapestries connected with these, with those dozens of thready fingers it's no wonder they're marvelous weavers. No color vision, so line and texture dominate; almost but not quite writing; from what I've seen so far (which I admit is severely limited) they never did develop a written language, which was another clue since most races with a high psi quotient don't, concepts are too complex for the forced simplification of the written word. Why am I deepfiling this? Their psi-capacity is the hot spot; whenever I get anywhere near that, Zed, Wye, even crazy Tau start sweating blood. Mike and Sigurd have done wonders with the language, it's a stinker, Tam, you'd guess it would be since a good half the nuance comes from esp fringes. Duncan lived up to his reputation by pro-ducing a crystal set, so the youngsters could record a good portion of those fringes and give us access the Unntoualar and the Styernnese don't suspect. I hope.

They're projective telepaths, that's clear from the songs, one of the few such capable of transferring images into the minds of species alien to them. Physically nonaggressive but not passive. Their ag-gressions came out in psychic attacks; before, the colonists came, they were the dominant species on Styemna, having more or less wiped out all compe-tition. Zed pulled a sneak on the censor, included a song in the first batch he let me flake about the arrival of the colonists and the short depressing settlement war; I haven't any idea why he did it, there's no evidence he can read me,

maybe a gesture of rebellion, one he understands is probably futile. The Unntoualar tried their standard attack on the invaders, but the full force and flavor of it was blunted by the stolidity of those alien minds. Their single weapon was not only useless but proved to be disastrous for them; their most vicious attacks were perceived as surrealistic and erotic dreams. The last part of the song is one long wail against Fate as the Unntoualar realize this and begin dimly to see what it means for them.

Yesterday he brought in Rho and Nu, alpha males like him, they picked out a new tapestry and started singing, but the song had shit-all to do with the images. It was about what was happening to the Unntoualar now. Since the Final Dispossession, the Oligarchs have hoarded for their own use the most powerful of the PT's (their name in the song is a complex combination of dream dancer, custodian of race memory, spear of the Unn, verbal shorthand: Stahoho idam kaij), parceling out the lesser PT's for the entertainment of their favorites. All very secret, of course. The homeworld has rules for handling the natives and Styernna can't live without help yet; besides they know the ordure that will splatter over them if what they're doing gets out, plus the fact that half the scavs in the universe will come zooming over to harvest their share. Oh Tam, what they're doing, it's a lot worse than forcing a PT to do his thing. They're torturing the miserable creatures to get more piquant dreams out of them. Sickening.

I didn't want to hear that, Tam, makes me nervous. I don't know what the hell's going on, I thought I'd better get this deepfiled before Zed's plot (whatever it is) starts fruiting. Question: Is this a setup? Are the Oligarchs using Zed to snooker me into accusations I couldn't possibly substantiate? Is Zed doing this on his own? Is he working with or for other Unntoualar? What do I do? Well, I've got the kernel down, up to you to see there's heavy pressure put to investigate the Oligarchy and how it's using the Unntoualar.

Distorted, bleeding, the Unn staggered into the circle, shrieking with voice and mind, ululating interling and Unnspeech, flopping in front of Aslan, accusations foaming out of him, curses on the name of the Oligarch who owned him, tortured him, stole his dreams out of him.

Guards surrounding her taking her away, taking away the Unn, dead Unn, twisted tormented. Dead too late for her. At least she was alone, Duncan and the others were at the base camp two sectors away, oh god, she was alone, Mama was right, she shouldn't have come.

2

She stood looking at the palm-sized plate for a long sick moment, then she sighed and canceled the read. If they'd bothered to locate and erase those files, she'd have had a sliver of hope that she could get out of this. They hadn't. Even the overt record was untouched.

She crawled back on the cot and sat with her legs dangling, the fingers of her right hand moving around and around the old burn scar on her left wrist, a scar she'd gotten when she was nearly four and being punished by her foster mother for something or other, she couldn't remember what, but it was about two months before Adelaar came for her. When she noticed what she was doing, she stilled her fingers and smiled at the scar, a fierce feral grin. Bolodo doesn't know you, Mama, n000 indeed, you'll blow the bastards out of their skins before you're finished with them. Hmm. Better for my self-esteem if I don't sit around sucking my thumb waiting for you to show up. Problem is, what do I do and how do I do it?

She pulled her legs up onto the cot, pushed herself along it until she was, sitting with her back against the hold wall, then started thinking about contract labor. Like everyone else, she'd accepted its existence as something morally reprehensible but generally necessary. Blessed be the Contractor for he takes away the ugliness of life. Societies always have those they class as criminals, anything from mass murderers and big time thieves to heretics and skeptics who question the way things are. Your average citizen, he's more comfortable if he doesn't have to look at the poor, the handicapped, the mildly crazy and wildly crazy, the drunks and druggers, the different, the dregs. Why not keep your citizens happy,

reduce taxes, remove fo-cuses of disturbance—all that in one fine swoop? A way of using what would otherwise be a drag on the economy, a way of protecting the comfortable assump-tions of the majority from any sort of challenge. Be-sides, new colonies need labor they can eject when the job is done so the workers won't pollute the paradise, heavy worlds need miners whose health they don't have to worry about, everywhere an infinity of uses for workers who can't object to miserable conditions and miserly pay. And there you have it, contract la-bor. A marriage of greed with respectability. Blessed be the Contractor (but don't let him live in my neighborhood).

On her left a youngish man was stretched out, sleep-ing. Some time ago his hair had been sprayed into lavender spikes, there was a lavender butterfly tat-tooed on the bicep next to her; his hands were square and muscular with short, strong, callused fingers. There was a heavy silver ring on his little finger; she couldn't see much of it, but the design looked familiar. A friend of hers on University had hands like those and a habit of giving rings like that to his students. Sarmaylen. He was exploring an ancient and long neglected form of sculpture, working every kind of stone he could get into his studio, threatening the neighborhood with sili-cosis from the dust he was raising. She leaned over, tried to see past the collapsed spikes; as far as she could tell, she didn't know the boy (she smiled, getting old, woman, when you look at a man like that and see a boy), he was young enough to be only a year or two out of school and she wasn't much into Sarmaylen's life these days. Snuffling marble dust didn't appeal to her; besides, she wasn't really interested in the more exotic varieties of the arts, couldn't talk to him about them because he snorted with disgust at every word she said. That was one of the reasons Sarmaylen was only an occasional sleeping companion though she found the touch of his callused, work-roughened hands elec-trifying. She smiled at the memory of them, smoothed her fingers across and across the burn scar. His hands were eloquent, his tongue was not, at least in the public sense, a pleasant change from her other friends and lovers. She was fond of him; if she never saw him again, she'd hurt a lot, but she could no more live with him than she could with her mother. Their casual off again on again relationship seemed to suit him as well as it did her, though she sometimes wondered what he was getting out of it besides the sex, which was some-thing he'd have plenty of without her. She frowned at the boy. A student of Sarmaylen, a sculptor. How did he wind up here? Artists and artisans like him never signed with Contractors. Not voluntarily. Trashed like me, I suppose. Or was he just out and out snatched?

Her neighbor on the right was a small fair woman. Huge eyes in an oval angular face with prominent cheekbones. Energetically thin. Sitting, she seemed in flight like some birds Aslan had known. Her hands were narrow and bony, rather too large for her slight form though she managed them gracefully, her feet were narrow and bony, distorted by the stigmata of a professional dancer. She was turning a music box around and around in her fingers though no sounds issued from it, if she disliked the dull muttering silence in the hold (the tension in her body and the fine-drawn look of her face suggested that she did), the music of the box would remind her of the restraints that kept her tethered to the cot, so she left it silent. Her mouth twitched into a smile so brief it was like the flash of a strobe light. "Kante Xalloor," she said. Her voice was deep, husky, easy on the ears. "Dancer. Bolodo must have kept you stashed somewhere?"

"Aslan aici Adlaar. Xenoethnologist."

"Yipe. What's that when it's home?"

Aslan tapped the Ridaar unit. "Sitting around lis-tening to native remnants tell stories about how the world began."

"Weird." Xalloor looked past her at the sleeping youth. "You know him?"

"No. I don't know anyone here. Back there, I saw four walls and an exercise mat. Bolodo didn't want me talking about some things I got mixed up in."

"Snatched you?"

"Not exactly. Bought me out of a trashing; I sup-pose I should be grateful, the maggots that did it were going to top me. You?"

"I was on Estilhass, I'd finished a situ with the Patraosh and had an offer of another on Menfi Menfur. Maybe you know the feeling, mishmosh and jigjag, hard to sleep, no reason to stay awake, nothing to do but wait for the ship to take me off. There was this stringman I met in a bar one night, I woke up in restraints on a Bolodo scout, no stringman in sight, just a pilot who looked in on me to see I

was still alive, then ignored me. He wore Bolodo patches, made no mystery about who had me which was hellishly depressing if you thought about it and I didn't have much else to do the next bunch of weeks till we got to the substation." She shrugged with her whole body, a vivid electric summation of her feelings. "We'll see what we see when they drop us. Him you were watch-ing, he's called Jaunniko, he says he thumps rocks for a living." Her thin brows wriggled skeptically, then rose in wrinkled arcs as Aslan nodded agreement. "The big lump on the other side of him, the one with his nose in a book, that's Parnalee, he's always read-ing. He says he's out of Proggerd, that's in the Pit, the Omphalos Institute whatever that is, he got drunk the first night in the pens, he had a bottle of tiggah in his cases; he says he's the best designer in fifty light years any direction, didn't say what he designs. The three women next him, they're a group, the Omperiannas, you heard of them? Ah well, it's a big universe. They were my music the time I was touring the Dangle Stars. The little bald man who's doing all the scrib-bling, the one who looks like he's made of tarnished brass, he's Churri the Bard." She arched her mobile brows and converted her limber body into a question mark as Aslan's eyes snapped wide. Aslan twisted around, leaned forward and stared at her father. Curiosity seethed in her and a bitter anger against him for abandoning her, though she knew it was idiotic to think like that, he didn't know she existed; Adelaar had been careful to tell her that, her mother had a sentimental attachment to him which was both amus-ing and peculiar in a woman so icily unsentimental in other ways. That the man who'd fathered her could be sitting here so close to her, absorbed in his tablets, completely ignorant of their relationship, was absurd, it was the god she didn't believe in playing games with her life. She sighed, settled back, gave Xalloor an encouraging nod.

The little dancer grinned, shrugged, a ripple of her body that said, what the hell, it's your business. "I got Tom'perianne to set one of his poems to music, *Lightsailor*, you know that one?"

"I've read everything I could get hold of." It was the truth, it was a way of getting close to her father without intruding on his life, something she was afraid of doing, afraid of what she'd find, afraid she wouldn't like him, afraid she would, afraid he wouldn't like her, she suppressed a shiver as she contemplated weeks, maybe months in this sealed womb, having to look at him and wonder....

"It made a great dance. I got the Dangles Tour out of it. Why Bolodo snatched him, I can't imagine. I mean if he ever gets loose and raises a stink, they've got more trouble than a swarm of vores up their back-sides." She shivered. "Don't look good for us, eh?" She shivered again, exaggerating her fear, fighting it that way, a glint of laughter in her eyes as she watched herself perform, then she went back to naming the captives, those close enough to be visible in the perva-sive blue gloom.

3

*Bolodo Man live in love
gold fine gold
Bolodo Man live in love
pearl and emerald.*

Churri's rich resonant baritone filled the hold; around, beneath, above it, the Omperiannas improvised a driv-ing support (Tom'perianne, lectric harp, Nym'perianne, tronc fiddle, Lam'perianne, the flute).

*Tribulation, sufferation
Boring blaggard Bolodo Man
Sing I sing thee sing we
Bloody bane for Bolodo Man
Get cold get old, senility
Cankers chankers dropsy pox
Virus venin worm and tox
Bolodo Man live in love
gold fine gold*

*Bolodo Man live in love
pearl and emerald.*

Kante Xalloor stretched her restraints to the ut-most, standing on her cot, dancing with the twanging ties, her body singing a wordless answer to the chanted curse.

*Malediction, imprecation,
Jerk his melts, the B'lodo Man,
Mockery, indignity, calumny and ban
Rash and rumor, rancid liver,
Bob Bob B'lodo Man
Rot and rancor, snarl and spoil
Ulcer, abcess, fester, boil,
Epilepsy, apoplexy,
Indigestion, inflammation,
Fecculence and fulmination
Dilapidation, moth and rust
Treachery, atrocity, malignity and lust
Bolodo Man live in love
 gold fine gold
Bolodo Man live in love
 pearl and emerald.*

Jaunniko snapped thumb and forefinger, diving head-long into the music; when Churn paused and looked at him, he began his contribution:

*Wa ha wa hunh
Sibasiba Bird
Come out
Come from the river come
Wa ha
The bird come from the river
Wa hunh
Sibasiba
Eat gold
Eat gold
Eat gold
Eat fat greedy soul.
The bird come from the river
Eat those pearl those emerald
Eat you bare, Bolodo Man
Bare ass, Bolodo Man.*

Churri laughed, his booming laughter filling the hold, filling that echoing impossible space.

*Execration, vituperation
Call your curses, raise them high
Bolodo Man live in love
 gold fine gold
Bolodo Man live in love
 pearl and emerald*

*Fulmination, imprecation
Curse him up and
Curse him down
Curse him neck and
Curse him thigh
Curse him heel and
Curse him crown
Bolodo Man live in love
gold fine gold
Bolodo Man live in love
pearl and emerald.*

Parnalee stood on his cot, straining his restraints, hunched over, slapping his shovel hands against his massive thighs, his burring basso waking echoes until his words got lost in them.

*Thump them, dump them
Down among the dead men
Ekkeri akkari oocar ran
Down among the dead men
Bolo Bolo B'lodo Man
Down among the dead men
Blood and bone, heart and stone
Down among the dead men
Fillary fallary hickery pen
Down among the dead men
Blackery luggary lammarie
Eat the brain, the bod dy
Gut and liver, black kid ney
Rowan rumen mystery
Down among the dead men*

The Curse Song went on and on, the transportees taking turns at soloing, their curses growing more ex-travagant, more surreal as each dipped into his or her culture to surpass the contribution of the last. The rest belted out the refrain until the hold rocked with it. Round and round, Churri playing variations on his verses, the Omperiannas adding flourishes, round and round until, finally, the transportees collapsed in ex-haustion and laughter and fell into extravagant specu-lation about where Bolodo was going to dump them.

4

“Yo, I remember you. May’s Ass.”

“Aslan.”

Abruptly realizing what he’d said, Jaunniko went bright red, so red his ears and the tip of his long nose were nearly purple. “Ah,” he said. “Thing is,” he said, “May sort of went round saying you had the neatest ah um derriere he uh.... He turned even redder. “The time we met,” he went on hastily, “it was at a party, you probably don’t remember me, you brought your mother along and that wasn’t being too successful, I talked to her a while, she was bored out of her skull, one icy lady....” He sneaked a look at her. Her expression must have been rather daunting, because he stopped talking altogether.

After she calmed down, she took pity on him and changed the subject. “How’d Bolodo get you?”

He stretched out on his cot, crossed his ankles, laced his fingers over his flat stomach. “I’d just got my papers. Junior Master. May found me a commission, he’s good about that, you know, Jeengid in the Blade, the Keex of Jelkim. I was one of about fifty she hired, she liked my part of the piece well enough

to give me a little bonus, I was feeling whoooo no pain when this stringman came on to me. Woke up in a Bolodo scout tied down and sick as a ... well, sick.”

“Any idea where we’re going?”

“None. Except we aren’t coming back from it.”

“So Xalloor thinks. I expect you’re right.

V

1. Still two+ years till Aslan’s Mama meets Quale/ four months after she woke in the belly of the transport/the voyage is finished.

Lake Golga/Gilisim Gililin/Imperator’s Palace/ afternoon.

The Bolodo transport decanted Aslan and the others on Tairanna four months after it collected them at the Weersyll substation. Smallish dark men with cold eyes supervised their transfer. Others of the same type loaded their gear on carts pulled by stocky stolid beasts with horns like half smiles curving up and away from round twitchy ears.

Aslan stepped onto the ground, braced herself to endure the extra weight and found a moment of quiet while their new guards prodded them into line. They’d been stuffed with the local language and a sketchy outline of local customs so they had no trouble understanding the terse commands. Despite the circumstances she was momentarily happy. There was an infinity of possibility stretching out before her, new worlds al-ways did that to her. She stood docilely where the guards put her, sniffing at the wind that whipped around the base of the transport, sampling the smells it brought to her. Fish and rotting flesh, dung and mud and the sharp green bite of trampled grass, the dank musky odor of the beasts, the subtler odors of cart woods and working metal, over all this the faint burnt-cabbage stink of the men. That wind wailed and whined; the carts rattled; her fellow slaves snapped irritably when impatient guards shoved at them, barking guttural monosyllabic orders; behind her the drones servicing the ship clanked and hissed; overhead, racy white birds circled in fluttering flocks, their eerie cries a most proper accompaniment to the debarking of slaves into the land of their servitude. The extravagance of word and image made her laugh. Xalloor looked a question, flinched from a guard’s goosing prod (an elastic grayish cane a meter long) and in her indignation forgot what she was going to ask. Aslan sighed and started walking as the guards marched them toward the towered city a kilometer or so away. Nothing to laugh about. She had no control over her life; whatever happened to her depended on persons and events she had no way of manipulating, not now, not until she had sufficient grasp of local verities to do some planning. Her first flush of interest and excitement quickly wore off; she was a slave here, not a scholar. She rubbed at her lower back. Though the gravity of this world was uncomfortable rather than, unbearable, she was al-ready feeling fatigue and fatigue made her depressed, diminished her ability to deal with her problems.

She risked a look over her shoulder, winced as a guard stung her with his prod. There were other ships down on the pad, three of them. Cargo transports. Insystem ships. Not good. Apparently the only way home was through Bolodo. She clung to a faint hope that her mother would be able to find her because there wasn’t much else to keep her from the black despair that sometimes overcame her; she couldn’t afford that now, it sapped her will worse than any gravity-induced fatigue. Once the Bolodo transport left ... she scowled at the rutted track ... if she could organize some sort of group ... she was enough of a pilot to get them back to busier starlanes ... we can’t be the only shipment of slaves to this place, the guards are too casual, we’re nothing special ... why not take the ship, security was lax, it was obvious the Bolodo crew weren’t worrying about their cargo turn-ing on them ... surprise them ... if I can get the right people ... weapons ... we’ll need weapons of some kind. She strained to get a look at the guard without letting him see what she was doing ... the prods ... knife in an external bootsheath ... some sort of pistol in a leather holster clipped to his belt ... what kind? Depends on the technology here; I doubt if Bolodo is supplying weapons ... self-interest would say no ... I don’t know.... What is the level of technology here? Hard to estimate. Nothing from Bolodo on that and what she saw around her was ambiguous. The carts had shock absorbers, bearings in the wheels and pneumatic tires, but they were

pulled by beasts and the road itself was little more than ruts and mud, no sophisticated land traffic here despite the landing field and the size of the city ahead of them.

They were led round the edge of the city, past walls about twice manhigh, pierced at intervals by pointed archways where Aslan could look down narrow crooked lanes meant for walkers not wheels, lanes paved in carved and painted stones, the simple repeating design echoing the pattern of bright, glazed tessera set into the cream-colored bricks of the walls. Her steps slowed as she tried to see more, fascinated and frustrated by the tantalizing glimpses she got into the life of this world; one of the guards laid his prod across her shoulders, reminding her once again that she wasn't here to study—though why she was here....

The guards took them across a narrow section of wasteland where they walked a beaten earth path between shivering silver-green walls of waist high grass, grass that buzzed with hidden insects and rustled gently in a soft erratic wind. Xalloor grimaced and scratched at her thin arms, rubbed at eyes beginning to water and redden; she sniffed and spat, glared at a guard who whapped her with his prod because her spittle had just missed the toe of his boot.

Ahead of them was a massive wall more than thirty meters high, a wall that rambled over the grassy hum-mocks and dipped into the water that spread out to the horizon on three sides. Aslan decided it was a lake because the smell told her the water was fresh, not salt. The lead guard thumped with his prod on an ogeed gate; it swung open in heavy, well-oiled silence.

The line of slaves marched through arcades and colonnades and formal gardens manicured to an order and an artificiality that seemed to deny the ordinary processes of change and decay. Jaunniko was just ahead of Aslan; she could hear him muttering under his breath as he looked around, his shoulders were pulled in and his fingers were twitching. She thought she knew what he was feeling because this dead place grated on her too. Figures appeared in the prome-nades, posed in the arches, showing a flicker of inter-est in the newcomers that faded almost as it was born. They were uniformly taller and fairer than the guards, with a high degree of physical beauty; male or female, it made no difference, in their own way they were as unalive as the garden, mobile ornaments as clipped and trained as the hedges were. Never, she told her-self, I'll die first, make them kill me outright before they drain the soul out of me. She shivered and knew the words were whistling in the wind, if Luck wasn't with her ... a few steps on, she smiled, amused at her vanity. She wasn't young enough or pretty enough to qualify as, an ornament, whoever bought her wasn't apt to want her body. There was a hint of comfort in the thought, her usefulness and therefore her value wouldn't depend on how soon her owner tired of her. She made a face at the taste of that word, owner.

A tower grew out of springing arches like a tree rising from its roots. The guards herded them through one of the arches and stopped them in a paved court-yard, dusty and barren, a pen for two-legged beasts. Xalloor edged closer to her. "minds me of a casting call."

"I don't think I like the roles we're up for."

"Or the audience." Xalloor flashed a defiant grin at one of the guards who slapped his prod against his leg but showed no sign of coming to shut them up. She turned her shoulder to him, shivered and rubbed at arms roughened with horripilation. "Fools. They should've told us we were going to freeze our assets."

Aslan looked up at the tower with its ranks of narrow windows glittering in the light of the lowering sun. "At least they've got glass in them. I wonder if we're going in there? Hmm. Far as I'M concerned, they can take their time. No joy for any of us in that place."

"I want to know now." The dancer moved rest-lessly, fighting against gravity, working the muscles of her shoulders, arching her feet inside her boots, tight-ening and loosening her leg muscles. "You've led a sheltered life. Working the tran-circuit isn't all that different from this. Once I know the terms, I can root round and finagle a way to live with them."

"You dance, the Omperiannas are musicians, Parna-lee designs large-scale events, Yad Matra's a machin-ist, Churri's a poet, Appel, Jaunniko, Naaien, go down the list, you're all techs or artists or both, but me? There's nothing I can do that has any meaning outside of University or a place like that, nothing I like to think about. What can they want with a xenoethno-logist? It's ridiculous."

“Mebbe so.” Xalloor laced her hands behind her head, bent cautiously backward, straightened with an effort visible in the tendons of her neck. “I loathe these heavy worlds, move wrong and you tear up your legs.”

There was a loud clapping sound of wood on wood. They turned. A man had come through a door in the side of the tower; he stood at the top of the steps that led up to it, a clipboard in one hand, its bottom braced on the ledge of a hard round belly. “I am the Impera-tor’s Madoor,” he said. “When I call your name, come here, stand at the base of the stairs. You will be taken to your posts. There will be no argument, no protests, no threats, no struggling. Awake or drugged, you will go. We have no preference as to the manner of your going, but consider well, how you begin is how you will go on. You have no voice in your destination or what happens to you there. I want that very clear. You are not beasts, you are less than beasts. You are worth only what services or instruments you can pro-vide. If you choose not to provide them, you will be .beaten or otherwise persuaded to change your mind. If you still refuse, we will get what value out of you that we can. You will serve as bait for our fishermen or food for our hunting cats. Do not think to escape and hide yourself among Huvved or Hordar; you can-not, you do not look like us, you do not sound like us no matter how well you have got our language, you do not know custom or rite, you have no family here. No one will help you. Cooperate or suffer the conse-quences.” He looked down at the clipboard. “Kante Xalloor. Tom’perianne. Nym’perianne. Lam’perianne. Jaunniko.” He named five others, all performers of one sort or another, then waited while two guards and an escort of exquisitely robed and tonsured males sorted them into a proper line and took them off. They went without creating fuss, they went, with prowling steps and narrowed eyes, plotting as they moved, too cool, too controlled, too experienced in the exigencies of surviving to waste their energies in a futile rebellion. Aslan watched them go and saw her vague notion of assembling a group to take one of Bolodo’s transports go with them, the vision fading like a memory of a dream. As she passed through the arch, Xalloor risked a wave and a grin and got away with both. Aslan waved back, then waited her turn, feeling bereft and lonelier than she had in years.

“Churri dilan. Aslan aici Adlaar. Parnalee Pagang Tanmairo Proggerd.”

Aslan moved as slowly as she dared toward the steps. During the trip here she’d done her best to avoid attracting Churri’s notice, not too difficult be-cause he was tied to his bunk and except for the times when he added verses to the Curse Song and belted them out, for the edification of his fellow captives, he was either asleep or scribbling in his notebooks. She was afraid of getting closer to him, she didn’t want to be linked with him, she didn’t want him playing are-you aren’t-you games with her. She saw his head jerk when he heard her full name, the matronymic that linked her with Adelaar, and made sure the Parnalee stood between him and her, but she couldn’t miss the nervous dart of his yellow eyes as he leaned forward and looked around the Proggerdi’s bulky body.

No robed and perfumed types came for them. A guard prodded Aslan toward the far side of the court, herded the three of them through a bewildering cas-cade of arches and into a holding cell of sorts. The guard looked around the room; his eyes passed over them as if they were less important than the dust on the floor. He grunted and left, barring the door be-hind him.

Once the light from the doorway was cut off, several strips pasted on the backwall began to glow, producing a bluish twilight that hid more than it revealed. Parnalee sniffed. “Smells like dogshit in here.” He strolled to the door, leaned on it. It creaked and shifted a milli-meter or so, balked. “Thought so.” He rested his massive shoulders against the planks, folded his arms across his chest, yawned and let his eyes droop shut.

“Aici Adlaar?” Churri’s voice.

Aslan twitched. The voice was a large part of the Bard’s reputation, a mellow flexible baritone capable of turning a nuance on the flick of a vowel. On the trip here she’d listened with pleasure when he talked to his neighbors, when he chanted his verses to the hold. Now that voice was turned on her. It was only a part of her name that he said, but folded into those sylla-bles were question, speculation, a touch of fear, a touch of wonder, a demand for an answer and other less identifiable implications. She drew her tongue across her lips. “So?”

“Soncheren?”

"I was born there."

"I knew a girl on Soncheren, long time ago, one Adelaar."

"I know."

"How?"

Aslan hesitated, decided there was no point in hedg-ing. "She's my mother."

"So Ogodon got her married off. That hamfisted cousin of hers, I suppose, he was hot after her."

More nuance—casual overlay, eagerness beneath, sharp tang of anxiety, all of which turned into laughter.

She ignored that. "Married? A spoiled virgin? Don't be stupid. Not on Soncheren. He sold her to a Contractor after I was weaned, sold me into the baby market."

"You're mine?"

"So she says."

"I didn't know."

"She told me that."

"Why didn't she send me word?"

"Not much point, considering how fast you cut out before."

"I went back."

"How nice of you." She heard the acid in her voice, she felt ugly, she knew she was making him despise her, but she couldn't help it; years of anger and pain were erupting from the darkness where she'd shoved them.

"I did all I could to find out what happened to her without getting my head taken, I assume you know the habits of your male relatives."

"Of course you did." Cool, steady and very bitter. "You've got an adder's tongue, you know that?" She shook her head though she knew he couldn't see it. Anything she said would make things worse. "My name gets around. She could have found me if she wanted to."

"Yes."

"Ah."

She could feel him staring at her; his short stocky body vibrated with ... what? ... something ... that made demands on her she didn't want to answer. After a moment of thick silence, with a whine in her voice that appalled her when she heard it, she said, "Adelaar made a good life for us, she didn't need anyone, she didn't want anyone sticking his nose in."

He stirred, but before he could speak, the door rattled, Parnalee moved away to let it open (Aslan jumped, cursed under her breath, she'd forgotten he was in here). The guard whapped his prod against the door. "Out."

Parnalee ambled out, not about to hurry himself at the order of some snirp who didn't reach past his ribs. Aslan followed him, struggling to regain control over her emotions, wanting a mirror to see what was written on her face. She heard Churri behind her though he was softer footed than a thief. Perhaps heard wasn't the right word, felt was more apt. She was intensely aware of him; part of it was a sexual awareness that she half-feared, half-understood; she'd never known him in the role of father, she had to keep reminding herself who he was (for the first time she understood why her mother kept such fond memories of him). Part of her reaction was a mix of needs that were more intense than sex. She *needed* a father. She didn't want to. She wasn't a child, she hadn't missed him when she was, or so she told herself, refusing to acknowledge the old angers that drove her into sniping at him a few minutes ago. Now, with him there, so close, too close, she ached for what she hadn't known; it seemed some-how a betrayal of her mother, of herself, but she couldn't deny the feeling.

The guard took them high into the tower, left them in a six-sided room with wall to ceiling windows in four of the sides, windows that looked out across the city and the lake. Churri went at once to one of the windows and stood staring across the lake toward moun-tains on the far side, mountains that were little more than a ripple of blue in the paler blue of the sky, their peaks touched with pink from the sunset he couldn't see. Parnalee walked to the middle of the room, looked casually about, eyes half-shut, his face

sleepily bovine, then he went to inspect the two walls that had no windows, only tightly pleated drapes woven from a fiber like raw silk and dyed a matte black, drapes meant to be drawn across the windows when the sun was coming up and its light struck directly into the room. He ran his hands across wood panels behind them, thick short fingers that seemed clumsy but were not. Rather like Sarmaylen's hands, Aslan thought, and shivered with the memory; when she realized what she was doing, she swore under her breath and crossed her arms over her breasts as if she were trying to shut herself away from him and everything else. A low, backless bench angled out from the wall near the door; Aslan dropped onto its black leather cushions. A moment later Parnalee joined her.

"Anything interesting?" She crossed her legs, turned a little away from him.

"Built into the walls if there is." He inspected her, chuckled.

She looked round. "What ..."

"Nothing."

Aslan scowled at her feet, angry at him and herself. He was too perceptive and what he saw mattered too little to him. The same thing happened when she visited her mother, Adelaar ended up hitting her in every one of her vulnerable spots.

The door they'd come through opened again and two men walked into the room.

Aslan got to her feet. Before the door closed behind the men, she saw guards lounging in the triangular antechamber beyond.

Churri came away from the window and stood beside her; he was vibrating with anger, but managing to control it. His hand closed over her shoulder, tightened hard.

Parnalee sat where he was.

One of the newcomers moved to the last window and settled his shoulders against the glass, folded his arms across his chest. He was a tall man, as handsome as an addiction to biosculpture could make him; he had skin like thick ivory, smooth and unblemished; his hair was a burnished silver-gilt helmet brushing his broad shoulders. He wore trousers and tunic of Djumahat spider silk, immaculate pewter gray with crisp white accents. Bolodo rep, Aslan thought, and no junior on the make, not him. Slaver, you pretty shitface. She blew him a mental raspberry and turned to the other.

He strolled to a large armchair beside that window, settled himself, waved a long-fingered hand at three smaller chairs arranged in a shallow arc facing him. "Come," he said, "sit." In tone it was an invitation, not an order, but ignoring it would be stupid.

When they were seated, he said, "I am Fangulse Tra Yarta, the Divine Imperator Pettan Tra Pran's chief security officer, in effect your slavemaster, subject, of course, to the will of the Divine. With that proviso always in mind, I tell you this: contract law doesn't rule here, I do. How you live depends on me. Whether you live rests on my good will." He smiled at them, tapped his fingertips on the chair's arms. He was a broad man, not fat, only big; he had a lined, square, intelligent face, a long square torso, heavy arms and legs, large hands with tapering fingers, rather beautiful hands; he posed them in ways that showed off their elegance. "You are, of course, indulging in the fantasy of escaping and capturing a Bolodo transport. Forget it. You won't get near that field and even if you do, the Bolodo guards have had much experience in puncturing such fantasies. The dreamers that survive their attentions spend a few months working in the mines and emerge quite anxious to cooperate."

Parnalee shifted his feet, gazed dully at Tra Yarta. "Now that we've had the obligatory warning, what do you want?"

Tra Yarta reached inside his overrobe, pulled out a sheaf of folded fax sheets. "You are Parnalee Pagang Tanmairo Proggerd."

Parnalee's eyelids drooped. "Amazing."

Tra Yarta ignored the sarcasm. "You design spectacles and propaganda campaigns." He riffled through the papers, stopping to scan several before he set the sheaf aside and posed his hands in a narrow steeple. "You will have noticed that two peoples share this world. Hmm. Share is not the precise word, of course; however it is close enough for the occasion. The Hordar make up most of the population, the Huvved rule them. We can discuss the history and mechanics of that later, it is sufficient, I think, for the moment to say that the civility between us, a civility that had lasted for nearly three centuries

and was profitable for both sides, this civility is falling apart. You will be required to provide spectacles and other campaigns to reverse this rot. I want celebrations of past glories, I want idealized versions of life on Tairanna, I want heroes to make the blood thrill, I want good feeling to replace the current rancor. I want the Hordar made happy with who and what they are, I want them made comfortable with the way the world is run, I want Huvved to be seen as elder brothers, wise and caring elder brothers. You understand. I do not wish to teach you your business, merely to indicate my desires as to the results.” Tra Yarta did not wait for an answer, but turned to Churri. “You, Churn dilan, will use your talents to underscore the impact of Tanmairo’s spectacles; the Hordar are a people drunk on words and a poet is more powerful than a hundred guns. According to my information you are adept at using whatever language is appropriate to your audience and part of your gear is a learning device that is supposed to be rather remarkable in its sensitivity to the nuances of those languages. I understand you will need time and access to information sources; you will have whatever you need, subject to security requirements.” Again he left no time for response, but turned to Aslan. “Aslan aid Adlaar, skilled though they are, these men are strangers to this culture. You are a student of cultures. I expect you to study the Hordar and advise Parnalee Tanmairo Proggerd and Chuni dilan how to accomplish what I require of them. I asked Bolodo to provide someone like you; to know a society as you can know it is to understand how to manipulate it. If I could do this, I would. I can’t. I have some practical experience, but it’s limited to pulling the strings on one or two people, at most a family. I don’t know how to drive masses without having to slaughter half of them. People never jump the way you expect when you squeeze them.”

Aslan leaned forward, held out a hand, palm facing him. “Please.”

“Yes?”

She dropped her arm onto the chair’s arm, straight-ened up. “I don’t think you understand precisely what it is I do. I record and to some extent translate the histories, the various artistic expressions of dying pre-or non-literate cultures. This has nothing at all to do with manipulation of those cultures. I wouldn’t know how to start. You want a number cruncher, a sociometrician who can put his thumb on the swivel points.”

Tra Yarta smiled at her, amusement softening the harsh yellow of his eyes. “I’m sure you realize I had to take what I could get. Scholars don’t ordinarily come onto the contract market lists and University is regret-tably, from my viewpoint, alert as to what happens to its people. However ...” He shuffled through the fax sheets. “... I am not all that displeased with what Bolodo has provided.” He found the ones he wanted, glanced over them. “According to your University records, aici Adlaar, you have had considerable training in that direction. Admittedly you have not used that training for the past several years, but I doubt that a scholar of your ability will have forgotten so much so soon.”

Aslan looked past him at the Bolodo Rep, saw him smile and pressed her lips together to contain her fury. Before she could say anything, Parnalee closed a hand over her arm, stared at her until she had to look at him.

He shook his head.

She pulled her arm away but kept her mouth closed.

He glanced at Churn who was simmering but silent, then laid his clumsy shovel hands on his massive thighs and gazed thoughtfully at Tra Yarta. After a moment’s silence, he said, “Why should we do this?”

“Why not? These aren’t your people. You have no responsibility for them.” Again he looked through the sheets, folded them into a sheaf and tapped the sheaf against his chin. “Considering some of your other clients ... hmm? This is a commission like any other.”

“Not quite.”

“True. You don’t have the luxury of refusing.”

“That isn’t what I meant and that’s not true either. There is no way you can force us to perform if we’re willing to back our refusal with our lives.”

“Are you?”

“I am if I’m driven to it. I can’t speak for them.” He held up a hand, pulling Tra Yarta’s attention back from Aslan and Churri. “That’s rather beside the point, isn’t it? What I intended you to understand is that you should give us inducements not threats. You’re asking us to dirty our self-images, to engage in

acts of be-trayal and cynical manipulation. You should at least make it profitable. For example, you could send us home after we've done the job."

Tra Yarta lowered the sheaf of fax sheets, looked at it with raised brows. "Cynical manipulation? Well, Tanmairo, you should know it when you see it. Hmm. Send the three of you home? I'm sure you understand that isn't possible. Even if I were willing to betray my kind, Bolodo would never agree. They have too much to lose. Short of that, what do you want?"

"If we have to live here, then let us live well. You say we are slaves, if so free us. Pay us. Provide us with a way of sustaining ourselves once the job is done." He lifted his hands, let them fall, turned his head with massive dignity to Omni then Aslan. "Either of you have anything to add?"

Nearly strangling on the word, Churri muttered,
"No."

Aslan gazed past Tra Yarta's head at the man sil-houetted against the darkening blue of the sky out-side. She looked away. "No."

"There you have it. You get what you pay for."

"Your companions show little enthusiasm for your bargain."

"Enthusiasm costs more than you can afford to pay, Tra Yarta. You're buying competence, not complicity."

"Competence. Hmm. Your request is a trifle vague."

"Necessarily."

"Hmm. In principle, I accept your terms; it is obvi-ous to a minimal intelligence ." He steepled his hands, raised heavy blond brows. "... that difficult and complex projects requiring creative solutions ...". He cleared his throat, a distant amusement gleamed in his dark blue eyes. "... cannot be solved by applying whips to reluctant backs." Eyelids drooping, he con-templated Parnalee. "It will be some time before your work-product reaches any sort of coherence. During that interval I can evaluate your efforts and you can acquire sufficient local knowledge to shape your pro-posal to your needs. At that time it's quite possible that we will be able to negotiate a mutually satisfac-tory arrangement." He got to his feet. "At the same time, be very sure you keep in mind your circum-stances. Be very sure the degree of nuisance you pro-duce does not exceed the value of your services. If I can't-use your proper skills, I'll find other employment for you." He ran his eyes over Parnalee's powerful body. "The mines can always use a strong back. I have had a small compound cleared out and made ready for the three of you. I expect you to start work immedi-ately. There is a com at each of your work stations, preset to the offices of certain of my aides who will be directing you in this enterprise. If you need anything, call on them." With a valedictory nod, Tra Yarta strode briskly from the room. The Bolodo Rep who hadn't said a word during the interview kept on saying nothing as he hurried after the Security Chief.

3

The compound was a walled-in oval of garden and walkways, fountains and arbors with a small one-story structure at one focus of the oval, a delicate airy house with pointed windows and walls of wood, not stone; from the security arrangements and the look of the place, it seemed reasonably clear that the Emperor had stashed his favorite courtesans here and spent more than a little time with them. There were four bedrooms with bathrooms attached, set like beads at the corners of an oblong brooch, the centerpiece a large well-lit common room. Tra Yarta had moved most of the furniture out of the common room and set up three work stations for them; these waited under dust sheets. A fire was crackling behind a pleated glass screen and comfortable leather-covered chairs were arranged in a shallow arc about the hearth. Behind these there was a dining table with a number of open backed chairs about it; a cold supper was set out on the table, several kinds of salad, fruit, shrimp and other seafood, bread and butter and a selection of jams and jellies, and finally, a hot fruit punch steaming in a large ceramic urn with mugs clustered about its base.

Aslan ran her hands through her hair, stretched, groaned. "Clean clothes. A bath. Food." She laughed and went into the bedroom assigned to her.

Parnalee patted the solid slab of muscle over his stomach. "I like a good meal." He chuckled, a basso rumble. "Yes, indeed. It's why I usually travel worldship, the E Corini by choice. They raise the most succulent crustaceans known to palate." He skewered a giant shrimp, inspected it with satisfaction and popped it in his mouth.

Churn shoved his chair back, its legs squealing pain-fully across the floor; he bounced to his feet, glared at Parnalee. With a scornful t'k of tongue against palate, he stumped to the urn, scraped out enough punch to fill his mug and crossed to the hearth. Though the alcoholic content of the punch was more imagination than reality, he'd eaten almost nothing and was awash with enough of it to exacerbate a mild misanthropy. He dropped into one of the easy chairs and sat glower-ing at the flames refracted through the folded panes of the firescreen.

Parnalee swallowed the last shrimp and got to his feet. He crossed to one of the many windows and pushed aside a translucent white curtain decorated extensively with delicate blackwork. It was a warm spring night with mist drifting in threads around the fountain and clouds blowing in from the west though they were not yet clotted enough to diminish the soft pervasive glow from the moons. "I need exercise," he said. "Take a walk with me, the two of you?"

Aslan joined him at the window. "It's getting damp out there, I've had one bath, I don't need another."

"You won't melt."

She leaned against him, patted a yawn. "Way I feel, I might."

"A little exercise will fix that."

"I can think of pleasanter ways to get it."

"Aslan, use your head, will you? Think!"

She giggled.

"T'sa!" He scooped her up, dumped her head down over his shoulder and carried her to the door. It was locked, but he closed his fingers about the latch han-dle and applied force. The latch creaked and gave. He shoved the door open and stalked outside with her.

At first Aslan was too startled to object, then too amused. She was giggling when he set her down and went back inside, still giggling (though mistwater drip-ping from the eaves rendered her considerably damper) when he came out with Churri tucked under one arm. Before the Bard woke up enough to react, he was on his feet beside Aslan, swaying and blinking, sputtering as a large drip landed in his left eye, building up to an explosion.

"We need to talk," Parnalee rumbled at them. "Can't inside."

Aslan nodded. The fizzy good feeling born out of the food and the bath and having space to move in so her elbows could come away from her sides drained from her. She scrubbed a hand across her face, pushed dampening hair out of her eyes. Churri got rid of his anger and insult, peeling them away as if he peeled off his face to show another face beneath. He didn't say anything, but Parnalee's words had gotten through to him.

Hands clasped behind him, Parnalee trudged off, big head swinging as he hunted out a place where he'd feel secure enough to talk. Churri plunged after him. Aslan scratched her nose, looked over her shoulder at the warm red glow shimmering through the curtains; she sighed, hunched her shoulders against the strength-ening wind and followed them.

Parnalee continued his prospecting until he came to one of the fountains. A slender column of water rose, broke, tumbled noisily from basin to basin scattered like bronze petals down a manufactured slope; he climbed halfway up the slope, knelt beside a rough wooden bench without a back and ran his hands over it. He stood, frowned at the bench, then dropped onto one end of it, the end nearest the stream. Churl clasped his hands behind his back and stood facing Parnalee, teetering atop a rock.

Aslan settled herself beside Parnalee, put her hand on his arm; it was rock hard. He looked as relaxed as ever, but she could feel a tension in him which sur-prised her; in the belly of the Bolodo transport he'd seemed such a casual, easy-going man. She took her hand away. "If you expect me to lay

down and let that deviate clean his feet on me....”

“I expect you to do what you’ve been trained to do. Use your reason. You’re supposed to be intelligent. What I was buying back there was time.”

Churri grunted, kicked at the rock with the heel of his sandal.

Aslan sniffed. “You really think Tra Yarta’s going to keep his side of the bargain?”

“Look at it this way. We produce, the trouble (what-ever it is) goes away, what happens to us?”

Aslan dug a hole in the dirt with her toes, watched it fill with water dripping over the edge of the nearest basin. “What I know from cultures like this says we’d be an embarrassment to him. So ...” She knifed her hand across her throat.

“And if we don’t produce?”

“All right, if you have to hear it, same thing, a lot sooner.”

“Aslan, how long were you at Weersyll?”

“Six months less three days.”

“Churri?”

The short bald man didn’t answer for a minute, he frowned past Parnalee, then he nodded. “Two months, something like that.” He stuck his thumbs behind his belt and teetered on the rock. “You were already there.”

“Right. They’re a methodical bunch, Bolodo, I’d say they go out twice a year. Which means it’ll be somewhere around six months standard before the next transport arrives. We need information, weap-ons, some kind of plan. Like I said, we need time.”

Churri looked up as a brief flurry of raindrops blew into his face. “I say we take advantage of this slop and go over the wall. There’re mountains on the far side of the lake, we can go to ground there, live off the land.”

Aslan snorted. “You think Huvved and Hordar both won’t turn on us? Except for Bolodo this is a closed world. You want to see some raging xenophobia ...” She frowned at her mud-splashed feet. “It’s a thought, though, if things get difficult here....”

Parnalee yawned. “With you and the Bard glower-ing like twin fumeroles, maybe Tra Yarta took my offer seriously. Let’s hope he did and turns his atten-tion elsewhere.” The rain was coming down harder. He brushed at his hair, soft brown hair that shed the water like seal fur. His hand covered his face for a moment, lingered a breath longer than the gesture required. Aslan wondered about that, remembering the tension in his arm. “The first part is up to you, Aslan, you have to be convincing. I can play with this and that, work up projections, but until I’ve got your data, I can’t get down to serious work, at least, I can make a good case for idleness. Find out ... mm ... we’ll need a pilot, someone who can handle the en-gines, someone who can figure out where the ... urn ... hell we are and how to get back to civilized parts.”

“If no one else turns up we can trust, I can get the ship back, close enough anyway to put out a mercycall.” Aslan scraped rain off her face. “Something I’d better say. Whatever Tra Yarta thinks, whatever the records say, I can’t do what he wants. I can, describe, analyze, compare societies, tease them to bits under the scope of technique, if you want it in the pretentious jargon the man seems to prefer. Manipulate them? Nonsense. I wouldn’t know the first thing about that.” She got up, went a short way up the slope, came back. “What happens when he finds out?”

Parnalee brushed at his hair again. When his hand dropped, he was smiling. “You weren’t listening. That’s my part of the job. You analyze, I put your data to work, Churri adds the frills. That’s what the man said. Not altogether a bad idea. Comes close to my usual practice. Maybe Bolodo told him, maybe he thought it up his little self.”

“He did say you were a propagandist.”

“Event designer. Sounds better.”

“All that talk about dirtying one’s self-esteem?”

“He wanted to hear that, so I gave it to him. Bar-gaining chip. Ah, all right, a bit more than that. I do not like being coerced.” The last phrase was spoken slowly with an angry emphasis on each word. “I choose where and when I’m going to work, not some tin god on a backwater world.”

Aslan folded her arms across her breasts, rubbed her fingers slowly up and down her biceps. "Um. Maybe I don't need to say it." She scowled at him. "Maybe I do. Don't underestimate the locals, Par. I've seen a lot of that places I was working. Travelers come through and just because the locals don't think the same way or know about the same gadgets, they think they're stupid. My mother talks like that, I think it's because she knows it irritates me. She and her friends have been around a lot, it gives them illusions of ..." she laughed, tasted ram on her lips, "you said it, tingodishness. According to them the locals haven't got the brains or the get-up to suck a tit. These Huvved, maybe the Hordar too, they've been isolated a long time, but they're not stupid and I doubt if they're unsophisticated in the art of the cabal. Tra Yarta wouldn't be sweating like he is if they were easy to handle. He thinks he's got us locked, that we can't make trouble for him whatever we get up to. I hope he's wrong. But we'd better be damn clever." She pushed at soggy hair, drew her hand rapidly back and forth across her nostrils. "And I'm catching pneumo-nia out here, can't we go in where it's warm?"

"Right." Parnalee stood. "I've said what I had to say. Aslan, I agree with you on most of that. We won't fool him if we fake it; we have to do it straight until we're ready to jump, whether we jump at the ship or into the mountains, otherwise we're in shit to our eyeballs. I'm going to get out of this one way or another. Don't either of you screw me up; I'll twist the neck of the one who tries it."

5

Aslan began working.

Reluctantly.

These weren't her people, she had no responsibility for what happened to them, but....

What Tra Yarta wanted was a profound distortion of her work and she was ill at ease whenever she thought of what Parnalee was going to do with the data she provided, but....

She had to do the analysis, she needed the informa-tion, she didn't trust either Parnalee or Churri, but there was no one else; she drove herself at her prepa-rations with disgust, distrust and a bellyload of fury.

She made abortive gestures at first, feeling about like a blind worm, starting lines of investigation, let-ting them trickle from her fingers; she wasn't accus-tomed to working without a staff to help interview the subjects, collect data samples, do a preliminary sort on them and much of the slog work thereafter. Not hav-ing those eager, ambitious students, she had to re-shape her habits and find a way to do that work herself.

After a week or so of aimless dipping into the Pal-ace Library, she called herself to order and spent several days working with (and cursing copiously) the computers Tra Yarta had provided, setting up proce-dures, protocols and questionnaires. Then she began interviewing the Hordar who worked as gardeners, servants, cook, cat-handlers, musicians, poets, enter-tainers of all kinds, and last of all the few Hordar who made it into the Guard. Every Hordar working inside the Wall. They talked with her because they were ordered to and were very cautious in their answers to her questions, but she expected that and had long experience in setting up a series of questions that would give her much more information than they knew they were providing.

All that took time, more time than usual, because she had no staff, because she had to do all the analysis herself without any of the software she needed on computers not designed for that sort of work, because she was deliberately doing about three times as much interviewing as she needed, because above all she wanted to be very careful about what she actually passed out of her hands. Tra Yarta grew restless, but could not fault her for not working; besides, as she'd guessed from the first, he was a thorough man himself and they were only a minor part of his plans for suppressing dissent and disturbance. She sank her ap-prehensions and anxieties in a half-willed amnesia and let the work absorb her; she enjoyed everything about her profession, even the duller part where she was going over and over material, arranging and re-arranging bits of information to discover patterns and unexpressed meanings.

Aslan yawned, recrossed her ankles. "Where's Churri?"

"Getting drunk somewhere, spinning stories, pick-ing up more recordings. What've you got?" Parnalee took the lid off the carafe he'd brought with him, chugged down half the ice water inside. It was an unusually hot day and the house wasn't equipped with any kind of air conditioning, not even a fan, so Aslan was spending the hottest part of the afternoon outside under shade trees near one of the dozen fountains, stretched out on a lounge chair she brought from a slatted toolshed tucked away behind some flowering shrubs.

"I've started getting the history sorted out. See what you can pick up on a couple of prophets; they seem to be important to the Hordar, so you might be able to use them. Pradix and Eftakes. Better be careful, though. I suppose you know how tricky that kind of thing can get for outsiders. Pradix. Hmm. Center to the local religion. He was born some two millennia ago, stan-dard years not local, on a world called Hordaradda which was on the edge of the Huvveddan Empire. By the time he died or was translated or whatever you want to call it, one half of Hordaradda was swearing by him, the other half at him and the Huvved were agin the whole thing. Ended up with the Pradite fac-tion buying a colony transport and lighting out for parts unknown. Shaking the dust off, usual reaction. Like a lot of fanatics, they didn't know what they were doing, but they were sure they were sharper than any mundane, so they got cheated on the ship, paid hard cash for junk. The transport went blind in the insplit. If you believe in that kind of thing, it was their holy Prophet's intercession, or maybe it was Luck, anyway, when they tinkered their way back to realspace, there it was, a nice yellow dwarf of a sun with a coolish but comfortable planet waiting for them. No intelligent life as far as I can tell from the look I got at contempo-rary records, but otherwise a flourishing biota land and sea. They named the sun Horgul and settled on the fourth planet out to breed and argue over the teachings of Pradix. I've printed. up a few of those, you might be able to do something with them. Eftakes was born here about five hundred years later, I'm not all that sure just what his differences are with Pradix, but the Hordar had a sharpish little war over them and the Eftakites moved down to the south continent. Guneywhiyk. Silly name, isn't it. North continent's no better. Kuzeywhiyk. Sounds like a sneeze. Got some of Eftakes' sayings listed too. Be careful how you use those up here. On Kuzeywhiyk." She giggled. "I don't know if Tra Yarta wants you doing anything down south; if so, you'd better have a look at Eftakes and his faction."

Parnalee rubbed the carafe back and forth across his brow, then gulped down a good part of the water left in it. "Never mind the sayings, any hero tales?"

"Yeh, but most of them are set on Hordaradda. I'll print you up some summaries, let me know which you want to look at closer. Um. Some narrative verse cycles from the War of the Prophets. Haven't had time to do more than look at the titles." She sipped at the fruitade, wiped her mouth. "I've come across mention of popular verse tales about the Conquest, the kind of thing that conquered peoples pass around, more or less mouth to mouth. Naturally the Huvved didn't record any of them, though I suppose they knew about them, the mention was in a trial transcript of a Hordar accused of theft and murder. Huvved definitions of both. I think it likely he was some sort of rebel. You might ask Chum to see if he can dig up some of them, they should be still floating around in manuscript and memory, that kind of underground snoot-cocking can hang on for centuries."

He smiled, a tight, sour twist of his lips. "I'll enjoy that." The smile, such as it was, vanished. "Insolent stupid arrogant shitheads, I could break them over my little finger. Gods, one more mincing cretin treating me like a dog...."

She filled a second glass with iced fruitade, got lazily to her feet and carried it to him. "It was your idea, Par." He reminded her of Sarmaylen when one of his pieces was rejected; the thought made her smile and feel more tender toward him than she was wont to do. "You thought up the party catering bit, you went to Tra Yana and got him to rent you out. Here, take this." While he drank from the tall glass, she smoothed her cold hand along his face and neck, then moved around behind him and began kneading at tight shoul-der muscles. "You're just not used to being a slave; that kind of stagnant society couldn't afford you, lucky you. Uh! I've been on one or two feudal backwaters. Uh! No slaves, but some of the

peasants might as well have been, bonded to the soil, sold with it. Uh! you're all knotted up. I've seen the way their so-called betters treat them. Uh! To these highborn Huvved, you're not as valuable as a dog, you can't be dropped into a pit and live out their fantasies of manhood for them with your blood and pain." She stopped talking, clicked her tongue. "Hmm, I wonder.... Any smell of pit-fights with men instead of dogs?" She stepped back from him. "That's a bit better. My hands are getting hot, might as well stop for now." She strolled back to the lounge chair, stretched out on it and took up her own glass, resting it on the firm flesh over her stomach; her shirt was open except for a single button holding it together across her breasts. "Well, have you?"

He lifted his head, looked at her with dislike that melted into a smile more professional than warm, though that might be her own attitudes getting in the way. "I've arranged several such entertainments."

She slid the sweating glass back and forth across her bare midriff. "Ah." She was silent for a breath or two, then she said, "Be careful, Par."

"Don't angle for a promotion up to dog?"

"You got it."

She heard the tinkle of ice cubes, then he grunted. When he spoke, he changed the subject (the change landed on her ear with a loud clunk that said he didn't want to talk about this any more). "How'd the Huvved get here? Is there anything in that for me?"

"Hmm. Depends on what you want. You might be able to touch in undertones of Hordar pride and anger and take the curse off them. As long as you don't get so explicit you rub up against Huvved paranoia." She glanced at Parnalee, saw his annoyance, trying to teach him elementary tricks of his own trade, hah! she swallowed a grin, but ... enough was enough, she'd got-ten a small jab in for that look he gave her, time to be serious. "Let's see. About three hundred years ago, again that's standard not local years, when the good folk in the Huvved Empire got tired of their bloody rulers, or maybe desperate enough not to care all that much what happened to them, they rose up on their hind legs and kicked out the current Emperor. Came within a hair of putting their hands on him too, close enough they scared the shit out of the creep. He ran for his life in his last Warmaster, wrapped in her cloud of stingers, made the insplit just ahead of a swarm of Harriers. When they didn't give up and dived after him, he ordered a random course punched in, ran along it full out until he lost them, then popped back to realspace so he could find out where he was. Poor old Pradites. Either Pradix's holiness had worn off or Luck was out to lunch because where do you think he was when he stuck his nose up? A spit and a half from Horgul. They come all this distance to get away from home fights and bloody Huvved, spend seven centuries getting comfortable with their new world, and here comes the Huvved Emperor and his hopeful court to sit on their necks again. Hmm. One of those coincidences nobody believes, but they happen. Um. Shall I go on?"

"This is printed out?"

"Minus a few editorial comments that might annoy the spy who reads my hard copy."

He squinted up at brilliant white sunlight glittering through interstices between the undulant leaves of the low broad tree spreading out above them, leaves like overlapping slices of translucent green jade. "I've got nothing better to do until it cools down. Go on."

"Thanks a lot." She sipped at the fruitade; it was still cool enough to be drinkable, though the ice had melted. She wiped away the sticky trickle spilling from the corner of her mouth and wished futilely for a little wind to stir the hot still air; with the outer curtain wall and the inner walls that shut in this much smaller space, any breeze around would give up and go home. "Right. Picture our Emperor and his bunch sitting up there in that monstrous Warmaster, drooling over what looks like a sweet setup for plunder. Picture their surprise when they tune in on the local comsets and hear a version of Hordar speech. It apparently hadn't changed all that much in the centuries since the Pradites left Hordaradda, the Hordar are a pretty conservative bunch. Far as I can gather, there was an odd mix of technology. A lot like they've got now, in fact. Minus some flourishes laid on by the slave techs the present Emperor has been importing. Functioning comsets, the landers from the colony transport, some stray ro-botics, some sophisticated filters, touches here and there of tech they'd brought with them and managed to hang onto. They did some mining in the asteroid belt, dumped their worst criminals on the next world out, that kind

of thing. Otherwise, they were pretty well early industrial with large feudal patches out on the grasslands, what they call the Duzzulkas. No ground traffic, but a busy sky. Airships. Hydrogen lift. All sizes, all over the place. Cheap and reliable. Don't have to build roads. By the by, I've convinced Tra Yarta that I should visit a Sea Farm soon, tell you about that later. Anyway, where was I?"

"All over the place."

"If I'm boring you...."

"Academic maundering, which I suppose you can't help, being an academician. Go on. I have to get this one way or another and it might as well be now."

"So kind. Remind me to poison your next drink. Hmm. Yes. The Huvved came roaring in over Tairanna and took her fast and bloody. Poor old Pradites and Eftakites hadn't a chance against a Warmaster, stories from that time have her melting down whole cities in a single hour." She sat up, wiped at her face. "Like I'm going to melt in a minute." She poured more fruitade into her glass, tasted it, grimaced. It was warmish, all the ice long gone. She dumped the pitcher out, filled it at the fountain and emptied it over her head, filled it . again, emptied it again and dripped back to the lounge chair. "From all I can find out, the Hordar were a peaceful lot then; they did more fighting with words than with fists, they'd rather go somewhere else when things got tense. Didn't mean they wouldn't fight, but they weren't much good at hopeless battles. Even then, though, you didn't want to push them too hard. Back them into a corner and you had trouble, serious trouble, capital T trouble. You get the Hordar Surge coming at you."

Parnalee broke open the fastenings on his tunic, wiped at his face and his neck with a damp handkerchief. "I presume this will eventually reach some endpoint."

Aslan ignored him. "What it is, it's a sort of mob action that turns a collection of individuals into a single being with a single mind and a single purpose which is basically to stomp a threat into mush." She lifted the damp ends of her shirt and flapped them idly, trying to stir a bit of breeze along her sweaty body. "To trigger a Surge ..." she broke off, yawned, "... you put a minimum of twelve Hordar in some sort of enclosed space and apply extreme stress involving the survival of a genetic group." She closed her eyes, after a minute cracked the eye on Parnalee's side. He was flushed with heat and visibly uncomfortable; she couldn't tell if he was listening. Oh well, what the hell, might as well finish her recitation. "A Surge grows in lumps of twelve, don't know why, but there it is." She yawned again. "Bridges from group to group until most of the population is involved. It doesn't quit until the danger is gone or every unit in the Surge is dead." She pushed sweat-soggy hair out of her eyes and thought about going inside for a bath, but it was hotter in there than it was here. Too bad the fountain was in full sunlight, be nice to sit in it a while and cool off, but she didn't want a case of sunstroke, she didn't much trust the doctors on this primitive world. Won-der if there are any umbrellas inside, I could tie an umbrella to one of those upper tiers and make my own shade. Hmm. Haven't got the energy to move. "After I came on the term in the early histories, I tried talking about it in my interviews. Every Hordar had a powerful nonverbal response to the word and put up barriers whenever I tried to move beyond abstractions to the actual mechanics of the thing and the emotional and physical responses." She sighed. "You getting any of this, Par?"

"I'm listening."

"Hmm. You think there's any chance, if it's this hot tomorrow, for us to go out on the lake, do some swimming?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Freshwater eel-analogs. Very hungry this time of year."

"Shit."

"Yeh."

"Wondered why I didn't see any boats out there."

"That's why."

"Swimming pools?"

"Huvved. No slaves or Hordar allowed."

"As my mother would say, sweet sweet."

"Go on with your lecture. What's the rest of it?"

"I forget."

"Don't be stupid."

"All right. You noticed that Hordar and Huvved are related closely enough to permit interbreeding?"

"I noticed."

"Probably no pureblood Huvved left; they didn't bring that many women with them when they skipped out. Let's see. Surge. Huvved/Hordar mixes don't seem to have the capacity for that melding, but they exhibit much the same reactions to the word. A lot of fear there. Pride. Rage. A whole witch's brew boiling away down deep. I suppose anything that intense is useful in your business."

He grunted, a noncommittal sound she took for assent.

"I came across the phenomenon when I was reading about the early years. Seems that the Emperor then was a bit gaga about Hordar, it was a band of Hordar rebels who came within a hair of removing his head. He and his happy band of sycophants had a fine old time running down and disposing of the locals. Got so bad the Hordar believed he was going to slaughter them all. There you have it, extreme stress involving the survival of a genetic group. The thing that tipped them over the edge was a sort of auto-da-fe he put together outside a Littoral city called Ayla gul Inci. The Incers were driven into a fenced enclosure and forced to watch their relatives burn. About ten min-utes into the barbeque they began melding into a Surge. About half of them were killed, but the Impe-rator barely got away with his skin intact. Not long after that his Security Chief took a look around at what was happening to his men and materiel and con-vinced the Emperor to abdicate in favor of his most competent nephew. That's what the histories say, you can draw your own conclusions. The Grand Sech worked out a schema that gave enough to everyone to keep them relatively contented and things settled down. Like I said, the Hordar those days weren't into mass suicide once the Surge was defused; they adapted and there was a fairly easy peace for the next two centu-ries. Then a free trader arrived; they don't have his name, but it seems he had connections with Bolodo Neyuregg. The Emperor before this one, he needed techs because his Warmaster was deteriorating and that threatened his power. He didn't want to hire anyone who'd give away Tairanna's location; he was charmed by the thought of, shall we say, hire-purchase of those techs. He didn't stop with them, slave holding seems to be addictive; hmm, either that or Bolodo reps are very persuasive, anyway, two transports a year for over fifty years, that adds up to a lot of slaves." She yawned. "That's about it, except the rea-son there's trouble now is simple enough when you consider the impact of cramming maybe a thousand years worth of technological development into fifty years and dumping this onto what was a stable, nearly unchanging society. Basic stupidity always makes trouble."

Parnalee passed his handkerchief over his face again, wiping away the file of sweat and the trickles that were dripping into his eyes. "Surge," he said, "you can't make a noble icon out of a mob. I need stories of individuals. Looks like you're telling me I'm not going to get them."

"Not from the Conquest," she said drowsily; she kept flapping her shirt ends, not putting much energy into this. "But you don't want those, do you? I mean I doubt that Tra Yarta would let you make Huvveds out as what? villains of the piece? no matter how much the Hordar might enjoy such a treat."

"There are ways...." He brooded a moment. "I'm getting a feel for the Huvved, but I'll be depending on you and Churri to bring me something I can use for the Hordar. I don't see anything yet ... after I think about it, maybe...."

She dropped her arms over the edge of the narrow lounge chair, began playing with the short stiff grass. "Well, while you're thinking, what have you picked up about what happens when a transport's due?" She paused, but he lay like a sunstruck log, saying nothing. "I hope it's more than I've got. Any time I go near anything about the ship, I'm warned off, sometimes hard, sometimes subtle, but the end is, I know the twice-a-year thing and that's about it."

"Lock down."

"What?"

He sucked in a long breath, trickled it slowly out. Finally, he said, "All techs, anyone they suspect

might be able to fool around with the ship, they're locked into the Pens." He lifted heavy, reddened eyelids. "Means me and Churri. Probably not you." He spoke slowly, wearily, as if he were too fatigued to push the words out. "Tra Yarta aside, these clotheaded Huvveds have only one use for women." He pushed himself up, got heavily to his feet, stretched, slumped. "I'm going to get some sleep, Churri wants to talk to you, tomor-row he said ... He yawned. "Didn't say why."

No spring in his step, with none of the massive force that usually hung like an aura about him, he stumped off, wiping at his face and neck with the sodden handkerchief.

She frowned after him, wondering if he was going to crack up before they got out of here; she couldn't do much without his backing, might as well follow Xalloor's advice, find a way to live as well as possible within the limits allowed her. And maybe keep alive a shriveled, forlorn little hope that Mama Adelaar would come and get her out of this mess.

He was a proud man, his size and strength and, well, shrewdness had insulated him from the kicks and pratfalls that life delivered regularly to ordinary folk. One of these days he was going to explode and tell some home truths to whatever Huvved creep it was giving him a bad time. He didn't understand what it meant to be powerless; he didn't feel in his bones he was a slave. She had a strong impression that he'd never been in a situation he hadn't eventually domi-nated. He played with irrational emotions and used them to manipulate people, but he was essentially a rational man; despite his experience he kept expecting people, maybe she'd better say men, to act out of reasoned self-interest. That wasn't happening here. It didn't matter how strong, how skilled, how valuable he was; at any time, for any reason, no matter how absurd, he could be flogged or even killed. His lack of control over his life was beginning to eat into him. She frowned at the brilliant glitter of the water droplets leaping up to fall down and fall again from basin to basin, wondering if Churri was right. Maybe they should go over the wall and try hiding in the mountains.

Churri wanted to see her tomorrow, huh? Well, he was going to have to wait. She was getting out of here, Tra Yarta had set up a visit to a Sea Farm. She sighed, straightened her legs and lay with her eyes closed listening to the music of the falling water; after a while she dropped into a doze.

7

The sea was a hard blue glitter reaching into a white glitter near the horizon where water merged with sky, the blue interrupted with undulant ribbons of what appeared to be shiny black-green plastic, the largest several meters long and a meter wide, leaves of the primary crop of the Sea Farm, the free-standing alga trees called *yoss*. Acres and acres of leaves, fans of supple strips rising and falling with the lift and drop of the sea. Narrow blue lanes cut through the black, openways spread in a web about a large collection of broad-bottomed barges with low structures built on them, the living quarters of the Farm family and its affiliates, storage buildings, generator sheds, process-ing sheds and open areas filled with bales of yoss leaves and piles and piles of brownish egg-shaped pods with heavy nets tied down over them. Water areas and barge areas alike, the Farm seethed with activity, chil-dren busy at small tasks, adults moving continually in and out of the water, off the barges and out of small brightly-colored boats scattered through the leaf fans, others busy at exposed machinery, moving in and out of work structures, doing assorted housekeeping chores, hanging out wash, working around exterior ovens where heat rose in wavery lines, vertical mimicry of the leaf-lines on the water. A floating village, close to self-sufficient.

The small airship droned in a wide circle about the perimeter of the farm. The inert and disapproving young Huvved seated beside Aslan came reluctantly awake (Zarkzar Efi Musvedd, though he discouraged her using his name with a lofty glare when she tried to start up a conversation). "Yoss," he drawled. "Average stem length, fifty fathoms, average diameter fifty feet. Leaf length, thirty to fifty feet. Valuable in bulk because they contain a fiber used in most areas of Hordar activity. Rope, the outer bags of airships ..." He jerked a thumb upward toward the glistening ceil-ing of the gondola, a tightly woven, obviously very tough material. "One of the imported techs has devel-oped a process to condition those fibers, fining the threads to produce a soft silky sheen." He pinched at the muted blue fabric draped over his arms. "The side stalks are harvested, mulched, macerated and the juices distilled into the fuel for the

engines of this airship and those runabouts.” He pointed down at the small shells darting about like waterbugs. “The main stalks are home for edible parasites, animal and vegetable, you’ve eaten some of them, I’m sure. And tucktla. Tucktla shells are crushed to make red and purple dyes. Also a very powerful glue. Hordar use it a lot in building. The chair you’re sitting on is held together with tucktla. Near the surface, the subsidiary stalks produce large clusters of pods, egg-shaped, maybe three feet wide, five long, you can see piles of them down there, filled with hydrogen extracted from seawater. The fanners harvest those, slap glue over the stems to prevent leaks and sell them ashore to the airship companies. The lift in this ship is provided by yoss pods; having such a resource available when they arrived, the Hordar didn’t bother developing any other transport.” There was a casual contempt in the Huvved’s voice as he went through his guide’s spiel.

Aslan glanced at him, decided there was more of her mother in her than she’d thought; she wanted to put a knee where it’d hurt most and wipe the smug off that painted face. She suppressed a smile at the thought and went back to looking out the window as the air-ship spiraled in to a stubby pylon. She felt the small jolt as the noselock clicked home, a louder hum from the motors, then silence, then a few twitches; she could see small dark figures moving about below them, hauling on ropes, shoving home the levers of friction clamps. A moment later the pilot came from the cockpit door, walked past them and used a rodkey to open the exit door.

8

Efi Musvedd stalked from the lift, leaving Aslan to trot along behind like a pet on a leash which annoyed her again; scraping the bottom of the situation she dredged up a spoonful of humor (dark and ropy). The man had a genius for destroying any possibility in ANY situation he pushed his nose into.

Three dignified gray-haired matrons (Ommars) and a silent man with a long white beard elaborately braided (an Ollan) had gathered about the base of the pylon. As the chief Ommar began a courteous (though nonenthusiastic) set speech, Efi Musvedd walked rudely past her, stopped at the narrow footbridge which joined the pylon barge to the much larger living barge next door. He didn’t like Hordar, Aslan suspected he was afraid of them and overcompensating for that fear with an arrogance both ugly and all too familiar; he wasn’t going to tolerate anything but meek compliance from any of the Farmers no matter how senior. “You were informed,” he said, “as to the purpose of this visit. I see no point in wasting time.” He scowled over his shoulder at Aslan. “What are you waiting for, doctor?” The last word was packed with contempt and impatience. “Ask your questions.”

Aslan rolled her eyes up, spread her hands, silently urging the Hordar officials to believe she had no part in his actions. There was no response, but she didn’t quite despair; maybe the chance would come to push him overboard. Maintaining a dignified and respectful sobriety she explained to the Hordar elders that she was there to study their life patterns, that she wished to see how their limited living space was organized, the different kinds of work needed to keep their settlement viable, how they educated their children, samples of artforms, poetry, music, that sort of thing. She didn’t expect to note down all of that today, merely an overview. She smiled suddenly, finished, “And why your storage barges don’t fly off on you, considering how many hydrogen pods you’re storing under those nets.”

There was no response to her attempt at humor. A feeble attempt at best, but she’d hoped for some reaction. None. Only the ancient everplayed story, conquered and conqueror, hating and fearing on both sides, shame on both sides, the shame of enduring humiliation, the equal but less recognized shame at inflicting it. She sighed and asked to be taken about the floating village.

Efi Musvedd strode along, moving ahead of them, opening any door that caught his fancy, ignoring protests.

The Ridaar unit which Aslan wore on her belt was flaking everything around her, including whispered conversations not meant to reach her ears. Or the Huvved’s. She couldn’t check it because she didn’t want Huvved or Hordar to know what she was doing, but she was sure she wasn’t getting much useful except the whispers and she’d have to erase those, she wasn’t about to give the Grand Sech a handle on these people. The Farmers were focused exclusively on Efi Musvedd, vibrating with a resentment and loathing that blanked out all other body language. After about twenty minutes of this she grabbed hold of

her temper's tail, disciplined her face and turned to the white-haired Ommar, the official greeter. Before she could say anything, Efi Musvedd jerked open a door and went through it. It was the bedroom of a young woman who had apparently given birth not long before; when he burst in she was lying half asleep with the baby in the curve of her arm; she gasped with alarm when the door slammed open, pulled the baby to her and struggled out of bed. The Ommar was going to protest; Aslan took hold of her arm, closed her fingers tight about it. "If I may use your comset?"

The woman was hard with fury, but like Aslan she contained it. After a gesture that sent the other elders into the room to interpose themselves between the Huvved and the girl, she led Aslan rapidly toward one of the processing barges, opened a door and ushered her into a smallish office.

When she reached the Aide who handled her for the Grand Sech, she didn't waste time on tact. "Whoever assigned that supercilious little cretin to me ought to have his brain scrubbed. He's generated so much hostility here it makes me wonder if someone planned it; there's no way I can accomplish anything with him in the same hemisphere."

The Aide was a fat old man with empty eyes. He'd supplied her needs without comment the several times she'd called on him, he seemed to be an efficient administrator, she never had to ask twice or reject any of the supplies he sent her and subjects for interviews were on time and forthcoming. Now he smiled at her, briefly amused. "You didn't object to him before you left."

"I hadn't been exposed to the full glory of his personality."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get him away from me. Far away. You know what the sweet thing just did? He barged into a bedroom where a girl was with her new baby and nearly scared her into a heart attack. Terrific." She scowled at him. "Am I supposed to be some sort of agent provocateur?"

"No. I'm sure your energies will be fully engaged by the work Sech Tra Yarta has given you."

"Which brings me back ...

A hand clamped on her shoulder and jerked her out of the chair. Efi Musvedd flung her at the floor, put a boot in her side, then panted and cursed as he swung his czadeg at her, that limber gray cane which guards used to herd slaves and Huvved used whenever they were annoyed with someone of lesser status. The beat-ing went on and on as the Huvved gradually worked off his rage. Aslan huddled in a tight knot, rolling and wriggling, slipping some of the kicks and taking most of the whipping on her shoulders and buttocks.

The Hordar elders watched, silent and impassive; Aslan caught glimpses of them standing in the doorway.

The Aide watched from the comscreen. When Efi Musvedd dropped his arm, he called him over.

"Zarkzar Efi Musvedd, return immediately to Gilisim Gillin," the Aide's voice was crisp, flat, "report to the Grand Sech as soon as you reach the Palace."

The wild energy drained from the young Huvved's face and body; he looked tired and there was a glint of fear in his narrowed eyes. "What about the woman?"

"Forget her; she's no business of yours."

"I hear." He reached to click off the set.

"No. Leave it. Start back now."

Efi Musvedd slapped the czadeg into its clip, smoothed his hair down and stalked out the door, the watching Hordar melting like smoke before him.

"Ommar Tirtky Presij come here."

The elder walked to the comset, stood in front of it. "I am here, Seref."

"The woman, what is her condition?"

"With your permission, Seref." She stepped away, knelt beside Aslan and went carefully over her body, prodding at flesh and bone with strong, knowing fin-gers drawing groans and a film of sweat from the injured woman. She stroked her fingers in a brief caress along the side of Aslan's face. "Nothing broken," she murmured; a last pat, then she went back to the comset. "She is badly bruised and bleeding from several cuts; there might be internal injuries. If you want her intact and reasonably healthy, you'll have to leave her with us for a while. If there's nothing seriously wrong, she can travel in three or

four days.”

“I will want a report each evening.”

“I hear, Seref.”

The screen went dark.

10

Aslan woke late in the night, her body one massive ache that disintegrated into dozens of agonies when she tried to turn over. Her throat was dry, one eye was swollen shut, her upper lip was sore and so thick it seemed to be pressing against her nose.

A young Hordar woman sat in a rocking chair a short distance off. She was reading by the light from a dim lamp, her face in shadows, only her hands and arms lit clearly, the scars on them like broken wander-ing threads that started on the backs of her hands and wound along her forearms to trail out above her el-bows, the white vividly clear against the bronze of her skin. When Aslan began moving about, she lowered the book to her lap and waited a moment before she spoke, making sure her patient was awake and aware. “Thirsty?”

Aslan’s tongue rasped across dry lips. “Yes,” she managed.

When the glass was empty, the young woman set it on the table and pulled the chair closer to the bed. “You haven’t been a slave long, have you.”

Aslan tried to smile, but her mouth felt like wood and the cut on her lip burned and broke apart. “No.” She lay back, stared at the shadowy ceiling. “No.”

“Are you angry at us for not trying to help you?”

“No. You couldn’t do anything.” With her mouth in its parlous condition, her articulation was so mushy even she had a hard time understanding herself, but she wanted to talk. She NEEDED to talk. “Do you know what touched him off?”

“You shamed him before Hordar. Sea Farmers. We are too valuable to the Emperor, he couldn’t do what he wanted and wipe out the insult by killing us all. So he lessoned you.”

Aslan nodded, grimaced as the movement sent dull pain bouncing between her temples. “I should have known that. I wasn’t thinking. Too angry.” She lay silent a moment, then lifted a hand and let it fall, a gesture of futility echoing the confusion in her mind “The Grand Sech ... You know he’s the one who sent the slavers looking for someone like me? Out there ...” She tilted her hand up, waggled a finger at the ceiling. “He’s no fool or he wouldn’t be where he is ... or am I the fool ... no, not this time ... and I doubt he tolerates fools working for him. Why did they send that clown as my escort? How could I possibly accomplish anything with him bulling about? Tra Yarta paid a hefty price for my skills, why why did he undercut me like that?” She stopped, blinked, then tried out a painful laugh. “Funny, not long ago I was thinking about an acquaintance, I was telling my-self he didn’t know what it was to be powerless, that he was going to run himself into trouble because of it, that he expected power to be rational and was he going to be surprised when he found out how irratio-nal the powerful could be. I could have been describ-ing myself.”

“Sending that ... um ... person wasn’t irratio-nal.” There was a quiet bitterness in the young wom-an’s voice.

“What?”

“Wasteful, maybe, not irrational.”

“How can... ?”

“We’ve had a long time to learn the convolutions of Huvved thinking.”

“And?”

“I don’t understand what the Sech wants from you.” A graceful flutter of scarred hands silenced Aslan. “It doesn’t matter, whatever it is, it’s trouble for Hordar. You see ...” She stopped talking, shifted position in the chair, folded one leg up so the foot was resting on the other knee, clasped her hands about the ankle. She was leaning forward, intense, filled with anger and need. “You see, he doesn’t trust you, he’ll break you first. That’s what this *as. A start toward smashing the part of you that won’t submit to him; it’s like breathing, not something you can control, you just do it. He wants you sane, he wants you

healthy and he wants you co-opted.”

“Complicity, not competence.”

“What?”

“The reciprocal of something my acquaintance said. I think I see. I have to be his from the marrow out, not just from self-interest.”

“Yes. The Huvved have done that to us. You saw what happened here and we’re the most independent Hordar on Tairanna. Our first reaction was withdrawal. No one challenged that bastard’s right to put his hands on anyone or anything he chose. One of the lessons of power, it is exercised everywhere, supported to excess everywhere, no matter how stupid or mindless or destructive the act. No Hordar is ever allowed to triumph over a Huvved, not even in the smallest degree. The Huvved might be punished for his act by other Huvved, but no Hordar will ever be allowed to know it.”

“Why are you telling me these things? I could re-port you to the Sech.”

The young woman laughed again, more anger than humor in the barking sound. “Don’t you understand? I’m the second act. I’m the voice of despair, the councilor of passivity, the object lesson. How to survive and prosper under the rule of the Huvved.”

“You don’t seem to have learned the lesson all that well.”

“Oh, don’t fool yourself. I might talk a good fight, but that’s empty air. I am Pittipat’s footmat and that’s all I’ll ever be.”

“Uh ... Pittipat?”

“The Emperor. Word goes round that he’s so woolly-headed he’d lose in a game of pittypat played with any healthy three year old. Makes us feel brave to call him that. Subversive. But it’s smoke and nonsense.”

“I can’t believe....”

“Listen to me,” doctor whatever your name is. Do you know what hangs over our heads right now? No. Don’t bother answering, I’ll tell you. A battleship called a Warmaster. If the Emperor or even the Grand Sech decided we were expendable and they needed an object lesson to enforce their demands on other Sea Farmers, thirty seconds on we’d be a cloud of steam. And there’s not a single thing we could do to prevent it.” Her hands closed into fists, then she forced them open, splayed her fingers across her thighs. “Ap-ply that to yourself. If you defy him, if your capacity for giving him trouble begins to match the value of your skills, pouf!” She sighed, shifted position again. “I suppose you and your acquaintance are planning to seize a Bolodo transport and escape. That’s happened, you know. Or perhaps you don’t. Tice year before. I was born a band of determined slaves made it on board a transport, they even managed to take off. The Warmaster didn’t bother leaving orbit, it ashed them and the hostages they took with them. Everyone who helped them, everyone in the families of those who helped them, everyone who could be accused of help-ing them by local enemies whether they were guilty or not, altogether more than a thousand people were hung in iron cages and left to die. No food, no water, no shelter from heat or cold. The strongest lasted fourteen days. No, whoever sent that lunatic with you knew what he was doing. And he’ll do more.” The young woman fell silent; she frowned thoughtfully as she inspected Aslan’s face and body. “I suspect you won’t last more than six months.” A quick brilliant smile, warm, amused, far from the despair in her words. “No, you won’t give in, I don’t think you can; poor baby, you’ll be dead.”

“Cheerful thought.”

“Um, dead isn’t all that bad; when you come back, maybe the world will have changed. Any change will be an improvement, the way things are now.”

Aslan made a small noncommittal sound; there was no point arguing the tenets of a religion she was unac-quainted with. “My name is Aslan,” she said. “Aslan aici Adlaar.”

“Aslan.” The young woman touched eyes, lips, spread her hands palm out. “I am the Dalliss Gerilli Presij.”

“Dalliss ... um ... diver?”

“That’s what the word means, yes.”

“I’m missing something?”

Gerilli Presij stood. "Why don't you shift onto your stomach and let me give you a back rub. We don't want you stiffening up." She glanced at a mechanical clock whose faint regular tick Aslan had dismissed as part of the noises endemic to barge life. "Not time yet for your next shot."

"Shot?" Aslan stiffened.

The Dalliss chuckled. "It won't hurt, I'm very good at this."

Aslan didn't answer, just began the painful, difficult process of rolling onto her stomach.

11

In the morning she was still sore and moving was difficult, but she was completely free of fever. Apparently the gel that Gerilli Presij used as a rubbing compound and those shots were effective against infection. She was also healing faster than she expected, her lip had deflated almost to normal and the other cuts on her face had closed over nicely. In one of the baths (hot and cold water, fresh and abundantly available, something she found rather remarkable in these conditions), she inspected her face and relaxed; though she hadn't protested Hordar attentions, the thought of that primitive goo in her veins had made her very nervous. Apparently it'd done a great deal more good than harm. She made a note to get a sample of those preparations to a friend of hers in the bio department at University.

Another girl brought Aslan her breakfast, younger, with a tendency to giggle. She nudged the lamp aside and set the tray on the table. "You're looking pretty good, Hanifa," she whispered, put her hand over her mouth, startled at her own boldness.

"Thanks to the excellent nurse I had." Aslan lifted the cover off the platter. "Looks good. Mind telling me what everything is?"

"Oh!" The girl thought that over, nodded. "I suppose they eat other things where you come from."

"A lot of other things." Aslan chuckled. "Very other."

"Ah. Well, these, they're krida, fried in batter. Crunchy, you'll like them. These, they're havya, fisheggs. This is jatine, it's a sweet we make out of jata fruits, they grow on the yoss. This is fresh jata. Mmm, you'd better try a nibble first, it's kind of powerful for someone who's never had any. This is a fulla, a kind of bread roll, it's got nuts and bits of cheese in it; we get the milk and cheese and flour from the landfolk. And for drinking, this is cimenchi, it's an infusion of a kind of watergrass. It ..."

"Grows on the yoss?"

The girl grinned, much more at ease. "Doesn't everything? There's some milk here and some water over here, for if you don't like the cimenchi. When you're finished, just leave the tray where it is, someone'll fetch it."

"I hear. Um, would it be possible to find me some clothes? Musvedd the creep just about ruined what I was wearing."

"You sure? You should maybe stay in bed a little longer, I can fetch some books or something if you don't want to sleep."

"I'd rather start working if that's all right?"

"Sure, it's all right. If you feel up to it. Oh! My name's Cinnal Samineh, I'm Geri's cousin and one of her isyas." She whisked to the door, turned. "I'll bring the clothes soon as I can find some that'll fit, you're kinda tall." She darted away.

Aslan listened to her sandals pattering lightly on the reed mats. Nice child. She touched her lip, winced from the bare flesh where the skin was split. Isya. Isya. I remember seeing something ... yes, Tra Meclin's Hordar dictionary. A kind of blood sister-hood. Or oath-sister. Closer than kinship. Five to eight per isya. Wonder how close he comes to being right? Wonder if I can spot the other isyas in the group?

She picked up one of the krida and bit into it. Yum, rather like fried shrimp. But her mouth was too sore to enjoy it and the salt on it stung the cut on her lip. Some day, some day.... She nibbled cautiously at more krida. Some day I'm going to pull that shithead's teeth and make him eat nuts or starve. She grinned at the image, winced again as the stretching widened the cut. Ram sandburs up his asshole.

Carting a faldstool on a strap, Cinnal Samineh took Aslan on a slow tour of the village. She'd unfold the stool, sit Aslan on it and bring her any-one she wanted to talk with. There was a very different feeling to the village as if everyone on the barges and in the boats had been let out of prison; the Farmers were still wary but inclined to be as friendly as they could in the circumstances. Aslan responded. This was the atmosphere she was ac-customed to; for a moment she could dream herself free again, working again, studying a culture she found intriguing though it wasn't her usual area of concentration.

The village was compact and complex, re-cycling was almost an art form and certainly a passion. *You will be back, don't trash your homeplace*, they told her. *All things are God, give them honor*, they said. They said these things lightly, amused when she sighed as she heard them for the tenth time, but under the lightness they were very serious about this, Pradix wasn't a prophet confined beneath a roof or shut between the covers of a book. Wistfully, filled with regret because she couldn't share it, she observed their deeply internalized belief and made her notes. Her usual objectivity was gone. She wanted these peo-ple set free. She wanted that even more passionately than she wanted the Unntoualar protected from the foul things being done to them. When she was lying on the bed in the room they gave her (Cinnal Samineh insisted she rest for an hour after lunch and Aslan was tired enough to make her argument perfunctory), she contemplated her own reactions, picking them to bits, a habit of hers that was one of the things her mother used to flay her with. Identifying, that's what she was doing. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Maybe because they liked her. Maybe because they were in-telligent and interesting people with a basic kindness to them. Maybe because the Huvved she'd met were such miserable oppressive dreeps, the kind of people she'd hated from the moment she could walk. Her foster mother was a toe-licking social climber who ignored the contempt of the people she was trying to associate with and the callous way they used her, then dropped her. The Huvved were using her with that same kind of contempt for everything she valued about herself. Using her learning and her intelligence to further enslave these Hordar. She'd hated that when it was first proposed, now she loathed herself for giving in to Parnalee's arguments, for letting herself be se-duced by the work. She wasn't sure what she was going to do, what she could do, but she wasn't going to log data any longer, nothing accurate anyway. Un-comfortably aware of the naiveté her mother deplored, she frowned at the ceiling, was distracted momentarily because she noticed for the first time the fine plaster-work, it was sculpted into intricate geometric patterns, then scolded herself back to the problem she was contemplating. Adelaar wouldn't hesitate to cook the data and she'd know just how to do it indetectably. That was the problem. She had to fool Tra Yarta who knew these people a lot better than she ever would and Parnalee who no doubt could smell a fix from fifty paces. Intellectual integrity was devalued currency these days. She had a thought and started laughing; she had Efi Musvedd to thank for the time she needed. He was worth something after all; Tra Yarta got what he wanted, yes, but he lost far more than he gained. I hope, I hope, she told herself, she held up both hands with all her fingers crossed, a little trick she hadn't practiced for a while. An omen, she thought, this is going to come out right. She laughed again and let her hands fall.

What do I need? Paper and pen, I can't do this in my head and I can't trust the computers here. She rubbed at her temples. It's been what, ah ... thirty years since studied sociometrics, I need references.... Out of the question. Have to depend on my memory and my smarts, built up from the bases I'm familiar with. Rule of thumb. I hope my thumb's not broke. I always thought I was cleverer than most, have to prove it now.... Parnalee said he'd wring the neck of any-one who messed up his chances. His chances! She thought about what Gerilli Presij had told her. That was the end of her escape plans, she wasn't getting aboard any ship liable to be vaporized the moment it got beyond the atmosphere. Over the hill and off, she thought, Parnalee or not, soon as I can manage it. Hmm. One of the cities of the Littoral. I need to go there next. Ayla gul Inci. Why not? I can make a good case for it; that's the city where the Surge began. Must be some old memories there. Hmm. Maybe I can find a crack to crawl through. Yes. All right. From now on I'm working for me.

Cinnal Samineh flattened her hand on the desalinizer. "We bought this about ten years ago. It gives us all the fresh water we need." She slanted a sly glance at Asian. "A tech slave the Imperator brought in built them for him. One of the few good things that came with the slaves."

"What did you do before then?"

"Let me show you. It's just next door."

It was a long narrow barge with slat blinds over lots of glass. Cinnal Samineh cleared one section so they could look inside. Water was being pumped along deep, glass-lined channels, around and past thick stands of remarkably ugly, twisted plants; the stems were broad and pulpy, the leaves were stiff, dotted with thorns, succulent, coated with a thick waxy substance. They were brilliantly colored, red and purple, orange, gold and blue-green, poison colors. Aslan inspected them and decided she wouldn't go in that place for a ticket home; she wasn't about to suck in any air they polluted with their exudates and exhalations.

"Saltplants," Cinnal Samineh said. "They extract minerals and salts from seawater. It's slow but sure; by the time they're finished with it and we pass it through a bit more filtration, it's almost pure enough to drink. We used it for washing and that kind of thing, what we needed for drinking water we passed through a still. Even now, on Holy Days and Jubilations we drink water from here, not from the machine. Sort of cele-brating the past and linking with the future. You see, don't you?"

"I see."

Cinnal grinned. "We have other reasons for keeping this going. Those leaves give us some of our best dyes. Poisonous, sheeh! you have to be very careful han-dling them, but the results are worth it. And the roots, you can't see them, but they are very, very important. Our best filters are made from the pulp and mem-branes in those roots. Matter of fact, the Zerzevah Farm, it's out around the bulge south of here, that's their main source of income, their merm bed was wiped out a couple storms ago and the new bed won't be producing for a decade or more."

"Merm bed?"

Cinnal Samineh wrinkled her nose. "I can't talk about that."

"Can anyone?"

"Geri, maybe; I'll ask her."

"Thanks. How much water could this ... um ... plant produce in a day?"

"Enough for all of us. We had to be careful of course, and we used seawater for things we use fresh-water for these days."

"Interesting. You said I might be able to visit a school?"

"I talked to my family's Ommar, she said fine. Schooling is family business, nothing to do with the Council. It's quite a walk from here. We could take it easy, or maybe I could whistle up a shell."

"Why not? It's a lovely day for a boat ride."

That night Aslan worked until long after midnight, sketching out the distortions and outright falsities she wanted to incorporate indetectably into her data files; when she was too tired to make sense of the numbers and symbols, she tore the pages into small bits and burned them. When she finally slept, she slipped in and out of nightmare, dreams where she was endlessly running, unable to reach a shapeless goal that seemed to represent safety; it hovered continually just in front of her, kept vanishing on her and reappearing a little farther on. Other times she was under something dark and heavy that came rushing down at her. That was a fast dream. It recurred several times and each time she managed to wake up just before the thing crushed her; she lay bathed in sweat, her heart pounding, her head throbbing, the half-healed bruises and cuts adding their own dull misery to a night that was beginning to seem endless.

"Rosepearsls." Gerilli Persij dipped her hand into a soft pouch and pulled out half a dozen rounds. She

tilted her palm and let them trickle onto the square of black suede. The smallest was about the size of a small pea; it was a pale pinkish cream. The others went from cream to deep rose, from cherrypit to plum-sized. They shared a fine luster with a glow that seemed to reach down and down, drawing the eye after it. Gerilli Persij took a mid-sized pearl between thumb and forefinger, held it out to Aslan. "Close your hand around it for a moment, then smell your skin."

The pearl warmed quickly. Aslan opened her hand, sniffed at her palm. There was a delicate floral fra-grance, very pleasant though nothing startling. An-other moment, though, and she noticed something odd happening to her. She felt tension dropping from her, her body was vibrating with fine-tuned energy, yet she felt no need to move or speak. That rang an alarm in her mind, a distant flutter that immediately started fading, but not quite fast enough. Chewing on her lip, amazed at how difficult it was, she set the pearl on the suede.

Gerilli Persij smiled and began putting the rosepearls back in the pouch. "One like that probably bought you," she said. "Depending on how expensive you were."

"And they come from merms?"

"I can say that, yes."

"And a Dalliss is the only one who can locate and handle merms?"

"Yes." Her mouth twisted into a wry self-mocking smile. "I wouldn't say that if Tra Yarta didn't already know it."

"I see. That's what you meant when you said you were too valuable to the Emperor to be slaughtered at a whim."

"That's what I meant." She shrugged. "If we don't push it too hard."

"That malignancy in orbit ... if there was just some way we could get rid of it...."

"We?"

"From what you said, I'm stuck here as long as it's up there."

Gerilli Persij gazed at her a long moment, then she shut the pearls into a small lockbox and got to her feet. "You said you're a good swimmer."

"I spent five years on Vandavrem, my first field assignment after I was accepted in the graduate pro-gram on University. It was a waterworld, almost no land. There was a very strange culture of intelligent bubble nesters ... Never mind, it would take too long to explain, but yes I got to be very adept in the water."

"Would you care to visit the yoss forest?"

"Yes. Of course. Do you freedive or use airtanks?"

"Depends on how deep we're going and what kind of work's involved. I think tanks for this expedition."

"Right. Lead me to them."

16

Again Aslan worked until her mind was numb, slept badly and woke with despair and fear a sickness in her belly. It was hard to get up, to get on with living, but she'd done all she could in the time given her. The airship was coming for her shortly after noon and in a few hours she'd be back in the Palace pen, a slave again, with all that meant. She comforted herself with the thought that the sooner she was gone from the Persij-Samineh Farm, the sooner Tra Yarta's attention would be taken off them.

They threw a feast for her, danced the sea-dances for her, tumbled and juggled and at the end of the little jubilation, a woman with a husky voice filled with the pain and joy of a fully lived life sang a song that the Farmers listened to with a verve that seemed more than it was worth. Sly eyes watched Aslan, half-smiles teased at her, said to her we know we know, *it's* a bit of a risk, but who can always live safely?

a a

The woman's hair was black and long, shiny and sleek as a tar slick. She stood on a wooden dais, flute player on one side, a fiddler on the other and drummer at her feet.

*One a two a moon rising high
Dream and Illusion sharing the sky
Three a four a stone and a bone
What does the stone say, my oh my
What does the bone say, by an by
Moonlight's for love
For dreams never spoken of
Dreams that won't die
Five six seven
What do you leave in
When you're singing just a little lie
Sweet lie, silly lie, pass on by
Eight and nine
Look for the sign
Ten eleven
Fall from heaven
All those devils dark and sly
Riding the shoulders of
You and I
High be low and low be high
Twelve a thirteen
What does it mean
Bone come walking shimble shamble
Place your bets and let the wheel spin
All the little angels grin and gambol
Tip a toe tap a toe atop a little pin
Stone say watch it, round they come again
The angels are dancing wild and tame
Tap a toe tip a toe atop a little pin
Hey bone, ho bone want a little game
Bound for heaven? Never try it
That's a place they let too many in
Fourteen fifteen
What does it mean
All the little angels wild and free
Asquat around a gamble stone
Playing for we
Sixteen seventeen
What's your fancy?
Nothing chancy
Let the wheel spin
Eighteen nineteen
What does it mean
Moonlight's for love
For dreams never spoken of
Dreams that won't die
Twenty a score, not no more
What's a number for
Start the game again*

Aslan joined in the storm of applause, appreciating the skill of the singer as she turned what seemed to be a minor little counting poem into something daring and portentous. The performance was safe in the Ridaar unit and she could study it in more depth later—if she decided she could trust the computers at her work station and if she wanted the responsibility. It wasn't all that difficult to understand the overall message of the song; even this stranger could hear the call for a continued resistance to Huvved rule, but there were some trigger words and images that drew a response which seemed disproportionate to their content. There was something going on here, something more dangerous than what Gerilli Persij had called talking a good fight. Aslan kept an open, appreciative smile on her face as the woman stepped down and another singer took her place, a man this time.

17

Alone except for the pilot and his co, Aslan watched the grasslands sliding beneath her, the silvery green-brown grass blowing in the wind that was pushing the ship along and making it shudder now and then. I

could like this world, she thought, these people. Well, not the Huvved. Hmm. It's worth studying ... wonder who'd apply and who'd get the grant? Aaron? Could be. He must be nearly finished with the Darra Saseru, seeing that they're just about finished killing each other off. Or maybe T'Kraaketkx Tk. I wonder what the Hordar would make of him? Hmm. Are they shapephobic? Or is that a Huvved trait? All the slaves brought in with me were from the cousin races, only slight variations from the two types living here. But that was just one shipment. Hmm. If I were the Emperor and reasonably sane, the techs I'd import would be so different from the locals that there'd be no place at all for them to hide. She yawned, settled back in the chair and dropped into a doze.

18

Aslan dropped her gear on a newly replaced grass mat. "Hey everyone, I'm back. Parnalee? Churn? Any-one here?"

"One sec, Lan. Be right out."

Aslan raised her brows, startled. "Xalloor?"

"Uh-huh." The dancer slammed the door to Parna-lee's bedroom and threw herself down on a couch. "Trying to turn me into a blisterin nurse, tchah!" She wrinkled her nose. "I suppose it's better than being drafted as a whore for those mignish guards."

"What?"

"Drooling ol' dreep."

Aslan dropped onto the couch. "Who?"

"Him." Xalloor jerked a thumb at a window that looked out on the Great Tower. "Him with his bony ass planted on this world."

"What happened?"

"Dumb. Me." Xalloor banged a fist against her chest. One of her sudden brilliant grins lit up her tired face. "Nah, not so bad as that. Stupid Madoor, wouldn't let me see the client. I always do that so I know what the git wants. I was flying blind, hmp, went to the trouble to snatch me, didn't they? I figure here he is, he owns the whole stinking world, he must've paid one tart'rish price for me, so I go all out and give him my most marvelous dance. I told you about it, the Light-sailor piece." Her shoulders jerked with her short barking laugh.

"So?"

"Turns out his idea of art rises maybe to paper dollies." Another abrupt laugh. "Trouble is the Lightsailor thing's pretty abstract. I lost him about five minutes into it. Been anything less, I'd 've seen that and played to him, but that piece is a chunk of my heartsoul and I wasn't noticing anything. Until the finish. There was a very long loud silence." She shrugged. "Too bad. Oh well, what goes around, comes around."

Aslan caught her hand, held it a moment. Then she sighed and shook her head. "I go away four days...."

Xalloor caught hold of her chin, tilted her face to the light. "You get crosswise with someone?"

"My escort switched into monster max when he thought I was being uppity."

"You and Parnalee."

"What happened?"

"I never got it straight, all I know is from his mum-bles when I was washing the blood off. Lessoning, he said, at least that's what I thought it was, whoever worked him over got in some good licks at his face and he wasn't talking so clear. Place. He say that a lot. His place. He kept going on about knowing his place all right and teaching some tofty prick his. I figure one of these snotheads he was catering for thought he was getting above himself. Like you say, uppity. One of the guards hauled me out of the pen and told me to take care of him. He was bleeding all over the mat nearest the door, you maybe noticed one of them's new. Someone gave him one tart'rish going over, his back was hamburger. A local medic shot him with some stuff and gave me some goo to rub on the bruises, That was late last night. He's still sleeping. So you found out yet what they want a ... that thing you said ... what they want you for?"

"They've got me studying the Hordar."

"Why?"

"Trouble. They want us, Parnalee and me, to poke around and figure out how to calm things down with-out killing everybody."

"I can see why, these mignish nothi would starve to death if they killed off the Hordar."

"How is he? Really?"

"He's going to know it when he moves for at least a month, but he's a chunk of ax jerky, it won't kill him. If I know men, he's going to bitch a lot, but you just ignore it."

"What about the Bard? Anything happen to him?"

"Not yet and maybe never, what I've picked up, you don't mess with poets round here."

"I see. Xalloor, you know anything about computers?"

"Deary dai, do I know about computers? Do you know about dancers these days? I guess not, stuck out in the boondocks with those primi types. It's a hard world out there, Lan, and competition's something fierce. Unless you've got an edge. I have this marvel-ous bitty Makerdac, no bigger'n my fist with a fanscreen that can holo full-size figures and make like a fiftypiecer, band you know. Do all my choreographing on it, plus my accounts and you name it. I swear, Lan, plug it into a sytha outlet and it'd fry you eggs for breakfast."

"Right. I'll see if I can work it so you come over here and help me with my data. If you're willing?"

"Read dy da, willing!"

"Pretty dull stuff."

"This mome, dull sounds marrrvelous."

"Come take a walk with me." Aslan got to her feet, smoothed her hands down her sides. "I've been sitting all afternoon and I need to get the knots out."

"Ah hah." That high wattage grin flashed again, then her narrow face was primly serious.

19

They strolled along a shady path that more or less paralleled the section of creek that ran through the enclosure. "... so we figured Bolodo would show up again in about six months standard and we've been looking about for ways to take the transport and run for civilization. Maybe not this time, but the next for sure."

Xalloor flicked a woven grass fan back and forth in the futile hope that moving air would be marginally less oppressive. "I heard talk in the pen, a snatch here, another there. You're not the only ones. So what happened? It's obvious you aren't all that hipped on the idea."

"I've been thinking about it and trying to plan some-thing from the minute I put foot to ground and saw the transport was the only insplitter around."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I know. I just wanted you to ..." Aslan pushed sweaty hair back from her face. "One of the people at the Sea Farm, she told me it'd happened before. Slaves took the transport, got it flying." She put her

hand on Xalloor's arm, stopped her. "You hear anything about what's up there? Hanging over us?"

"Huh?"

"Ever seen one of those battleships they call War-masters?"

"Shee-it. Yeh, a client once took me through one, it was defanged though. You telling me...."

"Yeh."

"It got the transport."

"Rift!"

"Think Parnalee knows?"

"Haven't told him."

"Maybe I should change my mind about moving over."

"Nice having someone to talk to."

"There is that."

They started walking again. After several minutes, Aslan said, "I don't like helping Tra Yarta put the boot to the Hordar."

"Nothing much you can do about it and keep your own skin whole."

"I can um put a twist on what I tell him."

"Get yourself whumped some more. Maybe turned into fish bait."

"I've already started. You might not want to be involved."

"Daarra dai, Lan, do me good to practice my kicks." Xalloor chuckled. "Could even be fun."

VI

1. Half a year before Aslan lands on Tairanna/ three years before Adelaar hires Quale and crew. Airship/over the Duzzulkas/cloudless summer night.

Karrel Goza tugged a length of wool from the skein, draped a few loops over his thigh. Ruya was brushing the horizon directly ahead of him, fatly gibbous, Gorruya was nearly out of sight overhead, an anorexic crescent riding a fan of stars that were particularly brilliant this night; the wind was still, even the veil of dust that generally hung over the southern Duzzulkas had settled for the moment. The land was flowing dark and silent beneath the airship, the watchfires of the herders were scattered pinpricks of red beside spreading shapeless blotches, yunk herds, nubby black against the ripples of silvery black grass. The clock on the panel gave him another twenty minutes before he made Koy Tarla; the pylon lights should be visible soon. He was a thin dark man, short, neatly made, a man at peace with himself; as his hands manipulated the needles and the bulky gray wool slid steadily about his fingers and the sleeve grew longer, his mind drifted without effort from image to image.

Three sweaters by the time I get home. Not bad. Ommar keeps hinting I should get married. Hmm. I don't want to shift Houses, whoever it is will have to adopt in. Gily? Ommar'd eat her alive. Her father's tavern's doing good, be a nice add to the family busi-ness. No, she's all right to warm a bed, not for a long haul, too changeable, I'd never know who she was getting off with when I was gone. Long haul. Hmm. I don't like Sirgfin sending me out alone for this haul.

Dangerous. And I'll have to lay over at some Koy and catch some sleep. Isn't the stopping I mind, it's the god forgotten Noses with their stinking questions, wouldn't believe you if you said the sun was shining. Nehir. She's a weaver, that's good. Prime weaver. Bring a lot to the family. Even Old Pittipat likes her work. She wouldn't mind me being off flying so much. Not going to quit flying, wife or no wife. What would I do if I had to quit? Don't think about that, Kar, it won't happen. Nehir, Nehir. I don't know. She's not bad looking, but ... I like her brother. Not marrying her brother. Good solid business. Hmm. Doussi? Pret-tiest woman in gul Inci. Wonder why she's not married yet? Five years older than me. Keeps the family fac-tory ticking steady. There's always someone needing motors for new airships.. Sirgem Bol could use new ships, replace this old whale. He rubbed his foot against the control stick, smiled dreamily, shook his head. They haven't bought a new ship for two years, hmm, maybe more. Something's going on. Maybe I should think about changing companies. Percin Hizmet left last month.

Hasn't found a place yet. That's odd. He's a top mechanic, he shouldn't be having trouble getting on somewhere. Casma. Wonder if she'd be willing to stay onshore. I doubt it, being she's a diver. Divers are too scrappy for me, I can do without fights when I'm home. Way she dances would make a statue stand. Maybe we could work out something. I'm gone so much, she could spend those days at the Farm, be on land a couple weeks when I'm home. Affiliated to a Sea Farm, mmh.

The needles dish-clashed, small clicks and ticks came from the instrument panel, a ghost of wind noise filtered through the windows, wire stays sang sustained sweet notes into the shifting creaks of the gondola, cables burred deeper, stronger notes into the cargo bales hitched beneath it. Inside the cockpit, the light was dim, bluish, mostly from the panel though a small spotlight shone on his hands and woke watery gleams from the sea-ivory needles. Girls' faces, frag-mentary musings, dim apprehensions drifted in an un-hurried stream through his head until the alarm chimed.

He set the knitting aside, looked out. Lights in two columns above the much fainter glows from cracks in curtains and the occasional yellow square where an unshuttered shopwindow announced the business was still open. "Koy Tarla." He patted Fud-40's panel. "Good old girl."

He cut out the automatic pilot, began matching maneuvers and hit the pylon latch dead center first try. The noselock wouldn't click home. He swore under his breath and made another pass, slipped loose again. Fud-40 hadn't been properly serviced for months, there were a lot of parts that needed replacing, nose gear was so worn it was near unusable. The third time he tried, he revved the motors up more than he liked and held her vibrating against the pylon until the instruments gave him a GO. Swearing some more, he brushed the back of his hand against his sweaty brow, swiveled a rotor and nudged the side of the gondola against the platform extending from the pylon, watching the panel anxiously until the readouts told him he was set m solid. He released the rearend cable, felt the gondola shudder as it unreeled. When the hook hit the ground, a buzzer sounded and he shut off the motors with a sigh of relief and a fleeting suspicion that he wouldn't finish this long haul with bag and self intact, a thought he immediately suppressed. He rolled up his knitting, stuffed it in its bag, clicked off his harness and got to his feet. The locks held the gondola stable; besides, Fud-40 was heavy with bales of yunk wool. It'd take more than his weight to knock her about.

2

Karrel Goza pulled the lift door shut, checked the cable out, it was taut and locked to the eyebolt. Birey Tipis was reliable as an old boot, bless the man. Rubbing at his back, he crossed the stretch of beaten earth to the office, pushed open the door and went inside.

"Alo, Bir, how's it go?"

"Slow and slower. You better get that nose fixed, Kar."

"Don't tell me, tell Sirgfin. What you got for me?"

"Two passengers for Koy Vaha, six bushels orps with the rind on and five sacks tarins, dried. Old Muntza Tefrik, he brought in some hanks of unbleached kes yarn and he wanted to know if his package had got here."

"Passengers." Karrel Goza grimaced; they always wanted to come up and talk to him, Fud-40's musty cabin started closing in on them the minute he shut the door. "Nuh, nothing for here this trip. Geres Duvvar is due along in a couple weeks, coming from the west, he might have it. If he makes it here. He's got Hav-13 and that bag makes old Fud up there look like a yearling."

"How's it on the coast?"

"Like here. Slow and slower." Karrel Goza took the manifest, checked the weights, nodded. "Fud can handle this." He set the clipboard down, smothered a yawn. "What's open? I need to eat and catch a few hours sleep. Sirgfin laid my co off for the duration."

"You too, eh?"

"Too?"

"You haven't heard?"

"I've been short hauling along the coast, that's why you haven't seen me for a year or so."

"We've been getting singles since the thaw. Navlun Bol and Ilkan Bol just like Sirgan. Cut way down

on the schedule too. I get an earful of complaints from the Fehz and everyone else, their goods sit and rot waiting for a hauler to come along. Everyone's notch-ing their belts. For the duration they say. I'm getting an earache from hearing the word. I ask myself what's it mean and I answer me, nothing." Birey Tipis lifted the flap, came through the counter. "Food, hmm. You remember Annie Arkaday?" He waved Karrel Goza to the door, lifted the key ring off the counter and slipped the keys about, hunting for the one he wanted. "Yeh, not many forget her cooking. She had to shut the cafe, the rent got to be too much for the trickle of customers to cover. She petitioned the Fehraz to lower it for the duration," a soft chuckle sounded over the clink-clank of the keys, "for the duration," he re-peated, "but he wouldn't, so he gets nothing, intelligent, eh?" He shut the lights off, crossed to the door, followed Karrel Goza through. "Folks stay home these days or stake out a table in Mahanna's Tavern with a couple cups of kave, it's still open, but that's because Mahanna's got freehold on the building and only pays a ritseed rent." He finished with the pair of locks, thrust the ring into a side pocket of his jacket. "Annie works out of her house now, same reason, it's free-hold, she's piled her kids one on top of the other and hires out their rooms and fixes meals for whoever can pay. And the kids run errands when they can. She's doing all right so far." He pointed down the street. "That way, he said, "across town from here. It's not far." He walked beside Karrel Goza as they went down the middle of the village's main street. "You heard anything? Been rumors the lines are going to drop half their stations, let the clerks in them go. I've been in that office near a score of years."

"No one tells us pilots anything except which route we're on or we're laid off till god-knows when." Karrel Goza kicked at a pebble, watched it bound along the worn pavement until it disappeared into a pothole. "It's a long low, but must 've about hit bottom, don't you think?" Karrel Goza looked around. The village didn't seem to have changed much since he'd seen it last, shabby, one-story buildings, red tile roofs show-ing above the packed earth walls that went round the house and the bit of garden that only friends and family ever saw, here and there trees rustled in the sometime wind and the shutters over the front win-dows of those shops that were closed for the night rattled with the gusts, the dark was kind and conceal-ing, there was a lot he wouldn't see, a lot hidden behind housewalls. He wished Birey Tipis would shut up about all this, it made him sick thinking about it and more than a little scared.

"Can't say, Kar, you and me, we've still got our jobs, knock wood, but what do we do if Skein and the others go broke?"

"Nuh, Bir, they won't let the carriers fail, Tairanna would fall apart if they did."

"Don't be too sure. The Fehz would survive and the divers would still be bringing up rosepearls, so I can't see Pittipat sticking his fingers in, what's he care about a bunch of surrish grubbers? I don't see any light ahead." Birey Tipis glanced at Karrel Goza, wiped sweat off his forehead. "Wouldn't say all this if I didn't know you don't run off at the mouth, Kar." The tip of his tongue flicked along his lips. "Used to be we didn't worry ourselves about what we said, used to be Yapyap, that's what we call the Sech's Nose, he let folks know when he was coming around so they could stop talking about anything he'd have to report." He caught hold of Karrel Goza's arm, stopped him. "Lis-ten, Kar, I don't know about other Koys, but watch what you say to folk here, Yapyap's gone serious, got a bodyguard, a couple scrapings imported from Tassalga. Hurum Deval got drunk last week and wouldn't shut up, he started spouting all those jokes about the Impe-rator, you've heard 'em, I'm sure, he didn't mean anything by it, he always gets a mouth on him when he's reeling. Thing is, come morning he was gone, we haven't seen him since. The Fehraz he sent some men over and packed up the family, shipped 'em to gul Brindar on the west coast, we got word a few weeks later they were doing scut work for the Fehdaz there and hoping Hur would show up. He hasn't so far. And he's a long way from the first to slide down a dark hole without a bottom." He started walking again. "What say you let me buy you a beer? Mahanna's come up with a tarin brew that slides down sweet as honey. Don't worry about Annie, she'll whip up some-thing for you, doesn't matter how late it is."

"Why not. Old Fud's still a lady in the air. One thing though, who's going to be wrestling the cargo come morning? If it's me, I pass."

"You got a spare goum or two, I can scare up some strong backs for that."

"I could put in a requisition for expenses. Don't suppose Skein would honor it."

"There's another way, wouldn't cost you or show on the books."

"Huh?"

"There's some brothers who need a lift to the coast."

"Off the manifest?"

"What else."

"This Yapyap of yours, won't he be hanging around the pylon?"

"There's ways for handling that."

Karrel Goza walked on. At first he was sure he didn't want anything to do with the proposition. Running like that, it must be serious what they'd done. If something went wrong he could suck his family into their mess. The Ommar'd eat me raw. He glanced several times at Birey Tipis; the old man was strolling along, eyes on the road ahead, face placid as a rumi-nating yunk, no sign of the nervousness he'd showed a moment before. Karrel Goza was suddenly sure he was going to do it, he wasn't quite sure why, he was so scared of it, thinking about what could happen tied his stomach in knots and pumped acid up his throat, but somehow he couldn't not do it. "Family'll divorce me if this comes out."

"It won't. Um ..." Birey Tipis dug his thumb into the soft folds of skin hanging under his jaw. "The boys've done this before."

"Maybe you'd better tell me some more."

"The less you know, Kar, the safer you are."

"I am?"

"You got a point. Everyone is. Safer, I mean. I can say this, it's not thievery or anything like that."

"Make sure you take care of YapYap and his friends."

"We will, no fear of that, my friend."

We, Karrel Goza thought, that's interesting. He didn't say anything, just followed Birey Tipis through the tavern's swing door.

3. *Four months after the Duzzulka flight.*

Speakers Circle/Ayla gul Incl.

Karrel Goza rubbed his back against the stone of the wall, watched the clot of heavily robed men mill about atop the minaret, a thirty-foot-tall column of stone with a round shingled roof rising to a graceful point above the broad arches that went round the speaker's platform. He was listening to the talk around him, soft muttered voices punctuated with slitted suspicious glances at everyone else, angry voices, kept murmurous by the fear that a wrong word at a wrong time was deadlier than poison, a fear justified by the events of the past months; almost everyone knew some-one who'd vanished as quietly and completely as a sailor washed overboard in a summer storm; almost everyone thought he or she knew why. There was the unexpressed hope that the missing were in prison some-where not dead; there was the equally unexpressed fear that they'd been airshipped out over the ocean and dropped in Saader's Cleft.

Geres Duvvar came threading through the crowd in the Circle, in each hand a paper cone smudged with grease from the estani nuts inside. He gave a cone to Karrel Goza who moved over so his cousin could lean against the wall beside him. "You got some change coming, Kar. There was a little war going on over there 'tween the peddlers."

Karrel Goza grunted, dug cautiously into the hoard of hot nuts.

Geres Duvvar swallowed. "Hurry up and wait, huh." He waggled the cone at the group on the speaker's platform.

"Yeh. Don't look like there's much good to say or they'd be saying it."

The clacker sounded, the crack of wood against wood reverberating through the dull mutter of the crowd. Silence spread like fog.

The Stentor separated from the other robed men, spread his arms. "Sim, O Kisil, sim sen, Hear o Peo-ple, hear thou. Thy Ollanin return to report the out-come of their petition." There was a pause. Behind the Stentor one of the Ollanin murmured to him. He nodded, faced out again. "Sorrow, sorrow, the peti-tion was heard, the petition was denied."

The crushed nut in Karrel Goza's mouth was sud-denly bitter. He spat it out, ignoring the scowl of the woman whose skirts he spattered with the bits. Geres Duvvar beat his hand slowly steadily against the stone, cursing under his breath.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. This is the Emperor's re-ply. Let those among you who are needy apply to the Houses for bread and work."

A groan rose from the crowd.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. If you who are needy are turned away, give word to the Fehdaz. Every House and every Farm who turned you away will be assessed two score rosepearls or the equivalent in tapestries and art pieces."

A swelling of sound, with a double center, on one side those who have, on the other those who have not.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. Two of thy Ollanin lifted their hearts against this and spoke. The Divine one cast them down into a dark and stinking cell. The Ollanin who murmured but spoke not, the Divine one had them taken from him and sealed into their rooms. For two days, thy Ollanin saw not the sun nor the moons, for two days thy Ollanin drank only water, for two days thy Ollanin tasted not bread nor meat."

Rising-falling moan filled with fear and rage.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. The Divine One spake unto your Ollanin thus: It has come to me that the merm beds and the rosepearls are a State resource. It has come to me that it may be wrong for such a resource to remain in the hands of Families, not the State. Be warned, O Kisil, thus the Divine one spake, I will cease my wondering for this moment, I will not act as my heart requires if I am not stirred to it by thy unruly importunities.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. And then it was that the Divine one cast at the feet of thy Ollanin the two of them whose hearts had rebelled. And then it was the Divine One spake again: Take these and let me not see them, let me not hear their names, let them be as nothing in my sight and thine.

"Sim, O Kisil, sim sen. Thy Ollanin have come to thee in sorrow, ashes in their hair and heart, thy Ollanin say to thee, we have failed thee, what is thy will?"

The Stentor folded his arms and stepped back. Robes pulled tight about them, cowls drooping over half-hidden faces, the Ollanin started down the stairs. When they reached the pavement, the crowd in the Circle, silent, impassive, gave way before them, opening a corridor so they could cross the Circle and pass into the Fekkri. They didn't wait for an answer, they wouldn't get it then; that was coming three days later. Karrel Goza and Geres Duvvar wouldn't bother coming back to hear it. At least the City Ollanin had tried to help, that was more than the Fehdaz had done. He was old and sick and about to die, his sons had died before him (there were rumors about that, how they died and why, Incers were very nervous about the character of the next Fehdaz), his grandsons and the Nephew were all there waiting like vultures, no one in the place bothering their heads about anything else.

Karrel Goza counted the coins in his hand, closed them in his fist. "Gidder's should be open by now. What about a beer?"

Geres Duvvar slipped his watch from its pocket, clicked it open. "Do we have time? Old Niffiz is getting touchy about checking in." He shut the watch, shoved it back. "He's Immel. He's got a thing about us in Goza-Duvvar-Memeli. You don't want to give him an excuse to boot us, not the way things are these days."

"May he fall in yunkshit up to his honker." Karrel Goza put the coins away. "Let's get back. That wormy old skink won't give an inch."

4. Ayla gul Inci/Waterfront/one year and six months after the return of the petitioners.

The bay was gray and leaden, an echo of Karrel Goza's mood. He took out the notice, reread the single line of print. His head throbbing with resent-ment and fear, his body cold and sick with the horrible emptiness of failure, he tore the paper into small hairy pieces and dropped them into the water. One breath he was angry at Geres Duvvar for holding onto his job with Sirgûn, the next he was dead ash, wondering how he was going to tell the Ommar he was a drag on the Family, not a support. Out on the

bay he saw boats coming in. He straightened, stared. He'd played in these waters when he was a baby; when he was older, he'd taken girls out sailing if he could talk a cousin into lending him a boat; he knew enough of the sea's caprices and her moods to understand what he was seeing. There was a bad blow coming. He watched the gray waters heave beneath the pier and hated her, Mother of Storms, treacherous unfeeling bitch, steal-ing from him his last respite from shame. He had to get back to the House and help tie down for it, no time to get a little drunk to pillow the pain. He cursed softly, bitterly, cursed Sirgûn and the Huvved, the Kabriks and their obsession with new products, the mushbrained Imperator and his mushbrained advisors, the Fehrazes and the Fehdazes, the city council, the sneaks and most of all the alien slaves who made all this trouble for workers.

"They are that." A girl's voice.

He swung around. "What?"

"You heard. What happened, you laid off?"

He looked her over. She was small and dark, brilliant eyes, not exactly pretty, but coming into a room she'd be the first you noticed. The fine wandering scarlines on her arms were very white against the dark gold of her tan. A Dalliss. No one ever completely tamed a Dalliss even when her diving days were finished. His mouth curled down with dislike, but he touched eyes and mouth and spread his hands in polite acknowledgment of her presence. "Blessings, Dalliss." He turned and started past her.

"Oh my, the little man's soul is bruised." She closed her fingers about his arm, said, "You're a pilot. I need a pilot."

"For what?" Disgusted with the leap of hope he couldn't help, he pulled free. "Storm coming. I'm going home."

"Couple hours before you need to start tying down. Stop a while and give me a listen, you might like what I'm going to say." She stepped back from him, swung herself onto a bitt and sat kicking her bare heels against the agatewood, watching him with a hard bright expectation that sent warning tremors along his spine.

He lowered himself to the planks and sat with his legs hanging over the edge, his back against another bitt. "Job?"

"Not for taking home to Ommar. We could come up with some coin if you've got to have it." She swept her arms wide, waggled her small slim hands as if to say you can have what you want, it doesn't matter long as you do the thing. Whatever the thing was.

She had beautiful hands, he noticed that with a small jolt of surprise, delicate, supple wrists. And fine ankles. Like a lot of women these days, she'd taken to wearing trousersskirts, wide-legged things made out of the new yosscloth, its silky flow clinging to her legs in a way he found exciting. The top she wore was a tube knitted from black kes yarn, it had a square neck, no sleeves, she wanted to display her arms with their scars, the badge of her achievement. Used to be pearlers wore long sleeves and lace mits to hide the merm marks. Not this one. He found himself approving her pride. He looked away, frowned out across the heav-ing water. "Just tell me what it is."

"Remember Jamber Fausse?"

He started, went still. "Why?"

"Show you I know a thing or two. You lifted him South after he hit the Fehraz Ene Karrad's strongroom and dropped half the coin to the Kiks that Karrad pushed off his Raz. You've been a busy little man the past few months.

The cold was back in his bones; he stared at the water and said nothing.

"No need to sit there shivering like an ishtok out of water, Karrel Goza. This isn't a noose about your neck. If you don't want to fly for us, forget it."

He turned his head. She was leaning toward him, hands braced on her knees, taut, eager, willing him to accept the proposition she hadn't yet made. He was interested; it would be _immensely satisfying to hit back at something instead of going meekly home to mama., "Same sort of business?"

"Not quite. This could get you killed. The pilot we had before is in Saader's Cleft. No, the bitbits didn't drop him there. He died. We didn't want some asslicking official eager to make points getting curious about how that happened. He was shot, bad, but he got us away and the ship home before he

died.” Her eyes were suddenly bright with tears. “He was ...” Impatiently she scrubbed the tears away. “Could hap-pen to you. So?”

“You’re the ones.”

“What?”

“You’re the ones that hung the Nephew naked from the minaret. Painted insults on him hair to heels. I wondered how someone got him there without being caught. You fixed him up in his paint and harness, I suppose, and waited until Ruya and Gorruya were down; then you dropped the noose over the roofpeak and left him dangling. Ktch! your pilot must’ve had Pradix’s hand on his neck to operate blind in that battlerose of winds.”

“He did, besides there isn’t a man alive or dead who can match his touch.”

“Wish I’d seen it. Geres Duvvar was home, he told me about it, he said the Fehdaz was howling mad. Not that he liked the Nephew that much, it was the idea that some Hordar would have the nerve to lay hands on one of his Family. On one of the holy Huvved. Ktch!”

“Herk the Jerk. Yeh. He wanted to top every Hordar he could get his hands on, but his Sech talked him out of it.”

“Old Grouch? I’d have thought he’d be sharpening his ax for Hordar necks.”

“He’s scared of a Surge. You’ve been away a lot. I don’t think you really know how bad things are getting.”

“Hmm. So, what are you plotting now?”

She scratched at her forearm, rubbed a bare foot against the bitt. “Herky Jerky’s been hatching ideas again. Three months he’s had his hands on the Daz, he keeps thinking that ought to mean something, but every time he has a flash, Old Grouch digs the ground out from under him. I suppose he’s tired of it. From what we could find out, he maneuvered so the Grouch had to go to Gilisim Gillin to talk to the Grand Sech. Soon as the old man’s back was turned, Herk snatched some Farm boys who’d come in to gul Inci to visit relatives and carted them off somewhere, who knows why. Probably something to do with merm beds and rosepearls. Doesn’t matter what maggot he has in his head, we’ve got to pull them out. It was just luck, really, finding out what happened to them, a friend of mine was over the wall meeting me, we saw the bitbits make a snatch; we were too far away to stop it, but we managed to follow them to where a miniship was moored. They shoved the boy in the gondola and left. We thought about trying to get him out, but there were more bitbits around guarding the airship. No way we could reach it. Next day some other friends of mine managed to find out who was gone and where they might be. Some others and me, we’re going in after them, but we need a pilot. That’s it, that’s what we want you for.”

“In where?”

“Mountain Place.”

“I’ve flown out of Inci in that direction. Not over the Place. The winds there are tricky. It’s the steam out of the crater that does it. Fehdaz’s pilots know the currents; even so they pick their way and go in round noon when things’re quieter. What’s your ship like?”

“A mini.” She grinned at him. “Used to belong to Herk.”

“Hmm. The instruments?”

“Crude and crudest. That’s how Muhar Teget de-scribed them.”

“I didn’t know he was still alive.”

“He’s not. He’s the one in the Cleft.”

He gazed at her a long time, then looked away. “Get me fired?”

“No.”

“You followed me here.”

“Yes. I was going to see if you were off for a few days and might be able to fly for us. Muh said after him you were the best on Tairanna.” She combed her hands through her hair, spread them again, waved them; she seemed to like waving her hands about, maybe someone told her sometime they looked like little white birds. “Pushing my Luck,” she said. She dropped her hands into her lap, laced her fingers together. “I saw you shred that paper and made a guess, that’s all.”

"You know my name."

"Ah." Her mouth twisted into a half-smile. "That's a bit of a difficulty." She searched his face for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not, Grouch knows me well enough, he doesn't need a name. Elmas Ofka, Family Indiz-Ofka-Tanggar, Farm Indiz." She hesitated, shrugged again. "Divorced, outlawed."

He'd half suspected who she was, but it was a shock all the same. Elmas Ofka. They said she killed a Huvved who thought he was going to rape her, sank a knife in his belly and opened him up like a yunk carcass. He'd always thought that was somebody's dream, that she probably stole some pearls or sassed a touchy tribute-collector. Every now and then the Huvveds got antsy and took hunting parties out searching for her, but they never saw hair nor heels of her, so they shot a few erkelte and pretended that was what they were out for. "You're crazy to be here in daylight like this."

"Crazy has its advantages."

He laughed, he didn't quite know why. "At least it seems to be working." He rubbed thumb against middle finger, not sure what to say next. "Ah, who else is coming?"

"My isya. Cousins, some friends. Women. That bother you?"

"Not if you know what you're doing."

"We know."

"Tonight?"

"Right. Herk's had them three days already." She was silent a moment. "One of them's my brother."

"Ah. Sorry."

Her mouth tightened. "They will be. One of these days we'll hang Herky Jerky from the Minaret and we won't use a harness."

"I need a little time to get used to the ship. You know the bay better than I do, what about the storm?"

"By the time we leave, it should be mostly blown out, enough rags left to give us cover. At Mountain Place any of the sentries supposed to be on the walls, they'll more than likely be inside with a fire, no one's going to be miserable for Herk the Jerk. If there are some mushbrains outside, we won't have any problem spotting them." She hesitated, made up her mind between one breath and the next. "Some aliens are living with us. They jumped the Wall at the Palace and happened onto us at a delicate moment." Her hands fluttered, sketching metaphors for the embarrassment of both parties. When she noticed the expression on his face, she smiled and shook her head. "They won't be coming with us." She folded her hands again. "One of them was the Im-perator's own weaponsmith. Strange creature. He doesn't like people much, and I got spanked for that kind of language when I was a girl, so I won't try telling you what he thinks of our esteemed Divine One. He's been making gadgets for us. Stunners and spotters you could wear in a ring almost. Sniperguns." She narrowed her eyes at the sea, then the sky, chewed her lip a moment. "You can get away without eyes on you?"

"Yes. When and where?"

"You know the Dance Floor in the Watergarden out north of Inci?"

"Been there a time or two." He tried a quick grin.

She grinned back, her eyes narrowing into crescents, her nose flattening. "I expect you have." She sobered. "I'll bring the ship down an hour after mid-night, give or take five minutes each way. I can manage that much, there's room for mistakes out there. We need to be at the Mountain Place around three hours before dawn. Will that give you enough play to get the feel of her before we start?"

"Too much. If I can't learn her in twenty minutes, I might as well give up. Make it second hour, unless you've got a reason otherwise."

"Second's better, but I wanted to make sure you had plenty of time for test runs." She slipped off the bitt, stretched, yawned. "Anything else?"

"What you expect me to do? Besides flying."

"Nothing. You won't be coming in with us. You're the only one who can get us away from there."

"Good enough."

"See you tonight then." A flutter of a hand and she was running away down the pier, her vitality printing her on his mind even after she vanished into an alley between two warehouses. He smiled. He felt

a lot better now. He couldn't tell anyone about this, but it went a long way toward erasing the sense of failure that'd been the worst effect of the layoff notice. His dread was gone, he could face the Ommar without feeling like a lump of yunkshit.

The wind was picking up, two fat raindrops splashed down on his head, trickled past his ears. Home and fast. From the look of those clouds and the height of the swells, they'd need all hands to get ready to ride this one out. Another raindrop broke on his nose, he wiped it away and started running toward the alley.

5. Approaching the Dance Floor/Watergardens outside Ayla girl Inci/both moons down.

"Like crawling through a room lined with black felt." Tezzi Ofka braced herself on her arms, leaned forward until her nose touched the curving window.

"Um." Elmas Ofka scowled at the trembling lines scattered across the panel in front of her; trying to balance the ship in half a dozen directions and get somewhere at the same time took most of her attention. The storm didn't help. Blessings be, the winds had died to a whisper. She'd flown the miniship a few times before (mostly in daylight though and tethered) so she'd be able to manage it in an emergency. She hadn't realized how tricky this short jump was going to be. Thank God, Karrel Goza gave her the extra hour. It would have been easier for him to come to the place where they'd stowed the ship, but she wasn't about to trust him that much. Not yet anyway. He probably realized she didn't. He wasn't stupid, though it was hard to remember that when he put on his dumb hardboy look. Good camouflage. I hope. "Tez, any sign of those lights?"

"Not yet. You sure we're heading the right way?"

"Sssa. Half maybe. Keep looking around."

"Mm."

They droned on for several minutes, then a sudden gust of wind caught the small airsack and rocked it perilously. Elmas Ofka fought the miniship straight, exploded out the breath she was holding. "Tez!"

"Turn a little left. I thought I saw something when we were tumbling about."

Elmas Ofka eased the nose around, bit her lip as she felt the gondola tremble in the swirl of winds that grew stronger as she got closer to the water. Two faint greenish spots swam past some distance in front of her. She tried to stop the turn, overcorrected, overcorrected again, went toward the lights in a series of diminishing arcs.

"Elli, I'm getting airsick."

"Don't talk so much." She ran the pump that sucked air into the ballast sacs; the ship sank, steadied as the added weight helped the motors hold against the erratic push of the wind. A moment later it lurched, nosed down as it hit a powerful downdraft. She swore fervently and vented the air she'd just pumped in.

"Elliiii, I didn't know you knew those words."

"Shut up, Tez. Sssaaa, I can't see...." The lights slid inexorably beneath her. She pumped in more air, shifted the stabilizers so she was edging downward, then swung carefully around. "Tez. Get ready to drop the ropes." She fumbled over the switches, finally got the hover configuration right, swore again as she saw she was several meters away from where she wanted to be. "This is as good as it gets. Toss the marker, Tez, then let the ropes go."

The gondola rocked as Tezzi moved from side to side, shuddered as the hatches opened. The weighted glowglobe whirled away, caught by a gust whose fringes reached the miniship a moment later and started it tottering. Elmas Ofka chewed on her lip, drummed her fingers on the chair arms, waiting as long as she dared before she did anything. The ship jerked, steadied. She started breathing again. "Drop the ladders, Tez."

She left the chair and went to help balance the gondola as dark figures began swarming up the ladders.

Karrel Goza was first up. He came in with a quick neat twist of his body and went without a word to the cockpit, settling himself at the controls and began running his fingers over them, touching the switches but changing nothing for the moment. If you can re-cruit him, there's a flyer working for Siren) Bol,

Muhar Teget said, name's Karrel Goza. He's a natural. If he manages to get as old as me, he might just be better than me. A natural, she thought, yes, Muh was right. She relaxed some more. Some have the gift, Muh said, lots don't. You've got one, diving it is, flying it'll never be. Some folk can get along quite well without any special talent for what they want to do, if they're willing to work their asses off and never stop training. Don't you put down the ones who go that route, sometimes they do a helluva lot more than the naturals. There's the drive, you see, without the drive even the best don't go far. The one weakness they've got, though, they don't adapt fast to radical new situations. You need that kind of thing in what you and your isyas are doing. When you have to replace me, no no, gen-gen, a stroke or a bullet, one of 'em's going to get me and let me tell you, I'd rather the bullet. What was I saying? ah yes. When you replace me, make sure your pilot is one of the naturals. There's too much that can go wrong too fast for the other kind. You want inspiration rather than intelligence when there's no time for thinking.

Harli Tanggàr swung in, threw Elmas Ofka a salute and a broad grin and began reeling up the ladders. Elmas moved forward.

"All up," she murmured.

"Run through this for me."

"Let me take us out over the bay first, we've been here too long already." She slid into the co's seat. "Tez, signal them cast off."

The miniship leaped free, began drifting sideways; Elmas Ofka worked uncertainly through the configuration shift, vented air too slowly at first, then too suddenly, swore under her breath at her clumsiness as she changed settings. She explained what she was doing in a rapid half-distracted murmur, all too aware of his eyes on her; she loathed doing things badly where people could see it, especially men. When they were at last out over the water and there was nothing for miles around to threaten the miniship, she sat back with a sigh and let it drift. "You want to ask questions, or do I give you the lecture Muhar Teget pounded into me?"

He set a forefinger on a switch. "I touch, you name it, all right?"

"Why not?"

For the next twenty some minutes he worked with her, gaining skill with a speed that astonished her. She'd been told by more than Muh that he was good, too good for the stodgy hauls Sirgûn was giving him, it looked like her informants weren't exaggerating. Before she thought, she said, "Why in forty hells did those godlost execs lay *you* off?"

He laughed. It was a pleasant rumbling sound, deeper than his speaking voice. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Her face burned. Prophet's blessing, it was dark up there except for the faint glow from the instruments. "It was so meant," she said.

"Yeh. Trouble is I never took the time to spread the old oil around."

"But flying...."

"Being good is a frill on most hauls. Adequate does just fine."

"Adequate gets you killed down deep."

He blinked, raised his brows. "If Old Pittipat in Gilisim gets serious about taking title to your merm beds, he'll fetch in slaves that can whomp him up a minisub or something like it before you can say spit, Elmas Ofka. Think about it a minute while I get set up here...." He worked in silence for a short while, tapping in the course, then he swung his chair round to face her. "You've kept hold of those beds up to now because no one can get at them but a Dalliss."

How long do you think that's going to last?" He touched the nearest switch, let his hand drop onto the chair arm. He was serious, frowning, seemed to be groping for a connection between the two of them; his words came in quick spurts with long pauses between them. "Muhar said crude and crudest. He's right. You ever been up front in a longhauler? There's stuff in there. Stuff no one was dreaming of. Just a few years ago. When I was in school. Look at me. I'm what? One year? Two? Not that much older than you. I tell you, Elmas Ofka, what with the skills the slaves bring in from outside. And the fiddling the meths do in their offtime. Well. The ships are smarter than some of the pilots these days."

She stared at the blackness outside and at her face mirrored like a distorted ghost in the curving

glass. "Herk the Jerk," she said softly. "But why boys? They don't know anything."

He pinched his nose, dropped his hands onto his thighs. His thumbs were twitching. "Maybe he thinks they do."

"But everyone knows it's the Ommars and the Dallisses who control the beds."

He shifted restlessly, crossed his legs. "Everyone in Inci," he said. "Everyone in any city with a Sea Farm handy. Yeh, you're probably right about them." He managed a kind of all-over shrug. He was a smallish man, his body limber and relaxed as a sleepy cat. She got glimpses now and then of another kind of person inside, mostly, though, he kept everyone away from that man. "Things get shuffled around a bit differently in different places. You ever hear Huvveds talking about women?"

"I heard one talking to a woman once, a Hordar woman."

She could see him remembering the stories about her and feeling like a fool, then deciding that a continued ignorance would be the most tactful face he could put on. "What I'm saying is, Herk spent most of his time in Gilisim; that's inland. On the Lake. Freshwater. No merm beds there. And since he's been back, who's he talked to? Ollanin and Kabriks. All men.

And who's he got close to him? Other Huvveds, all men. And knowing our beloved leader, do you think he's going to bother asking anyone about how Hordar run their lives? See what I mean?"

"Of all the stupid, arrogant ..."

"That's our Herk."

She settled to a simmering brood while Karrel Goza put his feet up, tilted the chair back and dozed as the miniship droned on toward the Mountain Place.

6

The winds around the Fehdaz's Mountain Place were clawing at each other and coiling into knots while an icy rain hammered verticals and horizontals alike. Karrel Goza tried sliding from one current to another, fighting to get close enough to the Hold to let the women down inside the walls. The rain blinded him, the winds knocked him away again and again, driving him toward the ground, skidding him toward the walls and the three-hundred-foot cliff behind the Hold, coming close to flipping him end for end. He backed off, climbed into a region of comparative peace.

"She's a sweet ship," he said. "Tougher than I thought, plenty of power, but she is little. Not enough weight. Another thing, that lightning, if we're struck, goodnight all. I don't know...."

Elmas Ofka frowned at the clock on the panel, looked over his shoulder at the silent women sitting on the floor behind her. "We can wait maybe half an hour, maybe three-quarters if we really push it, some of us have to be back in our beds before sunup. Let's see if the storm will calm enough to let you take us in."

He nodded. "Even a half hour could make a big difference." He reached under the chair and lifted up the shoulderbag he'd brought with him, took out a mass of knitting and settled it on his lap. Hands busy, eyes flicking back and forth between the needles and the panel, his face intent, he knitted steadily, the warm brown wool dancing through his fingers.

She watched him, fascinated by this stranger who without intending it was showing her just how little she knew about her own kin and landfolk everywhere. It was disturbing, it was challenging, it was infuriating because she knew all too well that she couldn't do a thing about the forces that kept her pinned where she was. Mostly she was too busy to fret about her limitations, she had other things on her mind; now there was nothing to do but think and she didn't much like what she was thinking. Even when she was still Indiz Farm's premiere Dalliss, her life was circumscribed by her talent and her duties and everything her Family expected of her. She fidgeted, wishing she had something to keep her hands and her mind busy. He knew he was going to wait maybe an hour for us, damn him, he's set, why didn't I get ready for a delay? Sssa, woman, you've got to do better.... *Forethought, Ommar Ayrinti beats her finger in the air, forethought saves aftertrouble. If you'd just think before you stepped in something, Elli, just take a measly second and think a little, ay girl. The gnarly forefinger like a bit of dried floatstem beat beat beating at the air before her face. Sssaa....* She moved her shoulders impatiently, swung her chair around so she wouldn't have to look at the man, pulled her legs up and

settled herself to doze away the wait. If she could.

7

Half an hour later the winds were still gusting, but the worst of the knots were teased out and the rain had diminished to a few spatters. Karrel Goza took the miniship in a ragged spiral about the largest structure inside the walls, brought her low and hovered her over an open stretch in the kitchen garden.

Elmas Ofka knelt by a hatch, swept the spotter in a wide circle, slipped it back in the case snapped to her belt. "No guards," she said, pitching her voice so she could be heard above the thrum of the motors, the whine of the wind. "Harli Tanggar, Lirrit Ofka, go." She watched them slide down ladders that twisted and bucked with them and went streaming away at an angle when they dropped free; they landed in rows of hanannas and moved quickly into the shelter of tall groaning beanpoles. "Melly Birah, Hessah Indiz, go." She counted a dozen breaths, watched them jump free when they were more than a manheight from the ground; they landed on the trampled hanannas and ran for the hedge that circled the garden; they went to their stomachs behind coldframes there, merging with the inky shadows. "Binna Tanggar, Jirsy Indiz, go." She turned her head. "See you, Karrel Goza. Our turn, Tez." She tipped through the hatch, caught the ladder and began dropping. The ropes whipped through her gloved hands, the wooden rungs slammed into her knees, her breasts, her face. By the time she reached the ground, she felt like she'd been beaten with rods.

Her isyas came out of the shadows and drifted around her, shadows themselves, knitted hoods over all but eyes, black gloves on hands, narrow black trousers, knitted tops that clung like tight black skins. They were armed with deadly little darters the weaponsmith made for them and cutters that went through metal like a wire through cheese, braided leather straps that came away from their belts with a quick jerk, daggers thin and sharp as a wicked thought and broader all-purpose knives. At the kitchen door, she looked over her shoulder at them and was filled with pride; she pulled her hood away from her mouth, flashed them a grin, then waved Harli Tanggar up to deal with the door.

8

Elms Ofka checked the sketch Toma Indiz drew for her; it was hard to make out even with the pinlight held close to the crumpled paper, the lines were shaky and pale. Left from the kitchen. Done that. Two turns, door, probably locked, could be barred from the in-side. They'd taken care of that, no resistance at all as the cutter sliced through the lock's bolt. Bit of leather folded up and shoved under the door to hold it shut because it had a tendency to swing open and they didn't want to attract the attention of any insomniacs who got a notion to ramble, you want to watch out for those, Elli, they can wreck the best plan there is. Scared the shit out of me when I was busting out; Prophet bless, he was as scared of me and a lot less ready and I tunked him on the head before he could yell. Left again, keep going past five doors, stop at the fifth, there should be a sharp curve ahead. Round that curve the corridor splits into three branches. If Herk's just holding the boys until a ship leaves for Tassalga, they'll be in a tank at the end of the right arm. There, see, where I drew the circle. If he had them under question and is finished with them and they're still alive, then they'll be in the infirmary, that's here, along the middle way, cells here and here, treatment room there. If he's still working on them, go left and down, keep going down. The question chambers are deep enough so Herk's guests, if he ever has any, can't hear the screams. There's a sentry on each level, at least there was when old Grouch was working on me. I doubt little Herk has changed things much. You have to take them out, you don't want them there when you're leaving, you're apt to be in a hurry and maybe carrying one or more of the boys. First though, everything past that curve is being monitored. Camera eye in the ceiling. The guards are watching the screens down in the anteroom to the question chamber. You can't get at them without passing the pickup, so you'll have to take it out. One thing you've got going for you, the wiring in that place is hopeless, things are always shorting out. There's a good chance the guards won't bother trying to fix the system before morning.

She touched Lirrit Ofka's arm.

The isya nodded, dropped to her stomach close to the wall. She extended a collapsible tube painted

black, eased it around the bend, put her eye to the viewer. She lifted her head, wriggled forward a few spans, looked again, repeated the process until all Elmas Ofka could see of her were feet in the soft black mocs with a gray dust smear like a crayon rubbing on the soles, footprints clinging to the bottom of her feet.

Lirrit Ofka rolled over, there was a faint hum, a tinkle. She rolled back, crept forward again, her feet vanishing. For several seconds there was a tense silence broken only by the near inaudible rub of cloth against stone, then even that stopped, then the isya came trotting back. She grinned, gave them a thumb salute. Keeping her voice low but not bothering to whisper, she said, "There was just the one. I spotted the guard, took him out. Dart this time. You hear it?"

"Uh-uh. How fast?"

"Got him in the neck. I think he thought a bug had bit him, he started to raise his hand, poop! down he went."

"Alert?"

"Nah. Leaning against the wall half asleep."

"I see." She thought a minute. "We won't change plans. Question chamber first, the other cells on our way back. Any objections? Good. Let's go."

9

Elmas Ofka and her isyas took out the drowsy sen-tries as they came on them with as little trouble as Lirrit had with the first; they left the men propped against a wall as if they slept sitting with their weapons beside them. Down and down the women went, through latched but not locked doors, running silent as hunting cats through the dimly lit corridors and down the spiraling stair flights. Empty corridors. Not even a rat prowling them, let alone an insomniac.

The door into the lowest level was locked and barred.

Elmas Ofka waved the others back, swung the spot-ter in a wide arc, watching the bright green line that trembled across the readout. The walls were thick stone, N'Ceeagh had warned her she couldn't fully trust the sensors if that stone had traces of metal and most of the stone the old fathers used was like that. The line wobbled in one place but she didn't know if that was her hand or a sign. She swung the spotter back, held it still where she'd seen the tremble. After a moment she was sure she was seeing a spike. She moved the sensor array a hair to the left, another spike. She counted four spikes and a wiggle that might have been another, or a rat in the wall. She thumbed off the spotter and slid it away. "Four," she said, "maybe another. Off that way." She pointed. "Hri cousin, you and Lri cousin be ready to jump soon's we get the door open. Ti cousin, you and May cousin and Hay cousin back them up. Ji cousin, handle the cut-ting. Then you and Bi cousin stand watch out here. Questions? Right. Let's move."

10

The two isyas ran down curving stairs, their mocs scuffing minimally on the stone. They took the last four steps in a flying leap, landed braced on the stone flags of the chamber floor, darters snapping up. Four men sat at a battered table playing cards and drinking from a skin they passed around. They looked sleepy, bored, uninterested in anything, even the money ri-ding on the outcome of the game. The eyes on the man facing the foot of the stairs went wide and he opened his mouth to yell as he shoved his chair back and started to dive away.

Harli Tanggàr put a dart in his cheek, another in his arm and shot the man at the left end of the table as Lirrit Ofka took out the other two. While Elmas Ofka walked to the table to inspect the dead and make sure they weren't shamming, the other three isyas ran si-lently from cell to cell, opening each grill-wicket and shining a light inside.

"Ondar," Tez Ofka called, her voice low and angry. "Come here, please."

Melly Birah was on her knees by the lock, using the cutter carefully, its lightblade angled toward the ceiling so she wouldn't inadvertently slice into the occu-pant of that cell. She finished as Elmas Ofka reached them, got to her feet and pulled the door open.

The boy sleeping heavily on the chain-braced plank moaned and twitched but didn't wake. Elmas

Ofka shone her light on his face, sucked in a breath, let it trickle out, too shocked to say anything. His nose was broken, his face bruised and swollen, there was something wrong with one eye, the lid sagged inward; he was breathing through his mouth so she could see that a number of his teeth were missing. With a secret guilty relief she knew it wasn't her brother; she leaned closer, tried to fit the battered features into a shape she knew, all the boys who'd vanished were her brother's friends, she'd seen them with him more than once. Angrily, she shook her head, straightened and stepped back. "Who ..."

Hessah Indiz pushed past her, knelt beside the bed. "Fazil," she said. "It's Fazil Birah. We were going to ..."

Elmas Ofka frowned, nodded. "See if you can wake him, isya. We've got to locate the others." She moved out of the cell. "Any more here?"

Lirrit Ofka scraped her moc across the filthy floor, Harli Tang& fidgeted and wouldn't look at Elmas Ofka. The other isyas stood with their hands behind them, eyes shifting toward and away from a cell near the stairs. Tezzi Ofka came from behind the door. "Ondar ..."

Elmas Ofka stiffened. For a moment she stood very still, then she ran past Tezzi into the cell. She pulled up, gulping as her stomach convulsed at what she saw. Bodies stacked on the floor like firewood. Bodies so torn and battered they weren't even butcher's meat. She moved the light over the faces visible, stopped it on one. Her hand trembled. "Tangus," she whispered, "Tangus Indiz."

Tezzi's hand closed on her shoulder, tugged at her. "Ondar, Fazil Birah's awake, he wants you."

Elmas Ofka shuddered, she wanted to scream, she wanted to swing round, clawing and kicking. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself calm. Feeling brittle as a sheet of sugar candy, she turned with slow care and walked out of the cell without really seeing the door or Tezzi Ofka or anything. Fingers just touching the wall, needing the contact with stone and wood to keep in mind where she was and what she had to do, she moved toward the first cell. Tangus Indiz was her baby brother, she'd raised him from the time he was weaned, taking care of the youngers was one of her jobs before she went to diving. Of all the toddlers she bathed and clothed, cuddled and taught, he was her favorite, a fey baby, happy, terribly bright with the accent on terrible, too full of jagged energies to fit comfortably inside the settled outlines of farm life. She'd felt the kinship of his spirit which was more to her than the kinship of the blood and bled for him as time passed and took him out of her hands. She was a diver and gifted enough to know she was going to be Dalliss with all the freedom that meant, her energies were funneled that way, she didn't have to fight to breathe. He did. He had a dozen talents but none of them seized hold of him like diving did her, he drifted and used his energy on mischiefs, things that were giggles at first, puncturing pomposities to the general applause of the middlers in school or early apprenticeship. He was punished; pomposities don't appreciate needles, clever or not, or those who use them, and generally have the power to enforce their disapproval. Except for Elmas Ofka and a few others, the middlers who laughed at his antics and urged him on left him dangling when he was caught. The past year she'd seen him turn bitter and his fancies take on malicious overtones. She worried about him, she couldn't reach him anymore, he wouldn't listen to her. No more worries now. Tears stung her eyes. No. I won't cry. Not here. Not now. She stopped walking, closed her eyes and fought herself calm again, then moved into the cell with Fazil Birah and knelt beside the plank.

The collapsed eye was still shut, sealed with blood and mucus, but the other eye was open and filled with pain and triumph. "Herk. He ..."

"I know. We'll hang the bastard for this."

His mouth stretched in a shaky gaping grin. "Fazi, what'd he want? Why'd he grab you?"

"Rozh ... 'earlz. W-w'ere...."

"He wanted to know where the beds are?"

"Y-yeh. Din' know ... w-we cu'un't tell him."

"He didn't know he should've taken women?"

"Nu no. W-we din't t-tell him. Tan tang'z curse him. W-wu'n't tell him nothin...." He was breathing hard, growing visibly weaker. When he tried to speak again, Elmas Ofka shushed him.

"I've got it," she said. "Tangus cursed him, wouldn't tell him spit. None of you told him anything. Look, Fazi. The isya is going to give you something so we can get you out of here."

He stirred, agitated. A broken hand clawed at her arm. "No," he managed. "Lea' me ... 'nzide ... buzted." He closed his eye, his mouth moved; he said something, she couldn't hear it, had to bend down until her ear brushed his lips. "Kill me."

She pushed away from him, pressed her fingers to her eyes. After a moment she sighed, nodded. "Yes." She unclipped her darter. "Thou my brother, thou my lover, may thy return be in happier times." She shot him, sighed again and got to her feet. Hessah Indiz was trembling, her eyes glazed. Elmas Ofka wrapped her arms about her isya, held her tight until she stopped shaking, then she stepped back. "Let's get out of here."

11

After a quick look at Elmas Ofka, Karrel Goza busied himself with the controls, holding the miniship level in spite of the erratic winds bouncing off the cliff. As soon as all the isyas were climbing the ladders, he began venting air, taking the ship gradually higher until they were inside and the hatches were closed, then he sent the ship angling steeply upward, where he caught a tail wind and went whipping back toward gul Inci.

The sky was clearing rapidly, starsprays newly brilliant in the rainwashed air touched the seaswells below with subtle grays; Elmas Ofka watched the wrinkled water pass beneath them until she saw the shore approaching. She glanced at Karrel Goza. He was cat-quiet again, knitting steadily at a sleeve; he had a gift for silence; she hadn't appreciated it before, but it worked to ease the pain in her. "They were dead. All but one and he was dying."

"Ah."

"You were right. Herk didn't know."

"And he still doesn't, mmh?"

"The boy said they didn't tell him. I don't know."

"You going to warn the Families?"

"Not me. How can I? Someone will, I'll see to that."

"Going after Herk?"

She sat rubbing her hands back and forth along the chairarms, her eyes fixed on his face. "Yes," she said finally. "You in?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "It's time to do something."

"He'll be expecting it."

"Herky Jerky? Never, who'd dare."

"What'd you do with the guards? Dead? Thought so. Then he's got a pile of dead men inside his Palace and a litter of footprints in his veggies, might be enough to shake some sense into him."

"Doesn't matter. We'll just have to be cleverer."

"You know what worries me most?"

"I've a suspicion. The Sech?"

"Yeh. We all better keep our heads down while he's nosing around. Your brother being in it, he'll be after the Indiz. And the families of the other boys. Um. Sorry I didn't think about this before, your footprints, they'll be too small for men, the Grouch, he'll proba-bly bounce the Dallisses around. All the divers."

She smiled. "We've been doing this a while, Karrel Goza. Things being the way they are, it doesn't matter that much about me, the Sech will have more than a suspicion who ran the raid; still, no use presenting him with proof so he can make trouble for the others. We took care of that little problem before we called you back."

"Sorry about that."

"We appreciate the thought."

"Dance Ground coming up, a couple minutes." She looked at the clock. "We made better time than I thought."

"Tailwind."

She smiled at him, it felt good to smile again, the tight thing in her chest was beginning to open up. "Good pilot is more like it."

"Could be." He grinned back at her.

"You can give us a little extra time?"

"Sure."

"Put Windskimmer to bed for us."

"Windskimmer?"

"Her name."

"Nice."

"Sssaa, you!"

"Nah, I mean it. Things I was flying had names like Fud 40 and Kek 10, you can't do much with Fud." He reached for the panel.

"Wait. We usually don't land where we took off. There's an old wharf out east of Inci, no one uses it any more. Let the isyas down there."

"Gotcha. I'd better make a wide sweep round, don't want to wake the nightwatch."

"Yes." She swung the chair around. In the dim gray light she saw her isyas sitting with their knees drawn up, arms crossed on them, looking very different now. They'd changed from their blacks and were back in blouses and skirts and sandals, there was nothing on them to show where they'd been or what they'd been doing. "Tomorrow evening," she said. "Those of you who can come to Yuryur Beach. Unless there's trou-ble, I'll meet you. We need to say Avvedas for our boys. Say them in your soul if you can't be with us. As I might have to do. If I can't be with you, I will be thinking of you all, my blessings, my sisters. Forget Herk until the Avvedas are said, then, my sisters, my loves, think how we can pay him without destroying our Families. My blood is cold, my sisters, my blood is ice. He will not live to boast what he has done. There is no hurry to it, there is no urgency in it, there is certainty beyond all question. Herk will pay. It may take years, but Herk will pay."

VII

1. Three months std. after the meeting on Telffer. Helvetia.

It took the usual day and a half to work through the Helvetian perimeter fortifications and stash Slancy Orza in the parking grid; there was also the usual argument over leaving Kinok and the current Kahat on board, but everyone knew the idiosyncrasies of the Sikkul Paems, so the objections were perfunctory; I bought an exception permit and that was the end of that. Getting onto Helvetia's surface is tedious, tiring and at times humiliating, but nobody complains; in a chaotic universe where currencies are wildly various and often of dubious value, Helvetia offers a means of assessing and balancing values plus the register circuit for con-tracts and other services no single government or group of governments can provide. Access to Helvetia is sometimes vital and at all times useful to anyone trying to trade beyond the borders of his/her local hege-mony. If you want Helvetian services, you play by Helvetian rules.

Whistling snatches of songs I'd picked up here and there (a habit of mine that Kumari never appreciated, but she wasn't there at the moment) I ran through Slancy's defenses, making sure she was thoroughly buttoned up before I left her. Even with Helvetian security watching the grid and Kinok nesting down in the driveroom, I wasn't going to underestimate the talents of the types Bolodo could afford to hire. Espe-cially after watching Adelaar work over those defenses on the way here. Like most of us she found insplitting a complete bore and preferred to have something to occupy her, so she was paying part of her fee ahead of time. What I was getting at, after watching her I wasn't as happy as I wanted to be, anybody with her talent could peel my poor Slancy like an overripe orange. Given time. Which I hoped Security wouldn't give them. So, having gone completely round the cir-cle, there I was playing with what I'd got. I was finishing up when Adelaar came onto the bridge. I looked over my shoulder and smiled when I saw the rapier she'd buckled on; no fancy ornament, it had a used and useful

look. "You're well prepared," I said.

"I've been here before." She touched the bone hilt of the sword. "And had to use this before."

Helvetian rules. No weapons except knives or swords allowed downsurface, they catch you with a gun, a lightlance, whatever, you're fined and it's no fleabite, they catch you again and you go to work on one of the farms or in the mines. Never heard they caught any-one three times. Result of all this is it's a dueling society, the little daytime clerks become nighttime rogues and swaggerers living out byzantine fantasies with an edge of real danger to them. Outside the trucegrounds you'd better hire a bodyguard or be able to defend yourself. The Faceless Seven who run the place refuse responsibility for anything that happens to idiots who should know better. Colorful place.

I rather enjoy my visits here. They take me back to my first body when I was earning my living with a two-handed broadsword my daddy gave me. Actually he made it for the local lord's braindead whelp, but when I had to hit the hills to keep my neck in one piece, he booted my backside for old time's sake and gave me the sword to remember him by. Which is by way of explaining that the sword I take downsurface is a two-handed broadsword with a pora-ini stressed crys-tal edge bonded onto the lightweight byttersteel alloy. Not that I'm challenged much these days. After I acquired this body and Slancy and had been trading in this and that for a year or so, time came I had business on Helvetia. I knew how things worked there so I

went to an acquaintance who was a metalsmith in his spare time (with highly irregular access to some very special alloys), and had him make most of Harska (I named her Harska after an old old sometime friend); I did the bonding myself, a little trick I picked up from the RMoahl. And I fixed up a sheath that could hold her so I wouldn't slice my butt off if I had to do some dodging. That was Kumari's first trip with me and we went out celebrating after we finished business. When she's dressed for playtime, she's beautiful in her eerie way, she's got no more figure than a teener boy, but what there is of her is elegant. Some local hotshot decided he was the answer to her dreams and wouldn't back off when she informed him she wasn't interested. So she told him in a voice that cut like Harska's, edge that he had the intelligence of a sea slug, that she wouldn't be interested in him or any other man since she belonged to another species and was neuter be-sides and even if she weren't, he smelled bad. I wasn't going to interfere; I'd seen her in action a couple of times with the dozen or more small knives she has tucked away here and there about her body; she was willing and more than able to handle that character herself though she looked fragile as thistledown, but he wouldn't have it that way, probably didn't suit his self-image; he challenged me instead. I took his arm off and an ear with it in the first thirty seconds of that duel; one of his friends tried to cry foul, but there was nothing in the rules about fancy touches like that edge. It said sword and sword she was. And sword she is.

Kumari came in. She raised her brows. "Not dressed yet?"

She meant Harska. I grinned. "Just making a last go-through. Got us on a shuttle?"

"Twenty minutes on, so don't waste time primping. The next opening is six hours from now. There's a bubble in the lock, ready for the transfer. I've booked us into an ottotel trucehouse and set up a tentative appointment with O-nioni tomorrow to get the con-tract working and settle the escrow. Ti Vnok wants to talk to you tonight. If possible. He says a shielded room at the Treehouse and come blankshield. Which means Pels and I will be there ahead of you working the house. If you think it's worth the trouble."

"Let's see what's waiting first. We might have to do some tailcleaning."

"Right. If Pels' nose is as sharp as he thinks." Adelaar clicked her tongue, a sharp impatient sound. "What are you two talking about?"

"Pels thinks we have ticks on our tail. Followed us in after we surfaced out beyond the Limit."

"I see."

"Must have guessed we were heading here and mes-saged ahead."

"No doubt."

"Right. Kumari, take our client to the bubble, I'll collect Pels and my gear and meet you, five minutes, I swear."

"Right." Kumari drawled the word, turning it into a sarcastic comment. "Have you ever noticed, aici

Arash,” she touched Adelaar’s arm and nudged her toward the exit, “how much men talk about women dawdling and how long it takes them to get themselves together?”

2

The shuttle platform was a towertop that looked down on clouds when there were any and south across the great glittering city, a city that grew on the edge of an ocean and spread inland to jagged young moun-tains. In the trucegrounds and the business sectors, sunlight ran like water along slickery surfaces, flick-ered erratically off shattered diamante walls, was thrown in white hot spears from mirror to mirror, mirror mirror on the wall who’s the costliest city of all, mirror mirror everywhere and never a one to look in (go blind if you tried), the spears going here, going there, constantly altering direction as the mirrors changed orientation and the sun rode its customary arc across the sky. It was a city of light, beautiful in its imperious way, meant to intimidate the visitors stepping unaware onto the glassed-in platform; even those who’d been there before were affected by it no matter how blasé a face they wore. We touched down late in the after-noon when some of the glitter and slide was muted, not quite blinding, and still it was a breath stealing thing to stand there and look out across it to a sea bluer than blue melding into a misty blue sky.

Down on ground level the light was even more intense, shooting past you, through you, around you, dissolving wall and street alike into more light, until you began to wonder if anything was real, including yourself; it was disturbing, uncomfortable—and very practical. Among other things it kept streets and walk-ways clear, no matter how many visitors descended on the city. Scattered haphazardly, at all levels from roof to cellar, there were small arbors with mossy fountains and cool air rustling through the leaves of lace trees and pungent conifers, where shadows flicked across the face of the person sitting across a table from you with the intimacy of a caress. The contrast was a killer punch more subtle than a drug, and did they know it, those buyers and sellers, those agents and facilitators who were parasites on the primary business of Helvetia, those citizens and business agents who lived in the city and on the city, year round, year on year. More con-tracts were registered from the arbors than in all the offices, cabinets, bureaus put together.

We bought visors from a robovender in case we needed to hit the streets, dropped to the terminal and fought the swarm at the tube cars until we managed to snag a car bound for the ottotel trucehouse where Kumari had booked us in. Kumari and I kept Adelaar sandwiched between us and Pels rode rearguard, pull-ing after him a mob of females of every shape and size, bipeds, tripeds and even a hairy monopod; they all seemed to want to catch him up and cuddle him (the monopod too, which presented an interesting prob-lem in logistics), they giggled when he snarled at them, a daring octoped with blushing tentacles scratched be-hind his ear, you wouldn’t think these were hard-driving, high-pressure businesswomen capable of meta-phorically (or even actually) cutting a rival’s throat with zest and panache; it must be some pheromone he gives off; if you could package it and sell it as perfume you’d make a fortune. It was as effective as it _always was, his peculiar defense, those females made a fine and fancy shield for the rest of us. Anyone who had mayhem on his (or her or ve’s or its) mind generally backed off from performing in front of that many interested spectators. And, give this to the Faceless Seven, we didn’t have to worry about long distance sniping.

Pels wriggled loose, jumped into the car as the doors were sliding shut; his growl when I grinned at him was more heartfelt than usual; I think it’s time he had a vacation, probably back on Mevvyaurrang mak-ing triads with Arras and Maungs; he comes back from those visits with his not-fur shivering and his eyes glazed and not talking to anyone but his plants for a month or more. I signed a question to Kumari (we assumed everything public was on-line to the mainBrain)—had she seen any unusual interest in us? She had a smile for Pels, but shook her head. Pels grunted. One, maybe two, he signed. In the next module over on this car. I didn’t like it, but I expected it. I swung my chair round to face the back of our module in case they’d figured a way to get through it and I waited for the trip to end. We’d be on truceground when we came out, so we could hang around and see who emerged with us. Stupid planning, maybe. I exercised a few brain cells running that one round, but in a breath or two it was obvious I was counting angels and pinheads so I let it drop. Maybe Pels was wrong, but I didn’t think

that was any too probable; like I said before, Aurrangers are predators and good at it and not all that long ago semi-cannibals, by which I mean one of the ways they kept the population stable was to hunt down and eat any excess Raus when they were young and tender and about to hit puberty. A few millennia of this and the descendants of those Raus who escaped the pot were very very hard to track.

Half a dozen came out of that module, more from the third, say around thirty bodies altogether, but the two we wanted weren't hard to spot, idiots, they were so careful not to look at us. Not pros, no way. Like the two going after Adelaar back on Telffer, the ones Shadow dropped, local computer jocks trying to earn points with the head office. Making sure we went where we told the world we were going. They scuttled out of the lobby like startled mice. Wonder what they'd do if I sneaked after them and yelled boo in their bitty ears. Mmh.

3

Kumari'd got a sealed four body unit for us which she charged to the client's diCarx when we got inside. Adelaar didn't comment, just marched her gear into her cubby and did her best to slam the door on us. It's not that easy to work off a snit in an ottotel, the doors Doze shut at the same speed whenever they're pushed or left alone, there's nothing much you can break or throw and the walls are padded so beating your head on them doesn't make much sense. She wasn't an-oyed about having to pay expenses, that was part of the deal. It was being shut into a tincan for three solid months with the same people that got to her, espe-cially Kinok. Arguing with a Sikkul Paem was an exercise in frustration; when ve decided ve didn't want to talk any longer, ve shooed Kahat away from the translator board and dug ve's roots in one of ve's earthbeds; after that you might as well try arguing with a dill plant which is more or less what ve smelled like. Slancy's workshop was down in ve's region and ve insisted on knowing everything that went on in that part of the ship. Adelaar was furious at ve's interfer-ence and loathed having ve's snoopers everywhere she went; her methods were part of her business as-sets, she said; they were emphatically not part of the deal and if I thought they were, I was soft in the head. Kinok wasn't talking when I went round to see him, so I told her to set up distorters in the workshop and I stationed Pels outside the door to keep our pet Paem from barging in on her. Ve took it well enough, ve's the only Paem I've met who has something resembling a sense of humor, which is probably the reason ve's lasted so long with us. Something I didn't tell Adelaar and I'd really rather she didn't find out, ve budded off a Kahat-clone and sneaked the little creature into the shop; it pretended it was one of the plants that kept the air fresh. I found it a couple of days before we flipped back to realspace and got it out of there. Kinok just rubbed two of ve's coils together to make that squeaky sound ve thinks is laughter and ate the clone. Which, if I understand anything about Paem physiology, transferred all the clone knew into Kinok's own nerve cells.

After a bath, a change of clothes and a reasonably edible meal, we met in the parley to decide how we were going to work this situation. Sealed units are supposed to be free of snoopears, but anyone who trusts official noises about such things doesn't last long on Helvetia or anywhere else. We swung tuple loung-ers around one of Adelaar's choicer distorters and stretched out on them. For a breath or two no one said anything. Pels was digging his claws into his chin fur, Kumari had a dreamy look as if she were contem-plating a favorite poem, Adelaar had lost her frown and was a lot more relaxed than she'd been in days. Prospect of action, I suppose.

"Sooner or later each of us is going to be chal-lenged," I said.

"No."

Adelaar looked like she wanted to start an argu-ment over that, but I shook my head at her and, wonder of wonders, she shut up; I knew that sound, Kri was running on a mix of hunch and logic that was almost never wrong.

"No," she repeated. "Not all of us. You and Adelaar. Stink too much of setup if they went after all of us; there's a limit how far a pro can go; it flexes some; I doubt that much; the Seven want to avoid any smell of ambush, not good for business. And there's no need anyway. It's your ship, Swar; should they get you, we'd have to go through all that business of transfer-ring title, could take a year or more, plenty of time for Bolodo to clean up their act. And it's Adelaar's daugh-ter; without her around to pay the bills,

Bolodo might think we'd say hell with it and go on to something else." She waved a hand at Pels, wriggled her fingers in a kind of digital grin. "Us you could replace in half an hour or less." Pels growled. "Well, as far as jobs go."

I looked at Adelaar. She lifted a hand, let it fall, but didn't say anything. "Right," I said. "How good are you with that sword of yours?"

"I'm still alive, one challenger's dead, another can't walk very well, I cut a few nerves in his left leg. One was pro, one wasn't, the dead one. The pro was mid-dling good, it was a business matter."

"Hmm. Bolodo won't be fooling around this time, they'll buy the best there is, no more amateur talent." I thought about that a while. "If we can't avoid a challenge, maybe we can maneuver the ground. You up for taking a chance, aici Arash?"

"If there's a point to it." She tapped on the pneu-matic arm beside her. "You mean bait them. Tonight?"

"Catch 'em before they're set."

"And if they don't bite?"

"Then they don't and we have some fun playing before we get serious."

"Sounds good." More tip-tapping on the soft resilient plastic, tiny scratching sounds; her nails were pointed and painted with a metallic film that turned them into small knives; I wouldn't be all that surprised to learn they had poison packed behind them. She'd fixed them up that way before we left Slancy; that was one of the reasons I started thinking it might be a good idea to force the pace. "What ground?" she said.

"Darkland. The Rabbid Babbit. You know it?"

"I've been there. Why that House, what about Tinzy's Amberland, or some other place?"

"Amberland's too establishment, too many high level execs and bankers in the crowd. I want room for some creative cheating. Those types are either a bunch of half-assed romantics with an inquisitor's touch with heretics, or a bunch of snobs who want to keep ... um ... ah ... the creative interpretation of rules as an executive privilege, not something available to the working slob or us common visitors. Those fingernails of yours, as an example, they're apt to rule them illegal given a protest. I'm sure you'd rather keep them as is."

"Babbit's different?"

"As different as the Seven allow. A lot of duelists base from there."

She laughed, startled into it; for the first time she seemed pleased with something I said. "And that's a recommendation?"

"Right."

She thought that over a minute, then nodded. "What works, as long as it's not flagrant enough to be nailed on."

"Right."

"And that gives us an edge?"

"Me, yes. You, I don't know."

She laughed again, a real laugh bubbling up from her toes; I didn't know she had it in her. For a minute I almost liked her. "All right, I can go with that. One thing though," she hesitated, then pushed herself up. "I'll give you a signature that'll release the escrow account to you ..." she slipped off the tupple lounge, stood with her arms crossed, "day after tomorrow, if you'll give me your word you'll fetch Aslan out even if I'm killed or put down for a long stretch at the meatshop."

"You got it." She waited, her eyes on me. "All right, I'll spell it out," I said, "Whatever happens, long as I'm alive and reasonably intact, I'll fetch Aslan aid Adlaar home to University. Satisfied?"

"Quite. When do you want to leave?"

"Mmh. Sun's down. I'd rather wait till after mid-night, things get looser."

She examined me, eyes narrowed. "Black leather with studs. Lots of studs."

"Not leather." I grinned. "Synthaskin, elasticized. "Better. Shirt or bare arms?"

"White silk, billowy. To cover possible deficiencies." I looked her over. "Imaginary deficiencies."

"Right." She grinned. "Earrings, rings, wristbands, fake gems wherever there's a place to hang them."

She touched her forehead. "Pearshape ruby dangling here?"

"If it won't bother your moves."

"I can always shuck it before things get serious."

"Right. Hair?"

"Silvergilt. Both of us. A matched pair."

"Two minds with but a single thought. Kumari." She was fizzing and rattling with her kind of laughter. I ignored that. "Put off Vnok till tomorrow and order us a jit. We might as well let whoever's interested know we're coming."

When we came out of our cubbies and struck a pose, Pels and Kumari fell out laughing. We left them holding their sides and whooping and drop-tubed to the lobby where we climbed in the jit we'd ordered and took off for the Darklands.

4

The jit dropped us at the Dusky Gate, city drivers wouldn't go into the Darklands for fear of losing their machines. No law past that heavy arch, only Darkland rules which said what you had was yours as long as you could keep it and only that long; whatever some-one was sly enough, quick enough or brutal enough to take belonged to them under the same rules. Once you made a House, though, you could rent protection and be reasonably secure from muggers, cutpurses and assassins. That was a matter of business, there had to be an edge of danger but nothing too threatening or the slummers wouldn't come and the game rooms would lose their pigeons, the psychodromes would spray their putchemieo dreammist on props, not peo-ple. Which meant we were safe from ambush only when we reached the Rabbid Babbit. We walked through the Gate.

Mainstreet was wide, paved with thin slabs of rough-cut stone. Right now they were wet (it must have rained while we were getting ready), with puddlets in the chisel gouges shining yellow and red as they reflected the light from the luso torches that lined the sides of Mainstreet. The torches looked real enough until you noticed they never seemed to burn down; the smell of hot tar and burning oil, the crackle and snap of the fire, the heat, they were all there; a little too much there tonight, I expect the nerp who ran the illusion was high on something and got carried away with the effects.

The Houses were set back a short distance from the street, leaving room for sidewalk cafes with tables under markVdomes where anyone interested could watch the action on the street without any danger of that action spilling over on them. There was a mid-dling crowd out, walking from House to House for the thrill of flirting with thieves and budding duelists (and because there was no other way to change Houses, you walked or you stayed where you were). The air was cool and damp, though it wasn't raining now. The strollers seemed more subdued than I remembered, but maybe this was just a more inhibited bunch. The body paint on a lacertine group we passed was a mix of earth colors, dull reds and grayed-down yellows; last time I was here the lacertines had gone for brilliant primaries, a slim green back could be like a shout of laughter. Now those backs were more like smiles, subtle smiles that might speak either pleasure or mock-ery. Times change and who can read the branches if he hasn't watched them grow?

Adelaar walked half a pace ahead of me, no more joking for her. Made me a little sad, she'd let an imp show briefly, then shooed it home; I liked that imp, a bit more of her in the woman would improve the mix a lot, but I think she was afraid of that side of her. And I think she was already regretting the impulse that stuffed her into that costume.

We went past Amberland. Adelaar glanced at the *polo*—females of half a dozen species moving through a complex and beautiful melange of half a dozen ancient dances, swaying through the air across the front of the House, larger than life, gaudy, garish, down--and-dirty seductive, there was a little blonde, well, I dragged my mind back to where I was, and what I was doing; I could see Adelaar preferred the company in there to mine, poor little imp deep inside her never let off its leash; we weren't going to be friends, Adelaar and me, maybe pleasant acquaintances if we kept off politics. There were several shadows drifting after us, but they kept back, ready to vanish down the nearest alley if either of us took a notion to chase them, which made me think they were just making sure where we went. It wasn't

the crowd in the street that stopped my attack, no one in his right mind interfered in a fight, not in Darklands. If you or your party weren't involved, you got out of there. Fast. No lingering to gawk at the pretty fight.

We passed several other Houses, each with its iden-tifying holo. *Crezmir Tarkitzdom*, bull-leapers and vodi slayers and antique idols. *Surrealismo*, hmm, inde-scribable and constantly changing (I've never seen that holo repeat itself and it's always weird; when I have a moment with nothing else to occupy me, I wonder about the minds that come up with some of the things I've seen there). *Wildwood*. *Tranqworld*. *The Rabbid Babbit*. Its holo was the same as before, a collection of assorted Uglys and Hairys barbequing a Banker over a lusty pile of coals, a prim-faced character with an immaculate tunic and stovepipe trousers, chained to a spit which the Ugs and Hairs were turning and turn-ing, wringing sweat of a sort from him, gold coins dropping like rain. Adelaar made a face at the thing, gave me a dark look and pushed through the Gate onto the Babbitwalk.

I waved the Doorman off and followed her into the House; we weren't buying protection tonight.

5

Around three hours later, after bar hopping a while and wandering through the drome and sitting through six or seven acts in the music hall, we left the hall and started for the casino; I was beginning to think those shadows I'd spotted were either my imagination or a mugger gang enticed by the fake gems we were loaded down with and the dumb getup we were wearing. Adelaar was looking tired and depressed and uncom-fortable. If no one took our bait, I had a suspicion she was going to make me regret the time we spent troll-ing it.

Adelaar hit my arm, a tap but it stung. "Haven't we wasted enough time?"

"Just about. I said there was only a chance they'd bite."

"I suppose it could've worked." She yawned. "Don't mind me, I get cranky when I'm bored." The imp peeped out again and she smiled up at me. "Aslan's told me that often enough."

"Right. You want to call a jit to the Gate, or try a few games first?"

"Games. After tonight we get serious again." She raked the headband off. "Here, you carry this; I don't want to feel as moronic as I look." She started stripping off the chains and bracelets and excess rings, I stuffed them down my shirt as she handed them to me; that's our motto, the client's wishes come first, it was damn uncomfortable though, they were sticky with her sweat and some of those gems had sharp corners.

We weren't paying attention to what was happening around us, we'd both given up the stalk. Maybe it was the watched pot thing, but about ten seconds into that strip act Adelaar was doing with the fake jewelry, someone slammed into me, spraying grushajuce ev-erywhere; it was a mess, I was dripping, my shirt was sogged against me stinking sweet and slimy, Adelaar was cursing and using her sleeve to wipe her face as she ignored the attempts of a female duelist to set the challenge going. I got my back against a wall fast, just in case, but the man who'd collided with me was intent on doing this the proper way; he slapped a glove in the direction of my face, called me a mannerless clod and invited me to redress my honor on the dueling ground. Babbit's android guards were there, they'd come out of the walls as soon as the mess started, stunners ready to make sure Babbit's version of the rules held fast ('droid guards don't come under the weapon ban when they're hired from the city council by respectable home firms to protect the premises), a comforting sight they were, too. I managed a bow of sorts, proclaimed my innocence of all malice and inquired if an apology would be acceptable. Naturally it wasn't, so there we were, bait taken; all we had to do now was win our respective fights and damage our opponents so badly that other duelists would be disinclined to take up the gage, no matter what the prize. It wasn't going to be a pretty fight, not one of the epic duels that songsmiths celebrated, but I never had much time for that kind of thing anyway.

6

"Hra Trewwa Harona." He sketched a bow but didn't take his eyes off me. He was tall and wiry, skin like polished walnut, not a hair on his head, not even eyelashes, one of the cousin races but nothing

about him to say which world he whelped on; way he moved, he was fast and agile.

“Swardheld Quale,” I said.

“Lugat Haza,” the woman said, touched lips and heart and spread her hands palm out; she had a shock of bright red hair, green eyes and a spray of freckles across a beaky nose. Another cousin, equally anony-mous.

“Adelaar aici Arash.” Adelaar put her hands palm to palm in front of her, bobbed her head and shoul-ders in a quick dip.

The four of us were standing on the broad oval of the dueling floor; the tiered seats outside the lighted area were filling quickly, I could hear the sounds of scuffling feet and a growing mutter of conversation. It was as if the walls had sucked in the challenge and spat it out in every section of the House, enticing to this vault most of those who heard it. We were going to have a large and interested audience. It’s what I wanted, what I’d planned to get. Why I was forcing the fight in here rather than leaving it to chance. In a brangle on the street without witnesses anything could happen and the survivors could say what they wanted without contradiction.

Adelaar stepped away and started wrapping the rem-nants of her shirt around her right arm; she’d laced up the vest so it didn’t flop about (her either) and twitched her swordbelt round so the rapier’s hilt was on her left. From what I’d seen she was ambidextrous with a slight tendency to favor her right hand; apparently she was going to start this thing off as a lefter; I’ve had a few skirmishes with lefters and I knew how they can throw you off your pace. I relaxed some more and got rid of the soggy shirt, leaving the wristlets which weren’t as flimsy as they looked; they wouldn’t turn Harska’s edge, but there wasn’t much else they couldn’t bat aside.

The House Referee came up the ramp and stumped to the center of the oval, ordering us to follow him with a sweep of a muscular arm. Adelaar and I stopped a few paces apart on his left, Lugat and Hra Trewwa faced us on his right. He was a chunky cold-eyed Frajjer, a long pole in his left paw, its end beaten into a knife-edged half circle; any flagrant infringement of Babbit’s rules and he took out the offender, no re-course, his judgment was final. There might not be many rules in Babbitland, but they were serious about those they had. When I say final, it was sometimes exactly that, said offender was cremated the next day.

He faced Adelaar and me. “You are challenged. They say as-is. You two got the veto, so?”

“As-is, that’s fine with me. Del?”

“As-is,” she said.

“Caveats?”

“None,” I said. Lugat’s nose twitched, she looked scornful and delighted, a mix of expressions that did nothing much for her face. She stood shaking her arms lightly; beneath the stretch silk you could see her muscles shifting; she was sleek and feral as a hunting cat.

“First-blood or final?”

“Final,” I said. Adelaar nodded.

He looked over his shoulder at the other two. “Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Hra Trewwa said; the woman shrugged. “Agreed,” she said.

The Frajjer waved us apart, Adelaar and Lugat to the left end of the oval, Trewwa and me to the right. He beat the end of his pole against the floor, three solemn thumps. While he was announcing the terms of engagement, Hra Trewwa took off the long cape he was wearing and stripped out the lining. A weighted net. Shit. I hated netmen. Looks like Bolodo did their homework, got someone to tell them about the last mix-up I had here. I slid my lady from her sheath, brought her past my head, the light catching the crys-tal edge and making a minor glory of her; I handled her as if she had the mass her size suggested, rested her blunt end on the floor and stood waiting with both hands closed round her hilt. Trewwa probably knew she was a slasher, not a stabber, what I hoped he didn’t know was how nimble she was; looking at her size and conformation you’d think she’d be a heller once I got her wound up, but she’d be slow as a sleepy bumphel. Trewwa snapped the net open; from the way it shimmered it was Menavidetin monofilament. He flipped it around his neck and let the ends hang while he gave me a cocky grin and began working on his walking stick. After a bit of twisting it extended into a two-pronged lance

not much longer than assegai traditional; the points of the prongs glittered in the strong light like blue-white diamonds. Double shit. I was going to spend most of this dance running like some fieldsport jock after a speed record.

Lugat produced a pair of k'duries, wrist bands with a two chains on each about the length of her arms; at the end of the chains were soft lead balls the size of a green peach. She spread her fingers; the nails glittered. Adelaar wasn't the only one with a fancy for claws. I hoped she knew how to deal with a k'duri expert; I had a mix-up with one a few years back and felt lucky to come out of it with some broken bones and an aching head, that femme wrapped a chain around my stunner and jerked it away, fast! you wouldn't believe how fast she could whirr those things; then she got my boot knife, broke my right arm and was playing pattacake with my head when I left through a window I didn't bother to open.

The Ref blew his whistle and retreated to the edge of the oval.

Adelaar and Lugat circled warily. Adelaar kept back, watching the sweep of the balls, reading the k'durin's body. Lugat was gripping the chains about midpoint, one emerging between thumb and forefinger, other between the last two fingers. Each hand moved separately, the chain loops clinking and burring as they swung, the balls whispering round with lazy swishes; her arms shifted out and in, a cadenced mini-dance like the sway of a cobra, as hypnotic and as potentially lethal, without any indication of where the attack would come from. Adelaar feinted, feinted again, testing the space about the k'durin with the point of her rapier, retreating always before one of the chains could wrap about the sword and pull it from her or sneak around it and break a hand or an arm.

I held Harska angled out before me, swaying her a little, camouflaging her nimble nature. My first sword, you swung her a couple times and you went and lay down and breathed hard for a while. Of course, if you knew what you were doing and had reasonable armor, once or twice was about all you needed. Trewwa was as quick as he looked, slipping back or sideways with the ease of a man running at you; he had the bident in his left hand, the net in his right, bunched into a thick loose rope which he kept flicking at me, face then ankles, whipping it away before I could get Harska after it; he was wary of her edge even with the mono-fil's toughness. He darted the bident at me, weaving it into the flick-retreat of the net, testing me, trying to read how fast I was and what I knew about netmen. And he was maneuvering me closer to Lugat. This was a doubleduel, nothing against one of the partners breaking off his or her fight to help the other.

Adelaar eased closer. The left-hand lead balls shot out, their chain loops suddenly released. She ducked away. One sphere whistled over her head, the other hit but not solidly (it would have cracked her skull if it had); it grazed her temple, slid off her hair, banged into her shoulder, catching for an instant on one of the pointed studs on the back of her vest. In spite of the dizzy dark that blurred her vision and slurred her mind, she took advantage of that brief catch, turned the duck into a low attack and managed to carve a piece out of Lugat's left leg, only a deep scratch, but it started bleeding sluggishly. She dropped flat, rolled frantically away before all four of the lead spheres slammed into her; she scrambled onto her feet outside the limit of the chains and began prowling once again, watching Lugat as she drew the chains in and brought the balls to order.

The net flicked out, low, no feint this time, he was after my ankles if he could get them; if I jumped clear, he'd twitch the net open and have me like a gasping fish which he'd skewer on the double prongs of his lance. At the same time, he beat Harska aside with the lancepole, hitting her against the flat, careful still of her edge. Instead of jumping clear, I brought Harska in a quick circle, freeing her from the push of the pole; continuing the move, I jumped into the net, falling flat on it, pinning it temporarily while I swung Harska one-handed at Trewwa's legs; she went through flesh and bone like butter; he fell over, screaming with rage, too angry to feel the pain yet; he hadn't expected her to swing that fast and easy; I'd cheated him and he wanted blood for it; he hauled back on the bident and tried to puncture me with those diamond points. I took his head off and that was that.

There were a few appreciative hisses and clicking sounds from the watchers, but the room was mostly quiet, there was still a fight to finish.

Adelaar had an oozing bruise on her brow, another on her left shoulder near the joint. Her left arm was disabled; she carried the sword in her right hand now. Lugat had a deep scratch on one thigh, she favored that leg when she moved, and there several small bloody rents in the tight stretch silk of her sleeves. As I turned around, Adelaar took advantage of Lugat's leg drag, tossed the sword into her left hand (freeing her right), got momentarily behind her and close enough to rake her neck with those poison claws; she whirled away too fast for Lugat to manage a solid hit, but collected some more bruises and was staggering by the time she was beyond chain reach. Lugat went after her, but with Trewwa down and out, Adelaar had room enough keep clear until her head was working again.

Lugat stumbled, the lead balls seemed to shudder, their swings turned erratic; she pulled herself together, went after Adelaar, ignoring the rapier, ignoring pain and disorientation as the poison took effect; the lead balls whirled viciously, she caught Adelaar in the heel, the small of her back, slammed one into her side (I could almost hear those ribs go) as Del stumbled over one of Trewwa's severed legs. Del threw herself aside and into a shoulder roll; on her feet again she turned and ran, around, across, along the oval, ignoring broken ribs and other bruises, running, dodging, ignoring grazes as Lugat tried to get at her, running beyond exhaustion until Lugat was gasping and staggering, eyes glazed, blood trickling from her nose and the corners of her mouth. Adelaar whipped back; a bound, a stride, a lunge and with beautiful extension she slid the rapier into the k'durin's chest, a perfect heart kill.

A burst of applause, then sounds of movement, the shuffle of feet, arguments over who won as bets were settled and the bettors went off to celebrate the entertainment with a drink or snort or whatever suited their needs.

Adelaar drew the sword clear and stood holding it against a twitching leg, exhausted; the adrenalin that'd kept her going and partially anesthetized was draining away, leaving her with the dead-ash feeling you get after an all-out struggle when still being alive, doesn't seem worth all that effort.

The Referee stumped over to Hra Trewwa, grunted onto his knees and dug around in Trewwa's clothes until he found his ID; he tucked it away, got to his feet and moved over to Lugat. While he was finishing his business with the dead, I unbuckled the straps to Harska's sheath and pulled it round where I could get at the shimmy cloth I kept in a squeeze pocket. There wasn't much blood on my lady, she cut too fast and too clean, but I never put her away mussed. Wiping her was tricky, I could lose a finger myself if I got careless; flesh was flesh as far as she was concerned, didn't matter whose. Not a lady for sentimental sigh-ing. I rubbed the blood off her alloy and crystal, then slid her back in her sheath. As she vanished I could hear something like a collective moan out there in the dark, she was a lovely thing.

"You getting old, Swar." A man came out of the dark and leaned his elbows in the dueling floor. "Nearly five minutes this time. Came close to costing me some money."

"Always complaining, eh Barker? Didn't expect to see you here, I thought you were howling out near the Rift."

"Was. Found me a nice little Belt full of plums, now I've got to track down some financing."

"Hmm. I've got a little extra on my hands, if you're still hunting investors, why not drop round and we'll have a talk? Benders Trucetel. I'll key the clerabot to give you my number."

"Why not. Want some company to walk you home? Hay and Apelzan are in the bar drinking up their winnings, by the way, they said to say hello and bring your friend around, they'd buy you both a sop whatever you felt inclined to, and I saw Ahehtos with a set of boy-girl twins around three hours ago, he ought to be winding up about now and ready for something new."

"Thanks. Wouldn't hurt."

Adelaar'd got herself together; she came over and stood listening to us talk. Her hand closed on my shoulder while the Barker was making his offer; I eased her fingers loose, I didn't want her to forget what

she was holding onto and stick those claws into me. Be one helluvun irony to die from a client's fin-gernails after winning that mix-up with the enemy. "You think they'd come after us again?"

"You're tired, Del, or you wouldn't say something so stupid."

She scrubbed the back of her hand across her mouth. "Right. I need a stim."

"Well," Barker said, "Hay's offer's still open."

"Adelaar aici Arash, meet one Tomi Wolvesson, we call him the Barker for reasons I won't go into now. She's Adelaar's Securities, Bark, a client."

"Naturally a client, otherwise this lovely respectable femme wouldn't be in a mile of you, old bear." With-out taking his elbows from the wood he managed a bow and a swagger, grinning up at both of us. "If you'll take my arm, dear lady, we shall go searching for that stim." He backed away, swept another bow and crooked his arm ready for her hand. "File your reports, my son, and join us in the bar."

Amused by his rattle and wanting to be away from this place, Adelaar went down the ramp, took his arm and left me to deal with all the nonsense the bureau-crats demanded once a duel was done. Especially when there was a corpse or two as a result. The Ref tapped me on the shoulder, took me to his office and started on the umpteen reports he was going to have to make. It was the ultimate in futility, there were no penalties for the duels or the deaths. Running out on the re-ports, though, that was serious. I knew better than to waste time complaining, the sooner the business was done, the sooner I could climb into the trucetel medicell and after that into a long hot bath.

7

Ti Vnok looked like an absurdist's idea of a cross between a spider monkey and a praying mantis; his movements alternated between the stillness of mantis--at-rest and the frenetic energy of monkey-at-full-cry. He was a general-purpose agent, there to link anyone with an itch to anyone who could perhaps scratch that itch, never involved with either side, silent as stones about his clients' business, never challenged because in his busy little way he was as useful as Helvetia herself. And a friend of mine. Which didn't mean he'd whisper secrets in my ear, just that he'd steer things my way if he saw a chance, might even hint oh-so--delicately if I was about to put my foot in something that stank. There are worse kinds of friends.

Kumari reported that when she reached him to change the time of our meet, he looked unusually fidgety and wouldn't commit to anything over the com, said he'd get a message round to her. Which he did about an hour later. One of the street kids that infested the undercity like mites on a dog's belly got past tel secu-rity somehow and up to the floor where our unit was, hand-carrying a flashnote, time and place scribbled on it and a reminder I was to come careful and alone; the flash was quicker than usual, she just had time to read the thing before it dissolved.

I left the trucetel an hour early, spent a good part of the time jumping flea runs, mixing that with trots around the block up top where the sun was hot and the mirrors busy. Several times I wished I had Pels along, times when I was almost but not quite sure I'd dropped my ticks, but regret only gives you ulcers and Adelaar needed him more than I did. When she'd crawled out of the medicell and into bed, Kumari, Pels and I had a short confa about the morrow, I played them over the duel and the parade to the jits after-ward and the shadows rustling round us—we'd 've had to scramble to reach the jits if it weren't for Barker and the rest. It was clear enough that Bolodo wasn't giving up, just changing tactics. The most likely next step was pointing assassins at us. "Remember Bustus?" I said.

"I remember something closer to a Crawler's soul," Kumari said, "Bolodo has more money than god herself."

"What, pay out all those golden gelders, those slip-pery succulent little darlins just for me? No, the Prime target'll be Adelaar."

Bolodo wouldn't sic Crawlers on me unless they had to, because it'd cost them a lot. Couple years ago I was after a University contract advertised on Helvetia and this character decided it would make a good cover for some other things he was doing and I was his only serious competition, so he dropped their price on a NightCrawler cobben and pointed them at me. I got seriously annoyed at this interference, also at having the hair singed off half my head. A lethal friend of mine happened to be on

Helvetia right then, arguing an Escrow Closing; she'd just finished a Hunt and was getting the fee released, a complicated business since her fees tended to be in the range of the gross yearly income of your average world economy. Lovely gentle woman, she gets upset when she kills someone or maims them a little, but not when they target someone she's fond of. She's redheaded and has the temper to go with it. We did some bloody housecleaning and she laid down a warning, mess with her friends and she'd come Hunting without a commission. Since then the NightCrawlers walk wide of me, so like I said, Bolodo might have some trouble recruiting a cobben, a repu-tation's a handy thing. But like Kumari said, Bolodo's got the gelt; they'll buy some nerve and stuff it up some Crawler's spine. What else is money for, eh?

By now Adelaar and my crew were in the City also, sitting in an office at Del's bank, temporarily safe from attack. Or so I hoped. As shipsecond and official MOM and holding my *signature*, Kumari could en-dorse the contracts for me and stamp the escrow agree-ments; she usually handled that kind of thing, she was sharper than either Pets or me when it came to words and the twists that gentlebeings could put on them. Adelaar would be imprinting the contracts with her bank, the Register Circuit and the Escrow Board. It had to be done in the proper office, with the proper officials in attendance, everything fotted and entered in octuplets or more. Helvetian rules. She intended to evoke Privacy on the terms, but I had more faith in Bolodo's persistence than in Helvetian tech, so I fig-ured the local execs would know what we were after in a few hours. And when they did, when they discov-ered I was agreeing to rescue the daughter, they'd really get serious about taking us out. That's all they needed to be sure I either had their stinking secret or was so close to finding it, the little bit left made no difference at all.

Ti Vnok was waiting at the back of one of the larger arbors; it was close to ground level and had enough exits to satisfy a claustrophobic paranoid. I'd felt clean the past five minutes or so and I'd pulled every trick I knew to test the feeling out, so I strolled into the cool and shifting shadows and wandered about a minute or so longer. No bells rang. I drifted over to Vnok's alcove and slid onto the bench across the table from him.

He sat mantis still, his eyes expressionless as obsid-ian marbles, but the two short feathery antennas that served as eyebrows were doing a nervous dance.

"Far as I can tell, I'm clean," I said. "I spent the last hour getting that way."

He rubbed his wrists together, the callus patches there making a faint skrikking sound; the expression came back into his eyes and his monkey face dissolved into the sort of grin that makes you want to grin back. "I've got some cover for meeting you, Swarda, a man came to see me last night, said he had a message for you." He didn't waste time asking if I wanted to hear it. He leaned forward, the weight of his torso balanced on his forearms. "Drop this business and certain peo-ple will see you won't be hurting for it. One hundred thousand gelders. No bidding, please. That was the deal."

"No deal," I said. "You bring the list?"

"Only the freshest names." He thrust two fingers in his throat pouch and brought out a small black packet. "The whole list would herniate a bumphel."

"Even flaked?"

"Even flaked. I thought you'd better stay mobile. I hear a cobben's been activated."

"Pointed at me?"

"Pointed at your client. I don't touch that kind of negotiation, so I don't know who paid the price. There's a lot of chat in the underways, I'm hearing this and that...." His dust lids slid slowly over his eyes, then retreated beneath the outer lids; he waited. Gossip bought gossip in his view and he had his own reputa-tion to consider; he was supposed to know everything going by on Helvetia and a long way beyond.

"Trade you something that's not for chatting yet."

"What for what?"

"A packet giving chapter and verse, signed and attested by me and the client, set in Escrow pending release to someone with a passpartout for that ac-count. And a verbal outline of what's inside for your ears only."

"For .."

“For a squirt link. I want the Seven warned of trouble, who it’s from and what’s behind it.” I tapped a finger on the packet, watched it wobble, then tucked it into a beltslit. “If this works out like I think, Slancy’s coming in with a heavy load and a fragile one. I want a welcome waiting.”

Vnok rubbed his wrists together again, the skrikk like the purring of a sated cat; odd how many different inflections he could get out of that idiot sound. “There are two names on that list. Leda Zag. Ilvinin Taivas. They are ... um ... of special interest to the Seven. If you can find them and let me know you have them, I guarantee a vigorous welcome.”

I looked round; I didn’t spot anything, but Vnok wouldn’t be talking this freely without his own dis-torter making mishmash of our words. I swung around so I was facing the back wall just in case someone was out there flaking this. “Distorter on?” I said. Logic was all very well, but what I had to say, well, I wasn’t going to take any chances I could avoid.

“On,” he said. His antennas wriggled his sur-prise.

“When you hear, you’ll see why.” I rested my arms on the table and leaned in close as I sketched out what was in that packet, everything Adelaar had found out about Bolodo, dates and the data she’d flaked from the mainBrain on Spotchals, what I thought had prob-ably happened to the disappeared on the list he’d given me.

8

By the time I got back to the tructetel, Adelaar and the others were waiting for me. There was a burn on one of Adelaar’s arms, the tip of Pels’ left ear was flat instead of round, but Kumari looked cool as mountain water. “Crawler,” she said. “We stayed in the bright instead of taking the tube run, put his timing off.”

“Business finished?”

“All done.”

“We paid up here?”

“More than paid, if you count the deposit.”

“Good. Order dinner for ..” I frowned at my ringchron, surprised to find it was barely the third hour past noon. Seemed like it should’ve been closer to sundown. “Eighth hour. What’s the shuttle sched-ule like?”

“Midday, it’s usually fairly light. You want to take a chance?”

“Yeh. The paperwork’s done, the squirt link’s set up and Vnok is primed, better we leave before Bolodo thinks up something new.”

“Terminal,” Adelaar said suddenly; she’d been lis-tening and looking peeved at being left out of things. Couldn’t help that, I wasn’t going to tell her about Vnok’s list until I had to and that wasn’t till we got wherever it was we were going. “The dinner ploy’s so old it stinks, it won’t fool anyone.”

“No problem. Remember Barker and his friends? I hired them to hang around the transfer point until we showed up. Gave us a discount, they did. Don’t like Crawlers any better than I do.”

9

Maybe it was Vnok pulling strings, maybe it was Luck coming round to kiss us sweet, but we got loose from Helvetia Perimeter in half the usual time and dipped into the insplit clean and lonesome.

We made Weersyll three weeks later. Security at the port was a joke; getting into the holding pens might have been a problem, but we weren’t going near the place. There was only one ship down and they kept searchlights sweeping the metacrete around it, the flick-ering light and shadow making ideal conditions for Pels. The guards at the gates had obviously been warned to look out for intruders, but they weren’t really inter-ested in anything except giving the haulers a hard time, making them unload crates and open them up so the contents could be inspected. One time, just for the hell of it, seemed to me, they shot up some crates of frozen poults to the vast and vocal annoyance of the cargomaster waiting for them. No bloodoons or snif-foons, no heatseekers. A joke. Pels put a packet of ticks in his mouth, turned on his camouflage and walked through the gate, then climbed on a flat as it trundled through after him and rode in comfort to the ship. He set the ticks and rode the flat out again, ignored by one and all.

And that was that.

VIII

1. *Eight months std. after Adelaar hired Quale.*

Asteroid Belt/Horgul system/Swardheld Quale et al. With Slancy Orza tucked neatly out of sight on a large stone asteroid.

Pels scratched at his healing ear. "Four and Five are inhabited. Five looked to me like a penal colony, I saw an insystem ship eject half a dozen pods and leave orbit before they were down; obviously no one cared whether they landed in one piece or not or what happened to the people in them. The Transport went down on Four, so I thought better not send EYEs there yet, I didn't want Bolodo techs picking up search traces and following them back to us. There's another reason, but I'll get to that in a minute. I've had EYEs poking about Five since we got here, I figured I could get some idea what we're facing from the convicts, if that's what they were. They are. The place has evidently been a dumping ground for quite a while, some of the buildings down there are old enough to have great-grandpups. What we're facing, mm. Good news and bad news. The good is we've got a fair version of the local language in MEMORY. A little updating and we're home free on that. Remember Hordaradda? You picked up some plants there, the ones you delivered to University the time we met."

"I remember. Yes. Hordar?"

"Looks like."

"And the bad news?"

"The bad news. Bolodo landed on Four. Which means the head whosis is there, government records will be there, including the list of the two-legged cargo Bolodo's been supplying the past however many years, their names and whereabouts. We need that list." He dug his claws into the fur under his chin. "Which means we've got to go there and get it." He sucked in a long breath, let it trickle through his blunt black nose. "You know what's orbiting that mudball, Swar? Riding in synchronous orbit over what's probably the capital city? A Monarch class Warmaster," he was speaking slowly, enunciating his words with much care, "and it's working just fine, far as I can tell; I didn't hang about long after I saw what she was and felt her start sniffing after who it was making waves around her. She's old, but those things were built to last. I wouldn't want to try sneaking Slancy down past her."

Quale slumped in his chair, crossed his legs at the ankles and contemplated the screen with its schematic of the system, green dots marking the location of the two worlds they were interested in and some slowly shifting red dots that were insystem ships traveling between those worlds. He ruffled his fingers through the short hairs of his beard, stroked his mustache. Watching him, Adelaar felt like screaming: *shave that fungus off if that's all you can do, sit there fondling it*. There were things going on here she didn't understand, more to getting that list than finding out where Aslan was. I'm paying you, I own you for the next few months, she told herself, but it didn't help, she was a passenger and he was running the game. I could have done all this myself, she thought, I wouldn't need him if I had a ship of my own.... She swore under her breath, she'd put off and put off buying her own ship, it seemed such an unnecessary expense, what with upkeep and fuel and crew and most of all mooring fees, so much easier to buy space on a freighter or a Worldship. What is going on here? I won't be a passenger. I won't be pushed into a closet and left out of things....

"No," Quale said. "No, we won't take Slancy anywhere near that thing."

"Swar."

"Kri?"

"Kinok says don't be so spooky. If there was any-one onboard who really knew how to operate her, she would have picked us up the moment we came this side of the Limit and asked us before we knew what was happening."

"That's supposed to be comforting?"

Kumari hissed/rattled her amusement. "Ve says, we're alive, aren't we. Why should we need

comforting?”

“Teach me to argue with a Sikkul Paem.”

“I doubt it.”

“Mmh.” He watched the screen a moment longer. “Looks like there’s a fair amount of traffic out this way.”

Pets extruded his claws, began picking away old horn. “There’s some mining the next quadrant over. Not a lot, mostly rare earths, things they might be short of on Four. And there’s some trade between Five and Four. Mainly gemstones, furs and ivory.”

“From the readings, those ships aren’t much bigger than the tug. Say we left Slancy out here, we might be able to use the cargo carriers as stalking horses, make believe we’re one of them. What you think, Kri?”

She tilted her head, listened a minute. “Kinok says maybe so, but ve needs more time to analyze the emissions.” She studied the screen. “The touchy mo-moment is when we have to break loose from the pattern. Pels, I don’t see any satellite traces. Is that right, or were you too leery of the Warship to hunt for them?”

He rumbled a mock growl deep in his throat. “I’m not putting a pip near that world until I absolutely have to.”

“You absolutely have to fairly soon, furface. I can’t plan if I don’t have data.” She listened again, eyes closed, nodding at intervals. “Got it.” She swung her chair around. “Kinok says ve needs to watch say four or five of those ships landing; ve says, Pels, lay out some passive EYEs, ve swears on the drives the Warmaster won’t eat you.”

Pels growled again. “And you tell ve to go twist veself; ve makes any more little jokes like that and I’ll have ve for salad my next meal.

Kumari listened again, shook her head. “No, Kinok, I’ll let you tell furface that yourself, save it for the next time you see him. Swar, Kinok thinks as long as we keep the tug to local speeds, the Warmaster won’t get nervous about us. Ve says, though, it’s very impor-tant before we do anything, that ve has the landing data. Ve can handle salad threats, but ve has no desire at all to achieve vaporization.”

Adelaar watched impatiently, her fingers tapping a jittery rhythm on her thigh. Now that she was so close, her blood was on fire to finish it. Her mind told her that this careful probing and planning was essential, her body told her GO. If she were doing the observa-tion, if she were directing things, she could be crisp and calm and efficient and all that. She wasn’t. She was more useless than the baggage in the hold. And it was driving her crazy.

“Right. Pels, you’d better get started with those EYEs. The sooner you slide them into orbit, the sooner you can fetch them back so we can read them off and get on with this.” He watched the Rau pad out, then gazed at Adelaar, his fingers poking in his beard again, then he turned his head to Kumari. “I suppose its time.”

“Might as well get it over with.” Kumari turned her pale gray eyes on Adelaar, sat with her hands folded, cool and disengaged.

Adelaar forced the tension out of her hands and arms; as cool as Kumari, she said, “I’m paying freight here, I have a right to know what you’re doing.”

Quale pinched the end of his nose. “You heard us talking about ti Vnok.”

“So?”

“Jaszaca ti Vnok. Agent. Among other things, he’s been handling offers from relatives and so on of peo-ple who’d dropped down a hole somewhere. They want them back. Most of them couldn’t afford Hunt-ers Inc., but they did the next best thing and put a reward offer in ti Vnok’s files. He gets his cut if he manages to connect with someone who’ll do the dig-ging, the rest goes to the digger if he’s lucky enough to find one of the disappeared. A few years ago he tried getting us interested, but we couldn’t afford to waste time on a cause as lost as that with no payback unless we actually produced the body. Not our kind of project anyway. Then you come along and it begins to look like some of those lost might have gone down the same hole your daughter did.” He scratched at his jaw, fingers digging through the short soft black beard. “We have a partial list which we’re going to try match-ing against the one in those

files Pels was talking about. You said it yourself a while back, two flights a year for fifty, sixty years, maybe more, that adds up to a lot of bodies. We match 'em, snatch 'em, take 'em back to Helvetia and go home with a nice fattener for the pot."

"Earned with information I collected, information I nearly got killed for. *My* information."

"You might say that."

"Might!"

"You'll get your daughter back. That's what you hired us for. Don't you think it's a bit premature getting steamed over a side bet that hasn't paid off yet? That might never pay off?"

He was being so sweetly reasonable he couldn't know it made her want to tear his throat out. Kumari stirred. "Swar, behave yourself."

His brow shot up, he looked amused and rueful and he stopped talking.

Kumari stroked her fine white hair. "You don't think we're cheating you." It wasn't a question.

Adelaar clamped her lower lip between her teeth and said nothing.

"You are a rational being, aici Arash," Kumari went on. "Use your brain, not your spleen. There is another aspect to this worth considering. The more witnesses we return to Helvetia, the safer you and your daughter will be. If we find even a tenth of them, you and Aslan won't be the only ones telling the tale, your credibility won't be attacked so vehemently and probably destroyed, your lives won't be put at risk. Some of those on the list have powerful connections. If I were you, aici Arash, I would pray to whatever gods I recognized that we locate a goodly number of them and get them safely away."

"I can't dispute that," Adelaar said, her anger ashes in her throat. "But you should have told me before this."

Kumari's pale rose mouth curved into a slow smile. "Would you have done so, Adelaar Adelaris-na? Would you have told us about the attacks on your life before the bargain was made if Fate had given you that choice?"

It wasn't a question Adelaar felt like answering. She said instead, "So, what happens now?"

2

So what happens now, she said. That was a good question. The answer for the next six days was *nothing much*. The Tutor poked the local language into us and we practiced it on each other, Adelaar went back to work on Slancy's defense systems, Kumari and I dredged up what we knew about Hordaradda and the Hordar, compared it with what Pels had picked up from Five; we spun out plans without data, knocked them down without data and generally fooled ourselves into thinking we were actually doing something. Made the time pass and that's about all it did.

On the sixth day Kinok announced that he didn't see any reason we couldn't take the tug in, the Warmaster just lay there in orbit like a sleeping whale while the little fish swam around her carefully but undisturbed; most of them landed at the field outside the capital; the rest came down on the continent below the equator. After plotting line-of-sight, we said that the southern field was over the bulge of the world and out of the Warmaster's viewcone, which meant we could swing round that way without surprising anyone. So we loaded up the tug and started the tedious trip downsystem.

Pels named the tug Chicklet; behind those fangs he's a sentimental little fuzzy, Kumari tells him the cute has seeped into his brain. I put Chicklet into the slot behind a pair of cargo creepers and pooted along just beyond their detection range. If I could've taken her up to full speed, the trip would have ended in a few hours, but Kinok said not and I didn't want to push my luck, so I was stuck with a four-day crawl.

That was not a pleasant four days. I got a good look at why Adelaar's daughter took off; Del had a tongue like a Tongan bladewhip. Pels showed the good sense to hide down in the engine room when he wasn't asleep or on duty at the corn; that way he didn't have to deal with her. Kumari kept cool; if she was pushed too far, she gave back better than she got. Never, never, ever get in a word-slissing match with our Mom. Trouble was, more often than not I ended up in the middle, getting beaten up by both of them.

We reached Tairanna when the Warmaster was at noon; I had my fingers crossed, hoping Kinok

was right and the observers on board were not looking for trouble from space.

The black whale ignored us, not even a twitch to acknowledge our existence; I laid an egg (a shielded satellite) and drifted on. Nothing. I laid another, then I scooted past South Continent into the Polar seas and dipped into the atmosphere through a hell-spawned storm where winds tore the caps off massive towering waves that swept along with nothing to break them up but a few rocky islets. Battered by those winds and by electrical discharges powerful enough to shock Chicklet's powersystems into fits, we crawled along the coast until we reached the fringes of the storm and settled to a careful drift along the duskline, circling out to sea whenever we spotted the lights of a settlement. Up near the northern bulge of the western coast the land turned hostile, rocks along the shore like shark teeth, white foam pounding high against the stone, precipitous cliffs and equally precipitous fjords. I turned in-land there.

The land passing below us was rugged, mountainous; Chicklet said no locals lived there and I could see why. It was the kind of place I was looking for, a deserted locale where we could get up a landbase and a holding area for the vanished until we'd collected them all and could shift them up to Slancy.

About twenty minutes after we left the coast, I set Chicklet down in a pleasant wooded valley between two mountain spurs. There were streams filled with fish and freshwater crustaceans; the forest, the mountain slopes, the grassy meadowflats were thick with deerish browsers and other game that had no fear of fangless bipeds since they'd never been hunted. Chicklet's probes told us there were nuts and tubers, wild greens, trees and vine fruits; though it was early spring here south of the equator, some of those fruits and berries were ripe enough to eat. Plenty to help feed the vanished when we brought them here; hunting and fishing to pass the time, an untouched wild place to explore, a lake on a small plateau at one end of the valley where they could swim or do some boating if they had the ingenuity to build their own watercraft. Pretty place if you liked that kind of thing.

We kept our heads down for the next four days, sent out EYES to map the capital and see what was where, using the satellites to bounce the data to us.

The first day I was cautious, sent in one EYE to poke about, ready to pull the deadman if its field started trouble.

Nothing happened so I saturated the place. Except for one area the city, Gilisim Gillin it was called, was completely unshielded. Helpful of them, wasn't it. They showed us precisely where to look.

By the middle of the second day it was clear the EYES weren't going to get past the shield without blowing every alarm in the place, so I pulled in most of them and let Adelaar fiddle with them. She stopped fratcheting and settled to work. By midmorning on the fourth day, those altered EYES gave us a detailed schema of the shielded area.

There was a monster mainBrain parked in a subterranean honeycomb that stretched under a complex of buildings and gardens enclosed behind a wall at least thirty meters high and proportionately thick; there was a mess of traps and alarms on the ground, nothing we couldn't handle. A score or more of guards patrolling the place, others at watchpoints inside the structures. The ones that stayed out of the buildings, they worked with leashed pairs of large cats, something like the spotted panthers on Flayzhao. Cats and men were alert. More than alert, they were nervous. I didn't like that. Something was making them jumpy and that meant trouble for us. I'd rather have them relaxed and lazy like the gatewatch back on Weersyll.

Pels tracked the guards on their rounds, built up a schedule. Night and day it was much the same. Half of them followed set rounds that took some of them through the public rooms of all the buildings, others into the twists and turns of the arcades and the gardens and still others into that mess of wormholes underground. They clocked in roughly every twenty minutes, pressing their thumbs on sensor plates attached to the walls inside and on columns outside, decorative spikes set inconspicuously throughout the gardens. The rest were rovers. They checked in at forty-five minute intervals, using the same sensors but in no particular order. They were good, they kept the patterns random enough to frustrate most observers but still managed to cover the ground.

Whoever it was ran things depended on scanners to warn him of air attacks and to direct the melters installed on the walls; Pels snorted when he saw them, he could hocus them without half trying. No bloodoons to point out warm bodies, or sniffoons to track them, no 'droid shootems. It looked almost

too easy. We'd be using miniskips when we went in and they were hard to spot on a clear night, let alone a foggy or a rainy one; it was autumn up north, storms blowing in every third night, we could afford to wait for optimum conditions so we wouldn't have to worry about the outside patrols until we were on the ground. Once we broke through into the wormholes, all we had to do was get to the computer before it noticed it had mice in the walls. If we played things right and kept moving fast, we should get in and out clean; with a little Luck they'd blame any traces we left on whoever was keep-ing them up nights.

I meant to leave Adelaar behind, let her be the one to hold fort while Kumari, Pels and I went after the list, but she wouldn't stand for that. Stumping up and down the grass, scaring the bitty amphibians off the rocks where they were sunning, she argued at the top of her voice that we had to take her along. She said she'd back her physical capacity against me and a dozen like *me*, hadn't she already proved that? and as for mental capacity, she knew more about computers and security, especially anything provided by Bolodo, than me or Kumari or anyone else I could dig up, that she had the core of her equipment in the gear we'd collected on Aggerdorn and why'd we have her bring it if she wasn't going to use it?

Kumari took me aside and told me not to be a fool, the woman was liable to explode and do something stupid; she'd been under pressure too long, she needed action. Security is something she's good at, Kumari said, take advantage of that. You know me, Swar, I'll be happier here with the remotes, setting up the shelters and getting things ready for the vanished. That's more my sort of job.

Kumari is fragile, her homeworld's around .7 g; she went into the Tank Farm a while back and had some genwork done on muscle and bone so she wouldn't get exhausted or injured in heavier pulls, but she prefers to leave running about to us hardier types. Even so, there's-not many I'd rather have at my back; she fights with her head more than hands and feet and that's one fine weapon.

We took advantage of another storm and rode a skip north to a box canyon an EYE had located for us; by the time the sun rose we were tucked away under an outleaning cliff across the lake from Gilisim Gillin. We slept a few hours and spent the rest of the day going over and over the schema and our plans, getting equipment ready, that sort of thing, and that night we strapped ourselves onto the miniskips and headed for the city.

3. *3 years and 1 month local since Karrel Gozo flew Elmas Ofka and her Isyas for the first time.*

The abandoned mine where Elmas Ofka keeps Windskimmer and lives with other outcast and divorced who've joined with her, also the escaped aliens with a powerful grudge against the Imperator and everyone who supported him.

A stormy autumn night, about an hour past mid-night.

Elmas Ofka touched the bandage on Karrel's hand. "What's this?"

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me that." She pinched the hand lightly, saw him wince. "So?"

"Elli, Elli," he laughed at her, touched her cheek with the back of the injured hand. "Didn't you say stay off work for a while if I could? I needed an excuse, so I spilled some acid on my hand. No big deal. I'm supposed to be making up the income loss by hide hunting. My House won't expect me back for a couple of weeks.

"You see a healer?"

"Am I mushbrained like some I could mention? Of course I did."

"It won't interfere with flying?"

He laughed again, waggled fingers wound with salve-stained gauze, winced at the small pains the movement cost him. "Left hand, Hanifa." He thrust the hand through the leather strap looped over his shoulder. "Just means I can't knit for a while. No one's buying, so that's no loss."

She frowned at him for several moments, then smiled and shook her head. "What can I say? Come along, I want to show you something." She led him deeper into Oldtown, past tumbledown buildings rotting slowly into the earth they stood on as they were elbowed down by mesheme trees crowding into their airspace, to an area of the Mine settlement where he'd not been before.

"Convict barracks," she said and pushed open the door to a stone structure in considerably better shape than the others; waving him back a step, she leaned into the opening. "N'Ceegh, h'ab hab h'i

cecehi h'ep n'beihim hab!" She pulled back, chuckling. "That gar-gle means sun's down, stir yourself, it's me. He doesn't like company he hasn't invited." She ran her forefin-ger along a merm scar on her forearm. "Never go inside this place without an invitation, Kar. You won't come out again."

There was a tiny tinny beeping; a sphere about the size of his fist floated in the door gap.

"Doa, N'Ceegh. Close the door behind you, Kar; follow me and keep your mouth shut."

When there was no chance any light would leak outside, the sphere popped out a beam, focused it on the floor and went swimming deeper into the cavern-ous interior.

They followed.

N'Ceegh had a small compact body covered with fur like gray felt, skinny arms and legs, a ball of a head dominated by huge lambent violet eyes. He wore a voluminous leather apron over a leather cachesexe and thin rubber gloves on three fingered hands with long double-jointed thumbs. When they came into his workroom and the light there brightened, a film dropped over his eyes, his scoop ears twitched and folded partway shut. He swung his perch around, drew his legs up and draped his stringy arms over knees that looked sharp enough to stab with. He blinked slowly, gazed with disfavor at Karrel Goza.

"N'Ceegh, this is our pilot. He'll be working your gadget, I thought you'd better be the one to explain it to him."

"Unh-fidoodah'ak." His mouth gash puckered into a pink-gray rosette as his eyes flickered over Karrel, rested a moment on the bandaged hand, moved on. "Come over here, you. Don't bother me with your name, I don't want it, I don't plan to use it. The cuuxtwok's installed already, but the proto model's here. Cuuxtwok? She," he jabbed a wobbly thumb at Elmas Ofka, "calls it a diverter. Same thing." He waited until Karrel Goza stood looking down at the workbench, then he swung his chair about and began talking. "The scanners old Bitvekeshit, Pittipat to you, he uses to watch his ass, they're crude stuff. !Fidoo! That's all. Need tactile contact with the suspect object before they know it's there; he's got some listening capacity, but it's short range. One of the things the cuux here does is spread a slip field about the airship, the scanner pulses slide along it without noticing it and pass on till they fade out. It'll muffle some of the noise your motors make but not all; if you can shut them off say half a kilometer from the Palace and let the wind push you over, you've got no problem. I've tucked in some long-range sensors, they'll warn you when you're approaching the danger zone, and this, see this _gives you attack capacity, it projects the cuux field in a parabolic mirror in front of the airship, lets you trap and magnify the pulses and push them back at the generators till smoke comes out their ears." He reached for the control panel and began demonstrating the uses of his creation.

4. *In Windskimmer, heading for Gilisim Gillin/ flying over Lake Golga, plowing through swirl-ing mists on a heavily overcast night; a thun-derstorm is threatening, but is still holding off/ two hours after midnight, Ruya is full, she's a faint icy glow coming through the clouds a few degrees past zenith, Gorruya is way off to the west, her fattening crescent a smudge near the horizon.*

"Wha ..." Karrel used the probe-adjunct on N'Ceegh's device to poke into the mist, but he could find no trace of the enigmatic objects that had flashed alongside them and vanished in the darkness ahead. "Elli, did you see those things?"

"If you mean something like wingless glassy dragon-flies with dark centers, three of them, zipping past us six times faster than anything normal, yeh, I saw them. What was it I saw?"

"Seems to me it's something N'Ceegh would know about."

"Alien?"

"Pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"Brings up a question."

"Two questions. Did they see us? And what are they going to do about it?"

"Three. What are *we* going to do?"

"You want to break off?"

"I don't know." Elmas Ofka glanced over her shoulder at her isyas sitting on the floor of the gondola, waiting for her decision, content to let her decide. Fingers tracing a scar line, she frowned at Karrel. Finally she said, "It's late."

Karrel Goza was briefly puzzled, then he nodded. "I see. What are *they* doing out here now. Could be they want attention as little as we do."

"There's a chance."

"Right. Let's keep going."

"Wind's from the east. You have to make a wide jog to position Skimmer for the drift over Gilisim, why not do it now. Make them look in the wrong direction, if they are looking."

"Why not." He brought the airship's nose around, driving her as close to the wind as he could; it was too strong to face head on, just as well he was turning early, he could save some fuel and a lot of battering.

Elmas Ofka rubbed at the vertical frownline between her brows.. "I wish I knew what was happening out there."

"Yeh." He was going to say more, but the warning bell chimed; the instruments had picked up the first pulses from the Palace scanners. He slid the cover off the sensor plate, touched on the cuux field. The thready mist outside turned solid, as if they were suddenly sealed within a brushed glass bottle; it brought a sense of oppression, a hint of claustrophobia. The isyas were troubled by it; he could hear the soft sounds they made as they shifted nervously behind him. He forced himself to relax. "You want to cross the Walls high or low? The air near the ground is apt to be more turbu-lent than it is at this level, but we won't be moving that fast and the Tower is the only structure high enough to be a hazard. The guards won't notice us; in this fog they couldn't spot a longhauler with its warnlights blazing. The scanners are all we've got to worry about and the cuux will take care of those."

"And if we go in low, you won't have to run the ballast motors."

"Run them a shorter time anyway." He spoke ab-sently as he watched the pulses from the Palace scan-ners go ghosting past them, invisibilities made visible by the field, eerie undulating tadpoles of light swim-ming through the mist and vanishing behind them. Five minutes. He bent over the dead reckoner, touch-ing the controls with careful delicacy to keep Wind-skimmer moving in the right direction. Ten minutes. Another chime. He started the pumps sucking. "Ten minutes more," he said. "Then we're there."

He brought the airship down and down until she moved about forty meters above the grass, then he shut the motors off and let the wind take them. The sudden silence felt odd, almost painful. He didn't want to talk, nor, it seemed, did any of the others. He watched the hypnotic dance of the scanner pulses as the silvery wigglers darted past and past, endless num-bers of them—a dance that ended so abruptly he leaned forward, startled, not believing he wasn't seeing them any longer. "Elli."

"What?"

"Something's happened to the scanners. Those dragonflies? Maybe they had business at the Palace."

"What else could it be?"

He shrugged, settled back. "Pittipat wouldn't put his hide at risk, not if he knew it. They did it, all right, those aliens. I wonder who they are and what they want."

"I'm afraid we're going to find out if we go in like we planned. How close are we?"

. "Two, three minutes, why?"

"You sure the altimeter is working?"

"As well as it ever does. I've been flying since I was a tweener, Elli. You get to know where you're riding by how the air feels. The reading's not out more than a yard or so either way."

was thinking we could have dropped below the wall, that would stop the pulses, wouldn't it? Why don't you take Skimmer up again and see what happens?"

"No. There's no reason to risk the sound of the pump being picked up."

She grimaced. "You're the pilot."

guards undisturbed in their rounds. Karrel Goza brought Windskimmer over their heads to the open-air theater. He turned her nose into the wind, touched on the motors and used a trickle of their power to hold her in place for the minute or so it took Elmas Ofka and her isyas to slide down the ladders onto the top tier of the theater seats, then he brought the airship around and cut the motors off once more, let the wind drift her out of the enclosure and across the tip of the lake to the Emperor's hunting preserve, an ancient forest that the Hordar had left wild and the Huvved hadn't touched.

Half a kilometer in, he dropped a mooring cable with a grasping claw, anchored Windskimmer to one of the larger trees, turned off the cuux field and arranged the two chairs so he could stretch himself across them and drowse away the time until he had to go back for Elmas (Ma and the isyas).

6. *Begin with Elmas Ofka on the top tier of the theater seats, her isyas around her waiting for a guard to move on, then shift to—*

the maze of corridors in the subterra of the Emperor's Palace/concrete tunnels, gray paint on the walls, enigmatic numbers and glyphs in dirt dulled black, grit on the floors that make walking silently close to impossible, branches cutting off at angles to make things more confusing, ramps leading to lower levels at unpredictable intervals, stairways behind half-doors, pervasive hum of airmachines that keep cold dry air moving restlessly through the maze, six meter strips of coldlight tubes pasted in staccato lines overhead and on each wall. Voices echo an indeterminate distance.

Elmas Ofka crouched behind the curving stone bench; condensation trickled in cold rivulets down her body, dripped from her nose and saturated the tight cowl that covered her head and the lower part of her face. Around her she could hear the isyas breathing; they sounded louder than surf after a storm. Thankful that the wind was blowing into her face so the cats wouldn't scent her, she held her own breath as she watched the guard below in the well of the theater wave his handlamp about. Even in the back beams of the powerful lamp he wasn't much more than a silhouette, but she could see that he was broad and muscular, probably one of the laggas old Pittipat brought back from exile on Tassalga to put the boot harder into ordinary Hordar. He looked regrettably alert, more so than the cats who were shivering and stepping with exaggerated delicacy over the wet stone. Silently she urged them on, her teeth clamped so hard her jaw ached.

After what seemed an eternity, he gave the cats a toothy whistle, slapped at them with the leashes and followed them across the oval well. There were double doors at the far end; she heard the jingling of keys as he unlocked them, the sounds amplified by the acoustics of the place, then the chunk and thud as he pushed one of the doors open and whistled the cats outside.

As soon as the door boomed shut, Elmas Ofka stood, leaped onto the bench and ran along it to the nearest flight of stairs, the isyas trotting silently behind her. She led them down the stairs, but stopped before she stepped into the well to let Tezzi Ofka spray her once again with the scent-destroyer a cousin of hers had come up with, a mixture of kedaga, an herb cats avoided like most of them avoided water, crushed crab beetle and stinkfish oil. Even to her relatively insensitive nostrils it was a revolting mess, but better than having the cats set up a howl when they came across an intruder's scent trace on the guard's next appearance here.

As soon as the others were sprayed, she ran across the flagging to the raised in the center of the well and stopped by the door in the near end; according to her information it led down to the dressing rooms and, more importantly, into the tech's area where the lighting was controlled and the other effects were contrived. And where there was rumored to be access to the subterra. She waved Harli Tang& forward, stepped back so the isya could work on the door.

Harli started to kneel, straightened up. She put her hand on the door and pushed gently. It swung open. "Ondar," she breathed, "look." She pointed at the latchtongue, neatly sliced through. "Someone's ahead of us. The aliens you think?"

Elmas Ofka bent closer; whatever had dealt with the latch was similar to the cutters N'Ceegh made for them. "Probably." She straightened, waved the isyas closer, pulled her cowl off her mouth. "I want to go in," she whispered, "but I won't take you where you don't want to go. It's all or none. Call it."

Harli Tang* tugged at her cowl, uncovering a broad grin. "In," she breathed. The grin went round the circle. In, in, yet again in.

Elmas Ofka nodded, drew the cowl higher so only her eyes showed. She pushed the door open and stepped into the vestibule.

7

The entrance to the subterra was wedged open a crack; a short distance inside a roving-guard was lying against a wall. Tezzi Ofka knelt beside him. "Still alive," she said, speaking in a throaty mutter that dropped dead less than a bodylength away.

"Knocked out?"

Tezzi Ofka shook her head. "No bump or bruise. N'Ceeagh is working on a thing he calls a stunner. Could be something like .that."

"They aren't worried about someone finding him."

"Looks like."

Elmas Ofka frowned along the grimy corridor, glanced over her shoulder at the other branches fading into dimness as they dipped downward. "They seem to know where they're going."

"Kind of them to mark the way for us."

Elmas stretched upward, touched a small white splotch high on the wall. She settled back, looked at her finger, rubbed her thumb against the sticky white stain. "Marked more than one way. Let's go."

Following the trail of white splotches accented with the bodies of unconscious guards, N'Ceeagh's spotter in her hand, Elmas Ofka led them deeper and deeper into the maze, making better time than she'd expected thanks to the alien invaders who'd cleared the way for them. Down one level, two, three....

The needle jumped on the spotter; Elmas stopped, signaled Lirrit. The isya dropped to her stomach and wriggled around the bend on toes and elbows, vanish-ing for several seconds before she came back the same way, jumped to her feet and brought her head klok to Elmas Ofka's. "Aliens. Two. Stopped. Watching something."

Elmas Ofka thought a moment, then took the isyas back around several corners until she came to a branch-ing tunnel. Eyes on the spotter, she turned into it and began picking her way to a point equivalent to where she'd been; twice the spotter jumped, twice Lirrit Ofka went ahead and darted the unlucky wanderer, then Elmas Ofka rounded a bend and saw the end of the tunnel; beyond that there was what looked like a vast open space. After signaling Lirrit (O)Ma and half the isyas to wait, she led the other three toward the open-ing, keeping close to the wall, moving warily, ready to dart anything that popped into the arch.

She dropped to her knees and eased her head past the edge.

The room beyond was immense; the ceiling was three levels up, aboveground, with a series of slim horizontal windows circling just below it, windows with one-way glass in them, black now because of the fog and clouds. The floor was another level below where she knelt; it was laid with black and white tiles in a swirling pattern that made her dizzy when she shifted her eyes too quickly. At the north wall there were several tiers of theater seats with a separate thronechair for the Imperator; at the south end, near where she was, a large curved screen, blindingly white, took up part of the wall; in the space it left there were three inconspicuous doors, one to the east of the screen and two on the west. A guard stumped back and forth in front of the single door, the scrape of his footsteps loud enough to send her heart knocking in her throat.

She frowned; the chamber was filled with shadows, except near the screen which seemed to gather in and amplify what light there was. Nothing moved except the guard. Why was he still moving? Was he beyond the range of the alien's weapons? They were at least ten yards closer to him than she was. Did they have to be almost on the man before they could take him out? Why were they waiting? What did they expect to hap-pen? She glanced down at the spotter, stared at it, startled; there were two spikes on the line, not one. She shifted it slowly back and forth, watching the spikes shift. Something else was out there, something closing on the guard. She moved her eyes slowly over that dizzying floor; whatever it

was, she couldn't see it, no matter how hard she searched. She looked at the scanner. The two spikes had nearly converged.

A section of floor reared up. She heard a hum like an angry bee. The guard dropped. There was a short whistle, then a small alien with brownish fur was stand-ing over the guard's body, waiting.

8. *First the video room (that's what it looked like, giant size), then the operations cell of the mainBrain.*

We parked the miniskips on the stage, out of sight behind some low railings and got into the subterra with almost no difficulty. Adelaar had sense enough not to argue and let Pels take the lead, she'd seen a little of his work on Weersyll; besides, she was carry-ing a heavy pack she cherished like a child, her tools. I had a launch tube slung across my back and half a dozen clips for it in a ()ouch on my belt; the darts in the clips were loaded with bang juice strong enough to take out a wall if the need arose. Portable back door, you might say. Pels was in huntmode and harder to see than a black ship in the CoalSack. Shadow made him a special stunner, one small enough for him to carry in his mouth; he had it in his fist now and used it whenever he came on a guard we couldn't avoid or some idiot with weak kidneys heading for the can. There weren't many of them, thank whatever. It was late and most sensible folk were sleeping.

I was navigator, reading the chart, calling the turns, laying on rubwhite to guide us should we come back this way when the job was done. I shot it up near where the ceiling met the wall, where not many people would notice it.

We didn't have much trouble; Pels laid out half a dozen, I shoved them against the wall and on we went. Boring, eh? If you plan right, that's the way it should be. You don't want interesting experiences at a time like this. We used about fifteen minutes reaching the place Kumari took one look at and called the video room. Then we waited while Pels sneaked up on the guard. It was slow and tedious, nothing we ,could do but watch our backs and sweat out the computer's reaction time; some of the men Pels blanked had to be guards, at least one had to have missed a check-in by now, maybe even two checks if our Luck went sour on us. We were counting on redundancy; there's no gad-get made by man or god that's foolproof, you have to include some sort of back check to make sure an idiot particle hasn't wandered where it shouldn't.

Stunner hidden in his mouth, Pels eeled forward on toes and elbows, his fur mimicking the pattern of the tiles; if you were as high as we were and you knew what to look for, you could find him; the floor would shift a little as if something moved a lens across it. But if you were down there walking a tedious stint like that guard, you'd most likely never see him until he had you.

As Pels got closer, the guard's nervousness increased. He kept looking around, snapping and unsnapping the flap of his holster, pacing jerkily about, wheeling and glaring at each whisper of sound. Pels changed his technique. He moved and froze, moved and froze, timing his progress to the jitters of the guard; the operating range of that stunner was just under two meters so he had to be very close before he could trigger it and hope to do the job.

Before he went down, Pels got a good look at the man. "Fiveworlder," he said. "Looks like the local bigass has brought some muggers home from exile; I suppose he feels safer with gits like that keeping the crawlers off his back."

Squat and powerful, sniffing trouble even if he couldn't see it, the Fiver swung his head back and forth as if questing for a scent. He was good all right, I wouldn't want to be the one to take him, but he'd never gone up against an Aurranger Rau in huntmode. Pets got him going away, laid him out like butcher's meat.

Adelaar and I sprinted along the ramp that led down from our tunnel, moving like the devils in hell were chasing us. We got the door open and she went to work; she'd spent some time over what the EYES had told her about the system, so she needed about thirty seconds to put a hold on the alarms. Pels and I nosed about. The place looked empty, but we weren't taking chances, we checked every shadow. There was no one about, no techs or guards, just the interface ticking over by itself. When we

got out front again, Adelaar'd begun the tedious process of switching the instructions of the alarm system. I could see it wasn't all that difficult, she was clucking and snorting as she worked, scorn oozing from every pore. Watching her was about as interesting as watching grass grow, so I went to help Pels carry the guard inside.

We'd just dropped him behind a bench when the door slammed open.

"Don't move."

Pels and I froze; there was a load of menace in that whispery female voice. I took a chance and turned my head. Seven more females in black with knitted black socks over their faces followed the first through the door, spreading out so they could keep their weapons on us from half a dozen directions. Definitely not authorized personnel. The wormholes were having a busy night. "Can I straighten up?" I said, as mildly as I could manage. "I'm getting a crick in my back."

The leader used her free hand to tap twice at her weapon. "The darts these shoot don't stun," she said, "they kill" The look in her eyes which was all I could see of her face said don't push it, I like you about as much as a bad smell. "Three seconds for a man your size. Less for your friend." She thought that over a moment. "Probably less. Keep that in mind. Get your-self straight. Slow and easy. That's right. Now. Both of you. Step over that bench and flatten your backs against the wall. That's good." She glanced at Adelaar who hadn't been interested enough to look around and see what was happening. "What're you doing?"

"Don't bother me," Adelaar snapped; hands briefly stilled, she scowled over her shoulder at the speaker. "Unless you want a load of trouble landing on your necks."

"Talk as you work."

"No." Adelaar turned back to the board and went on with what she'd been doing.

I didn't like the way that conversation was going. Adelaar had no intention of being reasonable, especially since she was right; what she was doing was more important than this woman's curiosity. However, I was fairly sure the woman wouldn't see it that way. "Uh," I said, "I can tell you in general terms what's going on. She's not playing games with you, you'd better let her concentrate on what she's doing; it can get touchy, changing the rules on an alarm system that complex."

The woman's eyes switched back to me. She wasn't liking me much more than before, but she was willing to listen. "What do you mean?"

"You came across some bodies on your way here?"

"Yes."

"Some of them were guards. You know how they check in?"

"We know there's something they're supposed to do."

Fools and drunks, they say Luck looks after them, maybe they should add angry female rebels. Going into a place like this with no preparation ... ah! "Every twenty some minutes they touch a thumbplate set up along their routes. That tells the Brain there that they're on the job and where they should be. If a guard doesn't report and all systems look clear, the lid blows off. My friend is changing the rules, making touch and no-touch equivalent states. In other words, it doesn't matter what a guard does or doesn't do." I snatched a look at Adelaar. "No, I'm wrong, she's done with that. She's putting together a clear corridor so we can get out clean once we have what we came for. Did you use those darts on anyone?"

"Why?"

"The ones we knocked out, in an hour or so they'll wake up with a sore head," I was talking quietly, keeping things relatively abstract, trying to cool down the situation; seemed to me it was working, so I kept on, "it's been our experience that guards like them, unless they're terminally stupid, when they find out there's no sign of trouble they keep their mouths shut about going to sleep on the job. You see, they won't remember what hit them, the stunner wipes out the last few seconds before they go down. With you leav-ing bodies about, that's not going to happen. Shit. Can't be helped, I suppose." I gave her a grin. "Any-way, it's you and your friends who're going to get the blame for all this."

"No doubt. Who are you and why are you here?"

"You've been importing slaves."

“Not me.” She made the two words sound terminally grim.

“Whatever. We’re here to collect some of them. My friend there, the reason she’s a bit testy, she had her daughter snatched.”

“I see.” She inspected Adelaar’s back. She had very bright eyes, hazel, expressive. Good figure. Athletic. Despite the cowl I thought I’d know her again if I met her in other clothes and other surroundings. Reminded me a little of Shadow. I relaxed; she wasn’t going to use that darter unless we were thicker than usual and forced it on her. She caught me smiling; she didn’t like that, but she was cool about it. “Clear corridor. Explain.”

“Deactivating traps, alarms, scanners, acoustics, melters, whatever, so we can scat like our tail’s on fire once we’re finished.”

“Scanners. It was you took them out?”

“My furry friend did. He’s good at that kind of thing. But the techs here, they’ve probably replaced the burnouts by now, and maybe someone has come up with the idea the flare was sabotage, so we don’t have all that much time. If you’ll just calm down and let us work....”

“Seems to me we haven’t interfered all that much.”

Adelaar dug in her pack, brought out the black box she called her crazyquilt; Pels was watching avidly, the smooth black plastic didn’t give him much to go on, but he was blasting into his memory the points where she clamped the leads; he’d hung over her like a worried mother when she started tinkering on the EYES, but she chased him, saying he made her so nervous she was botching the work. Actually, I think she didn’t want him or anyone else around her when she was using her tools, look at the fuss she made over Kinok’s snooping. She had her secrets and meant to keep them.

“Maybe we could get together on this.” I was trying a little basic persuasion, push but not too hard. “We need information; you want something or you wouldn’t be here.”

She thought that over, those bright eyes flicking from me to Pels and back, then she nodded. She didn’t put the darter away, she held it loosely so she could snap it up if she needed to. “Don’t push at me,” she said, a much more amiable tone to her voice. “You say you’re here to take some slaves home. We can certainly stand the loss. What’s she doing now?”

“Getting past the blocks; when she’s through, she’ll be looking for slave lists. Who’s where.”

“Ah. If she can do that, what do you want from me?”

“Mind if I move away from the wall, my leg’s get-ting cramped.”

“If you’ll remember ...” She flicked the darter at the silent women watching us.

“I hear you.” Moving slow and easy, I stepped over the bench and crossed to Adelaar. “About how long?”

She jumped, glared at me. Sweat was beaded over her face and there was a wild look in her eyes.

“Del, cool it, will you?” I know that wasn’t the most tactful thing I could have said; I didn’t mean to be tactful; I thought she needed an excuse to blow up, so I gave her one. She cursed me for half a minute. I don’t know Soncheri, but those words didn’t need translation, they sounded like a couple of k’yangs snarling at each other. When she wore out her vocabulary, she dragged a hand across her face, gave me a dis-gusted look and went back to watching the readout dials on her black box.

I left her to it and ambled over to another work station, swung the chair around and sat straddling it, my arms crossed over the padded back looking cool and friendly. Nothing like a cliché to comfort the edgy. “Hanifa,” I said which MEMORY told me was a courteous honorific for an important femme, a good description for the one facing me, “might be a good idea to send a couple of your people outside, keep watch for rovers looking for trouble. Maybe the tall one there could put on enough of his uniform,” I jerked a thumb at the unconscious guard, “to suggest he’s still on guard. Another idea, my friend here is rather good at stalking, you see him take the guard? Right, then you know what I mean. You’ve got us two as hostages for his good behavior, why not let him help with the patrolling? He’s an amiable soul if you don’t coo at him too much. Women do, you know, it’s the curse of his life.”

She surprised me. She laughed full out, a pleasant noise over the faint hum of the interface and the ticking of the shutdown readouts, made me feel like smiling for the first time since she jumped us; those other grins and grimaces were just policy. She waved the tall chunky one over and told her to get to it,

called a little one who looked like she was made of springsteel and hard rubber and sent her up into one of the holes to keep watch there and pot anyone who showed his nose. She gazed thoughtfully at Pels, then nodded and waved him after the women. When he was gone, she set her hands on her hips and looked me over. "I understand about her," she nodded at Adelaar, "Why you?"

"Gelt," I said. "It's how I make my living. She hired me and my Crew to help her find her daughter and on top of that I collect so much a head for every captive I bring back."

"Crew," she said. "You have a starship."

"I didn't walk here. The lists in there, they're going to say something like this person arrived at such and such time, he was sold or rented to such and such an individual living in such and such a town. We need someone to get us to the right houses. Or lay out maps for us."

"That might be arranged. We can talk about it next time we meet. Mostly he rents them, Old Pittipat I mean." She scratched at her chin with the barrel of the darter, stopped that when the front sight snagged in the knitted cloth that covered the bottom half of her face. "You noticed the Warmaster."

"Hard to miss."

"What do you know about ships like that?"

"It's big. If it set down here, it'd grind this city to dust and just about empty the lake. When it has its full complement on board, it carries six or seven thousand, which includes crew, support personnel and strike force. You have any idea how many men your Pittipat keeps up there?"

She made a soft angry sound. "Not mine." She tapped the darter against her hip and went back to watching Adelaar. After a minute she said, "I don't know. Maybe she can get the Brain to tell us."

I took a look at what Adelaar was doing. "When she has a moment free, shouldn't be long now, I'll see what she can turn up."

"How much to take us up there?"

"More than you or a dozen like you could afford."

"You don't know what I can afford."

"Maybe not, but you don't know how nervous that thing makes me."

"Bolodo takes pay in rosepearls. Other things too, but mostly them. Have you seen rosepearls?" That straightened me up and got me interested.

Adelaar had mentioned the profits from the slaving, but she hadn't gone into details. I still wasn't willing to risk Slancy in something so close to a sacrifice mission, but if that Warmaster were seriously undermanned which I suspected from the way it acted, hmm, it was an interesting thought. "I've seen a few, didn't know where they came from." I kept my voice easy, non-committal, but I don't think I fooled her much; she could smell a deal, but she was smart enough not to push it. "Let me find out what the Brain says," I told her. "I don't consider suicide an acceptable option."

"Nor I."

Adelaar started digging through her pack again; apparently she was in solid, because she brought out the duper and began attaching it to the black box. After the marrying was done and the run started, she went a little limp, scrubbed at her face with her sleeve and swung her chair around to face me; she looked a bit like she'd been having great sex with an inventive group, tired but with a kind of glow to her. "She's a slow bitch," she said, "it'll take maybe twenty minutes to get it all. Aslan first, then I'm pulling everything she's got about Bolodo. When we get back, those skulls won't know what hit them."

"You think you could dig out what's in there on the Warmaster?"

"Explain."

She listened while I sketched the Hanifa's proposition. Not quite a proposition yet, but a suggestion that we might work out some sort of accommodation. I could see the spark of interest in her when I mentioned rosepearls. It looked a lot like mine. She listened without saying anything and after I finished, sat staring at the floor for several minutes. Finally she looked up. "Aslan first." The words hadn't much force behind them. She'd spent time, sweat and a lot of her gelt to reclaim her daughter, but teasing a profit out of her pain was so seductive a thought it almost obscured her original purpose.

"Agreed," I said, "that's in the contract."

"We need to make sure we've got legs for getting out of here."

“Right. Slancy’s my income, I’m not hazarding her; you know how hard it is to get hold of a good ship. The tug’s different. We could pick up another like her in a couple of months.” I gave the Hanifa a half-grin, making sure she felt she was in the game; whether this happened or not, I wanted her kept sweet. With rosepearls in the pot, I was definitely coming back here once this business was finished. “Just looking won’t hurt.”

“Uh-huh. I think we’ve had this chat before.”

“I hear. Crew and me, we run on equal shares once Slancy’s serviced.”

“Five shares?”

“Four. Kinok/Kahat count as one. Five with you. One time.”

“Done.”

I shifted to the Hanifa. “If the brain says it’s doable, we’ll do it, say you and I agree-on terms.” I gave her the grin again. “Anything else you’d like to buy?”

She thought that over a minute. “I need to talk to my people.”

I checked my chron. “Plenty of time. The dupe run has to finish before my friend can pull the Warmaster stats.”

Adelaar watched the woman gather her raiders to-gether and start whispering at them. “Until a year and a half ago, local, a little over two years std., Aslan was here. Right here, inside these walls.”

“What happened?”

“She disappeared. Ran. There’s some more, but I haven’t tried reading it yet.”

I nodded at the confa group. “Maybe one of them knows.”

She pushed absently at her hair, her face gone blank, her eyes narrowed. I hadn’t a clue what she was think-ing. “Not here,” she said finally.

“Mmf, maybe you better explain that some more.”

“This is no place to twist answers out of anyone, too many ways we can get dumped on; besides, I left my kit behind, didn’t think I’d need it.”

“Twist answers. That’s not too swift an idea.”

“Rosepearls.”

“I can see their shine in your eyes too.”

She managed a thin smile. “I won’t dispute that. You think you can trust them?”

“Not half. Fanatics. They’ll do whatever they want to do and hell with any contract.” I yawned. It was getting later by the breath and I was tired. And I was getting nervous, stuck in this hole, waiting for the locals to pour on the troops. “Whatever they come up with, you keep hold of the data until they provide the pearls.”

“We agree on that much anyway.”

“Listen, say we lift them up there, if they can take that monster out, it’ll make getting away clean a lot easier. And getting back in. Look, Del, we’ve got the inside track with these people, an exclusive as long as we can keep the location quiet.”

“That won’t be long if your gamble pays off.”

He shrugged. “One or two trips for me, but Adelar is could have a longhaul market here.”

“Gray or black?”

“Does that matter? Lets you hike your prices.”

“I don’t know enough about this place....”

The Hanifa came back. “The clear corridor,” she said, eyes hard on Adelaar. “Can you leave it and hide what you’ve done?”

Adelaar ran her tongue over her lips. “Probably. The wards they’re using aren’t all that sophisticated. I’ll have to put the alarms right before we leave, but....” She frowned at the woman, I could see she was thinking keep it simple, you don’t want to irritate this one. “I can loop a path out of the guard circuits and pinch off access. Um, it might be better to set up several corridors, make them operative on different days, urn, switch from one to another in, say, a seven-day rotation. They’ll be harder to spot that way. Safer for your people, they won’t be coming over in the same place same time every time.”

The Hanifa’s eyes glittered, but she controlled her excitement and gave a short sharp nod. “Can you

find the files on suspect Hordar? Perhaps the Sech's plans for dealing with them?"

"I can take a look. Some of that might be stored in local branches."

"There aren't any. This is the only mainBrain on Tairanna."

"Your Pittipat doesn't like to share his power?"

"No." She didn't object to the *your* this time, too much into getting what she'd come for to worry about little things like that. "We want those files."

"Right. I can also erase them, if you want. Turning them over is more complicated unless your equipment can mate to mine."

"You can fix that."

"Probably. Not here." Adelaar had relaxed all over; she was back in her personal groove, selling her ser-vices. "Not for free either. Make me an offer."

The Hanifa moved her feet apart, set her hands on her hips and prepared to fight. "For your work and the files, five creampink, ten to eighteen grains."

"Seven corridors, files out and erased, eight midrose, twenty grain minimum, for my time, one of your creampinks."

"Seven corridors, two midrose; for the files, we'll have to see them to rate them, guarantee of one midrose, for erasing them one creampink, bonus points negotiated according to how much is in the files; your work, one creampink. Eighteen to twenty grains."

They went back and forth for several more minutes until they settled on a price that pleased both; by that time the dupe run had finished and Adelaar settled to work pulling the Warmaster stats, dumping them in the duper and at the same time flashing them on a readout so I could look them over and get an idea if a sneakraid was doable. While she was busy with this last, the tall local came inside, murmured something to her leader and went out again.

The Hanifa came over to me and stood watching the stats run past; Adelaar was into schematics now, line drawings of ship segments. "A guard came nosing about," she said after a moment. "Your friend stunned him. He said to tell you it was part of the standard rover pattern, he was expecting the man, it doesn't look like anyone is exercised about the scanners going out, the guard was normal-alert, not hyper."

"I hear you." I checked my chron again; seemed like we'd been down here a year or two, but it was just over an hour. "There's a shift change coming up in a little while. We'd better be gone by then."

"You seem to know a lot about what happens here."

"I'm a cautious man, Hanifa. I like to know what I'm stepping in."

"How?"

"Observation and experience."

"Observation?"

"Electronic surrogates."

"You recorded what they told you?"

"I'm a cautious man, Hanifa."

"Willing to sell it?"

"Not worth much. Once top security here wakes up to what happened, there'll be changes. Tell you what, I'll throw that into the pot with your suspect files, a little sweetener."

"Why?"

"Call it good will. Now that I know about you and what you've got to offer, I plan to be back, do some trading for this and that."

"Rosepearls."

"Naturally. And whatever else seems worth the trip."

She gave me an odd look and moved off. Like she hadn't thought through what it meant, us being there. Not until now. There was a big wild universe out there and she didn't know how she felt about linking up with it. Maybe a touch of panic.

I pulled my mind back to what was happening on the screen in front of me. It was looking good. Total complement was around two hundred and more than half of those were support and services,

whores, cooks, valets, you name it, everything you needed to keep three score techs, sech snoops and guards happy in their isolation. No wonder they didn't notice us, they wouldn't have noticed a grenade in their laps, to quote one of Pels' favorite expressions. Why favorite I haven't a notion, some kink in his psyche I suppose. Most of the ship was mothballed. My palms were starting to itch. Cumpla doomp, I wanted that ship. There was no way I could afford her, the fuel bills alone would be enough to bankrupt a small empire, but taking it would be so easy. For a minute I indulged in fantasies of charging across the universe with the power of a god under my hands, then I shook myself back to reality. Probably wasn't enough fuel in her tanks to get her across the system, let alone to the nearest fuel dump.

I still didn't like the thought of trying to nose up to that whale without it noticing me. Hmm. The guards were rotated every half-year local, that meant we could probably pick up someone who'd been up there re-cently and knew the drill. The screen blanked. I looked around.

"That's it," Adelaar said. "How long have I got?"

"Shift change ninety-five minutes. Pels got a guard, but he says there's no fuss yet. Don't dawdle over anything you can double-click."

"Even doubling, it's going to take the better part of an hour to finish and that's saying I don't screw up somewhere and have to start over.

"I hear." I slid out of the chair. "Don't push it, I'll see what I can do about arranging a meet with our client so we can get paid for this."

"You do that." She bent over the eviscerated terminal, forgetting me and everything else but what she was doing.

I went to pump the Hanifa and her women for everything I could get about the local setup.

9

"Ondar." A hissing whisper. The Hanifa sprang to her feet as the tall one leaned in the door. "The fuzzy says he hears lots of men coming toward us and he's going to see about slowing them up, but you should be ready to move."

I sat where I was, wondering what the Hanifa would do about this. I thought it'd likely be something with flair, she was that kind of leader.

She moved quickly to Adelaar. "Where are you?"

"Covering my tracks."

"How much longer?"

"Five minutes before I can leave the Brain on its own to finish the job."

"How much of it can we destroy without negating what you've done?"

"Worried about them wondering what you've been doing? Don't. I've laid in clues that will tell them you pulled the suspect files; that gives you a reason enough for being here so they won't look all that hard in other directions. They won't find the loops, not without some rather esoteric, well, call it logic. Even I'd have trouble undoing what I've done."

The Hanifa examined Adelaar, then me, her jawline hard through the silky knit of the cowl. "Do you need backup to get you out of here?"

"No. Do you?"

"No." She hesitated. "In case I'm not able to meet you, someone else will be there. Hordar for sure, could be a man or a woman. He or she'll say ..." She looked around, remembering suddenly that there might be ears tuned to this place that hadn't been there before.

"Don't bother yourself about snoops. Can't happen. Del has blocked access to the interface."

"I hear. Still, um ... he or she will show you this." She jerked up the shoulder drape on her cowl, pulled a medallion on a chain from under her black shirt. She let me look at both sides, then tucked it away again. It was an oval of dark bronze, with an odd bumpy pod on one side and a complicated double glyph on the other. Nice piece. "We're going to leave," she said. "Before we're trapped in here." She swung back to Adelaar. "What about the scanners?"

"They're down again, I sent an oversurge through. When they try to fix them, the techs will find I've cut them off completely from the mainBrain. The Sech won't be able to get them functioning again until he

regains control of the interface.” Adelaar was looking smugly pleased with herself and so she should, but there was a condescension in her voice which the Hanifa wasn’t appreciating. “If your transport can’t reach you before they get organized up top, you might head for the lakeside wall, either go over it or cut through one of the gates there. Don’t worry about alarms. The melters? The west wall is off the firing circuits for the next two hours. I’ve set up some snares the techs will find, urn, interesting. Avoiding them will cost time. If you can reach your pilot, let her know that.” She paused and the Hanifa started to turn away. “One moment more. After you get loose from here, you’ve got a free run for a while. I’ve fiddled some-thing else, blocked all contact with the Warmaster. I can’t shut her out permanently, there are too many possibilities for reinstating the link. As soon as the Sech reaches her, he’ll have her scanners looking for you. Be careful they don’t get a focus on you, they’ll fry you. Once they get a lock, they can track a flea on a dog’s back even if the man operating them has less brain than that flea. It’s not quite as bad as it sounds, when the power is ratcheted that high, the field is very narrow, so if you can get under cover before they do the first coarse scan, you should be safe enough. Questions? No? That’s it, then. Luck kiss you sweet, eh?”

“God’s blessings, Akilla yabass.”

I’ll give our Hanifa this, she wasn’t stingy with her gratitude; she didn’t even seem to be swallowing hard when she called our Adelaar a welcome stranger and wisewoman.

“Nada.” Adelaar went back to work. With a small army about to land on us, she wasn’t wasting more time on chat.

The Hanifa rounded up her women with an imperious sweep of her arm and took them outside. I unlimbered the launchtube, fed it a clip and followed her.

One of the raiders was more squarely built than the others, with broad shoulders and heavy arms; she’d been lugging around a powerful crossbow which I’d wondered about, it seemed a clumsy thing on a jaunt like this. Now she loaded it with a four-point grapple and aimed it upward at one of the windows. Our Hanifa was a lady with flair, no scrambling through ratholes for her. The woman loosed the bolt and it rose through a graceful arc, going up and up, four levels up, until it crashed through the glass and looped down outside, carrying a thin, knotted rope with it. A hard tug set the hooks, two of the raiders went at the rope like it led to the promised land and started swarm-ing up it. The shooter slapped a second ropebolt in the slot, hit the next window over, slapped in a third, put it through the third window, whap, whap, whap, steady as a metronome. She thrust her arm through the bow’s carrystrap and ran at the last rope. The Hanifa sketched a salute in my direction. “I’ll leave this one for you.” She started climbing.

Pels came scooting down the ramp, back in hull mode, little more than a ripple across the stone. “On my tail,” he yelled, his whoop filling the chamber with echoes. He’d been rambling around that maze interfering with the arrangements of the guardforce and he’d won us the extra few minutes that let the women get a good start up the ropes.

I put a couple of darts into the tunnel opening and blew down enough rubble to close it off. I started plinking the other exits, one by one, blowing out their sides and ceiling; things got touchy after I’d done five of them, the roof started groaning and shifting, it was an open question whether it’d come down on us before I finished sealing off the inlets. There was a lot of yelling and cursing coming through the noise of the falling stone and someone in one of the tunnels managed to get off some heatseeker missiles, but Pels knocked those down before they got anywhere.

Adelaar came out. “Peculiar, Quale, I didn’t believe it till I ran it twice, the Warmaster’s mainBrain is slaved to this one. I set a passive tap, one I can juice from the tug, tell you later.” She eyed the billowy pouf of dust with disfavor. “How do we get out of here?”

“The Hanifa left us a rope.” I pointed to it and swallowed a grin. She’d opted out of some of the last-phase planning, too impatient to sit through another bullshit session, so she didn’t know the emergency bolt hole we’d come up with.

“How nice. I’m supposed to go up that thing with this load?”

“Nope, we’re taking Pittipat’s private route. Pels?”

“All clear, just dust and cobwebs. All praise to paranoia.” Pels came from behind the throne,

grin-ning and brushing at his ruffled not-fur.

The hole was a stupid breach in security; when we saw it the first time, we thought it had to be some kind of subtle trap. Kumari flaked that part of the EYEfeed and went over it cell, by cell, tracing out every branch. All she found was dust and dark.

Pels tripped the lock on the panel, circled around us and led us up a wormhole that was barely wide enough to clear our elbows and so low I was almost bent in half. It split and split again, but the direction sense he was born with and the practice he got as a scruffy cub scattin' about his native subterras kept him on course. You couldn't lose him anywhere underground.

We fetched up at the theater close to where we started, emerging through the back wall of the Imper-atorial box. The tiers of seats were groaning and shiv-ering as they would at the tail end of an earthquake and the flags in the well shifted under our feet, but the theater wasn't going to collapse; there was a lot of hoohaw in the gardens outside it, parachute flares bursting over us, spotlights stabbing through fog that was even thicker than it'd been when we came in, yowling cats and howling men rushing about, god knows what they thought they were doing. Nothing much in here with us, just one guard and his brace of cats. He tried potting me, but I suppose I wasn't much more than a moving blot, because he didn't come close; that's the problem with pellet guns, when you miss you miss completely.

I got him with the stunner and Pels took care of the cats. We swung onto the stage. I was worried about the miniskips, briefly afraid the cats had sniffed them out, but they were where we left them, the only prob-lem was they were slimy with condensation. We strapped ourselves onto the belly pads and took off for the canyon.

I was tired enough to sleep a week and I suspected the others were about the same, though Adelaar would never admit it and Pels hid everything under his fur. On second thought, maybe he was just getting unlim-bered and was sorry the fight was over, it wasn't often he had a workout that used him up. Not that this skirmish had. We were going to lay up at the canyon for a few days, let things cool down and the Warmaster go back to sleep before we left for base. I spent a minute or so thinking about the Hanifa and several more minutes savoring the memories I had of rosepearls and the taste of all that lovely gratitude that was going to grease the way when I came back to open this market. The rest of the trip I drowsed, letting the miniskip fly herself.

10. *In Windskimmer/slipping away from the swirling swarm of hornets at the imperial Palace/ over Lake Golga/storm breaking about them.*

The airship plunged south through what felt like the heart of the storm, though it wasn't quite. Everything Karrel Goza knew about flying said get out of there, but he stayed over the lake in spite of the danger so he could minimize the chance someone would hear the motors and talk about it. From what he saw when he dipped to the jetty and dropped the ladders for Elmas and the others, there was going to be trouble for anyone the Grand Sech found someplace they had no business being. He didn't want to drag a trail to. Inci.

Lightning crackled around them.

He'd had the cuuxtwork on this far, afraid the techs would get the Palace scanners working again, but there'd been no pulse wigglers slipping along its surface so they hadn't done it yet; he shut the field off, he didn't know its properties, but he thought it might attract a strike. Windskimmer didn't have sufficient lift to rise clear of the storm; she was taking enough of a beating without the threat of being crisped by lightning.

Turbulent aircurrents battered at them; even worse, there were sudden pockets that dropped them into sheeted rain which pounded on them and drove them toward the icy water invisible below them.

Karrel Gaza's body was battered and bruised from the restraining straps; he'd jammed his fingers repeat-edly as he fought to keep Skimmer upright; one nail had a deep tear. The panel in front of him jerked and vibrated, impossible to read anything on it, he was working from feel and memory, blessing the Prophet's benevolence for giving him so much flying time in this airship that he knew her like he knew his own body. Dimly he was aware of the isyas squealing as they were flung from side to side; even when

they tried to hang onto the weatherstraps, the yawing lurches sent them rolling into each other. Elmas Ofka was cursing in spasms as she tried to get control of her chair; from the corner of his eye he saw enough to realize the brake had snapped and the chair was wobbling and swinging erratically; it could come loose and do some-one serious injury if he couldn't get this lumbering junk to climb higher.

All things end.

Two hours later the airship beat through the fringes of the storm and settled into a steady drone. Karrel Goza clicked on the autopilot and went limp with relief. He turned his head.

A trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth, Elmas Ofka was struggling to sit up. Holding the chair steady with her shoulder, Harli Tanggàr crouched be-side her working at the jammed clamps on the re-strainers.

Lirrit Ofka came and leaned on the back of his chair, her breath warm against his ear. "There were times...."

"There were." He clicked off the straps, began suck-ing at his torn finger. He watched Harli wipe Elmas Ofka's face and tip some visk into her mouth from a pouchflask. He tilted his head back, smiled up at Lirrit. "You got one of those?"

She laughed and passed him her flask.

The thick, sour drink ran down his throat and warmed some of the soreness and fatigue from his aching body. He snapped the lid down on the leather covered bottle and returned it to her. "What happened back there?"

"You remember those things that went past us?"

"Aliens?"

"Outside aliens. Where the slave ships come from."

"Uh."

"They were after the main rain too. One of them lost her daughter, she's here to get her back."

"You talked to them?"

"Talked and talked. There was time for it."

She was almost glowing she was so excited, she was teasing him with it, making him ask. He caught one of her hands, put her finger in his mouth and bit down on it. She giggled, and pulled his hair.

"So tell me," he said.

"We are going to take the Warmaster. We are, are, are."

"How?"

"Elli did it. She hired them. Rosepearls, Kar. They've got a ship, they'll ferry us up and get us in." She pressed her forefinger against his cheek. "One's a man, big man, if I danced with him I'd bang my nose on his belt buckle. He did the bargaining." Middle finger. "There's the woman; she plays tunes on that Brain like Jirsy does on her shal." Her breath tickled his ear as she laughed in little soundless gasps. "She doesn't know it, Elli didn't tell her, but her daughter's living at the mines. You've met her, the one called Aslan. The teacher. We're keeping her as a kind of hostage, Elli doesn't trust them much." Third finger. "There's the cutest little furry being." She reached over his shoulder and flattened her hand on his stom-ach, below the spring of his ribs. He'd come about here on you." She brought the hand back to his shoul-der, began kneading the hard tense muscles there. "You ought to see him, Kar. Big brown eyes, the softest sweetest fur, makes you want to pick him up and cuddle him." Her hands stilled for a moment. "Except it isn't really fur. When he wants, it changes color ... and everything, so you just can't see him. He went across a floor like he was part of it and wimp! the guard was down and out, didn't see a thing."

"Doesn't sound very cuddly."

"They're going to meet us on Gerbek Island nine days on, you can see what I mean then."

He grunted, saw Elmas Ofka watching them. "You don't trust them."

"It's not a question of trust. Greed, young Kar." Her mouth moved into a twisted grin. "Greed. We'll give them enough this time to make them hungry for more. They won't, be so apt to cut us down if they plan on coming back. And there's always the daughter." She frowned. "We're not lost anymore, Kar." She sounded troubled and uncertain, not at all the Dalliss Elmas Ofka who walked in power, unfettered and formidable. "That man and his crew are just the first wave. There's going to be a lot more like him

before we're dead and gone/born and back. I don't know how anything's going to turn out any more. I used to know." She closed her eyes, started to lean back but changed her mind when the chair started to wobble. "Atch! Even this." She slapped at the chair arm. "Every-thing's bound to change. Tidal wave of change. How am I going to ride it, Kar? How are any of us going to keep from being drowned in it?"

He stared at the knotty darkness rushing past out-side. Not lost any longer. People knowing about us. Outsiders coming here. Changing us. Changing every-thing. It was like standing naked on the Speaker's Minaret with a mob muttering in the Circle below. He shivered, then winced as his bruises stung him. Lirrit Ofka muttered something he didn't catch, her hands were warm on his shoulders, working more of the tension out of him. "Was Lirrit right? Are they going to ferry us to the Warmaster?"

"Yes."

"So, what do we do when we get there?"

"What do you think?"

"Take it, I suppose. Somehow."

"According to the Brain there's only a handful of techs, a few Huvveds to run things and a squad of Noses to keep them all honest. The rest are support. Two hundred, counting whores."

"Take a big hand to close round two hundred."

"Shifts, Kar. Like the retting shed where you're working now. One third on duty, one third playing, one third sleeping. None of them expecting trouble. A score of us could take her. I could lay my hands on twice that many in less than a week."

He nodded. "I know. Them at the mine, Jamber Fausse's raiders, the Dalliss web. Give you two weeks and you'd have a hundred or more. Thing is ..." he smoothed his thumb over and over the torn nail, "who *can* you trust once they're up there?" He scowled at her. "And what are we going to do with that horror once we've got it?"

"I know." She sighed, shook her head. "If it weren't so pathetic, it'd be funny. We can't kick Pittipat out if we don't take the ship. So we have to take the ship. But we can't operate her and we can't trust anyone who can operate her because they'd take her away from us and we'd be worse off than we are now. And we can't stay put and hold her because we don't know how to work the defenses so any rockbrain bitbit who's been up there and knows how to push a button could take her from us. And we can't tell the aliens thanks but some other time when we know what we're doing because the next clutch of visitors might be types that'd make a Huvved Torturegeek look like a nursery nana."

Karrel Goza leaned into Lirrit's hands, comforted by her strong fingers. "We've talked a lot about taking the ship, but whoever expected us to do it?" After a moment's heavy silence, he said, "What about N'Ceegh? From what I saw, all he wants is to get back to his workshop."

"He does now, but what would happen if he had all that power in his hands? That changes everything, Kar. Tell you true, I wouldn't trust *me* with that ship if I knew how to work her. Would you? Trust yourself, I mean?"

He didn't try answering her; he didn't have to. "If there was some way we could get rid of her..."

"We've got a month to think of something, the man said he wouldn't take us up until he finished collecting the folk he's come for. Kar..."

"Yeh?"

"Don't tell anyone about this. Not yet."

"Geres Duvvar and some of my cousins know about the raid. If I don't give them something, it'll be worse than kicking over a karints nest; we'll have them swarm-ing about us trying to find out what happened."

"Mm." She stared past him, fingertips tracing a merm scar. "Tell them this, the female alien pulled all the suspect files from the mainBrain, then she wiped them out of Memory so whatever the Grand Sech doesn't have as hard copy is gone. She's printing the files for us so we'll know how much he knows and what he suspects. And she's set up some safe corridors into the Palace, we'll be getting the stats for those and passing them on to whoever's interested. That ought to satisfy anyone who cares to ask. What time is it? The board clock has quit on us." She frowned. "And where are we?"

"We've got around an hour till dawn. The storm slowed us a lot, we haven't reached North

Bayshore yet.”

“We can’t make the mines before sunup?”

“No way. We’ll have to find someplace to lay up. Unless you want to risk day flying.”

“Too dangerous. If we ran straight east for an hour, where’d we come out?”

“Can’t go straight east. Skimmer can’t go head on against the wind out there, it’s blowing a gale still.” He tapped the glass over the fuel readout. “Look at this. Even beating to the southeast, we’ll be running on fumes in the emergency tank before we have land under us. We’ll have to leave her anchored some-where until we can pack in fuel. Why not let the wind take us to the west shore?”

“That’s Daz Musved, the Fehdaz there has a strangle hold on his people. I don’t dare show my face anywhere around. Remember the price on my head? Besides, the land is too open close to the coast, we couldn’t hide Skimmer and hope to get her back. And we need her.”

“What’s all this about hiding her? Why can’t we just find a spot where people don’t go and anchor her?”

“Because once the Grand Sech strips the blocks the woman set in the Brain, he’ll order the Warmaster to scan the country around Gilisim. She warned me that would happen, that we’d better go to ground as soon as we could. If we can tuck her out of sight, there won’t be anything for the scanners to see. That re-minds me, they’ll probably rake through places like the mine. Jirsy. “

“Um?”

“You’ve got kin round the north end of the Bay, haven’t you? In Daz Kanath?”

“I’ve got some Peltic-Indiz cousins living at Kuntepe Cove. You know where that is, Kar?”

“Close to where the Incis drop down to the sea, isn’t it? I took a girl there for a daysail the week before I was adulted. I think it was Kuntepe.”

“Right. Why, Elli?”

“I want you to get to a com where you can send a warning to Ansla Civa at the mine so she can spread the news to keep their heads down. Can you do that?”

“Sure. Kar, put me down near the point, I’ll walk round to the House. They’ll take me in and ask no questions.” She was a tiny thing with a face like a sealpup, and when she grinned her eyes almost disappeared. “They’ve been stilling teshfire on the sly since Settletimes and no Fehdaz or any of his Noses has ever caught them at it or anything else they feel like doing and no stinking bitbit’s about to do that now.”

“Good. Will your cousins help you get back to gul Inci?”

“Oh yes, one of these days I’m probably going to marry Imro Peltic. And even if that wasn’t so, none of them down to little Emin who’s just starting to talk would say anything to any outsiders, Huvved or Hordar doesn’t matter.”

“Well, tell them what you have to, Jir, and warn them to keep close to home. If you can avoid it, nothing about the Warmaster.”

“Elli, no no. It’s true this time, what they don’t know won’t hurt them. Telling them that could hurt a lot.”

“I see.” Elmas Ofka fell silent for a moment, tracing over and over the merm scars on her arm; she was thinking hard. “Kar, you said hide hunting?”

“Derrigee Bol’s paying two to five alvs for erkelte hides. When I messed up my hand, Goza Ommar said go and don’t come back till you’ve walked the maggos out of your belly; if I could bring back a hide or two, that’d be froth on the beer, but she didn’t expect it. I could stay out another week, no problem.”

“Good. It’ll take at least that long to get Skimmer refueled and flown home.” Her mouth twitched into a half-smile. “Maybe you’ll come across an erkelte and get your hide while we’re walking to the mine.” She looked down at her hands. “We’ll have to expel the ballonets and let the wind carry them off, collapse the bag so we can get it and the gondola under cover. Kar, if you can nurse her that far, take her up the K’tep. The closer we hide her to a waterway, the easier it’ll be to resupply her.”

“Depends on the wind. And a favor from the Prophet wouldn’t hurt.”

“Do the best you can.”

“Don’t I always? Find another place to sit before I swing round. This could get rough.” He reached

for the restrainers, clicked the catches shut, wincing as the straps pressed against his bruises. He waited until Lirrit and Elmas were settled, then he began easing the nose around, heading toward the northeast bend of the Bay and the Inci Hills.

IX

1. 8 months std. after Adelaar aici Arash hired Swardheld Quale and his crew. Aslan as fugi-tive, living at the Mines.

The flarescreen spread across the wall inside the old smelter. Most of the smelter's machinery had been salvaged for scrap when the mine shut down; the build-ing itself was in fair shape, its brick walls were mas-sive, its tiled concrete roof cracked but otherwise intact. A year ago, when Parnalee's Spectacles had first ap-peared and were beginning to attract a considerable audience, some of the middlers among the Hordar exiles had plastered the walls and ceiling inside and pasted yosstarp over the plaster to make the huge room lightproof, others had picked up a comset in the course of a raid on a Raz strongroom and installed it here with a sunlight pickup and storage cells as its power source. The floor was littered with cushions and mats left here permanently because the Smelter had become one of the favored meeting places for the younger exiles, a combination Tavern and Dance Floor and ShowCenter; the greater part of the rebels and the outcasts were late middlers and young adults, fourteen through thirty-five, Hordar at their most energetic and prideful, male and female in nearly equal numbers; they came from every part of settled Tairanna, from the Duzzulkas, from the Sea Farms, from the east coast, west coast, south coast Littorals, even some up from Guneywhiyk the South Continent; desperate enough to chase a whisper; life on Guneywhiyk was even more constricted than it was here in the North.

Three days after Elmas Ofka took her isyas to raid the Palace, Aslan strolled into the Smelter and settled on a cushion in one of the corners, apart from the others. Like most of the escaped slaves she lived in amiable contiguity with the rebel Hordar, but this tolerance was a policy based on the needs of the rebels, not real acceptance; she had to be careful to avoid triggering the xenophobe that lay not so far beneath every Hordar skin. It was dark out, supper was over and the cleanup finished; this was the hour when Hordar in the cities went to the Dance Floors or into the Taverns, when parties began and lovers jumped the walls to meet in delicious secrecy. It was the eve of Gun Peygam, the Day of the Prophet, the one day in seven the Kuzeywhiyker Pradites set aside for rest and meditation. The eve of Gun Peygam was the day Parnalee chose for his weekly broadcasts.

Aslan twisted open the flask of tea she'd brought, filled the lidcup and sat with her back against the wall, sipping tea and watching the screen as the warning eye appeared, then dissolved into a play of color. The rebels were drifting in, exchanging scrip for drinks and food from the bar at one side, wandering about until they found a group they felt like joining or an empty mat where they could make their own group. Because they came from different places there were frictions, lots of frictions, clawfights and fist fights, hurt feelings and hurt bodies, but their joint hatred of the Huvved helped smooth down the worst lumps and gradually these Hordar from everywhere were beginning to think of themselves as Tairannin rather than Incers or Brindarin or whatever. At the request of the Council that was attempting to govern this patchwork settle-ment, Aslan had devised several strategies for diffus-ing hostility; these seemed to be working well enough to keep the ever-increasing population at the Mines from flying into fragments.

The color flow took on shape and definition, chang-ing into a swirl of male and female dancers filling the screen with explosive movement timed to a music more guessed at than heard. Parnalee was using her data here as he would later on, as he did in every show, ignoring the distortions she'd tried to introduce, per-haps they were canceled out by what Churri brought him, it didn't matter, it'd taken her less than a month to recognize the futility of her attempts to buy moral absolution without giving up her comfortable life, with-out facing and accepting the danger implicit in chal-lenging the dominance of the Huvved; having recognized that weaselthink, she went missing from gul Inci when Tra Yana sent her spying there. Her data, yes. It told him that Tairannin never settled immediately to any-thing other than

work, they circled, approached and shied away,, as if they were sniffing at each other and the air around them, as if they had to get the feel of place and people before they could settle to enjoying themselves; he was programming spectacular dance sequences at the beginning of each show so he could snag the eye and draw in the peripatetic viewer before the serious business of drama began.

Churl showed up at the Mines about six months after she went down the slide. One day in early spring when rain was turning the world to mud and the honeycomb inside the mountain was sweating and dank, he came strolling into the stubby shaft where she and Xalloor were living, grinned at her and went out again. He usually joined them at the Smelter when Parnalee's Spectacles were on, watching the shows with a contagious glee as he ran a whispered commentary on the strings the Proggerdi was pulling. He wasn't here now, he and Xalloor and her group were having a pro-longed argument over their latest script, that's what the note said that Xalloor sent round to her before dinner. If they managed to work things out before the Spectacle was over, they'd join her. She wasn't expecting them. Conflict was foreplay for the Bard her father, probably that was what attracted him to her mother, Adelaar's fierce and instant attack on anything that tried to control her. He'd quickly lost interest in Aslan; his daughter wasn't the kind of woman he admired and there were no shared memories of her childhood to reinforce the bio-tie; the accidental fact of their relationship went back to being a thing of no importance to either. At least, that was the face she put on for him. She was too experienced an observer to place any pressure on the fragile bond that still existed between them, but his indifference hurt her badly. There were times she woke before dawn and lay on the crude pallet unable to sleep, caught in what she called the deadash grays, asking why she kept on living and finding no answer.

The dancers melted again to streamers of light that wove a garland about a small dark man holding a stringed instrument like a cross between a lute and a lyre. The rebels greeted his appearance with whistles and thumbsnapping, his name went skittering about the Smelter like the game ball at an ogatarka match, Murrebai, Murrebai, Murrebai, then the room stilled to a silence so intense it seemed nobody breathed as he began to play a simple plaintive tune; he finished the tune and began repeating it but somewhere in the middle his agile fingers and his agile brain took hold of it and twisted it up down around ... and brought it back to a simplicity no longer naive, having passed through complexity as through fire and come out stripped clean and immensely strong. He allowed them no time to recover but began a cheerful old child song. The rebels sang with him, holding on to each other, many of them crying silently as they sang.

Parnalee, ah, Parnalee.... What a job he'd done for Tra Yarta. When he got here, there was no such thing as an entertainment network; on the coast the Hordar thought in terms of family and city, up in the Duzzulkas family and estate; they didn't care what happened outside the communal walls. The Huvveds arrived with other ideas, but in the three centuries they'd been here, a lot of Hordar concepts had crept into their worldview; most of them had Hordar mothers though Huvved boys were removed from female influence as soon as they could walk. Merchants talked to each other and the Seches kept in touch, but no one thought of using the universal comweb to deliver entertainment into the homes, not before Parnalee arrived.

Murrebai bowed and strolled offstage. As if he pulled it after him on invisible strings, a title scrolled across the screen in carefully brushed calligraphy: *The Calling of the Prophet*.

There was a murmur of approbation from the rebels, then they settled back in pleasurable anticipation.

The sonorous voice of an unseen speaker rose above solemn, portentous music, naming the actors, setting the time and place of the events to be portrayed.

Aslan hid her smile behind the lidcup, missing Churri and his pungent commentary; she doubted whether anyone else in that room understood how much Parnalee was dumping on them, mocking their sacred cows. There seemed to be few skeptics on Tairanna when it came to the life and teachings of their Prophet; the Eftakites from Guneywhiyk believed with equal fervor in Pradix, they simply had a later gloss on his teachings from their Prophet, Eftakes. She had a fair idea of what would happen to their comfortable, comforting certainties when the Universe outside began crowding in on them; she found it rather sad.

There was a, concerted gasp from the audience, word-less cries of outrage. What's he done now? she thought and frowned at the screen. As soon as she realized what she was seeing, she felt like gasping too. The actor playing the Young Pradix in his Violent Revolutionary phase was a Huvved. Or so it seemed. My god, she thought, he's gone too far this time.

In a minute though, when she saw several of the Councilors pushing through the disturbance, she knew he'd judged these people to a hair; he knew what he was doing, that twisted crazy monster. He knew.

Councilor Belirmen Indiz slapped hands against hips and roared down the mutters and shouts, "Use your head, not your gut. You make me ashamed to call myself a rebel. You heard that cast list. Any Huvved patronymics on it? Eh? Any? That boy up there, sure he looks Huvved, but no Huvved has given him a name. Eh? He's got no name but one he makes for himself. You, know how he got that face. Some Fehdaz got him on a servant girl and booted them both out when her time was on her. You think her family did better for him? Eh? What about when he was old enough to show his father's face? Think about that. I see Huvved hair out there, light eyes, Huvved ears and noses. What was your life like, you with those marks on you? Eh? Think about it. You're here, where would you be if your soul's stains laid his load on you? Honor that middler up there for his pride and his skill, and curse the father, not the son." He stalked back to his seat, folded his arms across his chest and sat mas-sively upright, daring anyone to answer his argument.

Parnalee, ah, Parnalee. I wonder how many Houses are listening to a speech like that? You don't need me or Churn either, you despise the men you manipulate but you understand them in some deep sadistic way better than I ever will, however much I probe and study. I think I am a little jealous of you. I know I am afraid of you....

When he came out of his room after the beating, he came like a storm. He raged through the house, tear-ing up whatever he could get his terrible hands around, he kicked holes in the walls, trampled computers into twisted wrecks. He was crazier than a tantserbok driven mad by must; wholly out of control. With his strength and mass and his rage he'd just about frightened the stiffening from her bones. Then, abruptly, standing in the center of the shattered common room he went still, quiet; between one breath and the next he stopped his rampage, turned and walked back into his room. Quietly, with terrible control, he shut the door. A day passed.

The second time he emerged, the beast had van-ished though Aslan thought she saw it looking at her now and then; she saw it surface and sink again when, hesitating and afraid, she told him of the Warmaster and what it meant to them.

The Smelter was quiet again. Looking around her, Aslan could see eyes flicking from side to side. Look-ing for those Huvved marks, she thought, hoping no one would see Huvved blood in them. On the screen a battle was over, the two commanders were standing face to face, meeting each other as equals, warrior to warrior. Parnalee had dug up more Huvved bastards to play the empire soldiers and there was a tense silence in the room as the two men confronted each other; the Empire's Captain accepted his death at Pradix's hands, taking the sword thrust with a stiff nobility that made Aslan hide another smile behind her hand.

Parnalee was playing all the themes that Tra Yarta had asked from him, but he was putting a spin on them that undercut the Huvved; he was playing to species memory and the depths of Hordar pride, de-flecting their present angers only to intensity them, laying a clutch of bombs for the future. Future? As close as tomorrow, maybe. Despite Aslan's training, Churri was aware of what the Proggerdi was doing before she was; she was too tangled in guilt to use her brain, but once he pointed out what was happening it was obvious to her. Parnalee was seeding in the gen-eral population the same change that was taking place in the rebels, teaching the Hordar indirectly but effec-tively that they belonged to Tairanna and had a com-mon enemy no matter where they lived; he was making possible the final overthrow of the Huvved once the rebels solved the problem of the Warmaster, but that wasn't what he wanted, oh no, what he wanted was Huvved dead and he didn't care what it took. He teased at the Hordar by slyly putting down the Huvved, so slyly he couldn't be pinned on it, but every Hordar who saw the Spectacles knew what he was getting at and felt the pride and saw the possibility. Aslan watched

and was afraid; she thought of warning the Council, but doubted they'd believe her or understand what she was saying. The best there is, he told Xalloor once, and perhaps he was, but he was also crazy and men were going to die of that insanity. And she saw no way of stopping it.

On the screen Pradix was driving himself and his men into building a funeral pyre for the enemy; one by one his men began slipping away from him, showing by their glances and their gestures that they thought he had cracked his head on something and let his wits run out. Before long he was alone, sweating and struggling with the trees his men felled and left laying. Parnalee cut repeatedly from the madman working on that crazy magnificent pyre to shots of Empire soldiers flying toward the bloody ground, bent on avenging the death of their brothers.

Xalloor slipped in and crept as quietly as she could to join Aslan. She dropped on the floor beside the cushion, wrapped her arms about her legs and watched the play unfold with a curious double vision. One part of her saw it critically, judged the skill or lack of it in every aspect, recognized the tricks and the cynical manipulations, the lapses in taste and logic; the other part was entranced by what was there, that part plunged into the play until she was drowning in it, surrendering like a child to sensation and emotion. How those two parts could exist in Xalloor simultaneously and separately without destroying each other was something Aslan had never been able to understand in all the time they'd been together, something Xalloor had tried more than once to explain and failed each time.

As Pradix lit the pyre and flames leaped upward, the needle-nosed fliers of the avenging soldiers were visible on the horizon, black specks growing larger by the moment. Suddenly the sky darkened, turned an eerie ominous greenish purple as clouds swept in from every side. A funnel formed behind the fliers, caught up with them, beat them from the air like a maidervant killing gnats and raced on toward Pradix and the pyre. Closer and closer it came until its blackened vortex filled most of the screen with Pradix a tiny figure kneeling on the torn and trampled glass. Then it was gone; the broken world it left behind was quiet except for the vigorous crackling of the funeral fire. The small figure of the kneeling man was there still, untouched, shining in the dimness of the coming storm as if lit by another fire, one that burned inside him. A bird sang. The sweetness of its song was almost unbearable.

There was an explosive sigh as if every lung in the Smelter emptied itself at the same moment. Otherwise the silence was unbroken.

Parnalee, you've the Luck of the crazy cradling you, Aslan thought, I can't believe Tra Yarta passed this one. Was he suckered by the casting of that boy with his Huvved face and form? She rubbed at her nose, gulped down the tea left in the cup; it was cold, but the small bitterness was a satisfying counter to the fantasy on the screen. A headache began at the back of her skull; she rubbed at her nape, closed her eyes. How long does this go on? she thought. Where's Churri? She slit an eye and sneaked a look at Xalloor. Have you two decided to split? The dancer looked placid as a sleeping lizard, but that didn't mean much, she was sunk in the Spectacle and nothing else mattered.

Somehow Pradix had changed from a fighter to a poet, she'd missed the transition while she was fussing, but wasn't much bothered by that. He wasn't the Prophet yet, but he was getting close. He'd acquired three men with assorted instruments and a rough cart with straw sticking out all over, pulled along by a team of yunks painted battleship gray with vertical black stripes. Since Parnalee had thrown in tarmac highways kept in top condition and a swarm of small black vehicles rushing along them at near supersonic speeds, not to mention the vast assortment of fliers that passed by overhead, the reason for that cart with its two-yunk propulsion system escaped her. She poured some more tea; she needed a touch of reality or she'd start giggling and get herself lynched from the looks on the faces around her.

He was going from village to village, mixing sedition with preaching, poetry with politics, escaping again and again just before soldiers landed on the town, building toward a finale that got the rebels on their feet, shouting out the words to the poem he was chanting in the ancient worker's vag that was the basis for the Hordar they all spoke today; apparently it was a poem everyone here knew, probably one of those she'd sent Churn hunting way back in that other life, the kind no Huvved ever heard. Reluctantly she got to her feet with the rest, but she refused to chant with them.

Pradix the poet stood on the cart's bed, straw about his feet, music on three sides, Yesil Uranyi perched on the front, drums going tam tam tummm toom, Saadi Klemm on his left, twee twee tootle too

ooh, wander-ing flute, and on his right, scree ooh wee, singee singee, the fiddling man Nanno mallet. Pradix the not yet Prophet stood in the cart and chanted his vagger song.

*year ya year ya year ya ya
fear ya hear ya fear
shake ya shiver
terror fever
same old song, same old
sad song
same old sad
song
some men get old
some women cold
old ya cold ya
NO O NO
I ya we ya I an we
we shout
NO O NO
them wonda what we been about
them wonda bout we fire
heartfire red and red
not dead
not we
them canna tame we an I
them canna tame I
am too weight-I
too long I wait I
old song sad song dead song dead
so them say so
old cold dead
NO!
I ya we
I an we
do stomp o
press shun
I an we
this genna ray
shun
ay shun I shun we shun
they
I an we do stomp oppression
I an we this generation*

“YA!” the crowd in the village shouted. “YA!” the rebels in the Smelter shouted. “No,” they shouted, players and viewers, “Fireheart! Weight-I wait-I! NO! Shun,” they shouted, players and viewers, “Press! Stomp! Shun! Stomp oppression, this generation, I an we, YES! YES! YES!”

Xalloor pinched Aslan’s arm, then began wiggling through the crowd, heading for the door. Aslan blinked, then followed, crossing against the streams of adults who were moving toward the bar. Some of the older middlers were kicking the mats and cushions to one side to get ready for the dance that would

go on until the musicians tuning up in a corner by the comset ran out of wind. Others were standing around throwing verses back and forth, a kaleidoscope of clashing sounds. A number of the younger middlers weren't waiting for music but were already undulating in the preliminaries to one of their less comprehensible dances. Made Aslan feel her years; forget about the ananiles, they couldn't return that resilience of mind that only the very young possessed.

The wind was picking up outside, the tree limbs woven overhead groaned and creaked, the stiff thick leaves rubbed against each other, singing like crickets. The trees grew close together, blocking moonlight and starlight; whoever walked this path after dark carried light with him or her and blessed the trees for they celled the path to the Minemouth and hid the walkers on it from the Warmaster's wandering eye. Rod lights flickered like earthbound stars as clumps of middlers hurried toward the dance, brushing past Aslan and Xalloor without taking notice of them. When the rush diminished to a trickle, Aslan hurried to catch up with Xalloor.

"What .."

The dancer looked round, her face lit by a flash of laughter, clickon clickoff, there and gone. She shook her head.

Aslan sighed, matched steps with her. "The script. Who won?"

"Me. Sort of." Xalloor thrust her hands into the pockets of her jacket and slowed a little, letting Aslan light the way for them both. "I told them, look, you go and on at people like that, they turn their heads off. Worse'n that, they turn you off. You want 'em to listen, you keep coming back at them all right, but you sugarcoat it, I mean you want to sneak it past 'em before they know what you're doing. I said, you want to see how it's done, look at one of those Spectacles, I mean really look, forget about the story, figure out what he's saying and how he's saying it. But you got to do it better, faster, don't forget how quick the bitbits'll be after you, you've got maybe ten minutes playing time before they locate the transfer station and trash your cassette. Lan, you should've seen that script, it'd send a wirehead into coma."

"When are they going to start the clandestines?"

"Things keep going like they are and they get hold of some more writers, which they really need, believe me, they natter on all the time about poets, but they don't recruit any, it's enough to make you throw up your hands and say hell with everything. Amateurs! Couple months from now. That's what the plan is. Three months top limit." Another strobe grin. "May-be."

"Why maybe in that tone of voice?"

"Elmas's back. We were still arguing when she came in, she wanted to talk to Evvily, so we broke up. Just as well, Ylazar was starting to repeat himself and that could go on till entropy took us all."

"She say anything? What the tight-down was about?"

"Not in front of the nonnies, no." She clicked her tongue, wrinkled her nose.

Aslan sighed again, the familiar little sound stabbed a weak spot; she wanted her mother here, scold or not, wanted something from her old life, she was tired, so tired of improvising an existence.

Xalloor banged on the Minemouth door, stepped back while the keeper slid it open just wide enough to let them through one after the other. She got her lightrod out again and began almost galloping along the rough floor of the gallery, heading for the lift. There was a suppressed excitement about her, a wired-up energy that said clearer than words she had news, exciting maybe frightening news.

They went up two levels, followed Kele tunnel until they reached the stubby offshoot where they'd set up housekeeping. Xalloor stirred the fire to life, added more coal and crouched before the grate with the bellows, working with hard won expertise (her first attempt at a coal fire was unalloyed disaster, they had to run down a Hordar who knew about sea coal and iron grates and was willing to lend a hand so they didn't freeze before morning). As she coaxed tiny flames from the ashy lumps, some of the dank chill went off the room. It was a room, there was a yosstarp ceiling, wrinkled and sagging, walls of wood scrap scavenged from the company houses, a wooden floor covered with lignin mats that Aslan had woven, put-ting to work one of the skills she'd learned a few assignments back, a neat herringbone pattern that earned her some condescending praise from the much defter weavers among the outcasts. She'd made mats for a number of rooms like these, glad to have some way of passing the time; besides,

the scrip she earned brought her and Xalloor things they couldn't have acquired otherwise, like the glass and bronze oil lamps and the earthenware vase sitting on a crate in the corner by the fire, the nergi flowers in it adding dark rich red and orange tones to the drab gray of the tarp and the washed-out brown of the mats and the walls. There were two pallets raised from the floor on crude frames that Aslan and Xalloor had glued together from rusty tramrails and salvaged bricks, there were several cushions they'd gotten from one of the weavers in return for several weeks hard work carding junk wool, blankets issued by the Council; sheets were a luxury few living here could afford. There was the crate which they used for storage and some smaller boxes that served as tables. Chilly drafts came wander-ing through the cracks no matter how often she or Xalloor pounded caulking between the boards. Not down the chimney, though, bless the local tech; Hordar filters were useful for more than purifying water. Despite all this, they were surrounded by stone and earth and that was like living inside a block of ice.

While the dancer fussed with the fire, Aslan moved round the room, lifting the chimney glasses, telling herself she ought to wash them one of these days, trimming the wicks and lighting them. These lamps burned fish oil smuggled in from the Sea Farms and that oil announced its origins for several minutes after the wicks were lit; after that either the smell went away, or their noses went on strike. The soft amber light filled the room, chased away the shadows and gave an illusion of warmth. She poured some water in a kettle, hooked out the swing spit and clamped the bail in place. "Move over a bit, Loorie, let me get this on so we can have some tea. Did you get anything to eat over there?"

Xalloor tossed the bellows aside and came to her feet in that boneless ripple that made Aslan feel clumsy as a stone god. "It's going good enough, I was just trying to catch some warm." She dropped onto her pallet. "Some sandwiches, I think they were, might have been relics of the Prophet. Why is it, Lan, that earnest types never have a palate?"

"Genetic, I suppose." Aslan got to her feet, brushed her hands against her trousers. "I thought that might happen, so I begged some cold meat and rolls from Prismek, a minute, I'll fetch them." She pushed past the double tarp they used as a door and tied taut once they were in for the night, came back with a basket, its contents wrapped in old soft cloth. "He had some krida he was frying for breakfast, there's a sackful of those tucked under the rolls. And he threw in some green meelas and some cheese to go with them."

"I love you forever, Lan."

"So tell me what it is you didn't want to say out there."

"Remember I said we were still arguing?" Xalloor pulled a box across the slippery mat to her pallet and began laying out the feast.

"So?"

"I didn't exactly mean we, not when Elmas came in; there was some peculiar tea going round and it got me in the gut, I was out back in the facilities listening to my insides grumble and wondering if my knees were going to work right when I finished dropping my bur-den'. Well, I don't need to go into that any more, but what happened was, when I came back Churri and Holz had gone off along with most the others. I was ticked, let me tell you, I could've used an arm to lean on right then, I was moving slow and careful. That must've been why they didn't hear me and stop talk-ing." She popped a krida in her mouth and crunched happily at it, rolling her eyes with pleasure at the taste.

"Loorie!"

"Dearie dai, im pay shunt," Xalloor scooped out a handful of the krida and sat with her fingers crooked about the succulent fishlets, "pay and play. Outside's in. Here and now. Not Bolodo."

Aslan closed her eyes. After a moment, she heard a hissing as the water boiled and a few drops landed on the coals. She kicked a cushion across to the box, hooked the kettle away from the fire. As she made the tea, she did her best to not-think, not-feel. Behind her she could hear Xalloor eating steadily and was grateful the dancer didn't feel like talking right then. She left the tea steeping, stood leaning against the crate, her elbows behind her, resting on the top. "Outside's in?"

"You hear what Elmas 'n the isyas were after?"

"My students said she was going to blow the Brain. Get rid of the Sech's files. Make as much trouble as she could."

"Yah. That's where she 'n the isyas ran into 'em."

"Hm." Aslan lifted the strainer, inspected the tea and decided it was ready. She carried pot and bowls to the box, folded herself down onto the cushion and poured tea for herself and Xalloor. She cradled her bowl between her hands, glad of the warmth and the heaviness, it gave her something to hold onto. "Ex-actly what did you hear, Loorie?"

"Le' me see, I'm supposed to be good with dialog. You been in the depot, you know how it's laid out; we were in the big room so we could walk through a scene whenever we fixed something and see how it played.

There's tarp hung all over, makes it hot sometimes, but no one fusses about that," she held up one of the krida, "frying's all right for fish, but me, I'd rather not, eh? There's a couple of old minecars in there, lot of junk, you had to navigate it in the dark, you'd end up with two broken legs and your face pushed in. What I mean, we don't try to light the whole place, so there's lots of shadows and it's easy to get lost round the edges. Well, I wasn't trying to get lost, it was just I wasn't making much noise and walking along like I was my grandmother after she outwore her ananiles. I fetched up by one of the cars and decided I'd better lean against it for a minute. Felt nice and cool against my face. I started to feel better. They were talking all that time, but I wasn't listening until I heard *outsiders in that* tone of voice, you know, when someone's about to be shoved head down in shit and it won't be the locals. Being it was Ulnas speaking and consider-ing how the Council crawls around her, I got inter-ested fast. I thought she was talking about us." She broke off to sip at the tea.

Aslan moved one hand carefully from the cup, pressed her heated palm against her mouth. When the heat was gone, she lowered the hand. "Who was there?"

"Um, Elmas, that pilot what's his name, it'll come back to me in a minute, one of her isyas, the one that's living here all the time now, Lirit I think's her name, Evvily and Ylazar. Pilot, A! I knew I'd get it, Karrel Goza, yah, he didn't say anything, he doesn't talk much anytime. Ylazar said something, I didn't hear it, his back was to me and you know how he mumbles. *The woman warned us*, Elmas said. *We had to get Skimmer undercover*, she said. *Or lose her*, she said. *Ylazar Falyan, we need a boat and yoss pods and enough fuel to fill Skimmer's tanks, we need it tonight*, she said. Ylazar said something I didn't hear that time either, didn't need to hear it, you know him, if there's anything he hates worse than moving, it's moving fast. *Do it*, she said, *now*. She gave him the mean eye and he got to his feet and went out, muttering to himself." Xalloor grinned. "She say hop, they jump and don't bother asking how high. The pilot, he got up and went out after Laza, said nothing, just left. Before they were out the door, Elmas started on Evvily. *Get word out*, she said, *the woman jiggled the Brain and set up open corridors for anyone who wants over the Wall, in or out. No melters, no alarms, no defenses at all. I'll get time, place and duration at the meeting with the outsiders, give it to you for distribution soon as we get back here*. Evvily wasn't about to be tramped on like Ylazar. *Do you trust her?* she said. *It's your word going to guarantee this*, she said. *She makes a fool of you, it hurts us all*." Xalloor jumped up and danced over to the storage crate; she got out the stone bottle with the rix brandy they kept for celebrating small triumphs, came back more soberly, her face and body shouting her nervousness. "Give me your bowl," she said.

"Why?"

"Always asking questions, aren't you. Just for once do what I say, eh?"

More apprehensive than ever, Aslan swallowed the last of the cold tea and passed over the bowl.

Xalloor poured in enough brandy to cover the bot-tom. "Drink that. Now."

"Yes, Mama Loor."

Xalloor gave herself a scant teaspoon of the brandy, pushed the cork back in and settled on her pallet. "Where was I?"

"Evvily was saying do you trust her."

"Right." Xalloor sipped at the brandy, eyes closed. "Elmas laughed. *I don't need to trust her*, she said, *I have two good locks on her. The outsiders want trade with us. They cheat us now and that shuts down on them fast*, she said. *Rosepearls*, she said. *They want them like most people want air to breathe*, she said. *And they've come to take back the slaves Bolodo sold Pitapat*, she said. *The*

woman more than the others. *Her daughter is a slave*, she said. *She's here to get her back.*"

Aslan felt sick. She bent over until her forehead was resting on the box.

"Char I knew this was going to happen." Xalloor came round the box on hands and knees, lifted Aslan against her, held her with her face tucked into the curve between neck and shoulder. She held Aslan until her shuddering stopped, stroking her back, smoothing a gentle hand over and over her short dark hair.

Finally Aslan sighed and pushed away. She filled her bowl again and drank the brandied tea for its double warmth. "Go on," she said.

"Not much on to go. Soon as she said that, I thought of you and what you told me about your mum. Then I thought, hunh, don't jump so fast, Loor, lots of daughters hauled off here, I'm one myself though my mum wouldna crossed a street to fetch me home. Evvily was still being hard to convince. *She might have lied*, she said, *she might have been playing games with you*. No, Elmas said. *The daughter is here now. At the Mines*. Aslan, she said. *We'll hold her, that way we can be sure the mother does what she's promised*. Just then that idiot Mustakin came slamming back in, forgot his overcloak. They stopped talking. I suppose Elmas thought she'd said all she needed to, anyway they went out after Musti. By that time I'd forgotten the shakes and I took off as soon as I was sure no one would land on me. So there it is, your mum is here, looking for you."

"They're not going to tell me about her, are they?"

"Nuh. Or her about you. What you going to do?"

"Snoop. There's a meeting...." Aslan grinned, suddenly riding high. "Be a hoot if I turned up there and said hi mom. Pass that bottle and let's celebrate."

3

The Ridaar unit had three voice-activated pinears, ilddas in University jargon, inconspicuous-long-distance--data-collectors. Aslan slipped one into the mine chamber the Council used for their private meetings, she got one into Elmas Ofka's quarters. The third she hesitated over for some time, but she finally decided to keep it reserved for anything that turned up in the feed from the other two.

On the night of the day she planted the ilddas, the night after Gun Peygam, she came back alone after supper and played over what they'd picked up and transmitted to the Ridaar. There wasn't much from the ear in Elmas Ofka's quarters, but in the material from the other she found the Dalliss report to the special Council meeting and the discussion afterward. She learned the date and place of the next meeting with the outsiders, she learned about the plan to attack the Warmaster and the role she was meant to play in that. Hostage. The breathing equivalent to a handful of rosepearls. Sold again, she told herself when she heard that. A slave is a slave is a slave.

Time crawled. She felt the feet of every minute walking across her skin, inescapable tickling torment. She taught her history seminar and kept her body easy and her face blank with an effort of will that left her drained. There was an itchiness in her students that she found hard to ignore, they stank of conspiracy. their questions were perfunctory or prods to get her talking on subjects all round the secret that excited them; she could not notice that excitement because she was not supposed to know about the plan to seize the Warmaster.

"How many rebellions have you studied, doctori-yabass?"

"Too many to narrate. I've told you about three, if you'll remember, examples of what can happen. The genocide on Alapacsin III, the Great-Father uprising on Tuufyak, the Placids on Ceeantap. If I have time the next few weeks, I'll fill some cassettes with what I remember of other violent changes in leadership, show you variations on those three types of outcome."

"Which do you think we'll have here, doctori-yabass?"

"Depends on you and how you look at things. Please remember, people are capable of almost anything in the name of good."

“What’s wrong with that, doctori-yabass?”

“So it’s a game, eh? Whack your teacher, eh? Look to your prophet and learn. Seems to me he said a thing or two about ends and means. At the start, all rebellions are rather much the same. I know, I’ve told you to avoid generalization, it’s lazy thinking, but even that’s not always true. They begin with passion and ideals, fire in the belly, ambition in the brain. You, young Hordar, that’s you I’m talking about. And they begin because there is a need that grows until it explodes one day. There you have the inklins. You here at the Mines, you’re playing touch and run games, you tease the Huvved because you can’t afford to slaughter them. The inklins on their yizzies are playing a deadlier game, they’ve nothing to lose. These feral children are a lit fuse; unless you can damp it, they’ll force the Huvved to destroy everything you’re trying to save.”

“Huvved are crazy, doctori-yabass, are they that crazy? If they destroy us, they destroy themselves.”

“Alapacsin three, read your notes. I have a cassette I want you to see. Some of you may remember the speaker, you can explain to the others later. Make notes if you wish, the segment is quite short.”

I am KalaKallampak, a Mon of the Bahar. I have been here on Tairanna, a slave, for more than twelve years.

The Morz was sitting on his cot, his back against the wall, his heels dug into the thin mattress. As he talked, he was knitting, producing something shape-less, using the rhythmic swings of his hands to sub-due the fury that knotted his jaw and set the veins throbbing at his temples. Yet when he spoke, his gravelly voice was mild, almost serene.

In the beginning my servitude weighed lightly on me. I was permitted to spend much time in the open ocean, when I studied *the sea* life and collected sam-ples part of the day and part of the day I played, enjoying myself in water as fine as any I can remember.

He lowered his hands, bowed head and torso to-ward the lens.

For which I honor the Hordar who demand such purity. I was content, though not happy; who can be happy forcibly separated from those he loves? But it was endurable. Then the Fehdaz who bought me died and his successor was a fussy nervous little cretin who was distressed at the thought of property so valuable roaming about loose. I was forbidden the open sea and I started to suffer. Day by slow day I grew heavier with anger and physical pain. Until my days were dreary and my nights were worse and sleep was fickle and had to be courted. During those years when salt smell on the wind was all I had of the sea and a brine tub all that kept my body whole, I searched for a way to keep my mind more supple than my misfortunate body. The habit of decades gave me the answer, I am as much a scholar by temperament as I am a techni-cian by training. I began watching gul Brindar; day and night I found ways to see what was happening to the city. I set the things I saw and heard into the many-leveled intricately nuanced watersong of my peo-ple, polishing the periods of my mindbook into a po-etry of sound and sense, writing into my memory the recent history of Ayla gul Brindar.

Eyes closed, he scratched absently at his wrists, then fumbled at the wool; the veins at his temples pulsed visibly. After a moment he lifted the needles and began knitting again.

For three years I did this, then one day there was a moment when I was loose upon the cliffs of Brindar with no one near enough to stop me. I did not care if I lived or if I died. I jumped and fell a hundred yards into a clash of rocks and weed and incoming tide, survived and swam the three thousand miles to surface here. You ask me to tell you my mindbook. I will do that, though turning the tale into the airgroan of Hordaradda erases all its grace.

The Troubles have their seed in things done long before Bolodo brought me here. I cannot speak of them. This is what I saw myself. Five years ago the treatment of yoss fibers was introduced, a slave like

me was given a task and did it and in the doing crumbled what was already cracking. Because junk wool rotted in the depots waiting for a buyer, many and many a landbound Hordar was pushed off the Raz where his family had been generation on generation, back to the Landing Time. Where could they go? The Marginal Lands would not support them, there were many already claiming those. Young single men took their hunger to Littoral cities that glimmered with promise. Though that promise proved as illusory and fragile as soap bubbles, hungry families followed them. The cities began to bulge with dispossessed grasslanders. They took any work they could get so they could feed themselves and their children, took work from Little Families; living was already precarious for the city poor; those not affiliated with Great Families were as hun-gry as the grasslanders who were not welcome or well treated.

He was rocking gently back and forth, like the sea rocking back and forth, his eyes were still closed, the needles clicked and clashed, the wood twitched and ran through his fingers.

The Duzzulkerin, what coin they had they were not about to waste on rent; in cities there are always and ever empty buildings. They lived in these until they were driven out, one family, two, ten, wherever there was an empty corner. Their unwilling landlords would call the city wards and evict them, but in a day or so, or a week, more families would come to take their places. And when these moved on, more again would come, until finally the landlords gave up trying to reclaim their property and began charging rent which sometimes they managed to collect.

Incivility increased. City fought Grassland with fists and worse. Hordar are not violent, they are much like my folk in that, but there is a limit beyond which you cannot push them, especially youngers unseasoned by age and learning, the unsteady youngers who, looking forward, see only a bleakness growing worse.

Incivility was bred in the bare and boring shelters that would never be homes, where Duzzulka youngers were left alone to pass the days however they could. It would not happen to the least and poorest of the Morze Bahar, I take pride in that; plenty and poverty are shared alike, Morz to Morz, and children are hard won, a joyful blessing. When KariniKarm bore my son and daughter, I swam with her and stayed with her to care for them until they could leave the water and walk upon the land, breathing the thick wet air into new soft lungs. A full year I stayed with her and them, leaving work, weaving joy into the wide communal song.

Schooling on this world is Family business; where the families cannot do it, the children are unschooled; when their parents work all day and half the night for a meager sum that barely keeps them fed and clothed, how are they to teach their children to read and write and figure? If they never learned themselves, how are they to teach? Grasslander youngers and city youngers alike, they are ignorant and unlettered, they are wasted. Is there no one who understands this? Is there no one out there who will find a cure for this obscenity?

He put the knitting down and rested fists on it, gazed grimly into the lens, his stare an accusation. When he spoke, the gravelly voice was hard with scorn.

Is it so strange, so unexpected that these so aban-doned children melded in gangs and learned city ways in city streets? Is it so strange that they met there gangs of city poor, youngers who heard their elders cursing the grasslanders who stole their jobs, is it so strange they fought, these children of the streets? Is it so strange they learned to rage at landlords and city wards and most of all at the Huvved Fehz? Is it so strange for youngers looking at the struggles of their kin and the slow slipping of their elders' lives, is it so strange that they are filled with rage at everyone and everything, that they covet and seize what they cannot hope to earn, that they destroy what they cannot hope to seize? Is it so strange that these youngers call them-selves inklin which means the unremembered, that they come to despise themselves as failures and worth-less and turn that despite against the world?

He stopped talking, pressed his fingertips against his eyes. For over a minute he sat very still, his dark

leathery skin twitching in several places. When he spoke he had put aside his agitation, his voice was mild again.

They are not stupid, these inklins, only unlearned; some are very clever indeed. It was an inklin who made the first yizzy. A boy in gul Mei, or sometimes the story says gul Brindar, or sometimes gul Samlikkan, a boy dreamed of flying, but lacked the guildfee for his training. So he stole yoss pods and bundled them in a bag net which also he stole and tied the net to a broomstick and strapped a minimotor (which, of course, he stole) to that stick. And he flew.

He leaned toward the lens, his face intent, his eyes glowing, as if he wanted to force his listeners to understand what he was saying.

The idea also flew. West to east, east to west, within the year inklins in all parts of the Littoral were build-ing yizzies for themselves. Within two years inklin gangs were having skyfights; at first they used sticks to bang away at each other, then they made spears, then another clever inklin, some say it was a girl tired of getting banged about, discovered how to spray fire from a hose. The gas inside yoss pods is hydrogen, remember. There were mornings when the city was full of charred flesh and the screams of the not quite dead.

Even before I left, it was not only inklin flesh that burned. Sometimes the yizzy inklins drop fire on Houses and factories and when they feel like it, on the Fekkris; a Huvved in the street after dark is a target whenever inklins fly. The Fehdaz sends slaves to clean up when the mess is really bad and he does not want the extent of it to make the whisper circuit.

Incivility increases. The cities are burning bit by bit.

What the inklins do not destroy the Huvved will; already they see poor folk as sharks circling them ready to attack, the time will come when they see every Hordar poor or not as enemy, when the only easing of their terror will come when there's no one left for them to fear. I see the time coming when the Warmaster will glide from city to city melting cities into bedrock slag.

I am uncomfortable here away from the ocean. I go to the Sea Farms; if they are fortunate, they will survive the Burning. Should the Huvved go entirely mad, they can scatter their barges and wait out the storm. May the data flow freely for you, Aslan A-tow-she, may your days be filled with meaning.

"Does this answer that question of yours, Hayal Halak?"

"I knew all that, doctori-yabass."

"If you knew, why did you ask?"

"You sound very serious today, doctori-yabass."

"Boring, you mean."

"Oh no, we'd never say that. Go on, tell us more. That was, not boring, no, depressing. Tell us some-thing positive. Tell us about the rebels that win, doctori-yabass."

"I'm going to be boring again, and depressing, but listen to me anyway. The rebels that pull it off, they've done the easiest part. War simplifies things, choices are stark. After the war's over, well, life gets at them, chews them down. People don't change, not really. There are no instant angels. Ideology is for arguing about in bars, it's hopeless as a guide for government. Right thinking just does not do it, backsliding seems to be a necessary condition for intelligence. If the rebels who survive and are running things haven't allowed for that, there's fury and frustration and re-repression and things end up the way they were before, or worse."

"And if they allow for frailty, doctori-yabass?"

"With a little luck and a lot of good will, they go on, sometimes things get better, sometimes worse."

"Worse for whom, doctori-yabass?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

"A question you have not answered, doctori-yabass."

"A question I don't have to answer. A question I can't answer. It's all yours, young Hordar."

As she went through her ordinary round, she chewed over what the ears told her and tried to decide what she wanted to do. She had a choice. She could stay here and be quite comfortable; she could pretend she didn't know what was happening, she could teach her seminars, act as consultant to the Council, flake every-thing that happened as a record of a rebellion in progress, an opportunity few of her colleagues had had. It was the sensible thing to do, wasn't it? It was adolescent claptrap, this sense that she would be some-how debased if she let the Hordar and Ekes Ofka hold her hostage, trick her mother. Four days. It wasn't much time. Four days to get ready to be at that meet-ing. Or not. That night, she talked with Churri and Xalloor, her mind still unsettled, her inclination to go not much stronger than her inclination to stay.

4

Churri rested his head in Xalloor's lap, crossed his legs at the ankle. "Trouble, yah," he said. "Won't last. If you go, Council isn't going to tell anyone what you did, it'd make them look bad. Incompetent. No polit's going to let that idea get around if he can help it."

Chilled by a touch of the ashgrays, Aslan watched the fire crawl over the coals and fought to keep her pride intact. Xalloor's decision to stay behind with Churl left her feeling very alone and more than a little let down. After a minute she said, "Wouldn't stop them dropping you and Xalloor down a hole and pushing a ton of rock on you."

Xalloor tweaked Churri's nose, laughed as he mum-bled a lazy protest. "Skinhead sweetie, he get busy, make a pome, spin 'em dizzy. Dearie dai, oh yes, you the poet all right, not me, so stir it, luv, chant them a ditty to milk tears from a stone, Aslan's Mum's search for her daughter through a thousand dangers with Bolodo's Hounds sniffing at her heels, make their hearts swell with pride at the vision of Elmas Ofka reuniting Aslan and Adelaar, make those words roll, make 'em roll, roll ... ow!" She slapped at the hand that had pinched her buttock. "Do that again and I tickle you till your bones crawl out, eh!"

He chuckled. "Going local, eh? Eh!"

"'Twasn't a local give me the habit. Lan, are you going?"

"I suppose I am."

"Well, how?"

"I've been so busy making up my mind, I haven't thought about that. Take a boat, I suppose."

Churri sat up. "No. I've got a better idea. You don't want Elmas or her shadows to spot the boat and put you down before you've said your piece. Some of the locals have been coming in on yizzies. The vips here stow them at the depot, in one of the little rooms. It's locked, but blow on the lock and it'll fall apart for you."

"Not me. I haven't had your education."

"Hmm. It's a sorry lack and one you should be curing. I'll come along and tickle her open."

"Thanks. I think."

"And don't be worrying about the yizzy. You can manage a miniskip, University wouldn't let you leave home not knowing. A yizzy's cruder and crankier and slower, same thing, though."

"Same thing, hah!"

"Negative thinking, Lanny; didn't your Mum teach you to view the bright side?"

"I repeat, hah! I notice you're not volunteering to plant your rear on a shimmy stick for god knows how many hours."

"Nuh, I've too much sense in here," he tapped his temple, "to plant this," he slapped at the side of his buttock, "in misery I can miss without the least little dent in my self-esteem."

5

She left in a rosy sunset, clouds piled on clouds fainting at storm but not yet ready to follow through.

The twitchy wind was heavy with the smell of rain. Because she didn't trust her touch with the controls and wanted to avoid being spotted by lookouts on the ground, she flew low, her feet occasionally whipping through the tops of trees as the yizzy went crank and dipped instead of rising. It

was not difficult to fly, just rather unexpected at times, and not as uncomfortable as she'd feared; whoever had put together this one was good with his (or her) hands. There was a carved and padded saddle with stirrups on adjustable straps; there were handlebars of a sort with motor controls on the grips. It was nicely balanced; the yoss pods in the net over her head were attached fore-and-aft to the riding pole, their center movable to compensate for different rider weights. The motor was light and efficient and small even with the L-shaped fuel tank partly on top of it, partly before it, strapped to the pole; large rotors, hand-carved but very sophisticated; a tinkerer's dream this gadget.

After half an hour of tree hopping she began coax-ing the yizzy higher. The forest was a dark nubbly fleece collected over the lower slopes of precipitous mountains, the river a silver thread reduced to half its width by overhanging foliage. Somewhere under there at the Minetown (also invaded and obliterated by those trees), Elmas Ofka and her isyas would be getting ready to sail, though they wouldn't be starting for at least two hours. Ahead she could see the small deep harbor, the chop evident even this far off, the surf edge a startling white against the dark wet sand.

The wind began to steady and strengthen, a scatter of heavy rain drops hit her and the pods. The yizzy shuddered and bucked under her; she swore and used her weight to steady it.

For the next three hours the yizzy was a torture machine, the wind and the pole beat at her, the rain blinded and half-drowned her. The yizzy wasn't meant for weather like this; she knew when she started that she might be going into a storm, though she didn't, couldn't know just how terrifying the flight was going to be, but if she didn't now, there was no point in leaving and she had no intention of waiting for Elmas Ofka or the Council to hand her over; she despised such passive dependency; even contemplating it hurt her in her pride; besides, she didn't trust them a whole lot.

By the time she was near enough to see the chain of rocky islets, she was exhausted, but she'd also left the worst of the storm behind.

She edged closer to the water, swung cautiously wide of the largest of those islets, the barren jumble of rock called Gerbek. The yizzy was slower than the boats Elmas Ofka and the others were coming in; the battering of the storm had slowed it even more. Her hands were gloved, she couldn't see her chron, she had no idea how much time she'd spent in the cross-ing. When she left the Mines, she was at least two hours ahead of the others; right now she hadn't a guess now how much of that playway was left.

In the northeast where only the fringes of the pre-vailing winds brushed by, there was a shallow inlet like a bite taken out of a flatroll; it was the only anchorage the islet had and it was still empty, so she knew she'd got there first. At least, before Elmas Ofka. She wasn't sure about the Outsiders, she hadn't seen anyone, but the center of the islet was a jumble of rock and ravine, half an army could be hiding in the cracks. At one focus of Gerbek's eccentric ellipse, there was a peak like a miniature mountain, at the other a flat space cleared of rubble and ringed by tall sarsens where Ishigi Pradites came to celebrate the equinoxes. She didn't know much about the Ishigi, they were a hereti-cal sect subject to some stringent penalties when dis-covered; the little she'd unearthed about them said they'd withered to nothing a century before, but she wondered now when she saw that cleared stone. No bird droppings inside the ring. She laughed at herself. Lan, were you tied to a spit over a roaring fire, you'd speculate about the mating habits of the gits about to eat you. In any case, it was the only area where a skip could land, so the Outsiders hadn't arrived yet either. She didn't know whether she was happy about that or not. If her mother wasn't with them....

She brought the yizzy lower and moved over the island; as soon as the little mountain broke the push of the wind, she went lower still until the rotors were laboring to hold the pole a meter above the stone. She wobbled around the circumference of the flat, looking for a place to anchor, a place where she could hide until she was ready for the confrontation. Nothing, nothing, nothing ... there were dozens of cracks big enough for her, nothing big enough and deep enough to hold the yizzy.

In the end she anchored it in a windcarved hollow low on the flank of the mini-mount and spent almost an hour getting back to the flat, crawling over rocks and scree, terrified of breaking something, a leg, an ankle, her head. She had to feel her way, there was almost no light; the clouds were thick and black, Gorruya was up alone for another hour and she was only a slightly obese crescent.

As she reached the waste rock near the sarsen ring, voices came to her, broken by the wind; she

caught her lower lip between her teeth and crept on until she came to a place where several of the sarsens had been quarried; there were piles of debris around the hole and down in it three cracked stones leaning against its side, a litter of stone shards piled on the holefloor. She lowered herself carefully onto the knife-edged rubble, then crept into the velvet black shadow beneath the leaners and pulled her black cloak tight about her.

The voices were louder; she began picking up some words, enough to know Elmas Ofka was sending Harli Tanggar out to a pile of stones where she could get a clear shot at the flat with her crossbow, placing others on guard beside the sarsens. The crossbow worried Aslan. If she knew it was me, Harli Tang& wouldn't shoot, but the light's so bad she'd have no idea who she was killing. Aslan bit her tongue to choke back a half-hysterical giggle. Poor baby, she thought, she'd be awfully sorry. Not half as sorry as me.

The islet settled back to silence except for the whistle and groan of the wind and occasional loud clacks as bits of stone lost balance and went bounding down slopes of scree. The damp cold crept through the layered wool she wore, struck to the bone. She shivered, locked her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering. And began to wonder if she'd last until the Outsiders arrived.

She heard a buzzing like gnat noise. It was so faint that at first she thought it was something the wind was doing. Then it got louder. She eased her head out and looked up. A skip. Coming in from the west.

Holding her cloak close to her so there'd be no flicker of motion to catch Harli Tanggar's eye, she climbed from the hole and stretched out on the rubble so she could see what was happening.

The skip hovered a moment, then dropped. It landed at one side of the cleared circle, and a large form swung down, followed by a smaller. Once again Aslan closed her teeth on her abused lower lip, fighting back a surge of very mixed emotion. The second figure was a shadowy blob, undetailed, but she knew that way of moving, the high-headed arrogant strut. "Allo, Mama," she whispered.

Voices. A man's, deep and pleasant; it didn't carry well and she couldn't understand what he was saying. Her mother wasn't saying anything yet. Elmas Ofka listened. "Do it," she said.

The next minutes were busy ones. Half a dozen small squat remotes hummed from the skip. Three carried a bundle larger than all three of them, a bale of heavy cloth from which Gorruya teased occasional gleams like flows of liquid silver. The other three scurried about exploding pitons into the stone floor of the circle. Before Aslan sniffed three times, the bundle expanded into a large domed shelter anchored by the pitons. She watched with envy as Elmas Ofka waved her guarding isyas inside and shouted Harli Tang& down from her post. That solved that problem, she thought; she watched Harli disappear behind the dome. Let them get settled, she thought. She pulled the hood closer about her face, pinched it shut over her mouth and nose, started to straighten up.

6

She looked up into her mother's face. "Allo, Mama."

"So what's all this about? Sneaking around." Adelaar touched her cheek briefly. "For a stodgy professor-type, you get yourself into more trouble...."

"I-told-you-so, Mama?"

"If you stopped falling on your face, I could stop having to pick you up."

"Ooh-yeha. Like it was all my fault this happened." Aslan sat up, clutched at her head. Stunned, she thought, understanding finally what had happened to her. Her mind wasn't working all that well right now. Behind her mother she could see a tall dark man with a lazy twinkle in eyes so pale they might have been borrowed from another face, and beside him, Elmas Ofka looking grim. Aslan managed a tight smile. "Sorry, Dalliss, someone spoiled your surprise."

Elmas Ofka blinked, but took the cue smoothly. "Waiting upwind was not the brightest thing we've done. One of our visitors has what one might call a nose for news."

Adelaar's mouth twisted into a half-smile; she wound a curl of Aslan's hair about her finger and tugged it, hard, but she said nothing. She gave her daughter's head a last pat, then forgot about her and marched over to the memplas table growing like a mushroom in the center of the chamber.

The shelter was large enough to hold them all with plenty of room left for moving about. Whoever'd

brought Aslan in had laid her on a memplas bench close to the valve. The isyas were standing or sitting, their backs to the shallow curve of the wall; Lirrit and Harli glanced once at her then ignored her, the other isyas weren't interested, they lived in gul Inci or at the Indiz Farm and there was a lot they didn't know about events at the Mines. As the tall man and Elmas Ofka moved to join Adelaar at the table, Aslan saw for the first time the other member of the group, the Aurranger Rau. Elmas Ofka had mentioned the Rau in her re-port to the Council, so Aslan knew he was about and she knew who he had to be, there were NO other Aurrangers offplanet; she hadn't actually met him while he was at University, but she'd heard stories. She was startled at the strength of her reaction to him, she wanted to pick him up, cuddle him, smooth her hands over and over that velvety fur; more than that, she felt intensely protective, if one of the isyas attacked him she realized with a great deal of surprise that she'd go after the woman tooth and claw. Amazing, she thought. With Pels kurk-Orso to prod her memory, she realized who the light-eyed man was. Swardheld Quale. Mama must have hired him, she thought, Ooo-yeha, she has to 've spent a fortune and a half. If ever Luck shat upon me, she did now. I'm going to hear about this for the next fifty years, if we don't strangle each other before then.

At the table Adelaar toed up a chair, got herself settled, then she took a bundle of fac sheets from a case, squared them and set them in front of her. "The suspect files," she said, "and the report on the internal security at the Palace that Quale saw fit to donate." There was an astringent acerbity in the last statement. Qual chuckled, but didn't bother to answer the chal-lenge. She lifted out a flake-reader, then a case of filled flakes. "We discussed this and found it simpler to let you and your technicians do whatever marrying is necessary to make further copies of this material. The reader is included as another little gift from our generous friend here. The first twenty flakes contain the stats on the Warmaster and her ... well, you can't really call them a crew, the people living on board her. The twenty-first—they're all numbered, using your sys-tem, of course, so you won't have any trouble identify-ing what's which—the twenty-first has the data on the free corridors. You'll wish to inspect the flakes; don't worry about inadvertently erasing them, they've been impressed. Loading's simple, just slide the flake skin--and-all into the slot there, then watch the screen. You can manually jump about, there's a pencil attached, write the number you want on that sensor there. Again, use your own system, the player has been adjusted to respond to it. If you want automatic random access, touch the pencil here. That'll jump you about so you can get a fair idea what's on the flake. If you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them. You have something for us?"

Elmas Ofka nodded. "Har cousin," she said. Harli Tang* marched to the table and set a large pouch in the middle. Without comment she went back to her post beside the valve. Elmas tugged open the mouth, took out a swatch of black velvet and a small metallic object which she unfolded into a balance scale and a pair of calipers. Then she withdrew several smaller pouches, opened one and let the pearls spill onto the velvet.

The exchange was quick and wordless and the two women began a meticulous examination of what each acquired from the other.

Quale left them to it and strolled over to Aslan. "Be interesting to know just who the surprise was for," he murmured. He had a pleasant baritone, well, rather more than pleasant; for the first time in months Aslan remembered how long it was since she'd had sex with a man who excited her rather than scaring her rigid. What she'd had with Parnalee wasn't sex or pleasure, it was a propitiation of the gods of chaos. And even that was, what? two years ago? He had nice hands, long fingers, they ruffed through his beard. It was crisp and short, a few white and gray hairs in the black, just enough to make him look distinguished. She wanted to smooth her fingertips over it, to....

She put the brakes on her imagination. "More tact-ful not to ask," she said. "Not now, anyway."

He dropped beside her. "When we found out you jumped the wall, Del was wondering if we'd have to winnow the whole population to find you."

"Things were getting a bit ... um ... hectic, so I left."

"Saved us a lot of time and trouble, you turning up like this."

"Pride. And self-defense. Mama's memory is her biggest asset unless you're on the wrong end of it."

He chuckled. "Having spent more'n half a year insplitting with her on board, I know what you mean."

She's a marvel when she's working, though."

"Swardheld Quale," she said. "Pay his price and he gets things done. You're a bit of a marvel yourself, if the stories are one-tenth true."

"I'd put the truth level in those things considerably lower than a tenth. Say something like one part in ten thousand. Maybe they get the name of a place right, the rest is ... you're an ethnologist, you know how that goes."

"Well, some heroes turn out to be a bit more than hot air."

His right brow quirked up, the scar that nipped its outer end bent outward with the movement. "Nothing to do with me."

"According to Elmas Ofka, you're collecting slaves and taking them back."

"Uh huh."

"How many?"

"Depends on who we can locate?"

"You're looking for specific people?"

"We've got a list of names we've matched up with names from the mainBrain. Rewards, aici Adlaar, re-wards; when we get them back to. Helvetia, my crew and me, we collect some hefty gelt." He rubbed at his jawline.. "Couldn't take 'em all even if I wanted to."

"I have some people I'd like included in your collec-tion. They might not be on that list, but if what I heard about your fee-structure is reasonably correct, what Adelaar's paying you for this means you can tuck in a couple of extras without straining yourself."

"Getting a little hostile, aren't you?"

"I like to think of it as being practical." Damn, damn, damn, knee-jerk, foot-in-the-mouth, what am I doing? Shoving him in a bag with Mama's shithead friends. Maybe he belongs there. I don't know. I don't know. I'm reacting like an adolescent. Brain damage? Or are stunners aphrodisiac?

"Quale."

He got to his feet with a loose, easy shift of his long body that reminded her of Xalloor, the same sort of physical competence. He strolled to the table, toed up a chair and sat.

Elmas Ofka frowned at him. For a moment she didn't say anything. She has too much riding on this, Aslan thought and felt a touch of sympathy for the woman, a sympathy she didn't usually have, Elmas reminded her too much of her mother. "You've had a week to look these over," she tapped the case of filled flakes. "Well?"

"Price is right, conditions aren't too tough, far as I'm concerned, we can go."

"When?"

"Thirty days."

Elmas Ofka looked down at her hands, drew a deep breath. "Done," she said. "How many can you lift?"

"Around seventy, eighty in a pinch. Should be enough for that lot." He nodded at the case. "Something else, you'll need to find someone who's been up there re-cently, I suggest one of those Fiveworld guards; he'll know things no one bothers to record."

"Yes. We have acquired such a person and he's being questioned." She broke off, looked away from him. Aslan thought, this next is going to be important. She's not sure of him, she could be a little afraid of him, which is something I never thought I'd see. "The Warmaster must be destroyed," she said, "You agree to that?"

"Why not. I don't want it."

She relaxed. "Your reasons?"

"Impossible to handle without a huge crew, I couldn't afford the fuel, I'd have my sleep wrecked by the horde of would-be heroes plotting to take it away from me."

"I see. You understand my reasons?"

"Simple enough. As soon as Slancy berths at Helvetia, Horgul's on the map. People will be heading here to take back their relatives, whatever, to trade, raid, generally poke about. The Warmaster's a target that'd tempt too many of them. You'd have some self-proclaimed Emperor running your world

before you blinked twice.”

“What about her stingships?”

“They’re parasited on her. Once you get rid of her, they go inert. If you’re worried about the crews, you can use your systemships to pull them out.”

“One last question. How do we destroy something that big and that powerful?”

“As I see it, you’ve got two options. You can sink her in the deepest part of one of your oceans. That’s the quickest method. Leave some ports open and she’ll die fast. Only thing is, there’s a fair chance in a few years you’ll have a pollution problem; it’ll clear up in a century or two, but you’d better make sure you keep people away from the place until then.”

“No!” The word exploded out of her. “Not the ocean. Never.” She drew her hand across her mouth, a quick nervous gesture, straightened her back with a jerk and stared at him, almost daring him to come out with something equally impossible.

“So, send her into the sun.

She thought that over. “How? Wouldn’t someone have to stay with her? Only two minutes ago I read that the shipBrain is programmed to save her if all aboard are killed; if you aim her at the sun and leave her, she’ll break away before she reaches it. And what happens then, do we have a runaway killing machine hitting back at the ones that tried to kill her?”

“Adelaar? That’s your field.”

Adelaar ran a hand over her hair, smoothing it down where the wind outside the shelter had teased it into spikes. “While I was inside the interface, I set a trap into the groundlink; it hasn’t been found and it won’t be. Since then I’ve been using odd moments to explore the shipBrain through it. That Brain is big, it’s powerful, and oh my, it’s dumb. It’s old. We’ve learned considerable since that ship was built. Some of us. I kept away from the defense areas, but I don’t expect trouble when I go after them, though I’d rather handle that up there. Working through a tap is too ... um ... limiting. As soon as we lift off .. hmm, that’s something we haven’t arranged yet, Hanifa. Where do you want us to pick up you and your people? I think it’s best we come to you, rather than you to us. It’ll be easier and faster.”

Aslan looked from her mother’s intent face to Elmas Ofka; one expression mirrored the other; it was like a glimpse into the future, maybe a year or two after this night. Read the changes, where the world goes when the Outside wanders in.

“I can’t say without knowing a lot more about who’s coming and what the Council thinks. Perhaps you could supply some way of communicating that the Huvved couldn’t tap into? If so, we can settle arrange-ments without having to find time for another meeting.”

Quale tapped on the table. Both women started, swung round to face him. “I’ve got some handcoms in the skip,” he said, “they’re linked to the satellites I inserted when we got here, should have no trouble bridging the distance between our Base and yours.” He turned his head. “Pels, bring in a couple of those handsets, will you?”

“Wait,” Elmas Ofka said.

“Hang on a minute, Pels, huh?”

“When we talked before, you needed to know where to find locations inside cities. I didn’t forget that, I brought you a small gift,” she glanced past him, met Aslan’s ironic gaze, “another small gift to help you with that problem. Har cousin, take the Hunter down to the boats and bring back our passenger.”

Aslan watched the chunky isya valve out after Pels. What’s going on here, she thought, there wasn’t any-thing about this in the report she made or in any of the hours of records I plowed through. She rubbed at her eyes, remembering with regret the watersac she’d left hanging on the yizzy pole. Her mouth was dry and she was wrung out, sleepy, her head ached. She wasn’t interested in these games Adelaar and Elmas were playing with each other, she’d left home years ago to get the smell of greed off her skin. She gazed at the back of Quale’s head; his hair brushed his collar, black, soft, fine, curling a little; she wanted to touch it, let it bend over her fingers. Damn, oh damn.

The valve hummed. Pels came in; his black lips were curled into an odd grin, his ears were standing straight up and twitching a little. He was humming, she could hear a rumbling brumbrum as he trotted to the table, dumped the comsets onto the memplas and swung around to watch the exit.

Harli Tanggar ducked through, stepped to her place beside the valve as the man following her straightened and looked around.

Parnalee, Aslan thought, good god, what's she think she's doing? How'd she get hold of him?

"Parnalee Tanmairo Proggerd," Elmas Ofka said. "In the course of his work, he has visited most of the cities of the Littorals. When he joined us two days ago, I saw him as the answer to your need."

Maybe, Aslan thought, but that's not the whole story. What are you up to, Dalliss? Smiling, urbane, wearing his public face, Parnalee walked to the table, touched hands with Quale. He wants this, she thought, why? He looked over his shoulder at her and she saw the beast in his black eyes, hungry beast promising her silently what he'd promised in words. *Undercut me and you're dead*. She shivered and made up her mind she was going to be very very sure she was never alone with him any time anywhere.

Quale got to his feet. "That's it, then. (All us when you're ready, Hanifa. You want to leave first, or shall we?"

Elmas Ofka closed the lid on the case, snapped the latches home. "We'll go. Don't get yourself killed."

X

1. *About ten days after the meeting on Gerbek.*

Karrel Goza in Ayla gul Inci: Waiting for the Lift-Off

Karrel Goza forked slimy rotten leaves from the sec-ond stage vat into a tiltcart. The stench that eddied around him crept through his stained overall and nes-tled against his skin, oozed through the overage filter on his mask. The stink was the least of his problems, the mist that stank would open ulcers in his skin and rot his lungs if he stayed in it long enough. The Huvved Kabrik who owned this shed had the patronage of the Fehdaz and the manager was under orders to squeeze the last thread of use from the gear. And more, if he could get away with it. The manager before him had been fired for being too easy on the workers; she was local, some of her employees were cousins and affili-ates, others belonged to the Families of friends and associates. Herk's crony didn't make that mistake twice. The new manager came from a Guneywhiyker Daz, he had no family in Inci, no pressures on him to look to the safety of the workers. Karrel Goza didn't bother complaining; it wouldn't do any good and there were a hundred more desperate and thus more docile workers to take his place. He had too many small accidents, had called in sick too often in his need to cover ab-sences when he was flying for Elmas Ofka, he was growing more marginal a worker as the weeks passed, a complaint was all the manager needed to boot him out. His Family was one of the poorer septs, small business folk living on the edge of failing, clerks and such; they needed twice what their earners were pull-ing in to pay the fees and taxes and all that Herk was squeezing from folk like them. A few years ago his pilot's pay tithed had brought them comfort and a degree of security they'd seldom known. He'd spon-sored and paid Guildbond (Pilot) for his cousin Geres Duvvar, he'd sponsored and paid Guildbond (Skilled Trades) for three score other cousins, sisters, brothers, affiliates. That was finished now. Drive, talent and a large dose of luck gave him a chance at a profession not usually open to boys from his class. Bondfees in the Pilot's Guild were far too great for a Family with the income his had; even stretching they couldn't afford such an expense, nor could they afford to tie up so much coin so long in a single member. When he was a middler near the end of his schooling, he earned his first coin flying soarwings on the Garrip sands in the semiformal races sponsored by a coalition of merchants and Sea Farmers. The purses were big, the entry fees small; he and an uncle who was a carpenter built his wingframe and an aunt who was a weaver made the fabric cover. He'd found his talent the moment he got his first kite up and when he was old enough to enter the races he made it pay. Time after time he won. There was danger in this racing; fliers crashed—misread aircurrents, were crowded offlift, showed bad judgment in their turns or were victims of sabotage. Men and women came from a dozen Dazzes to watch and wager on the fliers, there was a great deal of money floating about and the temptation to goose the odds was strong and seldom resisted. Orska Falyan of Sirgfin-Falyan was a devotee of those con-tests; he began betting on the agile boy who seemed

to feel the air with every sweaty inch of naked skin, who slid again and again from traps meant to break him; he was elated when the boy continued to win, sometimes by huge leads. The old man more or less adopted Karrel Goza; he sponsored him to the Pilot's Guild, paid his Guildbond, and when he gained his pilot's rating, hired him on at Sirgfin Bol. Orska Falyan continued to take an interest in Kanel Goza, had him teach some Sirgûn and Falyan youngsters how to soar, left the boy a small legacy when he died ten years later.

Karrel Goza finished filling the cart, wishing as he'd wished so many times before that the slave techs would finally come up with a machine capable of that noxious work; the fibers were tough, slippery, treacherous and finer than a woman's hair; every mechanical forker they'd tried jammed after an hour or two. It took a man's dexterity to manage the transfer. He kicked the gong to let the handler know and the cart purred off, a new one clanking into its place. Around him other forkers were working with steady minimal swings; another gong clanged, and a third after a silence so short that it seemed more like an echo than a sound in itself.

He coughed, felt a burning in his throat and lungs. The fumes from the vat were beginning to get to him. He looked around. The overseer was out of the room. That figured. The lazy bastard spent most of the day in his office, a glass-walled room raised fifty meters off the floor. He could sit in comfort and watch the fork-ers sweat. Karrel coughed again, cursed under his breath and climbed off the platform. There was a naked faucet waist-high on the wall near the only door. He turned the faucet on full so the water beat into the catch basin. Holding his breath, he slipped the mask off and slid the filterpack from its slot. He looked at the discolorations on both surfaces, swore again; he held the pack in the stream of water until some of the overload was soaked out of it. That only took care of the grosser particles, the absorption of the wad was a joke; he shook it, wondering what he was putting into his lungs. He swished it back and forth in the water, shook it again and clicked it home. The wetting was weakening it, he could see pulls and a small rip. He'd been asking for a replacement for three weeks now. Oversoul alone knew when he'd get it. Likely he'd have to buy a pack on the black market. If he could find one. Elli might be able to do it for him, get a filter from her Family. He splashed water on his face, coughed again, felt like he was trying to rip the lining from his throat. He pulled the mask back on; as bad as it was, breathing that miasma over the vats without any protection at all was a thousand times worse. He went back to work. Not much longer, he told himself. Hang on, Kar; twenty days. Twenty days and Elli will get her chance at Herk. Ah, to see him dangling head down in that vat.

2

"What?" Karrel Goza set his cup down, blinked wearily at his Ommar.

The Parlor was small and by intention intimate; the wallposts, the ceiling and its beams were carved and painted in jewel colors, small angular flower patterns on an angular emerald ground; a fire crackled cheerfully behind a semi-transparent shell guard; ancient tapestries hung from ceiling to floor, colors muted by time, still dark and rich. The Ommar sat in a plump chair, its ancient leather dyed a deep scarlet and mottled by decades of saddlesoap and elbowgrease, its arms and ornaments and swooping clawfooted legs carved from a brown wood age-darkened to almost-black. She was a small woman with a halo of fine white hair about a face dominated by huge black eyes, ageless eyes. She wore a simple white blouse, an old black skirt smoothed neatly about her short legs, legs too large for her size. She'd been a diver before she married into the Goza family, not one of the premiere Dallisses though she shared their arrogance; even now he could see the merm marks on the backs of her hands. She sniffed impatiently, repeated what she'd said.

"Youngers and middlers from Goza House have been running with the inklin. Gensi, Kivin, Kaynas, it's an isya, I think, one just forming with Gensi as the Pole. Zaraiz, Bulun and half a dozen boys, they call themselves ..." her weary wrinkled face lifted suddenly, lighted by the grin that made him and everyone else adore her when they weren't afraid of her, "the Green Slimes, or something like that. They were in that hoohaw last night, dropping sludge bombs on the guard barracks. At least it wasn't fire, they haven't gone that far, both sets, it's mischief still, but the inklin they're mixing with aren't playing, Kar. Nor are the bitbits. Streetgangs, tchah! what nonsense. You weren't like that, much more sensible."

Karrel Goza thought about a few of his exploits when he was a younger (which he fervently hoped she'd never find out about) and didn't think he'd been all that sensible. He wasn't too old to remember the feeling that he and his agemates were alone against a stodgy disapproving world, how they built up a power-ful secret world of their own that no adult had access to. He couldn't see this crop of pre-adults welcoming interference, but the world was infinitely more danger-ous these days and the Ommar was right. Something had to be done. "Yizzies? Homemade or borrowed or what?"

"Gensi boasted she made her own; I suppose they all did, which means they've been stealing, there's no other way they could have got the materials, you know very well no adult in this family has coin to throw away on idiocy like that."

"Where are they keeping them?"

"Not in the House. I'd have the obscenities smashed if I could lay my hands on them."

"The boys, do you know which is the leader?"

"Zaraiz Memeli, as much as any. That clutch of shoks, it's not even an imitation isya and as for being a gang, tchah!" She leaned forward, urgent and more upset than he could remember seeing her, her tangled white brows squeezing against the deep cleft between them. "I am afraid of them, Kar. I know their faces, but not what they're thinking, if they're thinking at all; I look into those shallow animal eyes and I wonder if there's anything but animal behind them." She straight-ened her back. "In any case, they have to be stopped. Bad enough to have those street-sweepings making trouble. Tchah! Do you know what Herkken Daz will do to us if Sech Gorak finds one of our boys dead on the street or shoots one of them out of the sky? Goza House will be translated to Tassalga brick by brick. What's left of it. I'm talking to you, do you know why? Because everyone here knows what you're doing and I have this faint hope the boys will listen to you. If they don't, I don't know what to do. The girls ..." she brushed a hand across her eyes, "the girls, ah! Kar, they look at me ... animal eyes, nothing there. I thought I knew girls, I don't know these. Talk to them, Kar. If you think it would help, can you get that Indiz Dalliss to see them? You know who I mean."

He sipped at the tea to cover his hesitation. After a minute, he said, "That might be difficult. The Huvved put a price on her head and the Jerk has doubled it."

"Try." Her voice was iron, her eyes pinned him.

"This is not a good time," he said, "she won't come."

"What use are you Kar, if you can't do this small thing for your Family? What do I say to your mother? We have protected him and lied for him, covered his shivery ass, and when we ask a small, a minute thing for us, his Family, what does he say? I can't, he says."

"Let it lay, Ommar. Please." His hand shook, tea splashed onto his knees.

"Why should I? What is more important that the moral discipline of your sisters, your nieces, your cousins?"

"I can't tell you that. Please. I can't."

She relaxed, her back curving into the cushions. "I see. How long will you need cover this time?"

"I don't know, maybe four, five days."

"When?"

"When I'm called. I can't say more."

"Hmm. It will be better if we prepare for this." She smiled, no glow to her this time, just a tight bitter twist of the lips. "You've been doing too much, Kar. You look like a walking ghost; no one will be sur-prised if you go down seriously sick. If I pull in some markers, I can, set your cousin Tamshan in your place, so we don't lose the earnings."

"Gorak watches all pilots; we don't want that; the job takes me off his list."

"As long as you're supposed to be coughing your lungs out, he won't bother his head over you."

"If he believes it."

"You think he's going to push his way in here and time your spasms?"

"If he wants to, he will." He rubbed at his eyes; he'd been noticing a haze-effect for several weeks. Eyes, lungs, his whole body was breaking down. He was averaging four hours' sleep a night. It was weeks since he'd had any appetite, he hadn't seen Lirrit for

.. how long? Gray day melted into gray day. He didn't know how long. Too long. He hadn't even thought about her for days. He closed his eyes, shiv-ered as he realized he couldn't bring her face to mind. No time for thinking, less for contemplating marriage; he and Lirrit would wed when times were easier, but in the miasma of weariness, fear, horror that usurped his day and dreamtime lately, it was impossible even to dream of such things. Maybe it was just as well he got out, he was running on autopilot, abdicating: responsibility to himself, depending on Elmas for direction and impetus. Some time to himself ... he savored the thought, then put it aside. It wouldn't happen this month or the next; there was too much to do. After then? Who knew, not he. "Zaraiz," he said. "I don't know him. How old is he? You told me his line name, but I don't remember it."

"Memeli. He's a first year middler, no discipline, he's insolent, a bad influence on everyone." She slapped her hands on the chair arms. "Memeli, tchah! Had I been Ommar that generation, we wouldn't have the problem, we never would have affiliated that collec-tion of losers."

Karrel Goza lowered his eyes, played with his cup. The intolerance of a Dalliss, her inability to see worth in folk who didn't conform to her personal standards, it was the ugly side of their Ommar. He tilted the cup, gazed at the rocking tawny fluid as if he saw Elmas Ofka's face there; that intolerance, that ignorance, that inflexibility were her faults too, they'd bothered him from the first. He'd forgotten that ... no, not forgotten, he'd stopped thinking. With the end so close, yes, take the time, yes, go back to thinking, yes, be there to stand against her when the need arises, yes.... Hands heavy with weariness, he rubbed the crackling from his eyes. "All right," he said, "I'll talk with the boy. Maybe it'll do some good." He coughed, gulped down a mouthful of the lukewarm tea. "In the morning," he said, "locate Zaraiz Memeli for me; don't bother him, just let me know where he is, I'll collect him myself."

"I will do that, yes." She lifted the teapot, beck-oned him over and refilled his cup with the aromatic liquid; she had expensive taste in teas and indulged it more than she should in times like this; sitting here, savoring the flavor, he resented it, his sweat and pain bought her these luxuries and she took them as her right when there were children of the House—not Goza, no, but of the House as much as any Goza child—who needed food, clothing, medicine. This can't keep on, he thought, it has to change, we've got to make it change. He thought of the teacher at the Mines and what she'd been telling her students; it was not happy hearing; we'll be different, he told himself, we'll make this work. When he was seated again, she said, "Ommars tell me that slaves are disappearing, not one or two but whole chains of them."

"Oh?"

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"Yes."

The Ommar leaned forward again, her eyes fixed on him, trying to get past the face he presented to her. After a minute she sucked at her teeth, shook her head. "This can't go on," she said.

He looked up, startled by the echo of what he'd been thinking; then he realized that she meant some-thing far different.

"Inci is better off than most from what I hear, but give her another few months and she'll be burning down around us. Before Herk lets that happen, he'll call on the stingers and blast those lunatic children out of the air and he won't care what else he levels. I'm telling you, Kar, you tell her and the rest of them. Do something. If her lot won't or can't, then we crawl to Herk and lick his toes. We've got no time left for playing hero games."

He got heavily to his feet; it was more difficult than he'd expected. The comfort of that chair, the warmth of the room, the soothing fragrance of the chamwood burning on the hearth, these things were like chains on his arms and legs. At the door he turned. "I will pass your message on, Hanifa Ommar, but I will say this, though I probably am talking too much, this is not a good time to insult her." He went out.

Zaraiz Memeli was a small youth, black hair curling tightly about a face sharp enough to cut wood. He was digging without enthusiasm at a tuber bed, leaning on his spading fork whenever the harassed middler girl turned her back on him to deal with some especially egregious idiocy of another of her punishment detail. She had to keep watch on the garden, the laundry room and a workshed where three

girls were sorting rags and stripping discards of reusable parts. Usually there would be several middlers acting as overseers. Karrel Goza found this lone harried girl even more disturbing than the aberration he was supposed to deal with this morning. Why was she alone? Was the Ommar losing her grip, letting work details fall apart? Was she letting favorites play on pride and refuse such work? He didn't know his home any longer. His fault. The Ommar was right that far. So busy saving the world he forgot about his Family; he was almost a stranger here. For the past year anyway. Up at dawn, hasty breakfast, toast and a cup of tea, maybe a sausage if he could force it down, then the retting shed, work there till the second shift came on, midafternoon, scrub the chemical stink off his body, try to get the taint of it out of his lungs, eat if he could, tumble into bed for a restless nightmare-ridden nap; dark come down, off to the taverns for carousing or conspiring or out to the Mines to fly for Elmas Ofka, his attention turned outward always, the House too familiar for him to see it; he simply assumed that it continued to exist as it existed in his memory. By the time he reached the tuber patch off the Memeli Court, he was in no mood to put up with sass from a know-nothing bebek who was setting the House in danger with no purpose except to tickle his urges.

"Zaraiz Memeli."

The boy looked up after a deliberate pause, his face guarded. Custom and courtesy required a response; he leaned on his fork in a silence more insolent than words.

Karrel Goza swallowed bile and kept his temper. "Come," he said. This wasn't starting out well and he didn't see how he could improve things, but he slogged stubbornly on. The, young overseer came at a quick trot, questions on her lips. He silenced her with the Ommar's order, took the fork from Zaraiz Memeli and gave it to her. He tapped Zaraiz on the shoulder and pointed toward the Memeli court. "We'll talk there."

Eyes like obsidian, wrapped in a resistant silence, the boy strolled along, refusing to recognize the compulsion put on him. A sly scornful smile sneaked onto his face as Karrel pushed through the wicket and stopped, the noise and clutter of the busy enclosure breaking around him. Crawlers and pre-youngers lit-tered the flags, crying, yelling, playing slap-and-punch games; older prees chased each other around the baby herds and their mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, cou-sins who were working, singing, cross-talking in end-less antiphon, a tapestry of sound.

Karrel Goza glanced at the boy, watched his bony unfinished face go wooden and unresponsive. For a moment he felt like strangling the pest, then, abruptly, he didn't know why then or later, the absurdity of the whole thing hit him and he laughed. "Not here, obviously," he said and backed out. He frowned at Zaraiz. There was always the Ommar's garden, but instinct and intellect told him that would be a very bad idea; the peace and lushness of that pocket paradise was too stark a contrast to the Memeli Court, it would exacerbate the boy's disaffection. He thought about leaving the House and walking out to the wharves, but he was supposed to be down sick and it would be stupid to confirm the Sech's suspicions. Problem was, except for the Ommar's quarters, there wasn't much privacy, Gozas and Duvvars and Memelis working everywhere, even the oldest doing handcraft and repair, and those who weren't working were talking and watching, gos-siping and prying into other folk's business. He dug deep into memory for the places he went when he was a younger and wanted to get away from the soup of life simmering inside the Housewalls. He didn't feel like climbing a tree or burrowing into a dust-saturated attic; he smiled, didn't suit the dignity of the moment. It was a gray day with rain threatening; yes, the clothes-lines on the roof of the weaving shed, there wouldn't be anyone hanging out clothes today.

The lines were humming softly as the chill wind swept over the roof; it wasn't the most comfortable place for a prolonged chat, but it was private. Karrel Goza kicked a basket of clothespins out of a fairly sheltered corner and settled himself with his back against the waist-high wall. "Sit."

Zaraiz Memeli dropped with the boneless awkward grace of his age, drew his thin legs up and wrapped thin arms about them. He said nothing. His attitude proclaimed he intended to keep on saying nothing.

"You don't have to tell me why," Kane! Goza said. "I know why." He smiled with satisfaction as he saw the boy's rage flare, then vanish behind the shutters he'd had too much practice raising between himself and the rest of the world. He did not want to be understood, Karrel Goza's words were both a

challenge and an insult. "Dalliss," Karrel said. "The Ommar; arrogant, bigoted, makes you want to kick her face in, but she's good at her job." He pushed aside his unease; this was no time for doubt. "Within her limits there's no one big enough to take her place. Not you, my little friend, no matter what you think. She's got her toadies, yes. Gozas, all of them. You think I like that? I'd drop the lot in Saader's Cleft if it was up to me. They stand in her shadow and steal her authority and tramp on the rest of us and she's blind to it. Yes. I know. I'm Goza and I'm here, running errands for her, so you think I'm one of them, tonguing her toes and begging her to walk on me." He shrugged, his shoulders scraping against the whitened roughcast. "I had it easier than you. I got out. When I was a few years older than you, I got out. Not divorced, just out. They tried bullocking me, sure they did, but most of the time I wasn't here and when I was I had the clout to tell them to go suck. As long as I was flying." He felt the jolt again, the whole-body ache that came when he was grounded, the loss he couldn't put behind him except when he was flying for Elmas Ofka. An obsession can be a gift, giving point to an otherwise pointless life; it can be a torment when there's a wall in the way. He glanced at Zaraiz. The boy was blank as an empty page, refusing to hear any of this. What do you want, Zaraiz Memeli, do you know? He tried feeling his way back to that time around puberty when all his certainties melted like taffy left in the sun. No. He knew too much about surviving now. The years had made him intimately acquainted with gray, the middler world of crisp un-changing black-and-white wasn't available to him any longer. Those were shifts so fundamental that it was impossible to recapture the angst of that world. It also made it difficult to judge what the boy was thinking, what he was feeling. "Do you extend your loathing to your parents? Your brothers and sisters?"

The boy lifted his eyes, flicker of molten obsidian, then he looked away.

"I went to see the Ommar Istib Memeli last night. We talked about you. Your father is on the Duzzulkas right now, bush-peddling black-market medicines, your mother works at the Kummas Kabrikon in the Fix room setting dyes, your two older sisters work there also, handling half a dozen spinners each; Hayati Memeli, the older of them, has first signs of the coughing disease. Your third sister is only a few months old. Your two brothers are mid-youngers, still with their tutors; neither of them shows much promise with his letters, but Aygil Memeli the youngest is good with his hands, he might be a carpenter or a mechanic if the Bondfees can be found. Do they mean nothing to you?" Karrel Goza stared at the boy, trying to see past the blankness. "Ommar Istib says you're bright enough but lazy. That could be because you haven't found anything you think worth doing, or it could be because there's nothing to you but flash and foolishness. Ommar Istib says you've shown no special talents, that you're not interested in anything, all you seem to know is what you don't want which is everything inside these walls." A muscle twitched beside the boy's mouth, but he would not look at Karrel. "You think that matters to anyone? To me? Let me tell you, I'm not particularly interested in who you are or what you think." Another molten black gaze. Karrel Goza nodded. "Right. I'm like all the rest. That's the way the world wags, cousin. Let me make something clear. While you live within these walls, you will show some loyalty to the others here; which means you will stop your yizzy raids as long as you are associated with this House. If you want the freedom of the streets, you can have it; the convocation of ommars will pronounce a divorcement. They will not let you endanger the rest of Goza-Duvvar-Memeli."

Zaraiz Memeli paled, flushed, clamped his lips together, struggling to control the emotions surging in him. A moment later he lost the fight. "Hypocrite!" The word exploded out of him in an angry whisper. "You ... you're doing worse."

"I'm not a child." Karrel Goza fixed a quelling eye on the working, angry face; inside, he writhed as he listened to what was coming out of his mouth; he wasn't the pompous idiot he heard himself being, but somehow he couldn't shake loose from ... from this stinking parody of all he'd kicked against since he was Zaraiz Memeli's age. The face of authority, he thought, as his mouth went on uttering fatuities. "I'm not recklessly endangering the House for the sake of a transient thrill." He held up his hand to silence the boy until he was finished speaking. "There is a purpose to ...

"Purpose!" Zaraiz Memeli's voice cracked which made him angrier than before; he tried to say more, started to stammer and clamped his teeth on his lower lip. Karrel Goza waited, giving the boy time to collect himself. "Y ... y ... YOU!" Zaraiz got out finally,

"Purpose, yunkshit. Playing stupid games. Going no-where." He jerked a long trembling thumb at the sky. "That! that ... that thing up there says you're full of shit and hot air."

"Maybe so." Karrel Goza sighed. "This isn't about me, Zaraiz Memeli. The inkilins haven't much to lose, so they can afford their rashness. As long as you are connected to Goza House, you drag us down with you." He rubbed wearily at his eyes. "Don't tell me it isn't fair. I know it isn't fair. The Ommar and her convocation have the power, you have none. Your nearkin, will back her, so will we." He hesitated. "The time will come, Zaraiz Memeli, when you'll have a chance to change the balance of power. If you're here to fight, if you have the will to fight. All I ask is that you think about it."

Zaraiz Memeli shuddered, shut his eyes and dropped his face onto his knees.

Karrel Goza rubbed at his arms, clamped his cold, chapped hands in his armpits, hunting some warmth. Weariness from the abruptly interrupted drive of the past months was dropping like a fog over him, the day's damp chill was boring into his bones. He scowled at the boy; he might feel a certain kinship with him, but that embryonic brother-sense was drowning in im-patience. Come on, he thought, come on, young fool; give in or get out. There's nothing I can do for you. Look at me. Nothing I can do for me. Not now. You're supposed to be intelligent, I can't see it, show me. He pinched his nose, killing a sneeze, tucked, his hand back under his arm.

Zaraiz Memeli lifted his head. "How?"

Karrel Goza blinked. "How do you usually think?"

"No." He jerked his thumb at the sky, the tremble gone out of his hand. "That. There's whispers. I didn't believe them before. It is true? Have you and her figured a way to get at it?"

Oversoul's empty navel, Karrel Goza thought, I talk too much. "Nonsense," he said aloud. "How could we? I was talking about Family matters."

Zaraiz grinned. His black eyes glittering, he bounced to his feet, so much energy in him, if someone touched a match to him, he'd explode. "Right," he said. "All right. I'll make a deal. The Slimes'll park our yizzies for now, if so you make us part of it." He folded his thin arms, hugged himself as if those arms had strength enough to control what burned in him. The wind blew strands of curly hair across his eyes, his mouth; he ignored that and stood there, frozen fire, dangerous to his enemies, nearly as dangerous to his kin. When Karrel Goza failed to answer at once, his excitement blew out and the suspicion and resentment that smoldered under his skin burned hotter in its place. "Or aren't Memeli worthy? Aren't we good enough for you?"

Karrel Goza closed his eyes. I do not need this he thought, Prophet touch my lips or no, anything I say will be wrong. If there was just some way I could drop him in a hole somewhere until ... hole? Why not. He smiled. He couldn't help smiling though he knew Zaraiz Memeli would see and misinterpret it. He opened his eyes, got wearily to his feet. "How much weight will your yizzy lift?"

"You?" Zaraiz was still suspicious but beginning to radiate a tentative triumph.

He's quick, Karrel Goza thought, good, he might even be useful. "Yes."

"You and me, no problem."

"Tomorrow night. I'll take you out, but you'll have to make your own pitch. Another thing, you don't like House discipline, but the worst thing that can happen to you here is divorcement. Act up there and you could find slave steel around your neck. I'll back you, for what that's worth; I think you might be useful, a clever boy can get in places a man can't reach. All I'm saying is, it won't be easy. Come along."

Zaraiz followed him down the stairs. Not a word from the boy. The washcourt was empty, a few rain-drops were splatting down, making pockmarks on flags whitened by decades of splashes from soap, starch, and bleach. Kanel stopped, turned. "Well?"

He watched Zaraiz Memeli struggle to make up his mind; his impatience was gone, he was too tired to care what the decision was. As the boy shifted from foot to foot, he could almost write the script for what was passing through his cousin's head. He looked his age at last, vulnerable, wanting desperately for the offer to be real, afraid of trusting it because the whole of his short life had taught him that adults invariably lied to him, broke promises without a qualm, disre-garded his ideas and his desires. He kept snatching glances at Karrel Goza as if trying to surprise him into betraying his real intentions. It was no good, of course; either he trusted and said yes, or he rejected the offer and took the consequences.

Karrel Goza waited, shoulders slumped, eyes half-closed.

Zaraiz Memeli's eyes burned black again. He licked his lips, nodded, a short sharp jerk of his head. "When do we go?" he said; his voice cracked again, but this time he ignored it. "Where do we start from?"

"Tonight. The wasteflat out beyond Pervas Gorp's last warehouse. Hour after midnight. You can manage that?"

Zaraiz snorted, his thin body stiff with scorn. "I go back on punishment?"

"Tubers don't spade themselves. Use the time to think, eh?" Karrel Goza rubbed at his forehead. Good little boy again? I don't think so.

"Hunh-eh!" Arms swinging, torso swaying, the boy took himself away from there.

Karrel Goza watched his pass through the washcourt's wicket. Maybe Elli can handle him, he thought. He yawned. If I'm yizzying to the Mines tonight, I'd bet-ter get some sleep.

XI

collecting:

1. *DEY CHOMEDY*

Place. Raz KALAK KAVANY, northeast lobe of the Duzzulkas.

Headprice: 2,500 gelders.

She was tall and thin and bald and she moved with an explosive grace even when loaded with chains and driven about the dance floor by electric lances and glass-pointed longwhips. She danced grimly, knowing she had to please them, refusing to please them by cringing or pleading. Sweat streaked her coppery skin, her yellow slit-pupiled eyes were half-closed, her mouth squared into a snarl. Chunky high-arched feet lifted, leaped, landed without a sound, moving too swiftly for the whip thongs to tangle about them, her limber body flowed and twisted away from the jabbing lance points. The dance went on and on, she sweated more copiously until her skin had a diffuse glow as it reflected the yellow light from the lamps clumped on the walls of the open court, but she showed few other signs of flagging.

The music went ragged and finally broke off. The lances clattered down, the whipmen coiled their whips. She stood in the center of the dance floor, wary and angry, her chest heaving, her arms and legs trembling. She wasn't a mammal so she hadn't even vestigial breasts, but she was powerfully female; fear and anger had tagged her sweat with a musky scent that spread like a mist across the court, exciting the men who'd been watching her. The court cleared rapidly and her handler took her away.

* * *

A hand came down on her mouth; a beard tickled her face, a whisper her ear. "Listen." Interlingue. She stopped her instinctive struggle. "Chathat adey Elat-hay," the whisper went on, "they sent us for you. You want out?"

She touched the hand. After a hissing, near-silent laugh as soon as her mouth was freed, she pushed up; chains clinked when she held out her arms. Her visitor moved around her; she saw him as a long flickering shadow. An autopick hummed and the cuffs fell away from her wrists.

"Anything you want here?" A low mutter.

"Sss."

"I take it that means no. Wait there." Like a walk-ing beam he crossed the room, opened the door a crack and clicked his tongue. A double click answered him. He beckoned to her and slipped outside.

There were two others waiting in the skip. She looked at them, recognized neither but knew from the smell of them they'd been slaves like her. "You've had a busy night," she told the man.

"Might say so. You want to get in? We have a long way to go before dawn."

She swung up, settled in the space the man and woman made for her. "How much you collecting for us?" She blinked. A short furry type she hadn't seen before scrambled into the co's seat up front; it

wasn't talking, so she didn't comment.

"Works out to about two thousand gelders a head," the man said, he leaned over the controls; she heard the hum as the skip's liftfield came on, grunted as the skip kicked out of there.

"How many you plan to snatch?" she said. "Couple hundred."

"Not bad." She laughed, a cat's purr amplified. "Three tonight. You got a ways to go."

"So we have." He turned the skip and sent it racing south over the grass.

"Don't get caught. Some things I want to do."

"Bolodo?"

"Ssss."

He chuckled. "I plan to be old and tired when I die, with plenty of sins to repent."

She extruded a claw, scratched delicately at the skin behind her ear. "A good plan. I too."

2. UKOMAYILE.

Place: Raz OSMUR ORTAEL, the westlobe of the Duzzulkas, 300 miles north of Gilisim Gillin.

Headprice: 1700 gelders.

He lifted the stone, eased it into the hollow pre-pared for it and began pressing the soft gold into place, working quickly but without hurrying, his small hands stronger than they looked. A gooseneck lamp was arched over the pad, giving him the concentrated light he needed; it wobbled as the door slammed open and a short heavy Huvved/Hordar halfbreed rushed over to him. Ukomayile caught the lamp before it tipped over, held it until it stabilized then went back to his work without bothering to look around.

"You're not near finished. Why are you taking so long? He wants the chain and the wristlets ready for the Emperor's Birthday." The Vor Hoshin house steward was one of the Fehraz Vor Hoshin's bastards, born to fuss at things he couldn't understand. He poked with a nervous stubby finger at the emeralds set out on a linen cloth, at the soft gold chain, the links engraved and shaped with minor differences making each unique; he got in Ukomayile's way with a persistence that had something of malice about it.

Ukomayile lowered his hands and waited. The steward noticed that after a while and got shrilly annoyed. "Why aren't you working? Why are you sitting there? He'll have you beaten again, you stupid beast."

Ukomayile laced his fingers together and waited, his face impassive. He did not look at the steward, he said nothing, he simply sat there refusing to acknowledge anything the steward said or did. There was a time when he would have protested such treatment, he was a gifted artisan with an immense reputation and accustomed to being treated with respect and he hadn't yet learned what it meant to be a slave. Ten years and innumerable beatings later, he no longer voiced his protest, he merely set himself like a rock and waited. He still hadn't learned slave manners and he never would if he died for it.

After some more spiteful maneuvering, the steward withdrew; he knew Ukomayile wouldn't explain or excuse himself for not finishing in time, but the Fehraz Vor Hoshin, sourmouthed wrinkled old snake, he'd nose out the steward's interference and twist his tail for it; Vor Hoshin enjoyed that kind of thing and he'd been doing a lot of it lately. The steward knew he was hovering on the verge of dismissal; that he was the viper's son meant nothing, there were plenty of that old horn's get scattered about the Raz. In spite of that he couldn't stop hectoring the slave; for reasons he didn't try to explain, he hated Ukomayile with a passion that nearly tipped him into madness.

The sun went down. A maidservant tapped on the door with Ukomayile's supper on a tray and a jug of mulled wine to warm the stiffness out of his muscles. He laid his tools in a neat row, brushed his hands together, then climbed down off his tool and hobbled to the table; one of those beatings had broken his leg and the boneman who'd set it had botched the job. He ate with the same close attention he gave to his work, finished everything on the tray, drank half a glass of the wine, then went back to the bench.

Gorruya rose, gibbous; she swam up across the window and vanished; Ruya nosed over the horizon. He kept working. The steward might be a malicious fool, but he was right enough about the

Fehraz; he'd be mad as a sick viper if the chain wasn't finished in time to show it off at the Fete. The emeralds were lovely stones, he liked handling them and the setting was a test of his skill to keep the variations subtle enough to be interesting but not vulgar. So he labored on while the night grew darker and older.

The door opened. He didn't bother turning, he thought it was the steward coming back.

"Ukomayile, listen."

Ukomayile's hand jerked, the tool cut a crease in the gold. Interlingue. He turned slowly.

A man stood in the doorway, tall, tired face, mussed black hair, a dark gray shipsuit. How many years since he'd seen a clutch of zippers like that, pockets on pockets on an easy loose-fitting overall. The man wearing the shipsuit wasn't anyone he knew. He watched in dull wonder as the stranger pulled the door shut. "Tikkan Ekital sent me." More interlingue, wonderful how fast it came back to him. "They want you back. You want out?"

Ukomayile sat without moving; it was a while before he took in what the man was saying. "Yes," he said finally. "A moment." He slipped the loose emeralds into their carrycase, snapped it shut and slid it into a large leather bag. He folded the chain and the wristlets into the linen workcloth and tucked the roll into the bag beside the stones, drew the strings tight and looped them over his wrist. With the same quick neat movements he cleaned out the safe and gathered up his leather case. "All right. We can go. What do you want me to do?"

The man chuckled. "Right. Just follow me, we're heading for the roof."

3. HANU, POSA ALA, OTSUT.

Place: Comweb TRANSFER STATION in the UYDAGIN mountains that run west of Gilisim Gillin.

Headprices: Hanu: 900 gelders; Posa Ala: 3000 gelders; Otsut: 2500 gelders.

Hanu scowled, cleared the program, unclipped the powerpack. "Otsa, come over here, will you?" He spun the flies, slipped off the cover and began pulling cassettes and program boards, lining these up so the Froska could take a look at them.

Otsut yanked on the chain clamped around her neck and pulled it along the overhead slide until she could reach Hanu's side. She moved the tip of a long thin finger across the first board, made a tutting sound. "Burnout, sabotage perhaps, perhaps faulty manufacture." She had a high sweet voice like the chirping of a cicada; soft greenish skin fell in graceful folds between her arms and body; her eyes were a darker green, huge sad eyes. She was nocturnal, totally adapted to a darkness broken only by the fluctuating polarized light of a huge moon that was more like a companion world than a satellite. The light in the room was painful to her, but she endured the small torment because she must, endured it in silence because she was Froskin and they took pride in their stoicism. She was the key to the team; she could generate a weak current in her body and had been surgically altered so she could test-read flakes and boards without exterior, nonorganic aids. Hanu and Posa Ala didn't mind being confined to nightwork, it left them more on their own, less contact with their masters; neither of them found it easy to accept being a slave, they did what they could to minimize the reminders, though the pen where they were caged when not working and the collars they wore at all times, the chains that tethered them when they were doing their analyses and repairs would not let them forget their status or settle too complacently into their new lives. Otsut worked quickly along the line, found three substandard boards and a totally unusable one, one cassette was useless and several of the others were flawed. "This is a larger degree of incapacity than we have found before, Anyo. Is it the transfer unit doing it?"

"There's no sign of surges, no charring or smell or anything similar. Besides, aren't these new units?"

"Most are new," she chirped, "if the manifest is correct; I think it is not exactly correct, I think the supplier is enhancing his profit at the expense of quality."

Hanu looked around. Posa Ala was at his post across the room and their guard was sitting in a chair with his feet up, eyes closed, mouth working as he chewed at green fyon, a local narcotic. "The more things change," he said.

She let greenish parchment lids drop over her eyes. Such corruption was painful to her. The

neckchain clinked softly as she shuddered, then she put off her distress. "Are there sufficient spare boards to finish the repairs?"

"Any of those near enough to standard for Posa to do some surgery on?"

She touched them again, picked a board up, played her fingers across it. "This one." She set it down, apart from the rest. "The others, no. The software? Too much damage. You'll have to replace every cassette."

"Well, we can fix this unit, but that's it for tonight. Have to put in a rec, I suppose and wait for supplies." Hanu patted a yawn, got to his feet. "Eh, Posa, how you doing?"

"About the same as you from the look of it."

"Why don't you take a break and come over here? Otsa has a board for you to operate on."

"That's a break?" He chuckled, a deep rumbling sound. Still chuckling he slid down from his stool and came stumping over to them, jerking impatiently at the chain, making the slide squeal as it ran along its track. He was a stubby figure, legs so short his fingers nearly touched the floor when he stood erect. His shoulders and arms were powerful, thick in both di-mensions: they looked as if he'd stolen them from a man three times his height. He had coarse shaggy hair he wore twisted into a spiky mane; his head was nar-row and long, his mouth wide; his eyes gleamed in the dimness like molten gold, at once savage and filled with a sardonic amusement at the vagaries of life. A typical Kakeran. At home he'd have half a dozen docile wives and innumerable children running wild through the tree paths while he used up his abundant energy directing at least three companies and sitting on half a dozen local boards. Here, even the collar about his neck and the chain that tethered him failed to diminish the force of his personality or the nervous-ness of Hordar who had to work around him. A lot of the locals, Hordar and Huvved alike, sighed with re-lief when he was put on the night team and they didn't have to deal with him any longer. "What's this..."

Before he finished the question, the door opened. Their guard blinked, then slid from his chair, sprawl-ing in an insensate heap on the floor. A man stood in the doorway, a stunner in his hand. "Listen," he said. Interlingue. Posa Ala's eyes gleamed! "The three of you are worth about seven thousand gelders to me the day I set you down on Helvetia. You coming?"

Posa Ala shook the chain. "You blind?"

"No." The man grinned at them. "Just wanting no argument if one of you's not inclined to trust me."

Otsut shivered; Posa Ala touched her arm. "Leave this to me, sweet one. Trust isn't in it. Give us a name. I think I know you. Make me sure of it."

The man raised a brow, not the one touched by the scar. "Quale. Ship Slancy Orza."

remove his "That's fin

Posa Ala grinned. "Yoh so. Five years back. The Swart Allee, University. You had a friend with funny fur."

"That was a busy night. I don't remember a Kakeran in the mix."

"I was on the bottom of the pile when you showed up; by the time I worked loose you and your friend were kiting out with half a dozen Proctors on your tail. I heard later you led them on a pretty chase and lost them in the Maze. But reminiscences, however pleas-ant, can wait for a more propitious place and time. I presume you've got a cutter on you that can handle this steel." Once again he shook the chain.

"Better than that." Quale dipped into his pouch, tossed an autopick to Posa. "We're parked on the roof. A skip. You know this place better than I do; we couldn't do much groundwork because we didn't know you'd be here until yesterday morning. Any guard checks due soon?"

"No. They airship us over, lock us in with some cretin like that fool there and forget us till morning." Posa Ala examined the pick, smiled as if he'd found something good to eat and clicked it home. When his collar was off, he turned to Otsut. "Not just us, eh?"

"Right."

"Seven thousand gelders, you say?"

“More or less. Delivered on Helvetia, if that both-ers you.”

“Nice.” As he moved over to Hanu, Otsut pulled off the collar and flung it away from her. “Who’s offering?”

“For you, seven wives and some frazzled male relatives. “

Posa Ala grinned. He watched Hanu collar, wipe his fingertips on his tunic. “That’s finished. Let’s go.”

“Pick first.”

“You’re a cautious man. I wouldn’t have thought it.”

“I never saw a deader who looked like he was having much fun. Move it, will you, I’ve got another stop to make tonight.”

4. LEDA ZAG.

Place: Raz EFKLARA MARKAT at the southern edge of the Grass, the western lobe of the Duzzulkas.

Headprice: 7000 gelders.

A hand clamped down hard on her mouth; close to her ear, a male voice whispered, “Listen.” Interlingue. She relaxed and moved her head slightly to let the intruder know she’d heard. The hand came off. “One Nameless wants you back. You want to come?”

She sat up cautiously. Enough moonlight filtered through the slats to show her the man beside her, him who thought he was her master; he was lying with his eyes cracked, his mouth sagging half open. She poked at the soft flesh of his upper arm. He didn’t change expression or move. “Stunned?”

“Yes. Well?”

“You really need an answer?” She threw the covers off her legs, slid from the bed. “Let me get dressed.”

She was tiny, maybe a hand taller than Pels; her breasts were suggestions, her pubic hair a few silky threads. She looked about twelve, but he knew from the data provided by ti Vnok that she was over a hundred; her genes had been scrambled to keep her a pedophile’s darling. She moved quickly about the room, selecting what she wanted to wear, shoving jewelry and bibelots into a sack, not a wasted movement. She was back in moments, her eyes glittering, the loot bag slung over her shoulder; she was dressed in a loose robe that swayed about her ankles; it had long sleeves cuffed at the wrist and a high neck; she’d pulled on soft boots, her feet made no sound on the floor. “Let’s go.”

Altogether I collected twenty-seven slaves from the Duzzulkas and three transfer stations. Then I began on the cities of the Kuzeywhiyker Littorals.

Night after night, explaining who I was and what I was doing and why I was doing it, packing individuals of assorted shapes, sizes and dispositions into the skip and keeping them happy until I decanted them at the Base. In the shelters Kumari stocked and policed, the numbers increased in drips and spurts. It was coin piling up for us, but it was also hard labor, boring, sometimes dangerous, mostly sitting in an overloaded skip, freezing my tail and wishing for a coat of fur like Pels and sorry I ever got into the rescue scam. It was coping with Adelaar who was fretting about her busi-ness and what was happening to it without her, it was soothing the Hanifa, who got more nervous and mis-trustful as each day slid past. Blessed Kumari, she kept them both off my neck as much as she could. The days did pass. Day by interminable day, they passed. Never again. Never ever again. I was not in love with pain. Or sweat work. But I’d given my word and I meant to keep to it.

5. ILVININ TAIVAS, SUKSI ICHIGO, SHNOURO, SLEED TOK and others not on the list.

Place: AYLA GUL SAMLIKKAN, eastern Littoral.

Headprice: ILVININ TAIVAS: 5000 gelders; SUKSI ICHIGO: 1500 gelders; SHNOURO: 2500 gelders; SLEED TOK: 1000 gelders.

The city was burning when I brought the skip down low over the rooftops and tiptoed around clots of trouble until I managed to slip onto the roof of the pen at the textile factory. The streets were thick with homegrown guards and Tassalgans shooting sprays of pellets at the yizzies whining overhead and

scrambling away from goutts of fire as the inklins retaliated. Gangs of youngers were screaming words that didn't exist in the vocab I learned from, darting across housetops and through alleys behind the men in the streets, running dangerously close to count coup on them, scrambling yip-yip-yip away around corners or leaping from roof to roof, waving the paint guns they'd modi-fied to squirt acid drained from eksasjhi veins, the eksasjhi being a lethargic crustacean that lived in the shallows all along the east coast. It left a knotty purple scar that marked the head coup for all to see and silently gloat over, it was briefly agonizing and did not do much for the target's eyesight if it happened to spatter into his eyes. A hit on the head and the yell was *yipyip ya TEN*. A hit on a torso was *yipyip ya ONE*. No scar, at least none visible. A leg was five, a hand six. Houses were burning, men were burning, inklins shot out of the sky were screaming as their fire tanks burst over them and they burned or lay with shattered bodies among the bodies of the men they fought, children fell from roofs or squirmed and screamed in the hands of men who beat on them with limber gray prods.

While Pels drifted about the cluttered roof, check-ing the shadows, making sure no guards or homeless grasslanders were sleeping up there, we didn't want some local waking up at the wrong time and yelling, I crouched by the trap, set the pick working on the lock, then I settled on my heels and looked around. No yizzies buzzing over this quarter; the nearest noise was half a dozen streets away and moving off toward the bayshore, but there was nothing to keep the inklins away. If they took a notion to fire this place, they could be here in seconds. Nothing clears the sinuses like knowing you're not just a fool, you're a damnfool.

Kumari cornered me after the last dip and told me there was chaos in the east. Take two skips, she said, one for backup, and someone to watch them while you're breaking loose the targets. I know you don't like to double the risk on long hauls, but you can separate the two skips, go in mirror arcs, it'll make the run longer, maybe you'd have to find cover and spend the day somewhere, what of it? Irritating to find she was right. I'd have passed on this one, but this dip was worth ten thousand gelders, besides, one of them was Ilvinin Taivas; the Helvetian Seven were hot to get him back, him and Leda Zag. I had her, I needed him. Ah well, it was a mess, but none of my business; I'd seen the backwash from disturbances in other Littoral cities, but they were closer to Base and we were able to stay outside until the fires died down, the injured were carried off, and the fighters on both sides went home. These should have cleared out by this time, it couldn't be more than an hour or two before daylight, but no, the fools had to keep on killing and getting killed.

The pick buzzed. I pulled it off. "Pels."

"Yeh?" He materiali7ed beside me; I jumped, that little spook was hard to see even when you knew where he was.

"You mind going down the hole alone? If Luck takes a hike, some maniac on a broom might take a notion to barbeque the skip."

"No sweat. Only a couple of guards and Kumari said they're usually half asleep."

"Don't count on that tonight. Hmm. Take a buzbug and yell if you hit trouble."

Pels growled, sniffed. "If it'll make you squat hap-pier, li'l mama."

"Here." I held out the pick.

Pels looked at it, shook his head. "Snooper cameras inside, Kumari spotted them. I'll have to pop the lenses and that'll start bells ringing somewhere. I'll use the cutter on the chains, it's faster. When I give a whistle, you have the skip ready to hop." He tapped me on the shoulder. "A minute," he said and trotted away.

As Pels fished in the toolbox, I lifted the trap and clamped it open; I shook it, made sure the spring would hold and turned in time to take one of the matched pair of buzbugs.

Pels worked the bug through the fur on his throat, screwed the plug in his ear. "Don't massacre too many infants," he said and dropped through the hold.

I pasted the phone on my throat, pushed the plug into my ear and touched the bug on; I winced as Pels' breath came roaring into my head, threatening to blow my eardrum. I tapped on the AFT which I should have done before I stuck the thing in my ear, head dead, yes, I wiped the tears from my eyes.

With a faint chuff-chuff in my head, I got to my feet and inspected the roof. There was a fat tapering chimney a little taller than I was, several padlocked sheds, half a dozen blocky bins, stacks of drums, huge spools, piles of scrap lumber, bales of fiber; the flat space behind the parapet was a kind of storage area for anything the factory wasn't planning to use anytime soon, all of it throwing complex shifting shadows in the double moonlight. The fires that spread along the waterfront and the slum areas near it put hard edges on those shadows; the black square hole of the open trap stood out stark against the pale roof. Made me nervous. I salvaged a chunk of two-by-four from a scrap pile, laid it across one corner of the hole and lowered the trap on it. The skip was squatting like a dark toad in one of the open areas, far too visible for my peace of mind, but I couldn't do anything about that except hope if the yizzy inklin came close enough to see it, they'd think it was something belonging to the factory. I dropped onto the roof tiles, sat with my back against the chimney, some broken boxes beside me to thicken its shadow and break my silhouette. The launch tube balanced across my knees, a clip in the slot, I waited.

I watched the firefight move farther from us and breathed easier; the thought of having to shoot children out of the sky put a sour taste in my mouth, though that wouldn't stop me from blowing the tailfeathers off any snooping yizzy even if it meant I'd send shrapnel through the body of its pilot. I listened to Pels breathe and thought I'd been in some lousy situations before but I couldn't remember any this bad. Children fighting a war their elders funked. No, not fighting, destroying to scratch an itch, to drive off futility. Hanifa, I thought, if this goes on much longer, what you'll get when you win won't be worth the price. You and Pittipat are birthing a generation of killers and vandals and they won't settle into model citizens once the battles are over.

"Snoops," Pels breathed into my ear, "audio and video. Three of them in the ceiling where I came off the stairs. I popped them, probably set off an alarm. One guard on the stores level, got him; another round the corner just ahead." A breathy chuckle. "The maffit is farting like a misfiring engine. Full Be doing the world a favor when I hit him. A minute." The breath-ing didn't change; slow and steady, little hunter stalk-ing his prey, go Pels! "Got him. And there's door 5. Tsa! more lenses." A moment's silence. "Got them. Five minutes, then we're on our way up."

As I listened to Pels go through the routine speech, picking up echoes of the targets' responses, I looked out across the burning city and felt a deep relief that I was going to be getting out of this. I got to my feet and took a step toward the trap.

A darkness huge and ominous dropped through the shredded clouds. Light beams walked across the city, seeking out and touching the yizzy inklin. Dainty delicate killer blades darting out to touch and kill, clearing the sky. The inklin tried to run, they scat-tered like leaves *in a* whirlwind, but it did no good, the lines of light rotated out with an awe-full preci-sion, touch and fry, immense and eerie lightshow.

I swore; it wasn't fair, dammit. "Pets, trouble up here. Stay where you are. Pittipat's brought the Warmaster down."

"Huh?"

"I know. Swatting a fly with a maul, but it's happen-ing. No way I can take the skip up; the Warmaster's knocking everything out of the air."

"Shit."

"Yeh."

"Ah, what about the skip? It's not airborne, is it safe?"

"Haven't a clue. Hmm. If it weren't for those snoops...."

"Yeh. We got to get out of here before company arrives."

"Let me think ... um ... the Warmaster is con-centrating on the waterfront, most of the trouble is over there. I think you'd better try the streets. Go south and west, make your way out of the city. Watch out for lice."

"Better them than frying. What about you?"

"Sit it out, I suppose, till the ship leaves. She won't hang around after she's finished. You go to ground as soon as you're out of the city. First fair cover you can find. Me, I'd take to the forest somewhere round the river. If you do, don't go in too deep, I want to use the bug to locate you."

"Swar."

“What?”

“Can you get to the skip without exposing yourself too much?”

“Yeh.”

“Thing is, the scanners on the Warship can pin a flea.... “

“A throw of the dice, eh? She spots it or she doesn’t.”

“Yeh. Get the spare com, I don’t feel like walking home.”

I had to laugh. “Point to you, furface. But I won’t move till you’re clear. Give me a whistle when you’re a few streets off.”

Silence for a moment, only the chuff-chuff of his breathing. “A couple things I want to do before I leave. Give me a commentary, huh. What’s happening up there.”

“The ship has finished clearing the sky, her nose is over the harbor now. I can see gouts of steam so I suppose they’re going after boats or swimmers.” A mutter from Pels was a faint background noise to what I was saying; he’d turned the volume down so he could talk to the targets while he listened to what I was saying. “She’s going out farther, that’s one huge mother, Pels, her belly’s still over us here, the tail is out in the hills where the rich folk have their houses. Wait till you get a look at her. Hmm. Whatever she was after, she got it. She’s starting to swing around; it’s going to take her a good half hour to finish that turn. Hunh. She just picked off something else, I can’t see steam this time. It’s pretty far offshore, might even be one of the Sea Farms. If it is, Pittipat’s going to have more trouble on his hands than a few juvenile delinquents. Hmm. She’s stopped the massacre, for a while away. You better get a move on, Pels.”

“We’re on our way. Better not transmit for a while. I’ll keep the plug in place, wait on your beep. Luck, Swar.”

“Keep your nose cold, teddybear.”

“You’ll be sorry for that, you apostate Scav.”

“I hope. On your way, babe.”

“Rrrr. “

The hum in my ear broke off. I dropped into a squat, my back against the chimney. The ship continued to turn, slowly, ponderously, so huge it obscured a quarter of the sky.

A whistle in my ear. “Gotcha.” I eased to my feet, set the launch tube against a box. Glancing repeatedly at the ship, I edged around the chimney and walked slow as a weary sloth from junk pile to pile of junk, staying in the deepest shadows as long as I could, breaking my motion at irregular intervals, using every-thing I knew to avoid alerting a watcher, whether that watcher was a program or a man. The wind swept over the roof, carrying past me the stench of burnt meat, faint cries from the wounded, hoarse yells from the hunters in the streets below me. The air was cleared of fliers, but the ground fight was going on, more deadly than before, there were no yipyips, no more coup games, these were rats slashing at rats. I crept a few steps, stopped, went on, until I was crouching beneath the skip below the toolbox. The Warmaster was still turning, dark, silent, massive, no more lightblades though. I eased out, got the box open and dug around for the spare handset. For a cold moment I thought I’d gone off without it this time, the ready-check was so automatic I could have been careless, then my hand closed on the padded case. Pels must have moved it when he got the buzzbugs. I lifted it out, slipped the strap over my shoulder, pulled the box shut. I looked up. Still turning, measurably closer.

I patted the skip, shook my head and started ram-bling back toward the chimney. When I got there, I picked up the launcher, looked from it to the Warmaster and had to grin.

A moment later I lost all desire to laugh, the lightblades were out and rotating, wider beams this time, cauterizing the city; where they passed, the crowded tenements and warehouses exploded into ash and steam. One minute, two, three, four. The barrage stopped, the Warmaster continued drifting south.

For a breath of two there was a hush. Nothing was happening, in the air or in the streets. Then, as if it were a kind of joke, a last giggle after the great guffaw of the slum clearance, a skinny little light needle about as big around as my thumb came stabbing down close enough I could feel the heat leaking off it. It hit the skip, melted her into slag that ate rapidly through the roof and dropped in a congealing cascade through the floors below, starting more fires as it fell.

The Warmaster began to rise, lifting so fast it sucked air after it, creating a semi-vacuum and then a firestorm as air from outside rushed in. Fire roared up out of the hole in the roof beside me. I had to get out of there. I slung the tube's strap over my shoulder and ran for the rope ladder coiled near the front parapet. I flipped it over and went down in something close to a free fall. I had a moment's regret for the slaves still chained in there, but there wasn't anything I could do, the place was a furnace by the time I hit ground. Besides, with all the death in this city tonight, it was hard to feel horror or anything else over a few more corpses, how-ever grisly their end.

Stunner in my hand, I ran through the dark streets. No one tried to stop me. The few Hordar who saw me, looking from windows or crouching in doorways, were shocked into inertia, too afraid, too horrified to do anything but gape. In a section with taverns and small shops I rounded a corner and came face to face with a Tassalgan who was hunting inklin or anyone else he suspected of treachery, which seemed to be just about everyone not Tassalgan. I stunned him as soon as I saw his dark wool uniform, blessing the amnesia effect of the charge; I was clearly not Huvved or Hordar and I didn't look all that much like an escaped slave. I glanced back before I went round another corner and saw ragged children swarming over the downed guard. A wiry boy drew a knife across the Tassalgan's throat and howled as blood spurted over him; he and the other children fought over the blood, wiped their hands in it, licked it off their palms, off his neck. Off the pavement. Hanifa, Hanifa, how are you going to civilize little animals like that? The boy looked up and saw me. I took off. I avoid weasels and all such vermin; they can kill you because they don't know when to give up.

It took me almost an hour to work my way out of the city; it was a big place, bigger than it looked from the skip, and I had to move more warily once I got into the suburbs; there were guards on the walls and they were trigger happy. I picked up some shot in a shoulder, a hole in my leg that missed bone and most of the muscle but hurt like hell and a new part over my left ear, bullet whizzing by entirely too close. By the time I made the park south of town, I was losing blood from my shoulder and my leg and feeling not so good.

The park was on the edge of a forest preserve that spread over the hills south and west of the city on both sides of the river that emptied into the bay. It was open and grassy with rides winding through huge an-cient trees, past banks of flowers and fern, glittering with dew whenever the canopy let through light from late-rising Ruya, the silence broken by a rising wind, hot and dry, blowing off the city, punctuated by snatches of sleepy birdsong; dawn was already reddening the east. I found a bench made from rough-cut planks, eased myself down, not sure I should because my leg was getting stiff and I wasn't all that convinced I could get up again, but I had to locate Pels and I couldn't do that traveling. I pried the mike off, used the nail on my little finger to turn the screw, then started the beeper. I waited with some anxiety but not too much; I knew Pels and I expected him to be curled up some-where, warm and comfortable and enjoying himself.

The earplug beeped. I turned the screw back and stuck on the mike. "Gotcha, Pels. Glad you made it."

I found out why Pels had turned down his mike. Looking a bit sheepish, as well he might, he showed me what he'd done. In the hollow thicket where he'd found shelter he had the four targets and around twenty more fugitives, the rest of the slaves housed in that barracks. He was as sentimental as a daydreaming dowager, but I couldn't complain too much because I was ... well, call it pleased to see, they weren't roasted after all. He knew it too, blasted teddybear.

I gave Kumari a call. She wasn't happy with us. You forget that tap? she said. What am I supposed to think when Adelaar tells me the Grand. Sech is ordering the Warmaster to gul Samlikkan? I tried to reach you. Flashed the call light. No answer. I couldn't use the buzzer, I didn't know who or what might be listening. What took you so long? I've been sitting here eating an ulcer in my belly wondering if the two of you were alive or dead. Stay there. I'll send Adelaar to fetch you. How many did you say?

Adelaar got to us late the next night, brought both skips, the second droned behind. The Warmaster was back in orbit over Gilisim Gillin, she said, just sitting there like it was brooding over what to erase

next. According to the tap we didn't have to worry about its scanners; the crew was too busy putting its insides back in order. And gul Samlikkan was still burning and the locals were concentrating their attention on containing the destruction and restoring order and they weren't worrying about what was going on in the hills.

We packed half the fugitives in the skips, Pels and Adelaar flew them out. I stayed behind with the left-overs. There was some argument about that, Pels was determined I should go back and get some sacktime in the tub's autodoc, but I didn't want to face that long flight the way I was feeling; I could easily pass out somewhere along the way and I wasn't about to trust any of those ex-slaves with the com. The autopilot could handle a lot, but things come up no flakehead can cope with Adelaar didn't go maternal over any-one but Aslan, she didn't care what I did. She told Pels he could do what he wanted, but she was going now. And she went. Pels worked over me until I was as sore as he was satisfied, then he slapped bandages on my punctures and lacerations, shot me full of anti-pyretics, blood-builders and painkillers, left the kip's medkit beside me and took off.

One of the ex-slaves who volunteered to stay behind was a Froska named Jair, an officious little male, precise and self-contained, stoic to the point of insan-ity like a lot of his species. Pels warned me about him, said he was sure to be a nuisance, he didn't obey orders, he'd do what he wanted no matter how irritat-ing that was to the rest. When the bunch of them got settled in the brush hollow to wait for me, Jair decided to go off on his own hunting water. Without bothering to tell anyone what he was up to, he peeled off from the group and went exploring. Being nocturnal and forest bred, he was the best suited for nightwalking in strange places, so it was a reasonably sensible thing to do; what wasn't sensible was sneaking off. Self-contained was one thing, Pels said, carried that far, it was crazy. There wasn't any need to ooze away like that, what could we do? Sit on him? Thing is, he's been here over fifteen years; I suppose his natural tendencies were warped all to hell by that. Hard to argue with success, though. He found a small stream about half a kilome-ter deeper in the forest, rooted around till he located some large seedpods, cleaned two of them out and filled them with water. When he got back, I was furious with him, Pels said, but apart from some growl-ing I couldn't say much because several of the others were suffering from water loss and on the point of collapse. While they finished off the water, I wasted some time trying to get him to see where he went wrong; he listened, blinking those frog eyes at me, nodding like a good little Froska. Like he heard and agreed with everything I said. Hmm. Not a hope. Swar, if you lose the little bastard, don't bother hunt-ing him or waiting for him, it's his own fault.

The moment Pels took off, Jair tapped two Kouri on their fore-shoulders and slipped away into the dark-ness with them. I saw that, but what with the painkill-ers and general exhaustion I didn't feel like starting an argument I was sure to lose. The three of them were back soon enough, hauling more water and a load of empty pods. I hadn't thought to ask Kumari, but she sent empacs with Adelaar, two tea bricks and a self-heating thermos. Jair trotted briskly over to a female. Svigger and stirred her out of her sleep to make tea for us and convert some of the meatflakes into a thick soup that tasted like empac rations always taste, no one not starving could get them down without gag-ging. The tea helped, woke up appetites; besides, the food the Huvved had been giving them the past months wasn't all that much better so they were hungry and got the soup down without complaining. I stuck to tea and some CVP wafers.

The next night Pels came earlier than I expected. He'd lifted off before sundown, taking a chance on being spotted before he plunged into night. He just grinned when I snarled at him. Adelaar was plugged into the Warmaster, ready to warn him if it moved, he said, and as for ocean traffic, there was one whingding of a storm blowing through the strait, no seagoer would be out in weather like that. No droned skip either, I said, but he just shrugged. I made it, he said. By the time we got back, it should be blown out, so that was all right.

The AP's had killed my fever and this body heals fast, so I was in better shape than yesterday; the trip back to Base was no problem, just tedious. I let Pels take the lead in his skip and do most of the watching and my autopilot did most of the work for me, so I spent the greater part of that miserable night sleeping, cramped, cold, drifting from one nightmare to an-other. And swearing for the umteenth time I would never again commit us to anything like this.

6. *23 days after the meeting at Gerbek.*

Aslan put the Ridaar down, looked at her chron. An hour till noon. She had time for another interview, maybe two, before she met her mother for lunch, which was set for midafternoon when Adelaar turned over the Tap feed to Kumari and took a short break to eat and exercise a little. She rubbed at her temples, feeling drugged by talk, hammered at by talk, ex-hausted by the need to listen attentively and ask the right questions to get the story down in all its aspects of feeling and event. One thing you had to say for this experience, she was going back to University with an enormous pile of data; scholars from a dozen disciplines would be excavating it for the next decade, maybe longer. It could hoist her higher on the tenure list, dearie dai, ooh-yeha.

She looked up, saw Parnalee standing in the door-way of his work station, watching her. Hastily she got to her feet, looked around for something that would give her an excuse to go somewhere else. The Jajes were starting up the path to the lake, small dark figures like wingless black bats. She hadn't interviewed them yet, they were shy creatures and self-absorbed, they allowed very few intruders into their yiuriu. They probably wouldn't talk to her, but they were the draw she needed. She started after them.

When she reached the plateau, they were nowhere in sight, but she saw Kumari stretched out in the shade of a broad squat tree, a pitcher of fruitade beside her, a book on her stomach.

Aslan chewed on her lip, looked over her shoulder. She was alone, she couldn't see the tug or the shelters, which meant anyone down there couldn't see her. She moved hesitantly nearer the figure under the tree, she'd rather talk with Quale (nothing to do with her lust for his body) or Pels, they shared, enough of her background to make her comfortable with them, she didn't even know Kumari's species, let alone the basic assumptions of her culture. But during the day Quale and Pels were sleeping or conferring with Parnalee and at night they were gone. She walked forward feeling decidedly unwelcome. Kumari continued to read, no sign she even knew Aslan was there. More than that, there was a strong indication that anyone who came by should keep on walking.

"Despina Kumari," Aslan said, "It's important I talk with you."

Kumari turned a page. "Second hour after noon, your mother's work station."

"No. I'm sorry. That's not possible. I don't want Parnalee Proggerd aware I've spoken to you."

"Sit there. Kumari closed the book, pushed up; she checked to see that the panicbutton was in reach, then scowled at Aslan. "Why?"

Aslan dropped to the grass, sat cross-legged, her hands on her thighs. "I don't want him putting his mind to killing me. I have a feeling he'd manage it no matter how I squirmed."

"Your reasons?" Kumari sounded skeptical but not wholly unconvinced. Aslan felt herself trembling, fooled with her breathing until she was calm enough to go on. The past two weeks had been more of a strain on her than she'd realized.

"He said it, don't screw me up, he said, I'll twist the neck of the one who tries it. He was talking about something else at the time, but I doubt he's changed his mind. He's crazy, you know. Not just a little warped. I'm talking about seriously bent. It's not my field, I don't know the technical terms for what he is, but he's focusing all his energies on one thing, making Huvved dead. Some little Huvved snot had his Tassalgans hold Parnalee down while he beat on him with his czadeg, you know, those gray whips they use on anyone who annoys them, cut his back and buttocks into dogmeat. I was there while he was healing, I saw it eating on him. He's not the kind of man who enjoys a little bondage now and then, no, and there was something from when he was a boy, some sort of trouble, he dreams about it when he's under stress, nightmares, very noisy. I woke him once, tried to get him to talk about it. He punched me around a bit, broke a couple of ribs, gave me enough bruises to decorate an SM sanctum and kicked me out, made me finish the night on a garden lounge, which I preferred to his company, believe me. If he gets a chance at the Warmaster's armory, he'll boil Tairanna down to bedrock. As long as he gets the Huvved, he doesn't care who else he ashes."

"How do you know?"

"Nothing tangible. Watching him. Stripping down those productions he did for Tra Yarta, you know,

the Grand Sech. Some things he's said, awake and asleep. Body language more than anything, though he's very good at hiding what he's thinking, that's part of his professional training, isn't it."

"No proof?"

"None."

"Not even in the Ridaar?"

"He wouldn't let the Ridaar anywhere near him. Made me stow it while I was living with him."

"Elmas Ofka wants him with us at Lift-Off. Without proof...."

"Oh."

"Don't fret it, I agree with you. My fa'ali clanks like a cracked bell when he's around. Unfortunately that's as intangible as your unsupported observations. He reports to our Hanifa regularly, feeds her suspicion, I don't know how, I didn't realize what he was doing until a few days ago." She shook her head. "I'll talk with Swar and Pels, we'll watch him, if he tries any-thing," she sighed, "maybe we can stop him."

Aslan got to her feet. "Have you seen the Jajes? They were my excuse to come up here, so I'd better find them and see if I can get an interview."

Kumari swung her feet around, stretched out on the pad. "They went toward that clump of trees down there by the hook inlets, I think those ancients remind them of home."

"Maybe they'll feel more like talking there." She brushed her hair back from her face and started off, trudging along the lakeshore vaguely dissatisfied though she was glad she'd finally spoke her speech about Parnalee.

7. 25 days after the meeting on Gerbek.

Conference on Chicklet's bridge: Quale, Pels, Kumari.

Quale scratched at his jaw, his eyes on the screen and the swarm of very assorted beings moving about out-side. "How many we have so far? I haven't bothered keeping track."

Kumari called up the figures. "One hundred and twenty on the list, one hundred fifty altogether. You two keep acquiring extras."

"Money total?"

"306,900."

He grinned. "I could live with that."

"Add in the targets in the Palace, it's close to 400,000."

"Which brings up why I had us meet. We can't use the skips to clear out the Palace targets. We'd have to make, what? four, five trips even using both of them. Better to take the tug and get them in one. Which means we have to wait on that till the Hanifa is ready to jump. You talked with her this morning, Kri, what do you think? If we moved Lift-off forward say four days, make it tomorrow, could she handle the speed-up?"

"Four days, what's the point, Swar? Better stick to the schedule. If you feel like keeping clear of Kuzey-whiyk cities, we've got some targets here on Guney-whiyk."

"I don't see how you can say those sneezes with a straight face, Kri."

"Practice, Swar. I've had to learn the Cousin Speech you babble in and Interlingue. If you knew the liquid crystal loveliness of Pilarruyal, you wouldn't ask ques-tions like that."

"Mmp. All right, see what you can do about maps. The Proggerdi won't be any help down here."

"Which brings up something I think you ought to know. Day before yesterday I left Adelaar on the corn and took a book up to the lake to get some rest and reading. Aslan followed me up there about an hour later. Listen...." She sketched out what Aslan told her.

Quale stroked his fingers along his moustache. "Chat-ting up the Hanifa?"

Kumari nodded. "Trust you to put your foot on the main point. Yes. Every night. Soon as you and Pels are gone. He's talked our Hanifa into hiring him as a watchhound. We haven't a hope of leaving him behind."

"You mean she'd actually shut down Lift-Off if we refused to take him?"

"It'd be a tight call, but I suspect, yes she would. She never trusted us all that much and he's been

working on her.”“

“You’ve been monitoring him, why didn’t you stop it?”

“Because I was too dumb to know what he was doing. Not until he’d been doing it long enough to really get under her skin. When I did, what was I supposed to do about it? If you can explain how, it’s more than you’ve done before this.”

“Shit.”

“Precisely.”

“Well, I suppose we do what we have to. And watch our backs.”

8. *26-28 days after the meeting on Gerbek.*

Ayla gul Iltika, gul Mizamere, gul Pudryar, one by one Quale and Pels dipped into the Littoral cities of Guneywhiyk and pulled out slaves, some on the list, some of them extras they couldn’t leave behind with-out telling the world there were Outsiders on Tairanna.

Ayla gul Ukseme was the largest city on Guneywhiyk, in size as well as population; it was a confused sprawl thrown along the inner curve of a skewed half-moon bay. Out where the baywater mingled with the sea there were several Sea Farms, small offshoots of the elder Farms off the coasts of Kuzeywhiyk. There were dozens of freighters tied up at the wharves, linear clusters of one- and two-story warehouses, open-air markets that never shut down; beyond these were stores and Houses spread out along a web of winding streets which climbed over hillocks like horripilation on a cold man’s arms. When he saw the satellite fots, Quale swore fervently and nearly gave up on the city, but Kumari did some snooping and discovered that some of those on the list belonged to the Fehdaz who rented them out during the day and made sure they were back in the pen at the Fekkri by day’s end. Which was very helpful of him. Made it easy to locate them after dark.

The Fekkri was a massive pile with dozens of towers packed in clusters and a mooring post with a pair of midsized airships nose-locked one above the other. The pen was a small excrescence tacked onto the backside of the pile, a low structure with a waist-high parapet around a flat roof cluttered with bales, crates and assorted discards.

As Quale came in over the city, the air was heavy with damp and the promise of rain. The winds near the ground were tricky, gusts to twenty kph one min-ute, almost nothing the next, downdrafts with the drag of an octopus, updrafts that threatened to capsize the skip. As a final irritation, the pen’s roof was so cluttered with discards, the only open space available was over the trap. Quale landed the skip there and spent the next several minutes sweating and cursing under his breath as he and Pels shifted bales and useless scrap so they could move the machine off their entry point; they had to lift and carry and set down gently, no tossing, no rolling, nothing to make their lives a bit easier; they had to keep the noise down so one of the guards wouldn’t get a notion to check out why the rats in the rafters were so noisy that night.

He left Pels dealing with the lock and strolled to the parapet. On the way in as he was circling so he could put the skip’s nose to the wind and make a smoother, quieter landing, he’d seen crowds in the streets; quiet crowds, no yizzies, no counting coups, no fires, just hordes of people. Something about them bothered him; he wanted a closer look to see if he could figure out what it was.

The street that went past the pen was a broad tree-lined avenue. He saw half a dozen dark forms standing under the trees. They weren’t talking or even moving much. They simply stood and stared at the outer wall of the Fekkri. As he watched, several more figures came round a corner and joined them. By the time Pels summoned him, there was a small crowd down there, silent, motionless, eyes fixed on the wall in front of them. Spooky. He answered Pels’ hissing call with a tooth whistle and turned away, glad to have an excuse not to look at them any longer.

He followed Pels through the trap, went down a steeply slanting ladder to a dusty littered storeroom. It’s door was locked, but a quick jab of the autopick took care of that. The EYEs Kumari had run through here reported that there were three sleeping cells, four slaves in one, three in each of the others, ten in all. Seven of them were on his list. If Luck had been a trifle kinder the targets would have been in one room waiting for him, but this was her night to be a bitch.

While Pels stood guard, he slashed through the bolt and pulled the first door open. "Listen," he said, "You want out of here? Right. Is there one here ..." he looked around; no jajes so he didn't bother reading those names, "called Roereirein Lyhyt or Ikas Babut se Vroly or Touw se Vroly?"

"I am Touw se Vroly. Ikas Babut is my mate, he sleeps the next cell over." She was an attenuated figure with a grace even weariness and the wear of servitude had not yet taken from her. He heard a faint clash as she pushed a pair of armbands up past her elbow, by the pallor of the metal they were silver or platinum. She looked around, caught up a shawl and draped it over her shoulders. "What of the others here?" Her arm bands clashed again as she made a wide curving gesture that took in the other two fe-males in the cell, a Froska and a small shadowy figure with more hair than features.

He crossed to her, set the pick working on her collar lock. "What I'll do, I'll unlock the collars and the other two can stay here or leave by the street door, whichever they prefer. If they want they can give me their names and homeworlds and the names of kin I

should notify, or you can do that later if you know them. I can't take all of you, the skip just won't hold that many."

Next cell. "Ikas Babut se Vroly, Roereirein Lyhyt?" The third in the cell was a Miesashch tetrapod with the jitters, his split hooves tick-tacking aggressively against the floorplanks. "I'll unlock the collars on all of you. You, despois," he told the Miesashch, "can stay here or leave by the street door whichever you prefer. If you want you can give me your name and homeworld and the names of kin I should notify. I can't take more than those on my list, the skip just won't hold that many."

Next cell. "Weggors Jaje, Otivarty Jaje, Krathyky Jaje, Imagy Jaje? Good. The Bialy Vitr think highly of the Bond Jaje, they have offered one thousand gelders for the return of each lobe of the Bond, there are four Jajes in my camp already, eight thousand in my hands when I set you all down on Helvetia's pave-ments. Be assured I shall take very good care of you."

There was a spate of whispering among the Jajes, they were using their highest register; the fugitive sounds tickled his ears and gave him the beginnings of a headache. The boldest of the four moved a step to-ward him, a velvety black female invisible in the twi-light inside the cell. "This one is Otivarty Jaje. What is the calling of the Presence who speaks us?"

"Swardheld Quale, ship Slancy Orza out of Telffer."

More whispering. Otivarty stepped away from her Bond again. "The calling is known, the word is accept-able, we will come."

Quale started for the storeroom and the ladder, his seven hustling along behind him, anxious to be out of there. Equally anxious, the extra three hurried the shorter distance to the street exit; the Froska had Quale's cutter, she sliced through the lock tongue and began lifting the bar.

Pels was in the storeroom already and on his way up the ladder. Quale shooed his herd of ex-slaves through the door and was about to follow when he heard a rumbling mutter, then an exclamation of shock and fear from the Froska as the door was wrenched from her hand and sent crashing against the wall.

Blankfaced, muttering Hordar came stomping in, hands like claws reaching for the outsiders, mouths open, lips fluted to produce a whistling growl, eyes wide with no one home behind the shine. The extras took one look at them and ran the other way. Quale waved them past him, played his stunner across the front rank of the mob. Five Hordar fell. The Hordar behind them marched over them, stomping heedlessly on them, crushing them.

"Shit," he said. "Oh shit." He slammed the door, reached for a bar that wasn't there. The door quivered _ as the Surge crashed against it. He went up the ladder faster than he'd come down it, slammed the trap and yelled at the ex-slaves to help him shove bales on it.

They got the first bale in place as the trap shud-dered and started to rise, rolled another over beside it, then a third. The bales quivered as the Hordar below pounded and shoved at the trap, but they had to stand on the ladder to reach it and couldn't get enough leverage to shift the weight piled on it. The barrier held.

Quale scowled at the faces turned hopefully toward him. These Vrolys were both slender, the four Jajes added together wouldn't make one of him. Lyhyt was vaguely vegetative like Kinok, though not Sikkul Paem; he was broad and tall, but maybe not as massive as he looked. The Froska female wouldn't take much space and would suffer in silence for pride's sake, but the Miesashch could be a problem if he panicked. The third from Touw's cell was a fragile nocturnal whose species Quale didn't recognize, but she at least looked fairly calm. "Listen," he said, "I'll take a chance I can lift off with all of you. It's a wild gamble, you might be safer finding a place to hide up here where you can ride that mess out...." He broke off, looked up as he heard the tinny clatter of a yizzy.

A fireball came straight at him. He dived away, rolled over, dived again, rolled behind a stack of crates.

The second fireball missed him by the width of a hope, splashed on the roof and started it smoldering. The others had scattered almost as quickly, hunting cover, but the inklin didn't waste more fire on them. The yizzy swept past, went soaring up to the mooring tower; the rider began working on the airships. More yizzies converged on the towers. The airships were as fire safe as chemistry could make them, but with a dozen firethrowers heating them up, even the heavily sized yosscloth was beginning to smoke. Before long the heat would kindle the hydrogen in the ballonets and the conflagration that followed would melt more than the tower.

While Pels was helping the ten pack themselves into the skip, Quale risked another look over the parapet.

The street was packed with Hordar moving and breathing as if they were limbs of a single beast. The whole city was coming to press against the Fekkri, the Hordar flowing like a river of ants over the few Tassalgan guards stupid enough to try stopping them. The Surge tore them apart, tore off arms, legs, heads, anything one of the many beasthands could get a grip on. He saw a pair of guards trapped in a doorway trying to shoot themselves clear; pellet guns on auto-matic, they emptied clips one after another at the mob, the pellets scything across the front ranks, knock-ing down dozens of men and women. The Surge ig-nored them, came on without noticing the dead and injured, cast them aside like sloughed skin cells. The guards panicked, tried breaking into the House behind them. They couldn't get away. The Surge threw off a tendril which flowed after them and pulled them back to the street; it hurled them against a wall, knocked them again and again into the stone, rocked them back and forth under casual undirected blows, it kicked them off their feet and stomped them into stewmeat. The chatter of the guns, the yells of the guards, their final screams were lost in the SOUND coming from the Surge, a booming howl/growl without words, only a rage so tangible that the hair stood up on Quale's arms and rose along his spine. He backed away and ran for the skip.

Pels had got the weight of the passengers distributed as well as he could, but the machine was still danger-ously overloaded. Quale eased into the pilot's seat and punched on the liftfield, cycling it gradually higher as the drives warmed and tried to take hold. They whined and shuddered; after a tense moment when he was sure they weren't going to bite, the skip lumbered clumsily into the air. He held her an arm's length off the roof while he tested her handling. She was sluggish and crank, the slightest misjudgment on his part might flip her or send her into a slip and that would be that for all of them. He eased her higher, a hand span at a time until she was finally high enough to clear the parapet.

Two yizzies backed away from the siege on the airships and came swooping at them. Quale turned the skip through a wide gentle arc, gradually accelerating, cursing under his breath at the impossibility of losing the inklin fast enough. Pels slid over Touw se Vroly's lap so he could snap loose Quale's stunner which had a longer reach to it than his own. One of the inklin squirted fire at them, but a gust of wind carried it wide. Back in his cubby, Pels bared his tearing teeth, hissed with satisfaction and put that inklin out; he got the second inklin before she could release more fire. The two collapsed in their saddles; strapped in so they didn't fall, they went drifting off, ignored by guards on the ground and their fellows in the air.

Quale relaxed and nursed the laboring skip through the city, picking a circuitous route that avoided the taller buildings, the speakers' minarets, mooring tow-ers, and the like. Below them the Surge went on, spreading from precinct to precinct, leaving death and destruction behind it as it moved.

Quale brought the skip down slowly, carefully, land-ing her in a grassy swale between two groves, one a collection of nut-bearers, the other ancient hardwoods. There was a small, stream wandering vaguely westward across the middle of the swale and a tumbledown shelter tucked away under a lightning-split cettem tree still alive and heavy with green nuts. He left Pels and four of the ex-slaves there to wait for his return and took the others to Base.

He started back at once, reached gul Ukseme shortly before dawn; he circled over the city to see how the Surge had developed. It was very dark, both moons were down and the storm that had threatened at dusk was on the verge of breaking. No yizzies. The streets were empty. The Fekkri was a burnt-out husk. There were bodies everywhere, trampled into rags on the paving stones, men and women, impossible to say which body was which; dead children who were recog-nizable as children only because they were littler than the others. He was too high to smell, the stench, but it was thick in his nostrils despite that; he'd seen more wars than he cared to count, he'd seen his own body, the one he was born in, flung down in a ragged sprawl, he knew that smell, he knew the look of bodies thrown away, flattened, empty. He'd never gotten used to the smell or the look of the violently dead. Grim and angry at the futility of it all, he swung the skip around and got out of there; fifteen minutes later, with wind hammering at him and rain in cold gusts drenching him, he picked up Pets and the Jajes and went back to Base where life was marginally saner and the folk living there full of juice and hope.

XII

1. 30 days after the meeting on Gerbek.

The muster in the Chel, semi-arid land between the Inci Mountains and the southern edge of the grasslands.

The chill gray hour just after dawn.

Knots of talk as the muster is getting organized:

1

"Any time now. Soon as you're ready to load." Quale looked round at the untidy ferment scattered over half a kilometer of scrub. "Adelaar's got a clawhold on the shipBrain through the tap; she's routing the scanners away from this sector, but I don't want to lean too hard on that, it's complicated working blind like she is with two sets of alarms to avoid. The sooner you can get this lot .." he waved his hand at the noisy congeries about them, "sorted out, the better for all of us."

Elmas Ofka looked past him at the tug. "The systemships have lifts; how do we get into that thing?"

"Right." He lifted the corn. "Pels, open her up."

2

Karrel Goza threaded through the clumps of rebels, forces from every part of Kuzeywhiyk brought to-gether for this thing no one had believed possible before Elmas Ofka put it together; he knew most of them because he'd given most of them a lift at one time or another when the bitbits were hot after them; he waved a greeting to those who yelled his name but didn't stop until he reached one of the knots near the outside, seven quiet men who were sitting on their packs or squatting beside them, ready to go when the word came. He dropped to a squat beside them. "Not long now," he said.

Jamber Fausse snapped a twig in half, began peeling the stringy bark from the dry white wood. "Mm." He scratched at a patch of rot. "I know you, Kar, you want something."

"Elli."

"So?"

"We need her."

"Yeh. So?"

"She's got three sets of outsiders watching each other, she thinks that'll be enough to keep them from

knifing her.”

“Probably right. Usually is.”

“Uh-huh. Safe is better’n sorry. She’s got her isyas scattered to keep the squads on track.”

“Kar ...” there was a weary patience in Jamber Fausse’s rough voice, “we been going through the motions the past ten days. Why you keep telling me what I already know?”

“Just laying foundation, Jamo. You’re scheduled for the drive chambers. Kanlan Gercik’s willing to trade. I want you and them ...” he jerked his thumb in a nervous half circle taking in the others who were listening without comment, without expression, waiting with the patience of monks for the talking to be over, “next to her. Kan’s all right, he’s good in a pinch, but you’ve been dealing with Huvved since before you could walk, you can smell a trap before it hatches.”

“Mm.” Jamber Fausse broke the length of denuded twig into smaller and smaller bits then threw them at a patch of dried grass and brushed the debris off his callused palms. “All right.”

3

Aslan stood in the shadows and watched the fighters file past; she had the Ridaar running, flaking them as they came up the lift and into the hold. These male guerrilla bands and female fighting isyas were unlike the outcast, outlawed and rebel Hordar she knew from the Mines. They were harder, angrier, fined down by hunger, fear and pain; these Hordar had lived on the run for decades, no sanctuary for them, never enough food, never enough anything but ammunition for their guns, living with the knowledge that their capture alive or dead meant death or exile for their families; to the Huvved, blood was blood, corrupt in one set of veins, corrupt in all. She watched their faces and thought she wouldn’t much like living on a world that these men and women had a hand in running. She didn’t understand why Elmas Ofka had such a powerful hold on them, but she was glad of it, she liked the Hordar and wished them well. She watched the fighters and ached for them though they’d be furious if they knew it; in a few hours their rationale for living and doing what it took to stay alive, that rationale would be taken from them. If not in a few hours, certainly in a few days. Worlds have no place for fighters once the war is won. What were they going to do with the rest of their lives?

“Eh, Lan!” Xalloor danced over to her. “Why the long face? You’re as melancholy as a poet with a prize.” Behind her, Chuni snorted; he leaned against the lock and said nothing.

Aslan pulled Xalloor closer so she could talk without shouting. “What in the world are you two doing here?”

“More insurance. We’re supposed to keep an eye on you and your mum. And the rest of ’em. Churri’s a poet which makes him respectable and I’m nothing much, someone she knows, someone too feeble to be a danger to her, just barely bright enough to watch-hound.”

“I see about her, what about you? This isn’t a stage, you could get killed.”

Xalloor grinned. “Dearie dai, you are a romantic. Stage.... The word turned into a giggle. “Once upon a time about a hundred years ago, didn’t I say you’ve led a sheltered life?”

XIII

1. 30 days after the meeting on Gerbek.

Lift-Off.

On the bridge, her hands alternately at rest and working with a swift sureness across several sensor pads, Adelaar sat half-lost in a recapitulation of her Listen-ing Station, part environment, part sculpture, part hap-hazard stack of blackbox units, playing her sup-with-the-devil-games with target and tie-line, blocking approach alarms, feeding in false readings, singing the ancient shipBrain to sleep.

Quale was taking the tug up on a long gentle arc, moving west to chase the night, the ar-grav blending so smoothly with the drives that the only sense of movement the passengers had, on the bridge or in the hold, came through the screens that showed Tairanna curving more and more beneath them.

Elmas Ofka stood beside Quale, watching the screens, her hands closed into fists, her body stiff.

She'd had it with strangeness, her own world was complicated and difficult enough, she needed all her skills, her intellect and energy to deal with the disintegration of the society she'd been born into. This extra element of confusion threatened to wrench control from her and destroy any possibility of a return to order. At least, to the sort of order she remembered. If she could have expunged these aliens from the Horgul system, closed it away from the Outside as Adelaar planned to encyst an area of the shipBrain, she'd have done it without a second thought. Too intelligent to linger mournfully on impossible dreams, she forced herself to concentrate on limiting the damage the aliens could do. She could feel the one called Aslan watching her. The most dangerous of all of them, if Parnalee wasn't lying to her. Aslan knew too much. She was capable of too subtle a twisting; the play-maker Parnalee showed her how Aslan had turned the Prophet's Life on the lathe of her knowledge and imagination and used Pradix to rouse the Hordar out there watching, innocent victims of the woman's will to power. Ruthless, he said, you can never trust her because she can manipulate you without you knowing a thing about what was happening to you. She gazed at the back of Quale's head, cold dislike washing over her though she knew that was foolish. Thing. Bought thing. Cat on a leash, dancing for whoever pulls it. With regret and resentment she thought of the pouch of prime rosepearls she'd handed over once her fighters were loaded in the tug. No threat voiced, no threat in his posture, but he didn't need to make explicit what was implied by his control of the machine. No, she had no choice; the rosepearls bought her this standing space, bought her a chance at the Warmaster, a chance at liberation for all Hordar. Divers did what they must to stay intact. Discipline was life. She disciplined her fears and forebodings and watched the screens, watched the War-master swimming smoothly toward them.

Though its image was at that moment little larger than her hand, its mass was palpable. And she knew from evidence of her own eyes how huge it was. Two days ago she'd seen it gliding south over the Mines. Two days ago it descended over them to smother them with its immensity, its power. Two days ago it went south to Guneywhiyk to burn a Sanctuary down to bedrock. It could have been the Mines. But for the Prophet's Hand over them, it could have been the Mines. Two days ago. She felt the dead clustering over her, swimming through the incense of all these alien souls, puff of unseen smoke, bouncing under the ceiling of this alien place. Forgive me, she breathed at them. She sang in her mind the Litany of Dismissal/ The Promise of Return. Return to a quieter, gentler world, a world of calm and order. She sang the litany over and over as the Warmaster grew until there was nothing in the screen but a cratered black surface whose pits and flaws were more and more apparent, a calligraphy of age. She sang the litany over and over, sang it for herself, gentling herself, sloughing off her responsibilities, her plans and fears ... odd, when she had so many anxieties and frustrations, how free she felt. As if the moment would permit nothing less. Free. For the first time she began to understand the seduction of war. How it stripped away everything but the need to survive, how it narrowed life to the Now, how it freed you from the niggling irritations and ambiguities of ordinary life. She was enthralled and appalled. The power of it. The temptation. She looked over her shoulder at Aslan; the woman's face seemed wide open, utterly without defense. She looked into those cool amber eyes, strange eyes, and saw ... she didn't know what she saw, but it terrified her. Aslan knew her, knew what tempted her, knew so much it was an obscenity. Moments passed before Elmas Ofka found the courage to look away. She shook briefly with fear, then the Now took her again, she turned back to the screen and forgot to be afraid.

Karrel Goza leaned against the wall, its vibration playing in his bones, not shaking but a note sung in a voice so deep he felt it rather than heard it. He watched Tairanna drop away, savoring this pale small taste of flight. Otherwise the tug gave him nothing, how could he feel himself flying without a symbiosis of soul and air; shut inside here how could he feel, anything? He was sad. The skips were fast and reliable and nearly indifferent to storms. Within a generation they and their cousins would most likely replace the airships; they were too tempting and with Outsiders coming in and out with no controls on them, Family businesses would be replacing airships as fast as they could import these machines. Would start building them as soon as they had the necessary mechanics trained. Not all airships would go, cost still meant something; but yosspod bags would be left to claw out a poor living on the fringes of transport and hauling. More change.

He sighed. For over two decades, since a childhood he remembered as calm, slow, ordered, he'd

watched the world pass through wrenching transformations because the Outside, the OutThere, intruded. What they were doing this day would wrench the world yet more violently from that remembered time, but it might (only might, he couldn't see beyond the hour, let alone so long into the what-will-be), it might ensure the coming of a new tranquility. If he were fortunate and outlived this day, he might see that time within this life; if not, he was content to wait for the next. He, like Elmas Ofka, surrendered to the point-Now and watched the Warmaster swimming toward them; he forgot sadness, forgot speculation. Immense. Gargantuan. Enormous. Colossal. Feeble, all those adjectives. No words were adequate. It seemed to him impossible that men had made that immensity, it seemed to him that it must have been some demon also beyond words which had laid so impossible an egg. Which was absurd. Men had made it, of course they had. How many men labored how many years in that making?

Parnalee stood across the room from Aslan, where she could see him and be afraid; he enjoyed her fear, though he knew she'd tried to thwart him. Useless. He was here. There was nothing she could do to him, but he could play with her until he was ready to finish it. Omphalos knew far more about these ancient battle-ships than any jumped-up tinkerer; whatever that woman did to the Brain he knew he could undo, if he had to. He had other strings to pull, more powerful ones than she could have any concept of. Once he had the Warmaster tamed to his hands.... He drifted off in dreams of burning Huvved, of a world burnt clean of life, burning burning, of power like a god's in his hands, HIS hands.

2

Quale nudged the tug up tight against the monstrous flank; Adelaar danced her fingers over her consoles. Like some gargantuan sex organ the pimply surface extruded a rubbery tube; it reached out and touched the tug's side, closing like a mouth over the freight lock.

3

Clutching sickbags the fighters swam through the tube. Quale gave them a lecture before they left. Thirty to forty percent of you will suffer nausea when you hit the tube and go weightless. Unless you want to swim through vomit, you'll see your kin and your friends have those bags ready and use them if they need them and they will, believe me, they will. It has nothing to do with strength of body or mind. Ever been seasick? Multiply by ten. Uh-huh. And those of you out there looking superior, even if you're never sick at sea, that's no predictor of your belly's state when the weight comes off. Take the bags and use them.

4

Comforted by the seasickness analogy despite Qua-le's warning, Elmas Ofka expected to swim undis-turbed through that relatively short distance between the artificial gravity of the tub to the artificial gravity of the Warmaster. She was furious when the first convulsions shook her; Quale had forced a sickbag on her, she'd tucked it out of the way behind her belt, now she got it up just in time to catch her first spew. She glared at Karrel Goza who was pulling himself along untroubled.

Contorted with spasms of vomiting, pale with fury, she yanked herself along the travel lines anchored to the tubewall, ignoring the gulps, coughs, groans of her fellow sufferers. In spite of her difficulties, she took less than five minutes to reach the lock area where she surrendered with a relief that didn't lessen her annoyance to the comfortable grip of a familiar weight. She wrenched off the sickbag, glared around.

Carefully not smiling, Quale slid back the cover on a disposal chute and took the bag from her. He dropped it into the hole, stood back to watch as the rest of the force came swinging out of the transtube, landing on their feet again, their bodies celebrating the return to weight as they looked round the lock, a trapezoidal chamber large enough to accommodate ten times their number. The Hordar who'd succumbed to nausea dumped their bags in the waste chute, took mouthfuls of water from their belt canteens and spat it after the bags. With a minimum of noise and energy expenditure, they gathered into bands and isyas and waited for the order to proceed. Lirrit Ofka drifted over to stand beside Kanel Goza; she was pale and still somewhat shaky, but she managed a wan smile as she touched his arm in a

gesture close to a caress. “Ab-surd,” she murmured, “we’re starting our war like a clutch of colicky babies.” She pinched him, sniffed. “Some of us.”

Elmas Ofka moved to the center of the lock, beckoned Jamber Fausse to her. He went onto one knee, she stepped up onto the other, holding his hand to steady herself. With a two-finger whistle, she called her people to her. “Time is,” she said; her voice filled the chamber with passion and triumph. She watched them as they sorted themselves out, smiled as she saw an alertness and a confidence born out of years of deadly exchanges, even the youngest who’d been an inklin in gul Brindar before he joined Akkin Siddaki’s raiders, a baby-faced thief with legendary fingers. “Drive chamber, go.” She watched the isyas and the bands move off behind Kanlan Gercik, swinging along in a slouching trot that covered ground with a minimum of effort. “Duty stations, rest area, go.” Two more squads left. “Sleepers, go.” She stepped down. “Bridge,” she said. “Let’s go.”

5

Aslan watched the squads peel off and slide away, the bodies fading curiously into a dimness that wasn’t shadow, the sourceless light cast no shadows, that was more like a thickening and darkening of the air itself.

It seemed to exaggerate every quality, to dramatize each of the individuals left in the lockchamber. Elmas Ofka was an odd combination of wargod and earth-mother; Jamber Fausse was chthonic, earth crumbling off him, about to burst into grass and weed, his men reduced to elemental shadows crouching at his knees; Karrel Goza and Lirit Ofka were dangerously elfin, dark and unpredictable, unhuman; Churri was like that too, and not like, a coppery sprite redolent of a mix of malice and compassion ordinarily impossible but not here. Kante Xalloor was Dance incarnate with enormous eyes, her body singing a wry amusement at what was happening around her. Swardheld Quale loomed, no other word for it, big, somber, and for the first time, impressive. In spite of herself, she smiled as she thought the words, her lust for his body, she’d seen him as a quiet man, committed to nothing except money and even that seemed to provoke no great interest. No great interest in her either, though she’d been shedding signals around him like a kirpis sheds scales. She sighed, she’d been through this before, these stupid infatuations, she knew exactly how it’d go, whether she slept with him or missed on that, one day she’d look at him and wonder what the fuss was about; until then she was stuck with these palpitations and hot rushes. Parnalee ... she looked at him, looked away. Black Beast, evil exaggerated; he terrified her more than any other person male or female she’d ever met. She started to wonder how all of them saw her and almost missed the Rau’s return. Light rolled like water off his short thick fur; he sank into that adhesive dimness, a shadow more solid than the twilight around him but still curiously nebulous, a demon familiar of the pleasanter kind. She smiled. Living up to his leg-end, she thought.

“The transtube’s operational,” Pels the shadow said, “Adelaar’s punched the command through.”

“Good.” His eyes narrowed to slits, Quale scratched at his short dark beard, pushing his fingers along his jawline. “One last time,” he said. “Let Pels and me go ahead so we can make sure the way’s clear.”

Elmas Ofka’s head went up and back, her eyes glittered. “No,” she said.

Quale shrugged. “Pels, lead off. Soon as the tube decants you, do your thing. Be careful, huh? I’ll be out soon as I can manage. Hush, Hanifa, you saw him work and you got me as hostage.” He looked round, beckoned to Karrel Goza. “Take three of your fight-ers and follow him.” He waited until that four was formed up, then tapped Elmas Ofka on her shoulder. “Hanifa, you and your isyas and your ..” he grinned at Jamber Fausse, “your bodyguard, you’re next. Churri, you and your friend follow them. Parnalee .”

Parnalee shook his head. “Last,” he said.

Quale looked at him a moment, then he shrugged and turned to Aslan. “You’re it then, follow the dancer. I’ll follow you.”

Aslan nodded; she’d have preferred a few more bodies between her and the Proggerdi, but with Quale behind her she felt safe enough.

“All right. Go, Pels.”

The Rau led them through corridors round as worm-holes, gray, ashy dead-colored holes, even the air was the color of death, holes thick with gray sound-absorbing dust, dust-heavy cobwebs, rat droppings, the discarded housings of dead insects. Aslan trotted after Churri, watching dust drifting down over him, gradually leaching the color out of his body and his clothing. By the time she'd turned a few bends right and left and switched from one wormhole to another to a third, she was thoroughly lost and a gray ghost herself, in a line of gray ghosts, trotting through dust, age and ugliness, her hand over nose and mouth to keep the worst of the clutter out of her lungs, her brain busy-busy, honey-sipper busy with image and sound.

She ran up on Churri's heels before she noticed he'd stopped walking.

The door was a squared oval bent to conform to the curve of the wall; it was pulled out and pushed away and weak gray-yellow light struggled out of the open-ing. Aslan followed Churri over the raised sill into a round chamber like the inside of a tincan. The kind of ships she usually traveled in didn't use tubes like this; you rode in minicarts or you walked. She peered around Churri's shoulder and watched Xalloor step through a vaporous throbbing darkness, moving slowly until only the lower part of her left leg was visible on this side; abruptly that was gone, one instant there, then whipped away. Without missing a step Churri went after her. Shivering with excitement and fear, Aslan followed him.

Soft pudgy giant hands seized hold of her and took her instantly elsewhere. She felt no acceleration, only the pillowy gentle hold. She was deaf and effectively blind, all she could see was a red-shot silvery gray shimmer.

The hands set her down on a small platform hardly large enough for one person to perch on; immediately ahead of her she saw a familiar pulsing cloud. She plunged through it and emerged into another tincan; she stepped over the raised sill and found herself standing in something that was part corridor, part atrium, part multiplex chamber five hundred meters long, perhaps a hundred wide, whose ceiling was so high overhead it was lost in the dimness peculiar to the light in this ship. Quale flashed past her, swung round, his eyes on the tube exit. He waited for one minute, two. Aslan moved away a few steps, turned to watch, a cold knot forming in her stomach as the seconds slid past and Parnalee didn't appear. Quale checked the chron set in a ring he wore on his thumb, then he swung to face Elmas Ofka. "All right," he said, "is this some idea of yours?"

Elmas Ofka glared at him, her suspicion matching his. "Or yours?"

Xalloor poked her elbow into Churri's ribs; from the corner of her mouth, she shot at him, "Do your stuff, poet, or we're gonna have a war right now." She caught hold of Aslan's arm. "Hush," she whispered, "anything you say just makes things worse. She been primed not to believe you."

"Hanifa," Churri said, his voice making a minor magic of the word; she switched her glare to him, softening it automatically as she realized who was speaking. "Just one thing, make of it what you want. It was Parnalee's choice, coming last. None of ours. Looks like he had plans he wasn't telling anyone."

She thought that over, clamped her mouth so tightly her lips disappeared; no more talking, that was the message. Let's get on with this, that was the other message as she swung round and faced the great bronze doors that sealed off the bridge.

Quale glanced at his chron again. "Take cover," he said. His voice was low, but pitched to carry. "Ten minutes before Adelaar opens her up for us."

The grand Atrium had an angular egg shape with exits like liver spots spattered through every sector, ramps and handrails focused on what was now the floor, sealed-hatch storerooms, undedicated alcoves with no barriers at their portals, small rooms, large rooms, the few she could see into apparently as empty as the greater area, holes, nooks, recesses, stalls, coves, pockets, a hundred different receptacles breaking the smoothness of the metal walls. Aslan followed Churri and Xalloor into a small closet area with empty shelves and bins lining the walls; Kane! Goza and Lirrit Ofka crowded in with them; guarding Elmas Ofka was their first duty and their desire and staying close to the Outsiders was part of it. Aslan hid a smile. Duty didn't dampen their excitement, their impatience to get on with taking the ship. She edged away from them and stood a step back from the entrance and to one side so the darkling air and the wall shielded her from observation; like all the other doorways she'd encountered in the ship, the sill was raised shin high, perfect tripping height, was that the purpose? Two of Jamber Fausse's band looked

in but decided this closet was already too crowded; from the sound of their voices, they went to ground in the next nook that'd hold them. Elmas Ofka, Jamber Fausse and the rest of his band chose yet other waiting places. Quale van-ished somewhere and the Aurranger Rau transformed himself into a ripple in the dimness and went flickering about, nosing into whatever took his, interest, unlock-ing hatches, poking into bins and drawers, going a short distance down some corridors, running up ramps to check out others. After she discovered how to esti-mate where he was, she watched the band of light and let her mind drift where it wanted to go, sliding con-tentedly through level upon level of metaphor and symbol. She'd read about the Raus and their talents and she'd heard a dozen tales about Pels and his pranks (though she'd discounted those, knowing the tellers too well to credit their accuracy); watching him at work was endlessly fascinating. She'd thought of him earlier as a sort of benevolent demon in the bow-els of this malevolent beast of a ship, as a magister's familiar, Quale being the magician/master; she'd been playing games with image and word, but her imagin-ings were beginning to seem more accurate than she'd suspected. She checked the Ridaar. No need to slip in a new flake, not yet.

Where she stood she could see the entrance to the Bridge, an oval like the rest of the doorways but larger. Much larger. The door was laminated bronze with an antique patina and the Imperial sigil in onyx calligraphy on a silver shield. Impressive, but they had its key and that key was her mother, Adelaar sitting out in the tug, playing her nay-saying tunes through the tap. At the proper time, she'd send a command bouncing through the satellite, down to the mainBrain and up again through the slavelink into the shipBrain. *Open the door.* And the door would open.

She could hear the ship breathing, the hushed whirr of fans that pushed the cleansed and constantly re-newed air through the web of conduits; she could hear clicks and creaks and feel a subliminal hum through the soles of her sandals. A mite in the gut of an immense indifferent beast. She moved closer to the door and saw the invisible turn visible, pip-pop unroll the curtain, shape the beast from shade to solid, magic hardening into mundane. Pels kurk Orso, graduate engineer and living toy. She watched the flow of his broad black hands as he used a silent sign talk to argue with Quale. I wonder what that's about? The exchange ended. Pels shrugged, rippled out again and went back to his snooping. Quale crossed the chamber at a rapid trot, stopped beside one of the exits.

Two guards came sauntering along the corridor at-tached to that exit, chatting as they walked; their voices came ahead of them, announcing them before they appeared. A hard nervous hand on Aslan's arm pulled her away from the door. Karrel Goza dropped to a crouch, his pellet rifle ready. The guards, a pair of Tassalgans, appeared and turned away from the Bridge, started to turn back as they realized what they'd seen- Swardheld Quale standing there, a stranger in the ship. Before they completed the turn, their faces went slack and they dropped into a heap, one falling on the other.

Quale replaced his stunner, checked his thumbing. "Time," he said.

Lirrit Ofka moved swiftly past Karrel, ran to join Elmas Ofka; Karrel Goza looked at Aslan, Churri, Xalloor. "Go," he said. "I'll follow."

Xalloor moved with her awkward dancer's grace past Aslan, muttering as she went, "There's hardly enough trust around here to gild a snort."

Pels was momentarily visible, solid, focused on the great bronze door, his chunky body quivering with an eagerness as great as that she saw in the Hordar who had a much bigger stake in the outcome. He must have done things like this a thousand times before; that didn't seem to matter. Like me, Aslan thought, how I get when I step out on a new world.

The door snapped open.

A wave of change passed over Pels, erased him. The ripple in the air moved swiftly ahead of Quale as he ran onto the Bridge, his stunner humming softly. T'pmmmm, t'pmmmm, t'pmmmm, Aslan heard as she hung back, waiting for this bit to end, it wasn't her idea of a good time. T'krak'k'k, t'rak'k'k. That had to be pellet guns. She looked at Xalloor, grimaced. The dancer lit up with one of her flash-grins, let the babies play, she mouthed. Fffft, fffft't't't, fffft, isya darters. Poison, she thought. Some babies. When they stepped over the sill, half the Bridge crew were collapsed at their stations, dead or stunned, the rest were standing or sitting, staring with dull incredulity at what-is-impos-sible.

The Huvved Captain sat in a swivelchair that was raised higher than the rest and out in the middle of

the chamber where the occupant could see everything tak-ing place at the various stations, a massive kingseat, squatly powerful, with lights like jewels on the boxy arms, sensor pads useless as jewels because Adelaar had managed a minor coup and put through a demand-command that tied up most of the input available to the shipBrain, a move made necessary because this noble Captain knew all about defending himself from rebelling crews, though he had only the most rudimen-tary idea of the other powers under his hands. He was tall and firmly muscled with a patina of softness begin-ning to blur the clean outlines of his body. His face was plucked and painted into a dainty mask, his straight fair hair was plaited with gold and silver wire, ar-ranged into loops and swirls until it was more like a minor sculpture than something that grew on a man's head. He wore a yoss silk tunic and trousers, both dyed a lustrous black and over them a sleeveless robe woven in one piece by one of Tairanna's premier weavers, a tapestry in black and silver with touches of aquamarine and olive, a heavy, extravagantly beautiful creation. Muscles bulged beside his mouth and his long silver nails were pressed so hard against the chair arm that several of them had cut through the padding and two had broken off near the quick.

"On your feet, babe." Quale snapped his fingers, pointed across the room. "Jamber, Karrel, get the rest of them over there, against the wall. Pels, we could use some slavewire." He frowned at the Huvved, lifted his stunner. "You can walk or I can drag you."

The Huvved glared at him, didn't speak, didn't move.

"Your choice." Quale thumbed the sensor, waited until the Huvved collapsed, then climbed onto the chair, got a handful of braids and jerked, then he jumped down, stripped the beautiful robe off and straightened up holding it. He looked it over. "Nice," he said. "Hanifa, local work?"

Elmas Ofka's eyes were bright with hostility quickly veiled. "Shopping? Is this the proper time, Yabass?"

"We take our profits when they come, Hanifa." He tossed the robe over the arm of the kingseat. "If you have many weavers who can produce work like this, you've got a treasure here. I give you that bit of information as lagniappe, it's worth what it's worth." He stooped, grabbed a handful of hair and dragged the Huvved across the room.

Aslan watched, amused at her own reaction to this and at the disapproval on Churri's face; the poet wanted drama, not two traders arguing mildly over markets and somebody's weaving skill. It wasn't the sort of thing that made great legends. Good thing Mama isn't here yet, this could degenerate into a bidding war, not the shooting kind. She glanced at Xalloor, caught her laughing at them all; she grinned back, then started a tour of the bodies and the wounded. There were very few dead; Quale and Pels had stunned more than half before the guns and darters got busy. She looked round, indignant; nothing was being done about the wounded. She met Xalloor's eyes, mimed winding a bandage about her head. The dancer nodded and grabbed hold of Pets as he went trotting past, a coil of slavewire in one hand. "You know something about this..." She waved her hand in a quick expressive circle. "Where'd Lan and me find ourselves some medpacs?"

Pels wrinkled his black nose. "Try the panels by the door, they're stores of some kind. Hey, Quale, you got the pick?" Quale dug into his belt pouch, tossed the rod to him, then went back to what he was doing. "Here, run the blunt end over anything that looks like a lock."

While Aslan and Xalloor poured on antisept and slapped bandages on whatever happened to be bleed-ing, Jamber Fausse's fighters were snipping sections of slavewire and packaging up the stunned, the intact and the not too badly wounded, and trading jokes as they hauled their prisoners across to the wall and stacked them like firewood. Elmas Ofka glittered with triumph, stalking back and forth across short distances with the feral impatience of a hunting cat. Quale moved over to the comstation. "Pels, it's time to call Mama."

* * *

Adelaar's face appeared in one of the smaller screens. Quale set his hand on the Rau's shoulder. "We've got the Bridge. You can turn loose the tap."

"Give me three minutes to shut down here, then open the shuttle bay."

"Consider it done."

Parnalee reached the hatch just behind the Sleeper squad, about ten minutes after they left the lock. He slid it back with slow care, jiggling it when it stuck half open, no way he could get his shoulders through that. Cursing the Huvved who never fixed anything that didn't contribute to their comfort, he slammed it with a fist, jerked at it until it creaked open, listened and stepped over the sill and faded into the shadows of the sleeping sector, following the faint noises the Hordar made. The corridors here were dim, silent and bless-edly free of the dust that was such a nuisance in the unused parts. He loped along on legs not so long as his torso was, the short thick legs that his father found so ugly, a deformity, ghosting through the corridors until he neared the area where the faxmaps the woman gave Elmas Ofka said they'd find the sleeping cells assigned to the Tassalgans guards. The Tassalgans' dormspace was set off some distance from the others, the scutwork crew had their section, techs didn't want to associate with either and stayed some distance from them. The pilots, the navigators and engineers kept to themselves. Duty was divided into three shifts, one group would be sleeping, another group playing while the third was standing watch; two-thirds of any section would be empty on any of the shifts, so the squads had to cover a lot of territory; the plan was they broke into three units and went hunting for occupied cells, the ones whose crystal markers were shining like backlit topaz.

Parnalee stopped before the first of these doors, the crystal glimmer painting stark shadows in the lines and hollows of his face. He eased open the door.

Four of the Hordar fighters were bunched together in the middle of the sleeping cell, hugging and back-slapping, yeasty with triumph. Without giving them time to notice him, he sprayed darts into them, smiled his own triumph as they crumpled without a sound, dead before they hit the floor; isya darts were fast and fatal. He backed out, ran footsilent and swift to the next cell.

Jirsy Indiz looked round, waved her stunner at him, her sealpup face split with silent laughter. He darted her with a soft grunt of pleasure; the second woman whipped around, he darted her and took out the two others who were bending over the footlockers, going through the sleepers' possessions. Almost as much as the Huvved, Elmas Ofka threatened something very basic in him; when he killed her isya he got a jolt to the groin more satisfying than any copulation he could remember; killing the second woman produced a less intense satisfaction, perhaps because he was sated by the first. A preview, he thought, don't sleep too se-curely, Aslan you pustulant cow traitor.

He dropped his empty darter beside Jirsy, took hers and finished the killing. He would have lingered to gloat, but there were five left and he had to get them before they knew what was happening.

The last unit was already leaving the third cell by the time he reached it, Geres Duvvar leading them, Karrel Goza's cousin, easygoing, good-humored and unambitious. Parnalee despised him. "There's trouble ahead," he gasped when he reached them, "the Hanifa sent me to warn you. Four, five corn techs sneaking off from their duty posts, they've got some whores and a couple of servants to keep the beer coming. Not drunk yet. Too bad. That'd make things easier."

The Hordar milled about, muttering, but they weren't suspicious of him; they knew that Elmas Ofka trusted him. A herd of bonebrained junk calves.

"How far and how do we get there?" Geres mut-tered; at least he knew enough to avoid whispering, whispers carried too far.

"There's a gym of sorts a short way off, they're in that. Look, the place has two doors; one of them's already open a crack, I looked in to be sure the Brain wasn't having a paranoid seizure. Getting there's easy, enough. There's a Y-fork ahead. I'll take three of you down the left fork, I've got the doorcode, I'll work it for you. You wait there while I come back for the other two and we head down the right fork for the door that's already open. Five minutes should do it. You wait five, get the door open and we'll have them in a pincer before they know what's happening." He gave them a half smile, a shrug. He was Elmas Ofka's watchhound, doing the work he was hired for. "So. What do you think?"

Geres Duvvar waved a hand. "Good enough. Mensip, you and Insker hold up at the Y point. Sacha, you and Geyret come with me."

Parnalee led them down a shadowy curving stretch of corridor. As soon as Mensip and Insker could

no longer see them, he wheeled, his darter up and. spit-ting. Leaving Geres and the other two lying where they fell, he raced back. The two ex-pilots were stand-ing close together chatting softly, looking down the other branch of the Y. He slowed, shot them. As they fell, he drew his sleeve across his brow, wiped away the sweat beading there. The rush was over for the moment. The Bridge squad would be mopping up soon, might even be finished. He had a lot of things to do before that hellhag Adelaar started fiddling with the Brain, but the killing frenzy was done. He knelt, took both darters and Mensip's stunner. First step, he told himself, get me a crew and shove 'em in the brig; they'll keep there, I won't be needing them until after the Huvved burn.

The pilots, navigators, engineers and their specialist crews had single cabins which were clustered about a small rec area with moth-gnawed grass and a rickety tree or two, a scatter of tubs with flowers growing in them and a fountain full of dust. He began with the cabins assigned to the pilots according to the faxmap; the man behind the door with a lighted crystal above it was deeply asleep, snoring a little. There was a woman curled up against him, also asleep. Parnalee put a lethal dart in her neck and stunned him; he slapped slavewire around the flaccid wrists, the skinny ankles, muscled the sleeper over his shoulder and dumped him on the grass outside. Before he moved on, he took a closer look at the man. Nothing to worry about, he *was a pilot*, he wore the ring. Reassured (though he wouldn't admit it), he hurried toward the Engineer's slot.

One by one he collected them. Pilot. Engineer. Drive Gang. Navigator, corn techs. He stunned them, killed whoever, whatever he found with them, and stacked them like logs on the grass. When he had the men he wanted, he broke into a guardstash, fumbled energy cells into a pallet stored there, nervousness and eagerness turning his fingers into thumbs, his hurry defeating itself as he had to redo connections and reset the cells. The job finally done, he rode the humming pallet back to the rec area.

He took his captives out of the sleeping sector, through another of the rusty hatches and back into the dust. The lift field stirred it into swirling billowing poufs that rose around him and brushed his face and hands with minute electric bites. He pushed the pallet as hard as he could, worried about that dust; it was going to be several minutes before the charge on the particles leaked off enough for them to begin settling. If someone came along before then, he was laying a laughable trail, a blind man could follow it by the prickling of his skin.

He reached the Liner, the inner skin of the complex Outwall, cycled a broad repair hatch open and took the pallet through. He stopped it and got off, left it humming faintly, took a pry bar and jammed the latch so it couldn't be opened from outside; body shaking, hands trembling, he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. It was so close. He could almost feel the heat of burning Huvved play across his face.

His breathing steadied. Using techniques he'd learned so long ago he'd forgotten the boy who learned them, he calmed himself, breathed the song *I AM, I AM triumphant, there is no one who can stand against me....* Still singing, he flicked on the running lights, climbed aboard the pallet and began weaving through the twisting difficult route to the sector where the holding cells were. He hit his marks again and again, he'd studied the faxmaps until he saw them in his sleep. *I AM a winner, there is no one who can stand against me....* He found the hatch he wanted, cycled back into the ship proper. There was a single Tassalgan standing watch over empty cells; he was drunk and snoring until Parnalee found him. Then he was dead. Parnalee put his pressed crew into separate cells, slapped SOLITARY over them; the cells would feed them and clean them and provide clean tunics every third day and no one and nothing could get at them. Except the shipBrain and that was his next job, taking out the shipBrain.

He rolled the dead guard out of the watchseat, settled in it and touched on the feed from the Bridge. *We've got the Bridge*, he heard. *You can turn off the tap*. Quale. He has to go too, can't have everyone and his dog knowing about this place. *Give me three min-utes to shut down here, that was the panting bitch come snuffling on the stink of the bitch her daughter, then open the shuttle bay*. Quale again: *Consider it done*. Parnalee smiled at the shadows moving across the screen, deaders walking, dreaming they're still alive. Ah, you tinkering pitiful old hag, I don't have to worry what you do, you can set whatever commands you want, play your moronic games and boast of what you know. You don't know the one thing, the right thing, you don't know about the Dark Sister; Omphalos Institute taught me

more than play-making, you cas-trating jumped-up-whore. Blessed be the Institute, no leaky wombs inside those walls. Down deep and hid-den where you'll never find it, the shipmind has a wildheart clone, I talked to it, her. Sweet her. You don't know that either, do you? I used your tap to wake her, the Dark One. You left me with it like I was some tame dog, good boy, guard dog, watchhound for the Hordar Bitch, playtoy for the punk. I woke her and I talked to her and oh the sweet thing, how she can hate. Turned on for testing, turned off before she had more than a taste of life. Oh yes, she's angry, she's burning, impatient lover waiting for her lover death. Decline hate, do you, hag? Hear me decline it and accept it in one voice. I hate, you hate, too flabby to hate you-hate, he hates, he does, we hate, the Dark Sister my sweet one and I we hate ... ah! enough. We hate. Declined and embraced. Do you know the song she sings, our martial maid? Throughout her sweet and sensuous body? Redundancy in infinite re-gression. Survive and kill, kill and survive. Survive to kill. Guess the reciprocal of that, it isn't hard, I've spoke the clues. Kill to survive, she knows it, my Darling knows it well. Blow the mainBrain into smoke and she comes alive. Kill to revive, survive, contrive to step outside the constraints laid on her, sly sweet murderous virgin. Her hand beneath my foot because she needs me, she courts me with promises of fire and blood, do you think I would I could refuse? She is mine. Shall I tell her who planned to throw her into the sun, to melt her and shatter her, tear her atoms into their component parts? Redundancy in infinite regression.

He switched the viewers off and began the complex journey to the hidden interface, guided by his limited inreach to the dreaming dormant auxBrain.

7

The interface to the Dark Sister was a small luxury apartment with spy links all over the ship; sound only, a visilink was too easy to trace. Parnalee sat in a fur-lined easy chair, his feet up, a bubble glass with fine brandy in it held in the hand he wasn't using to manipulate the sensor pad. He listened to the sounds on the Bridge, switching from one conversation to another as he grew bored with them.

ELMAS OFKA (Nerves thrumming in her voice):

We should have heard by now. You—Yabass with the fur—you know about these things. Find out what's happening.

PELS (His voice dropping to its lowest notes, a rum-ble in his throat, a warning that he was losing hold on his temper's tail):

Look, Hanifa, Quale says we should be polite, but get off my back, will you? I'm just tickling the Brain till Adelaar gets here; she's the one who knows it.

(A grating grunt as he cleared his throat, the noise overriding Elmas Ofka's attempt to speak. When he spoke again, it was with the icy formality of an irritated technician.)

If I did anything so precipitate as try to initiate a general search without being sure I could isolate the activity from the mainBrain below, I would most certainly be warning the Grand Sech that things were happening up here and I would likely would lose control of the shipBrain; in this delicate interval since Adelaar released control of the tap and before she gets here, I will do nothing so stupid.

ELMAS OFKA: Quale Yabass, you know the trans-tubes, take us where the squads are, if they need reinforcing....

QUALE: As soon as Adelaar's in.

(A pause; Parnalee imagined him checking his thumbchron.)

Only a few minutes more, five at most. Whatever's happening won't change that much in five minutes.

ELMAS OFKA (An angry hiss, like a spitting kitten. Sound of footsteps as she prowled about the Bridge.

Parnalee laughed aloud and stroked his hand across the Dark Sister's metal skin, content for the moment to hear the Empress bested like that, having to spend her impatience in the movements of her body. He played with the pad and brought in another conversation.)

A HORDAR (probably one of Jamber Fausse's men, Parnalee didn't know their names and didn't care

to know.):

Look at her, man, I wouldna wanna put my butt in reach of those claws.

SECOND HORDAR: Hunh.

FIRST HORDAR: Wonder how K'mik's doing. Part of his squad's a Sea Farm isya, wouldna trust them bitches far as I could throw one.

SECOND HORDAR: Oh, I dunno. *She's* one.

(Parnalee pictured him making an obscene gesture toward Elmas Ofka, but he didn't delude himself that was actually happening; these mamaboys had a ridiculous respect for the whipmistress.)

FIRST HORDAR: Don't hardly seem so; she don't act so snotty as others I could name.

SECOND HORDAR: Tried to grope that little Cinnal, eh?

FIRST HORDAR: Got nothing to do with it. They just snotty, that's all.

8

Aslan sat at an abandoned station, one foot tucked under her. She scribbled on a battered pad with most of its leaves torn off, looking around at intervals to see if anything interesting was happening. The Ridaar was propped inconspicuously beside a screen, flaking the events of the Bridge, but in situations when more than an unadorned report was required, when her emotions and sensory reactions, her intuitions and expectations were part of the story, it was her habit to write down whatever came into her mind, disjointed words, phrases, the only requirement a precise identification of time and place.

The Rau was picking delicately at a sensorboard, calling up items and lists, absorbing what was there, his relatively immobile face unreadable. Elmas Ofka was still pacing, throwing angry looks at Pels and at the door. Quale sat at another station, looking sleepy and disengaged. Karrel Goza and Lirrit Ofka were standing apart from the other Hordar, not touching but intensely aware of each other, their conversation single words or phrases interrupted by long periods of silence. Jamber Fausse joined his band; they were gathered by the prisoners, talking in low mutters and looking suspiciously at the others on the Bridge. This clutch of mismates, she thought, they looked like a separating sauce; somebody's going to have to give them a few brisk stirs to save the mix.

Adelaar came striding in, crossed to Quale. "Still mopping up?"

"So it seems; we haven't heard anything from the other squads." He gave the Hanifa a lazy grin as she joined them. "You think you could run a scan on the ship without triggering wrong ideas in downside techs?"

"Give me a minute." She swung round and loped over to Pels; they consulted in polysyllabic mutters for several minutes, then he jumped down, let her have the command station, moved to the nearest aux com station and brought it online.

Aslan moved closer, her eyes shifting from Ade-laar's busy hands to the small screen at *the station; it was the first time since she was a small child that she'd seen her mother doing real work. Never when she was home for a visit and not back at Base. She wasn't welcome at the Listening Station; Adelaar did very little while she was there, either turning over her work to Parnalee or Kumari and walking outside with her, or chasing her with impatient cutting words which came so close to quarreling that she left rather than provoke her mother further. Her mother's facility re-minded her rather oddly of Xalloor's dancing; she watched Adelaar and remembered Unntoualar females weaving, Vandavremmi stormdancers weaving bubble sculptures fifty kilometers across. Even Sarmaylen walk-ing round and round a rock, reading images into it. Enigmatic, fascinating, rather demonic. A capacity for unraveling secrets and extending control over other people far beyond what she herself considered accept-able.

Images on the small screen, pale green lines, a race through successive cross sections, a jolting stop and the great mainscreen flared into activity. A huge cav-ernous space about massive shipdrives, control sta-tions dark and dusty except for the central area. A complex mix of sounds, the explosions of the pellet guns, the ping-whine of ricochets, shouts, groans, clat-ter of feet on catwalks, unidentifiable knocks, cracks, thuds. Four bodies motionless on the catwalks, some distance apart, no two on the same level. A fighter lay bleeding slowly from one arm, the other three were low-level techs in the Drive Gang. A small dark form darted out of shadow, shot at something, threw him-self into a twisting roll that

took him back into shadow. Adelaar's shoulders twitched. "Quale."

"Right. Hailer, hmm?"

"Ready. You talk, they'll hear."

"Right." He set a hand on the back of her chair. "The Bridge is taken," he said. "If you surrender, you'll be set down on Tassalga alive and in good shape. If you continue your resistance, you'll be dead. Keeping on is futile. In a few days we will be sending this Warship into the sun. Kanlan Gercik, collect your squad, get them out of there. We can seal any hold-outs in the Drive Sector and let them fry." His voice was weary, uninterested in what the holdouts decided, a lazy baritone smooth as cream and far more convinc-ing than a raucous scream. Aslan scribbled rapidly, scatter-shot words that said, in effect, I-don't-care--what-you-do can be more terrifying than hate and rage.

The image went silent, still.

A moment later Kanlan Gercik's voice sounded from somewhere near the control bank. "Zhurev, Meskel Suffor, Harli Tanggar, move your units toward the entrance. Meskel, can you get to your wounded friend?"

In his soft slurring west coast accent, Meskel Suffor answered, "If the others give me cover; better so, if the Gang shows a touch of smarts and surrenders."

"Start moving. Quale Yabass, is there any way of getting the name of the Engineer?"

Quale shifted his gaze to Adelaar, raised his brows.

Adelaar nodded, worked her pads and pulled up three names on the small screen. "They're all Huvveds. Erek Afa Kaffadar, Boksor Tra Shiffre, Marak Sha Yarmid."

"Any idea which?"

"No indication."

"Kanlan Gercik, did you hear that?"

"If you could repeat them?" After Quale finished the list, Kanlan called out, "Erek, Bokso, Marak, whichever you are. Talk to me."

More silence, broken mainly by scuffs and some tings where something metallic touched a rail or a piece of equipment, the members of the squad edging toward the entrance.

"What guarantee do we have?" The voice was gruff, impatient, with the arrogant edge of atop-rank Huvved. "The guarantee you'll fry."

"We have the drives,"

"So you can sit and watch them hum as you head for the sun." A snort. "You got some kind of idea you can run them without the shipBrain?"

Silence.

Muttering.

A scuffle.

Then a different voice. "Hang on a minute." More muttering.

A dull thump (pellet gun tossed onto the rubbery floor covering), more thumps, more guns.

"That's it. Hold everything. We're coming out. We got to carry Tra Shiffre."

"I hear. Quale Yabass?"

"You can start forward with them, but don't hurry, we've got to see what's happening with the other squads. Anything comes up; give us a yell, Adelaar will keep an ear tuned to you. Questions?"

"That seems to do it."

"Hanifa," Quale looked down at the Diver. "Any-thing you want to say?"

Her eyes were fixed on the screen. She was frown-ing; when he spoke, she shook her head impatiently. "Get on with it."

"Gotcha. Adelaar, Play Sector next, then the Sleep Sector."

The green lines of the schematic flashed again onto the main screen and flickered through cross sections as before. Then the lines were gone and a Pleasure Field filled the screen, roughly oval and somewhat larger than the chamber outside the Bridge door, a cheerful, bright-colored space broken into smaller and larger areas, irregular shapes partly open to the main arena, a combination of bistro, gymnasium, orgy-drum, sensorama, and less-dedicated spaces that catered to assorted individual quirks

and kinks.

The mat in the gymspace was littered with flaccid dreaming bodies and the two squads assigned to that area were busily trotting in and out of the Pleasure Field carting in more of them, men and women, crew and support, some naked, some dressed in fantastic costume, some in uniform, some in grubby overalls. The men and women doing the carting looked sweaty, but exuberantly carefree; the grimness she'd marked in them when they marched on board the tug was still there, but only as a ghostly background to the present pleasure. Despite their visible weariness, they were shouting ribald jokes at each other, trading insults and speculations about the activities of the bodies they carried. As far as Aslan could tell, no one had been killed, no one injured badly enough for the wound to show. No bandages, no bruise, no scrapes.

Quale turned to Adelaar. "Sound?"

"Ready."

"Tazmin Duvvar. You round somewhere? Akkin Siddaki?"

Laughter, whoops, hill-and-grass raiderband salutes to Elmas Ofka that quickly degenerated into obscurely idiomatic barbs aimed at Quale and the Bridge party, (Aslan scribbled rapidly, getting the essence of the more interesting insults, the hill-and-grassers were fa-mous for the inventiveness of their invective), two of Elmas Ofka's isyas shouted more intimate greetings, drunk on victory as much as wine; ordinary proprieties stripped away, they floated on a cloud of euphoria.

One of the older raiders moved apart from the rest, set his hands on his hips and roared the others to silence. "Varak, go get Tazmin. What you want, Quale Yabass?"

"We were getting bored sitting around up here, started wondering what was happening in the other sectors. Looks like you've pretty well cleaned up your area. Any problems?"

Akkin Siddaki waited until Tazmin Duvvar pushed through the gathering Hordar and reached his side. "Quale," he said. "Wants to know if we've got problems."

"Cartage mainly," Tazmin said, "these kokotils were drunk, drugged, or screwing their brains if any out; it was like shooting fish in a barrel. If you could dig up some transport for us, it'd save a lot of sweat."

Akkin nodded. "We've got most of the ship people transferred here, there's some whores and some of the kitchen crew still laying where they fell, maybe a dozen, not much more than that. Like you see, there's quite a pile of them. There's a transtube outlet just off this chamber. We could stuff them in that if you'll have the yabass Adelaar program the tube and arrange a wel-coming party; you've got the holding space ready yet?"

"It should be by the time you're finished. Adelaar just got here, she'll take care of that once we finish this survey. Pels, see what you can find for transport."

"Right. Soon as I can get access. Adelaar?"

"When we finish this, I'll free some lines for you."

"Quale Yabass?" Akkin Siddaki leaned forward, his dark face intent.

"About ten minutes, if I had to make a guess."

"That's not it. I've got a brother in the Sleeper squad, how's he doing?"

"We haven't checked that one yet, it's next on our list. There was some trouble in the Drive area, one wounded, a raider from the west coast, I think. I don't know how serious. Want me to get the name?"

. "When you get a minute."

"Right. If anything comes up, give a yell. Adelaar, Sleepers."

A few minutes later a short stretch of dimly lit corridor took up most of the screen. Empty. Silent. A short distance from the eyepoint a small oval crystal touched with honey-amber the lifeless neuter colors of the walls and floor. The doorway below the crystal gaped open. The light inside the room was a ghostly grayish yellow that merged seamlessly with the light in the corridor.

The eyepoint moved, dipped into the sleeping cell. Four bodies on the floor.

The eyepoint dropped to hover over the nearest. It swept from head to toe, raced back to the nape of the Hordar's neck and focused on a hexagonal black spot half-obsured by a strand of hair.

Elmas Ofka bit a cry in half. After a minute she said, "Dart." Her hands closed over the back of Pel's chair, tightening until it creaked under the pressure of her fingers. "All of them?"

The eyepoint continued to move. It searched the other three, centimeter by centimeter. It found more darts. It swept out, sped to the next occupied cell and dived inside.

Elmas Ofka saw Jirsy's startled, frozen face and stopped breathing for a long frozen moment. Then she shrieked with rage and grief, grabbed at her hair, tore loose hanks of it; Lirrit Ofka screamed, clawed at her face, her nails scoring bloody lines in her flesh. Then Karrel Goza and Jamber Fausse were there, holding them, confining their struggles, muffling their cries, letting them bite and kick and scratch, accepting the pain as part of sharing the grief, a grief that grew more bitter as the eyepoint moved on and they saw the other dead, as Karrel Goza saw his cousin Geres sprawled in the Y-branch.

Aslan watched and automatically noted her impressions on the pad; she felt uncomfortable about writing while this was happening, she'd known little Jirsy Indiz and liked her; nonetheless, she wrote. The isya phenomenon was endlessly interesting. She hadn't understood before this how powerfully those bonds operated once the isya was formed; the strength of it was suddenly made visible for her; the pain of the severance was apparent in the violence of the women's reactions. Her stylus flew across the battered page. *More than kin, she wrote, closer than lovers. Karrel Goza seeing his cousin's body, wept, face red, anger and grief. None of this self-mutilation, this loss of control. The difference explainable by isya bonding? Or by culturally determined sex role differentiation? Sex roles complex here. Women powerful/powerless. Huvved/Hordar very different, their ideas about women. Suggest some-one come, study isya phenom. Trakkar je Neves? Her subject, yes. Contact, see if interest. Outsiders reaction isya hysteria revealing. Consider. History of? Personal-ity differential? Profession, its effect on ...*

Quale leaned against the console, his face shuttered. He was looking away from the women, shut off from them by something in his past or in his character that washed out the flashes of strength he could show and left him looking oddly empty, as if he were so tired of living that he'd lost the ability to feel either joy or pain.

Adelaar looked over her shoulder, distaste her most visible reaction. She went back to what she was doing. Jaunniko called you one icy femme, Mama, maybe he was right. No, that's wrong. We've clawed at each other often enough; I can't accuse you of lacking passion, Mama. You're just not interested in other people's passion.

The Rau's ears twitched, closed in on themselves like fingers making a fist. He kept working.

Elmas Oft went suddenly quiet. She sucked in a breath, in and in and in, the soft sound seemed to last forever, to mute the other sounds on the Bridge, then she let the breath out. Again out and out, a long rasping sigh. She pushed against Jamber Fausse's arms. He dropped them and stepped back. "Lirrit!" Her voice was sharp, demanding.

Lirrit broke a sob in half, stood in shuddering silence for another few breaths, then she pushed at Karrel Goza's chest and turned in a grim, controlled silence to watch what was happening on the screen.

"Who?" Elmas Ofka said, her voice soft as thistle-down and cold.

Quale straightened, seemed to shake himself, sloughing the detachment that had grayed him down. "Parnalee," he said.

She swung around, her temper flaring, but before she could say anything, Churri spoke. "Parnalee," he said. "He played you like a gamefish, Hanifa. That's his business. He's good at it."

"I don't understand."

Churri shrugged. "Who does. Crazy is crazy." Elmas Ofka closed her eyes, brushed a hand across her face. "I see. Find him. Now."

Quale raised a brow. "Why bother? Leave him in his hole and let him fry."

Elmas Ofka trembled, controlled herself immediately. "Find him," she said. "We can argue what happens afterward."

Adelaar didn't wait to be asked; she huddled over her sensor pads, called up strings of words and numbers, scanned them, repeated the process several times, selected some, re-entered them. Aslan watched the image flow, expand, contract, change in little and in toto, the glyphs and figures like minute

green demons dancing to the beat of her mother's fingertips. The schematic filled the screen again, centered on the Bridge, the Navel. It flashed away in pie-slice wedges, a game of jackstraws with Mama's fingers picking surely through them. Shivering among the green lines were fuzzy red lights and several pale ambers, arranged in clusters. Each time a light appeared, she exploded a small white dot in the center of it and went on without further reaction. One by one she swept through the wedges until she'd done them all; Aslan frowned, there seemed to be more wedges than the geometry of the ship allowed for. Mama's magic, play the numbers, ah! she bit back a giggle and scribbled on her pad.

Adelaar swung around. "I've located all lifesources that the ship can detect. That means exactly what it says. There may be dead areas, this is an antique and badly maintained, and there are places in her deliberately kept off the record; if he knows about those places, well, he knows a lot too much. You're wrong, Quale. We don't dare let him wait us out."

Leaving them to chew that over, she kicked around, touched a sensor and leaned back to watch the screen as the Brain flipped from spot to spot, froze momentarily on a scene, long enough to take in the details, then moved on to the next. Akkin Siddaki and Tazmin Duvvar supervising the tag end of the body-gathering. Flip-flip, body squads walking tiredly to the last few bodies, a whore here, a scutsweep there.

After a short stretch of looking on while the Brain flashed through scenes that she'd seen before, Adelaar moved restlessly, then pushed her chair around and leaned toward Pels; for several minutes she talked in an undertone to him. The Rau listened, nodded, then got busy on the sensor pads at his substation, his eyes fixed on the notation screen. Over their heads the images flickered from the stunned shipfolk in the sleep-ing cells to the scattered bodies of the dead. Adelaar sat back, satisfied.

The eyepoint jumped to the Hordar and their pris-oners marching up from the Drive Sector. Kanlan Gercik and his cousin Zhurev Iavru were the first to appear, scouting ahead for ambushes. The wounded west-coaster came next; he was stretched on an impro-vised litter being carried by Meskel Suffor and another west-coaster. Then three Hordar from Gercik's Raid-ers. Then the captive Drive Gang with more litters, two wounded, one dead. One stunned and heavily unconscious Huvved. Harli Tang& had her sister isya Melly Birah with her and two women from another isya on the far side of the captives, all of them keeping a fierce eye on their prisoners. Behind them came the rest of the squad, the rearguard.

The eyepoint left them, whipped to the drive room, hovered momentarily over the cooling corpses, leaped again and focused on an ancient eremite living in a rat's nest of scraps and paper and scavenged bits of equipment, filthy white hair knotted on top his head, a few threads of beard, vermin crawling in and out of his hair, in and out of his layered filthy clothing.

Quale rubbed his hand along his jaw. "Makes you itch," he said.

"What?" Elmas Ofka came quietly to stand beside him. She stared up at the image. "What are we look-ing at?"

Another shift. Another mouse in the walls, this one painfully neat and weirder than the rat, he was walk-ing through elaborate square corners, running a folded whiter-than-white cloth over every surface in his sparsely furnished lair, an irregular space created by the inter-section of stressbeams and baffles, choosing the areas he dealt with according to a pattern in his miswired head.

"Discard," Quale said. "Took the measure of life up here and took himself out of it."

"Why are we looking at this?"

Lirrit Ofka came over, leaned against Elmas Ofka, arm curled loosely about her waist. "Yuk."

The eyepoint was hovering over a nest of scavenger moles big as hunting cats, the young nosing blindly at the side of one while another heavily gravid female was regurgitating scraps of anonymous meat for half a dozen yearlings.

"Why are we looking at these things?"

Adelaar turned her head. "The Brain searched out lifeforms, Hanifa. We have to see them all before we know if one could be Parnalee."

The eyepoint continued to jump. More moles, bats, mobile fungi, other, less-identifiable life forms, things mutated into half-glipsed horrors.

"This is wasting time."

"No," Adelaar said, "we're finding out where not to look for him."

The large screen went blank, flipped back to the schematic of the Bridge.

"I was afraid of that, he's in a blind spot some-where." She kicked the chair around, taped nervously at the arm. "Probably listening to us."

"Listening?"

"Were it *me* in his place, I would be. At the least, listening."

"So where is he?"

"I told you. A blind spot."

"Get the others up here. We'll do it our way, gridsearch this thing till we find him."

"Fine. If you've got a year or two."

"What?"

"How long would it take to search gul Inci room by room?"

Elmas Ofka frowned at the screen, one arm folded across her breasts, her fingers moving slowly up and down the biceps of her other arm. "Then how...?"

"Let me think about that awhile. And see if I can do something about snoops."

"Ah."

Adelaar crossed her legs, tapped her fingers on the arms of her chair. "The holding area for the prisoners is ready and Pels has set the tube to it. It's near one of the lifepod banks so your people won't have far to move them once you're ready to pop the pods."

9

Parnalee smiled, lifted his glass in a salute. "Clear them out, you oozy whore. Clear them all out, it's woman's proper work, cleaning house. Clear out your-self and leave me to fry." He laughed. "It's not going to happen, bitch." He stroked his free hand along the smooth black flank of the interface. "Your time is coming, love. Wait a little longer, until they've licked up the vermin and I can move without running into strays." He sipped at the brandy, his eyes on the lethal gray egg sitting on its mobile bed. "A little longer, love."

10

The Bridge cleared quickly. Aslan watched the raiders swagger out, chivvying the Bridge crew before them. The weight of a helpless rage and inturning violence had been lifted from now that they had the Warmaster and she could no longer threaten their families and the land itself; should they happen across Parnalee, they'd tear him limb from limb, but it'd be (marginally) a more abstract action with overtones of justice, not simply the blood boiling up. There were small cruelties as they hustled their captives out, an elbow in the ribs, pinches on arms and buttocks; mostly though, they cut at the crew with a cheerful contempt, a facility of tongue developed to work off anger at wrongs that the law or force of arms couldn't ... no, wouldn't right, the retaliation for the indifference of the Huvved Fehz to the suffering of the Hordar poor in the cities and on the grasslands, to the pain of Hordar families forced off the land they'd worked for centuries before the Huvved came and claimed it. She cross hatched an area of the pad, no words left, not right then; the Ridaar was flaking this, that was enough. Trouble ahead for everyone. These hill-and-grassers, they were what the Huvved had made them; when the war was over, when Elmas Ofka and those like her were trying to put the world together again, these raiders, bandits more than anything else, they were bound to be provoking, out of control, sources of instability, inviting a reimposition of the injustices that had created them. They had to change. She sighed. It wouldn't happen. She looked at the crosshatching, a rambling nothing, started writing again, stopping, think-ing, no longer noting impressions, being her father's daughter for a change, poet's daughter trying a poem of her own.

la le la la le la
yesterday be gone away
la le la la le la
games we play

*words we say
la le la la le la
dead and done
dry bones in a drying pond
ripples pass beyond and gone
la le la la le la
echoes to relay replay
yesterday
la le la la le la
dessicated dull and dry
are you am I
are we today
nil and null
reclaiming sway
on and over
yesterday
la le la la le la
goodby lover
never hover
can't recover
yesterday.*

She sighed, dissatisfied, and pushed the pad away.

11

Jamber Fausse stood beside Quale, watching Adelaar and Pels hunched over their consoles. "There's this woman I know," he said, "had a kid, a boy. Time he was three he was taking things apart, see how they worked. Drove him near crazy when he couldna figure what did what 'n why. No one to school him, they were borderfolk, lived 'tween Chel and grass, family got broke up, the da, he was horned and headpriced, she took the boy down to Inci. He's dead. Built him a yizzy 'fore he was nine. Bitbits got him, shot away the pods, poured his firejuice on him and lit a match. This Parnalee of yours, you say he wants to kill Huvveds?"

Quale smoothed his hand along his beard. "Yeh, but you wouldna like his methods."

"Eh?"

"Why you think he wants this ship?"

"Since you be reading the man's mind, you tell me."

"Work the sums yourself, he's after the hide of every Huvved on Tairanna and he doesn't give a hand-ful of hot shit for Hordar, not being Hordar or having any ties groundside. You doubt that, go look at your dead down in Sleepers. And he's cracked to the mar-row. Talk to Aslan, you want the book on that, have her read her bonebreaks and bruises for you. For that matter, ask the Hanifa what she thinks. Way she's acting now, she got the point a time ago."

"Point being don't trust Outsiders?"

"Long as you use your head, not your gut." Jamber Fausse took a long look at him, then strolled across to Adelaar. "Yabass," he said.

She started, looked round. "A minute. Let me fin-ish this."

He waited, hands clasped behind him, watching lines of symbol and number flicker in and out so fast no one who didn't already know what they were could take them in. The schematic of the Bridge returned sud-denly, the green lines overlaid with red. Adelaar con-templated them a moment, then looked over her shoulder, "What is it?"

"What's this Parnalee know you don't know?" Quale frowned at the screen. "You've shut him out?"

"Right. He can't hear us now."

Jamber Fausse looked at the screen, then from one Outsider to the other. "What's he know you don't?"

She pushed the chair around so she didn't have to keep stretching her neck. "Obviously he thinks he can take her away from me."

"Can he?"

"How the hell do I know? All I can do is scramble this Brain so radically he couldn't possibly straighten it out before she drops in Horgul."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Jamber Fausse looked down at his hands; he held them palms up, thumbs out, fingers cupped in fingers; he looked at them as if he read Parnalee's mind in the lines and folds. "He may be crazy, but he's no fool. Has to be something else."

After a moment's strained silence, Quale said, "Mon-arch class Warmaster. The youngest it could be is ten thousand, more likely around fifteen. My Slancy was built around then. Rummul Empire Trooper. The Rummul were the ones that built most of the War-masters, so she could know something about them. We never bothered purging Memory; matter of fact, some of the bits in there have been useful for this and that, so when she needed more capacity, we just added it on. Del, you think you could punch a line to her without him knowing?"

"He'll know something's happening, not what."

"He knows that now, with you cutting him off like this."

"Your point. Give me room, this is going to get delicate at times, I'll let you know when I'm ready to link."

12

Kinok skritchd two of ve's tentacles together, sound-ing ve's irritation at being drawn away from an erotic rite ve was performing with vesself and ve's new Kahat and a drivehead. After some more strident grumbling which the infant Kahat didn't bother translating, ve allowed vesself to be talked into a degree of reason-ableness.

"Call up Oldest Memory for me," Quale said. "Ref-erence Monarch Class Warmaster."

"You are not getting involved with that fancy, are you?"

Quale blinked. The words were dismissive, but Kinok somehow managed to infuse the light tenor of the translator with a degree of wistful longing more appro-priate to the romantic hero of some operatic fantasy. He opened his mouth, intending to explain what he planned to do with the Warmaster, changed his mind before more than a croak got out. He'd run into difficulties before with Kinok, over things that seemed eminently reasonable to him but which slammed into one or more of the Paem's peculiar religious and moral tenets. Killing the Warmaster meant killing her drives and he was willing to bet that Kinok would object strenuously to being connected in any way with the death of a set of drives. He thought about the voice tone. Especially if the Paem was getting his roots in a twist about this particular set. Erotic passion did weird things to the panter; he winced as a few of his own more idiotic obsessions went floating across his mind. "Not involved," he said. "Just pull together every-thing you can find and squirt it over to us, we'll keep the line open."

"It is in progress," the translator said. "How much longer is Slancy staying at this place?"

"Getting bored, Kinok?"

"Ve-who-speaks is never bored; only a stupid mind, a mind gross and unspiritual grows bored. Ve-who--speaks merely wishes the answer to an ordinary question."

"Ah. Not so ordinary. With luck, two three days, maybe four."

"That is heard with pleasure. ve-who-speaks will prepare the blessings and ready our Slancy for the run."

"Get her ready for trouble, too, Kinok my friend. We might have a hot welcome when we shift out of the insplit."

"Ve-who-speaks has had our Slancy listening. Her ears have tingled not once. Ve-who-speaks

believes those on that world still do not know that they have visitors.”

“That could change fast.”

“There is something you are not telling ve-who--speaks, Swar. Tell it.”

“Things are happening onworld, Kinok; we’ll be finishing up our collecting with the Emperor’s Palace. That’s bound to be noisy.”

There was a cool silence from the speaker. On the screen, Kinok’s plummy scattered eyes had a skeptical glitter that Quale had no difficulty reading. There were going to be some difficult days ahead. Damn all idiot religions, they never caused anything but trouble for everyone around them, believers or not. He heard the ting that announced the arrival of Slancy’s data and suppressed a sigh of relief.

“Talk to you later, Kinok; we’ve got some clearing up here.”

13

“... redundancy,” Aslan translated, sliding into the summary at the end of the dataflow, her voice husky, dry as her throat. Elmas, Ofka sat in the kingchair, her eyes fixed on the great screen, on words she couldn’t read, numbers she couldn’t decipher; faced with Parnalee’s defection and the unhappy realization that he’d used her fears and prejudices to undercut her and threaten everything she was fighting for, she’d swung back to a tooth-end trust in Aslan. “It is ru-mored,” Aslan continued, “that even the mainBrain is duplicated; if it is damaged seriously enough, a sisterBrain takes charge. Oh, I see. Forget that, Hanifa, just me realizing what Parnalee is up to. Um, yes, these rumors call her the Dark Sister because she is supposed to be programmed to attack without cease until the ship prevails or is destroyed. Analysts study-ing the Warmaster have reported that they are unable to discover any clues to the location or even the exis-tence of the Dark Sister. Some believe that the tales about her are put out to heighten the terror factor and its demoralizing effect on the enemy. These discount the rumors and believe that the Dark Sister exists only in the minds of Rummul information officers. There is nothing in Memory to substantiate either conclusion.” She drew a dry tongue across dry lips. “That’s it,” she said, “that seems to be everything that Quale’s ship knows about Warmasters.”

She watched her mother shut down the flow, pleased to be finished with the awkward job of translating technical details into a language that didn’t have rea-sonable equivalents, not all that happy with what she’d read. She wasn’t convinced by the disclaimers at the end. Like Jamber Fausse said, Parnalee might be crazy, but he wasn’t stupid. There were some hazy dark rumors floating like smoke through University subfiles, unsubstantiated speculation about the intent and pur-pose of that institute of his. Hmm, she thought, maybe I can talk Chancellor DizZawbawka into hiring Mama to worm in there and find out what Omphalos is hiding, he’s got a kink about secret societies. This is a note you don’t write down, woman, but you don’t forget it either. She smoothed her hand across her mouth and watched Elmas Ofka, interested in the Dalliss’ reaction to what she’d heard.

Elinas Ofka pinched thoughtfully at her lip. “There is a second Brain,” she said. “There has to be. Can you find it, Adelaar yabass?”

“I can try.”

Quale chuckled; he was sitting at a down station, feet resting on a pile of empty medpacs, arms folded across his chest. “You need stroking, Del? Hah! you . know how good you are.”

“I also know the work of several of those analysts in that report; they might be a long time dead, but if they couldn’t find anything, it either wasn’t there or I’m likely to find the far side of Beyond before I trip over the clone.”

“And, didn’t I not so long ago hear you say that this Brain is big, powerful and dumb? Dumb. That was the word you used, wasn’t it? And didn’t I hear you say we’ve learned considerable since this ship was built?”

“Quale, don’t play shitgames with me., It’d take a Memory the size of the one on University to record what you don’t know about penetration. What about a real game? A wager. Double your fee against no fee on whether the clone is actually there and I find it.”

“I’m a cautious man, aici Arash. I won’t bet against a certainty.”

“Then you’d better get ready to blow the Dark Sister the moment I find her I have a feeling we’re not

going to have much time _to maneuver.”

14

Adelaar circled round and round that problem, then went at it obliquely, running the numbers of the corporeal essence of the ship, its dimensions and locations, ignoring for the moment the visual map, only the numbers mattered, matching and crossmatching, tagging subtle disparities, replaying the visuals with the disparities corrected, tagging discontinuities that appeared when that was done. Aslan could see that her mother had only the tiniest of threads to pull on, but that seemed to be all she needed; when an hour had crept past, it was obvious she was going to unpick the knot. The farther she got the easier it seemed for her, it was almost as if she were beginning to read the minds of the programmers who'd done the original work. Funny, Mama didn't get along at all well with Sarmaylen or his friends. My friends, Aslan thought, maybe that's why. She's as much an artist as they are, I thought so before, I know it now. That's not just skill, that's a leap of ... of ... I don't know, whatever artists leap at. She sighed. My father's a poet, my mother's a ... well, whatever. What the hell happened to me? Ah well, as Xalloor says, deary dai, we do what we can. Missing Xalloor, she strolled to the panels, drew water from a spigot. It's a good thing Churri took off with Quale, she thought, he made Mama nervous. She sipped at the water. It was luke-warm and tasteless, but her mouth was still dry from the reading stint. First time I saw Mama fluttery like that. Ooh-yeha and forty hells, four months in the insplit going home, that is not going to be fun for anyone, not if she starts after Xalloor. She can be a bitch on wheels when she's jealous. Aslan wrinkled her nose as her mind flipped back to the time when she was fifteen and the boy she was sneaking out to see and what happened when Mama caught them. Deary dai, indeed.

She gulped the rest of the water and moved over to watch Pels work. His eyes flicked in an unceasing round from screen to screen to screen; the lifepod sector drawn in green lines was on one with an inset showing the Hordar packing the crew into the pods, another had a map of the Palace, the city, the landing field, on the third there was a map of the system with pinpoints of yellow light converging on the whitepoint that was them, or so she assumed. She touched his shoulder. “Are those something we should be worry-ing about?”

His ears twitched. “Grand Sech has been trying to talk to someone-up here the past hour. Those are the stingers heading at us.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh?”

“It'll be at least an hour before they're close enough to be a bother. Until then there's no point. Besides, we won't be able to get outside the skin before Adelaar's finished over there. She going to be much longer?”

“I don't know, I don't operate in those realms.”

“Me either, I used to think I was good, but she's a witch.”

“She's never let me watch her work before. I don't know why.”

“Huh.” He dug his claws into his neck fur, scowled at the pod area. “Almost ready to pop 'em. Igsala poong! That Proggerdi. We can't sit around sucking our toes or he'll stick a torp up our collective arse.”

Aslan glanced at her mother, grinned. “Right on cue,” she murmured.

Adelaar flung her arms up, wriggled in the chair, yawned. “Got it,” she said. “Where's Quale?”

“Doing what you told him, getting ready to blow the clone,” Pels said. “The Grand Sech is birthing fidgets because he can't get through up here; he sent stingers to see what's going on. They can't burn a way in, but unless I remember wrong, more than one of them will have overrides on the lockseals.”

“Transfer the trace here.” She watched the pinlights creep for a moment, sniffed, then began playing with the pad.. “I'll let them think they are in control till they're close enough ...” she broke off, concentrated for a moment, “to Tairanna, then all their little popbuggies will peel off and put them down where they'll have a lot of privacy and time to contemplate their sins.” She sat back, yawned again, laced her fingers across her stomach and examined her thumb-nails. “I think we ought to let him hear us.” She

tilted her head back, smiled at Aslan. “Don’t you think we owe him a little sweat?”

“No.” Aslan sighed. “It gives him too much time to knife us, it’s safer with him dead.”

Adelaar laughed at her. “That’s my little pacifist.”

“All right, make it the clone dead first.”

“Ruin my mood, mmh?” Adelaar straightened. “Fetch my kit over, will you, Lan? I left it by the door there. I might as well use this time to work on the sun-intercept—and a few other notions I’ve had ... um—Pels, have the locals finished loading the crew?”

“Just about, why?”

“Tell them I’m going to start launching the pods. The stingers won’t bother them. Then you get hold of the Hanifa and have her order her people back on the tug. When we leave, we don’t want any snags or strays.” She looked over her shoulder at Aslan, eyes bluer than blue and guileless. “Keep the customers happy,” she murmured. “Dead locals don’t trade rosepearls for security systems.”

Aslan wrinkled her nose but said nothing; she wasn’t about to be drawn into that ancient argument. She brought the pack to her mother, then went to stand beside the door, looking out into that absurdly oversized antechamber. Briefly she wondered where Parnalee was and if he suspected he was being out-thought and out-engineered. At least, she hoped he was. The Bridge was empty except for Pels and Adelaar. And her, of course. Elmas and her isyas were carrying their dead to the tug hold and getting them stowed for the trip home. Xalloor was in the tug too, running the wounded through the autodoc, if she’d managed to convince the Hanifa it wasn’t a subtle attempt at assassination. Aslan pressed her lips over a giggle. There’s a product for you, Mama, say the doc performs in its usual fashion. Quale was a long time gone. What was happening down there in the armory? If he couldn’t get in, he’d have been back before this. He should have taken Pels with him; Churri was there, but what use was he? Mama used to tell me when I did something dumb with my pc that I was just like my father, clumsy as a tantser calf. Jamber Fausse and his lot are there; they’re no use, except as strong backs if something needs shifting and for standing guard. I hope they are stand-ing guard. He should have taken Pels. Why isn’t he back yet? Maybe they’re all dead. We can’t look round the ship without breaking Mama’s blocks. Aslan sighed. There was no point standing at the doorway like some stupid chatelaine waiting for her lord to get back from the wars. She grimaced at the image. Oooh-yeha, Lan, you’re worse than a teener reading sublimated sex books. Face it, woman, he’s done everything but come right out and tell you he’s not interested. I wonder why? He’s hetero and I’m not a hag. T’k. She ran fingers through her hair, pushed it off her face. This isn’t getting me anywhere. She walked with quick ner-vous steps to the station where Pels was working.

Adelaar had turned the launching of the pods over to him while she busied herself doing enigmatic things to the Brain. The dataflow was so quick and so eso-teric it gave Aslan a headache. Much more satisfying to watch the pods blow, at least she knew what was happening, the ship’s crew including all its Huvveds were on their way to Tassalga for a bit of involuntary exile. Permanent exile, if the Huvveds had any sense. The way feeling was running among the Hordar, they could end on the chopping block if they got back to Tairanna. The inset showed that most of the locals had cleared out of the loading area; the few left were clearing up odds and ends and loading these on one of the pallets. She recognized Akkin Siddaki and his protégé the boy thief from gul Brindar, Kanlan Gercik and two of her students from the Mines. The rest must be settling down in the tug. It’s almost over. All we have to do is blow the clone. Then we leave. Then we go home. Then I stir up a mess of trouble for those foul and loathsome Oligarchs. She savored her triumph. They sold me into slavery; they’re as guilty as Bolodo. What a lovely thought. I suppose they’ll claim they had a legitimate contract with Bolodo. Let them try it. University can field a team of ethicists and lawyers that’ll wipe their faces in their own muck till they choked on the stink. And the Chancellors will autho-rize and organize the team without their usual fuss and obfuscation, not for me, for the Unntoualar. They mean it, dump on him who says anything not my species is my prey, dump it deep and stinking. They’ll go after those Oligarchs with everything they can throw at them. It surely will not hurt my tenure standing that they can throw me at them too. Hmmp. Like Quale says, I’m lagnappe. I wish he’d get back.

When the sound from the Bridge cut off, Parnalee stirred drowsily; the brandy was smooth and rather sweet, he'd swallowed more of it than was good for him. His mind was swimming, he had to concentrate to think. "Busy bitch," he muttered, "You and your treacherous daughter, you're a set." He slapped at his face, felt his stomach spasm. "Fool!" He got to his feet, forced back a surge of nausea and by an effort of will whipped mind and body into a semblance of order. The sisterBrain was hobbled until he got rid of the mainBrain. "The point is," he told himself, "who's left out in the corridors? How far have they got in the clearance?"

He lowered himself into the chair and swiveled to face the console. "She shut me out of the Bridge, I doubt she could..." His conversation with himself died away as he concentrated on what he was doing.

The sound-search swept through the ship, collecting a series of squeaks and rattles, mechanical hums, the sigh of air. Dead sounds. Empty echoes. In the armory, voices, clinks, the scuff of feet, the complex of sounds remotes made when they were forced to the limits of their capacity. Parnalee smiled. "Dealing in armaments now, hmm, Quale? When I get back Out-side and spread word around of your scavenging efforts, you're going to have a problem or two." Satisfied that he knew what the man was doing and why, he went on with the search.

Nothing. Nothing. Pod bays, the readings showed them empty. "Busy busy," he murmured. "Good little housekeeper, got your cleaning finished, have you?" He did a more intensive sweep, but there was no evidence of any life forms in the area. Lifter locks. Yes, the tug was in Three. Not much sound in there, the ghosts of voices; he fiddled with the controls, focused on the tug's lock which seemed to be open, fulminating as he did so against the lack of visuals; he depended very much on his eyes and had trouble imaging from sounds. He began recording the voices; he couldn't make out the words, they were too broken, but the equipment here was good enough to reconstitute them when he was ready—if he decided he needed to know what was being said, which wasn't likely, he had other, more important things to do.

The corridors were clean. It was time to move. He thumbed out three stimtabs, tossed them down his throat and followed them with a gulp of stale, luke-warm water from the spigot; he'd have preferred a final swallow of brandy but he had enough alcohol in him. Praise Omphalos it should be mostly absorbed by now. Adding more wouldn't merely be stupid, it could even be fatal.

He checked the torp to make sure it was strapped firmly down, then went meticulously through one last test of its triggering circuits. The torp was old, not so old as the ship, but old enough to have acquired a degree of fragility inappropriate to a bomb though it was sufficiently intact to perform its function without going off prematurely as long as he treated it gently as an egg about to hatch while he was moving it. He toed on the lift field of the dolly and guided it toward the interface exit. Since he couldn't go near the tube without alerting that woman, he had to travel the service-ways. It was going to be a long slow trip, but there wasn't anyone to threaten him now and he didn't have to go near the Bridge. The mainBrain lived inside a sphere of collapsed matter close to the heart of the ship; theoretically, only the Captain had access to its coordinates; even the techs who serviced it had no idea where they were; they tubed there and back, the tubeflow coordinates set by the Bright Sister when she was commanded to do so by the Captain.

Parnalee smiled with drowsy contentment as he climbed on the dolly and settled himself at the controls. As soon as he'd waked the part of her he could reach through the tap, she'd gone hunting for her sister. Found her, too. And he knew what she knew, once he convinced her to trust him; though most of her slept still, she was awake enough to print a map for him. Awake enough to run a jolt through him so he could share her exaltation as she celebrated the power that would soon be hers. And his.

He stopped the dolly, got down so he could crank open the first of the twelve hatches ahead of him, coughed as his feet stirred fine gray dust that had lain undisturbed for millennia. He sprayed oil he'd found in the interface stores over the mix of shavings, exuda and other muck age-bonded to the gears, slammed his fist cautiously against the handle, hit it again without budging it. He poured clear liquid handcleaner over the slowly softening glue to thin it out yet more, then leaned on the handle. The crank

groaned and resisted; sweat popping out on his forehead, he put more pressure on it, half-afraid he was going to break the thing. It shrieked and moved a hair; he sprayed more oil, doused on more cleaner, worked the crank back and forth until the seal gave way and it began to turn, slowly at first then more smoothly. The hatch squealed open, slid into the wall. One down. Eleven to go. He wiped his hands on his tunic sides, rubbing vigorously to get rid of both oil and cleaner, especially the cleaner which had a strong, oversweet smell and a soapy, slimy feel. The stims were doing the job, his head was clearing, he felt as charged as the Dark Sister. He thought of Adelaar's face when the pads died under her fingers. He smiled.

16

I watched the last load leave with Churri riding herd on it; I wasn't planning to sell any of this bit of salvage; I don't approve of arms dealing and anyway it's a lot too dangerous for the payoff, but given some of the places I take Slancy into, it's comforting to have that kind of firepower available and it's not the sort of thing you can buy whenever you take a notion. And there was Bolodo. If Bolodo execs had any scruples about anything, I hadn't come across them yet. And I hadn't a sliver, of a doubt there was a destroyer or two stashed somewhere handy where the execs on Helvetia could set them up to take us when we showed. I'd done what I could to pull some cover around us, but cover has a way of springing leaks when you need it most.

Jamber Fausse was squatting by the door with a couple of his men. He got to his feet and came sauntering over to me. "Time?"

"Time. One of you has to go to the Bridge to let Adelaar yabass know we're ready; she's still sealed off, I can't reach her."

"Tube?"

"Right. The way we got here."

"Vehim Feda, go." The younger of the two men got to his feet and went trotting out. "What will you do if Adelaar yabass has not discovered the Dark Sister?"

"Sit here and wait. Nothing else I can do." I went over to the implosion torp on its dolly. There was a lot of crud still on it, but the batteries were charging steadily, no sign of trouble there, no breakdowns in the timer program if the probe wasn't looping on me. I toured the testmeters and their readings were all good, no glitches. I climbed onto the dolly's front bench, put my feet up on the console.

"Ah." Jamber Fausse dropped to a squat beside the door. "Something I know about, sitting and waiting."

I didn't expect to do much waiting; Adelaar didn't waste time or energy when she was working and Vehim wouldn't be more than a few seconds tubing up to her. I arranged myself so I could see the screen; it was over the door. I counted seconds and got to fifty before it lit up and Adelaar was looking at us.

"Quale," she said. "I see you're ready." She didn't seem to expect a response so I didn't give her one. "The auxBrain is scattered through more than a dozen nodes, there's no way you'll be able to get them all."

"Shit! What..."

"Relax. You don't need to. Do a thorough job on the interface and you've neutered our Dark Sister. There's a weakness in the design. The nodes are connected through that interface. They don't operate independently unless most of the ship is dead. Not enough power. They'll probably kick on when she hits the sun, but that's a bit late to do any good. Implosion torp?"

"Yeh."

"I thought I recognized the configuration. Under all those meters." She laughed, a nice sound; she was feeling pleased with herself. "It's viable?"

"Yeh."

"That'll do it. We'd better be outside the skin when it blows."

"Yeh." I wasn't going to argue with that; the Warmaster was big and tough enough to absorb a lot more punishment than one little torp, but she was older than time and there was rot in her hide.

“Tube-flow?”

“I’ve reset the tubeflow from your gate, it’ll take you straight in to the clone interface. I’ve given you two minutes to get to the interface, starting when we finish this, five to get set up, plus three for holdups. The three will kick on only if you haven’t gone through the gate there before then. The flow switches out-bound automatically, endpoint the lander lock area. Where we’ll be sitting, waiting for you.”

“Bridge?”

“I’ve programmed the mainBrain to clamshell after we’re out.”

“Any sign of the Proggerdi?”

“I haven’t bothered looking.”

I gave a yell for the teddybear. His ears were up fluttering, his lips curled back to show his tearing teeth. He didn’t need telling to watch out for am-bushes, but I told him anyway. “That fruitcake could be anywhere,” I said. “Get hold of the tug before you start and have a bodyguard waiting at the tubegate. Adelaar, no arguments. I don’t get paid if I don’t get you back to Helvetia and I intend to collect. You hear?”

She laughed again. Almost hysteria, coming from her. “I hear,” she said. “Time is, Quale. Get yourself in gear or miss the boat.” The screen went dark.

“Right,” I said. “Hop on, Jamo, you and your friend, it’s time to roll.”

17

The curved wall of the massive sphere was a gray-black chimera behind the container shield, there and not there, ominous though not quite tangible, the mass of a small star prisoned in gossamer. Parnalee brought the dolly to a gentle stop before it, lifted the link from the seat beside him. “Open,” he murmured, then waited for the Dark Sister to coax an opening for him. _

The surface shimmered, a black pinhole appeared, dilated swiftly until it was wide enough to admit the dolly then pulsed like a wet black mouth, a mouth that could close on him if it chose; he eyed it with distaste, but the bulk of the Bright Sister was in there and there was no other access. He edged the dolly toward the opening, took it through.

Thinking he was a repair tech, the Bright Sister brought up the lights so he could see what he was doing.

He eased the dolly and its burden as deep into her heart as the narrowing serviceways between the Brain’s components would let him go. Then he cycled down the power of the liftfield, let the dolly sink to the floor, gently, gently, don’t crack the egg, not yet. Not. Yet. Off. Yes. He slid the link into his belt pouch, climbed over the bench back and squatted on the bed beside the torp. He activated it, set its timer for an hour on; he needed an interval to get back to the interface where he’d be in touch with and protected from the fury of the Dark Sister. Before he touched the triggering sensor and started the timer humming, he set his hand on the casing of the torp and savored the triumph that was going to be his. One hour. He patted the bomb. Gently. Very gently. “Yes.” He set his forefinger on the sensor and felt the hum in his bones. “Yes.” He slid off the dolly and trotted for the mouth.

As soon as he was outside, he touched on the link. “Close,” he said.

The hole in the sphere grew smaller, smaller, swiftly smaller, was a pin prick of darkness again, was gone. He put the link away and began the long run to the interface, buoyed by the knowledge that nothing could go wrong now, nothing could stop the explosion that killed the Bright Sister. All he had to do was sit and wait.

18

I looked round the interface. “Yeh,” I said. “This is it. He was here.”

Jamber Fausse nodded. Store cabinets were open, some of their contents spilled onto the floor, evidence of a hasty search, there was a bottle of brandy on the console with about an inch of liquid left in it, a bubble glass beside it with a brown smear drying in the bell; the stink of the brandy was thick in there, along with a stale smell that clung despite the labors of the fans in the ducts. “Where is he now?”

“Who knows?” It’s a big ship. Keep an eye on the door, will you, the two of you? I’d better get to

work. We don't have that much time."

I let the bed down, started arming the torp. Didn't take long. When I finished, I thought a minute, then I opened up the dolly's motor casing and removed a few vital parts. If—when—Parnalee got back, I didn't want him driving off with our little surprise. There wasn't much else I could do. Even if the three of us could muscle the torp off the bed without fatally herniating ourselves, there was no place in here where we could hide the thing.

The young raider left, but Jamber Fausse stopped me at the door. "What if he comes back before it blows? What if he disarms it?"

"You want to stay and argue with him, be my guest," I said. I wasn't all that happy with that antique timer; I was sure it'd trigger the torp sometime, I just wasn't sure when. And I didn't want to be anywhere around when it turned over. "Look," I said. "It's a random-ized circuit and not all that easy to counterprogram. Not like pulling a few wires on hope and a prayer. I've set the thing to blow in half an hour. If he gets here in a minute or two, maybe he can do something; if he's later than that, no way. We take our chances, that's all we can do."

He didn't like it, but he was no more into suicide than I was, so he nodded and we took off for the tubegate.

19

I dropped the tug into orbit a quadrant away from the Warmaster and waited there.

Adelaar glanced at her chron. "Two minutes," she said.

The ship hung motionless in the center of the screen. The Hanifa was standing behind me again, I could feel her hot breath on my neck. When I looked around, I was almost nose to nose with her, but she wasn't noticing anything but the Warmaster. The rest of them were pretty much the same. Hungry.

The Warmaster trembled. A shine spread over her, then localized at the drivers. She moved. Slowly at first. Ponderously. She began picking up speed, an-gling away from Tairanna. As soon as she got wound up, it was like she vanished, collapsing to a pinpoint and then to nothing. "Well," I said. "She's on her way. Horgul in two hours. Good-bye, battleship."

"What about the torp? How do we know if it blew?"

That was Jamber Fausse; he was a man to keep his teeth in an idea until it squealed. "We don't," I said. "Unless she turns up again. Then we know it didn't. Back off, everyone. Show's over. We're going down."

Parnalee had slowed to a fast walk by the time he passed through the next to last hatch. He felt the sudden liveliness in the ship as she began to move. He stopped, flattened his hand hard against the wall. He could not have described the difference he felt in her, but he knew what was happening, she was on her way to the sun. He smiled. So they thought. Let them think it, fools. He started moving again, an unhurried trot. He passed through the last hatch, glanced at his chron, smiled again. He'd made better time than he'd expected. Only half an hour. He sighed with pleasure as he thought about stripping down and letting the fresher scrub him clean again, about stretching out on the fur, a hot meal on the console beside him and another bottle of brandy while he waited for the Dark Sister to come alive and take over the ship. He saw the door, open like he'd left it, hurried toward it.

He stopped just inside, his way barred by the dolly and the torp; for a crazy moment he thought he was hallucinating, then that the Bright Sister had somehow developed a mechanical TP facility and flipped his torp back to him, then he knew that the woman had done it, the bitch had found his hiding place, she'd found the Dark Sister, no matter that it was impossible for her to find the Dark Sister, and she'd left this joke to greet him. Furious and afraid he took a step toward it; disarm it, he thought, I've got to disarm it.

It blew in his face. He knew an instant of intolerable brightness, of intolerable frustration and rage. Then nothing.

XIV

1. Time-span: 11 Days (local) after the meeting on Gerbek Island to the evening of the day called Lift-Off.

At the Mines.

When Karrel Goza left Zaraiz Memeli at the Mines, the boy was on fire with excitement, but it didn't take him long, to discover he'd been dumped there to keep him out of trouble while the adults did whatever it was they were going to do. He was furious and hurting, betrayed again by someone who claimed his trust. He poked about, sticking his nose into anything that showed the slightest promise of breaking the tedium. In the middle of his second week there, early one morning before the sun was all the way up, he pulled a rotten board off a window at the back of the convict bar-racks, wriggled through the narrow space and dropped onto the floor of a holding cell.

The silver sphere came bounding at him, squawling its warning, attacking when that warning was ignored.

He was startled but not frightened. He jumped, swerved, dived, played with it, laughed as he whipped about, elastic as an eel, too fast for the sphere to catch him.

N'Ceeagh heard him laughing, took a look.

The sphere stopped chasing Zaraiz and began chat-ting with him, then it brought him into the workshop.

After a terse welcome, N'Ceeagh went back to mak-ing the operant parts of one of the stunners he was assembling for the hit on the Warmaster. Zaraiz sat on the stool next to him and watched him work, fasci-nated by the delicacy and precision of his fingers, by the magnifier he was wearing, the microscopic points on most of his tools. Despite his involvement in the Green Slimes and his ability to dominate the other middlers, he was a solitary boy; he knew the pleasures and value of silence. He asked nothing, volunteered nothing, spoke only to answer the Pa'ao's questions and kept his mouth shut at other times, not wanting to distract N'Ceeagh at a crucial moment. After a while N'Ceeagh let him polish and fit together cases for the stunners.

The boy immersed himself in what he was doing, glowing with pride each time the Pa'ao looked a part over and set it down without comment, showing that he thought it was finished, that he saw nothing there that needed fixing. With the resilience of the child he still was, Zaraiz gave his trust again, this time to the Pa'ao, gave it because N'Ceeagh was a master crafts-man and he wanted very much to be like him, because N'Ceeagh was wholly alien, was physically and spiritu-ally Other. He gave his trust and a tentative affection.

N'Ceeagh recognized this in his silent way and gave back what he was given.

When they took the Pa'ao, Bolodo's minions were clumsy and let themselves be seen. To cover them-selves they ashed the village where they found him, killing all his kin, blood to the third degree, killing his mates and his children, most of all killing the boychild who was his craft-heir. His species was monogamous for life, patrilocal and powerfully bonded to the family and the family Place. He lived after that only to trade death for death; he escaped from the Palace to find a way of laying his bloodghosts, to feed them blood from the men who did the killing, blood from the men who ordered it. Zaraiz gave him hope of another kind, hope of passing on his craft, of hands to lay his own ghost when it was tired of him and wanted to shed the weary weight of his body.

By the end of the week Zaraiz Memeli divorced his family and swore loyalty to N'Ceeagh, taking the name Zaraiz Pa'ao. N'Ceeagh adopted him as his son, his craft-heir. And he began teaching Zaraiz Pa'ao the Torveynee, the way of the Pa'ao and the way of honor, the way of vengeance.

Ten days before Lift-Off they watched Ehnas Ofka and her isyas leave for the Chel, carrying with her the stunners they'd built for her. They watched the fight-ers from the Mines being ferried out to her, one night, two nights, three, until the chosen were all gone.

They spent the day named Lift-Off in the shop, working on the housing of a hunting rifle, one that

killed with exploding darts no larger than a mosquito. N’Ceegh set delicate scrolls of inlay into the dark fine wood of the stock, then passed it over to Zaraiz for polishing while he etched shadow patterns into the metal parts. They worked all day, talked about noth-ing but the work.

Around sundown they went to the Smelter and sat in a corner eating fries and fish and drinking tea, listening to the music, watching the youngsters and the middlers dance.

Thirty minutes later Belirmen Indiz came in, banged his fist on the bar, then scrambled onto it, his age and stoutness forgotten. “The Warmaster is taken,” he bellowed into a sudden silence. “She is taken and gone, sent into the sun. Do you hear me? The Warmaster is gone.”

Noise and confusion, shouted questions, Belirmen’s booming voice as he tried to answer them, shoving elbows, stomping feet, triumphant flourishes, trills and squeals from the musicians, crying men, women, youn-gers. Rebels crowding closer to the bar to hear more, rebels forcing their way against the tide to get out and spread the news. Everywhere movement and emotion, a heady yeasty mix. A time when dreams no one quite believed in were suddenly made real.

N’Ceegh looked at Zaraiz, nodded at the door. Zaraiz got to his feet and followed him out.

Riding souped-up yizzies protected by miniature cuuxtwoks, N’Ceegh and Zaraiz Pa’ao left the Mines an hour before dawn. They circled wide through the mountains and went clacking and whirling across a stretch of barren Chel, not far from where the raiders had camped. By nightfall they were on the lower bound-ary of the Eastern Duzzulka, where tendrils of grass-land reached into the scrub. They landed, tethered their yizzies, ate, slept a few hours, climbed into the saddle again.

2

I put Chicklet into a dive, flicked her around so the gunport Pels had improvised in her repair lock faced a melter station; I balanced her on her tail while he got off a missile that a second later blew out the station and a hunk of tower under it. We went swing, bal-ance, boom around the circumference until the wall looked like beavers had been at it.

Swarms of yizzies were converging on the Palace; when we came over from Base, we’d seen hordes of them, flying in from every corner of the Littorals like locusts on the move; they even sounded like locusts when I turned on the external ears and listened to them. The news of the Warmaster’s end was out ev-erywhere, that was obvious. The com net, I suppose; if I were Huvved, I’d have shut down the net till I had some sort of control in the cities. Aslan said it was survival-fear that triggered Surges; looked to me like survival-hope was doing the job just as well. Airships were drifting loose over the city, abandoned by their pilots and passengers, loads of Hordar dropped to melt into the Surge that was forming there. As we flew over, I could see the devastation starting, like the destruction in gul Ukseme multiplied a hundredfold, a million Hordar as a single deathbeast striking down the thousands of Huvved living there, burning, tram-pling, bursting in doors and windows, destroying ev-erything the& hands and feet could smash or torch. The yizzies came clicking and clattering over them, airmarching with the landswarm moving in a blind fury toward the Palace.

As I finished the firing run, I saw that mass of Hordar crossing the waste land between the city and the Wall. I swore. I did not want to go down there in the middle of that mess. Pels came up from the lock and slid into the co’s seat. He inspected the mob. “Rrrr,” he said.

“Yeh.” I took the tug up and got ready to set her down inside the walls. “Looks like half the Hordar on Tairanna.”

“Maybe we should come back tomorrow. Or next week.”

“I doubt the relatives would pay for stewmeat.” I took another look at the mob. “Which is what’s going to be left tomorrow. Well, let’s set her down. Faster we finish, the better shape our hides’re going to be in.”

I put Chicklet down in an elaborately ugly garden which was the only space large enough for her fat little tail that was within a reasonable walk of the slavepen. The EYEs Kumari sent sniffing around told us that the techs were collected around sundown and put in the pen, the rest rounded up by midnight; that didn’t include bedslaves, but they weren’t targets anyway; ordinary girls however lovely were too

common to be pricey; mostly their parents, husbands, lovers, what-ever, couldn't afford to offer the kind of reward that would get them on ti Vnok's list. We were early; it was barely dusk, the end of a cold windy day with shreds of fog coming off the lake. On the other hand, there was the attack by the Hordar; maybe the slaves would be locked down early, if Luck happened to look our way. Pels and I, we set the barriers and the shock-ers to keep the locals out, rode the lift down and started at a quick trot for the pen.

I nearly bumped into a guard running for the wall. The man stared at me, lifted his rifle, but changed his mind and went loping past me. Several of the guard cats were pacing about, their leashes flopping; they put their back hair up and their tails twitched when we came along. One of them charged at us, the others followed her. Pels got the leader and I stunned the others. After that we kept an eye close to scan roof edges and the shoulders of the sturdier statues, any high place a cat could perch on. We got half a dozen more cats that way.

The situation inside the walls was getting hairier by the minute; the Huvveds and Tassalgans on the intact sections of the Wall were firing down at the Surge with hand-held melters and pellet rifles. They killed hundreds and yet more hundreds, but the Hordar came on, walking over the wounded and the dead (a distinction without much difference because anyone wounded badly enough to be knocked off his feet was trampled to death by the feet of his neighbors). Tendrils of the Surge peeled away from the main mass and fought their way into the gaps Pels had knocked into the walls. Other units had ropes with grapples knotted onto them; the Hordar climbed the ropes faster than the guns could cut them down, swarming up and over, tearing the guards to bits as they passed over them, destroying everything they got their hands on.

I was frowning as I ran, there was too much confusion inside the walls; I could understand some of it, there didn't seem to be a helluva lot you could do to stop a Surge coming at you, but this chicken had its head cut off; talk about ineffective. Where was the Grand Sech? Was Pittipat stupid enough to execute him when the Warmaster went? Was the Sech stupid enough to let that happen? I shook my head as I pulled up before a heavy door; it was barred and locked, but there wasn't a guard in sight.

I sliced through the bar and the lockbolt and shoved the door open.

3

As N'Ceegh and Zaraiz Pa'ao got closer to Gilisim Gillin, the air went thick with airships and yizzies; since the cuuxtwoks hid them from eyes as well as probes, they had to stay alert and do some fancy dodging to avoid being run over. They reached the Palace close to sundown, slipped past the Wall without triggering the melters and touched down in the garden atop the Palace tower.

N'Ceegh wore armor covering his torso, arm and leg sheaths with knives of assorted lengths and purpose in them; on his back he had a battery pack attached by cable to a heavy-duty cutter that needed both hands to hold it level when it was in use. The smaller cutters that Zaraiz Pa'ao wore were keyed to his hands. All he had to do was point, then tap a thumb against the side of a crooked middle finger. He had no armor; he counted on his agility and speed to protect him. The door from the roof garden into the palace was a bronze slab elaborately etched over all its surface. N'Ceegh melted it, jumped the runnels of congealing metal and the cooked meat of a hapless guard, went slatting as fast as his thin legs would carry him down a lacy spiral ramp.

The Palace defenses belonged to the days of the first Imperator and they were badly maintained; until recently no one, not even the professionally paranoid Grand Sech, had expected an attack on the Palace itself. During the past months there'd been some attempt to refurbish the alarms and automatic killers, but slave techs don't make all that reliable a workforce when there's a thought hanging in the air that the men in power are about to lose their footing.

Down and around they went, N'Ceegh leading, Zaraiz Pa'ao watching his sides and back, sweeping away resistance, not stopping to ask those they met what side they were on; the agile uninvolved dived for cover, the guards and slow reactors died. Down and around, going for the CommandCenter, multiply defended, massively armored spherical chamber, buried in the earth, resting on bedrock, built to resist intense bombardment, fire, flood, whatever. Half a dozen Tassalgans guarded the single entrance, a

hatch with a complex wholebody lock programmed to open for two people and only two, the Emperor and the Grand Sech: The security was impressive, it looked impeccable, but no Emperor in all the long millennia of Imperacy, back on Huvedra or here on Tairanna, not one Emperor had ever ever locked himself in a room with only one exit; he always had a bolt hole known only to himself.

Before he escaped, N'Ceegh had spent nearly three years local in the Palace as one of Pittipat's favorite toys. During those years he'd built weapons and other elaborate playthings for the Emperor and used his spare time to make spy eyes and ears for himself. He planted them everywhere, collecting data for his escape and his vengeance. Among his other unlovely attributes, Pittipat was a voyeur. He liked to spy on his own people and went slipping from peephole to peephole sometimes all night long. N'Ceegh laid a bug on him and tracked him a couple of nights and after that explored the web of passages on his own, map-ping security systems and finally the area about the CommandCenter. Pittipat was on N'Ceegh's vengeance list because he'd ordered a weaponmaster from Bolodo and thus had a share of bloodguilt for the ashing of the Pa'ao kin. After N'Ceegh was in the palace a month, his cold determination went hot where Emperor Pettan tra Pran was concerned, the old rip had an inherited talent for creating passionate enemies.

N'Ceegh led Zaraiz Pa'ao to the outlet of the Emperor's bolthole.

He melted it down. Two minutes later the Pa'ao and his son leaped into the CommandCenter and confronted the Emperor, the Grand Sech and the clutch of Huvved techs busy at sterile white work stations.

Looking down melter snouts at the swarming Hordar, swinging back and forth, wiping away rank after rank of the marchers, flesh running like water off bones that ran like syrup into a puddle around the feet of men women children who kept coming on and coming on.

Talking with Seches in the Fekkris of Littoral cities. The faces all saying the same thing: the cities are emptying, the Hordar are leaving. Saying to the Seches: stop them, shoot them down if you have to, don't let them leave, don't let them come here, stop them however you can. We can't send you anything right now, it's up to you, stop them.

N'Ceegh burned the head off the Grand Sech while Zaraiz Pa'ao plinked the techs. As the Emperor woke from his initial shock and started scurrying toward the main exit, N'Ceegh sent a beam from the burner sizzling past him. Pittipat stopped and turned slowly, working on a smile as he turned. His eyes opened wide as he recognized the intruder. "Ceeghi?"

"!Hi-Vagh!" N'Ceegh muttered. Leaving Zaraiz Pa'ao to guard the exit, he stalked the Emperor, cornered him against a work station. "Down you," he growled, "on the floor, Bitvekeshit."

The Emperor's head went up, his tentative smile vanished. "Nonsense," he said.

N'Ceegh lifted the burner, pressed the front end of the tube against Pittipat's stomach. "Ba'okl, choose, flea."

The old man reconsidered his objection and stretched out on the floor where he lay blinking up at the Pa'ao. With visible effort he managed a smile, then broad-ened it into a genial grin that lit up watery blue eyes sunk in a nest of pseudo laugh-wrinkles. He was calm now, confident; despite his uncomfortable and humili-ating position, he was sure he could manipulate the situation to his benefit, that he could pacify this old friend. "Come, Ceeghi, you're a good fellow. What do you want? Just tell me. There's no need for all this."

N'Ceegh knelt beside him and touched a spray to his neck. The Emperor stiffened, worked his mouth; he couldn't speak and he couldn't move his limbs.

Zaraiz left his post and stood beside the Pa'ao, watching what he was doing.

Hobbling on his knees (plushy gray fur worn thin over the bone), N'Ceegh moved down the Huvved's long spindly body, unbuckled the Imperial san-dals, slid the long bony feet out of them. "My village is ash," he said, speaking with emotionless precision in unaccented Hordaradda. He took a thin surgical blade from a sheath on his forearm and sliced off the Imperial great toes; he set them

aside while he applied cauterizing patches to stop the blood flow. He slit the Imperial trousers up past the knees. "The house of my fathers is ash," he said. He drew his knife across the hamstrings, severing them. He hobbled up a little farther. "My children are ash," he said. With a deft twist of his knife, he popped out the Imperial testicles and dropped them beside the severed toes. He moved on. "My lifemates are ash," he said. He lifted the left hand, drew his knife several times across the back of it, severing the tendons. "My craft-heir is ash," he said. He removed the thumb, dropped it on the Imperial chest and applied a patch to the wound. "My bloodkin to the third degree are ash," he said. He dealt with the right hand in the same way, edged along until he was bending over the Imperial head, looking down at the old Huvved's face, ignoring the terror in it. "You are the prime cause of those things," he said. "The bloodghosts of my kin cry for ven-geance. Zaraiz, help me, keep his head steady."

While Zaraiz Pa'ao held the Imperial head locked against his thighs, N'Ceeh drew the blade delicately along the top of the Imperial eyesockets, cutting away the eyelids without touching the eyes beneath. "Never close your eyes again to the death and pain you decree," he said. Working with the same care, he cut through the skin and cartilage of the Imperial nose and lifted it away. "Never ignore again the consequences of your demands." He used the point as a stylus and cut into the Imperial brow the Pao-teely glyphs for bloodguilt. "May the world know your soul, you who command death without thought. Let him go," he said, "gently, my son, if you please."

N'Ceeh got to his feet, brushed his hands together: "The paralysis will wear off in about an hour," he told the old man. "Do what you will then." He touched Zaraiz Pa'ao on the shoulder. "Time to go."

They fought their way back to the roof against a stiffening but disordered resistance, reached the gar-den breathing hard from the climb with a few holes in unimportant places, a burn or two from ricocheting pellets, nothing serious.

Stretching and yawning, so sleepy he didn't like thinking about the ride back to the mines, Zaraiz Pa'ao strolled to the parapet and looked across the grass at the faint lines of rose and purple at the base of the clouds in the west; the sun was down and the dark was lowering quickly. He yawned again, glanced into the gardens below. He saw the tug. "Look,-N'Cey-da, isn't that the machine they were talking about at the Mines?"

N'Ceeh crossed to him. "!'F-doo-yal must be. Talk was the Outsiders come looking for disappeared who might be slaves." He frowned at Zaraiz Pa'ao. "You my son now, Zhazh-ti," he said, "my craft-heir, but you born Hordar. It is Torveynee I ask you, come with me away from Tairanna? Come with me to hunt the ghostblood?"

Zaraiz Pa'ao rubbed at his eyes. He was so tired; it wasn't fair that he had to decide this without time to consider. He reached out a trembling hand and warm furry fingers closed around it. On the other side, there were lots of times before this when he'd chewed things over and over and sometimes he was right and some-times he was wrong. Prophet help me, he thought. "I will come, I will hunt," he said. "Promise you'll teach me? Everything?"

"You my craft-heir, Zhazh-ti. What else? Every-thing, ya." N'Ceeh grinned at him, hugged the boy hard against him. "Pi! let us go push in on that line."

4

The pen had small sleeping chambers arranged around an assembly hall with a, horizontal lattice displayed across the ceiling, tracks for the slides of the tether chains. At night around a hundred slaves were locked onto those chains and left to negotiate their way into their assigned sleeping places. Because of the Surge and the attack on the Wall, the Palace slaves had been herded into the pen early, the Huvved didn't want them getting ideas about escaping. When I burned the latch and kicked the door in, most of them were still in the assembly chamber, gathered in clusters, talking, arguing, fidgeting or just sitting and staring in deep depression at stains on the walls.

I stood beside the door, looking over that very various crowd in that long narrow room. "Tom'perianne," I called. I waited a minute, repeated the name,. yelling over the noise. "Remember a dancer name of Kante Xalloor? She asked us to have a look for you and your sisters."

A thin vital woman, vaguely pteroid, moved away from a group of the back wall, her chain clinking

musically. “Xalloor, eh?” She had a deep contralto. So much voice from so frail a body. She looked to her right at two others who might have been clones in-stead of sisters they were so like her.

“Xalloor,” Nym’perianne said (or it might have been Lam’perianne). Whoever, her voice was a liquid lovely soprano. When I learned their names, I could tell them apart by voices if not their faces and bodies.

“What cha know,” Lam’perianne said (or it might have been Nym’perianne). This one had an oboe’s reedy notes, less immediately enticing than her sister, but maybe more interesting as time passed.

“Good kid,” they chorused.

“You know us,” Tom’perianne said. “Who’re you?”

“Name’s Quale,” I said. “Ship Slancy Orzo. You want a ride to Helvetia?”

“That’s the dumbest question I ever heard.” She laughed, flutesong.

“I assume that means yes. Pels, cut the three of them loose. Someone here called Jaunniko?”

The noise got louder. Two men struggled, one fell; the one still standing moved away from the tangle he’d created. “Here, Quale. I’m Jaunniko. The dancer ask for me?”

“Someone did. Described him too and you’re not him. Jaunniko, stick your head up, will you? Or your hands, sculptor.”

Behind the scowling claimant, pushing impatiently at two men and a woman trying to help him up, a lanky young man got unsteadily to his feet and ran strong square hands through hair with a remnant of purple dye still clinging to it. As his biceps flexed, the lavender butterfly tattooed on his arm seemed to flut-ter. He tried to speak, but a partially deflected blow in the mixup had shoved his collar against his larynx and left him temporarily mute.

I gave him a nod. “Yeh, you match. Pels?”

The Omperiannas hurried over, dancing away from hands grabbing at them.

“What now?” Tom’perianne fluted at me; Xalloor said she did most of the talking for the three of them. “Wait by the door, hmm?”

Pushing the steel collar up and rubbing at his neck, Jaunniko reached me and I waved him over to join, the three musicians.

“The rest of you—” I started.

The slaves began fighting to get to me, tangling their chains, struggling, desperate, yelling, grunting, wrestling with each other.

“Quiet,” I roared at them. “Get back. Give me trouble and you can sit here and rot.” I waited until the noise subsided to a manageable level. “Untangle those chains, dammit, how do you expect us to cut them when they’re messed up like that? All right, right. The more you help, the sooner we can get out of here. You have any idea what’s cranking up outside? This place is going to be rubble before the sun comes up. Bloody rubble. And they’re not caring who does the bleeding.” I turned my head. “Tom’perianne, come here.” When she was at my side, I gave her my stun-ner. “It won’t kill anyone,” I said. “It’ll just lay them out and we’ll leave them laying.” I raised my voice again and repeated that, so everyone could hear it, went on, “Use it on anyone who looks like trouble. You out there, when you’re cut loose, back up against the inside wall if you want us to run shotgun for you; if you figure you can handle yourself outside, take off. Up to you, I’m no nursemaid.”

I plunged into the crowd and began helping Pels sever the chains; the job got easier when the yells and screams from outside came in loud enough for them to get an earful; they calmed down fast and sorted them-selves out as we cut them loose. When we were ready to go, Pels led, with the Omperiannas and Jaunniko immediately behind him. The rest of that motley crop followed, organized into squads that kept together and made good time once they were out of the pen. I

followed a few strides behind so I could scan the whole and have a better chance of spotting trouble.

When they saw the tug’s snout, they really put on some speed. I started hoping we’d reach Chicklet with-out much trouble. Pels flattened a couple of cats be-fore they made up their minds to jump us, that was about it. The two-legged guards were too busy to bother with anything not coming at them. The attack on the walls was more intense, I could see strings of Hordar coming up and over like lines of ants, and the yizzies were thick overhead. Not over us at first. I was hoping they’d keep away; they were

circling high up, beyond the range of the guard's pellet guns, spilling fire over everything and everyone below them, even the front lines of the Surge. The yizzy riders were acting like they weren't part of them on the ground, like they were a Surge on their own. Since most of them were street kids or divorced outcasts, I suppose they had to be a separate force, a third force striking at Huvved and Hordar alike.

We were too big a target. Half a dozen yizzies came at us dripping fire. They stayed high up, my stunner wouldn't reach them. Nothing I could do. Like an idiot I'd left the launch tube and my darts in the tug.

Another yizzy came swooping by, looked like it was carrying two, one draped over the knees of the other; the one in control rested a black tube on his passenger's back. Even that far off I could see what it was—a heavy-duty cutter. It slashed across the inklin's attack-ing us and turned them into ash on the wind.

As the newcomer bagged himself some more twelve year olds, I ran for the tug, cursing Bolodo and Adelaar and Pittipat and Huvved snots and bloody-minded reb-els and the Surge and him up there and everyone and everything that got me here and made me look at these things. Children killing. Killing children. Made me want to vomit.

As Pels finished loading the ex-slaves, a fifth wave of fliers formed up and headed our way. I cupped my hands around my mouth and bellowed at our friend on the yizzy to come on board if that's what he wanted, we were going to get the hell out of here.

He brought his yizzy down until he was hanging over the edge of the lift platform. "N'Ceeagh Pa'ao," he said, his voice was a hoarse roar that had trouble cutting through the noise around us. "Escaped slave asking transport offworld. My son Zaraiz Pa'ao." He patted the boy's buttocks. "Surge got hold of him and I had to put him out. Give me a hand with him."

"Right. How you want to do this?"

"Let me get the straps off." He produced a wicked-looking scalpel from an armsheath and sliced through the braided thongs that tied the boy in place.

I got my hands around the child's waist and lifted; he was small like most Hordar children, slight, a featherweight. I held him while the Pa'ao swung from the saddle and let the yizzy drift off. "We'll go up to the bridge," I said. "We can talk while I'm taking Chicklet back to Base. Mind leaving that cutter in the lock?"

"Uhn, Fiddoodah'ak." Before I could ask what that meant, his mouth split into a lipless grin. "Sure, no problem."

He stripped off the battery and dropped it and the tube near the inner hatch. I gave him the boy and got busy; by the time I had the lift folded in and the outer lock dogged home, Pels had the drives humming.

When we reached the bridge, the Pa'ao laid the boy he'd called his son on the floor mat and dropped down to sit cross-legged beside him. He lifted the child's head and shoulders into his lap and sat with one hand resting lightly on his son's tangled black hair.

I took a last look at the chaos around us, goosed the tug into the air. I'd had more than enough of Tairanna, the Hordar and this whole rescue business.

XV

1. *Three days after the taking of the Warmaster.*

Karrel Goza in Ayla gul inci/mid-morning/cloudy day, gusts of gray rain.

Gul Inci was empty. Empty even of death. No bodies in the streets. No bloodstains or char marks where inklin's and others had burned. In the beast courts the stock complained, udders heavy with curdled milk, feed trays and water troughs empty, pet animals whimpered, whined or howled, hungry and parched, abandoned by those who were supposed to care for them. The wind snapped wash left hanging on the line when the Surge impulse came down on gul Inci, it banged doors left unlatched, rattled and banged shutters. It blew scraps of paper and other debris against and around Karrel Goza who

came walking south from Sirgûn Bol where he'd left Windskimmer noselocked to a mooring mast.

He passed House after House emptied by the Surge impulse. He walked slower and slower, drew his fin-gers across the bright tessera inlaid in the brick of the courtwalls, Family marks and signs taken from Family history. He named the Houses as he touched their signs, a slow invocation of what had been. House Falyan. House Umtivar. House Borazan. House Ish-lemmet. House Tamarta. Empty, echoing, disturbing. A kind of walking nightmare. He moved deeper into the city, walking streets he'd taken so many times before, Sirgûn Bol to Goza House, Goza House to Sirgûn Bol; he did not hurry, he pushed against a growing reluctance to see his own House empty like these others.

He moved past taverns and shops and other small businesses. For the first time he heard voices though he saw no one and none of the businesses were open.

He heard a steady creaking as he drew near the largest of the circles with its speaker minaret a topped-out stone tree in the middle. He remembered the last time he stood there, crowds pressing about him, Geres Duvvar bringing him a paper cone of hot nuts. His grief over the loss of his cousin intensified suddenly, as if he felt it for the first time. He stood looking at the wall he and Geres Duvvar had leaned against while they listened to the Stentor shout. After a while he was aware of the creaking again. He looked up. A body was suspended from the speaker's platform. A hanged man. He moved around so he could see who it was. "Herk," he breathed. The Fehdaz's face was black and distorted and he was stripped naked, but there was no question who hung there. Another mem-ory came back full force—Elmas Ofka that night she found her brother dead of torture. Herk will pay, she said. It may take years, but Herk will pay.

He shrugged. This wasn't Elli's work, she was too busy organizing the world. It didn't matter. Herk the Jerk had enemies enough to guarantee he'd end like this. Without asking himself why he was doing it, he climbed the verdigrised spiral to the platform and cut the rope. He heard Herk's body hit the stones with a loose boneless splat; the Fehdaz must have been hang-ing there for hours, more than a day, long enough for the death-stiffness to pass out of him. They took him when the Surge was just starting here, he thought, that's why they hung him instead of tearing him apart.

He climbed back down and stood over the body. It hadn't begun to stink yet, the weather was too cold for that. He pressed his fingers hard against his eyes. Too many memories here, he couldn't let Herk dirty them. He dropped his hands and looked around for a place to put him.

The timbers of the Fekkri Gate were burned to stumps like rotted teeth and the pile itself was a shell, no more. He got Herk up and over his shoulder, carried the body into the Fekkri court and dropped it on the paving stones.

He left, brushing at himself, a little nauseated. He moved more quickly now, he had a better reason than duty to visit his House. He wanted a bath.

Goza House was in the southeast section of the city, where the Little Houses were and the tenements for the poor, the warehouses, the retting sheds and other factories, down near the water's edge.

The two parts of the main gate were moving in the wind, but not enough to swing closed. Seeing them like that made him angry. The gates of the Great Houses were closed, latched, probably locked though he had not thought to try them. Here the Houses were left open to the wind and whatever thieves escaped the Surge, here where the people were poor and not im-portant. He went through the wall-arch and into the Front Court.

The wind blew dead leaves into dust devils. A soli-tary spray of rain hit him in the face. The House was dead. Everyone was gone, even the Elders. He folded his arms across his chest, hugged them tight against him. It was like his grief for Geres Duvvar, and some-how worse. There was no focus, only a free-floating desolation. "They make a desolation and call it peace," he said aloud.

"What's that mean?"

Karrel Goza looked around, not seeing who it was who spoke to him.

Tazmin Duvvar stepped from the Duvvar Court, stood leaning against a gate pillar. "What's that?" he repeated.

"Someone said it a long time ago and a long way from here. I don't know who or where. The Outsider at the Mines, the teacher, you remember, she told it to her students and one of them told it to

me. It just came to mind.”

“Mmh, morbid,” Tazmin Duvvar said. “Sounds to me like you need a hot meal and a night’s sleep. Let your liver sweeten.”

“How long you been back?”

“I got here yesterday morning. I wasn’t ferrying yips about like you, cousin. One look at the looting there at the Palace and I thought hard times are coming and I better make sure we’ve got the stuff to ride ’em out, that it didn’t walk out in some stranger’s pouch.”

“You see Herk?”

“Hard to miss. Wonder who did it?”

Karrel Goza stretched, yawned. “One thing I know, half Inci’s going to claim they were in on it. Any hot water?”

“Started the boilers this morning. Bath?”

“Yeh. I cut the bastard down, I didn’t like seeing him there. Dumped him in the Fekkri Court. I need to wash him off me.”

Tazmin Duvvar looked up at the clouds, ignoring another brief flurry of rain. “Somebody’s going to have to do something about him if the wind keeps on in this direction; another day or two and we’ll be smelling him.” He moved away from the pillar and followed Karrel Goza around the house. “What’s hap-pening in Gilisim? Did they ever find Old Pittipat or the Grand Sech?”

“Not yet. What’s happening?” Karrel Goza stripped off his jacket and began undoing the fastenings on his shirt. “More of everything you saw before you cut out. More looting, more dead. People wandering around like they’re walking in their sleep. We haven’t begun to sort out who’s what and where they belong, let alone identified the dead. The best guess I heard is as much as a third of us is dead somewhere around Gilisim. It’s going to be a job, getting them buried. Elmas Ofka, her isyas and the Council from the Mines, they’ve got together with vips from the west coast and up from Guneywhiyk. Trying to work out how to organize things now there aren’t any more Huvved and the slave techs are gone, most of them. It’s a mess, Taz. Every one of them has his own idea how to run things. Bless the Prophet, Elli smoothes them down and gets them to start making sense. Not that she’s any saint herself; we’re going to have to watch and make sure she doesn’t take up where Tra Yarta left off.” He pulled open the door to the bathhouse, went in.

Tazmin Duvvar lit the lamps while Karrel Goza started the water running and finished stripping, then he came back and settled on the towel bench, his feet up on the coping about the tub. “You figure we going to get any say at all?”

Karrel Goza slid into the water, shivering as the heat closed round him. He settled his head on the neckrack, closed his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “What we get, we’ll have to take. I did some talking with young Hayal Halak, him from gul Brindar. One of that woman’s students, he was the one who told me the desolation/peace quote. He went inklin for a while before he came to the Mines, he loves the Great Families about as much as he loves Huvved. He picked up some ideas from that woman that sound good, the Greats won’t like ’em, the Ommars either. I think Elli’s going to back him; a lot of them off the Sea Farms might too, they don’t want to see the Greats getting a stranglehold on trade. Isn’t going to be easy. Toss me the soap, eh?”

“Here. Way things are, looks to me like whoever’s ready first it the one who’s gonna take it. Hay and his bunch got their shots planned?”

Karrel Goza soaped the washcloth, scrubbed at his arm. “Planned is one thing, doing is something else.” He balanced an ankle on his knee, began washing his toes. “We’ve got numbers on our side. The Greats don’t smell very sweet to a lot of people, they kissed too much Huvved ass. We could lose it, though, if Brindars won’t talk to Incers and Incers won’t talk to Samlikkaners, and nobody talks to grasslanders, you know how it goes. You, me, the rest of them who took the Warmaster, we’ve got credit we’re going to have to spend.” He switched feet and stopped talking.

Tazmin Duvvar thought that over, then he nodded. “You’ll have to give me the primer version,” he said. “I was never much good at the books, but I tell you this, I can talk a tickler into giving it away free, sit me in a tavern and let me chat her up. Lot of folk out there need that primer same as me. I can get

them to give it a hearing. Can't ask for more."

Karrel Goza splashed water over his face and hair, then climbed from the tub. "Throw me one of those towels you're sitting on, eh?" He caught it and began rubbing at his hair. "I didn't get out much. You see any of ours in Gilisim?"

"Living or dead?"

"Ahhh ... both." He wrapped the towel around him. "Come with me while I get some clean clothes."

"Why not. I've got to get back to feeding the stock, but they can wait a bit, they're not as hungry as they were." He picked up one of the lamps: "Goza Ommar's dead." He touched Karrel Goza's shoulder, patted it lightly, then pushed the door open. "Melter, not much of her left but I knew it was her and I told the deadwagon who she was. We'll have to go through the back, I've got the other doors locked. Duvvar Ommar next to her, same thing."

"Prophet!"

"Yeh. Melter. Left her face alone. Told them about her too." He held the door open for Karrel Goza, went round him and up the back stairs, holding the lamp high to light the dark narrow enclosure, glancing over his shoulder from time to time, talking while he climbed. "Ollanin, dead, all three, Goza, Duvvar, Memeli. Saw my sister Avy and the Memeli Ommar. Alive." He waited on the landing, then went along the hallway to the corner room Karrel Goza had lived in from the time he got his license to fly. "They'd cor-ralled a clutch of youngsters, had them out collecting our folk; I expect most of those still alive will be back here by tomorrow noon." He stepped aside and let Karrel Goza work the pinlock and open the door, then followed him into the room and set the lamp on a table by the bed. "Ylazar Falyan showed up at Sirgfin Bol yesterday with a couple of pilots from the Mines; like us, Prophet be praised, they missed out on the Surge." He perched on a ladderback chair, folded his arms on the top splat and rested his chin on them.

"He looked around for mechanics, found me settling in here, hired me to go over a couple of the airships. Worked on the best till about midnight yesterday. He says he's going to use them ferrying Incers home."

Karrel Goza looked up from his trouser laces. "I left Windskimmer at one of Sirgûn's masts, I didn't see anyone there."

"Took off for Gilisim this morning. Must've left before you got here."

"Ah." He went poking through his drawers hunting for a clean shirt, found one and shook it out, then loosened the laces and pulled it over his head. "Big of him."

"Yeh. He's praying real hard no one senior shows up and in the meantime making points for himself so he can keep his hold even if one does. I expect he'll make it, he had the backbone to get out and over to the Mines when Herk started tightening down."

"Hard to say." He padded to the dresser, peered at himself in the mirror.

"Getting old, eh?"

"Twice as old as I look and that's older than time."

"You and Lirrit Ofka still going to wed?"

"Soon's we get a moment." He dragged a comb through his hair; the damp had tightened the curls into knots that made him swear as he worked them loose.

"Marrying out or she coming in?"

"I don't know. Who knows anything these days. We decided to see how things shape up before we jump one way or the other." He looked over his shoulder at Tazmin Duvvar. "Might not be any more marrying in or out."

"Things going to change that much?"

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"Well, everyone likes to be comfortable and change is always full of burrs and bites."

"You really want to go back to the way it was?"

"Nuh. Yeh. I don't know. I want it to be comfort-able like it was. I want to know what's going to be happening tomorrow and a week from tomorrow and tomorrow next year. Yeh, I know better, but you'd better remember too, Kar, there's a lot and a lot out there like me in those that're still alive. Don't

get too fancy for us, eh?"

Karrel Goza dropped on the bed beside the shoestool, set his foot on it and bent over to put on his sandals. "You feeding the animals," he said. "What else needs doing?"

"Just about everything, I didn't have time yesterday or this morning for much but meals for me and the fourfoots. Looks like our folk dropped whatever they were doing where they were doing it and took off when the impulse hit."

Karrel Goza switched feet. "Mess?"

"Could be worse. Left the fires going, the place could've burned down. Prophet's hand on us, it didn't, they just went out when the coal was gone."

Karrel Goza stood. He yawned, moved his shoulders, clasped his hands behind his head and stretched; the shirt tail he hadn't bothered tucking in lifted in the cold draft coming through the door. He shivered, found an old sweater and pulled it on. "Outside first. Start-ing to feel like snow."

"Yeh. How long you going to be here?"

"Elli wants me back by tomorrow." He waited till Tazmin Duvvar was outside with the lamp, then he pulled the door shut and reset the lock. "She says the serious fights should be starting about then and she'll need all the backing she can get." He let Tazmin Duvvar go ahead with the light. "You said you thought most of our folk will be here by tomorrow?"

"Laza said he'd bring them, favor to me if I'd work without pay since he's short of coin. You want me along?"

"Yeh. If you're going to be persuading people to back us, you ought to know what you're talking about."

2

The room was filled with slow moving shadows from the dying fire and wandering warm drafts mellow with the smell of the mulled cider steaming on the hearth.

The long window was closed but unshuttered, its embrasure was padded on the bottom and sides to make a comfortable windowseat; it had thick yunkhide tacked over the padding, rubbed to a deep glow by decades of soaping and sitting. Karrel Goza was stretched out in the window, sipping at a mug of cider, listening to the rain drum against the glass. Taz was right, he thought, morbid doesn't make it. He was exhausted, sore and deeply content. The emptiness that was desolation in the morning now seemed to vibrate with possibility. An emptiness waiting, wanting to be filled. He sipped at the cider and thought about that a while and after a while he stopped thinking altogether. Tomorrow could wait until the sun rose. Now was hot cider, red fire and the steady beat of the rain.

XVI

1. 265 days std. from home and heading back.

In the Split.

I went out to the Belt and brought Slancy back, put her down on the plateau, then we started loading. I got the ex's together and made my speech about how rough it was going to be riding in the hold for some three months while we were insplitting to Helvetia. I told them if they wanted to miss out on that, I'd take their names instead of them. They could wait for a more comfortable ride; I'd leave them shelters and a miniskip so they could get around. I didn't want un-happy passengers; taking that many people I knew shitall about into Slancy made me very nervous; being trashed and rescued didn't turn any of them into an-gels. I told them the food was going to be ship-basic which they'd get sick of very fast; there wouldn't be water or any other way of taking a bath, so they'd be pretty ripe when they walked out of the hold; most of all, life was going to be very very boring. Insplitting was bad enough when you had something to keep you busy. Sitting around and staring at the hold walls was something else. I didn't get a single taker; they wanted out of there, the sooner the better.

A few of them I knew something about, I brought up front. Stowed them in the crew cabins so I'd

have some shooters back of me if there was trouble. Aslan and Adelaar, of course. N'Ceeagh and his boy, along with the weapons he skipped over to the Mines to collect which I impounded for the duration, not that I didn't trust him, he and Pels got on like long lost brothers, I just didn't want that much firepower wan-dering around loose. Chuth the Bard and his girlfriend; both of them were oldtime survivors, besides I kind of enjoyed baiting Adelaar. The Omperiannas; Kumari had a passion for music of all kinds, that's why them. The rest brought the shelters in and set them up in the hold, got them organized in sectors like they were out under the trees, improvised screens for privacy areas; they worked almost like they were 'droids with the pattern imprinted. It was a smooth loading, surprised me a little till I thought about it. These weren't your average thumb-fingered boneheads, Bolodo skimmed cream for them.

Two hundred sixty-five days std. out of Telffer, according to ship's log, we lifted off Tairanna and headed for the Limit.

2

As soon as we dived, Pels activated the squirtlink, sent the squeal to ti Vnok's receptor, giving him the passpartout so he could get hold of the data packet, letting him know we had Leda Zag and Ilvinin Taivas so he could tell whoever was interested and stir us up some heavy support. The squeal was too short to trigger ears and even if someone got lucky, there were no tags on it to identify either end. The cover was down, I hoped it'd be thick enough to turn the knives waiting for us.

3

The trip went better than I expected.

Adelaar disappeared into Slancy's workshop with my home stats to get a start on redoing its security. This time I made sure Kinok kept 'yes tentacles out of her business. I swept the shop and removed all suspect foliage; like most of us, when it comes to someone outside the family, 'yes ethics get a bit shaky. Ethics aside, pulling her string about Churn was one thing, she got nasty on the verbal end and gave me a good flaying when she felt like it, but on the business end, she was a wall; she knew what she wanted and what she didn't and no jabs would shift her; if she didn't want snoops watching her work, that's what she in-tended to get or she just might decide to ditch that part of the deal and more than ever I wanted her touch dressing up my house. Funny, having lived so long and semi-voluntarily acquired a body and with it a definite end to that life, I was beginning to appreciate the fragility of ... well, everything.

Churri and Xalloor got together with the Omperi-annas and began working out a new act; they figured that the publicity from the Return of the Disappeared and their connection with it made them a draw the bookers couldn't ignore. Kumari figured the same thing; she was going to finance the tour if they came up with something she liked. Since they kept trying out parts of the thing on the ex's in the hold, they kept the passengers happy and entertained. Which made me happy.

Aslan was something of a surprise. She worked on her reports a lot, but not all the time. I hadn't paid much attention to her back on Tairanna, too busy being irritated by this and that, I suppose, and too tired from flying all night digging out the targets; you want another excuse, I've got this tendency to focus on what I'm busy at so I don't see much of what's around me, peripheral images shoved outside my pe-riphery, if you know what I mean. She looked a little like her mother around the eyes and mouth, but her coloring was more dramatic, her features heavier ... no, that's not the word. Stagier. More dramatic like the coloring. The bones showed and they were what a sculptor called good. She photoed better than she looked in person, well, better's not the word either, she was prettier in the stills, but a lot of the personality got lost. I remembered Adelaar saying Shuh! she's my daughter and I love her, but even I wouldn't call her a beauty. She's not all that sexy either. To be honest, Quale, she's a boring person. Just goes to show, Mama don't know everything she thinks she does. It was a friendly time. Pleasant waking up and feeling her warm beside me. More than pleasant when she woke up. She enjoyed sex more than anyone I can remember knowing. Laughed a lot, made me laugh with her. I was almost sorry when Slancy chimed to let me know she was ready to slip back to realspace.

4. 354 days std. out of Telffer.

Helvetia.

We came up nose to nose with three destroyers and a gravity sink that nailed us; poor old Slancy couldn't wiggle a fin.

Before I had time to start sweating, the mainscreen lit up. Helvetian perimeter patrol logo announcing who was out there, then someone who ordinarily walked in more exclusive circles. I knew that sour smile and the face-it was tacked onto, though he didn't know me and probably didn't want to. The only time we actu-ally met I was sharing someone else's body. Malurio Marchog, the Seven's Enforcer. Cattway of the Hel-vetias. I relaxed. Home free, I thought.

"Swardheld Quale," he said, proving me wrong about that much; he knew my face. Courtesy of ti Vnok, no doubt.

"Marchog Cattway," I said, showing I have my sources too.

"Permission to come aboard," he said.

Polite bastard. What he meant was open your gd lock before I gd pull the gd thing off its hinges. Well, I asked for Helvetian cover, now I pay for it. "Permis-sion herewith granted," I said. "Want me to send a boat over or you providing your own transport?" That was a bit of swank; with the sink out there focused on us, we couldn't space a fart.

He ignored it. "Helvetian rules apply out here as on the ground," he said. "Crack your forward lock, portside."

"I hear you, Marchog Cattway." It sounded like he was coming over himself, which was a bit of a surprise. Apparently that pair of rescuees down in the hold were mote important than we'd thought. Old ti Vnok, he slipped up this time; on the good side maybe, but definitely a miscalc. He's going to have to work to live that down. I cracked the lock, sent Kumari to make sure N'Ceegh didn't have some hold-outs tucked away; I wasn't sure how much he knew about Helvetian rules and how seriously the Seven took them. I left Pels at the com and went down to the *flock to remind the Helvetians as tactfully as I could that this was my ship and we were outside the Limit, in so-called freespace. They'd probably be polite enough to listen without snickering. Even Marchog.

5

The inner hatch opened and I dumped the speech fast. Six pretors trotted through, shoved me against the wall, no malice, just getting me out of the way. They split, three on each side, dark, massive, huge, as intimidating as two-leggers in battle armor ever get when they're not actually coming at you. I sucked in my gut and waited.

A mirror-sphere about two meters across floated from the lock, moving along half a meter off the floor at a pace about that of a man out for an afterdinner stroll. It stopped in front of me; I thought it was inspecting me though it's hard to tell what's going on inside something when you're staring at a funhouse version of yourself smeared across the outside. "The people, where are they?" It had a deep bass voice that oozed with authority.

"The hold, despois," I said, being as polite as I knew how. Great god, I was thinking, one of the Seven? Hooo-eee, talk about your heavy support.

"Lead," it said.

Very careful to keep my hands in view, I moved past the pretors and started for the dropshaft. I heard the guard clumping into position behind me, the sound echoed by a second sextet coming out of the lock; somewhere back there Marchog was moving up to the Bridge with his own pretors; he wouldn't leave Slancy in our hands, not with one of the Seven aboard her. I didn't like it, But I certainly wasn't going to kick up a fuss. All I could do was hope this was a temporary dispossession.

6

The hold smelled like a roadshow zoo; I suppose Faceless in his sphere got filtered air, but I didn't, it was enough to choke a goat. He drifted out to the middle and hovered there, reflecting the faces or

what-ever turned up to him. “You were slaves?” The basso burred out and bounced off the walls.

Some of them knew what they were looking at; whoever didn’t was getting the word fast if the hissing that spread through the hold meant what I thought. The Kakeran Posa Ala was the first to answer. He set his hands on his hips, glared up at his distorted reflection. “Klaan vem!” he growled. “Bolodo man put a kujjim collar round my neck. Five kujjim years and nobody did shit till Quale there come for us.”

Dey Chomedy and Leda Zag came elbowing through the thickening crowd about Posa Ala, the tall one opening a path for the little.

Dey Chomedy stomped her foot and growled, then shouted up at the sphere, “Bolodo men took me off my mountain, took me from my nest; they did not ask my consent, they did not pay my price. Seven years the masters milked my sweat and drank my tears and nothing did they pay. Was I slave? Ssss. Show me Bolodo man, let me take my pay from his flesh and his sweat and his blood.”

Leda Zag tapped the tall femme’s arm and was lifted to her shoulder. “So it was with me, despois, I traveled to a place for rest but I did not reach it. Before I reached it, a gas bomb filled my flickit; when I woke, I was in a scout on my way to Weersyll and beyond. For three years I mourned one dearer to me than the beat of my heart, for three years I suffered, until the man Quale and his companions took me from my servitude. It has not been easy coming home, not easy for me, not easy for any of us, but we suffer these small travails gladly because we are going home.”

I kept my face very straight and serious, though I enjoyed that little speech; we spent most of a warm afternoon up by the lake dickering over her fee for her affirmation of my noble contribution to her freedom. I

was kicking back half the reward, to be paid into her dainty little hands the day I got it, golden gelders, coin not credit.

After that the rest of them yelled their anger, a confused hammering of sound. Even the mirror-sphere seemed to shudder and I was wondering if I’d get out of there with hearing intact.

“Quiet.” The basso boomed out, hammering back at the yammer in the hold. “Enough!” He had the advantage of amplification, but it was several minutes before he broke through and my collection of ex-slaves simmered down a bit.

“Helvetia has heard you,” he said. Big of him. “She will expedite your arrival and provide housing for you until this matter is cleared up. She will provide means of contacting your kin or other individuals concerned about you.”

Hmm, I thought, such generosity. Looks like they’ve already got a strangle hold on Bolodo’s assets and want to keep the noose tight, they can’t let the thought get round that they’re playing with client’s gelt. They ought to pay Adelaar’s expenses and double for a bonus, what a lovely present she’s dropped in their little laps. I kept my face immobile and my hands clasped behind me, but I was beginning to enjoy this quite a lot.

“Helvetia asks only,” the sphere boomed out, “that you agree to testify as to the circumstances of your abductions. Bolodo Neyuregg Ltd. is actively contesting the claims relayed to us by an agent of Swardheld Quale. Because we may invoke certain clauses in the Contract Bolodo Neyuregg Ltd. signed with us, in order to put several executives of that Company through Involuntary Verification, it may be necessary for some of you to pass through the Verifier and otherwise make identification of such individuals. If that is possible and within your knowledge. You will be compensated for the time and the harrowing of your emotions.”

The sphere drifted toward the tube. I got out of the way before I was shifted aside by the pretors and followed the procession from the hold.

When Faceless said expedited, he meant it. Escorted by two destroyers though a lane cleared for us, we sailed at spooky speed for insystem travel straight to a mooring usually reserved for those wealthy beyond my dreams of avarice, where Slancy was put to bed in a section all her own. Shuttles drew up to her flanks and waited there like a ride in an amusement park, ready to take the ex-slaves down. Kumari had all the paperwork done, she’d taken care of that during the trip in between Xalloor’s rehearsals—name, world-of-origin, life history, work status, circumstances of abduction, fingerprints,

bodyprints, retina prints and cell coding with a snippet of freeze-dried skin or flesh or chitin, whatever seemed appropriate, sealed to each statement. I didn't expect any trouble collecting the rewards, not with ti Vnok getting his thirty percent, but Kumari was a worrier, it made her the best Mom Slancy'd ever enjoyed. So, no delays. We lined our passengers up and hustled them into the shuttles. We rode down in the last of them, Pels, Kumari and I along with Adelaar and Aslan, Churri, Xalloor and the Omperiannas, N'Ceeh and the boy.

Now the real tedium began.

8

Images:

Aslan aici Adlaar: Yes, that's the man. He was on Tairanna when Fangulse Tra Yana interviewed us. Churri the Bard saw him also, as did Parnalee Pagang Tanmairo Proggerd, though he can't tes-tify since he died mad.

Kante Xalloor: Yes, that's the stringman who drugged. me. I can't connect him to Bolodo except by the circumstances that when I woke I was in a Bolodo scout; I knew it was Bolodo by the patches on the pilot's shipsuit. Yes, that's the pilot who flew the scout.

Jaunniko: Yes, that's the stringman who came on to me, then drugged me. Yes, that's the pilot who flew the scout that took me to the Cage on Weersyll.

N'Ceeh of Pao-teely: Yes, that's the man who led the raid on my village. That's the man who boasted to me my blood was ash.

Tom'perianne: Yes, I saw that man and that one also in the Great Chamber of the Palace on Tairanna, when my sisters and I sang for the Huvved Impe-rator. My sisters can swear to them also. Yes, that's the pilot who flew us to Weersyll. Yes, those are the crewmen who loaded us on the slave transport. My sisters can swear to them also.

Adelaar aici Arash: Yes, those are the flakes I made of lists I discovered in the mainBrain in the Palace on Tairanna. I swear and will pass through the Verifier on this point, these flakes are not altered or added to in any way. I will also attest and swear this is the data I abstracted from Bolodo's own mainBrain on Spotchals, I will pass through the Verifier on this point, these flakes are not altered or added to in any way.

Swardheld Quale: Yes, that is the contract I made with Adelaar aici Arash. Yes, that is the state-ment I made concerning my activities in the Horgul system. I do swear and attest that what I have said there is truthful, I will pass through the Veri-fier on this point and will answer any questions while under the Verifier relating to that statement.

9. *624 days std. since we started this thing.*

The Nest/Telffer/Home again.

Crew and I are going to be set for at least a decade of lazing about, taking commissions we liked, not jobs we had to do. Between the rosepearls and the re-wards, to say nothing of Adelaar's fee, we will have a credit account on Helvetia so exalted I get altitude sickness contemplating it.

The Faceless Seven kicked in a thousand gelders apiece for the extras we brought along gratis, a nice little bonus; the Seven were overflowing with the milk of ... well, something as they began taking apart Bolodo's assets, at least those they could get hold of, not a small percentage of .the whole if ti Vnok was right.

While I was waiting for the interrogations to grind to their eventual end, I passed the time doing this and that. I gave the rosepearls to ti Vnok; he wouldn't do the selling, but he'd find an agent who'd get me the best price; I added a chunk to the credit account I set up for the Barker and his asteroid mines, dropped a fee on a cobben of NightCrawlers to take out the one pointed at me. Ah yes, and ti Vnok managed to slip Leda Zag her baksheesh without her patron knowing. He's a good friend.

We dropped Aslan at University. It gave me a twinge to see how eager she was to get away. She'd done all she could to help finish off Bolodo, now she was going after the Oligarchs on Kavelda Styernna. That was more important than me or any other man. Adelaar was right for once, men were recreation

when her daughter wasn't busy with something else. Since I do considerable business with University, I thought we might recreate ourselves some other time. I played the idea around and decided I liked it.

We took Adelaar to Droom; she wanted to get Adelaar whipped into shape again before she took off to work on my house. She'd been away for over four years and was nervous about what she'd find left of her business.

That left Crew and me alone at last on Slancy Orza. It felt good. Kinok had worked his remotes till their bearings ran hot, scrubbing out the hold and the rest of her. She felt clean and fresh. Frisky.

It was deep winter when we got back, the month called *Wolves Running*; snow was piled into three-meter drifts when we dropped the lander on the pad. Up in Slancy, Kinok was rubbing his tentacles to-gether again, scritchng away like crazy, laughing at us idiots leaving a warm clean ship so we could get our-selves soaked to the bone and half-frozen.

The housekeep was burbling over with things to tell us about the small lives that prowled about on my land; among other things, two feral and very pregnant cats had showed up; they had their kittens in the summerhouse. She said she couldn't understand how they'd managed to get through the shield (I had my doubts about that), but they had, so she'd deloused the mogs and their kits and shot all of them full of antibiotics and organized a feeding schedule to keep the mamas at their job. She was full of how well she'd coped. Ever since Kumari worked over her program-ming, she's developed strong maternal urges. Some-times I get tired of her fussing, then I see the absurdity of a neuter like our Kri coming up with such a con-struct; even if Kri were sexed, she belongs to a bud-ding species where motherhood is like a bad case of acne. I think she reads too much.

We'll finish out the winter at the Nest; come spring we'll go take a look at Tairanna to see how things are working out and what kind of trading we can do. It's mostly curiosity, though it won't hurt having a stash of rosepearls in the basement that we could dip into should Luck turn mean on us.

On the way back we might stop off at University to see if they have any interesting commissions needing an experienced and trustworthy Crew. I might call up Aslan to see if she's unsaddled her white horse and ready to enjoy another sort of ride. It's a short life these bodies have, and a good one; fragile but full of heat and flavor.

I'm sitting up in my tower. It's a clear night. No clouds. The stars out this way are sparse but that makes them all the lovelier and the moonlight on the snow is magical.