



CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

Spell of Apocalypse

By Mayer Alan Brenner

(c) 1993-2007 by Mayer Alan Brenner. First published by DAW Books, New York, NY, May, 1994. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivs 3.0 License.

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE GROUND, the bird was an infinitesimal white speck lost against the isoluminescent glare of the midday sky. From the perspective of the seagull, however, the ground and its features were clearly apparent in all their multiplicity and confusion. Below it now as it circled in its leisurely bank was the sparkling band of the Tongue Water, to its right the smoky bulk of the manufacturing district and beyond that the widening mainland, to its left the great city of Peridol.

There was more than just scenery transpiring down there under the bird's dangling feet, though. The seagull's unhurried path was carrying it around a wide coil of dark smoke that mounted even higher, curling and roiling, until an onshore breeze took it and shredded it into streamers and ragged sheets. Following the pillar of smoke downward took the eye into the midsection of a tall bridge. The bridge currently spanned the water less effectively than it likely had even a short time before. The center reach of the roadbed was obscured by steam clouds that were replacing the dark smoke with a puffier white. Here and there, where the steam parted, a few dying flames could be noted, and in more numerous other locations the surface of the water itself was visible through the bridge floor, rimmed by jagged holes and the raw edges of ruptured steel.

Wedged up against and partially underneath the bridge on its upstream surface, glinting and glittering, was a prodigious cliff of ice. Even to the seagull's inexperienced eye, it was clear that the steam clouds had resulted from the contact, in the not-too-distant past, of the shorn-off crown of the iceberg with the incendiary fires. Since the center section of the bridge was exhibiting - in addition to the roadbed damage - a prominent sag and list, of dire structural import, it was also apparent that the supporting influence of the iceberg's bulk was keeping the larger part of the bridge from collapsing full-on into the water. A slender crag of ice that had not been clipped on contact with the bridge still towered over the upstream mass of the iceberg and loomed at a perilous angle over the bridge itself. Curiously, the uppermost section of this ice needle seemed to bear within it the crushed remains of what might have been a modest fishing boat.

Spectacular though these sights were, the seagull's interest was not primarily architectural. Crowds of people were apparent on every side; on the bridge itself, on the river-bank grandstands, even a few remaining bobbers in the water or on small boats being ferried to the shore. Flocks of other birds wheeled about as well, those of sea and land keeping largely separate but all diving periodically to snare some useful morsel from the water or the crush on land. With a glance back over its shoulder the seagull verified it was being trailed at a respectful distance by a congregation of other gulls, panting and bedraggled from some recent exertion though they appeared.

A few large sea-creatures were still visible too, as looming shadows beneath the surface or as splashing wakes of foam. Confused by the abrupt end to the Running of the Squids but still attracted by the lures, a school of leaping marlin were trying to thread the tight gauntlet beneath the bridge and break through to the open ocean downstream. A lingering leviathan, wisely deciding against pitting itself against the bridge, was beating its way back upstream against the current.

The gull stood on a wingtip and spiraled down toward the bridge and the Peridol shore. From the swirls of soldiers, rescuers, gawkers, and hangers-on an occasional character stood out. Heading off the bridge into the city was a man who stood a full head taller than even the heftiest of the crowd around him. The man stood out even further by virtue of the breadth given him by the people in his immediate vicinity, even at the expense of hurling themselves bodily away to either side or of flinging themselves to the ground. The bird had descended low enough to catch the dull glint from the man's nicked battle sword, but the glower on his face would clearly have been sufficient by itself to open the path in front of him. The man also had a bundle slung lightly over one shoulder, something that was either a six-foot length of crisped meat fresh from the spit of a street rotisserie, or, improbable though it might have been, an actual still-or-barely living person.

The gull cawed twice and then flapped vigorously, gaining altitude again as it launched itself over the city. Beyond the fashionable estates mounting the slopes of the Crust, on its way toward the palace complex, the bird spied a churning mob surging along a boulevard, howling and hurling offal and the traditional rotten produce at something up ahead. As the vantage point changed, this something resolved itself first into a sizable contingent of soldiers, and then in their midst a stout ox-cart. Lashed down to the bed of the cart and apparently encased in partial stonework to boot was another man. He shared with the berserker the same expression of grim determination. It was more difficult to read his face, however, since his head was all but obscured behind its bindings and a mask-like cage. As had happened with the hulking berserker, several gulls detached themselves from the trailing flock and began to loop deliberately above the cart as the lead bird swooped away.

The great city held far too many urgent sights for the bird to give even fleeting attention to each one. Accordingly, it passed over without a second glance another human figure sprawled prostrate in the refuse-heaped mud of a narrow back alley, its eyes fixed on yet another fire off across the city up ahead. In truth, a second glance would scarcely have revealed more information concerning this particular human. The trash covered the body so thoroughly that even its sex could not so easily be determined, and as for its status among the living or otherwise, well, certainly no sign of breath or movement disturbed the stillness of its repose. But then if the seagull had chosen to be comprehensive about it, it would have most likely had no trouble finding another dozen or two people in similar circumstances at that very moment somewhere in the city. Was the city not, after all, Peridol, foremost in the known world in every leading category, urban violence not least of all?

Whether the gull indulged in this particular depth of reflection was obscure. Its purpose, on the other hand, could scarcely be doubted. As it gained altitude, the second black cloud-pillar ahead revealed more of its base behind the intervening structures and low hills. Where the fire on the bridge had been dying under the melting ice, this new one was clearly in the prime of its life. Such were the volume of the leaping flames and rolling fireballs and shooting pyrotechnic flares that its source was wholly shrouded. Anything from a single building to a full block or more might be in the midst of being consumed.

Beneath the seagull now, reeling down the center of a street, was another ragged and disheveled man. He was both singed and dripping sea water, and like the others the bird had singled out for closer inspection his face was set in a grim expression of bleak determination. As the bird watched, the man staggered and almost fell on his face, obviously pushing across the limit of his endurance. He managed not to go down, though, and instead continued the last vestiges of his dead run.

Short of exhortation, there was no purpose to be served by lurking overhead; either the man would collapse or he wouldn't. If he remained on his feet, it seemed likely to the gull that the man would ultimately arrive at the same destination as its own. Although if he didn't show up - for whatever reason - the bird was going to be more than a little put out. It flapped vigorously again and headed for the fire.

Owing to the precaution of approaching from upwind, it took several minutes to reach the scene. Braving the unstable updrafts, the seagull side-slipped its way toward the column of smoke and executed a careful dive. One street-facing building was the centerpiece, although at least some of the adjoining structures were a clear loss as well. *Whoosh!* - another fireball rolled out of the smoke and ascended toward the bird. The gull slid out of the way, feeling its tail feathers crisp, and glided toward more stable air. Had it heard any cries from the fully engulfed facility below? - detected any signs of life? No, it decided, it had not. As the bird dropped to a perch on a gable across the street, the remainder of the roof fell in, sending forth a fresh shower of embers and flaming sparks. The front wall leaned over toward the fire and then blew into vapor, floor by floor, from the uppermost peak straight down to the foundation.

A civic firefighting team had their gear spread out on the street in front of the building. Their sorcerer was making futile passes in the air, watching rain clouds begin to condense and then get immediately shredded to

bits by the churning hot vapors. His associates were wielding a hose leading back to their water wagon. The declining trickle from the nozzle, though, spoke to the imminent depletion of their supply.

The gull fluffed its feathers and settled down to wait. There was undoubtedly more to come.

The Great Karlini lurched through the streets, hoping it had been just a delusion, just a fever of his overwrought brain, just a sign his mental house of cards had taken an inconvenient moment to spring into ruin. But if there was a sign, it was clearly not found merely inside his own head. The evidence was apparent off ahead, in the column of coiling black smoke winding and twisting its way above the rooftops.

And he'd thought he had left pandemonium behind him at the Tongue Water. Or no, he had scarcely thought that at all. At the instant that horrible, despairing cry had split his head he had known that no matter the level of discord at the Running of the Squids, the true affliction - or at least the affliction closest to his own interests - would be found far across town.

The cry still hung in his ears. *Levitation*, Karlini thought, *why didn't anyone ever come up with workable levitation?* But he was putting all his remaining energy into running. Even if there *was* levitation he'd have no reserve to spare to invoke it, or any other spell-work for that matter - not that he could think of any spell activity that would be particularly helpful just at the moment. Resurrection was another concept endlessly discussed, endlessly debated upon, that regardless still eluded even the gods, as far as anyone knew. Whether it existed or not, though, it was what he'd need.

Bad planning, bad planning and irresponsibility, and he had no one but himself to blame. He'd have no one else to blame for the rest of his life. If he hadn't been so drained and exhausted from that out-of-control effort against the ice sorcerer - what was his name, Dortonn - and then his unexpected bath in the Tongue Water, perhaps he'd have still been able to think of something, to be there when Roni had needed him

That shriek, that *dying* shriek -

Or was it the sign of death? Might there be hope? Things even less probable had somehow managed to squeak themselves to an acceptable resolution, before. But this time? *This* time?

Then somehow he had arrived. The whole block seemed to be on fire. His arms reaching forward, feeling the air, Karlini plunged toward the flames; then, as his waterlogged clothes began to steam and his face began to sear he came limply to a halt. Maybe she hadn't been there. Maybe it was just Dortonn's final diversion.

In his reverie, he had actually begun to consider hurling himself to immolation in the flames when he suddenly felt himself beaten roughly about the head, and then seized with a sharp pinch on the shoulder.

"Oh, it's you again, is it," said Karlini, not even bothering to glance around at the seagull; he knew the bird far too well by this time, having been haunted by it since this whole thing had started, somewhere off in some desert. "Thanks for saving my life, I suppose, not that I've done anything with it but screw up when people needed me."

People? Karlini thought. Well, yes, but not just people. They might have been estranged (another matter that had clearly been his fault) but she was still his wife, and the person he'd intended to spend the rest of his life with. *Was* his wife? *Had been* his wife.

Had been his life.

So Karlini continued to stare, sweat and other fluids running down his face, his skin blistering from the heat, his breath coming harsh and twisted, trying still to get his mind back in gear, as flaming timbers crashed and

smoke billowed and prospects turned to ash; he failed to notice when the seagull screeched and flapped off to another part of the crowd, or when it returned, bringing others with it.

What does a guy have to do? Jurtan Mont had been wondering as he and Tildy watched the fire brigade try to contain the disaster and keep the entire block from going up, and hope to stop the flaming embers from jumping streets and buildings and leapfrogging across the district. He had been through quite a lot in the last day himself, culminating with his last-possible-moment nick-of-time arrival to pull his sister out of the building to safety on the street. But did his sister bother to thank him? Did she bother to *notice* him? No, all she'd done was keep edging away from him and staring at the fire. Of course, he was still covered with filth and reeked from his lengthy encounter with a hill of night soil, but he *had* unmistakably saved her life. What did she want from him?

She wouldn't answer his questions, either. Answer? Jurtan doubted she was even listening to him. Her information might be important, too. Take the guy she'd been with. Who was he, anyway? Why did Jurtan's music sense keep hitting him with warning slidehorn wails whenever the man was around? And then what had happened to the fellow in the Karlini lab? Had he set the fire? Was he dead, or if not where was he now?

How could Jurtan protect his sister if she didn't even have the good sense to realize she needed it?

Then all of a sudden she had opened up. But had it been to tell him what he needed to know? Hah! "So what happened to *you* since yesterday?" she'd said.

"I was chased. I escaped. I got lost. I don't want to talk about it," he'd concluded.

Okay, so it hadn't been the smartest thing to say, even if she did have him miffed already. He should have taken the opening to start engaging her in conversation, and then steered things to the topics in which he was interested. Instead, she'd immediately tuned him out again. And *then*, while he'd been trying to think of a new wedge to crack open her shell, they'd been dived on by this crazy seagull; dived on and virtually shoved down the street back toward the raging fire.

Ahead of Jurtan, his sister faltered. "It's Karlini," she said uncertainly.

Who do you think it would be, with that seagull involved? Jurtan thought, but he was proud of himself that he hadn't actually said it out loud. "Well, maybe he knows what's going on."

"He wasn't here," said Tildy.

Before Jurtan could say anything else, the seagull slammed into him again with its webbed feet extended, knocking him forward and into his sister. The music in his head, which had been playing a pretty demoralizing dirge, broke ranks with a mocking accordion wheeze. Jurtan seized Tildy around the wrist and yanked her forward. "Come on," he said, "before that bird decides to do us in." She dragged along behind him in a dazed shamble.

A moment later, Jurtan saw that the one in the *real* daze was the Great Karlini. He looked as though he'd just lost his last friend. His last - so that was it! His sister had neglected to mention anything about Ronibet Karlini in her recent experiences.

Becoming aware of their presence with him now, Karlini took in the Monts' own charred and ash-covered appearances. Tildamire's arms and face were fried a bright shiny red and her sleeves were barely more than clinging soot. "You were here?" Karlini stated. "What about Roni?"

"Inside," said Tildy, "I think."

"What happened?"

With her eyes too wide and her voice too shrill, and her words, when they came at all, trickling out in short meandering bursts, it was plain that Tildamire was barely still in this world herself. "He was different. It was almost like he wasn't the same person at all. But he threw a fireball at Roni, and it - she -"

"Who?" said Karlini. "Who threw a fireball?"

"The guy with no name. The Creeping Sword."

The air went out of Karlini and he slumped even further. "Him? Are you sure? What do you mean he wasn't like the same person?"

"There was - I mean, it looked like *light* was coming out of his eyes. He looked crazy, out of his mind, he was tearing up everything, and then he threw this fireball and everything went white, I couldn't see, and -"

"Excuse me," said a loud voice. Karlini swung around and saw a hefty man in heavy padded oilskins and a stout hard cap with a wide bill brim; an axe swung at his side in a belt sheath. The man had sweat running off his burly mustache. "Fire Chief Cinder. Are you connected with this building?"

"Damn it, yes," Karlini said.

"Then what's inside? Why is it burning so hot? You been storing anything toxic we need to worry about?"

Toxic? Oh, crap. Karlini gazed down the block, where the roof of another structure was beginning to show flames. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid there is."

"Figured as much," Fire Chief Cinder said with resignation. "That's Wraith District for you. Something took out our magic user soon as he set up." Cinder gestured with a gloved hand. Across the street next to the water wagon was another man in a firefighter outfit, lying on his back on the ground staring sightlessly at the sky, his lips moving feebly.

Karlini sighed. "I'd better see what I can do," he said. *Did anyone listen when I tried to tell them this was a bad idea?* Of course not. He closed his eyes, raised an exhausted hand, and forced his fingers into the release template for a preliminary probe. *Better key it to the containment field on the vats*, Karlini thought, *start off by making sure those magical organisms of Roni's are still in their cages*. The containment spells should have been good against more than a little fire... but where were they? What had that crazy Creeping Sword guy been doing here, anyway? What -

Karlini's hand jerked. His personal protection field clicked on, sucked at his energy reserve as he tried to cast loose the probe-tether before this pumped feedback loop got out of control -

- but he'd already depleted his reserve dealing with Dortonn, and he'd been drained even more than that getting in and out of the Tongue Water and then launching on his desperate run across the city, and on top of that there was the added adrenal draw-down from the emotional shock

Karlini knew when he began to keel over but had no idea if he hit the ground.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN KARLINI FOUND OUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED he was going to want my head. Of course, that would be his *first* reaction; after he'd had a chance to think about it he'd come up with something *really* nasty. At the moment, my take on the subject was that if he wanted my head he was welcome to it. It sure hadn't done me or anyone around me much but lasting harm.

Well, like the saying goes, I hadn't been careful what I'd wished for, so sure enough that's what I'd gotten. Now I might have known who I was, but I hadn't really solved anything. As it had turned out there probably hadn't been anything I could have done about it either. At least I hoped that was the case. It was one thing if I'd just been trapped in my body, being dragged along for the ride.

But if there *had* really been something I could have done to prevent it...

"So," said Gashanatantra.

I opened my eyes and glared at him across from me in the closed carriage. "'So'? That's all you can say, 'so'? 'So,' what?"

"Getting testy, are you?"

"Oh, testy, is it? You don't like testy? You think I should just accept it all and move along, none the worse for wear? You find out *your* true identity is a homicidal maniac and then tell me about testy."

"So," Gash repeated, "now that you have exposed your spleen, what do you propose to do about this situation - Iskendarian?"

"Don't call me that."

"Isn't it your name?"

"Damned if I know," I told him. Damned if I know. We'd obviously been occupying the same body, and the same brain too, him and me, but that was just the trouble. Him and me. I might have been able to dip into the underlying goo beneath both of us and return with some learned skill or the occasional odd fact - and indeed I had - but that was as close I'd come to feeling like he was anything more than the guy in the other room down the hall. I'd naively figured that when I finally broke through to reveal my hidden identity, wiped from sight by the Spell of Namelessness, it would seem familiar. Sure, I thought maybe major areas would still turn out to be gone forever, not merely hidden from sight but scraped clean. What I hadn't anticipated was that "I" still wouldn't recall the slightest scrap of memory that would make me remember being whoever-I'd-been. "We" were still utter strangers.

Not strangers like long-lost brothers, either. We didn't seem *anything* alike, which was fine with me, but didn't go any distance toward resolving the question of whether I was responsible for his actions.

On the other hand, another thing that I'd feared hadn't happened either. I hadn't been merged into him. I hadn't ceased to exist as an autonomous being; my personality hadn't seemed to change, my sense of self was intact - and neither seemed anything at all like his.

A lot of this could be explained if he'd told the truth when he'd said he'd created me. That didn't make me feel any better, especially considering the fact that as soon as he'd finished saying *that* he'd done his best to toss me back into whatever primordial soup he claimed to have ladled me out of.

Still, it all just didn't make sense, not that I was about to tell that to Gash, of all people. I mean, sneaky plots and long-range plans may be a way of life, but what I'd heard from Iskendarian didn't add up. Even if my worser half had decided to conceal himself from his enemies by going underground behind a false front, or he'd hatched some plot whose resolution had been a century out but for whose resolution he still intended to be on hand, there had to be better ways of running it than this harebrained contrivance.

Of course, given the facts as I knew them, that same harebrain was also me.

Gash was regarding me thoughtfully. He was still covered with filth and soot from what he'd referred to in passing as "that mess at the bridge," but then I hadn't exactly cleaned up either. Actually, I was in lousier shape than he was, not only in appearance but in damage, of which I'd suffered quite a bit while he showed no evidence of any problem deeper than approximately the level of his skin. Other than the problem of the habitual paths of his mind, which goes without saying. He'd had his strange little assistant in the flying brass ball flag down this carriage for us where we'd staggered the few blocks away the burning Karlini place, but then the assistant had swooped off himself, leaving the two of us here together this short while later and none the better for the experience.

"I seem to recall you were trying to uncover your identity," Gash said finally. "Are you happy now?"

"Not particularly, no, thank you."

"Not even when the identity you revealed is a name out of legend, a major player on the world stage?"

"*Especially* not."

"I see," he said. "But you must have realized from the outset that innocent bystanders are rarely subjected to the Spell of Namelessness. Did you think you were some purged paladin, some force for good cast down for your threat to the powers that be?"

"I don't know. I'm new around here. You tell me."

"Certainly, the number who might be described by such a noble definition is vanishingly few," he said with an air of contemplation, "whether among the ranks of the mighty or those insignificant others you appear to prefer to seek yourself among."

I slumped down further in the seat. "Good guys or not, I didn't expect I'd be a major scourge on the world."

"Yes. We should clearly discuss that aspect of the situation. What do you think he might be doing at the moment?"

"He's suppressed, asleep, under control."

"Are you certain? The jolt administered by Monoch was scarcely enough to banish him, I'm sure you must know."

I thought about it. Would I know if he was awake and listening in? At this point I figured I would. The relationship between him and me - leaving aside for the moment the metaphysics behind those two referents when both of us were occupying the same body and the same brain - was not totally symmetrical. In the most recent stage I'd been able to watch him when he'd been active without causing him to black out or to know I was there; he'd thought I'd been eradicated. But could *he* be doing the same thing now to *me*? "Yeah, I'm pretty sure," I lied. Only even if he *was* merely suppressed, what *did* I do now? What if he woke up again and tried to come back?

When he woke up again.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Why *are* you asking about him? Do you want to know from a concern from public safety or because you want to recruit him for some scheme of yours? How much did you have to do with bringing him out of hiding in the first place?"

He regarded me, and either I knew him well enough by now, or my insight was being supplemented from the time we'd shared the metabolic link that had let me pass myself off in his identity, or I'd played enough bid-and-bluff card games over the years, but I could virtually see the intricate orreries of his mind whirling in their epicycles, and then finally align themselves in decision. "I had my suspicions," Gash said, "when we met, in Roosing Oolvaya, that there was more to you than was apparent on the surface. As far as I was concerned at the time, our initial meeting was happenstance. Subsequently one must question, as one must always question these things, but if a plan existed to bring us together its subtlety lies beneath the level of indifferentiable noise.

"As you know," he went on, "there are always people who go about in disguise. Most often the masquerade is deliberate, occasionally not. In either case, being aware that some subterfuge is in progress is a very clear survival skill." Gash leaned back and re-crossed his legs. "I fear that much you have attributed to paranoia or omnipotent machination is in reality the merely comprehensive application of principles of prudence. Omnipotence is all a matter of mirrors and smoke anyway, laid atop a mortar of superstition. Are we not men?"

"I assume you're speaking rhetorically."

Gash favored me with an occupationally inscrutable glance. "Don't become caught up with labels. What is the practical definition of godhood if not one of power and demonstrable capability?"

"Well, you already did away with omnipotence, I guess, and I suppose by extension omniscience too, but what about creating and ruling the world, supernatural and eternal attributes, establishing ethical codes and -"

"There you're mythologizing again. Your associate Maximillian would never speak that way, I assure you. If you examine your abilities as Iskendarian, or the history of your activities, you would find very little to differentiate yourself from a god, I can assure you of that as well."

I pointed a finger at him. "You're trying to appeal to my reasonability," I said. "You're trying to humanize yourself - to demythologize yourself - so that I'll agree to do whatever it is you're leading up to. You want me to think I'm not being intimidated into it. You want me to feel comfortable I'm making a decision as one peer to another instead of being stampeded into something I've got no choice about anyway. Why? Why are you bothering? Because of Iskendarian's power?"

"Would you believe me if I said I wanted to be your friend?" Gash asked. "Of course not. Power obviously has a major role in everything that is happening, but raw power is scarcely the whole story. Fortunately it rarely is. At the -"

"Then why be a god if not for the power?"

"There's power and there's power. At the moment, as I was saying, the issue is the power of persuasiveness; in a word, politics. With the matter of Abdication versus Conservation looking to come to a resolution once and for all, things are very tentatively balanced. It may not be a great exaggeration to say the world of affairs is poised on the edge of chaos. Slightly different perturbations may send matters off on wildly different trajectories. "

"Wait a minute. Weren't you the one who just masterminded that little eradication of Soaf Pasook down in Oolsmouth? And what about trapping what's-his-name in the ring? Pod Dall? Wasn't he supposedly the moderating influence in god-to-god affairs? If you're worried about chaos, well, weren't you responsible for setting up the situation in the first place? And don't tell me there's chaos and there's chaos."

Gash closed his mouth and fixed me with an exasperated glare, implying that he might have been preparing to issue just such a pronouncement. "The situation is much different now than it was a few weeks ago in Roosing Oolvaya, or even in Oolsmouth. Who knew that so many gods would fly at each other's throats? Who would have expected that so many independent plots would reach their inflection points at so close to the same time? And your friends, Karlini and Maximillian - what were they working on in that laboratory we just left?"

"I'm not exactly sure," I said. "The second quantum level, I think, and something having to do with microscopic animalcules."

He gestured with a waving hand. "You see? If they had been successful, Maximillian would have either used this to jack up his own power and challenge us directly, or would have set it loose into the public domain, which would have been worse. With generalized second quantum level direct access anyone could have wielded the power of gods. It's possible civilization or even life on the planet might not have survived that exercise."

Why did I even feel like I might know what he was talking about? "But you think things are still that unstable even though the Karlini lab burned itself to ash?"

"Yes and no," Gash said. "The building didn't burn *itself* to ash, now did it?"

I didn't like where this was leading. My alter ego was the one who'd destroyed the lab, and I was sure he hadn't done it with an eye toward helping the world. Whatever they'd been working on in that laboratory was not unfamiliar to Iskendarian; the Karlini gang even had his notes on hand with them. Iskendarian had wanted his papers back and at least he hadn't gotten *them* - as far as I knew they'd gone to embers along with everything else in the place. But how much could he do on his unaugmented own?

The cautionary comment Gash had applied to Max could stick to Iskendarian as well.

"You never got around to telling me what you want Iskendarian for," I said, "and what you had to do with waking him up."

He launched himself promptly into it, apparently happy with the direction I wanted to go. "As I said, I had my suspicions that there was more to you than merely the detective. After our earliest encounters, I began to think. Who could you be, I wondered. I examined the list of likely candidates. I established the metabolic link between us, quite gingerly, you may be sure, and even so you managed to get past the cutouts and deliver me some nasty jolts. But the data that came back up the link were not consistent with a straightforward god-profile. So I passed along Monoch. Monoch is a very old construct, you know. In addition to being a soul-eater, he has experience in handling -"

"Monoch eats souls?"

"Of course. I thought you knew. Can't you sense it?"

"Monoch hasn't been out of the cane too much lately. Did you tell him to eat *my* soul?"

Gash gave me a thin but wary smile. "Shall we say you would clearly be resistant to even a nip, much less a bite? Monoch did, however, finally decide you were someone he had once met. How much do you really

know about Iskendarian?"

"Why don't you tell me what *you* think I ought to know."

"Very well. Iskendarian was never a god. He could have been, he just thought it was a waste of his time. He was contemptuous of everyone and everything. He was extremely clever, though. He was so blatant about his ingenuity that it seemed his prime motivation was to show just how indispensable he was, and how menial everyone else looked by comparison.

"Iskendarian did do work *with* the gods, however. You know about the Spell of Namelessness, for example, and since back then things were somewhat less structured than at present - less ossified, some might say - there was more give-and-take in general. When he dropped from sight it was fully in keeping with the way he'd conducted himself all along - high-handed and unexpected.

"It was thought something had finally blown apart in his face and taken him to pieces with it. Iskendarian was given to riding the edge, after all, and even with all prudent precautions luck eventually runs out. Iskendarian was given more to luck than prudence as a matter of philosophy, too. Still, since he was who he was, he's been considered missing rather than gone. Now that so many years had passed, though, he had moved out of consideration as a player likely to be ever seen again.

"And then there *you* were."

"You mean it suddenly dawned on you that Iskendarian had returned?"

"No..." Gash said slowly. "What I was trying to indicate here is that even after it was apparent that you were *someone*, it was still a significant surprise to learn that the someone was Iskendarian. Especially when Iskendarian began asserting himself. It was unclear what you... he... were up to."

"Was' unclear?"

He snorted. "Very well, *is* unclear. The clear thing, however, as I said before, is the highly destabilizing effect of his reappearance just at this moment."

"Now come on. Certainly one de-iced guy can't be worth all this attention."

Gash was watching me warily. "You really don't know?"

"What? Has he pulled this trick before?"

"Not this one, no, but others, yes. Iskendarian was known for wanton exercise of power. Indiscriminate experimentation. In the course of refining the Spell of Namelessness he once left all the inhabitants of a small city with no memory and the collective mind of a gopher. The ends of at least a dozen gods were linked to him. Towns were known to vanish from the earth when he was in the vicinity."

Great, so *this* was my life. "Is this what you meant when you said he might as well have been a god?"

"The gods have restraint. *We* know it's bad policy to foul your own nest."

"Are you saying Iskendarian was known for being out of his mind? Even by comparison with you nutty gods?"

"That is probably not too strong a statement."

I kneaded my temples with my hand. How much of this could I believe? After all, *Gash* was known as the master plotter of the gods. Could he be making all this up? From his reputation, absolutely. But why would he bother? How dangerous *was* Iskendarian? How dangerous did that make *me*?

Dangerous enough that I shouldn't want to be alone with myself in a dark alley, it sounded like. Hell, dangerous enough not to be alone with myself, period. "Sounded like" didn't even figure into it. I'd seen the evidence with my own eyes.

Except *Gash* wasn't telling the truth; not the whole truth at any rate. He never did. So which part was he fudging on? Maybe I could ask *Monoch*. I'd better wait until I had him alone, though, and could feel him out a bit more. He might lie too, but perhaps I could triangulate on whatever it was they were trying to keep from me by coming at from another direction.

It made sense that *Gash* might be pulling his punches when illuminating Iskendarian and his activities. If Iskendarian was listening in - and was as touchy as *Gash* described - maybe *Gash* didn't want to rub him the wrong way.

On the other hand, maybe that's just what he *did* want to do -

"Are you trying to decide if it's me listening to you here," I shot at him, "or if it's really Iskendarian? You think he might be awake after all and be using his puppet as a mask to hide behind?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," *Gash* said. "Even though *Monoch* doubts it. Yet *Monoch*, of course, could have been co-opted."

I glanced at *Monoch*, an innocuous walking stick still resting between my knees. Right. I had to keep remembering he was really a spy, and not one working for me, either. "And what have you decided?"

"It appears that you and Iskendarian are now, for certain practical purposes, different entities. Yet I am not convinced he is under your firm control, nor that you will be able to accomplish this."

"There's one basic answer to the problem. I could get killed," I suggested.

"Can you think of anything more likely to wake Iskendarian up again than attempting to die? He may well be several hundred years old already - you think he doesn't have safeguards? And do you think if Iskendarian could be safely wiped from the scene we gods would not have already brought this to pass? In a notorious manifesto, Iskendarian once declared that the world as we know it would not survive him."

"Another reason folks were nervous when he dropped from the scene?"

"Just so."

"But you say they won't be any happier knowing he's still around. No, I guess not. Doesn't sound like a good situation, does it?"

"You begin to perceive the problem."

"Yeah, right. Wait - how about this? If I can't *get* killed, maybe I could kill *myself*."

"An interesting twist," *Gash* said. "But if you and Iskendarian are indeed separate intelligences, as you claim, don't you think he would have precautions against you as well?"

"Huh. What about an exorcism? Maybe he could be driven out of me, so to speak."

"This doesn't appear to be a case of possession, per se. Of course, it is not a straightforward matter of multiple personalities, either. Some sort of exorcism might be something to try. On the other hand, this *is* Iskendarian. He could have contingency planning to deal with being driven from his body. Would you like to be responsible for delivering a free-floating autonomous Iskendarian spectre to the world? You may recall the activities of Pod Dall as he attempted to reincorporate in Roosing Oolvaya."

"For someone who may be out of his mind you sure think he's figured all the angles."

"Not necessarily *all*," said Gash. "Even if he intended to insinuate himself into the company of gods, I don't believe he would have planned for this level of close scrutiny. Also, judging by his rampage while he was in control earlier, subterfuge may no longer have been his goal. Of course, his actions do not quite make sense, either, which either means we have not yet seen enough to understand his plan, or..."

"Or he's out of his mind." *Our* mind.

"Just so. So I have a proposal. I think perhaps you'd better stay with me."

"You mean you actually *stay* somewhere? You don't just zip off into thin air between one appearance and the next?"

Gash sighed and looked at me with exasperation. "I mean, more broadly, that you should remain in my company. Moves by Iskendarian that you could not counter on your own should evolve differently when you and I and Monoch are present."

"You and I and Monoch?"

"And possibly others. To put it bluntly, which should not even be necessary, you are a walking time bomb. Since I'm aware of the danger, by rights I should be fleeing to the other side of the world."

"Then why aren't you?"

He fixed me with another stare. "If you detonate and the situation gets out of hand, the other side of the world may be far too close. Would *you* hibernate for fifty years and then reemerge for anything less than your major move?"

"Obviously not." He was right. I *was* a public menace, a walking time bomb, whatever exactly that was.

Only could I trust him? Of course not, but that judgment was largely mitigated by the fact that I clearly couldn't trust *myself* either. "So," I said, "where are we going?"

Gash scowled, an expression I don't think I'd ever seen on him before. "There is someone I believe it is time to see."

"An ally? I thought you didn't need allies, only tools, and ones to stab in the back as soon as you were through with them." Come to think of it, since I'd known Gash, every associate of his I'd been aware of had met a nasty end.

"Misdirection is often the strongest ally there is. And I didn't say this person was an ally, either, except potentially of convenience."

But what choice did I have? At the moment, none were apparent. If I'd said no to his proposal would he have let me leave the coach, whatever his warnings about Iskendarian and his potential defenses against harm? Somehow I didn't think so. And could I approach any of the Karlini gang at this point, after exterminating a key member they were all fond of? No, at the moment it was time to ride and think, and hope some additional options would present themselves somewhere down the line.

Rather than just cruising the streets, it seemed that the coach had already been following particular instructions from Gash. We had reached a reasonably high-class section of Peridol, actually one of the streets of the gods judging by the constant parade of temples marching past at either hand. If Gash wanted allies, it seemed like a reasonable place to look. Instead of pulling up in the front somewhere, though, the coach stopped midway between two medium-sized worship houses just long enough for Gash to hustle me out of the vehicle and down the narrow alley that separated the buildings. I didn't know if he intended to insure that I couldn't make out the sigils of the owning gods above the grand entranceways, but the result was the same; I had a quick glimpse of a basilica front to the right and the minarets of a mosque on the left, and then we were scurrying down the walk-space brushing the walls with our shoulders on either side. Truth to tell, I was feeling less like scurrying than like falling into a bed and not emerging for a week. In my recent history with Iskendarian I'd taken more damage than I was eager to itemize. Momentum was probably the thing; all I needed to do was just keep myself moving, was the thought on my mind, when Gash abruptly stopped ahead of me and I had to pull up sharply to keep from bowling him over. "Here, I believe," he murmured, passing his hand lightly over the stones of the basilica wall, then moving slowly away from me down the alley. For a moment I thought he was working some magic, as his hand seemed to sink into a stone, but then I saw that the stone itself was sinking into the wall under the pressure of his touch. He manipulated several other adjoining stones similarly. Not surprisingly, this was followed by a narrow section of wall swinging silently away from us. We squeezed into the passage and the secret door closed behind our backs.

The passage was narrow and twisty and apparently built within the internal walls of the building. It was also apparent that Gash knew where he was going, but that neither he nor anyone else had taken this route recently, judging from the dust and the evidence of heavy infestation by rodents and spiders and the other usual tenants of such places. Several times Gash paused in consideration at branch points, selecting one path over another in what I assumed was not a succession of random hunches. He took none of the exit doors and utilized none of the covered peepholes, however, until finally he held up a hand. The green wizard-glow ball that drifted ahead of him shrunk to a pinpoint and went out. I could see Gash pulling aside a wall-hanging curtain, however, in the glow that came through the silvery window it revealed in the wall. I had already begun to think we might not be expected. "After you," whispered Gash, fingering the window and transforming it into a waving sheet of gossamer eddies. I stretched out my own hand. Since I felt only a cool whisper as of the memory of an oil bath, I stepped through the mirror. Beyond the mirror was a person, her hands raised in a complex ward but her mouth open in surprise. "You! -" she said. "What have *you* -"

But her surprise was not yet over; in fact, knowing her as I did, it was clear the surprises had just begun. I had to admire him, even if he had tried hard to get me killed and hadn't necessarily given up yet on that goal. She was looking over my shoulder now, at the figure emerging behind me, and her eyes were wide now and her face white, too. "You! - you? - but I - you -"

"Hello, Jill-tang," said Gash, her husband.

CHAPTER 3

"THIS IS NOT WHAT I EXPECTED," said a voice some distance away in the darkness; that of the Imperial Archivist.

"That's rather a characteristic of my family, I'm afraid," Zalzyn Shaa called back. As long as any guards weren't interfering, why not converse? And if they did interfere, that could provide its own entertainment anyway. "What did you expect?"

"... I'm not sure, really. Torture, I suppose, possibly rape, more grandstanding certainly. I didn't expect to be just parked in a dungeon while your brother left to attend to other business."

"Well, I'm sure he intends to get to all of that in good time. He's bound to be rather stretched thin at the moment, though, wouldn't you think? Seeing as he's just promoted himself to god, and all."

"Right," said Leen, "so he's a god now. When you've just become a god what do you do next?"

"Aside from anything you want? When you're Arznaak, probably the greatest amount of harm to the greatest number of people."

Leen said nothing back to that. It *was* the sort of thought to inspire contemplation, not that they had any shortage of those. Shaa, in the momentary reverie that had sustained him as they were being dragged down to the subbasement to be dumped in the dungeon, had amused himself with the metaphorical image of the lot of them being swept inexorably into the maw of a huge maelstrom, the current at the funnel's rim being initially so gentle as to be unrecognized, then the insistence of the moving water and its motive force becoming notable and inescapable at virtually the same moment. Now an aerial observer would find them spread out along the funnel's sloping wall, each individually thrashing to keep head above water but simultaneously subsiding toward the common drain, when they would presumably all meet again in a common crashing fate. At the moment, his fate and that of the Archivist were the most tightly intertwined, of course, but Shaa preferred to think globally wherever possible. It was a certainty that, although presently out of sight, Max, the Karlinis, the Monts, the Creeping Sword, his brother Arznaak, his sister Eden, and who knew how many others were bound together in a common skein.

"You don't think he'd just let us starve," Leen called out suddenly. "Do you?"

"What fun is there in that? There's no entertainment value in starving someone *completely*, at any rate."

"Talking to you doesn't necessarily make me feel any better."

To advise a different choice of partners next time would be churlish. "This is quite a dungeon my brother's built for himself, don't you think?" Shaa said instead. "From the look of the floor-plan on the way down here he's obviously expecting quite a few more tenants. You'd scarcely expect it, looking at this place from the street."

"Looking at this place from the street I'd have expected almost anything."

"Yes, I can see your point of view." Shaa rattled a chain. "I might have thought he'd just hurl us out on the street too, under the assumption that we couldn't do anything more to stop him, but apparently not. Perhaps he just wants to keep us around so he can periodically enjoy a convenient gloat." That was not, of course, the only possibility. But suppose, god or no, there *was* something that could be done to stop him. The first step was traditional but clear. They had to get out of the dungeon.

As always, there were many conceivable ways to accomplish this. Given the dampness in the cell from Peridol's high water table, the manacles would eventually rust, which would be a start. The time span, however, might be inconvenient. Anyway, another potential alternative could be much more productive, and in more ways than merely getting loose from the chains. Shaa began to focus on quieting his breathing.

"What do you think's happened to Max?" Leen said.

Shaa drew a deep, regular breath. "By now, whatever Max's situation happens to be, it will keep." He was most likely firmly embedded in some impregnable dungeon, and if not that, he'd be out again roaming the streets. If the case was that of the dungeon, getting him extracted might take some doing but was probably not a matter of extreme urgency. In the other case, well, if Max wanted more help he could damn well come and beg for it.

Actually, that could apply to the case of the dungeon as well. Shaa was half-inclined to let him well and fully rot for a change. *Might do Max a world of good.* Of course, all this talk was somewhat specious considering his own present situation. But wasn't that same situation at least partly Max's fault? It was Max's high-handed plot to rid Shaa of his brother's curse that had led to their current low state, as well as to Arznaak's elevated one. Yes, after the success he'd had with his machinations the world might be better off with Max on ice.

"I realize you have certain feelings for Maximillian," Shaa told Leen. "So do I. In many ways he is like a brother to me."

"Not at all like your *actual* brother, then."

"Actually, my feelings toward both of them are often very much the same. They both inspire a mood of serious aggravation more often than is healthy for the digestion." But then Leen might, against all good sense, really be in *love* with Max. Shaa spoke softly. "Don't worry about Max. This place isn't shielded that well; if he were dead I would know. Even if he were being badly tortured, I would know." It was probably even the truth.

Leen again fell silent. Just as well; he needed his concentration. Locks were a basic exercise, but then Shaa had been at enforced idleness for far too long now.

Passive first. Just sit back and let the situation flow to you. Easiest thing in the world... and, so. The lock on the manacles *was* nicely shielded, and at Arznaak's own hand, but Shaa had not only learned his earliest lessons from the same source as his brother, Shaa had much more often been forced to consider and react to a situation of his brother's creation. There was likely to be a scrap of something lying about the cell... ah, a rat femur, just the thing. Now coerce the piece of bone to consider itself a key. With some prestidigitational manipulation -

The click from the lock sounded loud in the subterranean stillness of the cell, but another expected sound was absent. Shaa shook the manacle from his right wrist with a low clatter. In spite of himself, he felt himself grinning.

The pound of blood in his ears was soft.

His shortness of breath was no more than could be accounted for by the tension of the situation.

The habitual wheeze had deserted him.

Neither ankle was a soggy morass.

And the expected pain in his chest? *What* pain in his chest?

In short, the crushing rejoinder that had afflicted his every attempt to employ magic since Arznaak's original launching of his curse had not arrived. True, this had been the most modest sort of magic. But still Shaa was a physician, and the patient whose condition was most familiar happened to be himself. If there had been a backlash, however slight, he would have detected it.

Arznaak had attempted to decoy him through misdirection. Nevertheless, the possibility had been obvious. Max had swapped the ring containing Pod Dall to Jardin, the former Curse Administrator, in exchange for Jardin's lifting of the curse on Shaa. Although Arznaak, now having overthrown Jardin and installed himself as Curse Administrator in his stead, had gone through a ritual that he claimed would reestablish the curse, it had been a sham. Arznaak must have thought his brother would be too skittish to even *test* the curse again after the unpleasantness he'd suffered before. In every case of god-usurpation Shaa had heard of, though, it had taken the newly divine one some time to fully assume the mantle of office and become fully functional with the subtleties of their new powers.

Of course, the damage Shaa had already suffered through past injudicious use of conjuration was probably permanent; nevertheless, one must look forward, not behind, unless one wants to do nothing but fall over one's feet. And it was a near-certainty that Arznaak *would* reinstate the curse eventually. However, he might also - most probably *did* also - have other plans that needed prosecution first. So by the time Arznaak got around to the curse again many things could be different.

So. Shaa could use magic again without fearing the backlash. This meant he could most likely escape, and without excessive histrionics. Would it be best to leave in a subtle and mysterious manner that might only be discovered after some extended period of time, or through the satisfaction of pyrotechnics? The decision was not trivial. He considered the options.

Beyond the skittering of the rats in the hall and the drip of water, there was heard unexpectedly a soft click of metal. From, perhaps, the next cell? The click was followed by a creak, as of a reluctant door carefully eased, and then a shadow that moved across the grill in Shaa's own cell. Subtlety had it, then, although perhaps the opportunity for pyrotechnics would still present itself. Shaa finished divesting himself of the remaining chains and slid to the door. "May I help you?" he inquired.

"I think I've almost got it," hissed Leen from the other side.

Skill in the magical was, of course, part of her job. Shaa held his hand above the lock to feel her work. "Very adroit," Shaa murmured. "Quite deft."

"Thank you," said Leen, as this door made its own click. With a louder *clack*, she swung back the bolt.

Shaa joined her in the hall. She was looking down the corridor away from the door through which they had been brought. "You don't think there's some secret exit from this place, do you?"

"A dungeon is typically constructed with as few outlets as possible," Shaa reminded her.

"I suppose you're right. What do we do, then?"

The first thing ahead was obvious. That is, the first thing after escaping the dungeon and reaching the street. But perhaps he was getting a bit ahead of himself. "I don't particularly feel like overpowering guards and engaging in armed combat right at the moment. What about you?"

"Well, I'd rather not, but what else can we do? We've got to get out of here! Don't we?"

"Oh, certainly we do. Have you done any cloaking work? Misdirection spells?"

"In school, but that was a long time ago. Now I wouldn't know where to start."

"Hold still, then," Shaa instructed. "You are about to become a housecat." Leen grasped his arm. "Wait - doesn't your curse keep you from doing spell-work? What if you die - I don't want -"

"Things," said Shaa, "appear to have changed. I wouldn't mind your keeping that to yourself, though, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Changed? Oh! Yes, right, of course."

"Just so. Let's return to the holding still, then, shall we?" His control over the side-lobe emissions from the energies involved would be somewhat tricky, since Arznaak *did* have magic-release detectors out among his other alarms, and since Shaa's practical skills were sure to be reasonably rusty after the years of occupying the sidelines. Shaa had always been the family's real sorcery whiz, though, he didn't mind acknowledging, and this wasn't the first time he'd had to deal with this style of work from his brother, either. And the work involved was thoroughly trivial to boot...

"There we are," Shaa announced.

"Already?" said Leen. "I didn't even think you'd started."

"*Transforming* us into cats would have taken time." Actually, even doing *this* to a first-caliber level would have taken time. His quick probe of the building above having revealed a low count of guards and retainers hanging about, though, a full-scale job shouldn't be necessary. Accordingly, he'd been more concerned about someone popping around a corner unexpectedly and looking right at them. "Just think of yourself as wearing a cat-shaped throw rug, and remember that to anyone more than a foot away you look to be no more than about six inches high off the ground. Now, since there's no one just beyond the door at the end of this hall, perhaps you'd be good enough to open it and we'll be on our way."

It all proved far too easy, but sometimes that's just the way things go. In the event they met no one at all on the way through the building. Of course, legions of retainers were immaterial to a god, especially one as sneaky as his brother doubtless intended to be. They did have to wait in an alcove for a trio of guards possibly on the way to lunch to pass through the garden before making their final sprint for the door in the back wall; that passage too, however, was accomplished with further incident. They were down the alley and around the corner and another block away before Shaa called Leen to a halt. "I'm not used to this," was the first thing she said, "so I'm not going to argue with whatever you say. Just tell me what to do now."

"I will welcome your input wherever you wish to make it available," Shaa said judiciously. His heart *had* developed a pound from the sprinting and dashing, but no more than the level to which he had become accustomed. Still, physical exertion would need to be planned judiciously.

Which was not the same as avoiding exertion altogether. "Let's take a quick stroll around the neighborhood," suggested Shaa. "Shall we?"

"I, ah, stroll?"

"The most important thing to do right at the moment is to try to find Jardin, wouldn't you say? The former Curse Administrator? Presumably, he's been dumped somewhere in an alley, and from the look of that fellow my brother sent off to do the job I'd suspect he didn't take him far."

Actually, Shaa reflected, he was not being entirely straightforward with the Archivist. Short of combing the gutters how would they accomplish this search? Even within a four-block range there could easily be enough alleys and hiding places to keep them busy the rest of the afternoon. Jardin's god-signature was probably gone at the moment, too, which would leave them nothing useful to home in on either. In any case, running up and down blocks clawing through garbage promised to benefit no one but Shaa's washerwoman.

There was, of course, a more attractive alternative to the wielding of their own fine-tooth comb. It did present its own hazards, which were of a different caliber than those posed by a quest through rubbish. The perils of rubbish were those of an esthetic and public health nature, rather than immediately those of life, limb, and sanity. Shaa would choose the risk to sanity any day. With some judicious footwork it should even be possible to keep secret Max's involvement, whatever it had been.

But that could wait a few moments. There were a few things that needed to be aired with the Archivist while he had her preoccupied, hence this entire exercise.

"What *do* you think your brother's likely to do next?" Leen asked, following him.

"The fact that I'm still alive - that *we're* still alive, pardon me - implies any number of things, all of them nasty and any of them probably quite big. As you heard him say, he *does* like an audience."

"Aren't you worried that he'll..."

"What, reach out and smite us? That remains a distinct, if somewhat remote, possibility. Resting in one position paralyzed with fear, however, seems like more a strategy to assure that outcome than one calculated to fend it off. If he wanted to kill us straight out, well, he's already had years. He's trying to be more diabolical than that, clearly."

"But you're his brother. Don't you have any more insight than that?"

"If I were him," Shaa said, "I'd either be consolidating my position or using the element of surprise to propel my next stage of attacks. He's more rash than I am, so he may very likely have overrun a few more gods since he left us. Perhaps the Emperor too, for that matter."

"You think Arznaak's going after the *Emperor*?"

Shaa raised an eyebrow as they turned another corner into another major street. No bodies were obvious in the ruts, although what about that sizable mound of dirt? He led them ambling toward it. "I wouldn't be at all surprised. I'm rather inclined to let him."

"Surely you'd at least *warn* the Emperor. Wouldn't you?"

"He's a big boy, or at least he's supposed to be. In any case, he's no particular friend of mine."

"But if Arznaak, I don't know, *overthrows* him too, won't that give him so much power that -"

"What it would give Arznaak is no shortage of new trouble." No, the heap was merely dirt and mud and dung. The only living things it contained were small and invertebrate. "The power of the Emperor is overrated, anyway."

"Trouble? *What* trouble? Managing all the new troops and resources he'd have at his disposal? Deciding who to launch Peridol into war against?"

"Not at all. By trampling the compact, he'd bring down on his head the obligated wrath of the other gods. Whoever he might be allied with, they couldn't overlook a blatantly prohibited power grab like that."

"What if he isn't allied with anyone? What if it's just *him*?"

"Hmm," said Shaa. His brother clearly had enough gall. Of his nerve there was no doubt. *Could* this be his plan? To run full-tilt through gods and humans, bowling them over through a mixture of bravado and accumulated momentum?

But what other choice did he have? Being Arznaak, he wouldn't just stop now. And if he moved rapidly enough, even the gods might not realize what was happening until it was too late. On the other hand...

If Arznaak was on a course of wiping out the gods, how was that different from what Max kept saying *he* wanted to do? The difference, of course, was Arznaak himself. Arznaak would want *one* god left, certainly, and possibly others to serve him. Yes, that *was* a significant difference. At least when there were a bunch of gods, they had to operate within strictures, under a balance of power. If there was only *one* there would be nothing to stop him from whatever he wanted. "Very well," Shaa declared. "Luck is where luck usually is, somewhere else, making the enterprise of this search futile. Before we proceed to the next step, I must ask you - are you with me? Do you have any thought of siding with my brother in the hope you will avert his wrath?"

"After he kidnapped me off the street and threw me in his dungeon?"

"With no lasting harm that can be seen," observed Shaa. "You will have noticed that my brother is a master of second-order plots."

"Are you implying I'm the same?"

"I don't know. We haven't been acquainted long. Are you?"

"There's nothing I could say that would convince you one way or the other," said Leen. "Is there? But right now you don't have much to lose and we both have a lot to gain. What do *you* propose to do? Do you intend to stop your brother and rescue Max?"

Shaa eyed the Archivist. His question had been more misdirection; Arznaak wasn't *that* charming, especially after you'd seen his other side, as she had quite recently. No, the problem would be her feelings for Max. Well, perhaps she could resolve them before the question became too important, although if she could successfully resolve her relationship with Max in a mutually acceptable manner that would stand the test of time she'd be the first one. Damn that Maximillian, anyway.

"Both of these are my eventual hope," Shaa told her. Along with whatever else might need doing as a result.

"What *is* your plan, then?"

"I am making this up," Shaa said, also with less than total candor, "as I go."

"I don't believe you," Leen said immediately. "But if that's the line you want to take I'm willing to play along with you for the time being. What are you making up for the next move, then?"

Why were people never willing to just play their assigned role? "You and I must part. There is more that needs doing than a single person can oversee without destroying its time value. I would ask you to recruit *your* brother."

"To find Jardin?"

"Unless the Crawfish already has him in claw, don't bother. I will handle that. You find out what's become of Max - but please, if he is in no immediate danger, don't run after him to pull him out. Okay? Thank you. Also, perhaps your brother, who is, after all, my sister Eden's principal agent in town, would be good enough to relay the news to her in Yenemsvelt."

"If the curse is lifted from her too, do you want her to join you in the city?"

"What I want is likely immaterial. If the subject comes up, though, I'd recommend she drop from sight. This also would be good advice for you."

"I'll have Lemon to watch my back. He knows his way around these things, but if we just try to hide, sooner or later Arznaak will be back."

"This has not escaped my contemplation. Especially since whatever my brother wants from your Archives he has yet to obtain. You might also consider what that might be. Ah - you *know* what it is? You are looking at me in a more than casually speculative manner."

"You made me think of something else. At least I *think* it's something else. How well do you know those ancient languages Max seemed so adept with?"

"I can get by. There are others who are better than me, a particular cult here in the city; the worshipers of what they choose to think of as the One true God. Why?"

"Ah, I think it had better wait until later."

"With the way events have been evolving," Shaa pointed out, "there may not *be* a 'later,' at least for some of us."

"Don't you think you're being a little histrionic?"

"Do you?"

"I - well, maybe not," Leen allowed. "Very well. I uncovered an ancient device, Pre-Dislocation, hidden in the depths of the Archives. It is still active, although its activity is cryptic. I showed it to Max - don't ask me for the full story now, okay? - and it responded when he spoke to it in one of the old languages. Then it seemed to ask for something Max couldn't give

it - a password of some sort, I expect - and closed itself down."

This is not the first ancient association recently to arise, Shaa noted. Perhaps the Iskendarian papers recovered by Max from their hiding place and now in the capable hands of Ronibet Karlini could be brought to bear on this topic as well. The One God cultists had already been consulted on the Iskendarian material, or to be more precise, Jurtan Mont had been dispatched on this errand yesterday morning and had not yet to Shaa's knowledge reported back. It would be nice to get Max's assessment of the thing, but in the phrase of the ancients, that was clearly easier said than done. "Did Max say what he thought this instrument was? What about you - what do *you* think it is?"

Leen's mouth twisted. "Max was being mysterious, and at the same moment he discovered he had to run out the door to attend to something else, which I now suspect was related to his scheme with Jardin."

"Yes, that's Max, all right," Shaa murmured. "And your opinion?"

"I think it's a computer," she said. "From the fragmentary sources I've read, I've never been entirely sure what a computer was or what they were used for. I've always thought these computers end up sounding too omnipresent and all-encompassing to be more than myth, or metaphor perhaps; something like djinni trapped incarnate in mechanical shells. But the thing in the basement does seem to fit many of the physical descriptions: flat glowing lights in regular patterns, an oracular voice speaking a lost tongue, more high-grade metal than I've ever seen in one place -"

"And buried in the Archives," added Shaa. "A place of prodigious and seamless memory."

"Scarcely seamless, but yes. I've read about these computer things being repositories of ancient wisdom too. What do *you* think? Have you ever seen one of them?"

"A computer?" Shaa said. "No. Something matching the description you specify? No. However, in the course of my experiences with Maximillian, and my own escapades over the years, I know better than to assume that anything described in association with the ancients is merely myth. Their tricksterism was legion. So beware of this thing you've unearthed. Its lethality most likely goes in direct proportion to its significance. Contact the One God people." He gave her instructions. "Also - this may ultimately be a better reason to extract Max than anything else. But please don't be precipitate. Please? Wait for me."

"I said I would."

"Very well. Let us be off, then."

The closest thing to a coach in the vicinity just then was a garish rickshaw. Shaa instructed the driver, gave a last wave of acknowledgement to Leen, and let the vehicle clop away.

Shaa had taken the opportunity to reconnoiter his destination several days earlier. The location was not exactly obscure, and his goal at the moment was not what you would call clandestine, but it never hurt to know the lay of the land. It would be important to bring the Karlinis up to date - and perhaps the Creeping Sword would have something of value to add too, you never knew - but the Jardin situation seemed more urgent. Although did he remember how to work remote communications? What was Karlini's recipient address key? Shaa sank back and closed his eyes...

Either he wasn't doing it right or Karlini was for some reason off the line. What about -

The rickshaw lurched forward. "We here," the driver announced.

So they were. Shaa paid off and crossed the gleaming sidewalk. The grand entry ahead above a flight of wide stairs would lead through a collonaded aisle to the temple proper, a rectangular building with a broad nave ending in an apse. He had, after all, reconnoitered. He would not be going as far as the apse, though, and even the nave was in question. Instead, he glanced around the lobby, reorienting himself, and then approached the woman who was obviously, from the number of jewels on her breastplate, the senior priest on duty. She sat on a well-cushioned chair with a high, fluted back behind a desk laden with forms for the requesting of indulgences, casting an eagle glare around the sparse traffic trickling in and out. "By the look of you you're here for something major," the august one addressed Shaa.

Yes, Shaa thought, *but it's hardly what you think*. "I need to see Her Godship," he declared, "and don't tell me she's not in town because I know she is."

The priest's gaze hardened. "My Lord does not treat with buffoons. You must perform your supplication in the

traditional manner, and as ardently as possible. I advise you to go clean yourself up before presenting yourself here again. Only the holiest of human -"

"If Her Godship finds out you kept me waiting she'll break you back to a newt."

She raised her nose and eyed him superciliously along it. "Thoroughly out of the question. The supplication line begins down there, in the nave. Either join it or leave. Or do you have the resource for an indulgence?" She had been joined at either side by a guard bearing an anything-but-ceremonial pike.

Shaa realized he was rather looking forward to something like this. *Now we'll see about that heart*, he thought. But responsibility still came before pleasure. "I have tidings that won't wait, concerning Jardin, Master of Curses."

That did slow her down, at least until the old girl decided again Shaa was merely a mad person of the streets. "Then tell *me* your words. I will convey them."

Shaa released one of his more sardonic grins. "Up to you. The news is he's been pulverized."

The priest went white. "He's been - how would you -" She released a most unpriestly imprecation and rose to her feet. "Follow me no, wait. You! Acolyte!"

A pair of matching pimply kids in low-order robes stood at attention on either side of the door to the cathedral proper. They were both looking at Shaa's priest. The nearer one pointed uncertainly at his own chest. The priest glared at him and made a violent gesture with her arm. The kid scrambled over. "Guide this man downstairs as fast as you can."

The pikemen joined Shaa in a trot as behind them, the priest he had confronted gathered up the indulgences, thrust them into a lower drawer, and took off without another look round in the other direction, out the exit door and onto the street. *Perhaps*, Shaa thought, as the lobby disappeared out of sight around the corner of the staircase they were now descending toward the innards of the temple, *she is unwilling to be associated in even a circumstantial way with the delivery of bad news*. Of course, if that was the source of prudence - as there was no doubt it was - then just what did he think *he* was doing?

Unfortunately, what came naturally. Debarking from the staircase and wandering a short maze of passages, Shaa and his escorts came upon a tall chamber with a polished obsidian floor and twinkly wall hangings. Shaa averted his eyes as much as possible from the garish furnishings and fixed his gaze on the armed priest contingent at the far end. Then they had crossed the room and the acolyte was confronting his betters, trying to explain the errand that had brought him here.

Shaa considered using another misdirection spell. Deploying magic in a god's own sanctum was considered one of the riskier maneuvers, all things considered, by those who had studied the issue from afar; the maneuver had been studied from afar since those who had attempted it were not generally available for feedback. But there was misdirection, and misdirection.

Shaa waited until the assembled ecclesiastics had glanced at him again and then retreated back into their huddle; then he took a half-step back and edged to the side. One of his guard-escorts turned to follow him. Shaa rested a gentle hand on the guard's pike shaft, but then somehow the butt of the pike ended up between the fellow's legs with its business end tangling with the tunic of the other escort, and then both escorts were hanging onto each other to keep from falling to the floor, their feet slipping and skidding on the slick obsidian surface, and then they were falling to the floor anyway in a mess of flailing arms and waving staffs. All eyes turned to the cascading guards; all eyes, that is, except for Shaa's, which were fixed securely on the door he was approaching on a rapid lope from an oblique angle. Then the shouting was suddenly and obviously directed

at him, but by then he was through the door and shutting it securely again behind himself.

The room Shaa found himself occupying had the look of a law library. Bookcases filled with matched leather-bound tomes crept up the walls, punctuated by banks of filing cabinets and several large desks. Even apart from the furniture, however, Shaa was not occupying the room alone. Three people were facing each other in front of a tall wall-mirror, their expressions indicating mutual astonishment.

"We meet again," Shaa said to the first personage, the woman he'd met on the dock on his arrival in Peridol, whom he had subsequently researched, and whom he had come to her temple expecting to see. "As do we," he added to the Creeping Sword as well, although he had surely not expected *him*. And then, to be comprehensive and to fully observe the social niceties, he addressed with a courteous bow the third member of the group, only now fully emerging from the mirror. "The pleasure is mine," proclaimed Shaa. "The true Gashanatantra, I presume."

CHAPTER 4

SO IT HAD COME TO THIS. But what was 'this,' really? Other than a serious overstatement of his reputation?

His body was strapped rigidly to a sledge. Pillory blocks had been locked across his ankles, his legs at mid-calf and mid-thigh, his lower and upper body, and the upper arm. Each hand had been forced into a steely glove, and then cords had been passed through the tie-down rings at the end of each finger and lashed firmly to a spread-eagle frame. The sledge in its turn had been chained down to the walls of the dungeon cell with enough footage of hawser to have moored a good-sized schooner.

As if that wasn't enough, a grilled mask like an animal muzzle covered his face from the nose on down, and a carved mouthpiece kept his lips parted and his tongue mashed uncomfortably against his lower gums. Did they think he was going to bite someone's nose off unless forcibly restrained? He was scarcely a homicidal maniac, Max reflected; if nothing else he was far too cultured for that, yet here he was in -

CLASH! CLANG!

Ow! Mounted somewhere out of sight just behind his head was some additional diabolic mechanism whose only purpose seemed to be the making of random out-of-tune and extremely loud noises aimed at driving him out of his mind. Or if not out of his mind, then preventing him from putting two thoughts together endwise. If he had retained any hope of launching a conjuration under these circumstances, suppressor radiators aimed at him from the corners of the cell projected a seamless anti-magic field across the entire space.

Well, he was in the soup now, there was no denying that. The noisemaker let loose with another cacophonous caterwauling as a different part of the mechanism whomped enthusiastically on what sounded to be a large cookpot. *I wonder if they plan to feed me*, Max wondered to himself. If they did how would they accomplish it? The dripping of gruel paste over the mask so it could dribble down into his mouth? Spray him with water from the door?

If you were going to succumb to a trap, though, it might as well be a good one. The one that had landed him here had certainly been a champion.

Although the architect of the plot had not formally unveiled him- or herself, Shaa's brother Arznaak would appear as a leading suspect to be involved *somewhere*, at least. The plot-master had a detailed knowledge of the way Max's mind worked; had in fact used Max's own methods of plotting to have Max, himself, help deliver himself into his hands. Outmaneuvered he clearly had been. And outsmarted; he didn't mind giving appropriate credit when he was forced to. And taken unawares. For all of his paranoia, he had never seen *this* coming.

He had seen *something* coming, yes. All of those attacks by old adversaries had to have been coordinated for some purpose. The involvement of the Hand in lowering the final boom demonstrated *that* much. And Max *had* been looking over his shoulder more than was even his usual hyper-sensitive habit.

Arznaak was also ruthless enough to blow up the Emperor's own reviewing stand and a major bridge to boot just to implicate Max in terrorism of the most heinous nature. Just? Well, probably not 'just'; there had likely been another goal served simultaneously, but damned if he could think through what it might have been with that thing next to him pounding away like a mechanical banshee.

...But even so, there still had to be more to it than he'd seen himself. Jardin had the ring containing Pod Dall. Would he realize Max had booby-trapped it, anyway, regardless of their mutual assurances, or would he just go on to use it? If Jardin was part of the plot, as seemed more than likely, then was he in league with

Arznaak? Arznaak knew Max's habits; he'd realize the ring had to be trapped, so *he'd* warn Jardin... unless he didn't.

Arznaak couldn't have been after *that* - could he?

Of course he could.

Arznaak as a god. That's all they needed.

Maybe it was just as well for Max to stay wrapped up here in the dungeon, spending his time twiddling his thumbs. Although that was only a metaphorical option. Max couldn't even move a thumb, much less twiddle it.

But he still had responsibilities that wouldn't go away. Who had Shaa? And Leen? Max didn't know how long it had been, a few hours at most, but that was surely long enough for any number of distressing possibilities to have come into effect.

Actually, though, the thought that Arznaak was involved was somewhat reassuring, in a bizarre sort of backhanded way. Arznaak's *modus operandi* was to let his victims dangle in contemplation of their possible fates, rather than proceed to their immediate dismemberment or outright eradication. After toying with Shaa all these years why would he put an abrupt end to his fun? Even he, Max, could clearly have been slaughtered by the Hand on the bridge rather than being trundled back to the palace complex. And where there was life, there was... the promise of further aggravation.

Anyway, whatever had been in progress had most likely already played itself out, at least for the present act. A single act wasn't an entire play, though... even if the cast of characters sometimes had a distressing habit of changing during the interval. Well, at least there was still Karlini. And Roni; especially Roni. The work she had been doing had been on the verge of fruition. Perhaps the best thing *would* be to sit tight and wait for one of them to come and get him out.

Maybe he'd even make bail.

Well, if nothing else perhaps he'd be able to catch up on his sleep. He could just let the clamor from the noisemaker wash over him, slide past him, as he subsided into a meditative state...

Wait a minute. *That* clang was different. It had come from the other side of the cell, where the door was. Max opened his eyes. Standing over him was a familiar face. "About time somebody showed up," Max mumbled around the mouthpiece.

Max had not been badly injured by the events on the bridge. He was showing no lasting danger signs from being hit in the head by flying chunks of pavement, or almost no danger signs; the ringing in his ears and the occasional double vision could be explained by the auditory torture device alone. The Hand hadn't roughed him up to any great extent, either. Even his appearance was probably better than most, due to his momentary bath in the Tongue Water. Of course, a dip in the Tongue was likely to leave you with its own aftereffects, but at least it had taken off the surface layer of grime and soot.

He *had* been lucky. Most everyone present on the scene must have been worked over to one degree or another. Even, apparently, the dignitaries attending to take part in the ceremony. But there were dignitaries and dignitaries. Max didn't know if he'd ever seen a god looking quite so ill-used. Especially one venturing out in public with his head swathed in an oozing linen bandage that drooped low to cover his left eye, the remaining strands of mustache that had not been crisped off shooting away in every direction like the whiskers of a cat. *Especially* one favoring a leg with a locked knee and leaning on a *cane*, of all things.

"So," said Phlinn Arol finally, "just what do you thing you're doing?"

"What does it look like?" Max said, less distinctly than he liked. *Damn* that thing in his mouth. "Waiting for someone to rescue me. Is that why you're here?"

Phlinn Arol gave Max a severe look. "The very thought of you waiting passively is preposterous." Then he widened his glance to include the rest of the cell, and pursed his lips in assessment. "Still, preposterous or no," he said grudgingly, "this does look to be an effective pen of confinement."

"Right, yeah. If anybody around here remembered how to do suspended animation I'm sure I'd be in it, but this place is a close second. So *are* you here to get me out, or what?"

"Unfortunately it's not nearly that simple. You don't have any place to sit down in here, do you?"

"It hasn't exactly been me hiding the furniture."

"Urr," grumbled Phlinn Arol. He settled for leaning back against one of the sledge-restraint chains to take some of weight off his bad leg. Max had to crane his eye around to the side to keep him in view.

"What *have* you been doing?" the Adventurers' God asked Max again.

"The last few hours? Engaging in thought."

"Pure thought?"

"When's the last time *you* saw purity in this world?"

"A point well, if sadly, taken. But that's still not the answer I had in mind. Typically, you're spinning the question the wrong way."

"So twirl it back at me again. What are you getting at?"

"What did you say? Oh, yes, I see. Have -"

"If you want to understand me better just take off this mask thing."

Phlinn Arol looked away. "Even that would scarcely be so simple."

"What's not simple?" Max garbled. "I can feel it latches in the back."

"You tried to assassinate the Emperor-designate, and me too as well."

"You don't actually believe that, do you? What do I have against the Emperor? What do I have against *you*? Somebody wants me on ice, that's all, and maybe frozen so solid I'll never thaw out. I've got a pretty good guess who, too."

"And who would that be?"

"Arznaak, who else?"

"Are you certain you're not letting longstanding personal animosity get between you and a reasonable presentation of the truth?"

"What better reason to pull something like this against me than longstanding personal animosity? If it makes you feel better, I *am* certain there's more to what's going on than just landing me on the shelf."

Phlinn Arol scowled. He was looking less and less happy all the time. "As it develops, you happen to be correct. Yet let us stay with you for the moment. You are the most radical of radical Abdicationists. You wish to make the gods abandon humanity to its own independent fate, and have been willing to pursue any means to that end."

"I've never assassinated anybody."

"Tell me of your recent dealings with Jardin, Administrator of Curses."

"He was after the Pod Dall ring. I traded it to him in exchange for lifting the curse on the Shaas."

"So you *did* have the ring," said Phlinn darkly. "I thought as much. And when Jardin received the ring from your hand, it was fully operational? No booby traps?"

"Well, sure."

"Well, sure,' which?"

Max snorted as well as he could manage under the circumstances. How much did Phlinn Arol know? What *had* been happening out there? Phlinn might be the key to springing him from this joint - it would be prudent to be straight with him. Unless through being straight he made himself out to be so dangerous he *needed* to remain cooped up. "Of course it was trapped. You don't think I'd pass something like that ring off without some kind of safeguard, do you? I wanted to have the Shaa problem off my back, finally, but I didn't intend to create a bigger mess while I was doing it. I figured Jardin'd detect the trap and have to spend time disarming it, and that would give me enough time to catch up with him and get the thing back."

"I see. And then once you'd retrieved the ring Jardin would continue to honor your agreement? The Shaas would remain curse-free? Max, I know you too well. The only outcome you'd have been happy with was an incapacitated or inept Curse Administrator, one unable to reinstitute this curse."

"I thought it was supposed to be a heroic thing to try to help your friends against overwhelming odds. I thought that kind of thing was what you were there to support."

"Touché, Maximillian. But I should not have to remind you that timing is also crucial, and in this case you were badly off the mark. Even if you were merely duped, as seems perfectly plausible to me, what you may have helped to set loose is of significant concern."

"Anything I may have helped to set loose I can also help to contain, but I can't very well do it pegged down like a -"

"There are... complications," Phlinn Arol said reluctantly, yet again. "As you know, I dislike taking an explicit hand in these things. There are also already enough destabilizing influences in circulation without reinserting you once again, too. You may yet have a further role to play, but there is chaos enough at the moment without making the situation yet more complicated."

What was he really saying? "Does this mean you've teamed up with the *Hand* now?"

"I am open to all those who seek me. That is part of the job."

"You're giving chapter and verse to *me*? Who the hell you think you're kidding? I've never met a god who didn't play favorites and neither have you. If you want to simplify things you should just drag the Hand in here for a change and ask *them* what's going on. They didn't just happen to wander in from stage right, they were part of whatever plan was really happening there. Or if not then at least tell the Emperor to watch out for them."

"Oh? And why is that?"

It was obvious. Phlinn had to know it was obvious. So why would he ask, unless - unless "Why don't you just tell whoever it is lurking out there in the hall to come on in," Max called in a voice he hoped would reach the hall itself.

Phlinn Arol gazed impassively at Max. After a moment, a shadow darkened the doorway, hesitated, and then drifted into the cell. The cell, which was not large, had suddenly become crowded. A voice spoke from beneath the cloak. "So, this is your Maximillian, up close."

"That's him," said Phlinn Arol.

"So. Maximillian," said the hooded man. "You claim it was not your plot to kill the Emperor-designate? Shall I put you to the question to know for certain?"

Why do they always think they can pull this off? Max thought. These people should read more. "There's no point in torturing somebody who's telling the truth. If they break down all you get on top of the truth is fabrication. And I don't break down."

"You are quite the notorious fellow. Your sobriquet scarcely does you justice."

"It wasn't my idea."

"What?" said the robed figure. "Deliberately garbling your speech again? No, I see, the mouth-manacle remains. The Emperor-designate was asking certain... pointed questions about you, you know, after your disruptive performance with the Scapula at the Initiation Ball."

"Did the Emperor-designate like the answers?"

Phlinn Arol cleared his throat. "Max understands who you are," he stated mildly.

"Yes, I suppose he does," said the Emperor-designate. He swept back the hood of his cloak. "You wish me to believe that you are innocent of the popular sentiment associating you with the terrorist assassins, and propose instead that you are the dupe of a widespread plot. Because this enemy of yours, this mercenary Hand troop, is engaged by my guard for additional support during the Knitting period, you claim they belong to this plot, and by extension are traitorously part of the assassination attempt?"

"That's right as far as it goes," Max said, "Your Highness. If I were you I'd make inquiries."

"Oh, I am. I am *here*, for one."

"Have you inquired in Arznaak's direction?"

The eyes in the golden face were still hooded. "The Scapula has been unreachable today."

"Then you've got to figure he's *certainly* up to something."

"I have made my own inquiries," said Phlinn Arol. "Jardin, Master of Curses, has dropped from the Net of Gods, yet the carrier sigil of his office remains alive. I have traced him last to the headquarters of the Scapula. One hypothesis is that the Master of Curses has been usurped."

"Is this common knowledge?" said the Emperor.

"No," Phlinn Arol told him. "My resources are not typical."

"I've faced Arznaak before," said Max. "You've got to move fast; you can't let him get out in front of you."

The Emperor-designate favored him with a small smile. "If the Scapula has Transcended, he'll have much larger matters to concern himself with than me. Isn't that so, Phlinn?"

"That may be the case."

"Arznaak is the brother of my closest associate," Max protested. "I know him pretty well - far too well. One of his greatest satisfactions in climbing up the ladder is being able to deal with the folks he's left behind. He's already moved against you at the bridge. What do you think's going to stop him now?"

The Emperor-designate turned away. "I have heard enough for-"

"Are you afraid of him?" Max called.

The Emperor hesitated. "Afraid of Arznaak? Why, should I be?"

"Only if you're intelligent and awake."

"I have nothing to fear from the Scapula. He owes me too much," the Emperor-designate said expansively, "although I will admit to certain other precautions as well."

"Yeah, well, I thought I'd taken precautions too, and look at where *I* am."

"Surely you don't expect me to free you and employ you against him."

"Only if you're intelligent and awake."

"You have not convinced me," stated the Emperor. He raised his head regally and headed for the corridor.

"Who recruited the Hand?" Max repeated.

The Emperor was already almost to the door. He hesitated, then marched through. Phlinn Arol levered himself up from his perch on the chain and eyed Max impassively. "As a matter of fact," he said softly, "you're right. I checked that too. There were intermediaries, but ultimately it was the Scapula."

"If I were you I'd get him to put off the Knitting," Max said, equally softly, in return. Anyway, his mouth was by now so parched it hurt. He couldn't speak much louder if he tried.

Phlinn Arol gazed back. Did he nod, or was it merely the act of steadying himself on his cane? Then he turned and made his own exit.

An unseen guard dogged the heavy door shut behind them. In fact, the two visitors were the only people Max had seen since he'd been implanted in the cell. Did they credit him with a basilisk stare too? The ability to

impart with the merest glance instant hypnotic commands?

But there were far more important things to worry about. What had really been on Phlinn Arol's mind? If Phlinn knew Max, Max also knew *him*. He was badly preoccupied with something, and Max didn't think it was merely whether Max had gotten himself hooked up with terrorists. It was something he obviously didn't want to air with the Emperor-designate standing there listening to the entire exchange. They had been focusing on the action on the bridge, and the role of the ring, but -

What if Phlinn Arol hadn't been just referring to the ring? 'What you may have helped to set loose' - 'already enough destabilizing influences in circulation' - what had Phlinn been thinking of? *More* than Arznaak?

What was happening at the lab?

CHAPTER 5

A

SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE STOOD with their mouths open, their heads bent slightly as they stared at something on the ground between them. "There goes another one down," said Fire Chief Cinder, nudging the collapsed form of the Great Karlini with one foot. He transferred his gaze up toward Jurtan Mont, and then next to him at Tildamire Mont. "Any of you folks ready to try whatever he was fixing to do?"

A hot *whoosh!* roiled up from the side. The three of them ignored it; it was just more of the Karlini laboratory building falling in on itself. If they had bothered to spare a glance, however, they would have noticed a curious spectacle within the smoke and flames. For a moment the flames and smoke themselves seemed to solidify into a regular gridwork construction, of three double pincer claws of fire reinforced by gray restraints of vaporous wire on a telescoping crane-like base, with the claws clamping themselves shut around the tallest piece of standing wall and yanking at it until it fell toward them in cascading fragments that ripped the claws back into coiling streamers of disorganized fire and the crane mount into a curling geyser and then a detached upward-breaking fireball; but that was clearly impossible, a purely random illusion of shifting shadow and light. "Not me," said Jurtan. "Magic's not my thing."

Magic *wasn't* his thing; Jurtan knew he couldn't conjure the simplest effect to save his life. He wouldn't even know where to start. Perhaps if he'd paid more attention while Tildy had been doing her exercises under the tutelage of Karlini's wife he'd be equipped to make a try of it. But on the other hand...

On the other hand, the way Jurtan's music sense operated often *seemed* like magic. What if it wasn't merely *like* magic at all? Max and Shaa had commented that his music sense gave him capabilities that required the use of sorcery in others. So maybe there was something he *could* do. He'd put people to sleep before - why not a fire?

Yet there was no need to rush into the attempt. Quite the contrary. There were at least two magic-user professionals lying comatose on the street to attest to the potential hazards at hand here. Something was clearly out of the ordinary about this fire, not that one would expect anything different from a disaster associated with the likes of the Great Karlini. It was not necessarily surprising, therefore, that Jurtan gradually realized as he listened to whatever his internal accompaniment was trying to tell him about the conflagration that it also felt like something in the fire was watching *him*.

Fire Chief Cinder turned his attention from the youth staring blank-eyed at the engulfed building to the girl, and when she shrugged helplessly and shook her head he wiped them from his mind and strode back toward his forces. Even if he had seen the youth suddenly fumbling in his pocket, and then withdrawing with a triumphant flourish from the pocket a harmonica, it would have meant nothing to him, other than the fact that the youth might be yet another one of the breed of dangerous lunatics who often seemed to be the principal denizens of the Wraith District. It was prudent to spare enough attention to keep some track of the lunatics in the immediate vicinity, though, and Chief Cinder was nothing if not prudent. As a veteran, though, this cataloging rarely made itself felt at a level of full consciousness. The blond fellow a head taller than anyone else in sight making his way up the street at a pace faster than a trot, if less than a full-out run, and that with a side of crisped beef slung over one shoulder, for example, was worth at least a tick in the mental notebook. Not far away -

Something glinted in his peripheral vision, something fast, something *above* - a dull bronze sphere festooned with ... *stuff*, banking around the flames forty feet over his head but leaving its own trail of puffy smoke behind it. The flying thing spun around once on its axis, hesitated in the air, and swooped toward the ground, trailed by a squawking seagull. A gout of steam erupted from the matrix of vents in the ball's underside, a set of spidery legs in a tripod configuration protruded, and then the machine was squatting on the pavement next

to the fallen Karlini, temporarily obscuring him beneath the flowing billows of vapor. "Now this is what I call a mess," said the ball.

The top of the vehicle pivoted back and the pointy-eared head of Favored-of-the-Gods emerged. "Who's in charge here?" he demanded, just as the seagull, approaching from behind, pulled up sharply and slapped him across the head with its wing. Favored squawked in a tone much like the bird's and fell abruptly from sight back into his sphere while the bird executed a much neater landing on Karlini's chest and began fanning the fumes away from his face.

The clanging and clattering from within the vehicle subsided, and two hands'-worth of long spidery fingers reappeared grasping the lip of the hatch. They were followed again by the now considerably more annoyed face of Favored. "What the hell happened to *him*?" he snapped, looking over the side at Karlini and the gull. Fire Chief Cinder noted that the gnome, and for that matter his entire vehicle, smelled of smoke.

There was a lot of smoke around today in general. "Are you a magician?" Chief Cinder asked.

"Better than that," snorted Favored. "A fire this hot should sterilize anything biological, but something in there's still leaking energy anyway. What you got to worry about is whatever that stuff is dripping into the water table. Now here's what the situation looked like on my overhead pass just now."

Jurtan had stepped out of the way of the seagull and was humming carefully on the harmonica, trying to feel his way to the rhythm of the fire. Atop the fire's heavy bass roar, though, querulous meandering snatches of melody kept twisting out of nowhere like a cloud of darting gnats. They could be associated with the licks of leaping flame, but then there was a chance they might really be related to something else instead. Roni had had those vats of magical organisms in the lab; surely the fire would have sterilized them to lifeless ash... but it did seem as though *something* was surviving most improbably in the midst of the furnace. Or beneath it, perhaps, somewhere in the basement?

Then suddenly Jurtan knew what the fire was playing, atonal and harsh though it was, and he began to lay his own groove down around it.

"If you make a drop with the fire-retardant chemical just as we hit it with our last water bomb," Chief Cinder was telling Favored, "maybe we can -"

An insistent beeping erupted from inside the ball-vehicle. Favored ducked his head down, muttering. "What the hell is it this - wait a minute! That's not bad, kid." He popped back up, eyeing Jurtan across the pavement furiously jawing away now with his instrument. "Okay, Cinder, so let's try the bomb and the - wait, this is even better - over here, you idiot!" Favored yelled down the street, standing up on the hatch rim and waving his arms vigorously. "What the hell took you so long?"

The tall man with the side of beef loped up and set the meat on the ground where it rolled about, moaning. "Ice," said the tall guy.

"Perhaps I will redeploy my forces," suggested Fire Chief Cinder under his breath as he edged back out of the way. Very well; he was finally willing to admit it, it was time to put in for a transfer. Wraith District clearly had the better of him. He had lasted longer than his immediate two predecessors, by at least two months. That should be good for something, if not a full month-long rest cure.

"He doesn't look real useful to me," said Favored, inspecting the charred yet still-writhing form of their recent adversary Dortonn.

"We spoke during our journey from the water," Svin told him. "He may be stronger than he looks." Svin bent

down and hauled Dortonn effortlessly to his feet, then shook him out. Dortonn persisted in his moaning. Svin brought his own face close and addressed him with his deepest, most resonant voice, which was resonant and deep indeed. "Dortonn, the time to act is now."

"Well, I'm gonna do this pass with the chemical," Favored announced. Gears clanked, vapor whooshed, and the ball lurched again into the air. "Remember your master Pod Dall," Svin was exhorting Dortonn.

"Screw Pod Dall," Dortonn mumbled through his cracked lips, but he clenched his teeth and raised his arms anyway, in a slow sequence of stiff jerks. The blackened claws at the ends of his hands began to unknot, showing raw flesh at the charred joints.

Tildamire Mont drifted aimlessly back and forth at the far side of the street. Too much, it was all too much. Roni was gone, and all her husband could do was pass out on the ground, and all her idiot brother could do was stand there playing his harmonica. It was like a convention - that creature flying around in his machine, now with orange dust cascading out of it above the fire, the firemen loading a taut water bladder that must have been eight feet in diameter onto a winched-back catapult, even that barbarian fool Svin steadying that other person who couldn't be anything other than dead. And there was still no sign - and likely never would be again - of Senor Ballista, who had rescued her from the bridge and then sacrificed himself to save her from the Creeping Sword. But of all of them, *she* was the one left with nothing to do, however futile, however insane. She never should have left home. When her father, the former Lion of the Oolvaan Plain, heard about this, he'd never take her seriously again. He'd know; even back in Roosing Oolvaya, he'd know. She'd failed when people had been depending on her. She never should have -

SPROING! The water bomb left the catapult and arched overhead. Favored banked over its landing spot and dumped the final bag of fire retardant over the side, noticing as he did that a layer of mist seemed to be spontaneously condensing out of the air around him. Then it was more than mist, it was a cloud, water, *rain*, being wrung out of the humid sea atmosphere as though it were a mopping cloth. A sudden deluge washed over Flotarobolis, then something more solid; hail, *ice*. The ball shuddered and Favored felt the craft begin to lose altitude.

"There, are you satisfied?" croaked Dortonn at Svin, watching his ice sheet drop toward the fire, already breaking into steam. "May I die yet?"

"Is not your master Pod Dall a god of Death? Would you not just be delivering yourself to him, and with your mission not accomplished?"

Dortonn grunted. "Are you a barbarian or a lawyer?"

Abruptly Svin picked him up by the neck and shook him. "Are you performing sabotage?"

"What? -" The flying machine was falling into the steam clouds, tumbling erratically, most of its vents frozen closed. Dortonn made a creaky pass, easing back on the thermostatic regulator, as the vehicle was lost to sight in the mist.

Fire Chief Cinder felt increasingly morose as he watched a new gout of flame arch up through the huge billows of steam. A tremendous quantity of liquid had been thrown at this block, enough to reduce any normal fire to soggy mush, yet still it burned; still it kept flaring. Something had to be leaking energy into it, probably the same something that had socked those magicians out cold on the ground. So why was this other magician, the charred walking cadaver, still functioning? "Excuse me," said Chief Cinder, moving just barely into conversational earshot, "do you detect a malign influence keeping this conflagration alive? I would suggest not probing directly," he added hastily.

Only Svin was close enough to hear Dortonn mutter his usual complaint before bending himself to the task. What was he saying now, the best way to fight fires was to never touch them directly? Well, that apparently had been his strategy; not to probe the fire at all, merely to drop liquids on it from above. "'Malign influence,' he says," rasped Dortonn. "'Malign influence' - phaugh! Fuzzy-headed thinking, misuse of - huh!"

"What?" Svin demanded.

Dortonn was concentrating more than Svin had seen him since they'd arrived. "Not 'malign,' but indeed an influence. Fairly powerful -"

In a rapid fan outward from the fire-wracked buildings across the street, the cobblestones of the pavements began riffling upward and hurling themselves into the air, the ground beneath them hissing and lashing. Svin thought he might have heard Dortonn change his last remark to "very powerful," but that could have just been his own mind's own reaction to the latest development. Perhaps a dozen feet worth of cobblestones had left the ground when the prodigy suddenly ceased; at the same time, in fact, that some of the airborne stones could be observed to be coming apart into pebbles, gravel, sand; and other stones were flowing and melting like cobble-shaped molds of gelatin or perhaps loosely constituted rubber. Then the transfigured stones began to rain back to earth. "I did not cause this," stated Dortonn, bending down and covering his head with his arms.

Everyone in sight was trying to cover themselves, those who were not actively fleeing the scene or standing gape-mouthed frozen in amazement. Or those who were still playing their harmonicas. *Maybe the real problem here isn't the fire at all*, Jurtan Mont was thinking, doing his best to ignore the fragments cascading around him, and especially those few (fortunately small) pattering onto his head; he had the fire's meter and key and didn't want to lose them. But perhaps the real danger was related to those other dancing harpsichord runs, the ones he'd been trying to ignore as a distraction, the ones that had come to their most coherent life in a rippling rush perfectly coordinated with the unusual behavior of the pavement just now. Jurtan made his focus shift...

- and suddenly felt as though he'd tossed his line into a bucket and hooked a whale! His head shrieked at him, his vision blurred behind a wash of smearing green, he felt a knife-stab pain in first one ear and then the other, the harmonica bashed itself against his gums like a thing possessed - and the only thought in his mind was the irrelevant observation, "You're in the big time now, Jurtan."

But he *was*, he clearly was, and damned if he was going to let whatever-it-was get the better of him.

What is the Mont boy doing? Svin wondered, straightening up again and letting rocks cascade off his back. He had been sheltering Dortonn with his body; the other Mont had unfortunately been too far back for even him to reach in time, although that had also put her out of range of the worst of the sudden downpour of solids. Had Jurtan been bashed once too many in the head? He was jittering like one of those multi-jointed puppets on an elastic string, blood pouring from both ears and running freely over his shoulders, still clutching of all things his absurd instrument. And not merely clutching, *playing*, although as with most of the music he attempted, it sounded (to be charitable) as though he was merely following one small part in a large orchestral score. But this time he had clearly lost his mind.

Svin realized Dortonn was talking to himself. His voice had not improved - if anything, it had gotten worse - but even though the sound was cracked and distorted and barely audible to boot, the words could be still be ascertained. "It must be hiding underneath," he was saying, "using the power of the fire to go burrowing into the earth - intelligent? No, I feel no intelligence - but instinctual motivation? Yes?"

Should Dortonn be interrupted? Svin wondered, caught up as Dortonn clearly was in a professional challenge? Should or not, he *must* be dragged back to the issue at hand - but how best? Why not just presume on his competence? "Can you kill it?" said Svin. "Poison it? Send it to another dimension?"

One baleful red eye swung up to glare at him. "You will owe me more than you can pay when this is finished."

"Just deal with it," Svin said. "Talk later."

Overhead, Favored-of-the-Gods made another erratic swooping pass in his ball-vehicle. His scanners showed another upwelling deep beneath the fire. He'd seen the same indications before that strange bit with the animated cobblestones - something putting out enough thaumaturgical sideband radiation to leave a crater thirty feet deep if it all let loose at once. Whatever was down there was using a pumped-resonance cycle, feeding a catalytic amount of energy to stoke the fire and then turning on the siphons when the fire took the bait and exploded. It had to have some shield, though; it *couldn't* survive in the middle of those flames, and it clearly wasn't a creature of flames itself, no matter the manifestations its emanations had shaped. So it must be using a disinclination shield of some sort, or perhaps a misdirecting trick... and it bore remembering that craters, of course, were scarcely the real danger at hand, nor was energy, no matter how prodigiously employed.

Did he have any acid bombs left in this thing?

Jurtan was still fighting the leviathan, but at least he still had it on his line. He was starting to get a feel for its jerks and thrashes, though, and even better was the fact that it didn't seem to realize yet that he was playing it. If he could just hit it with the right out-of-phase harmonics he might even be able to do better. He'd try a different chord progression.

Svin was now watching Jurtan Mont even more closely than Dortonn. What if the kid wasn't insane after all? "Dortonn!" Svin said. "Pay attention to Mont, there. What is he doing?"

"Nothing, I'm certain," growled Dortonn, diverting a crispy hand to wave indifferently in Jurtan's direction. "Stop bothering - wait! You're right." He cocked his head to the side, listening with his residual fragment of earlobe. "I can only detect his side-scatter, but yes, yes, if he does that, than I will do - so!"

The flying machine was making its steepest approach yet to the center of the fire in the center of the Karlini building, Svin noted, coming in almost straight toward the ground. Had it lost control again? But then a small egg of gleaming copper metal emerged from a protruding tube and disappeared into the flames as the ball lurched away in a spasmodic roll that took it into a leaping curtain of flame... and through, badly scorched, on the other side. At Svin's own side, Dortonn gave a sudden shudder, his fingers writhing and his mouth moving without words; then Dortonn seemed to abruptly lose five pounds of his remaining weight in Svin's grip, and sagged limply. Jurtan Mont's instrument gave a final discordant blare and burst into fragments of reed and horn. Mont took a unsteady step to the rear, his bloody hands still held out in front of him, then went over onto his backside.

Well, that is that, Svin thought. The last participants were now out of commission, and no further reinforcements were in sight. A tall splash of flame erupted, as though a new barrel of oil had been added to the wreckage, and in its wake Svin felt a wind tugging him toward the building. Not strong enough to pull him off his feet, it still had the force to lift ashes and embers and some of the scattered small rocks and twirl them toward the inferno, and pull over the remaining standing wall, and suck in at the leaping flames... but then the wind died, and amazingly enough the fire seemed to suck in on itself as well, and puff out.

Fire Chief Cinder was hollering again, waving his men in his line of sight back from their spread-out positions along the block, where they had been fighting the secondary blazes and trying to keep the situation from spreading too far downwind. New streams of water hit the site of the lab building from several angles at once, and for the first time the bounding flames and towering gray smoke were supplanted by steam and a welcome white smoke. Dortonn was breathing but unconscious. Jurtan Mont was breathing as well, and his eyes were

open, but he seemed more glazed than truly aware of his surroundings. From the amount of blood in evidence, that might be just as well. In tearing itself apart, his harmonica had ripped its way across fingers and lips and -

"This time you've really done it, you fool," Jurtan's sister, Tildamire, was saying in a particularly hectoring tone as she rushed toward him. Her face, however, was the white of a grub found in the lightless hollow under a moss-encrusted boulder, and her stride was so wobbly that watching her Svin expected another comatose body to hit the ground any instant now.

Dortonn would keep. Svin grabbed up one of the few water barrels remaining undrained from the firefighters' wagon and strode toward the Monts. Tildamire, still unaccountably on her feet, turned her uncertain gaze on Svin, said "What -" and then "no! -" as she saw the barrel raised to the considerable height of Svin's arms outstretched above his body, and finally said nothing more as she disappeared beneath a cascade of water. The water scoured across Jurtan too, or indeed principally Jurtan, washing away blood and grime as well as the scum and stench still remaining from his recent plunges into his offal-laden mudbank and the Tongue Water, which of course wasn't much better.

With cleanliness returned attentiveness. "Wow!" said Jurtan, followed immediately by "Ow!" as the catalog of his injuries descended on him at once.

"An inspiring performance," commented Svin. "The danger has passed?"

"Looks that way," said Favored-of-the-Gods, leaning from the open hatchway of his once-again-landed vehicle. "There's still mopping up the fire, but at least I think we wiped out all the nasty stuff. Better keep an eye on it just to be -" Something within his machine began an insistent beeping sound. Favored ducked from sight but his voice continued, although unintelligibly. After another moment he peeked up again long enough to say, "Gotta run." Then the hatch swung back into place and the sphere wobbled into the air with the typical attendant prodigies of brimstone-laden vapors and strange clanking noises. The machine swooped off down the street, barely missing with its retracting landing-gear assembly the remaining Karlini retainers just now striding up the block.

Haddo gibbered something particularly unpleasant-sounding from the depths of his black hood, waving a gauntleted fist in the air as he did so. His companion, Wroclaw, merely sighed. "Oh, my," he said, surveying the scene.

They both looked about ready to keel over themselves. Haddo broke off his imprecations to ask the key question of the hour. "Under control situation is?"

The dripping, hair-plastered Tildamire was the one who answered. She had just decided to forgive that oaf Svin for his water treatment, since it clearly had done her good, not only from a standpoint of her own level of ash and grime, but from the way it had cut through her total mental paralysis. Being reminded of the facts of the situation, furthermore, might make it appropriate to have him do it again. "If you don't count Roni," she said heavily, "I guess it seems to be."

Svin was watching Wroclaw, so he was in position to view not only the stiff backward snap of his head as though he were recoiling from a sudden blow, but the brief sharp glare he cast at Haddo immediately afterward. *What does he know?* Svin wondered, *and of what does he accuse Haddo?*

It never stopped, did it? Here they were, gathered around a scene of devastation, just beginning to acknowledge and mourn the presumed death of one of their number; smoke was still in the air and blood on their faces; yet the first agenda item was one of suspicion and distrust and the assumption of some hidden plot.

But on the other hand, that was just the way the world was.

Could Svin change things on his own? *No*, he told himself, *clearly not*, and the attempt would only increase the chance of someone else coming to grief. This was the game of civilization, and he had already discovered that joining it was a one-way trip.

Of course, even as a barbarian, the freedom of the frozen steppes had been its own illusion, he understood now, what with Dortonn exercising dominion over his people in the name of his master Pod Dall, and Haddo and *his* people plotting against Dortonn in their turn; intrigue and subterfuge and open warfare. That had been the game then; that was the game now.

Only who from among them would be left to reminisce about this installment in *another* dozen years?

CHAPTER 6

FRADI HAD RECENTLY DIED, which made it all the more remarkable for him to realize that he was once again awake. That is to say, on the one hand he was rather surprised, but on the other hand he was scarcely surprised at all. He was aware that "recently" was a relative term under the circumstances, but - but... wait a minute. Something wasn't quite right. Something -

Something seemed awfully familiar. If his head didn't hurt so much Fradi was sure he'd have no trouble remembering what it was. Why bother being resurrected if you were merely entering a life of ongoing pain? The whole point of being born again was to leave past baggage behind. This hadn't happened last time; last time he'd felt -

Last time. That was it - he had been through this *before*. He had died in bed and had woken up again, the damage of age and assorted wounds miraculously healed, his thought and memory restored, eyesight renewed and energy invigorated. But this time... What did he remember? There had been a fire, no, a fire and a fight, against that guy Spilkas who had been pawn and tool and then suddenly a raving menace, who had been enough of a menace to kill *him*...

Or had he? Spilkas had been about to slice his head from his body with that flaming sword of his when the sword had turned on its master instead. Fradi's better instincts had deserted him in the heat of the moment, that's how the trouble had started. Instead of abandoning the girl to her fate and fleeing, he had turned to fight the maniac Spilkas; had landed a death blow dead center, too, only to have his own sword lash back and then melt over his hand. So that was why his hand hurt so much... But then there had been Spilkas fighting his own weapon and going into an epileptic fit, and Fradi had taken that final opportunity to scramble out of the place before being entombed once and for all under a building-full of fiery rubble. Out? Yes, he remembered he had made it to the outside wall, where he had experienced a momentary collapse, but there had been no further mortal wounds that he could recall, nothing but the collapse and faint...

So why had he required resurrection, and such an inefficient one as this, too?

Fradjikan opened his eyes. Above his head was a ceiling of cunningly carved stone inset with patterns of dancing light. He was resting on his back in a long coffin-shaped basin whose sides he could see right through. The surroundings were familiar. He had been here before. Last time, though, he had been overtaken with theosophical awe, for one thing.

He had also been more appropriately dressed. Instead of the pristine robe of his previous experience, he was wearing the same torn, burned, blood- and grime-soaked clothing that had accompanied him through those most recent paroxysmal events. Recent? - yes, clearly, since his clothes were even still wet, and their odor was much too fresh to have suffered through significant delay. His hand wasn't even bandaged; just a open mass of weeping blisters and raw red flesh and -

"It is about time you're awake," said a rumbling voice.

If Fradjikan had experienced more than his share of odd situations during the many years of his several installments of life, he had also recently learned quite a bit more than he had known the last time this particular situation had arisen; enough not to grovel beneath the shadow of gods, for example. There would be none of that sickly "sing your praises" or "no way to properly show my abasement" nonsense this time around. A politic tone of respect, though, was mere prudence. Fradi settled for, "Thank you for allowing me the opportunity for repose."

"Um," the voice rumbled noncommittally. Last time, this glass resurrection chamber had lifted Fradi up of its own accord, but then last time there had been attendants around as well. This time he would apparently have

to do the work himself. Fradi got his functional hand behind him, a tight fit in the narrow coffin, and levered himself up, trying to catalog the condition of as many body systems as possible during the process.

The familiar steam-pillar aspect of his employer hovered a confusing distance beyond the end of the bier, behind it the endless steely plain. None of it might actually be there at all, Fradi now understood, but it was just as well to act as though physical reality was the watchword until the need arose to prove it otherwise.

"You have been very active," his master continued, roiling his vapors in vigorous thought. "Activity, though, is not in itself a goal, and furthermore you have not been the only active one on the board."

Fradi had also learned the advisability of making particular preparations. Had he been searched, or had he retained the amulet? "I was merely attempting to carry out Your will to the limits of my ability."

"I am not displeased with your performance," pronounced the pillar. "Your primary target has been removed from the scene without the need for liquidation. He may be interrogated at leisure. This *is* as I willed it. But now there is more to be done, and quickly. There is now an opportunity for Me to become Supreme."

His boss *did* like the trappings of office. "Excuse me, Your Preeminence. May I ask a boon?"

The pillar's spinning slowed, and it directed a not-necessarily-favorable attention on him. "What do you want?"

Fradi's hand felt as though it was still burning, and being raked through with steel combs for good measure; his head was thoroughly throbbing. "Is there a possibility of repair?" he asked judiciously. "I take it I have not actually been returned to life, per se, but merely rather transported here for this audience."

"In the sense to which you refer, that is true. You could have been cloned, I suppose, but that would have taken much longer than we have available. No, for now you must subsist with the fruits of your own carelessness."

"My effectiveness would be enhanced with two operational hands," Fradi pointed out. "The standard-bearer of the Supreme one should be without blemish."

"Do you presume to instruct Me?" the steam-pillar said forebodingly. "There are other tools available to Me."

Fradi's ally, the Scapula, had counseled him to act preemptively if the need became apparent. The Scapula had also warned him of the cardinal signs of impending loss of favor, as he understood them from his own research. The amulet which the Scapula had helped him develop and obtain had indeed *not* left his person; it had now made its surreptitious way into his good hand. Fradi raised his damaged hand in obeisance and lowered his head; as good a misdirection move as he could manage under the circumstances. Only how could you misdirect omnipotence?

Except omnipotence was not one of his patron's virtues. Fradi's good hand flicked, the small amulet arched inconspicuously across the chamber, barely even another irrelevant mote, and entered the steam cloud. The pillar made a horrid grinding sound like a tornado plowing suddenly into a mountain of broken glass, stood up straight, and then fell over stiff as a log. Once on its side on the endless plain, the steam cloud unrolled itself, carpet-like, and began dissolving quickly into the air. Left revealed behind it writhing on the ground was a balding man in a cut-back tunic, short pants, and sandals, wearing wire-rimmed spectacles looped over his protruding ears, and mumbling in a voice that was the same as the Voice of the earlier Presence stripped back to human or even less-than-human proportions.

Fradjikan swung himself belly-down over the side of the glass coffin and was reaching with his feet for the

floor when a door behind the coffin's head flew open. A nimbus of golden light like an abruptly exploding sun expanded through the door toward him, around him, through him. The room reeled. Fradi found himself lying on the floor, limp but for an occasional spasmodic twitch, as something seemed to be freezing his bones from within.

His head had come to rest on one cheek, giving his lolling eye a view beneath the coffin and across the room onto the endless plain. A set of feet came into view from the now out-of-sight doorway and hurried quickly toward the incarnate but equally supine form of Fradi's master. "He was more clever than I had expected," the owner of the feet was calling, "and so quick! How can I forgive myself?"

It was a voice Fradi recognized. It was far more than a casual recognition. He had spent hours in the presence of that voice over the past days, planning, honing, sparring. Now the rest of the Scapula came into view as well as he bent over the other man. "Appalling," Fradi's late master croaked. "He might have eradicated me if not for your warning. You have nothing to apologize for." He coughed weakly. "I was the fool to have doubted you. Is he dead?"

The Scapula looked across at Fradi, his gaze impassive. "Even now his eye glazes over. Shall I finish the disposal for you?"

Fradi's ex-patron snarled without power. "Let him lie there and putrefy, the treacherous dog. We have more important matters at hand, and a visit to conduct." "Y

CHAPTER 7

OUR ASSOCIATE JARDIN HAS BEEN ATTACKED," Zalzyn Shaa said quickly to Jill-tang, hoping to get enough words in to make her hesitate before carrying through her likely knee-jerk reaction of eradication first, conversation later. "Not by me," he added, with even more haste.

"Attacked?" she said blankly. The door burst open behind Shaa, and in one of the mirrors across the room he could see the charging forms of some of the priests he had just evaded coming through it after his head. "Wait!" Jill ordered, and then, "Outside!" As they reluctantly crept back through the doorway, Jill glanced around the remaining group still present, wetting her lips nervously with her tongue. She was clearly swamped, overcome by too many unexpected and novel situations cascading simultaneously on her head. She was supposed to be in the elect category of players on the world stage, too. Of the others in the room, the Creeping Sword didn't seem to be in much better shape, but then he was an odd one; you could never tell in exactly what shape he might really be at a particular moment, anyway. Only Gashanatantra, by his deliberately raised eyebrow and folded-arm posture, appeared to appreciate both the content and the absurdity of the situation. Of course, as a master of counterplots and intrigue he did have the most practice in these things of anyone present.

"Yes, unfortunately, but not killed, at least not outright; he was still breathing the last time I saw him," continued Shaa. He decided that perhaps it might be better not to mention the Jardin finger-amputation at quite this point in the exposition. "I was under duress at the moment myself, but it did seem quite certain that his mantle of power was also stolen at the same time, as part of this attack."

Jill sat down heavily. Fortunately a divan was a convenient distance behind her knees; additional provocation might not sit well right at the moment. Suddenly she wheeled on the Creeping Sword. "You! You almost eliminated him once - you decided you had to finish the job?"

The Sword was shaking his head. "No, not me, not this one. I haven't seen Jardin since the two of you left my room. I certainly didn't steal anybody's mantle of power. I mean, *look* at me."

She *was* looking at him. Whatever she saw - or perhaps whatever she *remembered* - made her expression falter in its rage and certainty, and even acquire - could it be? - more than a tinge of fear.

Gashanatantra was ignoring the entire exchange as he leaned against the mirror frame that led to the secret passage; his eye was fixed only on Shaa. "Your brother?" he stated.

"You flatter me," Shaa said, "to know me that well by reputation. Unfortunately you have the right of it. My brother was indeed behind this act." He couldn't help feeling his back crawl and his neck tense. This was perhaps the moment of most extreme hazard.

Jill-tang's attention had suddenly returned to him; she was rising back off her couch, her hands were coming up. Shaa saw the Creeping Sword mirroring across the room his own grimace and clenching of teeth. *Well, if I die now*, Shaa thought, *at least it may upset Arznaak's master plan for fullest enjoyment*. What spell-work might he remember, after the years of enforced retirement, that might stand a chance of deflecting the forthcoming harsh decree?

"I would not do that," said Gashanatantra, his concentrated stare now on Jill. "I would certainly not do that at this particular time. Whatever has passed between us does not bear on this point. Events are spinning too far out of control to indulge a momentary pique, which you in any case would soon surely regret."

"But by his own admission this bug's brother -"

"He is not a bug," Gash said patiently, as though reasoning with a petulant child. "And he has far more reason to see his own brother humbled than you do. In case it has missed your notice, his brother is Arznaak the Scapula. Now, Shaa -"

"Not so fast," said Jill. "No one in this room will move until you tell me why you are all here, and just what is really going on."

"If I may be so bold," inserted Shaa, "there are likely issues of some urgency at hand. As I indicated, my brother has assumed Jardin's mantle of office and Transcended, ordering the damaged Jardin to be dumped in a street. It occurred to me that you of anyone would want to recover him while there is hope of restoration."

During Shaa's statement the color had drained definitively and completely from Jill-tang's face. "Don't move," she repeated. She was almost running by the time she reached the door, flinging it open hard enough to knock over an adjacent knee-high glazed pot housing a decorative flowering bush. Hollering for her priests, she slammed the door shut after her.

Shaa discovered that Gashanatantra was again staring at him, rather than after the departing Jill. "Transcended?" Gash questioned. "Are you sure?"

"That was what he wanted me to believe," said Shaa. "It was also consistent with the progression of the situation as a whole. He's not one of your protégés, is he?"

"No," said Gashanatantra. "He's a bit too dangerous for that, like deciding to train an asp as a house pet. It can be done, but why bother? Is this then his culmination? Have we seen all of his plan, do you think?"

"Arznaak? I doubt it. There's no telling what all he has in mind, but I'd be surprised if this was it. He might take some time to consolidate his position, I suppose."

"Is that the way you'd bet?"

"Not on your life," said Shaa, "so to speak. And with the Knitting ceremony still on for tonight - it *is* still on, I assume? - Arznaak would have an excellent grand forum for *something*. But -"

"Just a second here," said the Creeping Sword, from the reclining position he had assumed on a comfortable-looking settee. Judging by the careful shallow pattern of his breathing, Shaa thought a tentative diagnosis of broken ribs could be added to his more visible and stigmatic other wounds. "If my understanding of this whole thing between Conservationist gods and Abdicationists is up-to-date, wouldn't what your brother did kick the balance of power all to hell? And then wouldn't anyone going after him with the idea of knocking him back down make things even worse?"

"I would not put it past him to have incorporated this into his plan."

"It sounds like all he does all day is lurk around and plot," the Sword muttered.

"That's about the size of it," Shaa agreed. "You should have seen him as a child."

"No, thanks."

"While Jill is out of the room," said Gashanatantra, "what is your true assessment of Jardin's present state?"

"I doubt he'll be of any use," Shaa told him, "or my brother wouldn't have left him alive. As you may have noticed, my brother is not exactly a paragon of chivalry. On the other hand, he has been known to make

mistakes. Regardless, trying to locate Jardin and save him was an obvious path, and even if my brother had intended I follow it there were potential spinoffs he might not have anticipated. Finding you so quickly, for example."

"Finding *me*?" Gash repeated. "Why would you want to do that?"

"My brother is using that ring to power his Transcendence. You trapped Pod Dall in the ring. You could set him loose."

Shaa watched Gashanatantra consider him. "Neither point is quite that simple. It is an intriguing counterstroke you present, though. An unleashed Pod Dall at the Scapula's throat would give him something to think about."

"And the sooner it happened the less prepared he'd be to counteract it," Shaa pointed out. "If my brother hasn't been able to consolidate his position and secure other sources of power -"

Gash raised his hand. "Enough. If you have another point to present that will clinch your argument, say it; if not, be content that I take the proposal under advisement."

Shaa shrugged. "You're the god."

"How did you know Gash would turn up here?" asked the Sword. "With all the scheming he and Jill have been aiming at each other?"

"Who knew?" Shaa said. "It was a reasonable possibility, that's all. There were six other plausible means of reaching him. Encountering you so quickly was an unexpected pleasure," he added, directly to Gashanatantra.

"You waste your pleasantries on me," said Gashanatantra. "I am above flattery."

"No one is above flattery," said Shaa, "especially when it is the same as a statement of fact. For example, I respect your prudence."

"Prudence?"

"Prudence lies in planning ahead," Shaa observed. "It appears you took the precaution of compiling dossiers on the players you might have reason to encounter as long as you were involved with our enigmatic associate here."

"And you, I suppose, have done the same?"

"Well, I've had time on my hands. But you see, flattery is a harmless parlor game for even the highest. You find yourself doing it without half a thought."

With a crash, the door was flung open again, this time encountering the tipped-over bush and causing it to roll slowly onto an embroidered rug, spilling wet dirt and mulch behind it. "I can't detect him," Jill said, stalking back into the room. "He's completely dropped off the net. Can you do anything else to find him or do I have to wait for my priests to spread out in the streets?"

"As you know," said Gashanatantra, "I still work without an infrastructure. You're the one who's been closest to him; you would know his signature if anyone would. I'd scarcely have the resolution to locate him where you cannot."

Jill swung around. "You," she said, addressing the Sword. "You actually *are* what you originally purported to

be, a detective? And nothing else?"

"Well," said the one in question, "I guess the answer to that is yes and no. 'Yes' to the detective, 'not exactly' to the nothing else. If you're asking me as a detective, though, I'd say the best chance you've got is to turn your forces loose and blanket the neighborhood around the Scapula's place, or wherever else Shaa here was actually held, and hope the Scapula was telling the truth when he said they were just going to dump Jardin in the street. If you want something more active I'd suggest a confrontation with the Scapula himself. You're powerful, which Jardin was too, but you've been warned, which he wasn't, and you're also smarter than Jardin, too. If you're careful you might not have much to worry about. Oh, and don't even think about the police or the civil authorities. After all, the Scapula isn't just some guy, he's some guy somewhere at the top of their chain of command."

"Yes," Jill said. "Whatever else you mayor may not be, you did seem to have a reasonable claim to competence as a detective. I assume the answer to what you really are, and how much you are merely my ex-husband's puppet, lies with him. Does it not, my dear?"

Shaa thought the drop in temperature was not simply one of atmospherics. This could be an interesting one to witness; even more interesting if they all survived. "I came here to mend the fences between us," Gashanatantra told Jill.

"I see," she said. "And why just now, pray tell? Just how much do you want from me?"

Gashanatantra clearly was doing his best not to hesitate, to project his most forthright and agreeable persona while banishing all thought of trickiness. *He's good*, Shaa observed, *he is very, very good*. But then Jill-tang, as his wife, had presumably lived with him. Even if she'd been an idiot she'd have had to pick up something. "It is true," he said, "we have both been the object of each other's plots. It is true I have employed this singular gentleman as a tool-of-opportunity in an attempt to elude your grasp and deflect your aim. It is true we have been in competition for certain of the same prizes and goals. But this sport of ours has always been just that - a sport, a game, a luxury. There is a time when that is good and fine, and a time when it is merely dangerous indulgence."

Jill glared at him. "So what is so different now? This Scapula person may be a murderous nuisance but how extraordinary a danger could he present?"

"The Scapula is only the latest in a series of hazards that together have a geometrically confounding effect. This gentleman whom you spent no little time with is another."

"Him? Your puppet? Or what is he really, your catamite?"

"That sort of remark is beneath you," Gash said severely. "He is a victim of the Spell of Namelessness."

"Is that why you made certain he'd encounter Jardin? To get Jardin's recognition of who he was?"

"That was one reason, yes. Jardin was - is - the leading practitioner of that spell, after all. But not the only one. And in fact this man's curse was apparently not the casting of Jardin."

"So whose was it, since you've obviously taken such an interest in determining his identity?"

Gashanatantra pursed his lips. "If we are to believe his own testimony, the casting was his own."

"What do you mean?" snarled Jill. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You and Jardin clearly encountered him while he was someone else, when he struck against you. That someone else by his own admission is Iskendarian. While in that guise he told the personality present with us now that he had cast the Spell of Namelessness on himself and created this personality as a concealing subterfuge. What we do not yet know is why."

"Anyone who would do that to themselves must be out of their *mind*."

"That remains a distinct possibility."

"Jardin and I felt his unleashed power," said Jill thoughtfully. "It was consistent with what I've heard about Iskendarian. I don't know about this Scapula, but *this* man - *whoever* he is - is a clear menace. Especially if he's walking around as some sort of hidden weapon from the past or part of an ancient plot."

"You begin to appreciate the problem."

"And you brought him *here*? He should be *destroyed* - immediately!"

"You still don't entirely see the problem. If he is Iskendarian now emerged from the past, just how *would* you propose to destroy him? And why be precipitate? Is there a particular reason he has reappeared *now*? Since his emergence - indeed in the last several hours - we have seen a dramatic escalation in incidents."

"I heard," she said. "First that squid business on the water and now this new report of a disturbance in the Wraith District. Just what *did* the two of you have to do with these things?"

"Why would you think I had any involvement at all?" said Gashanatantra.

"I know you too well. You may recall we were married."

"Ah. Yes, indeed. Well, in that case, my involvement was purely circumstantial."

"Excuse me," Shaa said. "What disturbance in the Wraith District are we discussing? I'm afraid my brother failed to update the news while I was in his custody."

Gashanatantra faced him squarely. "This man, while under the control of Iskendarian, brutally attacked the facility of your associates, leaving the vicinity ablaze."

"... Is this true?" Shaa said softly.

"... Yeah," said the Creeping Sword. "Basically it is. Iskendarian went there to pick up some of his old papers. When he got there one thing led to another."

"And casualties? Just what do you mean, 'one thing led to another'?"

Shaa could barely hear the man's voice. On the one hand that was just as well; he didn't want to hear this. But hearing or not hearing wouldn't change the facts. And in fact the man *was* talking. "Roni was there," he was saying, "Karlina's wife."

"So you - Iskendarian -"

"I was trying to fight back against him. He thought he'd erased me but I'd woken up again. I was trying to overpower him, hold him back, but then he let loose with the fireballs anyway and if Gash hadn't shown up I _"

"So you disclaim responsibility?"

"No," the Sword said heavily. "How can I do that? It's my body too - if you can say there really is any *real* me."

"This scene is touching but immaterial," snapped Jill. "I - where do you think *you're* going?"

Shaa paused in the opening to the secret passage. "While you check on the well-being of your friend, it is only right that I see to mine. Gashanatantra - what was the situation when you left Harrow Street?"

"The main building was a loss and the conflagration was spreading, yet I thought it most prudent to remove this one quickly from the scene lest Iskendarian use the opportunity to reemerge."

"You were there," Shaa muttered. "I'm sure you could see what needed to be done."

"Go now," directed Gashanatantra, interposing himself between Shaa and the gesturing Jill. In a whisper, he added, "I will consider your idea for action," as Shaa set his path to follow the footprints in the dust.

CHAPTER 8

NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME in the past several days - Lords, no! - the Imperial Archivist was wondering just what she had found herself enmeshed within. She was not paranoid, or devoted to theories of the world that centered on conspiracies vast and venal in their scope, or on currents deep as they were powerful and subtle as their omniscience. *Was not? Or had not been?* Indeed, her attitude was undergoing an evolution, based solely on empiricism, that last refuge of the bankrupt philosopher. Empiricism was unduly scorned for all that, Leen had always thought. And who could doubt its present relevance? Short of a vast amusement mounted for her own mystification and with Leen herself as the object, and populated by a far too expansive cast of players, no other explanation fit the observable facts.

Great doings were indeed afoot.

So why should this one small step alone among them all be the thing that struck her most jarringly as unnatural?

Because it was in her own backyard. Or no, not in the backyard - in her Archives. The whole idea of visitors in the Archives was a perversion of her upbringing, and now here was *another* one. She'd had more people traipsing through the sanctum in the last few days than in the whole preceding time since she'd taken over from her grandfather. Well, maybe not, but it certainly felt like it.

Which was of course the leading problem with empiricism. The intertwined relationship between external reality and its observation - meaning of course the observer - led inevitably to the solid knowledge that something had happened when in fact, judged by another observer who had no stake in the matter, or was equipped with merely a different vantage point, the interpreter had created one situation in mind where another had apparently transpired in the empirical world of external fact.

When gods were involved it was only worse; part of the point of being a god was to play tricks with causality, with the domain of the senses, with the tangle of the mind - with those very areas, indeed, which interfered with the ability to discriminate fiction from truth. *When* gods were involved? - gods were *always* involved, one way or another.

"Um, excuse me, Madame Archivist?"

"*Please* don't call me that," Leen muttered. "I'm not an ancient; you don't have to make me into one."

"Excuse me, I'm sorry," said the young woman at her side. Tarfon? Yes, that was what Shaa's contact at the monotheist cult had called her. Why that fellow Aki hadn't chosen to come himself had struck Leen as an example of poor judgment, to put it mildly; this was not a situation for delegation to an apprentice, however gifted. A lifetime of experience and the keenest of honed insights were probably insufficient. "This is a matter of the utmost delicacy," Leen had told him.

"So the affairs of the Shaas always seem to be," he had said, "yet with the fullest justification. I do not attack your assertion to lessen it, by any means, and your request plainly honors us. But the situation is such at the present to demand my availability here." He had indicated with a gesture of his hand the people lying in the aisles of his cult's sanctuary, victims of the catastrophe at the Running of the Squids just three short blocks away.

She had tried her trump card. "Don't you *want* to see the Archives?"

Aki's expression was as pained as those of the charred, crushed, trampled, and doused casualties on the floor. "Books are my life. But do I have the right to set my preference against these unfortunates' need?"

"Are these your people?"

"All people are our people," Aki had said resolutely. "My responsibility is here. May I have your leave to join you as soon as possible?"

And that had been that. After leaving Shaa she had half-killed herself to get over to the cult, too, with the streets locked into virtual immobility by the crush of the Knitting crowds and by the Tongue-side congestion of the Running and its calamitous denouement. She had been desperate enough to consider hijacking a velocipede she had seen wobbling down the street, and had been brought up short only by the prospect of then having to drive it. Instead, she had made the journey to her brother's, with the hope that he might have better luck arranging for her transportation, but of course Lemon had been out somewhere in the mess himself. Perhaps he'd receive the message she'd left for him, perhaps she'd run into him herself out on the streets, if synchronicity continued operating in as hyperactive a fashion as it had recently adopted as its wont; perhaps all these exercises would be rendered moot by some new and even greater cataclysm, such as perhaps the transformed Scapula might be preparing to provide.

"What shall I call you instead, then, ma'am?" Tarfon was asking. Deferentially, but not fawningly, at least. The girl- woman - seemed confident enough of her abilities without being either too arrogantly inflated or too apologetic. Aki had trained her *that* well, anyway.

"Leen," said Leen, "just call me that; I don't stand on ceremony."

Tarfon swallowed. "Thank you, ah, Leen. What exactly are we going to see, ma'am?"

"If I knew *exactly*, we wouldn't be going."

Leen had been resigned to making the long hike back from the waterfront once again on foot, but luck incarnate in the unlikely vehicle of a fishmonger's cart unburdened by refugees had intervened. It had been so unburdened, of course, due to the fishmonger's extortionist demand for passage fare, and to the unfortunate miasma of seafood long gone that attracted a hearty airborne entourage of hopeful waterfowl and questing flies. Since the Scapula had not bothered to relieve her of her money pouch, an accommodation based on cash was quickly struck, hopefully to be reimbursed from the Archival expense account, but clearly nothing short of exorcism would suffice to banish the souls of the departed fish.

Let it be another sacrifice for the cause, then, and perhaps later she'd figure out exactly just what the cause *was*.

Without even trying to hijack them to an adverse fate the fishmonger dropped them at the palace complex gate and drove off, happily jingling his new stock of coins. Tarfon, a budding bibliophile herself by virtue of her late father's library and his own inculcation, had of course visited the public stacks on many occasions; Leen vaguely recalled her presence at the ends of aisles and deep in the dust. Tarfon also knew - or had deduced - enough to suspect the existence of the concealed store of the true Archive. Leen had already sworn her to secrecy but the only way to enforce it without laying a geas on her would be through lobotomy. Certain of her predecessors had employed both; Leen, however, thought methods of force a bit extreme. They'd have to see, though. What was that expression the ancients used? "I'll show you this," Leen said, "but then I'll have to kill you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, just a little bibliophilist humor." Leen did feel her mood disproportionately improved, however. They now had reached the Reading Room's wing. The grand entrance was visible far down a hall at their side, but a nearer alcove beckoned. Like the Archives below them, the Reading Room had its back entrances. The

Scapula might have set watchers on the obscure paths as well as anywhere, Leen supposed, but then that was hopefully overkill even for him, given that she was supposedly still under lock and bar in the dungeon beneath his headquarters.

This way they might also avoid the oversight of her assistant Vellum, reduced in her absence to holding down the reference desk on the Reading Room floor. She should have probably just closed the place down in honor of the Knitting and today's particular highlight of festivities, but it was a little late for that now. Maybe next time around.

The staff entrance let into an obscure section of the stacks not far from the rear workroom. Even when the Reading Room was busy, this was scarcely a frequented area; there were not many comparative philologists active at the present, apparently. So - the stacks; then, the staff area; then, the Front Door path. "Follow closely and step where I step," Leen instructed. Was it time for another bout of wishful thinking? - it was. Very well - hopefully the path guardians were still giving her the leeway they'd extended after Max's recent shenanigans; hopefully they would still recognize her as herself. If not, this might be a very short trip.

"Is this Creeley's work?" asked Tarfon, looking around her at the simultaneous advancing and retreating geometries the Entry Hall had been exhibiting of late. "The Arch-Librarian?"

"Yes," said Leen, "that's right." Maybe the girl really *did* know something. Old librarians and the history of the Archives were scarcely garden-variety studies either, for anyone but their successors, at any rate. Creeley's work and the existence of the Archives were supposed to be secret, too, but as with so many other secrets word did seem to get around in interested circles over the centuries.

The guardians were still benign, still actually helpful in places, still willing to accept her authority and extend her courtesies beyond that. *How variable had the guardians' attitudes been in the past?* she wondered. Well, if she ever had time she'd have to go back through the journals, see if any of her predecessors had noted mood swings of the sort she'd been experiencing. The priority of that research did not exactly put it at the top of her - oh, here they were.

Leen conducted Tarfon past her own desk and work area down the leaning book rows and through the maze to the section her nephew Robin had discovered, where she manipulated the hidden mechanism beneath the lower shelf. The familiar length of bookcase swung open. Watching it, she realized that she no longer got the slightest twinge of excitement from this, any sense of mystery having been overwhelmed by exasperated frustration. She had never liked puzzles that were too obviously puzzles, either, whether rebus or word game or odd crabbed riddle, but those of course typically had no stakes to them beyond the matter of gain or loss of self-esteem.

For that matter, Tarfon did not act overly impressed either, limiting herself to a speculative "Hmm" and a brief query about whether this kind of thing was characteristic of the Archives, which indeed it was not. At the base of the tight circular stair, she examined the metal walls, the window of thick smoked glass, now lacking any light or motion behind it, and the overall ambience of the hidden room, then listened to Leen's brief history of the discovery of the enigma. "It spoke?" Tarfon repeated.

"Briefly," Leen said. "It didn't use a language I knew."

Tarfon looked speculatively at her. "Someone spoke to it first?"

"That's right."

"Did this person die in the attempt."

"No," Leen told her. "The thing hasn't done anything hostile, just anti-social."

"Okay," said Tarfon. "Let's give it a try."

Leen recognized six of the first ten languages Tarfon ventured, then lost her way almost completely after that. Perhaps Aki had selected a qualified deputy after all, whatever her age. But perhaps the problem was just not solvable, at least by them, at least not by anyone other than whoever had set - wait a second. "That last one - that's the same language Max used," Leen said.

"Max?" said Tarfon. "Maximillian the Vaguely Disreputable? He's been here and *he* couldn't decipher this? He was one of the people who taught *me*. If *he* couldn't -"

"When Max was here he was in a hurry. His attention was on other things."

"Why not bring him back?"

"He's in a dungeon."

Tarfon drew away.

"I didn't put him there," Leen said. Since leaving Shaa she had also taken the time to determine Max's situation. As the architecture of the palace complex went, he was probably not that far from this location, physically, but from the standpoint of access he might as well have been on the moon. Although -

But she had promised Shaa.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Tarfon wanted to know. "What did Max *do*? Is anyone trying to get him out? Why aren't you -"

"Dr. Shaa said he would handle things," Leen stated, which of course was not quite what he had said but which would hopefully close out this argument. "Can we get on with this?" It would be nice to realize more from this session than the already-clear fact that Max certainly did get around.

"Well," Tarfon said reluctantly, "if that last one was the language Max tried and got results with, I don't know that there's much point in continuing to try other ones. I'm pretty well tapped out on spoken tongues, anyway. How about this -is there anything like a keyboard around? You know, ancient rectangular device that sits on a table, with letters that you press to spell out words?"

Leen's mouth dropped. Why hadn't she thought of that? "Wait here," she told Tarfon, trotting up the stairs. Now where had she last seen that thing? It hadn't been very long... in fact, now that she thought about it, she had found the device buried in its crate of junk and had cleaned it of the grime of ages years before, after her accession, when she had still had the thought of tidying up the place and putting things in some proper order, but then had stumbled across it again still on its same shelf with her same identifying tag only a few weeks ago. Had stumbled across it, and had played around with it, too... and then it had been less than a week later that Robin had wandered down one particular aisle and brought the hidden room to light. In this time of revealed synchronicity, was there any reason not to presume there might be a connection?

She hoped she hadn't just left the thing lying around someplace for *anyone* to pick up.

But no, here it was, a platinum-colored plastic box the length of her forearm, inset with fifty or sixty cunningly fashioned fingertip-sized blocks bearing black letter-legends. Leen hefted it carefully and headed back to the secret room.

"So this is what they look like," Tarfon murmured, holding the thing gingerly at half-arm's length. "You read about something you think can't possibly exist, and then there it is." Now she was studying the back, then the ends. "There's no cable. How do we plug it in?"

"Why not just try it?" suggested Leen. "The machine in the wall spoke; perhaps this keyboard will talk to it for us." Tarfon looked around for a surface to place the keyboard on, then shrugged, sank to the floor cross-legged, and rested it on her knees facing the wall of the oracle. "These letters on the keys are from the same script system as that language you said Max used. It was very common; I'm surprised you don't have anything on it here."

"I'm sure we do," said Leen. "The question is *finding* it, and finding the time to find it." Actually, Leen *did* know the script system, she just wasn't fluent in the language. "What are you waiting for?"

"... Nothing but nerves, I guess. Let's see ..." Tarfon hunted across the board, then tapped a key. "Hey, look at that."

Deep in the wall behind the murky window, the letter she had typed had appeared, a brightly glowing green. As she continued to type, the new letters sprung into life next to the first, spilling their way off to the side. "What are you telling it?"

"If this is a computer, supposedly they required very specific rituals," said Tarfon. "Plus identification codes, passwords - see, look, now it's asking who we are." Another line of characters had appeared beneath the one she had created. "Who do we *tell* it we are?"

Who would have? - "Try Byron."

"Byron?" The name didn't seem to mean anything to her. "Okay, I think this would be how it's spelled ... " Tap tap tap, tap, tap.

"Now what?"

"It wants our password."

"Does that mean it recognizes the name?"

Tarfon furrowed her brow. "It could be waiting until it has both the name and the password before analyzing them together, to keep from giving us any hints... You know, based on how you describe it behaving before, if we give it incorrect information now it's possible it would lock us out again."

"Can we go back and start over?"

"Let's see... okay, who are we this time?"

"Um... Imperial Archivist? Can't we just be a browser? A visitor?"

Taptaptaptaptap. "Hmm. 'Guest access not', uh, 'authorized.'" Tarfon shrugged. "Let's try Imperial Archivist. What do we have to lose?"

Leen, who had a pretty good idea of what they might stand to lose if the thing turned out to be as deadly as the other Archival snares, said nothing. She did, however, hold her breath.

Tarfon looked up. "It wants to see your sigil. Uh, do you *have* a sigil?"

Her predecessors had used to flaunt one, in the old days. Now it was just part of the accumulated lore. Where might her grandfather have stashed the thing? "Hang on again," Leen said. "I'll be right back."

A nasty thought occurred to her as she scurried off toward her desk. What if Max had stolen *that*, too? He'd admitted to the theft of his amulet, the one that gave him some resistance to acts of gods, but what if he hadn't exactly been telling her quite the *whole* truth? Had she ever seen the sigil of office during her own tenure?

Then Leen had reached her work area. She'd pretty much cleaned out the big desk. She'd never cared much for the credenza, though... but hadn't her grandfather used that as a dumping ground for all kinds of junk? She yanked open a drawer, took a deep breath, and began to dig.

Where *did* all this stuff come from? There must be trash here back to Creeley. If - wait. She pulled free a small mahogany box inlaid with ivory and popped the catch. Inside lay a signet ring inscribed with fine tight runes. Not just runes - the intertwined first characters from a score of major classical alphabets. Leen clutched it in her hand - it was too large for any single finger - and ran back toward the secret room.

"Is it still waiting?" she called ahead of her, down the steps.

"It's more patient than I am," Tarfon told her. "Did you find it?"

"Here," said Leen, sliding to a stop at the bottom of the staircase. "What do I do with it?"

"Hold it up to the screen, I suppose. Here - wait. I guess it's already seen it."

"Why?"

"Look what it's saying - 'Librarian access authorized.'"

CHAPTER 9

"WE'RE ON THE WAY to see the Protector of Nature, right?"

Gash actually stumbled as he glanced over at me. "Why do you think that?"

While Gash had been working on his ex-wife Jill, trying to convince her in the tradition of professional skullduggery to look past the multilevel vendetta they had been pursuing against each other since their breakup and see her way to a current *modus vivendi*, I had been thinking hard about the larger state of the game board. Protector of Nature had offered to make me head of her cabal if Max was removed from the scene, but of course she'd thought I was really Gash. Or had she? "With the way things are going," I said with conscious disingenuity, "if you don't take Protector of Nature up fast on that deal everything'll be off. I know you were interested, not that I'm entirely sure why. You've never shown me any sign you wanted to run anything openly. Behind the scenes, that's where you like to hang out, right? If anything, it'd only make you a target for Arznaak." On the other hand, it might make Gash someone the Scapula could cut a deal with.

"The bunch of you have the Scapula seriously overrated," Gash said, resuming his stride away from Jill's temple down the Boulevard of Gods to wherever else he was leading me, but not addressing the real issue on the table. "When a mortal Transcends, they are quite fragile until they comprehend all the workings of their new state. Not only the powers of the office, the web of relationships into which they must fit. These things cannot be appreciated in a mere few hours. Even if the Scapula is a prodigy, there would be nothing to fear for several days, and even then nothing more than would be the case with another existing god."

"You're the expert."

He cast another quick, sidelong glance at me, but this time retained his footing. "Besides," he said, "if he becomes a problem I can always throw you at him, can't I?"

"You actually made a joke," I said. "I don't believe it. Unless it wasn't a joke." Great. But then if I had a fate in store, why not that one? At least I could go out doing some good for somebody over something. I liked Shaa; I wouldn't mind turning him a last final favor. Maybe then Shaa would put in a positive word for me with Karlini; perhaps he could rehabilitate my posthumous memory if nothing else. I genuinely believe that the thought of what the Great Karlini would do when he discovered I had murdered his wife had not yet fully occurred to me until then. That may have been due, however, to the fact that I kept shying away from the whole topic. It was just too big for me to encompass. Too big and too nasty. I kept finding myself re-plumbing the depths of "what's worse" - was it worse to have your memory and personality stolen or to find out they'd never been there at all, that your entire existence was a fake? - was it worse to know you'd already killed one friend without knowing it was coming, or to wait for it to happen again on a larger scale, knowing there might be even less you could do to stop it the next time around? - and so forth.

Oh, my.

But what choices did I have? I needed more options than the ones I'd been working with, that was clear. I couldn't just keep running around this way indefinitely. My cracked ribs were letting loose a constant patter of pain, and I hadn't been able to take a good deep breath since I'd woken up, and then of course my whole body felt like I'd been wrestling with a squid, but if I tried to rest and fell asleep who was to say Iskendarian wouldn't take the opportunity to spring to life again and take charge?

Well, at least I'd survived my latest encounter with Jill. All things considered she'd accepted the fact that all her past experience with me was a matter of mistaken identity, but then she was being hit by so many other new developments at the same time I showed up I could understand if I wasn't the exactly the highest priority question on her mind. Gash had run interference for me with her, which was only fair since my problem with

her had been created by him in the first place, but that wasn't to say that she still wouldn't strike back at *him* by swatting his pawn, *me*, especially since I'd now been revealed to lack Gash's deterrent power after all. Of course, I had *Iskendarian's* deterrent now instead, which seemed at least an even trade. "So do you think your wife's actually going to help?" I asked. "What do you need her for anyway? Or is it just that you don't want her activities distracting you right at the moment?"

"I realize your experiences with her may not have left you with a particularly positive impression," said Gash, "but she does have resources and infrastructure where I do not. Also, our differences are too well known for others to give credence to the idea we might collaborate again."

"You don't actually intend to trust her, do you?"

"Jill is actually quite dependable, for one of us, and she also has her principles. You always know where you stand with Jill."

Was Gash actually getting a bit dewy-eyed? Or was that only the mist of remembrance of good times past? "Why did you break up?"

"Why do you think? She got tired of me being me."

"She didn't try to slide a knife in your back or something, did she?"

"You *have* spent time with her, haven't you." Gash fell silent for a moment. "Well, yes. But I wouldn't have been interested in her without an edge. It's not as though either of us were known for laying waste to regions."

"Right," I told him. "Good comparison. From the interpersonal to the cosmic. Great way to show your humanity."

"It's certainly more humanity than Iskendarian was known for. He *did* like to lay waste to regions."

"Thanks a lot. I guess your lot isn't exactly a paragon of humane expression, but then my alter ego obviously wasn't, either. We make a great team, don't we, buddy-buddy and all that. Why are you looking at me that way?"

Gash had edged away. His gaze was narrow and focussed beneath a furrowed brow. "... No," he said. "From the manner of your speech I was concerned that Iskendarian was emerging again. But no."

"Well, that's a relief. Where's Byron when you need him, right?"

"Byron? Why do you bring *him* up? He must be considered a phantasm, at best."

"His name seems so thoroughly unmentionable among the gods that he must have done *something* right. How well did you actually know him?"

Gash threaded his way across the crowded boulevard in mid-block. God or not, his boots and trousers were still splattered with mud and road dirt, and traffic didn't automatically part before him by mere force of his radiating divinity. Well, I'd already seen that the perks of godhood were overrated. "I never knew him personally," Gash said, once we had gained the relative quiet of the opposite curb. "He was in a way my patron, but the relationship was no closer than arm's length. You might think of it as a scholarship arrangement more than one of hands-on mentoring. By the time I entered the scene Byron had drawn inwards, become a thorough recluse."

"I understand Phlinn Arol knew Byron."

"... Yes, that's most likely the case. Have you discussed it with him?"

"I couldn't make him sit still long enough."

"Perhaps I should apply my influence," Gash mused. "What tales have you heard about Byron?"

"He figured out whatever it was that made you all gods. Then he had second thoughts about the whole thing and got purged for it."

Gash took a few steps in silent reflection. "As I told you I was not there at the first," he repeated eventually. "I came in not long afterward, after the Dislocation, true, but that was still a time when so much was in flux, when already the accounts of the formation were being revised, recast into myth. Nevertheless, in the true story behind all the propaganda, I believe Byron was duped."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Byron was a technologist, a very clever one, but not as suspicious as he should have been then, or as he seems to have become later. It was a much different world, in many ways, but some things have always been the same. Beings with intelligence will always scheme and plot against each other, and take advantage and lay traps and double-cross their friends. Perhaps Byron naively thought he was too important, or that his associates had only high thoughts and good will. Perhaps he believed that he was only conducting an experiment, an intellectual exercise, when in fact his associates had all along planned to take his work and let it loose upon the world."

My first thought was to wonder how anybody could have been so stupid, but almost as quickly as that thought had appeared I realized I knew plenty of cases where such stupidity had been the order of the day, and more than a few where the idiot in question had been me. At least I'd never been involved in anything with such long-range consequences. "What kind of technology are we talking about here? Not the same sort of thing as steam engines or light bulbs or printing presses, obviously."

"Cells," said Gash. "Microscopic organisms. Direct manipulation of molecules and atoms, that was the substrate. Byron wrote the firmware and the operating system and the major application programming."

"Say what?" It sure sounded like magic to me. I'd never heard anything of the sort before. Except... on some level I thought I might actually know what he was talking about, even though his words had so little meaning to me he might as well have been speaking some extinct language used only by clams. "What are you trying to do, interest Iskendarian enough to wake him up?"

"Is that what was happening?" he said nervously.

"I thought for a second there he might be stirring, when what you said started to make some sense."

"Hmm," said Gash. "Perhaps if you work carefully at it you can again tap into Iskendarian's knowledge without rousing his consciousness; perhaps that is what you were observing."

"If you say so," I said dubiously. "But how does this organism and atom stuff relate to magic? Other than sounding like magic all by itself."

"The idea of magic had been around for ages, of course, as something out of superstition and legend reduced finally to cheap popular fiction. Over all that time did it have observable reality in verifiable fact? No, it did

not. But advanced technology is a clever chameleon."

"You mean Byron figured out how to use this technology to *simulate* magic?"

"The argument is more subtle than that. If you can simulate something so closely that the details all match and performance is the same, then have you not created the thing itself?"

Rhetoric be damned, all that matters is the result? But rhetoric *be* damned - none of this lecture was giving me any more of the facts I really might need to know. "Whatever," I said. "You say you weren't around when all this actually happened, so who was? Are any of these associates of Byron still on the scene?"

Gash looked up speculatively at the sky. "Turke was the first to go, along with Ram Chandrasingh. Byron's closest partner - and the one whose clear betrayal may have finally opened his eyes - was Gold. Typically for your own experiences as a detective, Gold may have also been his lover.

She - well, as is the case with so many of us, her fate is obscure."

"Did Byron kill her?"

"That is one possibility. She certainly has not been seen or her presence felt in... oh, a very long time. But Byron was never known for bloodthirstiness, or even that particular inclination toward violence which so many of us demonstrate. Cunning, and elliptical long-range plans, were his characteristics; after he decided to broaden himself beyond his tinkering, that is. He was rather an inspiration to me, you know."

"Sounds like you were interested enough in him to make quite a study."

"Byron left more than his share of secrets. And do we not each of us seek to understand our origins? As I mentioned, I am what I am through the agency of his intervention."

"What would you do if he showed up again, now, then?"

Gash looked off into the distance. "Try to convince him I could be a valuable ally. Demonstrate to him that my goals and his are largely congruent. That is, assuming his goals are still the same."

"I'll have to keep that in mind in case I run into him."

"Yes, I would appreciate that."

Was that remark really intended to be serious? Well, the way things were going I suppose I *did* have as much of a chance of encountering Byron as any of them did, especially considering the number of odd characters who'd been crossing my path or downright seeking me out. Although - "Did Iskendarian know him?"

"Circumstantial evidence suggests it. After all, Iskendarian did build on and extend certain concepts Byron was known to have under development. Some say Iskendarian was his apprentice, although that could have just been Iskendarian's own propaganda talking."

"But you think if Byron returned he might be able to settle things? Straighten out whatever stuff is going on?"

"Almost assuredly."

"Does that mean you've been taking all this interest in me because you think I might be able to help lead to Byron? Or that Iskendarian might?"

"Iskendarian is a public hazard," he temporized.

"But *you're* not exactly the most public-spirited guy I've met, now admit it. Did you think that taking care of Iskendarian would help you convince Byron you *did* have the greater good in mind?"

"There is nothing necessarily preposterous in that reasoning."

"It all sounds like pretty much of a longshot to me."

"Longshots are not preposterous," Gash said. "Merely unlikely."

"And when they pay off you're a genius. So do you want me to try to wake Iskendarian up and ask him?"

"That would seem unwise."

"Well, thank you very much for that, anyway." If Iskendarian came out again I wasn't sure there would be any way to put him back. And if he came out I had a pretty good idea who he was going to be maddest at first.

But there was something else major still hanging. "You never finished telling me who of Byron's old pals are still walking around. What about Phlinn Arol?"

"I don't know how far Phlinn goes back; his origins are also enigmatic. He *has* been willing to talk about Byron, and it also appears to be true that they were on cordial terms. Without knowing the circumstances under which they parted, though, one has to be aware that the true story may be more complicated. Byron *did* vanish, we know that. Did Phlinn play a role in that development? Is his talk about Byron now a cover for his own participation in his friend's disappearance? Did Byron evaporate to escape *Phlinn*, and is Phlinn now casting forth to get him in his net? You can see he must be approached with caution."

I'd been led to believe Jardin had gotten rid of Byron, but why should that story be any more accurate than this? The different accounts weren't necessarily in conflict, either. "Have you already approached him?"

"In fact, I have. He was inscrutable. Have you?"

"I -" Gash was right; there had been something very odd about my last meeting with Phlinn Arol, when he had appeared in my room at the Adventurers' Club. We had been talking, and then he had appeared to suddenly notice something that made him nervous - *quite* nervous, and flustered too - and then he'd skedaddled so quickly he'd almost fallen over himself in his haste to get away. For that matter, the first time we'd met he'd brought up Byron himself, and out of the blue too. Some of his various remarks could have been considered to mean that he already knew who I really was, or had a pretty good idea. If -

"What are you thinking?" Gash asked carefully.

I didn't know if I should be telling him. On the other hand, what choice did I really have? "Phlinn also thought I could lead him to Byron. Then he saw Iskendarian start to emerge and got scared - panicked, really - and bugged out as fast as he could." 'I'm on your side,' Phlinn had said at the end, but he'd sounded particularly plaintive at the time, as though he was casting an especially hopeless defense on the waters. He'd acted like someone scrambling to get out of the way of a lunging sword point. "He said something strange about broccoli, too," I mumbled.

"Broccoli?"

"He was starting off with some pretty scatterbrained talk; he was probably trying to figure out how to lead up

to the Byron stuff. I mentioned that I hated broccoli and he said he used to know someone who hated broccoli. That kind of thing." Had that been exactly what Phlinn had said? There might have been more... But why was I wasting effort even thinking about broccoli at a time like this? "I wonder what his history with Iskendarian was. I have a feeling we should put Phlinn Arol on our itinerary. Definitely."

"There are dangers."

"So you said. But there're also dangers in not going to see him. There are dangers just being alive and awake; look at *me*. If Byron's the guy who can deal with Iskendarian once and for all I want to get my hands on him as soon as I can."

That wasn't necessarily the whole truth, but it was as much as I wanted to reveal to Gash. I didn't entirely know just what to make of this Byron connection. On the one hand, if I took what Gash said at face value, Byron could represent some measure of redemption to me. If Byron was the key to solving some part of the mess of the world, and if Iskendarian was the key to Byron, and if I was the key to worming the relevant information from Iskendarian without letting him loose again, then I could get the fear of Iskendarian off my back and help society at the same time.

On the other hand, it was a risky enterprise to take *anything* Gash said at face value.

But even if Byron wasn't the hope of the world, everything I'd heard about him did imply he might very well be wizard enough to be able to expunge Iskendarian. *If* he was alive, and *if* he could be reached, and *if* he was interested, and *if* he wasn't really aligned with Iskendarian himself in the same strange plot, and *if* Byron wasn't actually even more unpleasant than Iskendarian to boot. That was a lot of conditional modifiers.

Of course, the status quo hadn't exactly been breaking in my direction lately, either.

Yet this line of reasoning rested unpleasantly-much on the words of Gashanatantra. That brought up the question that had been dogging my thoughts to an omnipresent extent these last few days - how much of what Gash had said was really the truth?

If I thought of any options better than stringing along with him maybe I'd ask him then. "What we're getting back to is that Iskendarian may be the key," I temporized.

"A key, yes, indeed."

"So what are we doing spending the time visiting Protector of Nature?"

"There is more than just one lock involved. This way - I know the secret path to the Sacred Grove."

We had arrived at a large block set in the middle of the Boulevard of Gods - *literally* in the middle, with the road peeling off to encircle it in a long sweeping detour on both sides. The block was occupied by a park. Actually, "park" would be only the most minimal word to describe it. Beyond a low wall separating it from the bustle of traffic stretched a broad greensward dotted with the occasional thicket or copse; here a meandering stream, there a small pond half-choked with marsh grass. There were no pathways, only the luxuriant lawn and rolling meadows.

Gash led me into a field of what looked like wild wheat that started out knee-high, then mounted slowly to my chest before bounding suddenly to a level a good two feet above my head. When we emerged from the grain we were abruptly in the midst of a dense wood, fully equipped with clinging mists, dangling creepers, carpets of pine needles and decaying mulch, and heaven-scraping trees. Birds called exotically overhead, animals slunk in the underbrush. I wanted to ask Gash if we'd have to climb but I didn't really want to hear the answer.

Instead, I followed him along a ridgeline that revealed itself two hundred feet further along to be the broken-backed remnant of an ancient fallen trunk, food now for a whole new linear grove whose members had to be themselves a hundred feet tall apiece.

Then the trees parted suddenly. I had been hearing the muffled roar of untamed water for some time in the forest, but had no idea if the source was near or far, rapids or channel, or whether it was all just another trick of environment sorcery. I had certainly not expected the cataract that confronted us now, free-falling down the face of a cliff that dwarfed the trees that lay just behind us, at the top a smooth curve of glass, at the bottom a jumbled cauldron of thundering white and a mass of boulders, a small still pool, and an echoing subterranean exit that drained the torrent as quickly as it descended. A symmetric rainbow crowned the mist and framed the top of the waterfall and the summit of the peak above it. "We should have seen this from the street," I said. "Why didn't we see this from the street? This mountain has to be the tallest thing in the city."

Gash shrugged. "She's a god."

"Well, is that thing just there for decor or are we supposed to get ourselves to the top?"

"We are scarcely run-of-the-mill supplicants."

"That's something, I guess, but what if she's not around? We didn't exactly bring camping supplies."

"Oh, she's around, all right. She does split consciousness better than anyone."

He looked around, then raised his voice. "Clara? Where are you?"

A cloud passed overhead, a dark cloud, casting the clearing and the base of the waterfall into deep shadow. Thunder rolled. "She's just keeping us entertained," Gash said, I thought a trifle uncertainly.

"Fine," I told him, "but if we start taking lightning bolts I'm getting out of here."

He opened his mouth to respond - in fact, he might have actually said something that was lost behind the latest peal from the heavens - and we'd just begun to receive the first pelt of hail when the noise level dropped abruptly. It took me a moment to identify the fact that the waterfall had shut itself off. The last cascade of falling water hit the pool and as the spray and mist cleared a grotto in the cliff face became visible, along with a path of stepping stones and slick sections of ledge skirting the back edge of the lagoon. "You see?" Gash said.

What I saw didn't necessarily make me any happier, but then pursuit of my happiness was not exactly what had brought us here. I followed Gash along the trail, trying not to slip badly enough to slide off into the water, since it had occurred to me that nature clearly included carnivorous fish, and then entered through the mouth of the grotto into a hollowed cavern festooned with stalagmites and stalactites and the other traditional furnishings of natural limestone caves. Hidden lighting in bold colors cast the shadows of the pillars into eerie relief. By now I was half-expecting one of the pillars to writhe around and transform itself into our hostess, but instead there she suddenly was, in the same normal human form I'd last seen her wear in the street next to the Scapula's headquarters, stepping like a normal human out from behind an outcropping of rock.

"Gashanatantra. What a surprise," she said, not sounding surprised at all.

"Clara," Gash responded. "A pleasure, as always," he proceeded, underlining the fact that she had not referred to her own surprise as pleasant.

"Nice of you to bring the family," said Protector of Nature.

"You refer to my associate, and occasional surrogate? If we are to be colleagues, it is only appropriate to conduct our affairs in an open and aboveboard fashion."

'Associate,' was it? It sounded like I'd just received a promotion. Next he'd be saying the whole thing had really been my idea. "Yeah, right," Clara told him, which is about what I'd have said too at the moment if anyone had asked me for a comment. "Have you been power-sharing with this guy or is he some long-lost cousin? I don't like being fooled, you know."

"*You* approached *him*, I believe, and requested no validation."

"That's right. I approached *him*. So why are *you* speaking? Why are you even here?"

Enough of this. "I wasn't interested in your offer," I said. "I thought Gash would be, so I told him about it. I thought he was probably the one you intended your message to reach, anyway."

"Yes," said Gash. "I understood there was a bounty out for the elimination as an active force of Maximillian the Vaguely Disreputable; it was a question of determining who was offering it. I have now decided to collect."

"What are you talking about?"

"Since we *have* removed from the scene Maximillian the Vaguely Disreputable -"

"You?" she said. She began to smile. It was not the sort of smile you saw when someone was sharing a laugh with you. It was the sort of expression you saw when the joke was on you, and the punch line had claws. "That's not the way I hear it. Tell me then, how did you accomplish this task?"

I wanted to tell him to shut up. I didn't like to see us getting deeper into something that already clearly wasn't good. And us in her territory, too. "The question of Maximillian is scarcely the point," Gash said instead. "My arrangement with my associate is not the point either. The key is that you came looking for me, as indeed you should have. Who would be a better candidate for what you are considering?"

At the moment, Protector of Nature was reminding me quite a lot of Jill. But then that's the way Gash had said he liked women, hadn't he? - predatory and sharp, like him. "Him," she said.

For a moment I thought she might still mean me. Then two new men strolled out from behind the rock. "You're keeping interesting company," I said to the first one.

"As are you," said Arznaak, the Scapula.

"I hear you've been coming up in the world."

"That is the way of it," he agreed.

"As you can see," said Protector of Nature gratuitously, "the position is filled. If you'd still like to enlist in the cause there may be something we can find for you to do. Either one of you," she added, examining me carefully, obviously trying to decide where I fit into all this.

"And you, Vladimir," Gash said to the other man. "Suffered some recent reverse, I see? How unfortunate. Have you met the Lord of Storms?" he asked me.

"Haven't had the pleasure," I said. "Charmed." The Lord of Storms looked to have been bald even before he'd

been caught in whatever flensing spell had drained him of enough weight to make his skin hang loose and baggy, at least in the sections that weren't flaking off in eczematous clumps, and had made the residual hair in his eyebrows and over his ears flutter loose in thin white tufts now littered across his shoulders and face. One lens of his gold wire-rimmed spectacles was fractured and the twisted frame made the bridge aim itself strongly downhill toward the right. If this guy was in charge of storms the continent had better get set for a major drought.

"Of course Vladimir was always one for a winning team," Gash continued. "You are certain you've picked right this time, aren't you?"

The Lord of Storms drew himself up. "I can't guess what you're referring to."

"I'm sure you know best," said Gash solicitously. "Although don't I recall you and Clara in opposition -"

"Do you join us?" Protector of Nature repeated. "The common hazard menaces you as much as anyone."

"These are weighty decisions," Gash said easily. "Will you be making a formal presentation?"

"Of course," said the Scapula. "Tradition is important."

"You've been off the net," Protector of Nature said. "Will you attend anyway?"

"Why not?" said Gash.

"And your friend?" added the Scapula.

"Who can say? Why not ask him."

"I'll think about it," I said, "see if I can work it into my schedule. Sounds like it would be a shame to miss."

"Just so," said the Scapula.

"By the way," Gash said to the Scapula, as though he was just thinking of it for the first time, "as our newest colleague, have you aligned yourself with Conservation or Abdication?"

"That should be obvious. Do you think I'd go to quite a lot of trouble to obtain power only to throw it away?"

"That rhetorical statement could apply to any of us, those advocating Abdication included."

"I am here for the concrete exercise of power," declaimed the Scapula precisely, "not an experiment in social justice."

"Yes, that certainly clarifies it. Well, I will look forward to your proclamation. I assume that will occur promptly?"

Arznaak and Protector of Nature exchanged glances. It was Protector of Nature who nodded once at him, then answered. "Yes, of course. The community will be gathered for the Knitting; the occasion is already auspicious. Perhaps you'd choose to wait here for it."

I thought this might be a good time to heft Monoch, so I did. Even in his walking stick concealment, he emitted enough of a low power hum to cause the eyes of the three folks opposite us to flick toward him, then up at me, then back at Gash. "As my associate mentioned," he stated, "our schedule is demanding. So perhaps

we will now leave you to your preparations."

Several minutes later, after we'd recrossed the pool, just ahead of the reactivation of the waterfall, and were tromping again through the forest, I said, "Are we lucky they let us leave?"

"Yes," said Gashanatantra. "Dr. Shaa is correct. That individual is dangerous. As is Clara. Vladimir is a dope but he has an instinct for advantageous alliance."

"At least we didn't tell them who I was."

"Yes..." he said thoughtfully. "Although I still wonder what they might know."

"Maybe you'll end up allied to them and then you can find out."

Gash didn't say anything to that. In its way, that may have been the most unnerving thing that had happened to me all day.

CHAPTER 10

IT HAD BEEN SOMETHING OF A TOSS-UP. If the damage at the Karlini lab had been as extensive as the Creeping Sword had described, though, amounting to total devastation, then their backup plan would have gone into effect. Accordingly, Shaa eyed the front door of his flat one final time and inserted his key in the lock.

He had apparently guessed right, Shaa thought sourly. Seated on a chair in the entry hall, sword at the ready though resting across his knees, relaxed in posture but with the same coiled-spring tautness he always sported, even during his rare episodes of being either drunk or asleep, was Svin the ex-barbarian. As was typical for members of Shaa's extended family as this day wore on, Svin's clothes were distinctly the worse for wear, but Svin himself was largely unscathed. Indeed, he seemed freshly laundered. Shaa spared a brief prayer for the fate of his guest towels, nodded to Svin, and moved along toward the living room, from whence the clamor of voices that had assaulted him as he'd opened the door was emanating.

He stood surveying the scene, realizing as he did that he was expecting a typical shouted greeting, something along the lines of "Sure is about time you decided to show up!" or "Who's that guy and what's he doing in his apartment?" But who would do the shouting? Not Karlini, who was instead performing a very effective job of being comatose on the couch covered by a light blanket. Not that barbeque-in-the-shape-of-a-human sprawled on a sheet on the carpet being ministered to by the ever-solicitous Wroclaw. Not Haddo, who was typically sulking on a divan across from Wroclaw as he acerbically critiqued his handiwork. Certainly not the siblings Mont, who were taking mutual critique to the depths only capable of being plumbed by siblings close in age.

And not Roni, who was absent.

I wonder what the Creeping Sword might have neglected to tell me? Shaa considered idly.

Shaa had stored most of his medical instruments in the decorative apothecary cabinet on the wall adjacent to the entryway. He rummaged through it for a moment, then crossed to Karlini. *First things first. I suppose*, Shaa said to himself, however unlikely, and waved a bottle of concentrated smelling salts in the midst of Karlini's face. Karlini's nose twitched, his face contorted, he squirmed on the couch, and then his eyelids drew reluctantly back.

Amateurs. A whole house full of them, and he'd instructed them in basic first-aid procedures, too. *Ah, well.*

Karlini focussed on Shaa, his face drawn and lined. "Roni's dead," he said.

"Unequivocally?"

"Sounds that way," said Karlini, totally without energy. "The Creeping Sword killed her."

Shaa seated himself on the floor. "The Creeping Sword may not have been able to help himself. It appears he is also Iskendarian."

Karlini stared blankly at him for a moment. Then he drew in breath for a deep shuddering sigh. "I can see there's something here we're going to have to think about. Can I get a drink of water?"

Karlini was not acting in the typical manner for one who had just required resuscitation with smelling salts, but then very little about the situation was normal. Shaa was rising to his feet to fulfill the request for water, which was the first traditional move Karlini had made since reawakening, when Karlini abruptly said, "I'm going to kill him anyway, you know."

Shaa sat back down. "I thought you might be feeling that way. Don't think me callous when I say that might be precipitate."

"I wasn't there to help her when she needed it. What else's left for me now?"

"Honoring Roni by acting rashly would not have impressed her."

"I'll just have to be the one to worry about that. Are you arguing that because the personality we know wasn't in control and this other personality, Iskendarian, was, I should hold the one we know blameless?" Karlini shrugged. "You kill one, you get the other one for free. Nothing to do about it."

Did Karlini want his water or not? It might cool him off, but on the other hand there might not be a better time to try to work this through, and Shaa didn't want to lose the flow. "You wouldn't blame someone who was possessed. This is not materially different."

"Okay, fine," said Karlini, "I won't blame him if you'd rather I not. I wouldn't blame a rabid dog either. But I'd still have to kill it."

"What about the argument for self-interest? We may yet need the man's capabilities."

"There's no compromising with evil."

"Of course there is," Shaa said, "especially considering that no one ever has any idea how to define it. 'I know it when I see it' is an insufficient standard for executions."

Karlini was starting to steam. "Why are you defending him? Do you see Roni here anywhere? Wasn't she your friend and partner as much as any of us? Or are you just playing the contrarian for the hell of it, to drive me to want to kill you too?"

This was good, in principle. Under the ancient doctrine of transference, perhaps Karlini was starting to deflect his antagonism onto Shaa instead. Of course, it wouldn't do to let this get out of hand. Karlini could be deadly enough in his own right that Shaa didn't want to face him down unless he absolutely had to. Possibly a stern glare was what was called for here. "I seem to recall quite a lot of exertion on your own behalf when you were confined to a certain castle recently," Shaa said pointedly. "We all helped you, at no little sacrifice and danger, you might recall as well, including the same gentleman you're so ready to exterminate. He turned to us for help, too, did he not? Quite obviously we have failed him, or he would not now be in the situation of a runaway rogue. Perhaps he should be pressing his grievances against us rather than the other way around."

"Are you out of your mind? Think about what you're saying! These flights of rhetorical fancy are totally running away with you."

Well, perhaps he *had* gone a bit too far. The usual method for managing such a patient would have been to humor him in his obsessions, especially so soon after suffering such a major shock. Karlini, however, tended toward the *idée fixe*. With him, it was better to try to head off a bad idea before it became wedged in his head than to wait and hope to dislodge it later. That didn't mean he had to fall off the deep end in the process. Shaa raised his hand to hold back Karlini's mad onslaught. "These may be extraordinary times. My major point was the danger of precipitate action. We may yet need the talents of every one of us, what with Max in prison and _"

"What?" said Karlini. "What about Max? And where have *you* been, anyway?"

If all else fails, change the subject. "I too was locked up. Also, my curse is lifted."

"... If that's true, the bad news that has to go with it must be pretty bad."

"My brother is a god."

"Just like I said."

"I will get your water," Shaa stated, "assuming you still remember asking for it, and then I suggest we gather the troops for a brief session of bringing up to date. Hmm?"

This was accomplished, and remarkably quickly too, especially under the circumstances. "It is difficult to say which complication demands the most urgent response," said Shaa, watching Karlini chug down another tumbler fresh from the jug. "The situation at the laboratory may bother me the most, because of the potential for cataclysm if anything survived the fire to escape into the environment. Especially given the manifestations at the scene. Especially since you, Great One, were unconscious and unable to make a hazard assessment before you left."

"It wasn't my fault, I was -"

"I didn't say a thing about fault," Shaa said severely, "which is in any case irrelevant to the central concerns. Wroclaw? Haddo? I know you two reprobates have expressed your own misgivings in this matter."

Haddo was the one who spoke. "Said Favored vanished hazard was."

Shaa raised an eyebrow. "Who is Favored? Perhaps he or she - or it - should be at this meeting too."

As much as you could ever tell from Haddo's tone of voice, he seemed annoyed with himself. As though he had let slip something better left unsaid? Any such inference was as usual helped not at all by a reading of his expression, which consisted of his typical cowl-droop and eye-spark drift. "Busy Favored-of-the-Gods is. Attends he meetings not."

"Edifying," Shaa said, "as always. Anyone else have something to say about this Favored?"

"Was he the one in the flying ball?" asked Jurtan Mont. "Little guy with pointy ears? He was dropping things on the fire from the air. Seemed like a friend of Haddo's."

"I've met him, too," Karlini said reluctantly. "He's a technologist on call to the gods. He's got a nasty attitude. He thinks everything we've been doing should have been shut down, especially the work in the lab. If he's satisfied that the lab's been defanged I'd think that's pretty solid assurance."

Am I reassured? Shaa asked himself. No, he was not. There were too many new facts and new faces being thrown around here. "I want to meet this Favored, and I want a comprehensive probe run on the lab. I -"

"Since when are *you* leader?" said Karlini. "What happened to decisions by consensus?"

"You are in my apartment," Shaa stated, and, directing his stare fully at Karlini, added, "plus I may be the only one of us whose thought processes at the moment are intact. And before we degenerate into a tit-for-tat of tort and retort may I remind you that the stakes on this are too great for error."

"I'm getting a new doctor," Karlini muttered.

"That is always your prerogative. I'll have your records sent over."

Shaa had had his eye on Tildamire Mont, who had been looking increasingly like a balloon about to burst. "What is *happening* here?" she shouted suddenly. "We should be working together, not going for each other's throat. What would Roni think?"

Shaa made one of his ironic faces. "Roni would probably recall our standard mode of behavior, that being that after we have all spent too much time together we need to retreat to opposite ends of the continent or tear each others' ears off. But this time that's not an option we can afford. I nominate my brother for the problem of next greatest import. Does anyone want to challenge this assessment?"

"You know what *I* want," said Karlini.

"If Iskendarian takes over the city he'll be in hunting season faster than any deer you've ever seen. Will you be satisfied with that, at least for now?"

"If Iskendarian takes over and you hear about it, will you tell me?"

"As I run looking for cover, yes, I will."

"All right, then," Karlini grumbled.

Well, that was something. Of course, if Iskendarian *did* take over, Karlini would have to wait in line while a ballroom full of gods took their shots at him first, from the tenor of what Shaa had heard back at Jill's temple. "Now," Shaa said, "to my brother. His making himself a god does change our relationship somewhat."

"You mean now, when you can't, you're willing to kill him?" Karlini sneered.

"Who *says* I can't?" said Shaa, rather quietly. "That's never been the issue. But he shouldn't have to be killed to be stopped."

"What if there's no other way?"

"This time he *has* to be stopped," Shaa said, even more quietly, but with clear resolve. "Whatever happens he has brought down on himself. Whatever that takes, it will take. But he has already left himself open to an obvious stroke from us."

"The ring," said Tildamire Mont.

"Exactly."

"But -" sputtered Jurtan Mont. "But wouldn't your brother have triggered whatever traps Max had left on the ring when he put it on? And didn't you say it would be too hard to get Max out of the dungeon anyway?"

"My brother knew Max had had the ring and had certainly trapped it," Shaa told him. "That is one reason he hid behind Jardin, Master of Curses. Knowing Max, his snare would be optimized around the Curse Administrator's capabilities, as probed by Max during their earlier negotiations. I witnessed this ambush activated by Jardin in my brother's presence when Jardin put the ring on. Now, it's possible Max could have created a second-order delayed-action trap as well; not likely, but possible. I'm sure my brother considered that possibility too. The fact that he proceeded to store the ring in an ice chest rather than donning it in my presence argues that his prudence is at a maximum. Eventually, though, he will need its power boost."

"So what, then?" asked Jurtan. "You can't put a new trap on the ring now, can you, while it's in your brother's possession?"

"Not exactly." Shaa swiveled his gaze to the recumbent Dortonn, slavered against his will with Shaa's full stock-on-hand of medicinal ointments and with a sterile drip-line running fluids into his arm. "It is time to bring this gentleman into the discussion. "

The gentleman in question opened his eyes. "I have been listening," Dortonn croaked. "Why should I help you?"

"Self interest, primarily," said Shaa. "It would accomplish your mission."

"Wait a minute," Jurtan interrupted again. "What are you talking about here? What did I miss?"

"Dortonn is the disciple of Pod Dall, who's stuck in the ring," his sister said. "What they seem to be talking about is that Dortonn knows some way to get his master *out* of the ring."

Jurtan looked confused. "But if Dortonn knew how to awaken Pod Dall, why hasn't he done it already?"

Dortonn looked at him as though he was a moron; perhaps he was. "It was *dangerous*," Dortonn said. "It *is* dangerous."

"And that's with everything set up properly, with enough time, in a peaceful environment," Karlini put in. "Even if the work could be done at a distance, under battlefield conditions it could be suicidal."

"The release spells are that dangerous?" asked Tildamire.

"No," said Karlini, "it's what you get *after* the spells have worked you have to watch out for. You try being cooped up in a ring for months and see how *you* feel when you get out. You know what happened the other time Pod Dall started to come through; Roosing Oolvaya was *your* city."

"You mean he'd lash out at whoever was helping him?" Jurtan protested. "That doesn't make sense. He'd be grateful; you'd have rescued him."

"Yeah," said Tildamire, "and maybe he'd think you'd taken your own good time about it."

"Ah," said Shaa, "but what if Pod Dall had someone *else* handy against whom to take out his wrath? Someone closer to hand. For example, someone wearing the ring?"

CHAPTER 11

WAS HE DYING? Fradi wondered. He *was* in extreme pain, or to be just as precise the rest of his body had abruptly caught up with the distress of his hand. But dying? He would just have to see. There was nothing he could do about it anyway, since none of his muscles would move.

But he *would* be dead now, were it not for the countermeasure he had deployed when he launched his attack against his former patron, a defense which he had somehow never mentioned to the Scapula. The Scapula, his ally. Were it not for that small foresight he most likely would be mouldering now, rather than trying to understand the menacing twists and turns of the Scapula's own treacherous game.

"Treacherous" was the only word for it, clearly. As someone with his own history in that area Fradjikan felt thoroughly equipped to recognize the hand of a master of the field. As his ally, the Scapula had encouraged him in his suspicion of his ultimate fate at the hands of his patron once his task was complete, had counseled him on the key signs to beware, on tactics of response, on timing - had even provided him with a "carefully tuned" weapon for use at the appropriate moment. The weapon had performed the bidding of its master, but that master was clearly the Scapula. Instead of paralyzing or eradicating Fradi's patron, it had left him merely weakened, wounded perhaps, stripped of his mystic mantle of office to be sure, but scarcely out of the picture.

And then there had been the Scapula himself, appearing on cue to demonstrate his utility and perspicacity to Fradi's patron, having not only forecast such an attack but now fortuitously arrived to nullify the attacker. But Fradjikan was not dead, only incapacitated and immobilized. Could the Scapula have erased him on the spot? Surely, given the power he was now manifesting. Which obviously meant that the Scapula still had some role for him he was yet to play...

The most frustrating part of being paralyzed in this particular place was the restorative machinery that surrounded him. Fradi had benefited from its benediction before, and perhaps (although it seemed doubtful) had been subjected to its effects even today. Was there no way for him to get off the floor and activate the equipment himself? From their conversation as they had left the room, the Scapula and Fradi's former patron, whose name was apparently Vladimir, would not be absent long. If the Scapula's parting remark could be taken at face value, their absence would however be long enough that Fradi would never see the end of it. "You don't have a dungeon?" he had responded to Vladimir. "Well, it can't be helped. Just lock the doors to this place, why don't you, and let the assassin expire at his own pace." Of course, the pace Fradi was trying to choose for his own was extremely slow.

Now, there was the rejuvenation coffin above his head. The first time Fradi had been here he had awakened within it as well. On that occasion, though, he seemed to vaguely recall that the thing had been full of liquid, which had just been draining away as he had returned to consciousness. During that visit his orientation had still been mystical, too. He had seen the workings of the gods and had considered them unknowable. His sophistication in these matters had advanced considerably over the subsequent period.

It was now clear to him that there was very little in the realm of the gods that was inherently unknowable through being beyond the capacity of human ken. Things might remain unknown through being secret, but that was lack of knowledge of a very different order, one thoroughly familiar to any sentient of whatever stature in life. No, the truth appeared to be quite the opposite of providing transcendental infallibility for gods. From his direct encounters, from his research, and from the events of this day, Fradi had come to appreciate that his own former patron, Vladimir, Lord of Storms, could scarcely be called infallible or transcendent by any reasonable observer with a drop of residual sincerity in their makeup.

Vladimir was close kin to the parlor prestidigitator who manipulated his tricks of coin and card and box not through mystical power but through skill of hand, or by their mere operation as appliances. Both could work the hidden mechanisms cunningly wrought by others, but neither was heir to the secrets of the universe, or

even to the curiosity to seek them out; they were wielders of the tools crafted by their betters.

Which implied that Fradi could likely run the rejuvenation apparatus as well as Vladimir, could he get himself into place. Was that the role the Scapula had intended him to play? Was that why the Scapula had left him here alive, even if presumably he was on a fast track toward death? True, the Scapula had not known of Fradi's additional precautions, those defenses that had kept him from being killed outright... but was even *that* really true? Even if the Scapula had failed to learn about the specific countermeasure he had employed, the Scapula had still known *him*. With that perception the Scapula would have already understood that he would have something of the sort up his sleeve.

All of which seemed likely to mean that he was exactly where the Scapula wanted him to be in preparation for whatever he might have planned next.

Of all the conditions the Scapula could have left him with, he had chosen paralysis. What better to ensure his continued availability for the next act?

Which argued that the best thing he could do was try to escape the paralytic hold.

But if his course of action was clear, his tactics were not, since he was still, needless to say yet still frustratingly so, paralyzed.

"What about this proclamation?" I said.

"The Scapula's proclamation, you mean," said Gash.

"Yeah, that's right." We were now on our way somewhere in a hired cab. I'd hoped Phlinn Arol would be the next one to be paid a call, but Gash had said, rather curtly, that Phlinn seemed to be making himself unavailable, adding that he seemed to be taking his civic duties a bit too much to heart. I was about ready to cut out on my own, Iskendarian or no Iskendarian; I figured there was legwork I needed to be doing myself. The time I'd been spending in thought had also been leading me down some intriguing alleys. I figured Gash knew what they were and didn't want to bring them up, and I was damned if I was going to tell him I knew what I knew yet either. "If you guys are so independent-minded why's there all this bother about proclamations?"

"Yes," Gash said. "We are creatures of habit. You will have observed that what passes for governance among us is much along the lines of balance-of-power diplomacy between independent states occupying intertwining terrain. What knits us together as much as anything are traditions. Treaties and covenants as well, but tradition before all else. Also, never underestimate the value of a tray of canapés and a chance to socialize."

"But it's not real food at a conclave, I thought. Just simulated."

"Ah, but many *will* be gathered physically in the Gods' Gallery at the Stadium of State. You should understand by now that we enjoy a good spectacle as much as the next person."

"And the Knitting is the one to beat?"

"Just so," said Gash.

I was thinking back on the conclave I'd attended, back in Oolsmouth; the one Gash had stage-managed, purging one of his adversaries in the process. I'd actually learned quite a lot there, and that was when I hadn't even had any idea what questions I should be asking. In many ways I was still working through the leads I'd gotten then. I should be in a much better position to resolve certain things now.

Except what if that was the sort of opportunity Iskendarian was looking for? I could be putting him in position to spread the scope of his damage far and wide, to hook up with allies, to cause who knew what kind of trouble.

But if Gash was right, and Byron was the key to *heading off* further trouble, and encountering the right person might be the key to getting the relevant information from the lock that was Iskendarian - well, I couldn't think of an occasion with more potential than the one Gash had just described.

There was no way around it; there was just going to have to be risk involved. Any direction I turned promised hazard, and *not* turning was no different, either.

But that wasn't the only thing I'd had to consider.

Something had been nagging at my mind since my talk with Gash about Byron, and I'd finally figured out what it was. Gash had been telling me about how Byron had created the framework for operational magic as an intellectual exercise, not as something he'd expected to put into production, but that his associates had taken his designs and set them into motion without telling him. From my time with Shaa and Max and the Karlinis I had some idea of how these kinds of folks operated, and indeed this all sounded plausible, but I was wondering if there might not be more to the story than just that. The thing was, these wizzy types did things differently when they were just playing with ideas than when they were locking down some system that was expected to *work*. When they were brainstorming they'd be kicking around a lot of pretty loopy stuff they never really intended to have see the light of day; when they were getting ready to move something out the door, on the other hand, they got concerned to the point of obsession about safeguards and testing and making sure things really worked the way they were supposed to.

So if Byron hadn't been thinking about actual deployment for the material he had been developing, if he had really been in brainstorming and simulation mode instead- what was built into the structure of present-day magic that wasn't supposed to be there at all? What hadn't been tested? What hidden surprises had he left?

It didn't end there, either. Who said Byron's ability to tinker had gone away when his partners had let his stuff loose? He'd certainly have left himself a back door to get back in and muck around. After being double-crossed, what kind of revenge might he have been able to plan?

Founding Abdicationism was wholly consistent with this train of thought, and it was potentially revealing of Byron's inclination and state of mind as well. If he hadn't wanted his theoretical work made concrete but was willing to live with it after the fact, you'd have expected he'd have shut up and gone along. Instead, there he was, rocking the boat, starting a philosophical gambit that had grown into a political schism by claiming the whole idea of gods exercising dominion was illegitimate. The maneuver was astute. Even if Byron could sweep the basis of the old order away through some use of force or trick or stratagem, delegitimizing that order in advance could help insure against groundswell counterattack or lingering revanchism.

Such a magnitude of shift in public attitude wasn't about to happen overnight, though. To see matters through to their conclusion it might be politic to slip out of sight while sentiment grew, and only resurface when things had come to a head... which of course very likely described now.

So where was he? What was he waiting for? Or was he already back on the scene?

Could *Arznaak* be Byron? That was a particularly nasty thought.

But it was not, I suddenly realized with an even greater sense of dread, the only viable scenario. How many people on the present stage had been exhibiting shifts of identity?

I thought I was losing my sense of what was preposterous.

Max was considering counting to ten thousand, again. That would be at least as useful as any other activity he could busy himself with, locked in this dungeon with all the mobility of a cord of wood, obviously cast adrift and perhaps even forgotten by his associates and -

There went the barred door again. If it was a priest, Max resolved to do his best to fall asleep. He closed his eyes and made his breathing shallow.

Unexpectedly, something clanked behind his head, then clicked delicately. These were not noises he was accustomed to hearing from the banshee device that was deliberately ruining his hearing, and setting to work on his sanity, too. Could that be the sound of intentional deactivation? Then he felt someone breathing close to his ear.

"You can't be serious," said Phlinn Arol. "I know you're not dormant, and you haven't been driven out of your mind."

Max squinted across at him. "I was trying to cultivate an attitude of detachment. Seeing how unlikely it is I'll see the outside world while there's still anything I can do that will affect it."

"Pouting is beneath you, Maximillian."

"I would have thought a lot of things were beneath me, like being strapped down like a plucked chicken, but I'm here to learn better, aren't I? Is the Emperor still being a fool?"

"The Emperor-designate is being insufficiently prudent," Phlinn Arol temporized. "The Scapula will be staging the official proclamation of his assumption of godhood very shortly; imminently, in fact, during the social meeting preceding the assembly of homage for the Knitting of the Corpus. I would like you to think about how matters might evolve from there."

"He's moving pretty fast, isn't he?"

"He is," allowed Phlinn. "His progress is not unprecedented, but it does demonstrate exceptional self-assurance and a decisive will to act. These will impress many of his new peers."

"I'd think they'd threaten, more."

"Not when the vacuum of power is so acute," Phlinn said. "Realize that there is a significant faction that has agreed to bind themselves to follow a common leader if certain conditions are met."

"A leader? Are you serious? What conditions?"

"Your being here fulfills one."

"You *are* serious.... Arznaak. *He* put me here."

"He could convincingly argue as much, yes."

"How much do you know about this?" Max demanded. "Could part of his proclamation be to finish me off in front of everybody?"

"I - hmm."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Max. "I don't like that at all. Why did you come back here?"

"I was interested in your advice," Phlinn Arol told him. "As you may know, the Emperor-designate is permitted to attend a conclave of the gods, in somewhat of an *ex officio* capacity."

"Won't he have to be getting ready for the Knitting ceremony himself?"

"Certainly, yes, but there is a period of traditional meditation in the schedule that could allow him to pop in. It *is* supposed to be a time for socializing, after all."

"Is Arznaak violating some tradition by taking over this social hour for his own agenda?"

"Well ..." said Phlinn. "A proclamation of ascendancy does fall under the category of society-type news. It's actually considered at least as appropriate to make such an announcement at a regularly scheduled public affair as to show the hubris of holding your own glorification party."

"Huh," said Max. "What about you, then? Are all the gods required to be there?"

"It is rather a deliberate snub not to. These galas are supposed to be the great levelers and mixers. Of course, I *am* the designated representative incarnate to the Emperor-elect so I could claim meditation for my own excuse as well. However, it is the expected thing for the liaison representative to mingle and gain as much advantage as possible from their temporary status and visibility. But these social niceties are not necessarily the point. There is politics and there is prudence. You know the Scapula as well as anyone. Where does prudence lie in this situation?"

"I know a conclave is neutral ground," Max said. "It's deliberately set up so no one has an advantage of power; all you can do is talk. Of course we all know Arznaak can be a pretty convincing talker. Does *he* have a patron?"

"It is known that Protector of Nature and Vladimir, the Storm Lord, have been the active representatives of this faction I mentioned, those who would centralize power. I assume they will present and speak for Arznaak."

"Huh. I don't know," said Max. "I don't know. If you go to this thing - if the Emperor goes - I'd like to think he'd see once and for all what kind of plans Arznaak really has, where - if anywhere - he intends to stop. But I'm just naturally suspicious of anything Arznaak's wrapped up in. From everything I know there's nothing he should be able to do there, but I still don't trust him."

"This could be mere paranoia on your part?" Phlinn probed. "Exacerbated by the recent success of the Scapula's plan against you and the current fact of your confinement?"

"... Yes," said Max. "Yes it could, of course it could."

"I'm glad to see you retaining your objectivity," Phlinn Arol said dryly.

"Fine, then. Here's something else objective. If Arznaak's plan depends on me being here, you could derail the plan by springing me loose."

"But then the Emperor-designate would not see him for what he is, would he?"

"You're quick as ever, aren't you." Damn him. Or on the other hand, don't damn him quite yet - Phlinn was still standing over the bed of confinement. "What else you got on your mind?"

"... Your choice of companions," said Phlinn Arol. "Specifically the one under the Spell of Namelessness. Have you considered *he* may be a trap?"

"You think I'm an idiot? Of course he could be a trap. I just thought we'd be safer having him where we could watch him and hope to counteract him if he went off - wait a minute - *has* he gone off?"

Phlinn Arol donned what he obviously intended to serve as an impassive countenance. Max had seen impassive on Phlinn, though, and this wasn't it. "Perhaps that is a matter of interpretation. He has manifested himself as Iskendarian."

Max was sure Phlinn was about to say more - surely he had to say more - but after a moment of contemplative hesitation he swung quickly around instead, and was gone. "Phlinn!" Max shouted, breaking all his rules of self-possession and decorum. "*Phlinn!*" But he was gone.

CHAPTER 12

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Fradjikan was noting some serious regret at not have taken spell-work more seriously. He had never envisioned a case where the use of magic would be necessary and a sorcerer would not be available for convenient hire. He had certainly not foreseen being himself in a situation where his own life would depend on being able to conjure his own way out from under a malign spell. Yet the application of maximum muscular force had failed to move the most trivial portion of his body, and the most intense concentration and fiercest consolidation of will had produced mere mental exhaustion. His paralysis remained, and the tantalizing engines of healing remained an unbridgeable arm's-span above his head.

He had lost track of how much time had passed. More than minutes, surely; possibly as much as hours. And then, suddenly, the waiting was over; the door flung open, the Scapula and Vladimir returned. "- don't understand why we didn't just remain at Clara's," Vladimir was saying as he came through the door. As he crossed the threshold he stumbled, or more precisely his knees buckled, and he caught himself by grabbing the doorframe. With an air of solicitude the Scapula helped to steady him. "Her facilities are more comfortable," Vladimir continued, in his weakened voice, "and we wouldn't have had to travel all the way back here, and after the proclamation we would have a much better view of the Knitting."

"It would not do to appear to be too much of a cabal," said the Scapula. "We wish to appear a popular groundswell." He approached and bent over Fradi, examining his face searchingly. "This one is mouldering rapidly," he called back over his shoulder, but then did a most unexpected thing. As he was straightening himself, he glanced back down at Fradi, and winked.

From the other side of the room Fradi could hear the sigh of air easing from soft leather cushions. "I use these divans while conferencing," Vladimir said. "Shall I call for refreshments?"

"No time," said the Scapula. "The schedule is exacting and Clara will await." Fradi's eyes were the largest bodily feature he had found to remain under his own voluntary control. Fortunately, involuntary functions such as breathing and the beating of his heart had continued with some regularity as well. Since he knew of many poisons that caused death by freezing these activities, this had scarcely been assured. He had even retained some vestige of decorum with the retention of muscle tone in assorted sphincters. But the eyes were what concerned him at the moment. By craning them as far as possible around to the sides of their orbits, and focusing his attention on his peripheral vision, Fradi could see the Scapula settling onto a couch placed at a right angle to that occupied by the reclining Lord of Storms. Perhaps it was the extreme angle, or even an incipient cataract in his eye, but a small fogbank appeared to be condensing over Vladimir's head and extending itself along his body. The Scapula said, "Everything is ready?" as though he were asking himself a question, and then nodded in satisfaction as he answered himself in the affirmative; "Everything is ready." Then the same cloud swirled out of the air over the Scapula's head and spread out across his form like a caul.

I'd been here before. Not 'here,' this specific place, and even calling it a 'place' was misleading since as far as I could tell none of this had any basis in concrete external observable reality, but for all that it *was* a place, and was certainly of the same sort I had visited before, in Oolsmouth.

These conclaves of the gods, and for all I knew their whole system of communications, took place on a neutral common ground of artificial environments that existed - dreamlike - solely by mutual agreement. Since I still hadn't experienced a dream worthy of the name, I was taking that part of the description on faith but without the slightest complaint. If Iskendarian wanted to monopolize the dreams to which our jointly held body was entitled, I was with him all the way. The deeper he chose to retreat into dreamland the happier I'd be.

That he was still around, however, was attested to by the fact that I *was* able to launch myself into the gods' consensual fantasy-space, unless of course he'd abandoned our body while leaving his store of knowledge and practical techniques behind, buried somewhere in our shared unconscious. I wasn't sure what I'd feel if he *had*

cleared out - I doubted it would be as simple as noticing I was now rattling around in the equivalent of a large empty house formerly shared with a loud and demanding roommate - but I did have the (possibly fatalistic) idea that as soon as I thought he was gone and started to relax, that's when he would really let me have it once and for all.

Of course, the last time I'd hit the conclave circuit I'd been going as part of a group; this time I was solo. I still didn't know what Gash intended to do, which I'm sure wasn't accidental on his part, and if anyone knew if I'd be meeting up with any of my other pals it sure wasn't me. If I could have figured out how to nose around while not actually attending - eavesdropping with one foot out the door, so to speak - I'd have done that instead, but aside from the vague assurance in the back of my mind that I *could* do that if I was smart enough I couldn't dredge up the information that would tell me how to bring it about. Instead, I found myself retracing familiar ground: the cloud above my head, the drawing-down finger motions in front of my face, the clammy tendrils of fog creeping down my back and across my body and into my ears; the feeling that even though I didn't consciously know what I was doing, it was familiar, and I might as well just give myself up to it and let whatever was in control have its rein.

I wasn't sure where Gash had taken himself off to this time. Jill either, for that matter. We'd considered going back to her place in lieu of the availability of another base of operations, but when I'd told him I had it in my mind to attend the Scapula's proclamation but wasn't happy with the idea of leaving my insensible body lying around where she'd have easy access to it he'd reluctantly revealed that, indeed, he had his own small retreat down a convenient byway. His retreat proved in fact to be a walk-up apartment above a laundry and an eggroll shop in a seedy quarter not far off the Boulevard of Gods. On unlocking the door, he'd cast me a severe gaze, as though daring me ever mention this to anyone else, before leading the way up the stairs.

The flat wasn't *shabby*, exactly, but it was clear he hadn't had anyone in to pick up for a while. I even considered - very briefly - suggesting that perhaps he could set up some arrangement with the laundryman underfoot. I'd quashed the idea as soon as it had manifested, though. Circumstances had thrown me closely together with Gash but they hadn't made us *close*, if you follow my meaning, or at least close enough for me to be giving him the sort of critique bandied about by bachelor gentlemen of whatever social stratum. Perhaps the suggestion that I raise the topic had floated up from Iskendarian, in an attempt to get me pummeled and thus let him loose, but I didn't take that idea too seriously; I knew full well how creatively I could get myself in trouble with no need of external assistance.

In any case, after rummaging around for a bit Gash had produced a carafe of iced tea from his chiller, and I'd joined him in a glass before being shown back to the armchair in the front room. "Do you think this is a good idea?" I'd asked him.

He'd shrugged. "There are arguments on every side. That is why I am still considering whether or not to join you. Are you sure *you* can handle it?"

"Hell," I'd said, "I'm not sure of anything. All I know is that I did this before without our pal popping out, and there's nothing else on the schedule that has the potential of shifting the rules like this bit with the Scapula."

So here I was now, in the logical sequela to that argument, synchronizing into the arrival zone of... the crater of an active volcano? I'd never visited one that I could remember, you understand, but it still had all the hallmarks: a wide bubbling lake of glowing red magma, with burps of semi-solid rock jetting into the air here and there across its surface; a sensation of baking heat billowing from the cauldron in waves; the scents of brimstone and rotten eggs; a rumbling and quaking underfoot; inclined rock walls reaching jaggedly toward the heavens on all sides, excepting only the large flattish space I found myself at one edge of; even the arcs of lightning that sparked from the molten rock to the low-riding clouds and back on a continual crackling basis. Of course, the typical volcano lacked some of the amenities this one provided: the comfortable lounging chairs and settees arranged in conversational groupings around the undulating coffee tables; the strolling

instrumentalists and wait-persons and -things; and, of course, the crowds of gaily dressed folks standing around gossiping while ostentatiously ignoring the spectacular view. I looked for a ambulating palm tree but instead spotted a whole grove of them holding court off at the far side, checked for the raffish piratical aspect favored by Phlinn Arol, but without success, and finally decided to make a swing past the virtual sideboard on my way to join the hippogriff who was telling obviously hilarious jokes to his audience of two humans in jewels and ermine, an ostrich, a toad as tall as the ostrich, and a cloud of sparkling dust.

I'd had half a thought of mingling for a bit and then clearing out just before the Scapula made his spiel, but apparently I'd dawdled a little too long with Gash before setting out, for I had barely reached the sideboard when Shaa's brother, resplendent in his usual jet outfit, emerged from the midst of the palm grove and stood there waiting to be noticed. Or perhaps that *wasn't* what he was waiting for. With a ripple of fronds, all the palms simultaneously cast down their coconuts. At the large thud/*thwock* of several hundred coconuts demolishing themselves against the floor, every head swiveled toward the trees, and even those attendees wearing aspects that lacked heads (and in several extreme cases, eyes as well) gave the impression of shifting their attention to that end of the assembly. Then the grove said, in the echoing single voice of the Protector of Nature, "Nice to see you all here."

She went into a typical welcome-guys, hope-you're-having-a-good-time spiel and then moved smoothly on to the introduction of the new kid in their midst. The onlookers projected a mostly pleasant air of patient forbearance, although I did notice a few nervous glances and incredulously raised eyebrows, but when Protector of Nature made the rapid segue to describe how the former Scapula had fulfilled the requirements of her search committee for the god-among-gods a buzz broke out, rapidly ascending to a hubbub of heated debate. For some reason the whole thing was making me feel more than a little creepy, as though ants were marching through my head and down my back, not at all the sort of reaction I would have expected from myself but then what *was* I supposed to expect by now, anyway?

Maybe my uneasy feeling came from watching the Scapula himself. He had yet to say a word on his own, yet the gaze he was casting across the assembly owed only the barest nod to humility or a sense of place or gratitude to the benefactors sponsoring him in his latest enterprise. For a moment I considered the idea that this was the reserve of someone thrust into a unfamiliar social situation. But no, he had the expression I imagined was typical for him, the look of I-am-lord-of-creation holiest-of-holies biggest-of-cheeses; an expression designed to emphasize that the only things in sight were things he owned, or things he ran. Now that I thought about it, this probably wasn't too unfamiliar a social setting for him either, other than a few details of place and players and odd ambience effects. Before his Transcendence he had already been, after all, at the very summit of the political hierarchy of the greatest empire anyone had ever seen. You didn't get there by nepotism, either. You had to -

I suddenly began to suspect that I wasn't the only one watching who was having that same crawly sensation. Several celebrants in humanoid guise were scratching their necks or patting their hair, over near the edge of the magma lake a dwarf rhinoceros was surreptitiously brushing itself against the side of a coffee table, and even a few of the palm trees were rattling their fronds with somewhat excess vigor. When you thought about it, this was extremely odd, since no one was actually physically present in this place. Even the *place* wasn't physically real. And all these people were getting itchy? At the same moment?

It was time to leave, I decided, and even as I had the thought I moved it to execution by invoking a quick-disconnect mechanism that had just floated to mind.

At least I *thought* I'd tripped that mechanism. I subvocalized the trigger-word again.

Okay, so Iskendarian was playing games, so I was still where I'd been. There was still the traditional way to disengage and withdraw. All I had to do was terminate the wideband communications link and the reality field would collapse. I knew how to do that -

I was doing it *right*. So why was nothing happening? Why -

I looked around. At least a half-dozen other attendees were muttering to themselves, their eyes screwed shut in concentration and fingers making fluttery contortionist passes. I swung back to face the Scapula. Across the assembly, his smirk was wide and triumphant. As I glared at him, he raised his hand and began for the first time to speak.

"Thank you," he declaimed, interrupting the discussion between Protector of Nature and a trio of furies who had been yelling back at her palm grove with a single voice that jumped back and forth between the three of them in the midst of sentences and between words. It had been an amusing effect; I figured the three bodies were animated by one puppeteer splitting his or her attention between them. But it wasn't amusing now - *nothing* was amusing now. "Thank you, my partners, for such a laudatory introduction, so glowing and yet so trusting."

A new fusillade of speed-streaked coconuts appeared from the midst of the grove and converged on the Scapula. Instead of splattering his projected figure or beating it to the artificial ground, though, they spun into orbit around him, a brown fuzzy blur making the sound of a small tornado, then faded from sight and vanished. The Scapula was revealed again holding a tall glass of coconut milk, from which he took a deliberate sip, then pressed milk and glass into nothingness between his palms. "As you have been discovering," he went on, "this is scarcely a typical proclamation. Indeed, you have all become my prisoners."

CHAPTER 13

"JUST WHAT IS THE PROBLEM with your brother, anyway?" Jurtan Mont asked suddenly. "Why is he the way he is?"

"You're not the first to bring that up," said Zalzyn Shaa. Having reached a consensus, albeit a forced one, it had seemed prudent to hit the road again while Karlini and the remains of Dortonn worked their whiles. Since the consensus *had* been somewhat forced, however, he had enlisted the watchful Svin to keep them focused on the task at hand. And Haddo and Wroclaw, and Haddo's newly-revealed friend Favored-of-the-Gods? - well, it was an unfortunate fact that there were too many players on the scene, and not enough trust to go around. Maybe they could all be sent on the certainly suicidal mission of trying to free Max. Even if sent, of course, they would scarcely *go*, but with the attempt *would* surely go any residual measure of good will.

There were things to be said for catatonia as a style of life.

But even if there were, his brother Arznaak would scarcely be the one saying them. "I believe Arznaak's behavior stems from roots innate," Shaa continued. "Nurtured by the indulgence of my parents, to be sure, and especially by our father's particular myopia. I suppose you might say as well as anything that my brother lacks an appreciation for magic."

"He seems to be pretty effective using magic as a weapon," commented Tildamire. "*Wouldn't* you say?"

"That's not the sort of magic I was thinking about. There's magic as a utilitarian tool, which is the one you were thinking of, and then there's magic as a state of mind, a metaphorical descriptor for an attitude toward the world. Arznaak is thoroughly utilitarian. It's the esthetic appreciation of things as they are that has always eluded him. You appear to be wondering what I'm talking about."

"Are you talking about the beauty of nature?" said Jurtan.

"It's true that a humanizing effect is often associated with stopping to smell flowers or leisurely watching the sun set, and it is equally true that my brother has never had the slightest interest in these things. There *is* a danger in being too resolutely goal-directed. That's probably more a symptom than a root cause, to be sure, but it *is* also part of a syndrome. A constellation of symptoms often seen in association," Shaa added.

Jurtan Mont had his face contorted, a sign often noted when he was trying to follow Shaa through some unnecessarily abstruse argument. "Wait a minute," he said. "The Scapula's a villain, right? He's evil. Isn't that all the explanation you need? He tortured you and Eden when you were kids, now he made himself a god because he wants to run the world - I mean, that makes him *evil*. Doesn't it?"

"You idiot," said his sister. "That's way too simplistic. He doesn't think of *himself* as a bad guy, does he?, and evil's just a label. Isn't it?"

Shaa thought that Svin, the new-born philosopher, should really be at hand for this. "You tell me," Shaa temporized. "Arznaak enjoys causing pain. He enjoys depriving people of what they love best, using them as tools, imposing on them the fates he chooses; exercising his will as a lash. That is the way he is. Does that make him evil, whatever *that* is? If he *is* evil, then that probably makes *me* evil as well, since I failed to annihilate him when I might have had the chance." Shaa shrugged. "I don't know about labels. What I do know is that now he's gone too far and he has to be stopped. He's no longer restricting his wrath to the family, where it was our business how we handled him."

"But isn't it too late?" said Jurtan. "Now he's so powerful, and he seems to be such a master of magic. I don't know," he went on wistfully. "Maybe there's some piece of forgotten technology out there that could bring

him down."

"Could be," said Shaa. "More likely you're falling into the trap of a romantic mindset. Magic is practical, everyday stuff, with nothing mystical or sentimental about it; just another tool. Technology, on the other hand, makes people go gooey-eyed and misty-brained with that forbidden allure and images of an enchanting better world. The fallacy of that thinking is that if technology weren't proscribed it would just be another tool too. Tools aren't sentimental. People use them all just the same way."

"But -"

Shaa held up a finger. "We have arrived." He inverted the hand and spread his fingers to indicate the street ahead. The block held an unusual gloom in the declining sun; the gaslines to the wide-spaced streetlights had obviously been breached, or more hopefully turned off due to the damage to the neighborhood. The smell of burning was still intense, and wisps of smoke were still rising from the charred ash-heaps of the several ruined buildings.

Tildamire had begun to weave from side to side on her feet. Shaa grasped her shoulder with a steady grip. "I'm fine," she said quaveringly. "I was just visualizing -"

"Yes," said Shaa. *An incendiary consumption of living flesh.* And surprisingly enough, one that was difficult to tie to his brother.

"Couldn't she be alive?" Tildamire added plaintively. "I didn't actually see her burn -" she gulped "I mean, I saw Roni, and I saw the fireball, but I don't think I really saw the fireball *hit* her. Couldn't she have had some last-minute defense, something that shielded her long enough for her to get away?"

Interesting, Shaa thought. That was not quite exactly the story as he had been hearing it. Sometimes these minor differences could be significant. "Ronibet surely had her personal protection field, but likely it was overwhelmed by the force of the blast; Iskendarian *is* a heavyweight. But this argument has a flaw of logic. If she escaped, where is she now? Why hasn't she made herself known?"

"Then couldn't she have teleported herself or transferred her mind or - or something? Something that would make her unreachable for a while?"

"I suppose anything is *possible*," Shaa said reluctantly. "But I wouldn't try to console myself by convincing myself it was *likely*, or had actually happened. Shall we accomplish what we came here to do, then, which is to say evaluate what is unfortunately a much greater and a much less pleasant probability?"

"... All right," whispered Tildamire. "All right, yes, Shaa, let's do that."

"Right," said Shaa. "Now, you were assisting her on this, so you should be able to remember the recognition signatures of those organisms she was creating. The destruct beacons to track them down if any got loose? Those."

"I guess so. Maybe. But I've never run a probe on my own."

"I will assist you. And Jurtan? - perhaps you would be good enough to re-extend your particular talents as well."

"Yeah, okay, but what am I trying to find?"

"Anything that might have escaped the destruction, and be flourishing, in preparation to march out and eat the

rest of the city. Is that enough to start with?"

If his paralysis had been caused by a drug, Fradjikan had noted, it would most likely be wearing off by now, or he would be dead. But if he *was* afflicted by a drug, it was not one he was familiar with, and he had thought he had known them all, down to the rarest trace alkaloid. Sorcerous delivery methods for traditional poisons were scarcely unknown either, of course, and since the Scapula was clearly the master of magic he, Fradjikan, was not, their employment was obviously within his grasp. Still, when all the evidence had been considered it appeared that his downfall had been accomplished through entirely wizardly means.

Fradi *had* been considering the evidence at hand. Without question, pondering the etiology of his doom was a morose way of passing what likely were his last moments extant, but he hadn't exactly been in the mood for pleasant reminiscences. And perhaps he could still think of something useful.

Without any need to invoke the paralysis, his injuries by themselves had been increasingly sapping his strength. Fradi suspected he had gone through periods of stupor, and if his speech mechanisms had been operational it was likely episodes of delirium would have revealed themselves as well. On top of that, he was in need of sustenance - he was hungry, and thirsty, and could probably use a blood transfusion for good measure too. Perhaps if the Scapula bothered to take note of him again he would bring it up.

Fradjikan had also been watching the Scapula and Vladimir, for lack of anything more productive to do. They had been lying placidly on their divans, until for some reason, in the last several minutes, the Lord of Storms had begun writhing and thrashing feebly within his cocoon of fog. *Perhaps he has just encountered the Scapula I know*, Fradi was thinking, when the desperado in question abruptly stripped his mantle of cloud from around his form, stretched, and sat up. "Ahh," he said. "That was most invigorating."

At first Fradi thought his eyes might be finally growing dysfunctional now too. But, no, the Scapula *was* glowing. In fact, he was positively luminescent. Could it be that his plans had reached fruition? Perhaps the contingency for which he, Fradjikan, had been preserved was no longer prime to be invoked. Perhaps the Scapula would merely leave the room and advance to other pursuits. There, now he was getting to his feet ...

And now he was walking unambiguously in Fradi's direction.

Once their course had been resolved, it was clearly prudent to move fast. Initially reluctant, Dortonn had allowed himself to be convinced that the gambit might as well be tried. The upside for him was substantial; a grateful and sated Pod Dall could heal his wounds and shower him with garlands and return him to the frozen north, safe at last from these southern maniacs. If things went sour again he could always give up and die. In the meantime, Shaa had come through with a nerve block and the soothing salve made it less appalling to walk around, so why not try?

And he was, as he had been reminded, sworn to a mission.

As long as they *were* going to try it, there was no point in wasting time. The Scapula, being a rogue of the first order, was obviously proceeding with his own plans, and it had to be assumed he could have some counterstroke up his sleeve. But on the other hand there was no point in launching themselves unprepared at half-cock. It was more than just a question of procedures, there was an uncomfortable amount of unavoidable improvisation ahead. What was Pod Dall's state of consciousness in the ring, for example? Did the ravaging insanity that had gripped him in Roosing Oolvaya still wrap his mind? They had considered the tradeoff of waiting to move while seeking out additional expertise. After all, Max (having spent so much time probing the ring in the course of placing his traps) *might* know and Gashanatantra (having worked to establish the ring as a snare for Pod Dall in the first place) certainly *must* know how to release Pod Dall from his confinement, but even they didn't necessarily know how to restore his sanity or stabilize his mood once he had been freed. So *that* tradeoff had been rejected. With further debate reduced to a minimum, there was now no excuse for

delay.

Which was not to say there had not been some hierarchical jostling between the professionals on hand. "Are you familiar with the Kringlaffer hold?" Dortonn had asked Karlini.

"You can't be serious," had been Karlini's retort. "No one in their right mind would still use Kringlaffer after the Dray Kopf counter."

"I may be from the north but that doesn't mean I'm out of touch," croaked Dortonn. "If you *anticipate* the Dray Kopf you can build in *this*."

"That's not bad," was Karlini's grudging reply. "But what about..."

And so it had gone. "Why remain here we?" Haddo hissed at Wroclaw.

"We gave our word to Dr. Shaa," said Wroclaw, watching the network of tuning parameters hanging in the air around Dortonn and Karlini. Svin was hanging back by the door, fingering his sword speculatively. He had earlier expressed the intention to slash vigorously if anything sorcerous happened to wander in his direction.

"Pfah!" snorted Haddo. "Owe I Shaa nothing."

"That is debatable," Wroclaw said severely. "But even if true, Karlini is still our employer, and Karlini is still here. Would you leave him alone with your old compatriot Dortonn? Even damaged, Dortonn is not empty of tricks."

"Perhaps time it is to quit. The revolution help will I not if slave remain I to wages."

A cloud of ethereal vapor pumped pinkly across the room; Karlini leaned into it and made tamping-down motions. "And what revolution would that be?" asked Wroclaw.

"Always is there revolution," proclaimed Haddo.

"I see," Wroclaw said. "*That* revolution."

"Patronize not I," Haddo warned.

"Farthest thing from my mind."

"*Haddo!*" said Karlini, scarcely for the first time, half-enmeshed in the clinging folds of the marginally-controlled pink cloud. "You want to give us a hand over here or not?"

"Hear," grumbled Haddo, "I, and obey."

The Scapula stood over Fradi, gazing down. "So," he said, "you may have been wondering why you have remained alive, and whether this state of affairs is likely to persist. You are a clever enough fellow, but you have lacked important facts. Unfortunately there is insufficient time to enlighten you. Perhaps you will appreciate the sound and fury, at any rate." He tugged at a plain gold band on his finger; tugged harder. An expression of mild consternation appeared on his face. "Damn," he murmured. "That *was* clever."

"He has grown aware of us," Dortonn said suddenly.

"The binding spell is in place?" asked Wroclaw. He had lost track of the progression of the spell-work while

Karlini and Haddo were fighting the train of spell-packets back into line.

"Yes, he's got the ring on his body, and the binding spell's in place," said Karlini, who had inherited that part of the job once they had agreed on the modifications to the Kringlaffer. "It may even last long enough, too."

Even if the binding held, Wroclaw thought, there *was* an obvious countermove. But would Shaa's brother, unprepared, avail himself of it?

"They will pay," said the Scapula. It was those obnoxious friends of his brother, no doubt. His stroke against them was apparently not as preemptory as he had intended. Someone would hear about *that*; more than *hear*, to be exact - he didn't employ the fools to be late, and it wasn't likely they'd be able to wring from him a second chance. Well, at least his brother was still locked in his cell back at the house; he was going to need to take this out on *somebody*, and minions wouldn't be nearly as satisfying. Arznaak went to his knees, deliberately clenched his teeth, spread his fingers wide on the floor, positioned his dagger grasped firmly in the other hand, and leaned into the stroke. The tip went cleanly through the bone. His own finger - still bound to the Pod Dall ring - came free and curled up in the sudden rush of blood.

"Well, he went for the Dray Kopf," Karlini said. "Should we abort?"

"The proliferator should still bind to him," croaked Dortonn. "The ring is still tied to his flesh - it will remain synchronized to his aura."

And since he's drawing his god-power from the ring, Karlini thought, *casting it off would leave the vitality of his defenses collapsing* - "I'm projecting the disorientation barrage... here goes the rest of the diversion package."

"My master is being released," Dortonn said suddenly.

"What? We've barely launched the matrix piercer - I thought you said nothing should be happening for another three minutes!"

"I *did* say that, and it *should* have. He *has* been released, but not at my hand."

"There are troops in the trees and outside in the street," Svin said suddenly.

The Scapula had shrugged off the rest of the attack, although the wall just behind him and an adjoining arc of floor were still glowing red and pooling into puddles. This demonstrated once again the value of superior planning, he reflected, and of moving fast enough to stay ahead of the opposition. If he had still been drawing on the energy of the ring he would now most likely be reeling and drained, ready for Pod Dall to materialize and devour his soul, or whatever it was about him that might have attracted Pod Dall's interest. As it was instead, there was no need for him to be interested in Pod Dall any longer, not to say that such interest as had previously been relevant had been any wider than questions of power level and tap schemata; Pod Dall's place in the balance of power would for various reasons be neither relevant nor important again. But of course, thanks to his maneuver at the conclave the ring and Pod Dall its contents had served their usefulness, and issues of power levels no longer had any significance at all. In a literal sense, the Scapula now had more power than he could productively wield, but not of course more than he knew what to do with.

Which didn't mean the power was worth wasting; he *did* have a Knitting to elaborate, after all, and beyond

that other plans. The impending ceremony of Knitting, however, was not the only valid reason to abandon this place. His adversaries might be feeble and cower in his dust, but they *were* ahead of the schedule he had anticipated. If they had been a few minutes earlier, in fact, he might have had a real fight on his hands.

Moreover the ring *was* still bound to his finger, even if the finger was no longer bound to the rest of his body. They might think they could still bridge the gap. If they were adept enough with voodoo-style similarity work, perhaps they actually *could*. The fact that the finger was currently in intimate contact with the flesh of another should deflect their aim, however, since contiguity usually trumped similarity, and in any case once Pod Dall began to materialize he would lock to whichever living incarnate was closest to hand.

Fradjikan was still making gagging sounds there on the floor as the Scapula dashed through the door, holding his good hand tightly over the small gusher on the other. Fortunately, the paralysis of Fradjikan's voluntary muscles was preventing him from actually expelling the bolus the Scapula had just wedged in his throat, and in another moment or two it shouldn't matter. Pod Dall *would* materialize, he *would* appropriate Fradjikan's body as his incarnation vehicle - and then the weakened Fradjikan, teetering on the edge of death from his injuries and the Scapula's special field of sapping paralysis, would experience the last of the Scapula's carefully planned surprises. But as he went over the abyss to oblivion he would not go alone. The now-incarnate Pod Dall, just emerged from his shell, disoriented, and taken unawares, would be going with him.

Fradjikan saw the Scapula leaving, but his mind was on other things. He wasn't sure what had happened - why the Scapula had suddenly interrupted his peroration to perform such a deliberate act of auto-mutilation, or why the Scapula had compounded that repulsive move by jamming his gruesome trophy into Fradi's own mouth - but he knew what was *happening*. He was choking to death.

The ring stuck on the finger was firmly lodged in his throat. He could feel the hot blood dripping down his gullet; the finger itself was still warm. And he was compounding his own problems - retching and gagging, his mouth filling with bile, his body still on its side but even more on his back, there was no way to clean the ghastly mess out of his windpipe so he could breathe. His ears were roaring, red was marching in from the corners of his vision; he was well on the way to panic. But then he was also in the midst of suffocation. And it didn't appear likely that Vladimir, Lord of Storms, would be available to resurrect him yet another time.

His mouth was growing warmer, hot, fiery - he barely had consciousness left to recognize it wasn't his *mouth*, it was that *ring*, when something sizzled out of the ring and slid smoothly up into his head and out into his body, a tingly, half-orgasmic sensation rather than one wholly of pain, the narcosis of oxygen deprivation perhaps but still it felt like more than hallucination, it felt as though he were being stroked by an all-encompassing, soothing hand -

What a moment for a transcendental experience.

But then unexpectedly that wasn't his last coherent thought after all. Somehow he was on his side but now facing the floor, and he was still retching but now enough of the gore had drained to open a slight air passage, and most surprisingly he was no longer in the throes of panic; he now felt fully narcotized. Although he no longer felt fully *himself*, either - he was *changing* - he was larger, greater, stronger - he knew so many things, he knew-

His heart shuddered in his chest, and stopped beating.

"Now do you see why the Scapula is so dangerous?" said Gashanatantra.

"He was *lucky*."

"Can you think of a worse sort of danger?"

Jill-tang sat next to him, both of them on the divan in her reception room but scarcely reclining in relaxation. Their four hands were tangled in a cat's-cradle of sparkling force lines, weaving and tugging and braiding, while in the midst of the spell matrix an undulating image of the splattered, eye-rolling Fradjikan wavered beyond a cloud of status indicators. The cloud was now showing an inky black shot through with the streaks of dying comets. "Try this," said Gash, his fingers tangling in the loom, as a bulbous form the size of two fists coalesced from a converging cluster of red.

Jill leaned carefully in and grasped it with both hands. "Heart massage?" she said.

"Here comes another shock, now!" Gash muttered. The heart-simulacrum convulsed, fell silent, then beat once, forcefully. "Now compress upward from the apex, again, again -"

"Does he have enough of an airway?"

"Let me try shaking him again," said Gash. "At least we were able to shove him over enough to drain *ough!*"

"What?"

"Feedback, can't feel my left hand. Vladimir may be confined but the shields on his facility are still strong - I don't know how much longer I'll be able to maintain this connection. I -"

"Hold on anyway, dammit," snarled Jill. "I don't want to lose Pod Dall, not now!"

"Neither do I," Gash said, his teeth gritted. It had been a lot of trouble to stabilize Pod Dall to a stable reincarnation with his sanity intact. A lot of trouble with no assurance of a payoff, but now - "Not with most everyone locked in stasis and the Scapula riding roughshod over the landscape. If -"

The matrix flashed yellow, then blue; a coruscating light-burst snapped out from the center and collapsed, dragging the force-lines back with it like a fishing net caught in a riptide. The suction yanked Gashanatantra from his seat toward the imploding core. Matrix lines wrenched his outstretched hands like the cords of a mad puppeteer, raking his flesh, twisting his bones, as he tried throwing himself to the floor, vocalizing the disengagement trigger. Then the matrix finished falling into itself and was gone. Wisps of disconnected matrix hung twinkling in the air, flickering rapidly out.

"You look pretty well flayed," said Jill, eyeing his hands. "Serves you right, you bastard."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"You started this, when you trapped Pod in that ring."

"I didn't start the Scapula," Gashanatantra muttered, levering himself up to flop back against the base of the couch. "Would you mind very much lending me a few bandages?"

"I suppose you'll be wanting unguents next, too, huh? Oh, very well. Wait here."

"You might as least give me some credit for convincing you not to attend the conclave."

"Yes, why *did* you bother?" said Jill. "As things worked out you would have been free of me once and for all."

"I didn't *know* anything would happen. I was just being prudent."

"Yes, but why be prudent with *me*?"

"Affairs are becoming more and more hazardous, and the roster of potential allies is diminishing rapidly. You've always been underrated. You've always underrated *yourself*."

"Why are you babbling?"

"I am not -"

"Yes, you are. Why?"

Gashanatantra sighed. "You know perfectly well why. No matter how you've treated me I still love you."

"Are we -" said Tarfon, interrupting her translation of the ancient words scrolling behind the thick glass in the secret room beneath the Archives, "are we - are they going to let us live? If they find out we know these things, are they going to let us live?"

That same concern had already occurred to the Archivist. Except - "Who is 'they'?" Leen said.

"The gods, I assume."

"I thought your sect didn't believe in the gods," Leen said absently.

"We believe in them, all right. We just don't believe they're gods."

"If what we've seen here is any indication," said Leen, her distraction if anything mounting, "your cult is due for a big boost."

"*That* we could live without." Tarfon sighed. "Nothing to be done about it, though." She turned back to the words, then paused. How long had they been here working? What time was it? "Um - excuse me, but you're a Nerve of the Empire or something like that, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, doesn't that mean you're supposed to attend the Knitting?"

"Yes," said Leen, making a sour face. "One of those obligations of office. I - wait a minute - that's still *tonight*, isn't it? That's *now*."

"I, ah, I think so."

"Come along, then. We'll have to continue this later." The Knitting ... the Scapula! Wouldn't he be there? Of course he would. Perhaps it would be better *not* to go...

Well, of course it would be better not to go. But if he was there she could probably elude him, in the press of thousands, and she might still be able to learn something of use. And it was the *Knitting*. Even the Scapula wouldn't be bold enough to try something nefarious *there*.

Would he?

"How the hell much longer we supposed to stay out here diggin' through the trash?"

"Didn't you hear her Godship? Until we find him, or we might as well not bother coming back."

The first man, a grizzled campaigner and veteran of more god-squads than he cared to contemplate, set his feet and truculently crossed his arms. "This is it," he declared. "This is it for me, and if she wants to turn me into an axolotl she can go the hell ahead. Be a damn improvement."

"Hey, c'mon, sarge," said the second, fingering his neck. "If she does for you she'll do more for me too; probably the whole lot of us by the time she's through. You want that on your conscience, even if you *are* a newt?"

The older man glared up at his partner, then down the next alley in front of them. The alley was little more than a squeeze-crawl gap between two buildings that snaked off away from the street; garbage-choked and offal-strewn in the same style they'd waded through in, oh, the last fifty sites. "There's nothing in there alive except things we'd have to kill," he growled.

"The guy's got to be out here *somewhere*," protested the trooper. "He can't have been *eaten*."

"Why the hell not? You remember the size of those rats? Or dropped in a sewer or slung in the Tongue, or -"

Considering a prayer, or better yet some way of unambiguously distancing himself, the younger man took a deep breath and eased himself sideways into the alley, probing ahead of himself with his sword. They had roused a few live scum-denizens already in their search, and had uncovered two bodies as well, but all of them, living and dead, had possessed their full complement of fingers. They had also dealt with the city's thriving population of urban beasts, mostly rats and dogs and feral cats, but also a few less classifiable things. The sword, therefore, was clearly more than a formality.

It was getting well on into twilight too. Here in this warren, where midday sun would be an unaccustomed surprise, it might as well have been the middle of the night. The trooper lifted his lantern and peered ahead. Had he heard something? Something rather like a weak groan? And that long mound? No different from any of the others they'd examined, surely, but what was that gnarled silhouette lying on top? Could it be a *hand*?

A hand missing one finger?

"Sarge, got something here you're gonna want to look at."

CHAPTER 14

THE SCAPULA HAD PULLED ANOTHER ONE, all right. He'd started off by proclaiming that he had made the entire assembly of gods at the pre-Knitting conclave his prisoners, and as I'd discovered myself that was clearly true, but there was more to it than that. A *lot* more. The traditional uses for prisoners - as hostages for ransom, say - did not interest him in the least.

No, he was holding us so he could drink our power.

How he'd managed it I had no idea. It was obviously so tricky a move that no one had ever thought of it before. Something - obviously leakage from Iskendarian, my local expert in everything sorcerous - was trying to tell me about a software virus in the virtual conferencing code that kept participants from disengaging, with an auto-locking vampire tap to drain individual power into the captive net, but I didn't know what he was talking about. It was all just word soup to me.

What was self-evident as anything, though, was that the Scapula had declared war on the community of gods, had conducted his own preemptive strike against the majority of the gods extant - and had already won. He *was* the god among gods. This had not come about under the scenario Protector of Nature and Vladimir had planned, of course, and since they had been present too they were just as caught as everyone else, but then who should be surprised? The Scapula's favorite tactic was clearly to make friends with someone and then stab them as quickly as possible in the back.

I could see folks around the volcano-rim ballroom struggling and muttering and squirming as they tried with complete lack of success to work themselves out of the Scapula's trap. The Scapula himself, after his brief manifesto, had disappeared to wreak who knew what new devilment, not that I could blame him for not wanting to hang around and field the imprecations of his victims. And me? Well, I was thinking.

My thoughts were not very pleasant.

I didn't know how many of the others around me had considered this yet, but as long as their consciousnesses were tied up here, their unsupervised bodies back in their hidden rooms and easy chairs were not going to be getting the care they needed. For one thing, if this went on long enough they were going to start dehydrating and might even last long enough to starve. And why *wouldn't* this go on that long? If the Scapula let these folks loose you knew the first thing they would head for would be his throat.

I wasn't sure I liked the alternative to that scenario any better. If the Scapula could immobilize this many gods, why couldn't he backtrack down the communication links to reveal the location of their bodies, too? Then, if he wanted, he could have his minions force-feed them.

Them? *Us*. Although to be precise I was something of an innocent bystander. I wasn't a god, which is to say *Iskendarian* wasn't a god, but then it was also now clear that not much differentiated gods from anyone else with enough power, the right resources, and the bloody-mindedness to deploy them at will. Resources? If you could use the gods' conferencing system, well, you'd just be counted as a god when the hammer came down.

I was also wondering who else among my circle of acquaintances was trapped here along with me. I hadn't spotted anyone obvious, and I didn't particularly feel like strolling around the plain peering into faces and trying to divine who might be hiding behind which facade. Beyond that, I suppose I was still waiting for another shoe to drop. I didn't know whether folks would start metamorphosing into horrid tortured writhing shapes, or whether they'd start popping out like burst balloons, or whether the entire environment would warp or explode or fade, leaving each of us individually in the Scapula's private little hell. On the other hand, however, I didn't think we were just going to sit here indefinitely with nothing happening.

As it was, I would just have to wait. I didn't know what else to do. Whatever his other hazards, if Iskendarian was awake he might at least have some ideas, but

Wait a minute. Iskendarian probably *could* be awake. I'd been trying so hard to make sure he stayed *asleep* I'd almost forgotten I could try the alternative. And if he were awake...

Well, what did I have to lose?

"Hey, Iskendarian!" I thought. "Isky! You in there?"

For a moment I lost my train of thought. I didn't lose consciousness the way I had earlier when Iskendarian had begun to emerge, but my thoughts were suddenly... muddled, unclear. Then I remembered what I was doing.

I had a residual mental image of a fishing pond containing a striped bass. It had rippled the surface once; now, if I cast my line properly and could remember to keep my grip on the rod -

"Iskendarian!" I hollered in my head. "Rise and shine!"

Again my thoughts swam. This time, though, they were being shouldered aside - I was growing vague, diffuse, like I'd been on a sudden three-day bender without the benefit of enjoying the taste of the brew going down, my vision was gone, my ears were roaring, I - where was I? What was going on?

"Ah!" someone said, I seemed to be overhearing somewhere off in the fog. "At last, here I - what? What is this? I -"

There was one thing left in my mind, a thing I had been repeating over and over to myself like a mantra, I didn't know what it was or who I was or much of anything, but there was *something* I should be doing with this mantra, now what was it? How about -

Clamps closed on my head and swung it around, that voice that had been howling at me abruptly zoomed off into the distance, growing faint and echo-y just before it seemed to fall off a cliff and vanish; it felt as though something with claws was scooping out chunks of my flesh and hurling them over the cliff after it; I could see around me vaguely now a small reeling room where I was sitting in an armchair, or, no, I wasn't sitting *in* the chair, I was falling out of it, falling toward the floor but it didn't *look* like floor, it looked like a deep dark spinning pit; and while some part of me was noting I had indeed activated the emergency release mechanism and it had worked, leaving Iskendarian caught in the Scapula's trap, and under cover of his squirming I had managed to ooze away myself instead; another part of me was -

"It's the Hand," whispered the Great Karlini. "I've never run across them myself, they were always Max's own running sore, but he described them well enough." He had shimmied his way along the floor of Shaa's second-story living room and carefully raised himself to peer over the lower edge of the window frame without ruffling the curtains.

"They are in the back garden too," said Svin, reappearing from the rear of the flat. "Those crossbow men climbing the trees may be deploying to cover an assault from the roof."

"How many do you figure there are?"

"I have counted forty-three," Svin told him. "It is likely there are more."

"I have had my fill of you fanatics," Dortonn rasped suddenly. "What will it be next with you, the descent of

fiery archangels?"

"Just what do you intend to do instead?" asked Karlini. "It looks like they're gearing up for an assault out there. Maybe if we're lucky they'll give us a come-out-with-your-hands-up first."

"Perhaps a blast-and-run," said Dortonn belligerently. "Perhaps I will merely die and spare myself this foolishness."

"To die have threatening long been you," Haddo croaked, scuttling briefly out from under an end table. "If to die want you, to die already please proceed. Else if, helpful plan you be."

"Helpful," Dortonn snorted. "Very well. I will continue attempting to contact my master. Perhaps he is not beyond reach or rescue, regardless of your vast incompetence."

"Whatever you want," said Karlini, "but the Hand are jamming transmissions. I can't even raise Shaa. Max said their sorcerer was pretty good."

"But prone to overreaching," reminded Wroclaw, "and consequent error."

"Did Shaa have a secret exit out of this place? Anybody know?"

"Rental is it," said Haddo. "Passage of secrets is not average lease property equipped."

"What about that pal of yours, Haddo?" Karlini asked. "Favored-of-the-Gods."

Haddo did not sound pleased. "Told me did Favored unavailable would he be. Obligations has Favored others to."

"Great, just great." The first time Karlini had met Favored he'd gotten the impression the little green guy wouldn't mind seeing the lot of them dead, with the exception of Haddo; his inaction might help to win him that wish. "Anyone else got a helpful plan in mind, then?"

"Blast," declared Svin. "Blast and fight."

"Oh, come on, Svin," said Karlini, "you can do better than that. Don't give us that simple barbarian junk. You're the closest we've got to a military advisor, right?"

Svin had squirmed forward to join Karlini at the front window. "They do not seem aware we know they are here," he observed. "Do you see that small group down the block, the three who appear to be arguing? Can you overhear what they are saying?"

"Without tipping them off," mused Karlini. That should be no problem. A directional surveillance spell, low-order, not even affecting the trio themselves directly, just amplifying the sound waves that - *okay, let's see now...* "The one who's talking is saying this is a waste of time, they should be out rounding up the real terrorists before they pull some stunt the Scapula doesn't know about that comes back and bites *everybody* in the - now he's just cursing; that one must be the Hand's battle commander, Romm V'Nisa. Now one of the others, I'd imagine the leader, Gadol V'Nora, is trying to cut him off, saying how many times does he have to remind him they've been *hired*, they work for the Scapula, they're doing a job, does Romm want them to go back to starving in the hills so he can practice his own strategies again?"

Karlini was getting into their rhythm. "This is Romm: 'Use your brain then for a minute, why don't you? Why didn't the Scapula release extra men for us to do this job properly? You've seen the way he operates - he's

using us to tie up his loose end and get ourselves cut apart at the same time; then he doesn't have to worry about *us* being a loose end either.' Gadol: 'But you know he's promised us a long-term engage -' Romm: 'You idiot! You've heard the stories coming in. He treats his allies worse than his enemies. Even if we take out Max's pals and we're still standing afterwards, who's he got to throw back next? Even if we had Max on our side again we'd be lucky to get out of this city alive.' 'I won't tolerate this kind of -' 'Get your head out of your -' Oh, now here's the third one, Chas V'Halila, the sorcerer: 'Romm has a point. We should think this through again, before we launch the attack. We have Max's friends penned up, they're not going anywhere. Yes, we were ordered to be standing by for the Knitting, but that still leaves us plenty of time to resolve the situation here, so what do we have to lose?' Gadol: 'Both of you, now, questioning my judgment, undermining my -' Romm: 'Absolutely correct, O illustrious leader.'"

"Gadol is the one stalking away?" said Svin.

"Yes," Karlini said, "I think so."

"You wait here," Svin told him, "listen for any more interesting news. Prepare a spell to take down the trees with the climbers. Do you see the men with the grappling hooks? They will be the ones who plan to swing to the roof."

"And you?"

"I will help the others fortify the doors."

"So we are agreed," Shaa said. "There are no indications, not even the slightest, that any experimental material has survived the destruction here at the laboratory. Yes, Tildamire? Yes, Jurtan?"

"Uh, Shaa?" said Jurtan, fighting a reflex to raise his hand first; Shaa always made him feel as though he was in class. "What if there's still some of these microorganisms left, only there're so few of them we can't detect them? Couldn't they still cause trouble, I mean if they start to multiply after we leave? If they could really be all that dangerous wouldn't it be safer to..."

"To what? Cauterize the neighborhood? Evacuate and quarantine?"

"Uh," Jurtan said. "Oh."

"Actually, if I could," said Shaa, "I *would*, just to be on the safe side. At the moment, though, an attempt to test our good will with the civic authorities would be most likely worse than unsuccessful, and I shy from demolishing a district without removing the inhabitants first. What we can do at present is mount a watch, and proceed to the next agenda item."

Tildamire had been glancing at him, then looking away whenever she thought he might be detecting her gaze; she had not yet realized Shaa was the proud owner of the proverbial eyes in the back of his head. Now she spoke, albeit with hesitation. "Aren't you pushing too hard? I mean, your heart..."

"I am feeling surprisingly fit," Shaa told her. "Beyond which, the exhilaration of present freedom is all the impetus I need. Yet even so there is the goad of responsibility and the lash of duty."

"You sounded downright grim just now," Jurtan volunteered.

"Titanic forces unleashed do that to me. This is not all fun and a stroll in the park." Was he getting a bit on edge? Yes, he was. But then the one he was waiting for was unambiguously overdue.

"So *now* what?" said Jurtan.

He would have to speak to Jurtan about that late-adolescent truculence, but this was probably not the best time. Instead, Shaa said, "I would recommend the Knitting."

Tildamire sighed. "I know you mean well, but I don't really feel like going to another big extravaganza right now. And anyway it isn't for hours yet - doesn't it start at midnight? I -"

"It is a long way from Roosing Oolvaya," Shaa stated, "and who knows when there will be another Knitting?" If ever, he added to himself; with his brother involved, anything was possible. "It is considered one of the wonders of organized civilization."

"Why aren't you going, then?"

"Did I say that? I wouldn't miss it for the world, especially under the present circumstances. There are certain other items that should be attended to first, however, and a changing of the guard."

"You mean that watcher you mentioned?"

"Just so. I expected Wroclaw. Unfortunately he seems well overdue." Perhaps it was time for a call to Karlini. He raised his hand for quiet, probed for Karlini's recognition signal... *huh*. No busy, no carrier - jammed? "Follow me," Shaa said, breaking into a jog. "It seems Karlini may have called down someone's wrath upon his head."

Leen hadn't even made it as far as her desk before beginning the list of questions she should have asked the oracle but had failed to think of at a convenient time. Still, she had resolved not to let her thoughts interfere with her forward momentum, determined to be on time and fully prepared for once at some affair of state. Then just short of the door to the recessional path her catalog expanded to include yet another item and she came to an abrupt halt, her hand raised to deliver the initiatory command. Tarfon, who had been lagging warily behind, alert to any sign of wavering attention that might rebound against her, stopped as well, and waited.

She *had* promised Shaa, Leen was thinking, but mere gathering of information didn't imply action. The likelihood of pertinent information was clearly low, too; the computer had most probably been put into place before the catacombs of the Archives, so what it might know about lost secret passages was presumably small.

But it should be easy enough to ask. Tarfon found herself being seized by the arm and dragged back into the stacks.

"The Knitting? -" she said.

"Plenty of time," Leen told her. "I checked the clock at my desk; plenty of time." And there weren't any forgotten nephews left behind this go-around to mess up her plans, either.

A few moments later they were back in the computer room. "Ask it," Leen demanded, "what it knows about the floor plan of the palace complex."

"Okay," said Tarfon. She tapped away on the keyboard. "I - oh, my."

The entire space behind the thick window in the wall had come to life. "That's not just the palace, that's this

whole end of the city," said Leen.

"That's quite a map - look at all that detail."

"*Too much* detail. Can we focus in on just the area around the Archives?"

"I think so," Tarfon ventured. A blinking rectangle appeared at the corner of the map; by touching a group of keys bearing arrow-icons she was able to steer the marquee around the image.

"There," Leen said. "No, a little to the left - *now* you're over the Archives." And the image was grabbing the nearest corner of the dungeons too.

The selected area swelled up to fill the window. "Can we find out how recently this information was updated?" Leen asked. "It looks fairly recent..." There were the Front and Back Door paths with their winding, serpentine coils; and on the wider overview she had glimpsed, in dotted lines of a paler green, the foundations of the new office block even now under construction.

Tarfon looked up. "It says revision goes on constantly. It must have spies - sensors - all through the palace."

"It would have to have its agents in the *air*." What would she and Tarfon have seen if they'd asked for the entire city? Or the *world*?

This oracle was a treasure house anyone with an interest in power would kill to control.

But *she* had it, and she wasn't finished with it, either. "Can it show Max's cell in the dungeon?"

Taptaptaptap. "... It says it's processing the request. You know, if this machine can really deliver this sort of information -"

"I know."

"Um, you still wouldn't kill me for knowing about *this*... would you?"

"I doubt it," said Leen. "If I did that I'd have to kill myself too, now wouldn't I? If -"

One of the tiny green room-outlines off at the corner of the window had begun a blinking a bright green. "It says it's finished processing," Tarfon said superfluously, eyeing another box at the window's base containing another sprawl of cryptic text.

I really must learn this thing's language, Leen told herself again. "Release him," she said. "I mean, tell the computer to release him."

Tarfon hesitated. "You mean - are you sure - I, ah, we don't know if this machine can actually *do* things - how it might decide to carry out a command like that even if it could -"

"There's one good way to find out, isn't there?"

Taking a deep breath, Tarfon typed again, slowly and deliberately, then continued to hold her breath as the oracle spelled out its response. "It says, 'Librarian access privilege insufficient'," she read.

Leen realized she too had been holding her breath. She let it out now, meticulously. "I assume we can infer from that response that it *can* take actions, it just won't take them for *me*. Very well. Ask it to show any

passages running from the Archives to the dungeon."

This time the oracle responded quickly. "I suspected there might be one or two," Leen murmured, "but *this*?" She stared at the new tangle of green spaghetti. "Does it have one it recommends?"

The snarl was swept away; one pulsing jagged trace remained. "It's warning of a deadfall, a pit, and three false turns," said Tarfon, in some amazement.

This was important information, realized Leen, critical information, in fact... but only if she actually intended to traverse this path. Did she? She *had* promised Shaa...

But neither of them had anticipated this stroke of fortune.

"Manifested himself as Iskendarian." Max scowled toward the ceiling. *Damn* that Phlinn Arol - where was the *rest* of the story? He'd tossed Max the tagline and then bugged out like the cheapest purveyor of cheap fiction. *What had happened next?* And here *he* was, to coin a phrase, still stuck in this dungeon.

Max wanted to cross his arms, put a world-beating scowl on his face, and sulk. Or better yet, get out on the street and start taking an active part in events. He could wield powers from the second quantum level, after all, or he could if he wasn't under all this shielding, and even if he couldn't wield *them* he could still deploy his brain. But here he was instead, not even able to do that much, what with the interference from that diabolical mind-scrambling shrieker, and a lack of enough facts from the outside world.

Was it time for the Knitting yet? There was no day or night here in this basement cell, of course, but in the outside world it must be getting on into evening, at least. Between wails from his personal torture system Max had been reviewing the few facts at his disposal, and his much wider knowledge of the Scapula's past history and predilections. He would have happily given more consideration to the question of the Creeping Sword and Iskendarian as well, and whatever might be happening with the Karlinis and the lab, if his old friend Phlinn had bothered to give him some actual useful information on the subjects rather than a gratuitous half-turn of additional tension on his current rack of mental cruciation. Even so, the Iskendarian connection could be figured into the equation. In particular, the foremost issue that had been occupying Max's attention was that of synchronicity. Why had all these separate threads taken the same moment to come to a head? Did that mean that the establishing postulate itself should be reexamined - the idea that the threads were indeed separate? The Scapula was surpassingly clever, that much was surely a given, but was even he all-encompassing enough to have orchestrated half the known world?

That was likely taking things a bit far. Nevertheless, the Scapula's timing was rarely less than impeccable. Since he had chosen the day of the Knitting to make his move, one could scarcely imagine that correspondence to be a coincidence.

So what *did* he have planned for the Knitting?

Again Max heard the abrupt clank from the doorway, then felt the rush of air from the swing of the thick door itself. Again Phlinn Arol hove into his line of sight. This time, though, Phlinn wasn't stalking confidently toward Max, he was virtually backing into the room, or so his contorted posture from craning back over his shoulder and trying to make forward progress at the same time made it appear. "What's the matter now," said Max, "haunted by your evil ways? I think I've spent more time with you and accomplished less in the last day than in -"

"Shut up, Max," Phlinn Arol snapped. "I -"

Okay, so Phlinn *was* nervous. But Max was pretty annoyed, too. "You here for me to help you vent your soul again? You want me to do anything but glower, you can start by telling me the rest of the story behind this Iskendarian bit."

"That doesn't matter now," said Phlinn Arol. "He is out of the picture. He has been captured by the Scapula."

"It doesn't surprise me that the Scapula is capturing people, but why *him*?"

"Him and most everyone else. Something quite terrible has occurred. Now sweep that chip off your shoulder and listen."

"I -" Then Max took another look at the expression on Phlinn Arol's face. Phlinn wasn't just nervous, he was barely one side of panic, and which side was difficult right at the moment to tell. "I'm listening."

Phlinn Arol was running the hand on his less injured arm through his hair. If the disarray inside the head matched the rat's-nest on it, Phlinn was in a very bad way indeed. "I don't understand how he could have managed it," said Phlinn. "They can't break out of the conclave. None of them. They're all trapped."

"The Scapula's got everyone who was at the conclave *trapped*?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. He's worse than a menace, he's - he's -"

"He never works small when he can help it, that's for sure," Max said. "I take it you weren't in attendance? You -" The noisemaker behind his head let loose with another bloodcurdling caterwauling fit. "Look, you want to turn that thing off, so we can maybe hear each other speak?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course."

While Phlinn tinkered with the device, Max's mind was still rolling. "You decided not to go?" he went on. "What about the Emperor, is he trapped too? And if you weren't there how did you find out what had happened?"

"No, I didn't go, and yes, I'll give you some credit, I did take your advice, although I was inclined in that direction to start with. The Emperor-designate was a more difficult matter. He is of the command-from-the-front school. The more potential danger the Scapula was advertised as presenting, the more the Emperor desired to confront him directly to make his own assessment. But no, he was not in the event present for the Scapula's triumph."

"How did you work that?"

"A sleeping draught," admitted Phlinn. "I was running out of time and ideas. He was determined, but he was wrong."

"Might have served him right," Max suggested.

"Do you really think so? He may make a good Emperor, once his impetuous and pigheaded streaks are brought under control, but whatever his qualities I submit that throwing the succession into confusion would only accelerate the current slide toward anarchy. I don't know that the Scapula would have taken him hostage too, but I wouldn't put it past him to have had some provision for the Emperor in his plan."

"Neither would I. The Scapula's been riding full-tilt across every convention and treaty the gods have lived by. And not only the gods - which covenant does the Emperor figure most directly in himself?"

"Just so. But do you think even the Scapula would dare to proclaim *himself* Emperor? A god-king incarnate violates every -"

"It sure does," said Max. "I don't know if he really would or not, but he sure isn't sparing much effort to make us *think* he would. I suppose it's still too much to ask to call off the Knitting; like you said you've got a pigheaded beneficiary and additional destabilization to worry about."

"I'm not convinced I wouldn't trade this Emperor for a broken Scapula at this point, but yes. There. This device that's been annoying you is deactivated forever. Don't bother to thank -"

"Huh. Just how many of you-all *did* escape Arznaak's trap?"

"Not many," Phlinn Arol said grimly. "He still has a standing broadcast on the network inviting others to the conclave, but I don't think he'll snare anyone else; the alert has gone out as well." Phlinn shook his head vigorously, as though trying to dislodge a colony of moths. "I still don't understand how he could have accomplished all this."

"You got to look at the infrastructure that allows your telepresence conferencing; somehow he got into that and poisoned it. Look - these god meetings don't just happen - there's some underlying carrier mechanism. Right?"

"I - I suppose so," Phlinn said. "I've never really thought about it."

"You and most of those other dopes you call gods, you bet. They just figure it's there, so you use it. But *somebody* thought about how that system works, all right. I bet it's not the only thing they've thought about, either. The intergod communications network? You'd better consider *that* compromised too. Maybe he can't lock you up the same way, but you'd better assume he can overhear anything you're saying. And let's see, what other little toys do you guys use? How about -"

"Enough for now, Max, please."

"It's *not* enough," Max said, "there's more - there's another part of the answer to your question; the 'how did he do this?' one. Arznaak's not a deep technical thinker. He's a master schemer, no doubt about it, but this kind of guts-of-the-world engineering just isn't the way his mind works. He either found some old reference that describes how to do these things or he's got a confederate. Who might be able to do the legwork who's unaccounted for?"

"I - I don't know. I'll have to give it some thought. But what does he intend to do with his hostages?"

"For one thing, they're *not* hostages - you can bet he's not holding them for ransom. He can never let them loose and expect to live, remember? Let's see... here's some possibilities. Start off assuming he wants to take over, wants to be the only god around, or the supreme god anyway - having the former big-cheese gods toady to him would be just his kind of satisfaction. So, a preemptive strike, obviously, and now he's just about won almost before he's begun. But does it end there?" Max stared into space for a moment. "Could he be drawing power from the ones he's got confined? He *is*, isn't he."

"...Yes," said Phlinn Arol, "he is. That is what he says. I have received a personal message from him. A message of friendship and conciliation. He invites me to join him as an equal to help him rule the world."

"That's it? Anybody else get one of these messages?"

"I don't know, Max. I -"

"Wait a minute. Does he mention *me* in this message? He knows you're assisting the Emperor and he knows the Emperor's got me locked up; that was his plan, right? Does he want you to deliver me to him?"

"He didn't mention that," Phlinn said. "He could be trying to disarm my suspicions and draw me within his grasp."

"Damn right," Max told him. "If he's trying to butter you up that means *you* could be his next target. You've seen how he operates. So what do you want to do? What's *your* plan?"

"I suppose I could impose a geas on every adventurer in town," mused Phlinn Arol, the Adventurers' God, "set them to storm the Scapula and bring back his head. Of course all that would yield is a pile of dead adventurers, wouldn't it, and the Scapula's unmistakable enmity. I could send the Emperor to face the Knitting alone while I quit Peridol for some sunny southern climate, but that would only serve the Emperor up to him while not making me any less a target. *More* of a target, if anything, since demonstrated cowardice would show I was ready to be swept from the board." He shrugged. "Even if you called it a strategic redeployment, what advantage could regrouping offer? What other allies would there be to seek who are not available now? What additional resources could I find?"

"Or I could put *you* back into play."

"I thought the Emperor wasn't going to like that," Max said sarcastically.

"At the moment the Emperor is not my greatest concern."

"Well, setting me loose is the course of action *I'd* recommend. I've been suggesting it ever since I got here, if you recall. At least you've finally come to your -"

"I'm not turning you free," stated Phlinn Arol. "You will be on a leash. You will come with me to the Knitting. Afterward we will see where the situation lies. Will you do this?"

"This may be exactly what Arznaak is planning on," said Max. "Sending you that message, trying to panic you into bringing me out where he can pulverize me once and for all."

"Or he could assume you'll be here alone in the dungeon during the Knitting, without me to protect you. Will you do this for me? Are you finally afraid of the Scapula?"

"I've *always* been afraid of the Scapula. Anything else means you're living in a dream. Yeah, I'll back you up. But just what help do you think I can give you? How much good you think an expert consultant on Arznaak is going to be if he cuts loose?"

Phlinn Arol's expression of concern was suddenly broken by a brief and rather unpleasant grin. "You have been very clever, Maximillian, but I have been watching you for a long time; more closely even than the Scapula, perhaps. You have mastered some of the tricks of the second quantum level, yes? You have sought to destroy the gods, hmm? I offer you Arznaak."

"He's in fairly sorry condition," said Gashanatantra, gazing down at the comatose form of Jardin, just dragged in by Jill's troops, "but at least he's alive; that's something. Now all we have to do is get him in shape to talk."

"Keep your hands off him," Jill-tang spat. "He's already been tortured enough without you using your 'methods' on him too."

"There may not be many of us not under the Scapula's claw," Gash pointed out. "Those of us left are natural

allies." He spread his hands. "Very well, I won't interfere with him... although any information he might be able to provide could help us all. Time may be critical before the Scapula strikes at us here."

Jill snorted. "How could he reach us here? This is my sanctum, remember? We're shielded behind -"

"How could he have done anything he's done? It's prudent to assume every extra moment puts us in greater hazard. But you have said not to work on Jardin, so my arms remain folded."

"If you say you love me, why do you always act like such a bastard?"

"I treat you the same way I treat everyone," said Gashanatantra. "Better, actually, if you want to know the truth. I seem to be a little old to change my nature."

"You know I've been with Jardin," Jill said. "Why have you done even this much to save him? So you can pull him to pieces now at your own pace?"

"Perhaps I have been changing my nature after all," Gash murmured. "You've been happy with him, yes? At least relatively?" He shrugged. "I may be jealous, but I'm not a psychopath. I'm glad for you to be happy; why should I destroy that? He is an idiot, and if you come to realize that too I'll be ready, but why should I make you hate me all over again by - well, enough said, perhaps." Gash coughed. "I've also just described to you where I think our self-interest lies, as well. Then there is the off-chance that Jardin has been in some manner booby-trapped."

"You can't be serious," began Jill. "... Do you really think so?"

"No, not really; if he was a trap the Scapula wouldn't have made it so hard for us to find him, or might even have had him dropped off at the door. Still, we surely haven't seen the last of his cleverness."

"I don't love him," Jill said abruptly. "I don't think I love you, but I certainly don't love Jardin. And he *is* an idiot. You'd better do what you can to wake him up."

CHAPTER 15

"ARE THE HANDS STILL BICKERING?" asked Svin, insinuating himself silently back at Karlini's side at his observation post at the window of Shaa's flat.

"They're still trying to decide whether to immolate us or enlist us as allies," Karlini told him. "How are our defenses?"

"Shaa has a well-stocked pantry," Svin said. "Wroclaw is boiling his cooking oil in a succession of large pots. Haddo is smearing toxic ointments and muttering something about birds. I have shifted furniture."

"And Dortonn?"

"He has not died, despite his pronouncements. He claims to be attempting to raise his god."

"I guess anything's possible," Karlini grumbled. "There's no point in a preemptive attack against *them*, is there?"

"How badly do you want to attend the Knitting?"

"Not *that* badly."

"Then no. Unless you wish to speed all our deaths."

"Maybe we'd better ask that of Dortonn," said Karlini. "Was he like this when he was running things back at your home in the north?"

"Dortonn likes ruling people too much to give up and die," Svin told him.

"He also seems to like revenge."

"That is true," said Svin. "Revenge is a tradition of the north."

"Why should the north be any different?"

"Survival is also a tradition of the north," Svin added, ignoring Karlini's comment. "Dortonn is smart. He will not betray us to the Hand. I have made a bargain with him. I have forsworn my oath of revenge against him. When we are finished in Peridol I will escort him back to the north. I will speak for him to our people. I will explain how he has changed his ways."

"What if he hasn't changed his ways?"

"Then I will kill him anyway." Svin hesitated. "Perhaps I have been in civilization too long. Now I make deals with the one I was sent to destroy. Now I even wonder whether the elders sent me because they thought I was the one who would ask no questions. Now I wonder whether my whole mission was not just more politics."

"Politics is the oldest sport there is," said Karlini. "You - wait a minute, there's something new happening outside."

"What's that down there?" said Jurtan Mont.

"It appears to be a cordon," Shaa observed. The three of them had turned back onto the block containing Shaa's flat only to find ahead of them blocking the street a torch-lit perimeter of stretched cord backed by a pair of watchful pikemen. Others garbed for battle were maneuvering beyond the barricade. "I wonder what it's here for," he added superfluously.

There were still a few neighbors milling around outside the guarded area, but it stood to reason that most of the residents of the district - along with the larger part of Peridol's inhabitants - were either making their way toward the giant stadium of the Knitting or otherwise preparing themselves for behaving riotously on the night of festivity now beginning. The number of people on the other side of the barrier, though, significantly outweighed the count of spectators. In addition to the forces on the ground eyeing his own building from various positions of concealment, Shaa could pick out a good half-dozen more perched precariously in the foliage of trees.

It did not appear, however, that anyone was gearing themselves for imminent assault. Instead, Shaa observed what appeared to be a command discussion, or more accurately argument, being conducted only a few yards beyond the roadblock. "Are you receiving any messages from the infinite?" Shaa asked Jurtan Mont.

Mont had been standing in his habitual posture, a sort of eager foxhound stance with his head cocked slightly to one side, eyes floating and vague. He was listening for his spoor rather than sniffing it out, however, plugged into who-knew-what currents of the ether. No god had stepped forward to claim Jurtan as his oracle, which of course proved nothing one way or the other, but whether his talent was a deliberate benison or an ability innate was thoroughly immaterial to the matter of its utility. "Strings," Jurtan Mont said, "being plucked and plonked; lots of strings, with some soft horns in the back."

"Tiptoe music," observed Shaa. "Yet nothing overtly menacing. Yes?"

"What are you up to?" Tildamire asked warily. "What are you planning?"

"We shall see," said Shaa. "Wait here."

"Just a -" began Tildy. But Shaa was gone. "I thought only Max did those quick disappearances," she said, glancing around.

"Over there," her brother said, nodding down the cross-boulevard they'd used for their approach. The side of the property whose front extended ahead of them behind the barricade was fenced from the thoroughfare by a brick wall lined with bushes. Between two of the gas streetlights that had flared to life during their dash back from the laboratory site flickered an ascending shadow, if you were looking in exactly the right direction. "With Shaa and Max and those guys I sometimes wonder who taught whom," Jurtan added, obviously concentrating on matching his tenses up properly, Tildamire noted.

It was exhilarating, Shaa acknowledged as he dropped to the garden beyond the wall, to be doing this sort of stuff again, less uncertain of his limitations. For the moment, at least, his limitations were constant, liable if anything to become less onerous as he built up his strength; his health and the status of his heart were unlikely to spiral down the nearest drain through his own activities bringing into play the sting of the curse, at any rate. Did this mean he no longer had to worry about that absurdly gratuitous clause to the curse, that he would only fall in love while on some adventure? Well, he had always considered life in and of itself to be an adventure, but had also made a point of refraining from falling in love out of general principles. Of course that had been Max's principle too and look what had happened to him, going clearly head-over-heels for the Archivist, Leen. And she for him, which helped, if you were going to do that sort of thing in the first place; Shaa's resolve to stay clear of the application notwithstanding, he *was* clear on the theory. Shaa wondered if Leen had managed to restrain her inclination to spring Max loose. Well, they'd know soon enough. With Max's instinct for trouble, if he were on the streets he'd probably be showing up here at a moment perfectly timed to gum up the

works.

Shaa gazed carefully past another band of shrubbery and through the barred gate at the front of the property. The barricade and its guards were to the right, the three quarreling commanders were ahead of him, and he was well within earshot of their scarcely whispered conference. So... they were the Hand, were they. And their discussion was as relevant as Shaa had suspected it might be. He waited until the three of them had reached a momentary impasse, and had drawn back to glare at each other above belligerently folded arms, then vaulted lightly over the low gate and strolled closer. "Gentlemen," Shaa said, "I believe I have something worthwhile to contribute to your deliberations. Especially seeing as it is my apartment to which you are laying siege, and my brother who is your employer."

"He's *talking* to them," said Tildamire. "He's crazy - they're going to kill him! We have to *do* something!"

"Let's wait a minute and see what happens," her brother said. "I don't hear any sort of mounting crescendo, nothing that'd make me think they're gonna swing right into action."

"But look at all those soldiers - they're surrounding Shaa's building! Who do you think they're after if not him? What is he doing, trying to sacrifice himself to save the rest of them still in there?"

"You've never really seen Shaa with all his stops pulled out, have you?" Jurtan asked, with a sidelong glance at his sister. "His deadliest weapon is his tongue. When he's finished with you you're not sure of your own name, or whether you actually got up that morning."

"There's only one person you could possibly be describing," said a new voice, behind them and somewhat above their heads.

It was a voice Jurtan recognized, one remarkably like Zalzyn Shaa's, only pitched an octave or so higher. "Eden!" he exclaimed, wheeling around, already looking up to search the trees to discover her lurking-place. It was not necessary to bring foliage into account, however, for the woman who also *looked* strikingly like Shaa was in the act of swinging off her horse. "You escaped the curse, too!"

"Looks that way," said Eden, taking in the barricade and its associated company of troops, "for now at least. What's Zolly gotten himself into this time? You guys have been keeping yourselves pretty busy, haven't you - this your sister?"

"You might as well introduce me as well," said yet another person, also on horse, but concealed until now on the farther side of Eden, "seeing as how we all may be flinging ourselves forth to hopeless death any moment now." He was capless, and the wavy mop that omission revealed was so red Jurtan thought for a moment it was some fluorescent mutation. Maybe not, but it would still make an effective beacon in the fog.

Eden grinned at him with an expression of genial familiarity. "This is Lemon, otherwise known as the Crawfish, for reasons civilized folk can only guess at in disgust. I understand someone from your bunch has been messing around with his sister."

"Pay no attention to Eden," said the Crawfish, leaning on his pommel. "She has her family's gift for innuendo but hasn't had an audience to practice on for years. Now she'll be cutting loose with a torrent." He ts'ked reprovingly and eyed her back. "The only messing about that was discussed was on the part of your brother, and not the one with the pleasant disposition, either."

"You'd think as a freelance, currently beholden to me, you might have a little more discretion where you sling your insults."

The Crawfish looked thoughtful. "Could that be why I've never held on to a regular job?"

"Freelance?" Tildamire said, feeling strangely like she was back watching the Karlinis again, only with the air of pleasant bantering that had slipped away from them toward the end here restored. "Freelance what?"

"Tends to change," said the Crawfish laconically. "Usually without notice, like the drift of this conversation. So just what *is* the situation here?"

Shaa had been keeping a weather eye peeled on the goings-on around him, alert for a surreptitious effort on the part of the Hand to preemptively pounce with the aim of subduing him, or an initiative from the Monts designed to save him from himself, or a sortie from his besieged associates intended to do who knew what-all, or indeed any inspirational creativeness on the part of the world at large. The gathering convention around the Monts had thus not escaped his notice. Not that he could tell for certain, in the deepening gloom of evening, exactly who the newcomers were, but he thought that suspicion and deduction, not to mention analysis of timing and circumstance, had brought him reliably nine-tenths of the way to certitude anyway. What would they do, was the real question. "So you see," he continued, addressing (as he had been) the Hand's most wavering digit, Romm V'Nisa, "your employer is indeed using you as he has used all his tools, which is to say with callousness aforethought and meatgrinder dispensibility. Contrast with that the opportunity of gaining the undying favor of those who literally *are* undying, not to mention the approbatory eye of forces temporal including the Emperor and the ruling hierarchy, whose posteriors you will have de-slinged." These were hard-bitten campaigners, after all; it was often necessary to employ saucy language to establish rapport with such fellows.

"We have a contract," Gadol V'Nisa reiterated stubbornly.

"We didn't sign up to dig our own grave," said Romm, not for the first time on his part, either.

"I don't like this," said Chas V'Halila, shaking his head. "I don't like any part of this. We're mixed up in something way too big for us. I say we get the hell out quick as we can and dig in long as it takes till this thing blows over. Max was one thing, but now we're talking serious -"

"Shut *up*," Romm and Gadol told him simultaneously. Then they paused to glare at each other, a standoff Gadol broke first. "I won't say there isn't something in what you say," he acknowledged. "I am no seeker for immolation. But neither do I wish to be on the losing side. If your brother has already achieved such a record of success, what better chance do we have through betting against him?"

"Now we're talking tactics," Romm said with satisfaction.

"No, we're *not*," snapped Gadol.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Shaa, in his most placating tone of voice. "My brother thrives on sowing dissension, and indecision too, for that matter. For years I refrained from seeking his destruction even though I had far better justification even before this than you will hopefully ever have if you work for him for a decade. It is now clear my reluctance has engendered dire consequences, beyond even those you already know - as if those were not themselves more than enough. I fear he intends to release a magic-bearing plague of such malign import as to insure that the world would never again be as we know it. Sir Chas, here, realizes this is possible."

Chas had gone white. "Zinarctica?"

"Perhaps merely a warm-up," Shaa intoned gravely. Of course that last was not, strictly speaking, true. As far as Shaa knew, his brother was not about to expunge civilization; there would be no one left for him to rule, so

what fun would *that* be? If anyone was capable of deliberately releasing such a scourge, however, Arznaak was the man.

But that was not the reason for airing the possibility of such a pestilence. There was still the Karlini lab. If something had survived destruction and his most recent attempt at detection, the hazard might very well first reveal itself through being quite extreme; through being, indeed, beyond their own abilities to contain it. Accordingly, it seemed only prudent to begin lining up potential allies. "We don't break contracts," Romm was saying to Gadol, "but we don't work for psychotics either. We seem to have blundered into a serious situation here."

"This could all be a story he's making up," protested Gadol, although somewhat weakly, to Shaa's ears. "It could be a diversion to rescue his friends."

Romm shrugged. "If it is, so what? How important are these people anyway? Max is the powerhouse, you know that. Now that he's out of the story what do we lose? Prudence would dictate we provide ourselves with insurance."

"This could be a subtle plan for revenge," Gadol ventured.

"Max is not dead," said Shaa, "merely sequestered. No torture is involved, I trust? Then where is the incitement to revenge?"

"Enough talk," Romm proclaimed. "Do we need a vote, or can we define what we intend to do for each other?"

"All right," said Gadol, "all right. But I warn you, there better not be any tricks. The first sign of anything funny and your throat is the one running red."

"That only seems fair," murmured Shaa. "I had best inform my colleagues of our arrangement. There is an additional matter to discuss first, though; that of informers."

Gadol drew back. "Informers?"

"You know my brother. Don't you think he's planted someone on you or suborned someone already in your Hand to report back to him on your activities?"

"What are they talking about all this time?" Jurtan Mont asked. "Don't you think we'd better rescue him?"

"No," said Eden Shaa sternly, "that is exactly what we shouldn't do. Weren't you the one talking about Zolly and his mouth? As long as they're still talking he's got them under control."

To be sure, Jurtan's music sense wasn't giving any particular foreboding of alarm, either, and he did feel like he was learning significantly more about what had been going on. But why did they need to just keep standing here? "Don't you have forces you could call in?" he said to the Crawfish. "Give them standoff for standoff?"

The Crawfish studied a nail. "I've never much liked fleet actions," he remarked.

"Then what good are you? What do you do, just hang around?"

The Crawfish glanced at Eden. "You mean I'm not supposed to just hang around?"

"Sounds like a fine job description to me," said Eden.

Tildamire knew her brother well enough to realize his next utterance was likely to be some sort of outburst, accompanied by a petulant accusation of being toyed with or taken for a nincompoop; of course his tirade would only underline how appropriate the accusation was. The way he'd been acting lately she had half a mind to let him make a fool of himself again, but there was still the chance they had some family honor left to uphold. "It sounds like you've done your share of traveling, Mr. Crawfish," she inserted, while Jurtan was still opening his mouth and drawing air for his eruption. "Did you ever meet our father? The former Lion of the Oolvaan Plain?"

The Crawfish directed a pleasant, if slightly goofy, smile at her. "Lemon's actually my name; you don't have to bother with this crustacean nonsense. Your father's the one in Roosing Oolvaya, isn't that it? It's possible we might have crossed paths back in -"

"Something's happening," Jurtan said suddenly.

Wroclaw, inspecting the apartment yet again, concluded that all was in readiness. They were as prepared as they could be. The snares, the deadfall on the stairs, the acids in the cupola, the pails of bubbling oil kept at a boil each on its own hotplate or burner, the mannequins dressed in Shaa's spare clothing positioned to draw the first round of fire or the first slashing attack of anyone who achieved the unlikely result of actually making it into the flat, Haddo and Karlini's polychromatic spell-tangles hovering close to hand, their trigger-releases at the ready, and so forth and so on. Wroclaw had uncovered a cache of martial materiel crammed precariously in a rear closet and had handed around the spoils; even Haddo had made a war helmet disappear somehow into the darkness of his hood. Wroclaw had a mace dangling by its thong from his belt. He didn't expect to use the thing, but why not? If nothing else it was picturesque.

And Dortonn? Well, Dortonn was still surprisingly active for someone who looked the way he did. Even his pronouncements on the imminence of his demise and the extremity of his suffering had begun to seem rather beside the point; window dressing, so to speak, while the business of the store within continued to roll along with scarcely a waver. For all his incantation and contortions and glaring out into space, though, he had thus far shown no evidence of success in whatever-it-was he was hoping to accomplish.

Haddo scuttled past again, muttering as usual under his breath. "My friend," said Wroclaw, "you seem unusually preoccupied with birds this evening. Would you like me to prepare for you a snack? Dr. Shaa's larder is well -"

Haddo broke off and craned his red eyespots upward. "Help of lots you are," he spat sarcastically. "Forget you wings of chickens yours, even fried. Your seagulls, bah! Of use nothing for seagulls are."

Wroclaw shrugged. "Who among us can choose our legacy?" As was the case for so many of the not-quite-humans, Wroclaw's gene pool was quite small, and inbreeding had not particularly helped things. He had always considered his family's rapport with seagulls and other waterfowl to be evidence that the laws of natural selection had a sense of humor. "They don't like to go out past sundown," Wroclaw added, "or I would have asked them to come over here anyway. There are bound to be good pickings on hand before long."

"Pickings of carrion will be," grumbled Haddo. "Carrion have your friends not the taste. Smarter than that are they. Even gull of Karlini coop has flown."

It was true. The seagull that had been trailing Karlini for reasons which remained its own had refused to enter Shaa's building with the rest of them. Wroclaw could still feel it lurking around, but damned if he could tell what it was up to. The bird was having its fun, that much was clear, swooping silently out of the trees to make the occasional dive on some unsuspecting Hand and letting loose at the last second with one of its special

raise-the-dead screeches, leaving the fellow making futile hacks at the air, cursing violently against the apparition from hell and trying to decide if he was really having a heart attack or not. Then the gull would mount back into the sky and loiter about, giving every impression of waiting for someone or something. Come to think of it, was Haddo protesting a bit too much? "Haddo," said Wroclaw, "are you up to something?"

"Fah," said Haddo, with another furtive upward glance. "Small birds, tiny birds, fah! Of use only big birds are. Trapped are we. Only help now can I - up with Karlini now is what?"

Karlini had crept back from the window and was beckoning them closer. "We have a new plan," he hissed.

"No tricks," they had demanded; indeed, what an interesting, if implausible, world that would be. No, this would be tricky enough even without gratuitous shenanigans. Keep it simple and hope for the luxury of no unintended surprises; that was the plan.

One option had been to stage a mock firefight for any observing spies. It would have been too difficult to coordinate convincingly, though, especially considering that causing *actual* casualties to either side would have scotched their shaky deal immediately. Another option would have had the Hand fighting illusions, only to discover after the fact that their quarry had slipped away. Alternatively, Chas V'Halila could have proclaimed his success in offensive thaumaturgy, Karlini and the others could have feigned paralysis, and the Hand could have mopped them up and carted them away only to have them spring to life unexpectedly and give their "captors" the slip. There were the options of surrender against overwhelming odds, of an announcement to the troops by Gadol that they had read the address wrong and had just discovered themselves to be besieging the wrong location, and of a feigned message of recall arriving unexpectedly from their employer; and the much flashier one of the staged demolition of Shaa's building, with his associates hiding in the basement.

These options all had drawbacks, though, either of logistics or plausibility or excess hazard. They could come at the problem from the other side and forge ahead under the Scapula's own rules, dashing the consequences of discovered treachery and relying on momentum to carry them past any counterstrokes. Shaa had also floated the possibility of smoking out his brother's hypothesized spies through an appropriate subterfuge. The leaders of the Hand, though, displaying their preference for the blow direct, had refused Shaa's offer to supply them with a stratagem suitable for the occasion. With the prospect of their collaboration crashing imminently on the rocks, then, for lack of a mutually agreeable first step, the unexpected had inserted itself, as the unexpected in so timely a manner often did.

The unexpected announced itself with a sudden disruption in the trees just in front of Shaa's address: a cracking of branches, a lashing of leaves, and a rapid series of thuds and *oof*!s and wails, followed by a rain of thrashing men falling first from that tree, then the next - the men of the Hand, waiting with grappling irons and crossbows at the ready for the signal to storm the building from above. At the same time a large gray shape passed overhead above the trees, silently but for a ruffle of air, showing the suggestion of long feathers on its underside and wide gliding wings spanning the street. "Gods damn you," snarled Gadol, "a *trick*!"; and with a powerful move he drew his knife and turned to plunge it as he had promised into Shaa's neck.

Shaa was scarcely waiting for him, however. Perhaps later they could discuss the sarcastic hand of fate; perhaps later he would discuss this particular trick with its instigator, as well, as soon as he discovered who that person was. Not Karlini, probably, since he *had* been able to get a message through to the Great one to hold tight while he tried to work out a deal; possibly that fellow Dortonn, who had been acting the nihilist well enough to show even Max a new turn or two; but taking into account his growing suspicion of what - or whom - was carrying on up there in the foliage, and how they had arrived on site, Haddo was clearly the leading candidate for the appropriate recipient of wrath. A powerful bloodcurdling battle cry that sounded like the roar of some savage cat of the savannas with the ululating trumpet of an enraged elephant tacked on at the end echoed from the trees as Shaa, cloaked by the refraction spell he had kept ready in case of the need for a

quick escape, bent himself double and slid himself forcefully toward Chas V'Halila.

Chas was taking his own step forward and waving his hands in the launching of his own spell-work; suddenly, though, he tripped over something unseen, felt a solid blow to his belly that threw him energetically up and forward, and found himself doing an exuberant cartwheel head-over-heels directly into Romm V'Nisa's iron chest. Romm saw him coming and tried to throw him past, but in the event was reduced to futile if flamboyant cursing as they went down in a heap. Down the block, the forces of the Hand, who were if nothing else well-trained, decided they had received enough of a go-ahead to begin their assault.

Down the block and up in Shaa's flat, the Great Karlini was staring at Haddo with a crazed expression on his face. "You did *what*?" he howled.

"Thought I help need we would," said Haddo, unapologetically. "Initiative took I."

"This is it, Haddo! You're fired!"

"If I were to make a suggestion," said Wroclaw, "it would be fight first, fire later. They are breaking down the door and in another few seconds will be on the steps."

Behind the barricade at the end of the block, Tildamire Mont watched as her brother Jurtan, muttering "I knew it!" under his breath, swung himself over the roadblock and tore down the street in a flailing run, made erratic because he was simultaneously fumbling out his replacement harmonica from his inside pocket. She was still listening to that savage cry that hung in the air; listening, and thinking how strangely familiar a sound it was. "So, what do you think?" the Crawfish was saying behind her. "Should I rush in?"

"First thing you do is put these on," Eden Shaa told him.

"What's this? Earplugs?"

"That's right," said Eden. "Here, Tildamire, these are for you. Your brother's about to play, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," said Tildamire. "I -"

"Mash them up in your fingers first," Eden instructed, watching lights flare down the street. "I've got rubber trees out on the estate - you'd be amazed at the things you can make out of rubber. There now mumml mumml mum-"

They *were* amazing, Tildamire decided, as she wedged the second plug in her other ear and noticed the level of sound from outside drop virtually to nothing. Now had the Hand made the same sort of preparations?

Philosophically speaking, all battles involve more than their share of confusion. Still, Shaa had to admit that this one was shaping up to be exceptional in its level of chaos and muddle per capita. "Call off the attack!" he was yelling, in a convincing imitation of Gadol V'Nora's own officious roar, as he slipped across the lawn of the building across the street from his own, having vaulted its hedge just as his short-term refraction field flickered and collapsed.

"No!" roared the real Gadol, from somewhere back in the street. "Attack! Attack! Kill them all, the lying -"

Ah, there they were. Shaa crammed his own earplugs into place, feeling quite satisfied that he had had the foresight to have Eden messenger them over before he'd left for the Running, settling the second one within his auricle just as the bleat of a insane reed instrument drifted to him over the hedge. His vision fogged and then settled. Using a convenient plaster lawn flamingo as a footstool, he raised himself to eye-level over the

top of the hedge. What he saw was Jurtan Mont, standing in front of the building containing his flat, tootling on his harmonicum one of his cockeyed paralytic airs. Jurtan was weaving from side to side to avoid being cast asunder by the crowd of surrounding Hand-thugs who were tottering, reeling, vomiting, and heaving themselves at Jurtan in an attempt to bring him down to the ground with them and crush him beneath their weight. They were having no success. Indeed, enough of the Hand members were already chewing the dust that Jurtan was doing his dance half on the ground and half on their backs.

Jurtan's biggest hazard at the moment was evading the rain of troopers who were dropping from the trees and falling backward from their storming-ladders. Even the howling berserker who had started this mess by anointing himself a tree-dervish had fallen silent, and the foliage was no longer being wracked by the whirling scythe of his sword - no, wait, there was that bellow again after all, although quavery this time and without power, more of a collapsing screech really, and then the screecher himself made his appearance, launching himself with a mighty-thewed leap from his tree-perch toward the upper-floor front window of Shaa's flat. It was amazing he was still even conscious under the force of Jurtan's onslaught - but even though nominally awake, he was clearly not unaffected, judging by the weaving stance he took on the branch prior to leaping out, and the way he seemed to lose track of what he was doing halfway through his trajectory in the air. Instead of reaching for the window frame and using the finger-hold to flip himself through the glass into the living room, he hit the wall below the window head-first and slid down the facade through the awning above the front door and thence onto the stoop.

The man was not alone there. Just before his arrival, a knot of Hand-folks had come rolling down the interior stairway and back out onto the porch themselves, followed closely and doubtless propelled by Shaa's long four-person sofa. Accordingly, the screeching man was fortuitously spared from splitting his head open against the slate paving by the cushions of this same sofa; Shaa could hear the *sproing* of its tortured springs across the street and through his earplugs.

That much was probably empathy, though. There would need to be plenty of empathy to go around. Shaa was willing to spare an additional helping for Jurtan Mont, who had followed the appearance, flight, and downfall of the maniacal berserker with a gaze of as much open-mouthed astonishment as he could muster given that he was still persistently piping on his instrument. Jurtan's expression was not merely one of surprise, it was one of confounded recognition, for the psychotic brawler was clearly, if without obvious explanation for his presence, Jurtan's father, the former Lion of the Oolvaan Plain.

Down the block, coming carefully toward the carnage from the direction of the barricade, were the fallen Lion's other offspring Tildamire, Shaa's own sister Eden, and, making a show of escorting while leading his horse, Lemon, the Crawfish. Shaa let himself out of the garden through the front gate and approached them. "What do you want to do now?" the Crawfish lip-spoke at him.

Shaa shrugged. "Round them up, I suppose," he mouthed back. Jurtan had now turned around and spotted them. Jurtan's predominant expression at the moment was one of confusion floating perhaps atop a sea of horrified dread. His confusion seemed to deepen when he saw them all ambulatory and apparently none the worse for wear; no one had informed him of their experiments with earplugs. Shaa caught his attention, pointed at his own ear and made screwing-in motions; then, observing Jurtan's bewilderment growing rather than being relieved, made a wiping-away forget-it gesture followed by patting the air downward in an attempt to get him to reduce the fervor of his playing. Wait a minute - *Jurtan* didn't have earplugs, *he* could hear. "Turn it down a little," Shaa yelled at him.

Eden had produced a coil of rope; Eden never went anywhere without rope. She and Tildamire had begun to busy themselves with binding the moaning, barely sensible Hands. As Shaa moved aside to let them work, he noticed that the Crawfish's horse, and Eden's next to it too for that matter, were not unoccupied. The Crawfish's steed had two bodies slung across its back, with a third slumped over Eden's. The three leaders of the Hand had already been wound securely with cable and apparently bonked over the head for good measure.

Shaa sidled closer and fixed the lolling, upside-down eye of Gadol V'Nora with an affable expression. "Now," he said to Gadol, "about that alliance."

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" said Tarfon. "I mean, you said that Shaa explicitly told you not to make a move until you'd had a chance to discuss it with him."

"He never could have thought I'd have this chance," Leen told her, "and anyway, he's not my boss, I'm not his slave. We were just thrown together, that's all, and -"

"But I thought he knew a lot more about these things than you do, and a lot more about *Max* in particular, and that's why -"

"I think I see light up ahead," announced Leen, in a tone of voice intended to declare definitively that this discussion was over and the subject closed. She did not want to be reminded again that Tarfon was most probably right, and that she herself was substantially out of her league and in the process of doing something quite unwise. In contrast to the usual state of the affairs for this sort of thing, her course of action's misguided nature had nothing to do with the outcome. Well... to be fair, that wasn't entirely true. The sheer scope of her folly might not be known unless she happened to succeed.

But Max wasn't a greater hazard to the general welfare than the Scapula... was he? Certainly not. Only his good friends and closest associates, who had known him for who knew how many years through situations she didn't even want to guess at, thought so. And she, herself? Clearly what she was doing was absurd, even granted that she had these unfamiliar... *feelings* toward him. Absurd? No, that was really most unlikely. Leen knew she was the most rational of persons. Everyone had always told her so, and they couldn't all be wrong, could they? Especially since she had usually heard the assessment delivered in despair, just after an argument where she had been urged to be more human and less a creature of cold intellect, and just before the arguee (often a close relative) threw up their hands and stalked off in disgust muttering under their breath. It was not as though her friends and relations had been appraising her thus in order to flatter her. If this was as she had always been, then, surely a few... *feelings* wouldn't completely remake her, couldn't rob of her capacity for analysis and her common sense.

No, of course not. So it must be only a delusion that that was the way she felt.

In Leen's favor on the scale of rationality versus dementia, she *had* given Tarfon the option of excusing herself from the enterprise. Leen had to acknowledge that Tarfon had been quite right to call her on that, though. "What," Tarfon had said with resignation, "wait here in your Archives when you don't come back, and starve to death? At least if I go with you there's a chance I'll end up in a cell somewhere with food, instead of dead out of hand to serve kids as a nasty bedtime cautionary tale."

So here they were instead, far along the hidden passage the computer had revealed to them linking the Archives with the nearby dungeon; a quixotic librarian and a dragooned innocent. Squinting ahead past her lantern at the pale smear of light against the tunnel wall, Leen stepped carefully through another pair of side-path turnoffs and edged sideways into the narrow passage, straight into another tunnel-spanning floor-to-ceiling tangle of dusty cobwebs. She swept the stuff out of her eyes and cleared her nose and mouth enough to breathe but refrained from cursing; it was best to retain a stoical attitude as an example to her reluctant accomplice. "We seem to be on the right path, at least," Tarfon muttered, examining the sketch-map they had drawn from the image of the computer's display. "What luck."

"You were the one who was appalled that Max was locked up," Leen hissed at her.

"That was *abstract*."

"Shh!" Stoical; remember, stoical. She could see the source of the light, now - a sliver at head-height where the cover had been incompletely replaced in front of a spy-hole on the blank end wall. At least the walls expanded out enough here to let her inhale without making her back and breasts scrape against the rock; the space was even generous enough to turn around or take a step to the side. Leen hooded her lantern, slid the cover fully aside with a low nerve-wracking creak, and applied her eye to the crevice.

The flickering light was cast by a torch in a sconce on the wall opposite the peephole. Next to the torch was the sort of thick wooden door studded with bars and nails and hasps one expected from a serious dungeon. Bulking humped and angular in front of the door was what appeared in the uncertain light to be some sort of torture rack, with the shape of a prostrate body reclining in limp disarray along its inclined surface. "Max?" Leen hissed through the spy-hole.

The body failed to stir. Had the person been flailed? Knocked insensible through blows to the head? Passed out through loss of blood or merely generalized agony? The current government administration - of which Leen was, to be frank, a part - held an enlightened attitude toward the treatment of those who found themselves within its grasp. Accordingly, torture was supposed to be entirely proscribed, but on the other hand where there were dungeons, and cells never accountable to the rule of light, it stood to reason that anything could happen. "Is there a door here?" Leen muttered, feeling about the wall.

"Try your other hand," suggested Tarfon in a low whisper.

Her other hand? - oh, an interesting idea. She was still wearing on that hand her signet of office. As she transferred the lantern from her ring hand to the other, one of her fingers brushed the top of the signet, and she noted that the ring felt damp; actually more slimy, really. When she brought up the ring, furthermore, she noted in the thin beam that escaped the lantern's hood a thin film of some sort of gray goo covering its surface. Sorcery she was used to; goo, on the contrary, was something to be scrubbed clean, but on the off chance that the substance had seeped through some cunning vent from the ring's interior, rather than being something noxious she had scraped against on the way through the tunnel, she touched it to the rock wall anyway, then moved it about on the surface. She was rewarded by ... nothing. No rumble of hidden machinery, no spinning of cunning doors, no illuminatory flash revealing the path to a new exit. Nothing. Except... why did a line snaking down the wall appear to be *bubbling*?

Beneath the foaming trace, a deeper crevice was now coming into sight, a crevice outlining what could only be the shape of a door. Was it too absurd to hypothesize that the oracle back in the Archives had relayed a message to her ring, which was now passing it in some organic, half-alive fashion to the rock itself, which was now responding by recreating for her an ancient passageway? Surely this was not the sort of hypothesis in which one would traffic on a daily basis, but still it did seem to fit the facts. Examining the face of the rock a bit more closely, Leen now noted how certain patches of moss or lichen so drab as to have otherwise escaped the attention of anyone but a fanatically dedicated naturalist were squirming in a veritable frenzy themselves, exuding from their extended runners a dull ooze that appeared to be the source of the fizzling active principle.

It did seem like a lot of trouble to go to, though. Why not just provide a standard sort of secret door? True, masking the door by making it literally part of continuous rock was certainly a permanent way of keeping security intact and making sure that only someone who knew the trick could sneak through, but - really. Unless -

Who had built these secret passages? And using what means of construction? The network of creep-spaces indicated by the oracular computer was amazingly extensive, revealing the palace complex to be a virtual honeycomb of hidden byways. How had the oracle become so knowledgeable about the tunnel system's ins and outs? Leen had a sudden, mind-boggling vision of hidden rivers of gray sludge chewing their mysterious way through the foundations of the city, under the command and guidance of the enigmatic machine she had uncovered in her own lair. If her vision was authentic, the potentialities were extensive... and the power

implicitly wielded by the oracle distressing vast. More, in the ancient legends of the thinking machines, they were always represented as the bound slaves of their greater masters, with no initiative or capability for independent volition. If the lore also ran true, then, to whom did this computer report? Could anyone with her ring and the right answers to its questions *become* its commander?

It had recognized her as the Archivist by the ring, Leen recalled. That implied that the presentation of different sigils could also result in recognition. If -

"I think it's finished," Tarfon prodded her.

So it appeared. Leen pressed tentatively at the newly revealed door. It slid smoothly away from her on a concealed pivot. She hesitated, gazing through the gap into the poorly lit cell, then straightened her shoulders. What was she here for, if not to proceed? She edged through the opening and took a step beyond, approaching the figure bound to the rack of confinement. Behind her, there was a fresh rush of air, a muffled cry of "Wait! I can't -" that was abruptly shut off with a small thump, and as Leen turned again she was already realizing what sight she was about to see. A hewn rock wall, unbroken by the doorway she had just passed through.

Leen scrutinized the surface. The action of the mysterious goo had taken several minutes, so it seemed unlikely for the rock to have knit itself again spontaneously... no, there was the outline of the door. Perhaps touching the correct spot with the ring would allow her to pass through again... although it did seem rather odd for the door to have taken the decision unilaterally upon itself to close behind her, instead of waiting for her to retreat through it again. Perhaps there was some additional command she should have given it to compel it to remain open. Or could it perhaps have sensed some untoward situation in the making, and followed the dictate of preserving any knowledge of its mere existence from -

The real door to the cell clanked and then began to slide open with a low creak.

There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to retreat, no time even to release Max and unleash his fighting skills - for the first time Leen took a good look at the figure on the rack.

It was *not* Max. It was not even a person. It was several pillows and gunny sacks wrapped in a cloak and trousers and secured to the bed with the straps and cables provided. A mask of restraint in the correct location obscured the absence of a face and head from anyone peeping through the observation hole in the door. In *either* door.

Leen was joined in her contemplation of this state of affairs by the man who had just entered the cell. Beneath a rich cloak of dark velvet could be glimpsed his robes of state, their hems of ermine and filigree of gold braid. "Well," said the man. "Someone shall hear of *this*."

Except calling him a "man", though approximately true, was not strictly speaking accurate, for was the personage not in fact his Highness, the Emperor-designate himself?

It was just as well, Leen reflected, that she had never been one to swoon. She tried to steady her breathing, and watched as the Emperor-designate appeared to consider the question of whether to strike out in frustration at the effigy, or merely turn on his heel and stalk out, calling for the inevitable guards. It would have been the most boring alternative for fate and the most outrageous one for probability, and was not, in any case, in the cards, for of course the Emperor turned and saw her instead.

The Emperor-designate ran a dubious eye up and down her form. Smeared with dust and scraped by rocks, draped from head to waist with the remnants of ancient spiderwebs, holding a hooded lantern, Leen realized she struck a striking image out of classical mythology. "I know you," the Emperor-designate said, "don't I?"

"All know *you*, sire," she told him. She hadn't tried to make her voice particularly sepulchral, it was the dust and the coughing and the associated secretions that combined to produce the effect. For good or ill, it certainly didn't sound like *her*.

The Emperor-designate frowned. "The prisoner Maximillian is no longer in his cell, yet here you are in his place instead. What do you have to say about this?"

She fixed him with a gaze she sincerely hoped was fraught with mythological import. "Maximillian has a larger fate than this."

"His fate is subject to *my* will."

"And is not your will subject to the will of others?"

"No," he said impatiently, "of course not, that's the whole point of the compact. The Emperor is granted freedom of action on a level with the gods."

"Tell that to the Scapula," Leen intoned.

He peered more closely at her. "You're the Archivist, aren't you? Of course you are. What is the meaning of this charade, and what are you doing in this cell?"

"Whiling away some time before the Knitting?"

"That," said the Emperor-designate imperiously, with the barest hint of a sniff, "is scarcely appropriate wear for the Knitting. You should have already changed. Perhaps you will allow my guards to assure it? You will join me in the box of state, and as time permits we shall discuss this matter further."

"Is he dead?" said Jill-tang. "If he isn't dead why isn't he waking up?"

"He's not dead, but he's being quite persistent about choosing to be unconscious," Gashanatantra told her. They had arrayed Jardin on a slab in Jill's workroom, located conveniently behind the reception area that had been the venue for their earlier sparring bout. "You wouldn't have anything so crude lying about as an injectable amphetamine, would you?"

"You've already seen what's in the medical cabinet."

"Hm, yes. Do you recall a particular item of furniture, a decorative marble pedestal that we kept that globular light sculpture on? Is that piece still around?"

"It's in my dressing room; this way. Why? Is there something hidden in it?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, there is." Gashanatantra followed her down a hall with a polished parquet floor, modest gilt and crystal chandeliers, and matching mirrors atop provincial end-tables with fluted legs and claw-and-ball feet. The hall was long enough to bring a pony to a good canter and back to a stop without having to navigate a bend. "You've redecorated, I see. Your count of worshipers is up?"

"I suppose I can't complain. About *that*, at any rate. In here." The pedestal in question held a dramatic position in the middle of a circular settee surrounded by dressing tables and the doors to tall closets. A cunning skylight directed a wash of soft yellow over the base and its artwork; considering the depth of this apartment within the temple, the simple skylight must have required a significant supporting infrastructure of prisms and light guides and tracking mirrors linking it with the roof. And an artificial light source somewhere along the

way, too, since it was by now unquestionably night. "Don't break the sculpture, all right?"

"Why should I break it?" said Gashanatantra. "I was always fond of the thing. I commissioned it, if you don't remember." He carefully placed his palms flat on the curved sides of the pedestal, pressed, then moved his hands and caressed again. As he released his grip, the cylinder began to rotate with a soft whirr; rotate, and wind itself upward. The marble was revealed as a mere shell atop an interior mechanism fitted with a hefty spiraling screw thread. After a moment, the ascending tube slid to a smooth stop without giving the sculpture the merest jangle. Gashanatantra performed another cryptic manipulation and an interior cavity appeared. Withdrawing a latched box from the recess by its handle, he remarked, "You see? I am backing with actions my statement about the need for mutual collaboration and some modicum of trust. Now you will undertake a search of the premises for anything else I might have left sitting around, yes? Yet if it were not for me you would be none the wiser."

"Just get on with it and wake up Jardin," said Jill. "The longer we go without hearing from the Scapula the more nervous I get. We haven't gotten anything back from the brother, either, and it must be almost an hour since I sent off the messenger."

This time Gashanatantra led the way out into the hall, letting the pedestal reassemble itself behind him. "The Scapula is probably preparing himself for the Knitting. It is conceivable his preparations include the recapture or more lasting extermination of his brother. The Knitting is the central concern."

"That's exactly what's been on my mind. I've been thinking about your friend Iskendarian too. Don't you think you should go bring him in before the Scapula gets hold of him?"

"The Scapula already has hold of him," Gashanatantra stated. "From what Monoch tells me he is frozen in a chair no differently from any of the others we have already heard about. As far as that goes, he's likely to be less of a danger in that condition than anywhere else. Even if he somehow manages to escape there is still no need to worry. He may know Monoch is a soul-drinker, but I don't believe he's realized all the implications: Monoch is keyed to him, and Monoch has his orders. On the other side, I suspect the Scapula will wait until he has some leisure time to review his catches one by one, and I doubt he'll discover what he has until then. Even when and if that happens, he may find himself in a situation... not to his liking."

"Tell me about it," Jill growled. "Iskendarian or whoever he is is a walking disaster. You're looking for booby-traps? - *he's* the -"

"Now, now, dear, don't foam at the mouth." He could feel Jill glaring at him behind his back, then thought he knew when the grudging hint of a grin flickered through the murderous intent. Just the memory of old times, or perhaps the glint of something fresh and closer to hand?

Back in the workroom, Gashanatantra eyed Jardin carefully, alert to the possibility he had risen from his coma to prowl around the place in their absence with malign intent. No evidence of this presented itself. The restorative drips were proceeding, the shock radiator remained where he had left it, the chain restraints he had insisted on applying were undisturbed. Gashanatantra clicked open his box and began sorting through its contents.

"Where do you think the Scapula is, physically?" asked Jill. "In Jardin's sanctum?"

"Possibly," Gashanatantra said. "He may be on the way to the Knitting, or he may be planning to execute whatever his plan is by remote action. Or he may be using Protector of Nature's lair as a base, or Vladimir's, or his own original Scapular facilities."

"I - that's not a thumbscrew, is it?"

"Only incidentally. But I prefer to try this first." He held a vial up to the light and tapped it to clear air bubbles.

"Is that your amphetamine?"

"No," said Gashanatantra. "This is much more powerful, but you would have been unlikely to have any yourself; that's why I asked for the other instead. This is old, very old. I doubt anyone is still making it. Now."

"You're injecting it into his *chest*?"

It *was* a long needle. "Directly into the heart. The action is not only pharmaceutical, the formulation contains a cross-linked spell-skein as well. If he - ah."

Jardin's chest had twitched. A low creaking rattle came from somewhere deep within it. His right arm jerked; then, his eyes flew open and his lips drew back and his teeth rattled, his back arched up from the table, a whiplash wave ran down his body to his feet, which drummed a brief rat-a-tat, he gave voice to a guttural wail that brought with it a thin spray of greenish bile, he began to draw in paroxysmal rasping breaths.

"Jardin!" called Jill. "It's me! Can you hear me?"

Jardin's staring eyes were rolling and red. "That scum bastard," he was whispering between wheezes.

"Which one?" Gash murmured urbanely. "Now listen closely. It is important that we talk."

CHAPTER 16

ZALZYN SHAA HAD NEVER BEEN FOND of conventions. Even a family reunion was edging over the line, but then with his family any rational observer would feel that *that* part of his attitude, at least, was perfectly understandable. So when he considered the fact that he was at least partially responsible for the present congregation of disreputable characters spread out along the street - could even be defined, in fact, as co-host - it was enough to make a new identity and a turn to the open road seem of more than merely passing appeal. But lurking around on the other hand was the matter of responsibility. Who knew what this gaggle of loons would do left to their own devices if he headed off into the sunset?

Still, matters had clearly passed smoothly through the absurd and were charging unwaveringly into the preposterous. Where would it all end? An old phrase Max had picked up from one of his researches came to mind, "the heat-death of the universe." Max had spent a few years tossing out this remark as his contribution whenever a situation became completely unintelligible, as an illustration of incomprehensibility that might only be resolved by one with unknowable knowledge or an unachievable vantage-station from which to exercise their point of view. It was clear the ancients had meant something by this mysterious "heat-death", but for all Max's exertions it had remained only a string of cryptic words.

So as Shaa stood there, surveying his rabble of compatriots and wondering where and whether all this would end, reflecting that by now it might take an apocalypse of legendary proportions to achieve resolution by the sheer expedient of sweeping all of them and perhaps even the rest of Peridol with them into the sea, he felt his thoughts turning philosophically to -

Someone gave him a hard slap on the back. Someone? No, that was a smack he recognized. "I am also pleased to see you, my sister," Shaa said, raising an eyebrow.

"Not a very good time to sink into reverie, wouldn't you say?" said Eden pointedly.

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Shaa considered the problem. "It would be better to find a small coffee shop and sit on its veranda swapping reminiscences and recapitulating hardy moments from the recent pitched battle. Or, considering how many invitations would need to go out to ensure the attendance of everyone appropriate, perhaps a ballroom would be better instead, even if a tea-lounge would be more atmospheric. Shall I call the caterer?"

"You've been on the road too long," Eden told him. "You've finally up and lost your mind."

"Certainly I've been doing *something* too long," agreed Shaa, putting his hands in his pockets. "Probably slithering in and out of plots. But I suppose that's still the leading matter on the table now, to sit down and brew up our next wily scheme, leaving the rest cure in the country for a later date."

"I've been *on* a rest cure in the country for the last - well, you know how long - and trust me, it doesn't solve a thing."

"That is not," Shaa said reflectively, "the sort of thing I would choose to take on trust; one must experience it for oneself. Although I will accept that it can probably wait until morning."

Eden had drawn back to scrutinize him. "Okay," she said, "I'll bite. Why are you just hanging around and wasting time like this? Are you waiting for something?"

"Zalzyn Shaa!"

It was a new man on horseback, wearing livery Shaa had last seen only a few hours before, in the temple of Jill-tang. "Over here!" Shaa called out, waving his hand above his head. "You should be more careful when making remarks like that," he added in an aside to his sister. "You know the universe's habit of listening in."

The rider reigned up, stepping his horse carefully and glancing curiously around him at the tidy aftermath of carnage. He handed an envelope down and Shaa promptly tore it open.

"What is it now?" Eden demanded.

"More news of our brother," said Shaa, still scanning the letter. "- And Jardin's been located, rather the worse for wear. Are you waiting for a response?" he asked the messenger.

"I expect so. Will there be one?"

"A moment for assessment, please."

Shaa took breath in a last moment of contemplation, hearing as he did a snatch of conversation drifting across the tortured remains of the front-lawn flowerbeds. It sounded like Tildamire Mont, in a particularly biting tone of voice: "So does this resolve everything? Was that the grand finale?"

"I wish," said Jurtan Mont, casting a glance back over his shoulder at the Shaas where they stood out in the street with their new mysterious rider. This was the first time he had actually seen the two of them together - likely the first time they'd *been* together in years and years, from his understanding of the terms of their just-lifted family curse. Jurtan's earlier impression on meeting Eden seemed even more true now that he could view them side to side; they were like one person seen in a mirror with at most a modest ripple. It was not at all what Jurtan saw when he looked at his own sister, or even worse, at the father lying still in a stupor at their feet.

He hoped the Shaas were at least having a deep and meaningful conversation of reunion. As soon as Dad regained his senses such an episode of family bonding would obviously be the last thing on *his* family's mind. "You think maybe I should just slide off and get out of town?" Jurtan asked his sister.

"Might as well hear what he's doing here first," Tildamire suggested. "It may not be a total loss for you even after he finds out what happened. I mean, you single-handedly subdued a major mercenary troop; that should be good for *something* with Dad. And you were already pretty cut up from this afternoon - I don't know how you could even hold that instrument on your lips."

"Yeah, but wiping out the mercenaries looks like what *he* was here for. You know how he feels about somebody stealing his fun."

"You *are* his son; with you it might just make him proud."

Jurtan snorted. "Maybe if I hadn't done it by making him fly into a wall."

"Uhhh!" said the former Lion of the Oolvaan Plain. The heads of his offspring swiveled down in unison. The Lion was still reclining on Shaa's couch, which had been dragged off the front stoop to let people get through the door without stepping on his chest. An icebag slumped comfortably on his forehead, Wroclaw having produced it in passing with his own inimitable style.

"I think he's waking up," said Tildamire.

"You think I should deck him out again?" suggested Jurtan.

"Why not give him the benefit of the doubt? Maybe he'll surprise you."

"Thanks a lot," Jurtan moaned. "That's all I need, more surprises."

Off across the lawn, next to the largely demolished hedge separating the property of Shaa's residence from the street, another small group was deciding whether to continue with rational conversation, or to have things out in some form of free-for-all. "With ancestral breeding grounds finished was bird," Haddo was explaining again. "To work return thought was bird the time, so contact did it I. Suggested I on the way to up reinforcements pick. Relayed did message seagull."

"My seagull?" hollered Karlini. "You used *my* seagull to tell that oversize vulture to drop that Lion maniac off here and let him loose to fight everything in sight?"

"Thought I not liked seagull you," muttered Haddo.

"That's beside the point! Whether I like having that seagull around is -" Karlini stopped and tried to pull himself together. Above Haddo's head and across the lawn he had a remarkable view of the Lion in question half-risen from Shaa's couch, his face an archetype of incredulity even with an icebag drooping down past one eye, one hand supporting him and the other waving in the air as though seeking for something yielding to crush; across from him, his son had one of *his* hands half-raised as though to protect his own throat. Karlini resolutely turned his back. He'd had it with carnage, he'd had it with feuds, he'd had it with trying to help out everyone else when he couldn't keep his own life from sinking ever-deeper into its own mess. "If you're working for me, Haddo, you're working for *me*, not off running your own side games and getting me ground up in the gears. Now once and for all, are you working for me?"

"Yes," said Haddo, "and no."

"What was *that*?" croaked Dortonn, arching his neck to peer across the lawn in the direction from which the still-echoing despairing-voiced call of "ARRGH!" seemed to have emanated.

"As long as no open warfare follows it is safe to ignore," Svin told him, threading his way carefully amidst the wreckage and toward the Shaas in the street. It would be too bad if the Great Karlini succumbed to his own growing tendency toward madness before he had the chance for a recuperative nap, but Svin decided that any intervention on his part would have to wait. Karlini's holler had more exasperation than true loss-of-mind insanity in it, anyway, although he would clearly bear watching. But Karlini was not the issue at the moment. "Shaa," Svin declared, removing Dortonn from his shoulder and arranging him on his feet. Or, rather, "Shaas," he amended. "Dortonn has news."

Both Shaas raised their right eyebrows at an identical angle. "Yes?" they said.

Dortonn shook himself out and spoke, still looking like the result of some barely competent necromantic conjuration and sounding as though he was unsure whether he was in or out of the grave. "I have achieved contact with my master. He is free of the ring. He is not quite incarnate, but he is not entirely dead either. I have done my best to stabilize his condition but I am too far away to be fully effective. I am not in condition to travel on my own and Pod Dall is unlikely to appear in this doorway under his own motivation. Who will assist me?" He glanced behind him, where Karlini staring down and his cloaked assistant glaring up were lambasting each other and waving their fists in the air. "Haddo?" he said dubiously.

"I will help you," said Svin. "You may need to be dragged. Haddo would not be of much benefit."

"Thank you for such an attractive offer," Dortonn squawked. "Is that the best I can do?"

"Be careful what you wish for," murmured Shaa. Dortonn followed the direction of his gaze. Svin, of course, had detected the flamboyant approach of the stalking Lion without the need of turning his back. Actually, Shaa considered, the two of them made an interestingly didactic comparison: both ex-barbarians, both appallingly competent in matters martial, at least on a tactical scale, but each with an entirely different demeanor and outlook on life. To wit:

"Stop looking like somebody died," snarled the Lion, casting around him with a belligerent glare. "*Did* somebody die? It's amazing *any* of you are still alive."

"Thank you for your motivating remarks," Shaa told him. "As long as you're here, you might as well do something useful."

"I'll go rescue Maximillian. He does need rescuing, right?"

"That might not be so useful."

"I thought he was your *partner*. Where I come from when your partner's in trouble you -"

"This has been a long story," said Shaa, "of which you have missed the last several volumes. Trust me on this."

"You're all a pack of nitwits!" the Lion bellowed. This latest outburst froze his offspring in their tracks. The next-generation Monts had been edging tentatively closer to the group, looking somewhat the worse for wear from their own private reunion with their sire, and were now clearly reconsidering the idea of remaining anywhere in the same city with him at the moment.

"That may be true," Shaa said, considering the imposition of a curse of his own, "but is still largely irrelevant. In any case there *is* an important mission at hand for you."

"I'll accept no missions from you while Maximillian rots in the pit!" With that, the Lion turned on his heel and stalked off again, with the aggressive glower of a man looking for someone to kick.

Shaa gazed after him for a moment, then turned back to his sister. Eden got the conversational jump on him this time, though. "You're not sending *me* off on some errand so I'll miss seeing what happens to our brother," she declared. "I'm sure the thought's crossed your mind, so just tell it to head right out again."

"Are you finished?" Shaa said. "Although it is true that a plan of sorts is consolidating even as we speak, what you accuse was not one of its features. Trust," he told her in an only-between-us tone of voice, "is a commodity in danger of short supply. Among all these actors who can be depended on implicitly?"

"Arznaak?"

"Hm, you have a point. But what we can trust our brother for is to act as directly as possible against our interests. While there may be some use to be gained there it's not much to build a counter-strategy around. Indeed -"

"Why is all we seem to do just stand around and talk?" ranted the Great Karlini, from his new position barely an arm's-length away. "Arznaak's the only one who's out accomplishing things."

"Thank you for coming over," Shaa said mildly, wondering whether to inquire after Haddo's employment status, and for that matter health. But no, there was Haddo lurking along behind him, doing his imitation of a shadow draped over an ambulating rock. "I was just about to get you, since you play such a central role in the plan at hand. My own skill is too rusty to trust, and someone must ensure that the experiments in your late facility remain suppressed."

Some might deem it cruel to dispatch him to the scene of recent trauma. Shaa, however, had the thin hope some catharsis might result, in addition to the satisfaction of the explicit requirements of the mission. Unfortunately, Karlini was not particularly amenable to the plan. In his uncharacteristically belligerent manner, he shoved his face close to Shaa's and snarled, "You're not going to park me in some corner where nothing's happening, so you can just give up trying. I'm not about to nose over and fall apart."

Is there an echo in here? Shaa wondered. He seemed to recall hearing a surprisingly similar statement mere moments before. He draped an arm over Karlini's shoulder and led him - *dragged* him, to be more precise - a few steps away, while murmuring in his ear. "The sector of your laboratory is scarcely a backwater," Shaa told him. "You recall my earlier misgivings, I'm sure, so you will appreciate I do not proclaim this to everyone, but I am not confident that all of your engineered microbes have been destroyed. My own abilities were insufficient to detect residual signs of activity, but consider this - if any of these pets survive to enter the population, the plague of unconstrained second-quantum level effects could wreak untold havoc. Who else here can I trust to make certain they are all well and truly dead? It may require an extended watch, in case any of them are lurking below, waiting for the right moment to escape surveillance and spring again to action."

"I'm sure everything's dead," Karlini said morosely, although not, Shaa was pleased to note, with the same combative anger directed at him. "Even if something survived, you're treating it like it's intelligent, like it can plan ahead. You're anthropomorphizing something you can't even *see*."

"Intelligent or not, the end result might be the same unfortunate one either way. Take an escort with you just in case. Perhaps Tildamire and her untimely father?"

"Urr,," grumbled Karlini, but this time he didn't say no. Good, that took care of one theater of operations, and three of their players. The other Mont could go along with Svin and Dortonn. On to Haddo and Wroclaw, then, or to be more precise Haddo-and-Wroclaw together now, followed by a private word to Wroclaw before they set off.

"I would like some intelligence," Shaa told the pair, "and please be so kind as to omit the obvious disparagements, hm? There are questions on the table concerning the 'how' of my brother's inexorable ascent. I believe your pal Favored has channels to the gods, yes? Gashanatantra and Jill-tang have been incompletely forthcoming, and prudence would dictate consulting an outside source regardless. Whatever your status at the moment with the Great one, this is in your own interest too," he added.

"Agree do I," said Haddo, in a note of compliance astonishing for its contradiction of the current dismal tide. What nefarious purpose could lie behind his sudden affability? Other than Shaa's growing feeling, warranted though it was by the circumstances, that they were all out to harass him to death? But be that as it might, he was left with Eden, and the crustacean brother of the Archivist, and for that matter the Archivist herself. Well, he would handle that one. If -

Someone he had been trying to ignore pugnaciously cleared his throat. "Very well," Shaa told the Jill-tang agent, impatiently glowering atop his restive horse, "here is my message for you. Does anyone have a pen?"

CHAPTER 17

"THANK YOU FOR THE ESCORT," Leen told the leader of the troop of the Emperor's Own who had accompanied her back from the dungeon to her apartment. She had always suspected that the wide-ranging catacombs, of which the dungeons and the Archives were both prominent constituents, formed a common basement stretching beneath many of the individual above-ground buildings of the palace complex, but she had never witnessed the objective evidence until now. She had gone underground in the Hall of Memories which housed the Archives and had now emerged into her own residence wing several edifices to the west.

"You're quite welcome, mum," said the captain. His courtliness did not improve her mood; all it underlined was the elite nature of her chaperones. These were the dragoons who appeared when it was necessary to cart off a member of the elite. They were clearly expert in preserving appearances and the crust of formality, but there was little doubt in her mind that their martial skills were not lessened by their attention to manners. Quite the opposite, most logically.

But manners *were* manners. The captain watched as she unlocked the door, then made to enter just behind her. Leen had anticipated the move, however, and had been considering how to turn it to her advantage. "Captain!" she protested. "I am here to change clothes, at least those were *my* orders. Surely yours were restricted to accompanying me from place to place, not assisting me directly with my gown."

The captain scrutinized her for a moment. "As my orders are to ensure you arrive in a safe and timely manner at the Imperial box, appropriately attired and coiffed, I suppose there is that room for interpretation. Allow my men to inspect your rooms first, to warrant against any lurking eventuality that might interfere. Following that, we will remain at your disposal, in case you need any assistance with hooks or stays, or in the unlikely event that our mutual schedule becomes pressed. In this way decorum may be balanced against the demands of duty."

"I quite agree, captain," Leen said, awarding him the mild smile appropriate for the situation. "You are a man of taste and discretion."

He returned a modest bow. "That is my job, my lady."

And just what *was* a job, these days? She herself had been spending less and less of her work day performing the standard functions of an Archivist, trading her time instead for intrigues and exhumations. Yet there was still no obvious alternative to continuing along that path; people were depending on her, not least of all the unfortunate Tarfon, who had been left, to all evidence, sealed up in a tunnel with no active exit and no easy route back, and without a light to boot. Ignoring her responsibilities had every promise of merely making things worse. Sooner or later the Scapula would be back, or Max, or if not them than surely someone else.

But was this all *she* could do in the meantime? Get dressed for a ball?

She could scarcely escape by climbing from her fourth-floor balcony. There was the carp pool below to cushion a drop, but the captain would certainly station an observer in the gardens. A chorus of aggrieved shrieking from within the apartment suggested she could disguise herself as Florence, her maid, but when Florence emerged a moment later under guard and relieved of her hairpin, that option dropped resoundingly from the list. If she had been thinking ahead instead of with a mind clouded by eager thoughts of Max, she could have commanded the oracle to reveal any secret entrances or exits in the vicinity of the apartment. Well, when the time came perhaps she would be able to think of something.

The captain ushered her into her own suite, expressing regret at the advisability of retaining Florence outside under care until she had recovered from her bout of antisociability. Leen was more than willing to have the captain assume the burden. She had inherited Florence from her sister, likely both as a spy on her personal life

and a goad to make that life more interesting to Susannah; Susannah was not given to practical jokes or she would have suspected that as well. In any case, Florence in the best of times had an excitable temperament. At the moment - well, let the captain deal with it.

The captain's men had searched her rooms earnestly but without, remarkably enough, leaving anything obviously broken or dramatically out of place. She was all the more surprised, then, having locked the front door behind her and wandered into the bedroom to check her wardrobe for the correct formal state-wear, to discover that the room was not, in fact, unoccupied. "The window," explained Zalzyn Shaa, seated comfortably at the foot of the bed, "preceded by the roof, preceded by an attempt at a more straightforward entry from the hall. The hall, however, was invested by your friends."

"I didn't notice you," Leen said, somewhat dazed. "I saw Colonel Houda's widow peeping around her doorframe but that was all."

"Yes, well. Some," said Shaa incredulously, as though amazed at the very idea, "have called me surreptitious."

"But wait a minute - weren't there guards outside in the garden too? Didn't they see you climbing in the window?"

"Of course there were guards," Shaa said, "it's scarcely worth doing if there aren't guards." Leen didn't know him well enough to be certain when he was being sarcastic, but then she had gathered it was safe to assume he was being sarcastic all the time. "But no," he went on. "They didn't see me. Or shall we say I would seriously doubt it. Might I suggest your formal livery as a Nerve?"

"What? Oh, right. It *is* a Knitting, isn't it."

"Just so." Shaa popped from the bed with a spry bounce and ambled toward the door. "Perhaps I'll wait in the sitting room while you attend to your infrastructure."

"Thank you," said Leen. "Thank you very much."

"No problem at all," he called, now firmly out of sight in the other room. "Did you build these?"

"What, the stuff on the *étagère*?" Leen yelled back, trying to decide if she had time for a shower; trying to decide if there was any chance of avoiding it. She clenched her teeth and edged in front of the mirror - a shower, definitely, without question. Fortunately the palace apartments were quite well appointed in matters of plumbing and other luxury services, and the central water pressure was generally more than adequate. "Uh, yes. Actually, yes and no. The originals came from the Archives, books of course. You can see they're paper? I had them copied - I wouldn't cut up the old ones, of course."

"Of course. These began as flat sheets of paper with schematic diagrams of assembly?"

"Diagrams, yes, but it was as much just a matter of fitting the symbols together. An idle diversion, I'm sure, cutting out paper sculptures."

"There's no need to apologize for yourself to me or all people," Shaa said, balancing the level of his voice between that necessary to pierce the patter of the shower at the low end and that loud enough to alert the guards outside. "I've spent far too much of my life in exactly that position to require it of others. What a marvelous structure this one is, this tower." He stepped back and contemplated the assemblage formally, as though it were an exhibit in a gallery. "The open lattice-work sides, the curves on these four stouter legs merging into such a graceful upward thrust. And judging from the scale of the windows on this observation level, it would have been easily, oh, almost two hundred person-heights tall. Imagine that. One might as well

be stepping backward through time and standing shoulder to shoulder with the ancients, although obviously this was some special monument even for them or such a model would never have been commissioned. And next to it on the shelf, this ship. Observe how low it sits to the waterline, the smooth and cunningly sealed deck, this narrow dorsal fin."

"I agree," Leen gurgled. "It appears to be some species of submersible."

"Remarkable. I would keep this collection from Maximillian, however. At least until you've made your mind up about him."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"He'd fall in love with you over these alone. Of course," Shaa added thoughtfully, "he might try to walk off with them too, but then that's always the risk you run with Max. So did you make an attempt to rescue him, or is that escort outside the door just a new affectation?"

"Yes, I tried. He was gone." The explanation behind that remarkable fact carried her past the finale of her admittedly abbreviated shower and through a round of vigorous toweling to boot. "Do you think he escaped?" she concluded.

"With Max that is always a possibility," Shaa mused. "I am inclined to think he did have some active role in not being there; the effigy on the bed of restraint in his stead does suggest his personal touch."

"But if he didn't escape on his own, as I think you seem to be implying, and you didn't help him, then who did?"

"The most cost-effective way to get that answer is to wait until he shows up, and ask him. I suppose you could have had that oracle machine of yours tell you where he went, but you never made it back there, did you, and when you set out in the first place it was because it had told you he was in the cell. Not that I think it was lying, or trying to get you in trouble, mind you; not necessarily. But you do have to watch your step around these old machines. Look at the fate of the unfortunate Tarfon. Have you given any thought to extracting her before she starves?"

"Yes, right. I'll ask the Emperor to turn me loose so I can open up the secret passage into his dungeon. What about you? Do you have a plan?"

"In fact," Shaa said, "I do, at least a tentative one, at least if your brother can get into your Archives and survive the experience, and could legitimately wear your ring of office."

"That could work," Leen said. "You want to send him alone? Do you think you could do anything with the computer?"

"Not I," said Shaa, shaking his head regretfully. "Max would be the one. Indeed, you could say Max has been training himself his entire life for this opportunity, even if he failed to make much headway the time he was there with you. Of course, one has to ask oneself what Max would *do* with the opportunity once it was in his grasp. But enough speculation in that quarter, I suppose; after all Max's is not the only strand in this story. The Hand, for example, have been heard from again, and my brother has been up to more than his share of nastiness. Would you like to hear about it?"

Shaa's own subsequent exposition took Leen into her outfit of state, an absurdly gaudy ensemble with its sparkling slouch cap and bright spinal weave and flashing dendritic arborizations swooping out across her back; thank goodness for the hat, at least, which let her get away with a minimum of attention to her hair. She

managed to get all the fasteners squared up herself, even without the nattering help of Florence, then squared her shoulders and went out into the sitting room. Shaa had moved to an assiduous examination of the contents of her own local floor-to-ceiling wall of the Archives. "It's too bad my lodgings weren't rendered totally uninhabitable," he added, scrutinizing her incunabular Horst Villaments. "I could move in with you, sleep on this couch, and have enough reading material within reach without setting foot on the floor to last for the next five years."

"While I'm on my honeymoon you can stay up here and watch the place."

"How about while you're locked up at the command of the new Emperor?" Shaa suggested blandly. "No, I suppose that wouldn't do; all your possessions might be forfeit to the state." He straightened up and brushed off his hands.

Leen crossed her arms and stood in the doorway. "So I see you're busy and thanks for coming by, but as long as you're here would you mind helping me escape?"

"Now why would you want to do something like that? I would think at the right hand of the Emperor is not a bad place to be."

"Ha ha," Leen said deliberately. "Right. Are you saying you *can't* help me, or you *won't*?"

"Can't now, might be able to later. Did you see those five fine fellows outside with your other friends, the ones without any weapons except those odd little daggers, the ones with the lightning bolt insignia above their unit patches? They're elite commando types. I'd have to use spell-work to sneak you away, and that's just what that squad's trained for. Unless their reputation is based totally on air, which I would certainly not count on, we wouldn't get far."

"But couldn't I just go out with you the way you came in? Didn't you use magic for that?"

"No magic, just physical conditioning and a lack of sound good sense and the recent rebound boost to my metabolism you already know about, and something in my heredity that makes me comfortable hanging off ledges and trees. I am also, as you see, appropriately cloaked in black. It wouldn't be safe, trust me."

"So I have to go out there and sit in the very place the Scapula is bound to see me when he pulls whatever he's bound to pull. And if I survive the Scapula's attention there's always the Emperor's."

"If you survive my brother you can blame his machinations for everything," Shaa pointed out. "You might want to do that anyway as soon as you get the Emperor's ear. Believe me, my friend, you may find yourself the most strategic asset of all."

"I'm sure being an asset goes hand-in-glove with serious hazard," Leen said, her expression gloomy.

"You've been reading the manual," Shaa observed.

"I suppose you know because you *wrote* it."

"That claim is far too generous," said Shaa, poo-pooingly. "I could rightfully claim no more than contributor credit. Maximillian -"

He was interrupted by a deliberate rap on the front door. "My lady?" came the captain's voice. "Do you require assistance?"

"No, thank you!" Leen called. She and Shaa had been keeping their voices low; there was no evidence they had been overheard. But it would clearly be best not to give her escort the suspicion to come in and check around again. "I'll be ready in a moment!"

"Very well," said the captain. "We await."

"I'm sure you do," murmured Leen. She swung back to Shaa, then hesitated.

"You look quite striking," Shaa offered. "All elements of your trousseau seem in place."

Leen gave him a dirty look. "I've been thinking about all this, your brother in particular. Where did he get all the knowledge he's needed to make himself a god, and the rest of it? He hasn't been in the Archives - I don't think that information is *in* the Archives, I've certainly never found it, but you'd think he would have made the effort... unless there was no need for it. Is this - is this knowledge part of your family lore, is that why he didn't need to research it? Do you have the same insight he does?"

"I was wondering if you would pick up on that question. The proximate answer is no, I am not privy to the inner workings of his behind-the-scenes machinations, but I *have* been asking myself the same questions. I suspect my brother has cultivated a confederate. And not the ones we know about, either, the ones he's already betrayed."

It made sense. It felt right. But there was more. "That might imply this confederate shares the same goal as your brother," Leen thought out loud. "But *which* goal? Making the Scapula master of the world? Dethroning the other gods?"

"I would think the latter," said Shaa. "It would be reasonable to assume this hidden associate to be closer to the center of my brother's plots, which would also imply a fuller understanding on their part of my brother's carnivorous habits and past history, which in turn would imply they would have a plan to offset Arznaak's inevitable treachery... or would *think* they have such a plan."

"Maybe this other person really *is* clever enough to outwit your brother - you don't think so? You wouldn't bet against your brother, then?"

"Would you? When he's on such a major roll? My brother has a regular diet of appetizers made from people who thought they had the drop on him. But you're right, this case might be different. As you started off, we're postulating this compatriot to have knowledge Arznaak needs but can't yet duplicate himself - unless my brother has already chewed them up and thrown them away. I don't think that's happened yet, frankly, since I still seem to feel the whiff of an additional motivator behind the scenes. But unless my brother has fallen in love with this accomplice - which I suppose is possible, although where he'd find a puff adder who could give him this level of assistance I'd never know - then clearly the way to bet is against this accomplice being long for this world.

"So." Shaa pivoted on his heel and paced deliberately back in the other direction along the rug. "Whoever this hypothetical co-conspirator might be, my brother would know better than to trust them, which means he would do his best not to be dependent on them, which means he would throw himself into learning everything he could about the guts of their contribution as fast as he could, so as to be able to do without them when the time came... but then again things have been moving so quickly, he may have run out of time to learn everything he needs to know. Or maybe his confrere really *is* clever enough to successfully keep their secrets intact, making their expectation for longevity greater than a matter of minutes."

"But can anyone stand up to your brother indefinitely? Wouldn't your brother think of a way to outsmart them and double-cross them eventually? Wouldn't that be his priority?"

Shaa faced her with an expression of pensive intensity. "When we find this confederate," he said, "we will have to convince them of just these facts. If we want to stop my brother, he may already be so powerful as to make this our last remaining chance."

CHAPTER 18

A

WALKING CORPSE and an inhuman fighting machine, and him, the kid, Jurtan Mont thought; a scenario drawn straight from the flimsy pages of one of those pulpish romances his father had kept throwing at him in the hope he'd absorb their spark and amount to something. Something violent, the wilder and more bloodthirsty the better. Except now that he *had*, more or less, Dad *still* hated him. And his sister wasn't too happy with him either.

Well, who needed a father like that anyway? He would just have to do what he had to do and let the family members fall where they may. After all, he was surrounded by the object lessons of families gone bad; all you had to do was look at the Shaas and the discussion was over right there. If you needed an encore there were the Karlinis, and even -

"Are you paying attention?"

That was Svin. Now that Jurtan thought about it, that was probably not the first time he had asked the question, either. "Of course I am," said Jurtan. "He's up there. No question about it."

"I already told you that," croaked Dortonn.

Why don't you just go ahead and die, already? Jurtan thought, but he knew better than to say something like that out loud. Although with the biting glare Dortonn shot him, perhaps even *thinking* it had been too loud; Dortonn was a master sorcerer, after all, and one not nearly so benign as the Great Karlini, even if it was difficult to figure out how he could possibly still be alive given the damage he was displaying across his body. Even the outline of Dortonn's shape beneath the black cloak he had wrapped loosely around himself appeared lumpish and gnarled, with protrusions where none were typically found, and similarly unexpected concavities. But not only was Dortonn alive, but he seemed to have gotten his second wind, of all things, scuttling with them step-for-step through the lamp-lit evening streets toward the Boulevard of the Gods; scuttling, true, except for the stretch where Svin had hoisted him across his shoulder like a dressed carcass.

They had arrived, now, however, at the spot along the Boulevard to which their various instincts and senses had led them. This location had turned out to be the edge of a moat, or more of a small lake, really. Rising straight from the water in the midst of the lake, without even the benefit of a modest island for footing, was a tall spindly tower with a bulbous seedpod-like apartment swelling from the top. How tall? Ten stories, at least, had been Svin's estimate, and the professional gaze he had allotted it before rendering his assessment had made it clear he had significant experience with this type of architecture; from scaling and entering during his more barbaric days, no doubt. "This god's not exactly welcoming worshipers, is he?" said Jurtan.

"The Lord of Storms draws his potency in other ways," Dortonn rasped.

"This is your idea," Svin reminded him. "Do you have a plan or should I look for a boat? I am not prepared to swim," he added. In examining the water they had seen fins.

"Hang on a minute," said Jurtan. The situation was strikingly reminiscent of the one with which Jurtan had begun his career of adventuring, such as it was, when he had stood with Zalzyn Shaa gazing across another body of water at an island stronghold into which they had intended to penetrate. The situation was similar, but then many significant elements were different, too. Shaa was somewhere else, for one, and more importantly he, Jurtan, had been given trust as a potentially helpful member of the company. His promise, though, had still to be redeemed, so he was trying his best to get to work.

The trick, Jurtan thought, was making himself receptive in the same manner as when he'd followed the Intuition Track with Max, trying to listen for anything that might be out of place or didn't fit the context. There was the feel of the breeze from the west, the lapping sounds of the lake water against the bank and the splash of leaping fish, the cold presence of the tower... and there *had* to be a business entrance *somewhere*. They had spotted no boat dock, and the barred door set in the tower wall a person-height above the waterline had the braying clarity of the lure to an obvious trap. This hypothetical entrance would have to be concealed well enough so that the average watcher would not be able to descry traffickers going in or out, while being comfortable enough not to inconvenience the fragile manners of a visiting god by making them slink through a mud-bank, for example. In fact, short of the use of concealing illusion, which of course could scarcely be ruled out, there was no place along the bank that seemed to allow for both the opportunities of access and concealment. Perhaps they should look for a camouflaged person-carrying ballista?

But no, wait. Jurtan slowly turned his head. That sloshing of water, that crack and slap of waves off to their left along the bank of the moat - there was something wrong about it. It was out of proportion, that was it; there was more sound than the mild motion of the water there could account for.

Jurtan unhooded his lantern enough for a thin beam to escape and led them toward the spot. As they approached, they were forced to edge away from the moat due to the thickening bulrushes and the swampy condition of the ground, but then the swish of the marsh grass started growing in his consciousness too, growing and then abruptly falling off. Did that signal a path? - yes, there it was, a trail of firm ground that twisted behind a shrub and subsided quickly off a low hill down toward the lake. Then, not far from the water's formal edge, his internal orchestra made a suddenly hollow echo. Jurtan raised his hand to hold back the others and knelt carefully down.

His music was shifting keys and rhythms in a disconcerting manner; there was something here now it didn't like. The disguised entrance to a tunnel under the moat *was* around here, you didn't have to have any special abilities to recognize *that*, but it was only logical to presume that along with the tunnel came some trap. That was what the music was trying to tell him... wasn't it? Maybe he should consult with the others. After all, this wasn't explicitly a test, was it? - although it might as well be. Part of the test, though, could be of his good judgment, to see whether he knew when to ask for help and could sublimate his ego enough to actually do it. Jurtan cast a quick glance over his shoulder, just checking his alternatives, really. There was Svin doing his big-cat imitation, poised on the balls of his feet with his eyes scanning and nose sniffing and sword ready to hit dervish-overdrive at the slightest provocation. But where was - "Dortonn?" Jurtan mouthed.

"He is resting back on solid ground," hissed Svin. "He is drinking Shaa's restorative concoction. Do you have a problem?"

"Just checking for traps," Jurtan told him. How could Svin quarrel with that? If it was Max, now, there would be no question; lack of justification hadn't stopped Max from his sharp critique as long as Jurtan had known him, which felt far too long even if Max was now being tortured in a dungeon. If there was anything to this karma stuff he had clearly brought it on himself. So -

So why was he procrastinating? It had become apparent to Jurtan that the small hillock in front of him could be moved, swirls of marsh grass and all; that it was, in fact, an entrance to the tunnel. The obvious thing to do was find the trigger for the door and then enter through it. Except... he was hanging back because something didn't fit. Was it *too* obvious? Jurtan supposed it was possible that the true entrance was really found a block away, in the basement of some apparently unrelated building entirely. His internal accompaniment didn't think much of that idea, though, and try as he might he could detect no querulous scent or drifting specter to draw his attention back across the moor to the more typical structures that ringed it.

There *was* another concept to try, though. Jurtan rose back to a crouch and edged carefully around the camouflaged door. Chittering away in the underbrush up ahead was a muskrat or some such small animal. Not

that Jurtan claimed to know much of anything about small animals, but weren't they supposed to quiet down when a larger animal who might potentially use their noisemaking to guide itself toward lunch happened by? A larger animal like, say, Jurtan? He headed toward the sound of the animal, whatever it was.

There was indeed a continuation of the path. Around the next stand of grass and through another patch of standing water that seemed home primarily to a horde of hungry gnats, Jurtan's music was now picking up tempo expectantly. He could almost hear something sizzling. Sizzling? No, that much must have been his imagination, but here on the ground *was* a nest, and within the nest, eggs. The nest's guardian was not in evidence. The subliminal sound of frying did persist, though, and now with it was the gentlest whiff of cooked breakfast. Tentatively, Jurtan reached out for the nest, rolling first one egg, then (at the urging of his accompaniment) a specific second. With only a puff of displaced air and lacking the slightest sound, a section of the grassy knoll beyond the nest dropped smoothly away, revealing a stairway leading downward. The treads glowed faintly past the range of the lantern.

"There was another entrance?" Svin asked from behind him. "What was the problem with the first one?"

"It was a decoy," Jurtan explained. "It would have led us to ruin."

"It is good you realized it, then," said Svin. "I will fetch Dortonn." Svin clapped him lightly on the shoulder. Jurtan was amazed not to find himself driven into the ground; Svin obviously *did* know his strength, and could be delicate when the need arose. "We will see the value of your work when we travel below," Svin added, then disappeared silently back up the path.

Jurtan was still trying to decide if that remark had been a kudo or a warning when an equally hushful Svin made his return, again toting Dortonn. Jurtan had also used the time for additional reflection, however. "This is the door," he reaffirmed. "But should we be *using* the door? What about guards and retainers?"

"For any problems that lie ahead," said Svin, "you will detect them, Dortonn will blast them, and I will slice them. Then there will be no problems."

"I guess that sounds like a plan," Jurtan had to acknowledge.

The Emperor-designate's box of office occupied an expansive dais atop an uncomfortably slender pillar at the stage-edge of the parade ground of the Stadium of State. They had reached its pinnacle using an elevator lift within the pillar. The elevator's motive power had been concealed either atop or below, but its progress in jerks and starts, the ferociously thrumming vibrations of its floor, and a wholly perceptible lateral swaying behavior made Leen wish she was taking the service stairs that wound about the lift's open shaft in coil after apparently endless coil, regardless of the distance to the zenith. Still, the Emperor-designate must have traveled this route himself, and even though he was given to the display of a certain obtuse nature on occasion, he had never engaged in out-and-out recklessness or an obvious bent toward suicide. Furthermore, in light of the events of the Running of the Squids - remarkably, that calamitous midday was still only hours past - the Imperial engineers must have been over the entire vicinity with a paranoid sieve. Regardless of all this rationality, however, Leen was mightily relieved to disembark, all in one piece, on the observation gallery level below the open-air box itself.

The captain of her guard-escort trotted up the grand stair to determine the Emperor's proximate pleasure, leaving Leen, her guardians diligent around her, to take in the spectacle through the broad open windows. The expansive parade-ground was a carpet of torches and the globes and streamers of wizard lights, illuminating the throngs of Imperial office-holders and functionaries, Bones and Ligaments and Muscles, Nerves and Vessels and Viscera, both Lesser and Greater; constituent parts of the Corpus galore. It was one measure of

them to see them on a daily basis scurrying around the palace grounds or executing the required annual Organ System maneuvers - there were always so many of them underfoot even as it was - but to have them all assembling in a single place for a unified purpose, rank upon rank and legion upon legion, was enough to make one consider just what all these people actually *did*, and wonder whether the Empire might be better served by posting more of its staff abroad or divesting itself of them entirely.

Merely thinking those sentiments now and here, though, was probably treasonous enough to warrant some severe and unimaginative decree, and was plainly out of keeping with the mood of raucous revelry; better to just goggle at the spectacle and tip any errant philosopher over the guardrail to be devoured by the masses below. Although below was not the only option - the same result could be achieved by heaving the soothsayer off to the side. As tall as this pylon was - five stories? ten? - the grandstands surrounding the field mounted even higher. Tier upon tier, their stone benches groaning beneath the stamp of the thronging spectators still flooding in for this climactic official ceremony, their waving banners and frothing kegs at every hand, sparklers and small skyrockets waving and arcing in hazardous defiance of all regulation, the bleachers would have unquestionably collapsed at some Knitting long before this if the entire stadium had not been built sunken into the ground, with the grandstands supported on berms of earth.

Between Knittings the hippodrome was used for sporting events and the occasional pageant, and Leen was aware of at least three sorcerous duels in the last fifty years fought within its confines (although surprisingly enough not one had led to its ruin), but the real reason for its existence, right and truly enough, was on display all around her now. Or to be precise in a different direction, the reason was walking around in the crow's-nest above her head. Having been instrumental in heading off the latest surge toward reforming the traditional system of nepotistic succession several years before, the Emperor-designate (then merely a Ventricle-in-Waiting rather than the full Heart he would thereafter assume, of course) had secured his prospects of being here today, and had wasted no time in setting in motion certain tasteful, if surreptitious, preparations. But then that was merely traditional as well. He had not done anything so blatant as to urge his uncle onward toward his retirement - in either a conversational or a more lethal manner - but his uncle had been no fool either, and had acted to declare himself dead-in-state after waiting a decent interval and playing up a series of small strokes, but before his total incapacitation or out-and-out demise. That previous Emperor was now holed up somewhere on the continent with his personal troops and his sinecure and his gradually unspooling memoirs, and of course his not inconsiderable residual deterrent capabilities, leaving behind him the still-circulating speculations concerning why he broken with tradition to this extent, leaving on his own feet rather than with those extremities preceding him.

Ah, politics. Leen might hate it but you couldn't ignore it, because it wasn't about to ignore you. And neither was the Emperor-designate, apparently, for here came her captain to usher her up the stair and into the presence of the great man himself. He was not yet occupying the central throne on its final sky-reaching spire, but rather circulating among his intimates and raising an occasional benedictory hand to the mob in the stands around them. To Leen's eye he did not look particularly nervous, which is to say his demeanor did not reflect at the moment an appreciation of the larger hazards at hand. But then he *had* come down to the dungeon to consult Max, of course, and he had had her brought here as well. It would be wise, therefore, she had already decided, to treat him as though he knew what he was doing.

On the other hand, it would be wiser not to be here at all, but that didn't seem to be an active option. Perhaps -

The Emperor-designate looked at her, and past her, at whomever was coming up the grand stair from the elevator behind her. Leen edged off to the side before casting a glance back over her shoulder. She noted two men, one with a neat, perhaps affected mustache, a dashing earring and a plumed hat, and a certain regal air perhaps shading toward godliness; she had seen him before, several hours ago in fact, also in the company of the Emperor-designate atop the reviewing stand for the Running of the Squids, before they had all been blown half to hell and gone. For all his festive garb, the fellow looked substantially the worse for wear, especially considering his limp and apparently immobilized arm - but then the same could be said for many of the others

in this august company, who had been unfortunate enough to attend the Running in the sparkling company of the Emperor-designate and had now been unwise enough to choose another public ceremony so soon afterwards with the same group.

As she woolgathered, though, the other newcomer was still in motion, a dark specter in fulgent armor whose lacquered ebony curves covered him from greaves on up to his hardshell cowl; even eyes were invisible behind charcoal glass socket-pieces. The fact that he was somewhat shorter than the first man did not immediately register, such was the armor's glowering aura, although the person inside did wear it to full effect, passing silently (but for a small creaking of joints) up the stairs with a feline glide, all promise of contained energy and ferocious contempt.

Leen had never seen the armor. It was barely possible, however, that this was not the first time she had witnessed that glide.

"Emperor," said the one with the mustache, inclining his head and placing his hands on his hips as he came to a halt, effectively drawing the four of them - the Emperor-designate, the two just arrived, and Leen herself as well - into a tidy conversational group.

"So," said the Emperor-designate. "Phlinn Arol. You have decided after all to grace us with your presence. Yet that you find it appropriate to accompany yourself with such an aggressively menacing figure makes one question the message you mean to project."

The menacing figure executed a precise bow. Rather than bending toward the man of the hour, as protocol, good manners, and a prudent regard for one's own health and longevity would dictate, the genuflection was unmistakably toward *her*. "Honor to you, my lady," intoned a voice from beneath the cowl; a voice not at all like that of Maximillian, the Vaguely Disreputable. "And to you, my Emperor."

"Hmph," sniffed the Emperor, ignoring the figure as completely as if it had been a black lacquered beetle, although the bodyguard at his shoulders was clearly on alert. On alert, but not ready to pounce - the person might be an affront, but it was an affront mounted by the only dignitary present who arguably outranked the Emperor-designate himself. "Surely the Scapula does not still concern you?"

"Surely," said Phlinn Arol, "he does, and more than ever. Have you not noticed the vacancy of the gods' gallery? That his cunning has not reached its culmination is assured."

"Oh, come come, Phlinn, I already have a mother."

"I hope she's not too attached to this particular son," Phlinn Arol said darkly

"None of that," the Emperor-designate told him, raising a reproving finger but clearly fighting to keep an expression of annoyance off his face and his smile of beneficent welcome tempered by the weighty responsibilities of impending office in its place instead. "We are on showcase. All auguries must be favorable."

"Have you proclaimed that to the Scapula? You still have a perfect opportunity to postpone the Knitting until we know how to deal with him. Declare a public commemoration of that mess at the Running of the Squids; host a municipal banquet."

The Emperor-designate lowered the finger to point between Phlinn's eyes. "You are becoming more tiresome than witty, Phlinn Arol. When this ceremony is over I shall request from the gods a new liaison."

"You're not going to have much to choose from if you get rid of me, except for the Scapula. He's laid low

pretty much everybody else."

"That," declared the Emperor-designate, "is patently impossible. Since you are clearly descending into fantasies, our audience is over. Please assume your place at the designated station." He turned away, hesitated, then rounded again on Phlinn Arol. "Furthermore, if you do not follow your role in this ceremony to the letter you will find yourself disincorporated faster than -"

"Very well," Phlinn Arol snapped, "you've made your point. Why don't you go off and see to your... guests."

The Emperor-designate glared at him one last time. Then the Emperor took a step back, wheeled, and stalked off, motioning for another supplicant to approach him.

Said the menacing figure in the beetle-like armor: "How did that blockhead ever survive to become Emperor?" This time his manner of speech did remind one significantly more of that of Maximillian the Vaguely Disreputable. "If we stick around for this, Phlinn, we're gonna be sitting ducks."

"Quaint," said Phlinn Arol, "but not beyond the bounds of possibility. That is what you are here to prevent. You are the local expert."

"The way to prevent it is not to be here."

"What the -" began Leen in her own low hiss. "What is going on here? Is that you in there, Max?"

"Of course it is," said the dark figure, becoming none the less dark for all of that. "My good old patron thinks the best way to deal with Shaa's brother is to present him an easy target, in the hope he'll be grateful and give everybody a break." He fixed Phlinn Arol with the front of his cowl, the polished lacquer showing Phlinn's reflection on its surface. "Maybe he'll only kill us all instead of redeploying us in some new game."

"You are supposed to be developing a plan to counter him," Phlinn Arol said, in the clipped voice of one whose patience is chafing thin enough to snap at any syllable. "That is what you are good at, plans. Yes? Correct me if I am wrong."

"Yeah, I'm so good my last plan played things just the way he wanted them. It's time for me to retire before I cause more trouble."

"I think there's only one way you retire from this one," said Leen. In the midst of all of this, she felt light-headed with relief. The way for *her* to play this, though, was clearly to follow their lead. This was scarcely the moment to explore the nature of any relationship she might contemplate with Maximillian. Providing motivation, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly appropriate. "You may have screwed up, all right, but that means the Scapula probably thinks he has you beaten. As far as he's concerned you're still in the dungeon, right? At least you're out now, and in a position to do something about him, and if that's still not anything than at least I'm glad to see you're safe." Well, okay, so she had tossed in that tidbit at the end, there. The lords of skullduggery could sue her.

"I'm not safe," Max glowered, "none of us are, but - but thank you. I'm glad you're safe too. Only what are you doing here? How did *you* get away from Arznaak?"

"That can wait. And if nobody else cares enough to lay out a plan, you might as well hear mine. I had a meeting with Shaa."

Sooner or later, Zalzyn Shaa thought to himself, he would have to finish all this dancing around, dropping suggestive hints and floating innuendoes, convincing those around him - by the evidence - fairly successfully that he *did* know what he was doing, and was operating on the cryptic gyre of some master plan, and actually decide on such a plan. Truth be told, he was running on instinct more than conscious device. In the general order of things this was not recommended, since the major element separating the highly crafty from the brute of force was the multiplier of cunning. On the other hand, when dealing with Arznaak instinct was not necessarily such a bad idea.

His brother had been clearly showing himself to be at the top of his game, his preferred mode of operation - and the one that had been carrying him through his recent string of remarkable success - being his ability to anticipate the plans of his opponents, and to forcibly mutate these plans for use against them. Knowing one's adversaries well enough to predict what they would do in any given situation was a tactic often given lip service but rarely practiced to its fullest extent; perhaps if he survived Shaa would write a treatise. Or perhaps Arznaak would. Knowing Arznaak subscribed to the family weakness for cheap theatrics he might as soon go for a ghost-written popular romance instead.

But at the moment that was scarcely the point. The question was what Arznaak would expect him to do, and what he could do in its place that would be both unexpected enough and at the same time useful. The way Arznaak had been playing him, he would probably assume Shaa to be paralyzed by ennui or wracked by irresolution of spirit; not far wrong, in fact, or at least not until the Running of the Squids and its aftermath. By now Arznaak must have learned of his escape. Would he conclude from that that Shaa had become newly energized? Probably. Would he postulate that Shaa would wait to put his preparations in order before striking back? For that matter, would he think that Shaa had finally overcome his hand-tied-behind-his-back scruples and try to strike back in the first place, or would he figure Shaa as still one to stay his blow and give action over to others? Would he conclude he had paralyzed their operations through instigating the imprisonment of Max? It was reasonably clear to Shaa that whatever counter his brother expected, Arznaak intended to nullify its effect by forging ahead and continually rearranging the board, causing any plans in the making to be rendered obsolete by the time they could be set into force.

The bottom line to all this was the demonstrated futility of making rigid plans at all for action against his brother. Letting loose as continual a barrage of skyrockets as possible with the goal of immediately sending the reserves through any breach was the ticket, trying to aim where Arznaak would *be* rather than where he had already showed himself. And for the moment, that came down as much as anything else to instinct.

How absurd.

Well, it wasn't entirely just the intuition of guts or some brute dumb hunch, at that. There were things that were physically possible and things that weren't, and even if Arznaak was now ferociously more powerful than any single entity had the right to be, transcendent or not, he still had to live in the physical world. Which meant in turn that for him to pull off major pyrotechnics at the Knitting he had to be somewhere in the vicinity, not off skulking in a hideout or reclining on a chaise lounge back at home.

Of course, as Shaa stood there at one of the sixty-five entrances to the grandstands, gazing around him at the assembled multitude - which appeared, from his present vantage point, to encompass a significant proportion of the population of the civilized world - he was considering the fact that he had not fully grasped just how big these Knittings really were. Even so, that shouldn't make a major difference. Arznaak, the newly divine, would scarcely hide himself in the bleachers with the teeming hordes. It was almost as unlikely for him to be found among the elements of the Corpus milling like ants on the parade ground. There were exclusive levels, true, and rows of private boxes, and the possibility of a subterranean lair buried beneath the earthen buttress berm or beneath the field itself could scarcely be ruled out. Considering the likelihood of fireworks, an aerial conveyance - whether balloon, dirigible, tethered kite, or hypertrophic bird - would end up midway on the scale of probability. It was clear, though, that without some added intuition Shaa could scarcely run his

brother to ground before he did whatever he was going to do to reveal himself; some added intuition, or a sudden cascade of luck, or -

"*Here* you are," said a hissing voice at his shoulder.

"Yes," Shaa confirmed, glancing over with a quick eye-dart, "just as we arranged." Under the circumstances it would not do to point out that the others were late; the snarled traffic alone could more than account for the differential. "All three of you?"

"No," said the cloaked Gashanatantra, with more than a trace of annoyance. "Jill wanted her own mission, and Jardin insisted on revenge at first-hand. We'll see if he doesn't fall over dead all on his own before that."

The slumped figure of Jardin stirred. "There is always enough energy for revenge," came his grim whisper.

At least the two of them had apparently come alone, without Jill's legion of warrior priests or errant tagging acolytes. Even more importantly, they had tuned down their god-auras, not that Jardin had much of an aura left of any sort after his treatment at the hands of Arznaak. Except for ego, then, and a certain undisguisable lethality, there was nothing to stop them from blending into the mob. The fact that only Gashanatantra's support was keeping the barely conscious Jardin from slumping to the ground was scarcely remarkable. Plenty of those thronging the stands had wounds or disabilities or stigmata; that was why they were here, hoping for the favorable benediction of the risen Emperor incarnate. Perhaps it had worked in past years, and had been more than legend; perhaps it would work tonight. Or perhaps -

"As long as he chose to be here, then, perhaps Jardin would be good enough to get to work," suggested Shaa.

"If your friend Favored has, as you say, gone to ground," Wroclaw protested, "then what are we doing up here?"

Ahead of him, Haddo was clinging - rather grimly, in Wroclaw's estimation - to the neck of his other old friend, the colossal vulture, which had returned from its sojourn in the ancestral breeding grounds significantly invigorated and - if its current frisky banks, dives, and the barrel roll from which they were only now pulling out were any indication - ready for vigorous adventure. "Rather walk would you?" Haddo warbled.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I would." The naturally greenish pallor of Wroclaw's skin was serving him in good stead at the moment, saving him the trouble of turning the same color from conscious volition. "I've never enjoyed flying," he added, "as you know."

"Perfectly safe it is," hollered Haddo, just as another dramatic maneuver from the bird flung his cloaked body straight outward from its neck. He squawked frantically at the bird, hanging on convulsively to a flapping wattle, the vulture cackled its own protesting squawk back, and then a billow of air washed over them as the creature luffed its wings and pulled up, punching Haddo back down into his perch. "See you?" Haddo demanded, just as the bird cast an evil glare back along its outstretched neck, goggled its bloodshot eye, yanked its wings in, and headed beak-first for the ground.

How had Shaa talked him into this? Wroclaw wondered. Perhaps it was high time to take a fresh good look at his policy of being the faithful loyal retainer who always knew where the salt shaker had gotten to and could mix any drink without referring to the book, not to mention the host of other grubby tasks that had a talent of coming his way. Perhaps more of a middle ground between scrubbing out pots and clandestine missions of hair-raising peril would be -

"To cast loose prepare you!" Haddo screeched, looking straight down the bird's neck at the rapidly expanding

spiral of ground clutter ahead of them.

"So the bird *has* gone out of its mind," Wroclaw remarked conversationally, not caring whether Haddo was listening or not. There was not a seagull in sight, either; they had left the reassembled flock behind at some higher altitude a few gut-wrenching maneuvers ago. At least there were trees below them, it looked like, and some sort of body of water sparkling back at them the night sky, but cartwheeling there off to the side, lit from within by its own torches and from the outside by cunning banks of spotlights - was that the triumphal pavilion used for the Knitting kick-off ball several nights ago? Surely the bird was not making for the pavilion...

No. Of course not. The bird was heading for the *lake*.

With a powerful shriek and a cloud of released feathers, the vulture pulled out of its dive and leveled off just as its belly splatted into the water. Spray sailed everywhere, a bow wake began at the bird's breastbone just beneath Wroclaw's dangling feet, and then just as Wroclaw was collecting himself to wonder how far the creature could hydroplane along, its wings spread wide, without either clipping a wingtip or running out of moat and skidding up on the bank into the trees, it suddenly folded its wings again, pointed its nose down, and slid under the surface.

Water foamed over Wroclaw's head - how deep *was* this lake? But one way or the other, this was where he got off. He floundered at the buckle and the seat belt came free, he came out of his saddle - goodbye and good riddance, bird! - and then he was thrashing for the surface. Just as he broke into the air, a fresh cataract cascaded over him; out of the falling sheets of water, the bird could be glimpsed again taking wing, laying a storm front behind it as it cleared the trees and vanished into the night. Wroclaw turned on his back and coughed fluid out of his lungs.

Two red embers perched on a log were paddling toward him. "That thing has a very nasty sense of humor," Wroclaw told Haddo. "Is there some purpose in all this?"

"So crowded is Peridol," gurgled Haddo, he of the glowing eyes, "from when place one to other fast get must, air must use."

"Are you trying to *justify* what we've just gone through?" Shaa had been questioning how far to trust Haddo; a reasonable enough suspicion given the way Haddo had been acting. Of course, after this most recent display Wroclaw was more than willing to see Shaa's wariness and raise him a few major doubts of his own. "Next time just let me know when you intend to get me killed and we can handle it with much less inconvenience all around - we'll pick a pleasant restaurant and you can put poison in my wine, how about that?"

"Finished you are? Mission ours is Favored to seek, yes? Also knows Favored bird. Complex is bird. Like big vulture looks, but is part eagle, part owl, part what know I not. Many senses has it."

"Part *duck*? Are you trying to tell me that bird is a hunter? A tracker?"

"Think you live it could only carrion on? Fah!"

"Very well," said Wroclaw. "Fine. So the bird can somehow detect the presence of Favored-of-the-Gods' current lair, you say. If it has done so, then where is this hideout?"

"Perhaps good enough would you be search help me to," Haddo muttered.

"Well, I don't imagine it's in this pond. Favored did not strike me as the sort to enjoy splashing around in the water." Unless - "Can his floating module travel submersibly?"

"Not surprised would be I," said Haddo, after a moment. "Shack of construction used by Favored right here around was."

Wroclaw let another wave roll past and raised his head. Dark water still surrounded him, the ripples of their traumatic entry still rolling to and fro. The bank still looked to be a good furlong off, but that was unlikely; in the midst of Peridol this was more a stream with ambition than a river fallen into doubt. On the other side from the bank, the curtain wall of the palace complex loomed tall above the waters. Overhead, for the sake of completeness, was the unhelpful starry sky. And below? How deep *was* this basin, anyway?

But no, that was beside the point. Even if there were some entry on the bottom to a concealed grotto, lost in the midst of the water grass and the silt of river mud and unnoticeable even if it weren't already the pitch-dark of night, how could they find it? It was unlikely Favored would have left some convenient signpost saying "This Way to the Secret Lair"; after all, he would have already gone to some effort to make the thing impossible to find. "If your friend Favored is indeed down there," Wroclaw said, treading water again, "is there any particular reason he would want to see you? Any token he may have given you to attract his attention in urgent times?"

"Cheap fictions have been reading you," grumbled Haddo in return. Was that actually a log he had found, or did he have some sort of flotation bladder concealed beneath his enigmatic cloak? "Ridiculous is this. Adepts of sorcery are we both - skills should we use."

"'Ridiculous' - what a remarkable conclusion," said Wroclaw, considering whether or not to use his vaunted status as an adept to swamp Haddo beneath a fresh surge of water. Or perhaps he could pierce the flotation bladder, or overturn the log. "Whatever your bird had spotted, it wouldn't have killed it to wait here and point it out."

"Skree!" said something above their heads, followed by "squaw!" and a flopper of wings - normal-sized wings, this time - and then the white ghost-blur of bird dropped in for a landing.

"Thought I not are nocturnal seagulls," said Haddo, his eye-sparks craning upward at the claws scooting for purchase on his hood.

"Thought I not many things," Wroclaw said. "At the moment, might I propose we merely take this one as a given and proceed from here? This body of water is not warm."

Haddo made growling sounds under his breath as Wroclaw communed with the seagull. "Over here," Wroclaw concluded after a moment.

"Told you that could have I," snapped Haddo; the bird had been gesturing so vigorously in that direction with its beak that its message had clearly leapt species barriers.

"At least someone here had the foresight to get the rest of the directions from *your* bird," said Wroclaw, doing a very effective breaststroke with his extra-jointed arms. From the renewed shrieking of the gull he could tell Haddo was following. Then the bird flapped again, sailed overhead, landed on the water just ahead of him, and just in case he hadn't quite gotten the message, stuck its head under the water for good measure.

Wroclaw gave a last stroke and arrived at the gull's location, watching the creature eyeing him shrewdly and wishing, no doubt, it had an eyebrow it could raise over the eye in question to give the proper counterpoint to its expression. "Just so," said Wroclaw. He took a deep breath and dove.

One fathom, two, three - *how* deep was this thing? - and then finally the first slimy tendrils of bottom grass; whatever the birds had spotted was hopefully right around here, and if this was all some practical joke they

would find out just how flappable he could be himself under the right provocation. He clawed his way down through the grass to the bottom and felt through the muck. His eyes had been closed - if it was dark on the surface, there surely wouldn't be any more illumination down here in the silt, and who knew what sorts of ophthalmic diseases might be added to the unescapable scourge of dysentery from this pleasant evening dip - but just to be on the safe side he opened them anyway for a quick peep. *Guess what?* Wroclaw thought to himself. Just two feet from his questing hand a coil of pale blue phosphorescence made a bulls-eye around the outlet of a wide pipe rising an arm's-span free of the bottom sludge.

He surfaced. Haddo wisely made no mention of his increasingly bedraggled appearance, or the festooning strands of weed and slime; these were in any case inconsequential details. Instead, Haddo cut to the meat: "Passage deep how you said is this?"

"I did not say," Wroclaw reminded him. "Either your friend Favored-of-the-Gods intends for any swimming intruders to asphyxiate before reaching the outlet, or he doesn't. There is one principal way to find out."

"Urr," said Haddo pithily. "Breathing spells any know you?"

Wroclaw thought he recalled some sort of apparatus for breathing assistance Maximillian had used back in Roosing Oolvaya. He had no idea if the appliance had arrived with them in Peridol, though, and even if it had been in the city it had probably perished with the rest of their equipment in the laboratory fire. "Either we give up," said Wroclaw, "or oxygenate well and forge ahead. Or I suppose there's no need for both of us to perish. One of us can go ahead and drag a line or some such."

"Eh," Haddo said. "Bother why? Behind you am I. For it, go we must."

"Are you sure he's in there?" asked Jurtan Mont.

"Yes," rasped Dortonn. "How many times do I need to repeat it? He is there."

"Then are you sure we should go in? You weren't there, but the last time Pod Dall tried to materialize back in Roosing Oolvaya he devastated -"

"I have heard that story," Dortonn snarled, "more times than is at all justified based on its undistinguished facts. Ask someone about the year of the Businiu Ice Age if you care to hear a genuine tale of godlash. Still," he went on, more reflectively, "it might not be a bad idea to announce our presence in advance."

"Do you think he already knows we're here? I mean, after what happened to us on the way in -"

"*Nothing* happened to us on the way in," said Svin.

"Well, yes, I mean that's my point. This is the headquarters of a god, right? Wouldn't you think he'd have more defenses than just a hidden entrance and the lock on the summoner for this - what did you call it, Dortonn? - this elevator-thing, that you had to pick apart?" Once into the passageway from the secret inlet in the marsh they had remained alert for trouble, but (rather to Svin's disappointment, Jurtan thought) such trouble had not been forthcoming. True, the tunnel had been dark, but they had had a lantern; the walls and ceiling where the walkway passed beneath the moat had been clammy, but Svin's recovery from his case of consumption was apparently complete; Jurtan had three times detected potential booby traps of an unknown character, but they had successfully skirted whatever might or might not have been lying in wait none the worse for the experience; and even the elevator, the only exit from the tunnel they had been able to find, which held the promise of plunging them to a concealed pit, dousing them with astringent gas, or holding them in place for suffocation or apprehension by guards who might after all have only been on their dinner break, had proved to be nothing but a convenient mode of transportation to the upper levels of the tower, in

lieu of obvious stairs. Svin had clearly been disgruntled at not having to scale the outside of the tower, pound demonic guardians, wrestle some ferocious beast, or ease a critical key from the very belt of its custodians in their well-lit and well-nigh impregnable chamber, but had still found it in him to be philosophical about this state of affairs. Jurtan's own philosophizing had taken a different tack. Even if he survived whatever he was walking into here, there would still be his father to contend with.

To get back to the here-and-now, though, there was still the open matter of what awaited them on the other side of the closed-door exit to the vestibule onto which the elevator had discharged them. "An interesting point," Dortonn allowed, casting another glance at the door. "Perhaps I should attempt to contact my master directly."

"Wait a minute," said Jurtan. "I thought you *were* in contact with him. Isn't that why we're here?"

"Do not question my methods, boy," Dortonn barked. The effect fell short of what he had obviously intended; due to his debilitated condition the bark emerged as more of a yip with aspirations.

"Then *I* will question your methods," intoned Svin. "I would also like to know the answer."

Watching Dortonn think over his response, Jurtan (not for the first time) considered how highly evolved Svin's personal style was becoming. He might have started as a barbarian, but he now had real class. Svin clearly understood the effect he could get from a bald unembellished declaration. There had not been the slightest of hint of "call *me* boy, will you?" in his statements just now, nor had he bothered to so much as frown at Dortonn. No theatrical tricks, beyond making sure his voice sounded sufficiently cavernous and resonant to support a major intonation, no gratuitous swipes with his sword, no "speak or your life is forfeit" melodrama. Just -

"I do not have to speak with my master to know the state of his health," Dortonn said reluctantly. "Or his approximate location. This is a power he awarded me when I became his acolyte. I -"

"It didn't work too well when he was trapped in the ring, did it?" said Jurtan. "How do you know it's any more accurate now?"

Dortonn went back to glaring. "It *did* work. How would I have succeeded in tracking the ring without it? And it works still. Pod Dall is incarnate. He is in this tower. He is -"

"He is looking forward to seeing us," Svin said, "I hope. Would you be good enough to verify this?"

"He, ah," said Dortonn, "he may not be awake. If he is not awake, that may be in, ah, a somewhat safer condition overall than if he *were* awake, and this is definitely better than waking him up. Definitely. Ah, Pod Dall is normally a reasonable fellow, for a god, given to compromise and negotiation at no little sacrifice to himself. However, as you know he has been through quite a lot of difficulty lately. In the best of times he is not sanguine about those who have done him harm. Knowing him of old, I am certain he has a list, a list of, well, ah - a list. While I would surely not be found on this roster it would be important to make certain he remembers this. I would not want my master to have cause for regret."

Svin scrutinized him calmly. "Plainly you are the expert in these matters. Please lead us to your master, then. Now."

"I, ah - yes. Boy - traps? Danger?"

Jurtan said, "I don't hear any."

As Dortonn reluctantly reached out for the door, Jurtan noted Svin flattening himself against the adjacent wall, out of the door's line of sight. Jurtan, not wanting to challenge his example, edged up to the wall on the other side. Dortonn ran his palm over the surface of the door, his eyes closed, and then waggled his fingers slightly. The door, emitting a low hiss, slid to the right and vanished into the wall.

Light spilled through the doorway and washed across the dim vestibule, light from glowing panels in the ceiling and from powerful discs set into small cylinders suspended at cunning angles from the walls. The floor was set with wide white tiles, the walls lined with mysterious machines, except for one section of wall that appeared to have recently melted and was still giving off both a glow of heat and possibly toxic vapors. A coffin - that in fact looked more like a transparent bathtub on stilts - was visible to the right. Dortonn leaned through the doorway and glanced around, then squared his shoulders and shuffled boldly into the sanctum. Svin raised an eyebrow at Jurtan, who shrugged, indicating no change in the ambient music, so Svin hefted his sword and crept through the doorway himself.

Jurtan followed. Dortonn, obviously ignoring the banks of strange equipment on hand, had already made it to the other side of the spacious room, where a comfortable sitting area of divans and easy chairs around a low serpentine table had been set aside atop a dais. A human figure was slumped in one of the chairs, and another figure had keeled over across it. Dortonn, looking as always as though he was about to collapse himself, was gingerly approaching the both of them. He took a careful look, then equally carefully prostrated himself. "My master," he proclaimed.

"Which one?" said Svin, approaching on his habitually silent feet.

"On the top."

"You're sure he's not dead?"

"Of course not. You see - his chest rises. True, he may not be pleased with the body -"

"I wouldn't be," Svin said. The body in question had apparently suffered recent exposure to fire, explosion, and from the evidence partial dissection, was streaked with blood and bile, and had only one serviceable hand. The remains on the bottom, however, were worse. "However, if it was me I would be stuck with it," he continued. "Can your master pick and choose?"

"Of course. He is, after all, a Death, and although this is a rude breach of etiquette -" he indicated the shrunken-head mummification of the lower occupant of the chair, and the positioning of the upper occupant's hand on the lower's waxy throat "- it is clearly an emergency. He is not inhabiting his original body but one that was conveniently close to hand. I believe his original body to be lost, but he is a god; he can grow a new one. Tissue samples will have been kept, and -"

"Look at this," said Jurtan, coming up the steps to the dais. He was carrying gingerly, in a cloth, some small parcel, a parcel that had stained the white cloth red. Carefully avoiding crimson drips onto the carpet, he spread the bundle out on the coffee table.

"A finger," Svin noted. "Partially gnawed."

"Yes, but the *ring*," said Jurtan. "That's the *ring*."

"Powerless now," proclaimed Dortonn. "I will keep it as a souvenir of - what?"

"I don't think so." Jurtan had already whisked the thing away, and was stowing it in his pack. Maybe Max or Shaa or Karlini would want it, and maybe he could barter it to them in exchange for support against his father;

plus, he didn't trust Dortonn. Not that he trusted Max or Karlini, or even Shaa, completely and without question, but that didn't mean he couldn't try to use them as allies. Wasn't that what they'd all been trying to teach him, after all?

"Should he be moved?" asked Svin, again indicating Dortonn's master.

"Laying hands on a god is presumptuous," Dortonn muttered, "but these are special circumstances, and he does appear to have finished with his feeding. This other is barely now a husk."

Jurtan was having his first good look at the person in question. Although he had yet to glimpse the face, the whole seemed strangely familiar. Now, as they respectfully lifted the incarnate Pod Dall to transfer him to the adjoining sofa, Jurtan realized that his impression had been founded in fact. His music chimed in with a belated confirmation, recapitulating the theme he had heard when the body's original owner had wooed his sister and had eluded him in the traffic and had transported her into near-disaster at the Karlini conflagration. "How much is left from whoever this guy was before?" he said.

"Easy to ask," said Dortonn, "difficult to answer. If - ah." He sank to the floor in another obeisance. Svin and Jurtan joined him. The eyes of the body on the couch had opened.

"Dortonn?" croaked his master.

"Yes, my lord?" he croaked back.

"Revenge."

Dortonn sighed. "If that is your will, my master -"

"Not against *you*, you idiot. Get me a drink of water."

Jurtan leapt up. He had noted a well-endowed bar on his way across the room. Would Pod Dall want ice? He splashed water from the decanter into a goblet and scooped up a load of ice balls from the freezer into another. When he scurried back Svin had lifted Pod Dall so that his head was reclining on the couch's plush leather armrest. With his own hand the god lifted two ice balls and plopped them into the water, then after a moment's deliberation added a third. "Ah," he said with satisfaction, after a long closed-eye sip. "Much better. Thank you."

Dortonn was wringing his hands. "May I get you something else, my master? Would you rest now?"

"There are things that must be done," Pod Dall said sternly, sounding for the first time as though he might actually *be* a god. "I have had far too much resting lately. Although I was not asleep in the ring, it was rather the extreme of dissociative states, and in any case my ability to influence events was limited. I may have awakened..." His voice trailed off. Jurtan thought it was not as though he had just lost his strength, but rather had reconsidered the wisdom of continuing with that particular revelation. Jurtan had caught just a hint of another musical motif that rang familiar, down below the majestic chords accompanying the words of the god, as mundane as the words themselves might be. What motif *was* that - or whose?

"As I say," continued Pod Dall, "I may have at last awakened fully, into this trap of a body set for me by Arznaak the schemer, but his snare has failed to bring me down. It is instead time for those who have hounded me to be brought low."

Dortonn took a deep breath. "But my master - if I make speak freely - at the moment in this body you are barely alive, and perhaps not even that for very long. How do you expect -"

"I am not ready to retire. There is always enough energy for revenge," Pod Dall breathed grimly. "This is a central tenet of godhood. What did *you* expect?"

"I thought you were the Conciliator," Jurtan blurted out.

The gaze scrutinized him. "In some circles, yes. In others, no; you are already aware I employed Dortonn. One cannot conciliate without strength to compel respect. Now," he said, addressing them all, "tell me this."

The Creeping Sword. That was it, Jurtan thought, that was whose melody he'd heard; the Creeping Sword. Had Pod Dall awakened Iskendarian from his hiding place within the Creeping Sword? Judging by the trouble *that* had caused, it sure didn't establish Pod Dall as a player looking to keep collateral damage to a minimum. And now they were supposed to help him in the next stage of his plan?

Suddenly Jurtan was wishing he had gone with his father after all.

Someone was moaning piteously. Someone close by sounded absolutely miserable. From the rank odor, someone had recently been sick to their stomach.

Somebody was *still* sick to their stomach.

Then I realized I was feeling the combined sensations of nausea and gill-greenishness far too personally for these to be purely vicarious observations. My head was pounding; actually, it felt like it had been pounded out so much from the inside as to have inflated it to the size of a watermelon, which was only precariously attached to the rest of my body. I didn't want to look in a mirror, *ever*. I was afraid that I'd find that my brain-roommate had punched through my skull and out my forehead in the process of evacuating the premises.

Evacuating? Roommate?

Wait; I'd left Iskendarian behind, trapped in the Scapula's web. But *I* was still here, even if at the moment I didn't feel like being much of anywhere. How was that possible? If Iskendarian was the real owner of this brain and body and I was only some ruse thrown up by him as camouflage how could *he* be evicted, leaving me in sole possession?

And he *was* gone. How I knew I wasn't sure - were my thoughts clearer? My head less cramped? My vocabulary different? I didn't think so. I thought I felt the way I always felt, except more physically wretched at the moment, of course. But still, he was gone. Maybe there was less chatter in the background, maybe it was like leaving the city and winding up on some solitary hillside away from civilization, the only sounds the cheep of birds and rustle of leaves and gurgling of brooks. Whatever the metaphor, though, Iskendarian was *gone*.

But how could Iskendarian be gone when I still didn't have an identity? I hadn't liked having *his*, in fact being a wanton mass murderer whose only principles were those that directly benefited himself was one of the lousiest fates I'd been able to imagine... but in a perverse way I had to admit it had been better than nothing.

No - that was ridiculous. I'd been better off with no identity than with that overheated maniac in the belfry. If I wanted a new alter ego I could - I could...

If my head didn't stop throbbing I'd never be able to follow a thought through to its end. What had I been thinking before I'd gotten lost in the haze? Iskendarian, that crummy leech - although if he'd been telling the truth *I* was the one who'd been the leech. Well, what of it? How *did* I know he'd been telling the truth? Suppose he'd been lying, suppose he was just some mind parasite and making me feel like I didn't belong was

a weapon to help him clear me out of my own body. Or suppose he'd even been telling the truth as he knew it, but it was still a lie - why couldn't he have been as deluded as me about what was really going on?

Well, at least I didn't have to worry about good old Iskendarian any more; hopefully Iskendarian was giving the Scapula at least as much trouble as he'd given me. Although I still had *some* responsibility for him, I guess. After all, I *had* loosed him on the Scapula and the web of other trapped gods, and I did know at first-hand just how much of a rabid animal he really was - but then on the other hand that kind of ferocious demolitions expert was just exactly the sort of fellow the Scapula needed tearing at his throat. It wasn't like Iskendarian could break out and threaten the general populace.

Unless...

What if Iskendarian *won*? What if he succeeded in subjugating Arznaak's personality the way he'd done to mine? Arznaak was *out* of his mind, of course, and so was Iskendarian, but at least Arznaak preferred to scheme where Iskendarian chose to blast. It would be nice if they could just conveniently destroy each other, which was exactly why it was hopelessly unlikely that would ever come to pass. No, Iskendarian in charge of Arznaak's mind and wielding his overload of power wasn't merely a threat to the general public, he was - well, yeah.

I *was* still responsible. Pain or no pain, I had to get myself up off the floor, pull myself together, and find out what was happening. I had to get to a workstation. The one in the Archives was probably closest, but who knew what shape it was in - plus there were all those pesky defenses to get past on the way. Had there been an access node in the facility under the moat? What about the -

Wait a minute. Iskendarian was gone but I *still* had memories I didn't recognize. Not the same ones I'd had filtered through him - this was the first time I'd thought of some underwater hideout, for example - but that wasn't all, either. Things I'd never understood before were suddenly starting to make sense. I *knew* things - but some of the things I'd known when I'd been Iskendarian I now knew had been *wrong*. He hadn't been thinking straight; he'd warped logic so subtly I'd never noticed it... and for that matter I had the sudden suspicion he hadn't known it either. Iskendarian had been a walking thought disorder, that's why he was so messed up. But then I guess that was just the way he'd been built.

Built?

No, that *wasn't* just a metaphor. Iskendarian *had* been built. I knew because I'd built him.

And that's when I realized I knew at last who I really was.

CHAPTER 19

"JUST WHY DID THE EMPEROR want all of us here?" Leen whispered to Phlinn Arol. "I mean, I understand the exercise-of-power-for-its-own-sake stuff, and the unbridled urge to throw your weight around, and the putting-on-the-best-face-and-united-happy-front for the crowds, and even the idea of getting people who might be plotting against you together so you can watch them all at once, but when it gets right down to it all he seems to be doing is acting like a total idiot."

"Unfortunately, you may have noticed I agree with you," said Phlinn Arol. The two of them were planted in their seats adjoining the Emperor-designate's triumphal dais. Glowering at them from behind, even though he had stated his clear preference for a chair as well, was the black-shelled Maximillian. It was not merely for effect that he had been denied a stool; also gathered at their backs and stationed in a winding trail down the stairwell were the escorting guards of Leen's recent acquaintance.

On the field beneath them, from what they could glimpse past the grand rostrum and the other ceremonial apparatus emplaced round about on the tower, the preliminary excursions and evolutions had reached their climax, the animal acts, historical evocations of feats of gladiatorial prowess, and comic relief had similarly run their course, and the massed bands were thundering forth their evocation of the majesty to come. The Imperial functionaries were forming up in their ranks of state - the ramifying Nerves had already stretched their tendrils from the digital corners of the field into the twisting central spine and then the dense tangled mat of brain, and the Bones and Vessels were doing their intricate maneuvers to form up around them; the Vertebrae had just finished twirling into place around the spinal column Nerves, and here came the ribs and long bones sliding in from the sides and bubbling out from the pelvis. All was in order and the signs were unmistakable. The Knitting-together of the Corpus of Empire would soon be upon them. And also upon them at that time, most likely, would be the crash of whatever hammer the Scapula had recently been forging. "Of course, it would be thoroughly anticlimactic if the Scapula plans to lie low," Leen ventured. "After all this we're all geared up for, and all. Maybe the Emperor's right and nothing *is* going to happen."

"The only good apocalypse is the one you avoid," muttered Max. "*I'd* be perfectly happy to be disappointed, but I don't expect it for a minute."

"Perhaps Dr. Shaa and his new friends will succeed in running your *old* friend to ground," Phlinn Arol suggested. "Or in detecting and tracing the umbilical power cord linking him to those he holds in thrall, through the intermediary of this hypothetical ally."

"It's possible," said Max. "It *could* happen, but there again I'd be surprised. Arznaak's worked on this for a long time; he's not going to let himself get tripped up on some minor detail. Shaa and *your* friends may find him, but I'd bet it won't until he makes himself traceable by letting off an energy signature that makes him visible - and if he's done *that* it'll already be too late."

"That's what I like about you," Leen said. "You're such an eternal optimist."

"I *am* being optimistic. I think we may have a chance of getting through this alive. Look on the bright side. If the Emperor sics his assassin guys on us at least we should be able to handle *them*."

"I'm glad to see you've regained your confidence," Phlinn Arol said.

"Yeah, well, it's nice if somebody still thinks I'm good for something around here, even if that somebody has to be *me*. All right, damn it, I'll admit it again if that'll make you feel better; I made a mistake."

"You're being uncharacteristically modest, don't you think?"

"Absolutely, yeah, of course, completely, I'm the first one ever to make a big mistake on something really important. Are you happier now?"

"Without bound," Leen said unhappily.

"It does make you think, though," commented Max. "Why does it seem more and more like everybody in the world is incompetent?"

"Everybody but you, right?"

"*Especially* me."

"The Adventurer's God," Phlinn Arol said, staring into space. "What was I thinking? Why couldn't I have picked something like God of Actuaries, say, or Lord of Ferns and Moss? No, I had to sign up for Lore and Romance, damn it all. And here's where it all might end."

"Have another drink," suggested Leen.

It's being reactive I hate, thought Max. Going deliberately over to defense, placing yourself square-up against the bulls-eye because that gave you the best angle on the bowman, these had never been his tactics of choice. People were supposed to dance to *his* tunes. But Phlinn Arol had been refusing all the most reasonable ideas he'd come up with; after all, if Phlinn wanted he could single-handedly scotch the Knitting in its tracks by refusing to play his ceremonial part. True, that would create its own new set of problems, but that was pretty much a given for any course they took.

Phlinn wasn't lily-livered, not really; what he was at the moment was even worse - fatalistic. Their earlier discussion on the way over, between Max's comments on which part of his body the obnoxious armor was chafing *now*, had illuminated their best guess at the most likely medium the Scapula's intervention would take. Since it involved a direct strike through Phlinn himself, you couldn't very well accuse Phlinn of personal cowardice; foolhardiness, on the other hand, was present as a matter of definition. And to rely on Max's ability to think up a counter on the fly and deploy it in what might be a window of milliseconds ... Well, Phlinn's fatalism might be understandable, but that still didn't make it *healthy*. "How much do you know about the basic mechanics of the Knitting?" Max had asked him.

"Probably more than most," Phlinn had said dryly, back before his mood had headed for bottom and hadn't come back up.

"You're there as the liaison god, right? How much of what you have to do is ceremonial and how much is a physical transfer of power?"

"It's basically just a sound-and-light show, you should know that. Just symbolism."

"But do you establish an actual conduit of some sort between you and the Emperor?"

"... I see what you're getting at, of course," Phlinn had said, his disposition tilting now over the edge and starting its nose-dive into the abyss. "You think whatever the Scapula is going to try involves infiltrating the link, however limited and tight-band. I would say that's impossible..."

"Except the Scapula has been doing a lot of the impossible today, and that might not even be too far technique-wise from what he's already demonstrated."

"You'd better start thinking what you can do to offset it, then." And that had been the last thing Phlinn had

said that was of any practical relevance to anything at hand.

Max checked around himself again, they glanced over the side at the drop. "I just hope they didn't plant explosives in this spire too," he murmured. Then it occurred to him for the first time just what the tower reminded him of: a single-branch candelabrum, with a swelled cup at the top for the flame of the torch. It was big enough to light a flare that could be seen for leagues.

"I just thought of something unpleasant," Max said.

But Leen and Phlinn Arol had given up paying much attention to him; Phlinn was all but crying on her shoulder. True, Max had resigned himself to his own conclusion that she was eminently lovable, not that he had had the opportunity to seriously pursue the thought, and true, Phlinn Arol's job did not usually bring him into contact with Leen's sort of person, since adventurers - male or female, and of whatever species - tended to be a much more rough-and-tumble lot, rather than significantly bookish. True, these were predisposing factors - but still, how had Leen gotten him to discuss a subject Max had been trying to pry out of him for years?

"You see," said Phlinn Arol, "everyone knew *of* Byron but not many knew him face to face, personally that is, and of those who were intimate with him I believe I'm the only one left. That's why his personality is so familiar to me, so familiar in fact that I believe I would know him again if I saw him, whatever his disguise of the moment happened to be."

"Yes, yes, that's all very good, but the point is, *have* you seen him again?"

"Yes," said Phlinn Arol, "I believe I have. That's why I was hoping he might be timely enough to show up here now."

Shaa dragged himself up to Gashanatantra, feeling more than a little askew at the moment. His outfit might not need to be cast into the rags entirely, but it was going to require some serious attention from a cleaner. He had just finished his walk-through of the mob of viscera on the parade grounds. The idea that the Scapula might be hiding in plain sight - among the other Bones, for example - had been too Shaa-ish not to deserve a personal check-out. So there he had been, forcing and wedging his way through the tightly packed ranks of giblets of various sorts, all pursuing their in-group and intra-society jabs and shenanigans as they wheeled and gyrated in their formal exercises. It had taken every bit of slipperiness at his disposal to penetrate the throng at all, let alone accomplish his mission; but somewhat to his own surprise, he had succeeded in making a fairly thorough anatomical sweep, not only of the skeletal members but other attendant systems as well. In none of them, of course, had his brother been found.

Well, it had had to be tried. On to the next step. Which was

"Wait a moment," said Gashanatantra, raising his free hand slightly. "A message from Jill."

Shaa wondered if he should turn and flee back to the body parts. These were gods - you couldn't very well order them around - but he thought by now they understood how dangerous it was to use any of their accustomed accouterments of their goddish infrastructure. They knew the Scapula had corrupted the conferencing architecture; it was only prudent to assume normal communications were no longer safe either, even if they weren't yet demonstrably lethal. And there was already enough bait around to spare. But if Gashanatantra wanted to talk to his inamorata at the risk of his life, well, the die was cast.

Maybe there would be a bright side. Maybe she *had* found a valuable clue or a hot trail to trace by physically examining one of Arznaak's enthralled god-captives. Maybe it *was* worth the risk of telling an eavesdropping Arznaak exactly what they were up to and how far they'd come. Maybe -

Gashanatantra gave off whispering to himself and glared back at Shaa. "You don't know everything," he declared. "Your brother is not the only one with surprises." He removed something that looked like a black button from his ear, displayed the item, then replaced it.

"Ah yes, radio," Shaa said. "I once had one of those myself. Has it occurred to you that perhaps my brother's confederate is an Artificer? An Artificer might very well have his own radio too."

"Hence the utility of a private verbal code. There is value to having once been married to someone."

Shaa sighed. "I apologize. I know you know your business. This whole thing has clearly been getting under my skin to a greater degree than I'm accustomed."

"Understandable; the adversary *is* your brother."

"Most gracious of you. If -"

"Will you just tell me what the hell she said?" croaked Jardin.

If Max had been here, Shaa expected he would have said something like, "Oh, are you still alive?" But indeed it was difficult to look at the drooping energy-drained figure Gashanatantra had propped for the moment against the retaining wall at the base of the stands and recall it as being any more ambulatory than a dressmaker's mannequin. Except for the smoldering glare of the eyes, which had been closed but were now again open, at least far enough to be charitably described as lolling slits. And for all his desperate ferocity in the task, Jardin had so far been unable to detect the slightest intimation of the new Curse Master in the vicinity. Of course, Gashanatantra hadn't done any better, and for all the good Shaa had done himself, he might as well have been their maitre-d'. So what *had* Jill-tang discovered?

"Jill succeeded in locating two other divines not snared by the Scapula's web who were willing to join her in a raid on his headquarters. She and her soldier-priests and certain forces of these other two have just completed their assault."

"The midtown estate where I was held captive earlier?" Shaa asked.

"Yes," said Gashanatantra. "The property was not demolished in the fighting, they are still searching for secret passages and rooms, but aside from the human legions from his time preceding his Exaltation none of your brother's forces were found. No Transcendent equipment, no pertinent records, no -"

"No lurking confederate? Nothing of use, then - not that we expected anything more."

"Just so," Gashanatantra confirmed. "But it has been clear for some time that his whole strategy is hinged on never looking back."

"Maybe we can still trip him from the rear," Shaa murmured. "As you say, going nose-to-nose is scarcely a plan for survival where my brother is concerned. Or for victory, of course."

"I'd tear his throat out with my teeth from any side you choose," croaked Jardin. "I'm feeling much stronger already; I don't mind trying a frontal attack."

"Hopefully suicide will not be necessary," said Gashanatantra. He looked off down the field, past the assembling ranks of the Corpus, the pageantry of their processions now all but complete, to the spire of the Emperor's tower at the other end.

Shaa followed his gaze. "You're not considering heading down there and joining Phlinn Ami, are you?"

"Certainly not. You did hear me say just now suicide should not be necessary? Phlinn Arol is likely to be the center of seriously difficult events quite soon now. The stroke of midnight approaches; all is in its appropriate order. Yes, I think we will know very shortly just exactly what your brother has in mind."

"I'm not too sure anymore this is such a good idea," said Eden Shaa.

"Why, what would make you say that?" The voice of the Crawfish came to her from somewhere in front, to the right, and apparently overhead, and also - if the unreliable testimony of her ears could be credited - from several miles off down an echoing canyon. Her eyes had nothing to contribute on the subject, since all illumination - both the lanterns they had brought with them and the inherent ambient lighting of this place - had suddenly and completely vanished into the palpable black of an ink bath just a moment before. Before the lights had gone out, Lemon had been within arm's reach; now - well, all she could say for sure was that he wasn't.

"I thought you said you knew how to do this!"

"Well, sure," he shouted back. "At least in theory. But it *has* been awhile since I've been through here on my own."

Oh, great. For this she'd left her estate? If -

"I think I've got it," Lemon hollered. "Take two steps forward, then one to your right, good, now you're going to want to jump ahead high enough so you'd miss, say, a three-foot obstacle, and come down upside-down on your hands. Got it?"

"No problem." At least she hadn't gone the puffball route trapped on the plantation; as a warm-up routine this stuff wouldn't even raise a sweat. Eden sprang forward, flipped, reached for the landing -

- and then she was back in the light as though she'd pierced through a blackout curtain, but somewhere along the way gravity appeared to have flipped too (although it was undoubtedly just another one of the Archives' harebrained tricks of perception) and instead of coming down on her outstretched hands with her feet in the air the situation was quite exactly the opposite. Floating off below them suspended from a glowing pink doorframe in empty space was, well, a door.

"See?" said the Crawfish. "Nothing to it. I told you the place would recognize me."

"Plus you do have your sister's ring."

"Probably doesn't hurt. Still, a bit of fun, rather."

"If it's all the same to you, I think we'll come out through the dungeon." How had she ever let her brother talk her into this?

Lemon sighed. "All these years I thought you were a genuine Shaa, but clearly I was mistaken. Where is that reckless abandon, that stylistically baroque flaunting of facts, that -"

"Any more of *that*," she warned, "and I'm leaving you down here entombed in the rock."

"Dad," said Tildamire Mont, "if you don't stop that *I'll* drop you in a well."

"But this is all a waste of my time!" bellowed the former Lion of the Oolvaan Plain. "I didn't come halfway across the continent on the back of a smelly, bad-tempered bird to -"

"What *did* you come here for, anyway?" said the Great Karlini, unwisely inserting himself again into the line of fire. "Only to make all our lives miserable, or was there some deeper consideration than that?"

"Aarrh!" the Lion said, at maximum volume. Another window cracked in the building behind them and went tinkling into the street. He went back to carving off strips from a length of wood he had found sitting around holding up the lintel-piece of a townhouse they'd passed along the way.

There wasn't much else to do, frankly. Here they were, once again on the burned-out site of their former lodging and workplace, watching while absolutely nothing calamitous happened whatever. Cobblestones lay scattered about, the sole reminder of the extraordinary manifestations of the afternoon. Since nothing was obviously mutating, though, or shooting off sparks or threatening to run amok, Karlini had persisted in his brooding and the Lion in his frustrated exuberance. The few passersby who had entered the block with the apparent aim of strolling down it to eye the devastation had changed their minds on witnessing the Lion's casual twirling of his sword and his eager scrutiny on spying them. Tildamire couldn't blame them. Her father's examination made Tildamire think of a herder looking over his cows with an eye toward imminent dinner. But in any case there had been no pedestrians - whether genuine or abortive - in some time; word appeared to be getting around.

"Faugh!" declared the Lion, springing to his feet. "Enough of this sitting in place!" He turned his back and stalked off down the block.

"Be as well to let him go," said Karlini. "I sure don't want to jump on him and try to tie him down."

"Can't you zap him and put him to sleep or something?"

"You want to deal with him if it didn't work? Anyway, you need a brain of a certain size to hit with a soporific and I'm not sure he qualifies. No offense, I hope."

"He's been my father for a long time," said Tildamire. "We can go bail him out later." She joined Karlini in gazing back across the street at the skeletal beams of their building, and the wisps of steam and smoke still rising as the rubble continued to cool. "I, ah, I, ah..."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering why we never found a trace of, ah, of Roni's body. I mean, I was there, and I didn't actually see her consumed or blown to bits or anything like that. Couldn't she have been thrown back by that fireball blast and knocked clear out of the building through the back wall? Or something."

"Then where is she? If she was in shape to walk away by herself then why is she hiding? And she wasn't then who carried her off? And why can't I hear her at all?" Karlini's head drooped lower, into the hands that were there to receive it. "I'd like to believe something like that happened, but there's no evidence."

"Maybe Shaa's brother has her."

"We never saw a sign he was interested in what we were up to here."

"Maybe - maybe the Creeping Sword part was fighting the Iskendarian part like he said, and made Iskendarian think he'd wiped her out when he really hadn't, and then he came back later and... I mean, the way he told his story to Shaa, it didn't sound exactly like what I saw."

"All right," said Karlini, "all right." He levered himself to his feet. "Let's go back in there and have another look."

"Would you like to kill your friend Favored?" Wroclaw inquired, "or should I?"

Wroclaw and Haddo were stretched out on a narrow landing, between one tunnel and the next, their feet barely out of the water. The pipe whose outlet they had discovered in the moat had angled sideways in a smooth curve to lead clearly under the palace walls and a lung-crushing distance beyond. A minute or so into his frantic sprint, it had been clear to Wroclaw that if there were no air-filled outlet somewhere quite near he was about to die; he had passed the distance he could possibly retrace and still escape asphyxiation. But they had been in luck; perhaps the reservoir of air in Favored's flying vehicle was limited itself, or perhaps their own lung capacity was greater than average. In any case, the passage had tilted back up, and they had broken through the lapping surface into an antechamber hung about with light-globes turned so low their glow was almost purple. More of them stretched away down another tunnel, this one horizontal and filled only with humid air.

Urgent mission or not, there was no way to proceed without a pause for recuperation.

"Think you knows Favored here are we?" wheezed Haddo.

"Why are you asking me? He's your friend. You're the expert."

"His own ideas always has he had." Water still squelching from his cloak, he levered himself back to tottering feet. "On should now we go."

They trudged down the passage. There was more than enough clearance for Favored's vehicle but no sign of the floating ball itself. The tunnel was not long, however, and after a few snaky bends and a rope-and-belay across a wide pit they were brought up short by a massive sealed door studded with rivets perched darkly across the entire bore of the passageway.

Haddo stood back and put his hands on his hips, his eye spots shooting sparks of red at the barricade. "Know I in there are you! Door open or wrath feel!"

A moment passed in silence. Then a tinny voice echoed from the gloom of the ceiling in front of the door. "Go away, Haddo, I'm busy."

"Fah!" spat Haddo. "Away go I not! Business of you precisely the problem is! Warn will I not again!" He shrugged back his sleeve and extended toward the door a thoroughly reptilian claw.

"Haddo," said Favored's voice, "this ain't no game. I've got poison gas that can burn you down where you stand. Now get out of here - you'll thank me when I'm finished anyway."

"Traitor are you!" Haddo snarled, on the verge of total incoherency. "Scapula help are you, but world rule he would! All of he destroy he will! Worse than that are you - us kill now with gas promise you!"

An amplified sigh rattled from the ceiling grate. "All right, you can wait in the isolation chamber. But no fast stuff, I'm warning you, Haddo. I'm not gonna let anything distract me."

The tall hatch clanked and creaked, then broke its seal against the wall with a hiss of escaping air. A breeze ruffled their clothes. Beyond was a smooth chamber, featureless but for three smaller exit doors and Favored's

Flotarobolis, resting on its landing skids in the middle of the cramped floor. Haddo scuttled beneath the exhaust vanes as Wroclaw edged in around the now-quiescent side gear-train linkages. The door swung ponderously shut again behind them.

Wroclaw gazed at the three closed exit doors. "A particular old proverb comes to mind," he remarked.

Favored's voice came one more time from a new grate atop the entrance hatch. "Get your hands away from that, Haddo - you mess with the attitude jets and your cloak is a dishrag."

"Edge on, you are," Haddo noted. "Situation reviewing are you?"

A wheel set in the center of the door on the left spun and then the door made its own hiss and creaked open. Haddo led the way through another tunnel into a small chamber containing several chairs facing a wide window that seemed not only very solid but very thick. Visible through the window was a different room, somewhat larger, lit with a stark white light by glowing strips in the ceiling and strange displays on the hulking boxes that lined the walls. One panel on the mechanism across the room from them showed exceptionally realistic light-pictures, in over-stimulated colors, of various scenes they had recently witnessed: the entry hall with its four doors and the parked Flotarobolis, the outside tunnel where it approached the hatch, the pool into which they had emerged following their underwater journey; and other locales that were similarly impossible to immediately place.

At right angles to their vantage point, though, was an apparatus that appeared to be the feature of central importance. Another wide picture-screen cast its radiance over a work-desk, set into which was an array of fingertip-sized keys bearing on their tops unfamiliar runes. Seated at these controls in a swiveling chair cranked up to its full height extension - and still as a result barely having his head clear the level of the desk - was Favored-of-the-Gods. Piled around him on the floor were boxes and sacks and bundles he had apparently carted in on his own, since they were choked with perishable provisions - potatoes and broccoli and cabbage, carrots and stoppered flasks of dark liquids and a wrapped side of smoked fish, sourdough bread and a churn of butter and a good two dozen sweet rolls. Perched precariously at the side of the desk was a half-eaten ear of corn on a dish and a mug of what might be orange juice.

"Would you say your friend is preparing for a siege?" Wroclaw said to Haddo. Behind Favored's chair was a cot, too. It appeared to be part of the original furnishings, though, since it was fastened securely to the floor by a rotating tilt-mechanism, and as much of the sleeping-surface as was visible around the pillow and bedroll spread out on top was metal, too. Suspended above the cot by a wire from the ceiling was a glossy white helmet; Wroclaw didn't even want to guess what that might be for. For that matter, it was difficult for him to decipher most any of these bizarre apparatus.

That was not, apparently enough, Favored's problem, however. It would be difficult to learn from his example, too, since the message-board he was observing most closely was almost edge-on to their observation gallery. In a panel above the primary screen was another matrix of views of scenery, and Wroclaw was pretty sure the vistas that were showing pertained intimately to the environs of the Stadium of State, where the Knitting ceremony by now was surely reaching its climax. At least part of Shaa's surmise was presumably thus confirmed. Unless Favored was working at some cunningly unlikely cross purpose, the Scapula did have a confederate, and Favored was it.

On the other hand, the more speculative part of Shaa's hypothesis - the one that had prompted him to slip into Wroclaw's ear an additional message of watchful wariness - had to be downgraded in probability, unless the game had the additional convolutions required to put him off the pace. From the way Haddo was sputtering and growling at Favored through the window now, and the bright flashes his eye-sparks kept reflecting off the obviously shielded glass, it seemed all the more unlikely that Haddo was in league with Favored too. Wroclaw had been disinclined to view Haddo as a thoroughgoing traitor, even with his increasingly craggy behavior of

the recent days, so having that theory meet the dust was all to the good with him. Of course, that didn't help at all in dealing with Favored.

"We don't know each other all that well," Wroclaw said to him, "but I'll admit I was taken with your good sense and judgment, as well as your plainly brilliant artistic abilities. Unfortunately, though, I see I was mistaken. For you to trust Arznaak Shaa enough to cast your lot with him -"

"You think I *trust* him?" said Favored, not removing his attention from his board. "What the hell kind of idiot you think I've turned into? I've got him where I want him."

Wroclaw settled himself into one of the chairs; this promised to be a long haul. "You're not the first one to think that about Arznaak. And he doesn't trust you either, that goes without saying. So what mechanisms do you have in place to assure that neither of you stabs the other in the back? Just how far you think common interest is going to take you?"

"Far enough," Favored said definitively. "You've gotta risk cracking eggs if you're gonna have an omelet, am I right?"

"Crack you, would I," muttered Haddo.

Wroclaw waved him down with a calming motion. "So you do have some strategy in mind for parting company with the Scapula?"

"Who do you think I am?" Favored said slyly. "You think I'm the kind of guy doesn't have a backup drop-dead plan? Anyway, if the Scapula did manage to turn the tables on me, I could always go running to Max and you guys." Wroclaw heard Haddo mumbling in his ongoing undertone, "If alive still you are," while Favored went on with "I've got plenty to barter with."

"Such as?" said Wroclaw.

"Well," Favored drawled, "I just may know a method for pulling the plug on the gods feeding Arznaak his power. How about that, huh?"

"If I knew how to do that," Wroclaw said severely, "I would have done it immediately. This situation is too dangerous to play games with."

"That may be good enough for you, but we all know you're a low-impact player, the supporting character type, right? That loyal subservient crap's not for me. And hey, Arznaak's doing exactly what we agreed, so far anyway. He's wiping the slate clean of every other god in sight, and -"

"And then he intends to abdicate, I suppose? And neither of you cares who gets devastated in the process?"

Favored grinned. "Arznaak cares, all right. He *likes* to hurt people. And if a few humans get plowed under along the way, who's gonna miss them, huh? Even this Emperor guy - *especially* the Emperor."

"You want to destroy the structure of society?"

"You got it, buster. That's the only chance for our folks to break out of the ghettos and straighten the deck. It's about time we were on top for a change."

"Of your mind out you are," Haddo muttered accusingly.

Favored was being obnoxiously cheerful; something must be going right for him. "That may be, but whether I am or not there's not a damn thing you can do about it. I can pump gas into the room where you are now, too, you know."

"A pleasant offer," Wroclaw told him. "Not terribly consistent with your plan to come begging to us if you get into trouble, and hopefully not indicative of the quality of your thought in general, but -"

"Now that's interesting," said Favored, examining something off to his left. "A lot of those caged gods are trying stuff, but there's one of them in there working to destabilize the matrix who may actually be able to do it; seems like he really has some idea of what's going on at the subcode level. Let me check the identity tracer. Huh." He grimaced at the panel and fiddled with something at its base. "There we are, recalibrated I think. You know somebody called Iskendarian?" he said, still glowering and tweaking simultaneously.

"About what talking is Favored?" Haddo hissed at Wroclaw.

"He is seemingly the keeper of the Scapula's trapped gods," Wroclaw guessed. "The vampire's apprentice, one might say."

"Duh," said Favored. "Wait a minute here... Well, can you believe that."

"What?" said Haddo.

"This Iskendarian thing is disincarnate; it's got no body. It's just sitting out there subverting the network. It even looks like - yeah, it's already cross-infected the Scapula's lower-level functions. I wonder if he realizes it? His command effectuation is still within nominal but -"

"Excuse me," said Wroclaw. "What are you babbling about? Are you saying that Iskendarian has somehow abandoned his body?"

"You *do* know this Iskendarian? He really *did* have a body?"

"To our misfortune and that of our associates, yes. Iskendarian was responsible for the destruction of the laboratory - you recall? You were there for a moment trying to put out the fire? - before you left to plot against us all again. Iskendarian is also answerable for the murder of Madame Karlini. And do I understand you correctly, that this disembodied Iskendarian is now trying to take over the Scapula?"

"Could be, yeah, sort of looks like it." Favored began gnawing on a finger.

"All part of your plan, I'm sure," Wroclaw said. "Of course, that's all the world needs, Iskendarian in control of the Scapula's power. It's difficult to say which one of them would be worse. Or maybe they could join forces; we'd all like *that*, wouldn't we. It's clear *you* would. Weren't you just arguing in favor of maximizing anarchy?"

Favored stared at his wildly gyrating instruments. "So if Iskendarian started out with a body, I wonder where the hell it is now?"

"I'm afraid I can help you with that one," said a new voice.

"How the hell did you get in here?" demanded Favored, craning back over his neck with his hands still on his boards. One of the banks of equipment at the side rear of his control room had eased silently away from the wall, revealing behind it a camouflaged door, and within it a familiar figure. "Don't move - you take one step and you're toast."

"Iskendarian?" Haddo croaked.

"Not anymore," said the man, "which I suppose is one thing to be happy for. I -"

"Favored," said Wroclaw, seeing that one's teeth clench as he reached his decision and sent his hands reaching for a new configuration of controls, "I wouldn't -"

Whereupon the newcomer - whether Iskendarian, Creeping Sword, nameless one, or something else entirely - spoke a single incomprehensible but immaculately uttered word; another sourceless voice that was plainly different but still strangely similar to his own answered; the lights on the boards around Favored's controlling perch chattered and swam; and though Favored pounded incredulously on the keys in front of him absolutely nothing resulted; surely not the sentence of destruction he had obviously expected.

Favored abruptly gave off his efforts, directed a final stare at his machines, and then spun on his swiveling chair. "How the hell did you do that?" he spat.

"Well, you see," said the man, "this stuff used to be mine. I'm sure you don't think it all got here on its own."

"Don't make me laugh," said Favored, not looking as though any outburst of the sort was close to hand. "This place's been sitting here *forever* - if you built it where have you been all these years? How are you still *alive*?"

"I'll grant you I *have* been indisposed, but -"

"You know who you are now, sir, don't you," Wroclaw interrupted. There was no chance he and Haddo could escape their current cell, much less make it to the tunnel or whatever other entrance the man had used. Although the man wasn't dry, he looked more as though a bucket of water had been poured over his head and clothes in an effort to accomplish a quick bath, rather than appearing soaked and be-mossed as swimming the moat and the length of the underwater shaft would have left him. Judging from the story of the destruction of the Karlini laboratory, there was similarly little chance of warding off an attack if that was what he had in mind. No, if this man had it in for them they might as well find it out now, and if not -

"Yeah," the man sighed, "I'd say that's pretty obvious, wouldn't you? Now let's see just what kind of mess you've all gotten up to in here."

CHAPTER 20

"IT IS A PICTURESQUE SIGHT," said Max, "I'll give them that." The maneuvers on the field were complete. Stretched out along the turf with flying banners and darting wizard-lights, the details of its anatomy outlined by floating strips of cold-fire and accentuated by the contrasting colors of clothing and patterns of heraldry in the ranks of Nerves and Muscles and Bones and other assorted viscera and glands, was the grand figure of a human, its feet almost at the base of the Emperor's tower, its head at the far end of the field, its left hand now raising itself to its brow in salute. The Emperor-designate, mere moments away from losing his hyphenate status, had risen from his seat and ascended to the commanding top-roost, his arms raised, garbed now in his robe of white with flame edgings.

Then the Emperor-designate was looking back over his shoulder, and down at *them*. "*Phlinn?*" he mouthed.

Phlinn Arol sighed and climbed to his feet. "Even if there wasn't the Scapula, I'd still hate this," he muttered. "My lines are so overwritten."

Max was still standing, too, and as Phlinn's head drew level with his own, Max reminded him, in a low whisper, "If worse comes to worse, just *jump*."

Phlinn said "Urr," walked around to the front of the Emperor's dais, and planted his hands on his hips. A golden disk materialized above his head, then descended over his body, leaving him radiant and glowing.

"Should we bow?" said Leen.

"Might get you out of the line of fire, I suppose," said Max. "Just -"

But now Phlinn Arol had begun to preach. Through some feat of legerdemain, his voice was echoing around the stadium, louder even than the ongoing roar of the crowd, yet the sound level of his pronouncement was still not entirely deafening here close to hand. "I AM PHLINN AROL!" he proclaimed. "I SPEAK HERE FOR THE GODS! BY THE SACRED COMPACT OF THE AGES, WE HONOR YOUR NEW MASTER! HERE IS THE SYMBOL OF OUR GLORY AND OUR FAVOR VESTED NOW IN THE HANDS OF YOUR EMPEROR!" Then he turned and pointed up behind him at the Emperor-designate. The golden radiance came off his outstretched finger in a stream and showered over the Emperor, leaving him shimmering as well.

The Emperor raised his arms in a wide "V", basking in the adulation of the crowd. "Any idea what kind of goodies he's got in mind to give out to the audience?" Max said to the half-kneeling Leen. Cementing the goodwill of the hometown constituency with large-scale Knitting gifts was another custom of the ages. Some poor country of indentured indigenes in some remote part of the continent would pay for it, to be sure, but of course the Empire was scarcely a believer in full citizenship, much less suffrage. Too, there were always the Living Mines to help equalize the balance sheets.

"I just hope it's not books," she told him.

The Emperor was now into his own peroration, a nimbus of lightning bolts crackling around him amid a stench of ozone that was causing coughing fits to break out in several spots around the platform. Phlinn Arol, in undoubted violation of some protocol, was edging back from the brink, his burnished aura dulling as he did so to make his retreat less obvious. He caught Max's eye with a quick glance over his shoulder, and shrugged; Max jiggled the pauldron of his plate mail in response. But indeed, Arznaak had apparently let the moment pass. *That* moment, anyway.

Now the Emperor was getting around to his own big payoff, the part where he'd demonstrate he was really the chosen of the gods and the elect of the Empire by performing the traditional prodigy. He lowered his arms, the electricity crackling out along his skin and balling around his hands, lowered them until he was encompassing the vast body of the Corpus of the Empire laid out on the parade ground floor, laid out so that if you squinted at it just right you'd stop seeing thousands of heads in matching costumes and start to perceive instead the prostrate figure of a perfectly proportioned colossus... a colossus that was now unmistakably starting to glow.

And then even if you *stopped* squinting, you *still* might see the same reclining giant, its eyes closed, its chest rising and falling a good twenty feet as it inhaled and expired. And then no one in the stadium was squinting - or doing anything but putting their full attention on the Corpus - for the person-mountain's eyes had now opened.

Twin light beams the equal of any lighthouse's beacon stabbed up into the sky, then swiveled down to fix in their glare the Emperor's stand as the apparition raised its head. The Emperor stared down the field at the hugely magnified reflection of his own visage and proclaimed, "I GIVE YOU THE LIVING EMPIRE!" and with a rumbling *THUDD!* that shook the stadium, raised a cloud of dust that obscured the field, and set the reviewing tower to swaying disconcertingly, the giant planted a hand behind itself for leverage and sat up at the waist.

"I thought this was supposed to be an *apparition*," said Shaa, his voice totally inaudible beneath the echoes crashing around the arena and the avalanche-style collapse of a section of interior retaining wall not far from him and the two gods' current position. He considered and quickly dismissed the idea of trying to get himself off the track and back to his feet; the ground was still rolling up and down, and from as much as could be seen through the rising dust cloud the manifest figure of the Imperial corpus had not yet achieved its own standing posture. Once up and ambulatory, of course, who knew what the Emperor had in mind for it.

The Corpus moved again and Shaa flew into the air, flipped end-over-end like a fried egg on the receiving end of an expert skillet-wielding chef playing to an audience, and came down flat on his back as the earth slammed up again to meet him. A shower of pebbles and small rocks cascaded over him from above. Was the adjacent section of seats seriously considering collapse? He could barely even see Gashanatantra, sprawled in similarly piscine fashion next to him, much less the bleachers, but if this latest seismic shock was the Corpus getting one foot beneath it, it was clear what would follow - another foot, and then ambulation. If there was any doubt about the structure now, these coming events would replace that with dead certainty. Of course, attempting to flee in the direction away from the potentially collapsing stands would lead one to the center of the parade field, which was not unoccupied itself, but then the Corpus would likely not be particularly concerned about eradicating every gnat rushing about beneath its feet.

He managed to grab Gashanatantra by the shoulder - a familiarity he hoped the god would not hold against him, under the circumstances - hollered, "Away from the wall!", and then, without waiting to see whether he was being followed, set off in a rubber-legged lope over the bounding field. Shaa figured he would only be able to proceed a short distance before running into the first of the massed legions of human corpus-constituents, no doubt disarranged from their ceremonial order... but actually, of course, that represented a larger and scarcely hypothetical question on its own.

The dust in the air obscured clear vision all the more so when trying to view the scene at ground level, but Shaa had the impression that at the very least the Bones of the Empire had been thrown to the dirt themselves. If the thing now considering its footing, its head even in its half-kneeling position at a level with the higher tiers, actually had mass, though, Shaa had a pretty good idea just where that mass had been drawn from. Mass, after all, could be neither created nor destroyed, although a clever practitioner could slip some from place to place behind his back, so to speak, but this amount of mass was something for which no mere prestidigitation

could fully account. If the Corpus *did* have mass, the most prodigious transfer-rate ever recorded would be insufficient to add up by several orders of magnitude. No, if the Corpus had mass it had come from the bodies of its constituents. And if *that* were the case... well, the Emperor-now-no-longer-designate, for all of his misguided vexations, had shown no signs of wanting to grind his staff and adherents into corn mash. Which lead one inexorably to the suspicion that if the Corpus *did* have mass...

...then the Emperor might not be the one in control.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" shouted Leen.

What she was referring to was scarcely in doubt. The looming face of the Corpus beyond the glare of its searchlight eye-beams had experienced a transformation that was more than a matter of a fresh expression. The features were clearly not those of the Emperor. They were those of the Scapula.

The tower was whipsawing back-and-forth violently enough for its survival to be in imminent doubt. Most all of its occupants were sprawled on the floor hanging on with breakneck grips to anything solid, and trying to stay out of the way of the cascading chairs and the wreckage of the buffet tables. Only the Emperor, at the highest point of the spire, had managed to retain his feet, and that by dint of a lean-rod behind him to which he was clutching with both hands.

Max could see the sweat pouring from the Emperor's face. Even Max, in his black plate armor, was starting to feel like a boiled lobster, and if those light rays the Corpus was giving off were intense enough to do that to *him*, a good twenty feet off their focus point, the Emperor had to be pretty much melting. *Serves him right*, Max thought.

A toppled chair moved aside just ahead of Max and Leen, and Phlinn Arol, having entirely shed his aura of golden radiance, crawled through the opening. "I've shut down and disconnected whatever I can," he said. "I believe I am free of contamination."

"Arznaak's after bigger fish," Max stated, "but then we always knew that. Now -"

The floor rebounded again. The tower leaned far over to the right. They heard a crash, a hubbub of extensive breakage, and then a chorus of human wails, declining in volume as though the makers of these sounds were disappearing down a shaft. The angle of the incoming light beams steepened. The Corpus was on its feet.

Max took the risk of looking up. Its shoulders topped the level of the highest stadium tiers, waving banners and all. Its feet had sunk into the thick earth of the parade ground deeply enough so that the midpoints of its ankles were even with the grass. It was wearing a toga-like garment that looped over one shoulder and left the other bare, and a fiery diadem around its brow. Its hands had been planted on its hips; now, they were being raised into the air, where they would no doubt disrupt migration patterns for birds.

"HEAR, O MY SUBJECTS!" said the colossus.

"What the hell kind of jury-rig cockeyed disaster did you put together here?" I demanded.

"Now just a damn minute," began Favored-of-the-Gods, about to spin himself out into another aggrieved tirade, "where do you come off sneaking in from the street, claiming to be resurrected or some kind of idiot story no one with half a brain would -"

"Favored," said Haddo, also for not nearly the first time, "up *shut*!"

"Fine!" yelled Favored, "fine! Be that way! Here I am working for the good of the world and -"

"Put a lid on it," I told him, "or I'll have to blast you or something." Of course, blasting folks was the last thing I wanted to start doing again. I'd had quite enough of that with Iskendarian, thank you. Now that I was Byron again, more or less, I thought it was past time to try *fixing* things for a change.

Which wasn't to say I was back to normal - as if anybody could say at this point what might be "normal" where I was concerned. It did seem that I'd freed myself of the self-inflicted though inadvertent wound that was Iskendarian, and I now knew who I'd been before *that*, and some things that had happened in the recent past now made a lot more sense, but that didn't mean all my memories had come back in an overwhelming flood or that I was even the same person I'd been when I'd been Byron before. I didn't have the same body as the original Byron, that was for certain, or to be more precise I probably *did* have the same body - I hadn't been regrown from a cell sample or had my brain transplanted or something drastic like that - but a crew of nanoremodelers or nanosurgeons or whatever they were calling them these days had been loose sometime in my Iskendarian-past. Most likely this had happened when the personality virus had gone after me; that would have made the most sense. I didn't remember enough details to remember if I'd included a shape-change module in with the virus - as I said, my memory was still coming back in spots and chunks - but it would have made sense. I was pretty sure that was the way my mind operated.

I'd been working on this personality virus idea, like I'd said, as one of several projects aimed in the long run at getting the world out of the situation I'd played a key role in getting it into. My clean-room technique must have gone sour on me, though, or perhaps I'd been the victim of sabotage - I hadn't exactly been a figure of great veneration by that time - but the bottom line was that my test system had gotten a jump and infected *me*.

I hadn't been left with no recourse, however. I'd been building in certain safeguards - that much was only standard good practice - and if they hadn't been enough to totally eradicate the pest that was Iskendarian and restore me to full knowledge and function, they had still managed eventually to tone him down and put him to sleep. The battle hadn't been one-sided, however. Iskendarian had left me with a violent antipathy for magic, designed I suppose to keep me away from techniques that might have healed things up once and for all. He had also managed somehow to redeploy some of his own code in the form of the Spell of Namelessness. So there I'd been, first comatose for who knew how long, being kept in fighting shape by the tight-leash nanodocs that were godhood's greatest perk, then awake enough to wander the world but not quite at the level of consciousness to realize I had no memory of a past and no identity but the stream of day-to-day. I didn't know where I'd be if I hadn't finally crossed paths with Gashanatantra.

Of course, Gash hadn't merely started to wake up me, Byron, but me, Iskendarian, too. There was a lot going on inside us that Iskendarian couldn't explain. In the manner of disoriented personalities everywhere, he'd started filling in back-details to try to make things make sense. That story he'd told me about deliberately imposing the Spell of Namelessness on himself to lie low until the fruition of some unspecified mysterious plan, for example, was cockeyed on its face. Since I now knew Iskendarian had been much more unstable in this instantiation than he'd been the first time around, I might have been able to reduce him to gibbering insensibility merely by forcing him face to face with mutually inconsistent facts... but I hadn't known that then, and in any case it hadn't been necessary. Byron-instincts filtering up through the Iskendarian-haze might have tipped me to that tactic, as they had apparently guided me to so much else, but now the problem was the Scapula's.

And whose problem was the Scapula?

Well, it was everybody's, of course, but I was the one on the spot with the possibility of doing something about him, if I could figure out just what Favored had pulled together here with his cross-rigging and counter-forcing and spaghetti-weaving. I'd already shut down the in-room intruder defenses on the system, true, so Favored couldn't be another one to stab me in the back with my own knife, but I didn't dare pull the plug on the Scapula until I had some idea which plug it was, and what else might be side-linked and deadfall booby-trapped to the same components. The more I tried to trace his work the more convoluted it became, and

me still running more on instinct than with a firm grounding in fact. I did have the advantage that I knew I had once known everything about this place. I also knew that an ideal of any sort of engineering was that final crystalline clarity to any elegant design. When you had the key, everything laid itself out logically and rationally, in clear order.

Unfortunately, I now knew as well that Favored-of-the-Gods was a tinkerer of the first rank. Here he'd been building on the accretion of the ages to boot, and on elements he didn't fully understand in the first place. He hadn't been looking for elegance, he'd been after something that worked. "I ain't telling you a thing," he was spouting now, as he watched me goggle at the monitoring readouts and try to put myself in his head. Then his glance - which I was watching myself out of the corner of my eye - slid off me and roved up to one of the live-video feed matrices on the panel above our heads. I looked in that direction myself, and saw Favored wince as he realized he'd called my attention to something he'd rather have left hidden.

So what was it? The images were coming from the Stadium of State where the Knitting was in progress, that was obvious enough, but then who was that monstrous and apparently solid figure planted in the middle of the parade ground with his hands raised? The one with -

- with the Scapula's face.

I grabbed Favored by the collar, lifted him off the floor, and shook him. Fortunately my own injuries were healing themselves more rapidly than was humanly possible; not surprising, actually, but it was nice to know my nanodocs were still on the job. They hadn't been able to fix the residual nausea and more than a touch of hangover from shedding Iskendarian, but I was happy to have the better part of my stamina and the use of all limbs back. I didn't bother to let Favored's teeth stop clattering against each other, though, before leaning into his face and shouting, "This has gone far enough! I want him shut down now! Either you do it, or I'm going to take down everything I can reach myself and damn the consequences! You hear me?"

But he was gazing past my shoulder at another panel, which he'd remapped to show what I'd figured to be the vital status indicators of the Scapula's captive gods, and the spreading Iskendarian virus within them.

"Hey, will you look at that!" Favored said. "He's draining them down to the dregs - he's really going for it! There's gotta be gods dropping dead from terminal exhaustion all over town."

"Yeah?" I said. "Why? What's he need all that power for, that he's gonna let it loose all in one binge? He -" He wouldn't do *that*, would he? But it was a Knitting, and it was time for the traditional Emperor's Gift, and the manifestation of the Corpus was in the hands of the Scapula rather than the Emperor whether or not the people realized it, and -

"Uh-oh," said Favored. "I didn't think he'd do that."

"Of that sound like do I not," I heard Haddo mumbling from beyond the glass. No question, I agreed with him.

"What?" I demanded.

"He's cast loose," Favored said. "He dropped out of the web."

"Does that mean -"

Favored looked at me, chewing his lip. "Even if I wanted to, yeah, I don't know what I could do any more to shut him down."

"Look at that mob," said Jurtan Mont. "How we ever going to get in there?"

"Leave that to me," Pod Dall said.

Did you bring a pry-bar? Jurtan thought. And it was scarcely clear either just what Pod Dall's goal would be if they did gain access to the overstuffed Stadium of State and its ongoing Knitting. *What* his goal would be - or *whom*. Pod Dall had listened to their recounting of current events and the active danger posed by the running-amok Scapula, but had been noncommittal. *He* had wanted to know about Gashanatantra. It was not clear whether their lack of information on that score had helped them or merely placed them on the list of expendables with no particular reason to live.

Pod Dall had seemed to have something of a soft spot for Dortonn, though, even if it hadn't been soft enough to help him out when he'd finally keeled over in a dead faint as they'd prepared to leave Vladimir's lair.

"He is a more hardy fighter than I had expected," Svin had said, eyeing Dortonn's body where it had slumped down the stairs from the carpeted dais. "I expected him to fall down hours ago."

Pod Dall had made them carry Dortonn back up to the longest couch and lay him out there, anyway, and indeed he *had* still been breathing, although he had not appeared to be any longer for this world than at the outset of the escapade. But Pod Dall's revenge would clearly not be stayed, so off they had gone.

"Who's *that*?" Jurtan said now, his music sense giving him such a symphonic blare of imminent warning that he could barely hear the outside world. It had been mounting as they'd approached the Stadium, but he'd had the feeling that any danger up ahead would pale against the hazard represented by Pod Dall himself if his immediate wishes were thwarted. If this guy was the peacemaker of the gods, Jurtan already knew he'd sure hate to meet whoever planned their fights.

But perhaps he was about to encounter that entity anyway, whatever his feelings in the matter. Svin and Pod Dall followed Jurtan's pointing finger, up, up, over the rim of the stadium, where the head and shoulders and upraised arms of a ferociously huge human figure were clearly visible, lit from below by torches and spotlights.

Pod Dall's eyes widened and he began muttering to himself under his breath, mutterings that included more than one discernible reference to the Scapula. It occurred to Jurtan to wonder how much of the mind of the original occupant of Pod Dall's current body was still hanging around; at the moment he was hearing more than a trace of the music that had accompanied the guy before, on their several meetings. What dealings had the man had with the Scapula, himself?

All told, it was looking like a pretty good time to get out of the vicinity, a time that might not last long, either. Between the giant haranguing the crowd and the nearer half of the city, Pod Dall with his steely-eyed glare, and Svin, who was simultaneously examining the colossus with a professional air, as though looking for critical points of vulnerability, and fingering the edge on his sword, Jurtan was definitely in the company of a crew of maniacs whose lunacy was clearly about to boil over. Then Pod Dall had him by the arm and was marching him resolutely forward. "You," said Pod Dall, "will listen, then play."

The manifestation of his brother had taken a few steps in the direction of the Emperor's tower in the course of its speech, Shaa noted, picking his way through the broken-field rubble left in its wake. That was probably just as well; Shaa wasn't sure at all he actually wanted to catch up with the thing, or what he would do if he did. Gnaw on its toe? In any case, the Corpus had to be a decoy; it would be quite surprising if Arznaak was actually inside. Parade around in public where he could be a target no one could miss? Not Arznaak, not bloody likely.

But he still had to be close enough to be controlling the thing. To keep leakage and the chance of interception to a minimum he was probably on a tight-link communications setup, which argued in turn (on the grounds of

greatest security, if nothing else) for line-of-sight. Now, of course, the thing had a line of sight to most of the city, but before, when it had been aggregating itself out of the assembled Imperial functionaries, that line would have terminated strictly within the stadium walls.

Shaa stopped and squinted around himself again. The dust was still swirling, still rising. With the amount of energy the hypothesized tight-beam would have to be carrying, and the amount of dust it would now be having to push itself through, was it too much to ask for a trail of scintillation?

Here came Gashanatantra now, coughing and rubbing his eyes and splashed to the knees and up to his shoulder with churned mud, fresh from not-quite-skirting a loam-caked hollow where the Corpus had planted its hand on its way to its feet. "Any ideas?" Shaa said to him.

"With this prodigious a waste of power normal rules may not apply," Gashanatantra yelled back. "What are you looking for up there in the sky?"

Shaa quickly explained. Gashanatantra craned his neck back and joined him in the scan.

Someone new humped their way up the muddy slope, looking in their caked-on and oozing demeanor more large earthworm than humanoid; Jardin. "He is using my power," Jardin gasped. "He is readying a curse-based spell."

"Where?" demanded Gashanatantra.

"Where the head was."

Shaa took off.

"He's cut off my links to the stuff buried under the stadium field, too," said Favored. "All the capacitors, the power reservoirs, the precursor vats -"

"To you cross-double is he about," spat Haddo.

"There's no way he could -" Favored began, wheeling on Haddo.

"Iskendarian," I said. "How much of the Iskendarian virus had infiltrated the Scapula before he dropped off the net?"

"I'm not sure what I was looking for," Favored said reluctantly. "Some, I guess."

"Do you know how to do a display rollback?" I said. "Here, look, like this - now what was your access sequence for that screen? Okay." The old status screen on the Scapula's thrall-network came back, I fine-tuned the sieve, and - there were signature traces of the Iskendarian infection wherever I looked. *There* - in the Scapula, too. And here I'd never even thought about network-wide contagion - I must have been doing *something* right when I'd designed that virus-thing. But how long did the Scapula have left before he realized he had to fight Iskendarian? Or for that matter, how long before Iskendarian was in control?

Now, I knew I must have put *some* kind of safeguards in the Iskendarian code. Hmm - I wondered if the Scapula had found out anything about the privileged subcarrier channel. How much did *Favored* know? - that might give me a clue. "Where did you stick the communications module?" I asked him.

I let him pick an option from one of his coded dialog screens and the second quantum level trunk status display popped up. Activity across the net was lower than I'd ever seen it - not surprisingly, considering that

most of the high-volume transmitters had melted down and any remaining others were wisely lying low. And the subcarrier burst bands, that the magical nanoeffectors used to talk to each other themselves?

"The hell is *that*?" hollered Favored, as the new splashy readouts stabilized. "Is that *magic* we're looking at?"

"Part of it," I told him. "'Magic' doesn't just happen, you know, something's got to do the work. Molecular-scale machines - any advanced-enough technology is indistinguishable from magic, I'm sure *you've* heard that, haven't you? And there's got to be a way for the systems to communicate, right? How else could you handle things like clairvoyance, or even this workstation being able to monitor what's happening clear across the city? We're not talking about witchcraft with this stuff, just cold engineering. Although I'll be damned if I know how they pull some of these new tricks."

Favored was now sort of shrinking back against the wall as he watched me work. "You really *did* build this stuff, didn't you? I mean - *somebody* built it, right?, that's what you're saying? I mean, there's technology from the past, sure, but - when you dig down to the roots magic's magic, it just *is* ... isn't it?"

"I would have thought you, of anyone, would be above those old superstitions," I said. "Of course I didn't do everything myself; there's a tremendous amount of work embedded in this stuff. But most of it before me was basic science that got put together into building blocks. I came in when there were already blocks to play with. You might also keep in mind the fact that I thought it was an abstract exercise. If I'd ever thought someone would dump my work directly into implementation I'd never have fooled around the way I did. I did things that directly violated the safeguards designed to keep the stuff from getting out of control."

"Like what?" Favored said weakly.

"Mutation, for one." It was interesting to hear myself talk. More than interesting, actually. It was like listening to someone else give a lecture on my own life. As these revelations came reeling out of dead storage and into the light of day they were also emerging into a realm where I could actually know them, rather than their being latent wisps of potential. "I didn't do too much hardware, per se; I was presented with a hypothetical substrate that I used as a basis for implementing an operating system, and then I did a lot of application programming on top of that. I *did* work out a lot of the user interface material and the spell compiler - you know, the way the machines could respond to incantations and so forth, translating user commands into internal reprogramming - but I got to thinking how interesting it could be if these programs could *evolve*. So I put together a system that treats program code like genetic code, letting program fragments transfer across nanomachines, mate, and recombine. Most of the time you'd get nothing, of course, but my models showed that there were enough 'occasionallys' that panned out to make things interesting. But that's exactly the sort of interesting stuff you don't want going on out in the real world. In software, anyway. Although in my defense I have to point out these concepts were already in the air when I started tinkering with them."

"How so?"

"I mean genetic engineering; *real* genetic engineering. Where do you think all you humanoids and nonhuman creatures came from? And why you can all interbreed, and we can breed with you too? Most species aren't more than few snips and twists away from human makeup in the first place."

Was I only one in the area who wasn't trailing their jaw down around their ankles? It was always difficult to tell with Haddo, but as slack as his hood looked I figured it wasn't too great a stretch to put his expression down as "incredulous" as well. To be truthful, I didn't know if I was any less confounded than the others, if perhaps a little less outraged. I might actually have gone a bit too far just now, telling them in such a conversational tone that they owed their existence to a few nips and tucks by a harebrained experimenter. Probably best to turn the conversation to something else. As it happened, something else was at hand. If -

"Why are you telling us this?" said Favored. "Are you planning to rub us out?"

"There's been enough skulking around in the dark as it's been," I said. "I don't care who knows any more. Except the Scapula - now *here* we go."

"What?"

I'd finally managed to trace Iskendarian to its Scapula instantiation using its subcarrier signature. Now I was infiltrating my code patches down the link - had to use a low-bandwidth packet to avoid alerting the recipient - but it shouldn't be -

"Huh," I said.

"*What?*"

I'd never seen anything like it - a humongous power surge, coming from the Scapula, no doubt, overloading everything in sight - the emergency cutouts in this workroom were kicking in but it was anybody's guess what his game was this time, and what would be left when the dust settled - or whether there'd be anything left *but* dust. All I could say was, "Hang on to your seat."

"I don't like the sound of this," said Leen. "Is he promising them *miracles?*"

"The amount of energy he's sloshing around," Max muttered, "he may actually be able to deliver." The Corpus itself was both source and consumer of more power flux than Max had ever heard of being deliberately wielded. Just producing the apparition of the Corpus - as was the expected case in your typical Knitting - was a reasonable feat. It left the assembled Imperial officeholders none the worse for wear, too, and uplifted through their contribution to the spectacle to boot. But welding together their bodies as the scaffolding for this man-mountain horror, with on top of them the cloaking illusion that made the Corpus seem to have one skin, one flesh, was waste on a massive scale, even if the Scapula hadn't been sucking their own life forces for an assist in their own destruction. Even if you didn't like bureaucrats, they weren't *all* useless, and surely no one deserved such a fate. Max didn't even want to think about those at the bottom, being ground into mush by the weight of the tons of mass atop them stretching up into the sky.

The Scapula had been one of them. To his other accomplishments he could now add elevating the taking of revenge on your coworkers to a wholly new plane. Presumably the multitudes on their feet in the stands venting acclamation at full volume had not yet realized this was anything different than the run-of-the-mill Knitting; presumably those who had had friends or relations on the field had no idea that their intimates had already perished or were likely to finish doing so in the next few moments. Presumably anyone left who understood what was happening had been standing by with the same impotent frustration as Max himself, trying and failing to think of some way to effectively oppose it.

But Leen was right; now Arznaak *was* promising miracles, too. The Corpus gestured, the ground around its feet heaved, and then the surface broke open and blasted itself up into the air. Great gouting geysers spouted up around the Corpus, as though it were the centerpiece in some titanic heroic fountain... but what was that material rising above the rim of the stadium, arcing outward but not even yet starting to descend? It didn't look like oil, or dirt, exactly; it seemed more gooey and iridescent than either, more like soap scum, perhaps - but now the topmost portion of the spout was churning and roiling, great clumps of the material separating themselves off and floating away as giant bubbles, others twisting themselves together and beginning to rain down... as water, apparently, but mixed in with this more typical rain was - *stuff?*

Leen and Phlinn and Max were already hiding under the chairs and staying far enough away from the edge to avoid being tossed over the side by another of the platform's frequent lurches and tremors, but under cover was now the right place to be for yet another reason, as the Scapula's promise of miracles made solid began pelting down from the sky - within the steaming rain a hail of coins, small jewels, chains and trinkets; just in front of Max a whole cooked turkey impacted on a soldier who had been crouched low trying to shield his head. The man fell over, knocked cold, as drumsticks flopped off to either side and stuffing cascaded down his back.

Then the decanting cornucopia tilted on its side and began to vibrate - *no*, Max realized, it wasn't what he was watching that was shaking, it was *him*, he was having some sort of a seizure - the storm of stuff wasn't the only thing Arznaak was sending out, on top of it was something magic, *pure* magic, a sleet of magic like the noise of a million people shouting at once into his ears -

Max felt his eyes bugging out. His head felt like it was getting ready to explode right off his shoulders from the overload of first and second level harmonics. Violet induction coils lashed through Max's personal protection field, he knew he was gibbering mindlessly beneath the widespread roar, and as his eyes whipped around most everyone on the platform seemed to be writhing themselves into a frenzy. Had the Scapula deliberately hit them up here with his full force, or was it like this everywhere across the city?

Not far away, a piano plunged from the heavens, plowed into a knot of squirming people, and continued through the floor in a wild clanging clamor of popping strings. A pervasive groaning and creaking and cracking became more apparent. Was the tower finally coming apart altogether?

"All right, already, Arznaak," Max found himself thinking. "Okay, you've won."

CHAPTER 21

SHAA COULD DETECT his brother's transmission beam; he could almost see it, even.

The rolling of the earth had subsided enough, for a moment, that he thought he might actually be able to reach the beam's point of origination, a squat camouflaged pillbox sort of thing that had popped itself out of the ground to about knee-high. Then had come the cavalcade of marvels.

It could have been worse. If Shaa had still occupied his location of half-a-minute before he would have been directly on top of one of the geysers gushing precursors and the rest of the grab-bag of stuff; indeed, he himself would either have found himself rendered for his constituents, or dropped whole on some startled housewife or fishmonger as an offering from the gods. He was also under the arc of the fountain, so that virtually all of the baggage descending from the heavens was falling no closer than the inner tier of the stadium, and much appeared to be descending beyond the stadium and perhaps even across the city.

Still, the assault of dry-goods was not the only barrage underway. The paroxysmal energy bloom rolled over him, making it feel like his very hair follicles were crackling with eldritch vigor. For whatever reason, though, it became apparent as he probed the surge field with his suddenly augmented power that he was within something of a shielded lobe; that most of this energy push was following the distribution of the horn of plenty, being directed outward at the spectators in the stadium and the city beyond.

All the more reason to presume his brother was near. Arznaak would naturally guard against some sort of feedback overload. His power surge would be affecting anyone who had any capability for magic - the more powerful you were, the more the potential for traumatic burnout, but there would be folks around the city whose abilities had been only latent who'd suddenly be finding themselves shooting flames out of their fingertips before they fell over in a crisp. He wouldn't want to fricassee himself, though - it appeared Arznaak wanted to be the only magic user of any ability whatever still left standing when he was done, as well as the only functional god.

But there wasn't any particular reason his brother should *always* get his way.

Shaa's own currently augmented energy stores wouldn't last forever; might as well use them. He gestured ahead of him. A cloud of force-lines appeared, spun themselves together into a gleaming silver discus, and zoomed off, condensing further and acquiring the sheen of a perfectly reflective mirror, skimming the ground and then pulling up and virtually screeching to a halt -

- directly in line with Arznaak's scintillating beam, an arm's-length in front of his pillbox.

Several things happened at more-or-less the same time.

The beam beyond the mirror winked out.

Shaa heard a muffled yet nonetheless familiar voice cry out from under the small pillbox and beneath the ground, followed by a zip-zip-CRACK! sound and a gout of steam from around the beam's lens-coupling; then the beam died.

Arznaak's power burst desynchronized and began to rapidly decay. The rain of curry-favor-with-the-masses trinkets began to lessen as well, although who knew how long it would take for the stuff already in flight to finish pattering down.

The Corpus took a look around, momentarily at a loss for words. Then Shaa could see it fix its gaze on the tower at the far end of the field and take a deliberate step in that direction, lowering its arm toward it and

opening its fingers as though to grasp the pinnacle for a firm handshake. Well, it had stood to reason that Arznaak would have left his golem with instructions in case communications were abruptly severed. It would be interesting to see how fast the thing began to atrophy.

If, that is, Arznaak was actually out of the picture. Gashanatantra had reached Shaa again, dragging a scorched-looking Jardin. For that matter, Gashanatantra didn't seem particularly healthy himself. Even this side-lobe radiation must have hit a god's augmented system with the same roasting fervor as being on the receiving end of a bolt of lightning. "Did you stop the transmission?" Gashanatantra gasped.

"Yes," Shaa said, "at least for the moment. That would make the next natural step the storming of the hideout."

"Shouldn't someone be going out there to fight that thing?" Phlinn Arol said nervously, as the Corpus fixed its gaze again on their position on the top of the tower and headed resolutely in their direction.

"Don't look at *me*," said Max, his voice rubbery, the rest of him still twanging like an elastic band. Was smoke coming out of his ears? But it was looking like high time to do *something* other than wait around for the Scapula's next move, though, even if that something was to jump.

"What's *that*?" said Leen. She was gazing off behind them and into the night sky above the rim of the stadium.

"What's -" Max began, wheeling around to see what she was talking about; in his obnoxious armor it was impossible to merely crank his head over to the side for a quick glance. By the time he had gotten his field of view over to see what Leen was goggling at, though, the answer was clear, and not unfamiliar either - a large black shadow against the stars, swelling rapidly, the ragged outline of feathered wingtips, a descending wattled claw, a -

"Hey! -" Max began again, just as it became obvious that the claw was descending straight toward *him*, and him alone, but before he could get any further the foot slugged him in the chest and his stomach fell out through his toes as the clawed talons snapped shut around his back and dragged him across the tilting floor and - just short of the guardrail- yanked him unceremoniously into the air. "You crazy idiot!-" Max gasped, "what do you think you're -"

Then the bird leaned over in a tight bank, flinging Max out sideways virtually parallel to the ground, and Max saw between his feet the hand of the Corpus, seemingly half as large as the bird itself, as it mashed its fingers together on the space it had obviously thought the bird would be occupying at that particular moment. From the block-sized foot sliding by far below, too, it was obvious that the bird was not taking their narrow escape to heart, either; quite the contrary, in fact, for it was wrapping itself into an even closer spin around the body of the Corpus. And here was the hand following them, not surprisingly, now trying to bat them out of the sky with the sort of flat-palm swat usually reserved by normal-sized folks for a mosquito.

The bird *was* the latest player to be out of its mind - that much was merely empirical evidence - but it plainly wasn't going to do Max any good to try to cure it, or put it out of its misery, either. The damn thing was squawking at him, too, and you didn't have to be Haddo and actually be able to hold two-way conversations with the creature to have a pretty good idea what it had in mind. Or how limited your options were if you wanted to do anything else. At least Max had a sword, although he might as well use it to run himself through for all the good it was going to do against Arznaak's runamok Corpus. Arznaak was too smart to leave the proverbial soft unguarded patch the size of a grapefruit where a single sword-stab could hit a vital ganglion and fell a construct the size of a small mountain.

So what was the vulture's plan? Wait for the thing to decay on its own and feast on the carrion? Maybe the bird did know carrion when it saw it, but it was not out of the question that under the circumstances it was

planning for Max to fill that role himself. The bird was gaining altitude now; it was still swooping around the Corpus' trunk as the Corpus kept twisting to try to keep it in sight. At least the bird was continually side-slipping out of the way of the Corpus' vigorous swipes, even if it was waiting for the last second to actually make its escape, and in the process it had succeeded - at least for the moment - in distracting the Corpus from its probable intent of tossing the tower over the bleachers and out of the stadium like a javelin. Of course, the bird might be straining for height merely to get the right angle for lobbing Max into the thing's mouth. It did not appear particularly likely that the Corpus had a gullet behind its mouth, or indeed anything in the way of internal structure or traditional organs, but then again the bird *was* crazy. And it *was* still a bird, after all.

On the other hand, there didn't seem to be much point in continuing the attempt to lie low. Max didn't think he could attract any more attention through a use of second-quantum level energies than he'd accumulated already. Arznaak might have been trying to burn out his magical abilities through his power pulse, but if he'd succeeded Max would probably be dead; time to find out how much residual capacity he had left. The toes of the bird were still wrapped firmly around his body, leaving his arms free, so he pointed with one of them at the arm of the Corpus, which happened to be trailing them astern at present, and activated a passive probe. Max felt the probe lock on, and when no retaliatory spell-forms came barreling down the line after him he boosted the gain and added an active interrogator. Diagnostics took shape around him, their level of detail augmented by proximity, revealing the structure of the animatory apparatus keeping the Corpus intact. The Corpus *was* clever work, with its mass of captive functionaries trapped in a supporting matrix that supplied motive power and the cloak of unity, clever - but apparently *decaying*. If he could desynchronize the timing of the stabilizer it might pull the finger out of the dike, so to speak...

With the bird squawking its enthusiastic approval, Max began to tinker. It was delicate work, not the sort of stuff you really wanted to be doing while hanging a few hundred feet in the air in the foot of a giant vulture while the object of your puttering tried to bash you into mush, but there it was; he was, after all, supposed to be a professional. It didn't seem wise to take more than a few seconds to set up the job, either. Max had determined that the Corpus was indeed operating on internal programming at the moment, but there was no telling when Arznaak might come back on line and deploy some of the anti-magic defenses Max had thus far been able to skirt. So - *wrap it up and send it off*, Max thought, and he yanked loose the originator cord and felt the package slide away.

The giant arm waving after them paused. The head of the Corpus skidded by, looking thoughtful, and then a ragged line of piercing silver sparks ran crossways down its face from its left eyebrow across the bridge of its nose past the corner of its mouth and around the angle of its jaw. More sparks burst loose on its chest, it took one step backward, and then its head and shoulders slumped downward a good twenty feet, like a balloon just getting underway with a solid leak.

That was not, in fact, far from the case. "Enough, already!" Max yelled at the bird. "Get us out of here!"

But instead the bird pulled up in the air, laid its wings back, and dove toward the head of the Corpus, its talons extended toward the thing's goggling eyes.

"Two can play at this game," I said. My words were perhaps robbed of their full impact, though, by the fact that my face was being ground into the floor by the chair that had ended up resting on my back with one of my arms wound through its understructure. One of my legs was trailing upward and it felt like my foot had become wedged somehow into the workstation's desk keyboard surface. Someone was moaning, too, but for a change it wasn't me; it sounded like a suddenly asthmatic Favored. When the Scapula's sorcerous tidal wave had hit, it had scrambled me to a fair-thee-well and shot my voluntary muscle control out from under me, but it had slammed into Favored with the impact of multiple hits from a rapid-fire crossbow. He'd gone down in a spasmodic heap and was now huddled under the neural-interface couch.

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen or heard anything from Haddo and Wroclaw, either.

I couldn't admire the Scapula's methods, or Favored's either, for whatever contribution to this mess had been his responsibility. Overloading the subcarrier channel through sheer excess was the solution of a brute with power to waste; scorching everyone who was expressing mitochondrial genes for magical latency was downright genocidal. It might be *literally* genocidal in the case of the nonhuman species, all of whom had the extra magic organelles woven into their cellular ultrastructure more as root constituents than the add-ons more characteristic of magic-capable humans. No, there were more refined ways to pound the world back to its pre-magical days. The genetic code was there to command lysozyme resorption of the magic organelles. For that matter, there was a targeted oncogene, too, and an autoimmune solution one of my associates had launched by retrovirus a few hundred years ago; it should certainly be established in the population by now. And -

- and I realized I was thinking about elegant and subtle ways to launch my own apocalypse that would put the Scapula's to shame. That shouldn't be necessary, though, at least to target anyone other than the Scapula himself. Even in that direction it might not be necessary. It might have been my imagination, but I'd thought the Scapula's pulse was going to keep on building instead of experiencing the abrupt decay and trough that had sucked me back into full awareness. Had my modifications to the Scapula's Iskendarian virus turned him into a living example of rigor mortis? Had someone else with paralytic intent made it to him first? Was he trying to suck in any counterattacks? Had he just burned out prematurely?

On the other hand, even if it was a question of choosing between subduing the Scapula or leaving him free to rampage again, I didn't know if I would try to use any of these tools that might be available to me. With the effect of the Scapula's blow still reverberating through the system who knew what might go awry; I could set loose a chain reaction that wouldn't stop until it had consumed... well, a *lot*, if not everything.

Even if the infrastructure wasn't messed up that could still happen.

But in any case the first thing to do was get my head back on the right side of my feet, and see if the workstation systems had come back enough to tell me what was going on. It was not quite as easy to do as say, however, for not only was my arm wound around the chair, both arm and chair were entwined with the walking stick Monoch, whom I was still wearing slung sidelong down my back. Maybe Favored would finish reviving himself in a timely enough hurry to be able to give me a hand. He was seeming more alive, anyway, even though what I could see of his skin through the chair appeared unnaturally wet and was sporting an unpleasantly greenish slime, and he was bubbling bright red froth through his nose and mouth during his respiration. He seemed to be mumbling, "Gotta change my name, gotta change my name," too.

"Favored!" I said.

One eye cracked open and swam blearily in my direction, completely injected with red. "I don't want to talk about it," he gurgled.

He wasn't going to be of much use, that was clear. I didn't want to try any sort of conjuration, either, even though I still felt tingly and invigorated from the Scapula's rapid-grow treatment, since on the one hand I didn't know what eddy loops and feedback circuits might be left in the system, either inadvertently or as deliberate mop-up weapons planned by Arznaak, and on the other hand I hadn't really shaken my anti-magic bent, whether it had been inculcated in me by Iskendarian or not. I thought it was past time to be trying things just to see what might happen.

There was a scrabbling sound behind the viewing-gallery window and a greenish clawing hand rose into view, followed by the sagging face of Wroclaw. If I kept craning my neck around to see what was going on while my nose and cheek still remained in intimate contact with the floor, though, I might end up frozen in an even

more unnatural position with no one but myself to blame for the crowning touch. I tried again to lever myself up from the floor with my free hand, simultaneously using my elevated leg as a pivot point to roll over to the side and tip the chair away from my back. This time I yanked with my entwined arm too, and between everything the chair slid free and crashed over onto the floor.

"Ow!" said the wincing Favored, covering his ear with his arm.

"Who was that?" I said.

"That was *me*," muttered Favored. "I was -"

"No, I thought I heard somebody new trying to clear their throat, or maybe just making one of those rattly noises down in their chest. There it is again."

A limp blackish dishrag had joined the wilted Wroclaw at the viewing window, but it hadn't seemed like the kind of sound Haddo would make, anyway.

"I didn't hear anything," Favored was saying, with surprising sharpness for all his woebegone appearance.

"Shut up and let me listen," I told him. I had gotten my leg free, too, in the process of relieving myself of the chair, and was sitting up on the floor with my back to the main console while I tried to get my bearings. But now I thought someone was saying, faintly and in a creaky voice, "Where am I and what am I doing here?"

"Anybody hear anything *that* time?" I said.

They all shook their heads, no. Was Iskendarian back? That was clearly the fear in Wroclaw's saggy-lidded eyes, at least, and with the shower of prodigies abroad in the land right at the moment the prospect could not be thoroughly discounted. But I -

Then I realized this voice was not the only new message impinging on my senses. There was a band of heat running diagonally down my back, heat accompanied by a tingling thrumming quiver, all these sensations coinciding with the position Monoch in his walking stick form currently occupied. I reached up and back and pulled him loose.

"What am I doing here?" said Monoch, now coming through much more clearly as I grasped his handgrip. "Where *am* I?" But - leaving aside for a moment the fact that the sword had never actually *spoken* before - that voice certainly didn't sound like any voice I'd have thought Monoch would use. It didn't sound like the voice of a sword at all; it was altogether too pleasant, that and too thoroughly *female*, too. It was also quite possibly a voice that was not exactly unfamiliar to me. In fact, it sounded like -

"Damn it," she said, "I'm in a *sword*! What am I doing in a sword?"

Gash had told me Monoch was a soul-drinker; he must have sucked her in while I was distracted and Byron and Iskendarian were playing out their struggle for control of our body. Now the Scapula's power surge had given enough of a jolt to let her emerge into consciousness.

"It's sort of a long story," I said, "and I doubt you're going to like it very much."

"To who talking you are?" creaked Haddo.

"Your late boss," I told him, "Ronibet Karlini."

"What was *that*?" said Tildamire Mont, flat on her back on the street, watching a few final blue sparks, the remnants of the brief tempest that had suddenly engulfed them, trickle off the tip of her nose and wiggle their ways footward along her body. Another small squid dropped out of the sky and draped its slimy mantle across her ankle. Next to her and still on his feet, her father batted another falling something-or-other out of the way with the flat of his sword. "Karlini?" She raised herself up and looked around for him.

Karlini was sprawled on the ground too, but he was unconscious again. Even with the sickly yellow cast of his exposed skin and the even brighter yellow in the white of his lolling eye, which she pulled back his eyelid to view in the light of the lantern, he still seemed happier to be rid of his sense than he had all day being awake. Whatever had just transpired surely had nothing direct to do with them; it would be as well to let him sleep -

"What's *that*?" the Lion said sharply.

Deep in the wreckage they were guarding, a pearly glow was seeping up out of the ground, enough of a glow to cast shadows upward amidst the remaining scorched beams. The light was shifting and waving, as though shining through a pool of rippling water, and the ground appeared to be... *bubbling*.

Tildamire yanked Karlini forward by the shoulders and began shaking him vigorously. "Karlini!" she yelled in his ear. "You better wake up and see this!"

"Allow me," said Gashanatantra, and with a wave of his hand the ground in front of them exploded into the air in a shower of churned mud and pulverized stone. *Picturesque*, thought Shaa as the mud glopped down around and on top of them, but the stroke for all its lack of moderation had been efficacious, for revealed before them, sunken into the earth with its hardened ceiling now peeled back in a large jagged hole, was what apparently had been his brother's hideout. Arznaak, however, was not personally in evidence.

With the volume of mud still slumping into the small pillbox, though, Arznaak could easily be swimming about beneath the surface. On the other hand, if the backlash from the severing of Arznaak's transmission link with the Corpus had been harsh enough he could be unconscious somewhere in the gloop, too, breathing the stuff with terminal intent into his lungs. Of course, Arznaak might no longer be anywhere in the vicinity; there must undoubtedly be an exit from the facility which he could have taken, conscious or not. Arranging for conveyance in the midst of adversity was characteristic of solid planning.

Given that Arznaak was still being as undetectable to Shaa's tentative probe as he had proved himself earlier, the manner of resolution for any of these possibilities was the same. A morose expression on his face, Shaa swung himself over the edge and slid feet-first into the bog.

The slime moved up his legs and past his waist before stopping halfway up his chest when his soles finally encountered solid floor. The chamber was small, perhaps ten feet on a side, and square, and the surface of the mud was showing no indication of someone breast-stroking about beneath it. Moving as quickly as possible across the floor, which considering the adhesive effect of the sludge was not quickly at all, Shaa encountered first (amidst the more solid clumps of dirt within the mud and the rubble from the traumatically ruptured roof) an overturned and splintered chair, and finally, set into the far wall with the curve of its top edge barely peeping above the mud, an exit hatch, closed and dogged and tingling to the touch with guardian energies.

"Did you find the body?" Gashanatantra shouted down at him from his perch on the ground above.

"I'm afraid not," said Shaa, backing away across the floor from the hatch, careful to avoid tripping over the submerged chair. "Perhaps you would be good enough to pry open the door in that wall, preferable without shredding me in the process."

Gashanatantra let fly. His effort this time was rather more modulated, however, Shaa was pleased to see, and so rather than finding himself separated into an assortment of smaller pieces (which had of course been a distinct possibility) he was instead watching the basin of muck slump away from him through the punched-through door into whatever passage lay beyond. Watching, and feeling the viscous pull himself, so having little alternative he let himself be dragged forward.

Ten feet or so into the dark tunnel beyond the door the mud had subsided enough for Shaa to easily squelch his way free of it and continue carefully ahead. The sides of the passage could be brushed without fully extending his arms, and if the low ceiling had not already been swept free of dangling cobwebs by someone's earlier traversal Shaa knew he would have been well-festooned in no time at all. The shaft ran straight back under the stands, and although it would undoubtedly angle up at some point to burrow up from the sunken level of the parade ground Shaa had not yet reached that location as he hurried along when he found himself stifling a yawn, his eyelids growing suddenly heavy. It *was* after midnight, and the last days had been characterized by a frenzy of activity at all hours and with precious little diversion for sleep, but still it scarcely seemed an appropriate moment for a nap. Behind the still-cascading roar of the crowd he suddenly thought he distinguished the barely musical skirl of a pipe somewhat closer to hand.

A pipe?

Feeling increasingly sluggish and clouded of thought, Shaa dug furiously in his pockets. Surely he still had them; surely they had not slipped out during one mad scramble or another; surely they were not buried with so much else beneath the mud of the parade-ground field - ah! *here* they were! - fouled with soggy grime no less so than the rest of him, but it was not a moment to stand on fastidious ceremony, he thought, cramming the plugs deep into his ears.

There was light up ahead now, too, actually in fact ahead and *above*, spilling down through a vertical shaft and picking out a strange latticework of intersecting lines; a circular stair, that was it, coiling itself upward toward the unquestionable sound of Jurtan Mont. Shaa began to creep carefully forward again, then paused, as he heard from behind him another rapid squelching of muck-laden footwear, turning from a deliberate jog to an erratic wobble, followed by Gashanatantra's spacy utterance, heard distantly through the earplugs, of, "What - what is that?"

"Cover your ears," Shaa hissed, watching the shadows shift at the base of the stair as someone came down it toward them. There were at least two of them moving, the one with the lantern and another one advancing below - and now that the light was becoming more distinct it became clear that there was another person in sight as well, this one slumped at the base of the staircase with his upper body trailing upward along the lowest curve. If one of the folks advancing down the stair was Jurtan Mont, it seemed likely the other would be Svin, and - leaving aside totally the matter of what they were doing *here*, and what had become of Dortonn along the way - it seemed reasonable to hypothesize that the fallen form at the bottom was that of his own erstwhile brother.

Shaa edged forward as behind him Gashanatantra's efforts to block out his ears seemed to be proving inadequate to the need, judging by the clatter of him sliding limply to the ground. Shaa was almost at the upward branch of the tunnel when he realized, virtually simultaneously, several things.

First, the person reclining on the stairs was indeed his brother Arznaak; rather than displaying the usual limp and splayed posture of someone who had just encountered the music of Jurtan Mont unprepared, though, he appeared to demonstrate instead the rigidity of a cataleptic fit, complete to the rictus of open eyelids and eyeballs tilted firmly back. Second, as the people above descended the last coil and drew into sight, the first was indeed revealed to be Svin and the second - bearing both lantern and flute - was Jurtan Mont. There was, however, following just behind Jurtan Mont, a third.

"Stop the music," this man commanded, adding a peremptory wave of his hand. He pushed past Jurtan and Svin, sparing barely a glance at Arznaak and his convincing imitation (however premature) of rigor mortis, and gazed instead past Shaa down the tunnel, where Gashanatantra, legs splayed on the floor, was leaning against the wall with the more characteristically groggy and slack-jawed expression of the Jurtan Mont-inflicted. A fairly unpleasant grin spreading across his face, the man advanced toward Gashanatantra and stood over him, his arms folded across his chest.

"So," said the man, "Gashanatantra. I understand I have you to thank for spending quite an excessive amount of time inside a ring."

The bird dove at the Corpus, its talons outstretched toward the giant eyes. Max, still grasped firmly within the other set of matching claws, pulled up his legs and tried to brace himself for impact. The Corpus was watching them come in with a singularly vague and disinterested expression. Its aspect was not necessarily so surprising when you considered that its cloak of Knitting was in the process of shredding itself apart ever more rapidly, the gouts of silver sparks chasing up and down around its skin like seam lines ripping away on an overstuffed pillow. Widening gaps were opening up in some places where the silver lines were pulling away from each other; in other spots the silver burnout effect was licking back along the skin itself, consuming it in vast sheets of shimmering flame that left a sparkling residue swirling like dust in the air. Along the seams and beneath the swaths could now be glimpsed the surface layer of packed bodies, wrapped around each other in contorted poses, some clearly in broken postures incompatible with life, their Knitting finery now tatters and rags stained liberally with blood, others clawing feebly for the open air, and a few (not yet the full avalanche that would obviously soon be seen) falling free of the matrix and beginning their tumbling trajectories toward the earth far too far below. With the bird executing its currently suicidal and unnecessary mission, Max fully expected to be joining them within the next few seconds.

But then the looming right eye focussed on them. Some residual trace of its basic operational reflexes made the Corpus take a half-step back; then, as the bird shrieked at it for good measure, it lurched away again, its head rearing back even faster than the body as it tried to get its face away from the imminent danger, the vast arms again coming up behind them and the hands bending in

- when all at once the head jerked back and disappeared.

It had not of course actually *disappeared*, Max realized; what had happened instead was that the uncoordinated Corpus had simultaneously lost its balance and gone over backward, pulling its head rapidly earthward on its whip-lashing neck, and its feet (though still embedded to a good depth in the ground) had slipped out ahead, where they were now plowing two huge furrows through the field and sending tons of loam into the already well-clogged air.

Perhaps some of the captive Imperial functionaries making up the main mass of the Corpus would have a greater chance of surviving when the thing hit the ground, compared to the likely outcome of descending a hundred feet or so in free-fall, but by the same token those on the Corpus' back were about to become nothing but thin-smeared marmalade. As for the stadium itself...

The bird had begun to flatten out its dive as the Corpus executed its massive seconds-long topple toward the ground, but had given off its ferocious squawking, and so Max had a chance for a quick glance around without the distraction of having his ears blown out at close range yet again. So it was that he caught the sight of one of the Corpus' sliding feet, not yet significantly retarded by the fifty-foot earthen berm it had already shoved away from it, moving inexorably in a straight path that would shortly take it directly through the base of the Emperor's observation tower. "BIRD!" Max yelled, and somehow the creature seemed this time to hear and agree, for it stood up on a wing and came out of its tight wheel driving hard for the end of the field.

Then, with a titanic rumble that seemed synonymous with the crack of doom, the remains of the Corpus slammed into the earth.

The surface of the field seemed to leap straight up in the air as the shockwave dashed outward toward the stands. The rising mud and dust did not completely obscure from view the network of fissures radiating from the long canyon the impact of the Corpus' body had spontaneously hollowed out. The Corpus was still splitting apart, too, revealing a dense concoction of gore and carnage that was already mixing its own cloud of spurting red with the flying mud. It could not have been much more than a second after the impact, for all the time-slowness effect of viewing at first hand a great calamity, before the shockwave reached the front of the bleachers.

More dust rose. With the glacially slow movement that signals the onset of a great avalanche, the northern stands began to crumple toward the parade ground, first the field-box tier, then the middle, and so on up toward the top, seats and benches and shrieking masses rolling and tumbling until they were lost beneath the billowing dust. Perhaps other sections of stands were going down as well; perhaps the entire stadium was in the process of collapsing inward; but Max's attention was now fixed on the tower - or rather on the remains of the tower, for although the fall of the Corpus had arrested the slide of the foot at the limit of its outstretched leg just shy of the tower's base, the mass of the hill it had pushed ahead of itself had been enough to crack the tower in at least one spot below the center-point, and as a result the observation deck (impelled in addition by the large-amplitude tremors wracking the field) was spinning on its axis as it crashed down the snapping length of its ruptured pylon.

Max activated his second-quantum level vision apparatus as the bird glided slowly overhead, banking sharply to avoid the eastern bleachers and come around again for another pass. Roughly in the center of the wreckage of the observation level spread out across the top of the Corpus' substantial hill Max had seen the yellow-green glow of a fully-activated personal protection field; the Emperor's, most likely. Various other colors sparkled around it; here a cross-hatched pulsing that was probably some sort of amulet, there the fading orange of another protection field taxed beyond its limits, but *there* - in just about the right place, too - was the gold radiance of a god.

The bird came in low and slow and released him. Max crashed down fifteen feet, his usual litheness deserting him in the ridiculous black armor, but he managed not to break his ankle or land on anyone's head in the process, or at least not on anyone who was in a condition to protest. He straightened up and shoved aside a pile of bashed-in chairs.

The gold shell revealed under the rubble contracted and faded out. Phlinn Arol, in an approximately fetal position, looked up at Max over his shoulder. Even with his protection field obviously jacked up to its maximum level, Phlinn Arol still appeared exceptionally haggard, not to mention the blood running freely from his nose and ears. His mouth was a bright frothy red and the whites of his eyes had gone entirely crimson. Still, he was clearly alive, a fact underlined when he sat up in a slow series of jerks, extending his hand back down to whoever he had been further protecting beneath his body and within the extended cushion of his shield. Leen came into sight, holding her head with her free hand. Whether the blood on Leen was her own or Phlinn Arol's was not immediately apparent.

"I believe the blood is mine," Phlinn Arol gargled to Max. "I didn't want to survive all this only to have you hunt me down and cut off my head."

"Good thinking," Max told him. "You okay?"

Before either of them could answer, the ground shook again, and a section of structure not far away detached itself and went rolling away down the side of the hill.

"Down?" Leen said, deciding not to climb all the way to her feet. "Or up?"

"Let me check out up," said Max. "Be right back." He clambered his way over a knot of groaning Imperial guards, that decaying greenish-yellow glow beckoning the way to the highest point. Kicking aside an errant banquet table bearing only the stained remains of the refreshments it had recently displayed, the source of the radiance was revealed.

The Emperor was lying on his back, his arms outstretched, thoroughly dazed. Max creaked over to him, realizing that his black armor's chest plate had been pretty well cracked in by the grasp of the bird. The Emperor rolled his eye at Max as he loomed overhead, and made a gargling sound.

"Yeah," Max said to him, "so what *about* those terrorists?"

That must have been the Corpus, thought Shaa, watching the wood and iron scrap that was the remains of the circular staircase continue collapsing in front of him down the vertical shaft that was the exit from the tunnel. The horizontal section of the underground passage he had traversed a mere moment before was clogged with rocks and earth a few paces back, and for all anyone knew could have pancaked the whole way out to its start. It was quite annoying to have the whole long business grind to its climax in such a base manner, lacking all subtlety and grace, distinguished solely by a surfeit of mindless action, but there you were; and on the other hand it was not at all clear that all the climaxes had already been performed.

"If anyone has a plan," said Shaa, "this would be a reasonable time to reveal it."

Actually, the situation might not be as bad as all that. Svin, who had been here a moment before, was now gone, which meant he must have found a way down into the tunnel, which meant that the tunnel had *not* collapsed, not completely, anyway, although sections of the ceiling had clearly come down when the seismic shock had rolled through, and other areas were undoubtedly weakened and awaiting their chance to do likewise. Since that had also been the direction of the earthquake's epicenter conditions were likely to be worse further along.

Not as much worse as they were ahead of him, though, where the circular staircase *had* largely fallen in. It was impossible to worm one's way through the mangled wreckage to determine the condition of the vertical exit shaft itself. Still, lacking the always-pending development of a practical mode of levitation, whose realization seemed all the more distant given the current state of collapse of the magical environment, and lacking as well the services of a professional mountaineer, even if they could reach the chimney shaft and even if it did not immediately afterwards cascade down around their ears, there wasn't much they could do but stand at the bottom craning their necks up at the sky. And then, of course, there was also the matter of the cast of characters they had here on hand.

This active cast was fewer in number than it had been even several minutes ago. In the brief moment that Shaa had had to examine his brother before the earth began to shake and the premonitory rumble of the circular staircase pulling itself free of its moorings in the rocks had led Svin to yank him clear with one huge grab-and-throw, it had been apparent that Arznaak was suffering from insults to multiple systems. Arznaak's skin demonstrated widespread burns and surface trauma consistent with backblast from his own power beam being reflected onto him. The more significant affliction, however, and presumably the one that had brought him down in a seizure state alternating between rigor mortis-style rigidity, widespread clonic tremors, and primitive reflexes of forebrain-release characteristic, all beneath a face-full of writhing muscles of expression and rolling, vacant eyes, was whatever malign force was wracking his brain. It was mild to say Arznaak had no shortage of enemies, though, especially when one incorporated into their number not only the full roster of extant gods, however short that list might be, but the surviving population of Peridol to boot. Shaa was

perfectly happy to have yielded the right of *coup de grace* to whichever one had laid him low. Of course, Shaa had been the one to be standing mere feet away as whatever remained of his brother had been entombed beneath a rain of stair risers intermixed with what was undoubtedly tons of wrought-iron supporting structure.

For some reason, Shaa could not find it in himself to dig him out. *So perishes another solemn vow*, he mused. Yet in this at least Max had been clearly right; Shaa's father had had no business demanding such a deathbed oath in the first place. Shaa had been free to acknowledge that it had not been inappropriate for he himself to share the blame. Romantic notions of chivalry totally unreciprocated by their beneficiary had no place in their scurrilous modern world, replete as it was with all manner of chicanery, venality, and downright backstabbing cussedness. But now Arznaak was off the table, oath or no oath, and even if their father had been around to do something about it, even he might have been able to see the consequences that had flowed from his irrational coddling of his eldest son. In any case, it was not worth losing sleep over.

Which meant, of course, that Shaa well knew he had plenty of late nights and bleary-eyed mornings to which to look forward, the rightness of the situation notwithstanding. That would do for later, however - and would also demand that he get on in the meantime with the matter of *surviving*, in order to have the option of sleepless nights to come. There was still the business of the two members of that small band of god-survivors who happened to be doing their own surviving at the moment in their midst, and were attempting to resolve between them the question of whether their ranks were about to be reduced by yet another one.

Gashanatantra had shaken off the aftereffects of Jurtan Mont as well as a first-timer could typically hope, which meant that even without the upheaval of the earthquake, the ear-boggling collapse of the staircase, and a section of tunnel ceiling just above his head coming down on top of it, he would have been somewhat addled and lethargic for a few moments yet to come. Instead, Shaa observed him to have been simultaneously invigorated by the adrenaline rush and scrambled by the environmental convulsions. At least Gashanatantra had been sufficiently oriented to begin digging his way out, and having been in the shielded lobe at the time of Arznaak's power pulse he still had the strength to make a good show of it. Of course, having Shaa, Svin, and Jurtan Mont available to shift rocks and earth from the other end had unquestionably been essential to his escape from asphyxiation.

Pod Dall, on the other hand, for all his pointedly menacing remarks to Gashanatantra seconds before, had fared in all regards worse. Whether due to his traumatic reincorporation in a body near death (more Arznaak here, without a doubt, from the story highlights Jurtan Mont had hissed to him during the moving of earth), his debilitation from his sojourn in the ring, the effect of Arznaak's overload pulse, some unrevealed chicanery of Gashanatantra's (which could scarcely be ruled out), or any number of factors together, he had gone down beneath the cascade of earth and had not budged again. Even after he had been dragged free of the fall by a fortuitously protruding digit, gasping stentoriously, he gave every appearance of being out for a fairly long count.

"Well," said Gashanatantra, brushing clods of dirt from his hair and staring down at his fallen colleague, "I suppose that's that."

"Will you kill him now?" Svin asked.

"No," Gashanatantra said thoughtfully. "I think there's been a bit too much of that lately, don't you?"

"He seemed ready to kill *you*!," Jurtan Mont pointed out.

"Yes, well," said Gashanatantra, "I think he was only having his fun. I could have most likely talked him out of it."

There was more to it than that, Shaa knew. From the available evidence the two of them might represent a

significant proportion of the gods left alive. Depending on just how much damage Arznaak had caused, every last one of them might need to stand together before too long. Shaa noted Gashanatantra now eyeing *him*, of all people. Shaa cocked a noncommittal eyebrow, which Gashanatantra answered with an almost imperceptible dip of his head. "Whatever the case," Shaa reiterated, "might I propose exit from this place, before the option is removed utterly from us?"

"This way?" said Svin, his voice echoing back down the tunnel toward them.

"Is it passable?" Shaa called after him.

"So far," shouted Svin.

"Yes?" Shaa said, now addressing Jurtan Mont, who had assumed his accustomed posture of attentive listening.

"What? Oh, yeah. The tunnel sounds best."

"Hm," mused Shaa. "More evidence for a different modality, unmediated by the standard infrastructure." Jurtan had said he was hearing a heavy overlay of static, but his music sense all told was remarkably unaffected by the disruption to the magical ether. "Let us go, then," he continued, "while the going is as good as it is likely to get."

Gashanatantra hefted Pod Dall over his shoulder in what Shaa deemed a reasonable act of camaraderie and they set off down the tunnel, Svin leading the way from somewhere up ahead and Jurtan Mont monitoring whatever extrasensory channels he was prone to frequent. In the event, the tunnel's condition was not too terrible, meaning that although earth and rock-fall were frequent there was no obstacle that they could not traverse with reasonable alacrity. Sooner than Shaa had expected they had already entered the region of sludge that implied they were close to the exit. He even allowed himself the momentary fantasy that this might in fact be the ending of the whole long business, that all that might remain would be some cleaning up and sorting out, and perhaps a few days off in the sun somewhere.

These pleasant reveries accompanied him through the sludge and the clamber up onto the field, where they passed quickly and firmly into memory, as Shaa had expected of them. As they surveyed the situation, Jurtan Mont came up beside Shaa, cocking his ear.

Through the static, Jurtan thought he was hearing another familiar theme. He squinted off across the field, beyond the mounds of bodies and the lakes of gore and the writhing injured, to the heap of wreckage atop an apparently fresh hill, and the people making their way down it. "Look!" he said, pointing. "In that dark armor, with his head free. Isn't that Max?"

"This thing has bit the dust," I said, sliding my chair back from the workstation console. Favored had managed to bypass the cutouts, and in any case no one had ever anticipated a maneuver such as Arznaak had just pulled; his power pulse had fried everything sensitive that was online to any element of the gods' infrastructure, a category that was bound to include a fair number of brains as well as the burned-out systems in front of me. If it hadn't cut out when it had, probably because the modified Iskendarian virus had shut Arznaak down from within, there wouldn't have been a magic user with any more processing power in their head than a rabbit anywhere closer than five hundred miles.

There was still too much noise and static on the modalities I could access directly to punch through to anything with decent information content, or to retrieve any news that might be out there either. Nevertheless, I had the nasty feeling there could be nasty things sprouting all over the place; you don't spontaneously supercharge everything in sight and assume they're all going to sit there saying "Ooh! How interesting!" while

they wait for the cows to come home. Potions, for example, especially those produced in bulk plants in industrial quantities, had a tendency toward instability even under everyday conditions. They could be blowing their vats sky-high for all we knew down here, or worse - potentially much worse - they could be reacting and recombining and mutating into stuff that would never consent to seeing the inside of a vat again.

Whether there was any chance of counteracting the situation - or more precisely the thousand different situations that were probably evolving out there even as I sat thinking - was highly questionable. Even if I had the superuser equipment to start tinkering with the overrides and common carrier controls and the general guts of the system, or triggering the waiting oncogenes or retroviruses or other biologicals, I might be able to do nothing but make the general predicament worse.

The system I'd set up all those years ago wasn't the only possible modality that could influence affairs, either. To meddle directly by rolling up sleeves and plunging arms into the guts would be cruder and rawer and less effective than working through the transformers and facilitator channels, but the world out there wouldn't wait. Anything that had survived the assault on the infrastructure would already be exploiting any alternatives.

For the first time since the beginning I had begun to think seriously about the autokill self-destruct option. But I'd still need to get to an operational workstation, one that had been off-line during Arznaak's pulse and that hadn't had its cutouts tampered with. "Anybody know the fastest way to get to the Archives from here?" I asked.

Tildamire Mont hadn't been certain Karlini *was* actually going to wake up, and when he did start to move it was with his eyes rolled back and his arms and legs jerking spasmodically, and when the seizure had stopped and she and the Lion had gotten him turned over so he could finish vomiting without asphyxiation and he opened his eyes for real, blood still running out of his ear, and his face and eyes as red as if he'd been run head-first into a freshly painted wall, well, by then the reason she'd wanted to so urgently get him sensible had advanced far beyond a curiosity into a clearly significant hazard.

She didn't know if she'd ever been so aware of the movement of air. There was a slight breeze, and it was blowing away from them, which meant that the material that had come foaming up from the ground under the wreckage of the laboratory and was now having its top layers wafted away by the wind in streamers of bubbles was heading in the other direction rather than settling over their own heads. In the glow of the streetlights and the illumination from the Knitting celebration fireworks that were still occasionally going off overhead the stuff had an oily sheen and was a particularly dingy shade of gray as well; it looked overall like the sludge left in the laundry barrel after the clothes were clean. Its scummy appearance was not especially cheerful, but it wasn't notably ominous either. The menacing character came from what the stuff was doing: it wasn't merely coating the surfaces of the obstacles it encountered in its path, it seemed to be *sinking into* them, penetrating, being absorbed. It was unclear what happened to the obstacles next. It was thoroughly clear to Tildamire, however, that she didn't want that stuff infiltrating *her*.

"That looks bad," said the Lion.

"Have you ever seen anything like it, Dad?" Tildamire asked.

"No," the Lion told her. "But I learned a long time ago never to trust anything escaped from a vat. Gray goos are bad business."

Karlini made a gurgly sort of sound. Had there been a word in there, perhaps with the inflection of a question? He was up now on his hands and knees, his head hanging down toward the ground, but he *was* shaking his head as though trying to clear it, and if his eye, when he rolled his face far enough to the side to peer up at Tildamire, was not completely focussed or any less bleary, it was still no longer the empty vacant blank that had been the case a few moments before. He gargled again, and this time his utterance sounded more like

"Goo?"

The Lion grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, hoisted him to his feet, and pointed him at the mounting foam. Karlini stared for a moment, at the mound of ooze in the wreckage, already easily twice their height, at the sheen covering the buildings behind it, and at the waving sheets of foam sailing off down the alley and over the tops of the structures and out of sight. "Damn," Karlini said.

"Can you stop it?" said Tildamire. "Or kill it? Or whatever?"

Karlini raised a limp hand, looked at it, then forced his fingers into some sort of spell-sign. A sickly green wisp puffed out of his fingertips and faded out, and at the same Karlini uttered an involuntary grunt of pain, as though someone had punched him in the stomach. "Lemme sit down," he mumbled at the Lion.

"No," the Lion said. "Go ahead and kill the slime first."

"I can't," Karlini said, sagging even more.

"What the hell kind of talk is *that*?" snarled the Lion, with the look of someone who is just about to wallop his conversational partner over the head.

"Burnout," mouthed Karlini. "Power pulse hit hard. Can't probe - remote sensing channels are out. Can't call for help - carriers are down. Magic's useless till things settle down, maybe longer than that."

"Arr!" the Lion growled, and shook Karlini hard enough to make his teeth actually rattle. So that really *could* happen - Tildamire had always thought it just a colorful turn of phrase.

"Dad," she said, "that's not going to help anything. Karlini, is that bubbly stuff what I think it is? The material from Roni's vats alive and growing again?"

"Hoped it was all dead," Karlini mumbled. "Couldn't detect anything. Must have been *almost* dead, must have been only a few drops of it dripped down into a crack in the ground, saved it getting sterilized by the fire. Would have finished dying if that power pulse hadn't come through, give it a major transfusion. Burnout for me, energy to grow for it. Should have died out of the vats anyway, lacked essential nutrients - *told* Roni not to let them mutate."

Magic-generating organisms, Tildamire thought. *Magic-using* organisms. Each one of them might be too small to see, but put enough of them together... "But Roni was developing them as *tools*, right? To respond to your commands, something you could tell to do spells on its own instead of having to do it all yourself, right? So why not command them, tell them to kill themselves off?"

"They're not listening. Must have mutated, must have gotten rid of the self-destruct -"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," said the Lion. "They're *magic*. Magic's your job. *I* can't cut it with a sword, it's *goo*. So start doing *your* job. Shaa thought you could handle it or he wouldn't have sent you. You said fire kills it? Then let's start lighting off buildings. Somebody's got to stop it. That stuff's got to be dangerous."

Before Karlini was able to respond, a bat came toward them into the nearest light, the paper-dry rustle of its wings erratic and its flight path lurching, until abruptly it careened head-first into the light standard with an audible thwack and fell limply to the ground. The bat's skin had blotches of an iridescent sheen, and through its skin, the bones seemed to glow a pale yellow. "Why does that thing still look like it's moving?" said Tildamire.

It wasn't moving, not exactly, but areas of its skin did appear to be...*foaming*. "Let's get out of here," said Karlini. "*Now*."

CHAPTER 22

"SOMETHING'S HAPPENING OUT THERE," said Max, as they jogged and weaved down the alley, "something that's not good. I can feel it."

"How?" said Leen. "How can you feel it?"

"Intuition," Max told her. "That pulse of Arznaak's was bad medicine, the kind of thing that sets off chain reactions nobody can see the end of."

The exit from their current alley came into view around another twist, and they saw yet another wider street filled with yelling, shrieking, stampeding people. The revelry of the past several days had now clearly tilted over from the riotousness of celebration to the riot of panic; it was now no news to anyone in the area that the gods had been at each others' throats in their very midst, and that the general public had been placed on the playing field themselves. The hysteria was being spread by the realization that the imminent fate of the masses was not merely a matter of the dire threats of folklore or even the cautionary tales of ancient history, of the collapse of empires or the devastation of continents; no, the casualties in the midst of the city - at the Knitting itself - were plainly in the thousands, and blood-soaked but still ambulatory victims were spreading the graphic image in their flight across the city away from the stadium.

As if that were not message enough, the rain of prodigies from the sky had not entirely ceased either, and the evidence of its landing was impossible to overlook, whether it took the form of a thirty-foot boulder freshly embedded in a ripple-edged crater straddling a boulevard and an adjoining building, surrounded by what must have been a lethal spray of cobblestones; or a fishing net still slick with sea-wrack and crammed with expiring skipjack; or the numerous structures along the streets with their roofs caved in and flames mounting through the shattered beams; or the rampant evidence of wild sorceries, uncontained and uncontrolled, their control logics scrambled and even the characteristics of their manifestation transformed. The wizard lights, for example, so common a feature of Peridol's streets as to be unremarkable, had now become a constellation of miniature suns, comets, flares, and diving torches, any of which might unexpectedly swoop down from the sky and explode into a building or pounce incidentally on an unlucky pedestrian, burning their skin or blinding their eyes or - as in several cases they had passed - immolating the victim in a spontaneous sooty pyre.

Max and Shaa and Phlinn Arol, each of whose power was still reasonably intact due to the shielding effect of their proximity to Arznaak's inner lobe, and whose minds had not been reduced to mush in the manner of so many others they had passed, without obvious wounds yet still crumpled on the pavement or clawing at their eyes or baying at the sky, drooling with dedication and incoherence covering their expressions, had been maintaining a common shield over the group. This barrier had not been subjected to direct attack but had been proving effective in deflecting the swooping passes of errant aerial hazards. Svin's sword had been equally convincing for those hazards of a more concrete nature.

Svin, in the lead now, slowed at the alley's exit and leaned out into the street. Even in the midst of flight, it was prudent to look ahead to see if you were rushing into something worse; after all, the throng trampling ahead of them might be in active flight from some fresh immediate menace. Indeed, almost as soon as the two groups had linked up on the battleground of the stadium floor and had launched their escape from the arena through a grandstand tunnel now emptied of spectators still able to walk, they had suddenly heard again the tumult of pounding feet and the shriek of voices, and had seen ahead of them a shifting light, now gold, now red. Flattening themselves against the wall, they had let the terrified pop-eyed pack swarm past them without sweeping them off their feet. Behind the ragged mob, though, was the source of the light, revealed to be a humanoid creature of flame, accompanied by a smaller flame-cloaked familiar projecting the general aspect of a terrier. Within each could be glimpsed the remnant of a corporeal form; a sorcerer caught in the midst of a spell, perhaps, which had blown back over him and the dog at his feet. Max's first thought had been to try to

snuff the fires and see if the person within could be saved, and Phlinn Arol and Shaa had similarly shifted into readiness for some sort of operation, but - almost faster than the eye could follow - Svin, in a broad horizontal two-hand sweep followed by a tight overhand loop that converted his blade's trajectory to the vertical, had rendered the issue moot. Eyeing the heatless flames as they churned along the remains of the carcasses, Svin had said, "Emergency conditions apply. Any questions?" and that, rightly enough, had been that.

"Isn't there something you can do to stop this?" Jurtan Mont gasped now, to no one of them in particular, as Svin in his role as spearhead shoved his way out into the street.

"Nothing to do but stay out of the way of this stuff until it burns out," Max said.

"What if it doesn't burn out?" said Jurtan. "Some of these things look like they're *eating*, getting stronger. Look! - like that!"

Ahead of them, three of the leaping fire-comets, each about the size of a bushel basket, had suddenly begun to orbit each other, wrapping themselves quickly into an overlapping spiral. An even more powerful burst of light strobed out, and when the brightness had died enough a second later so the thing could be viewed without squinting, the three had become one.

"That's not all," Jurtan went on. "I keep hearing music..."

"Yeah?" said Max. "What music?"

"The Karlinis' themes. And things I used to hear back at their lab."

Shaa said, "I sent Karlini back there to keep an eye on things."

Leen said, "I should check on the Archives, and your sister and my brother and poor Tarfon trapped in the secret passage."

Max said, "With things the way they are we shouldn't split up."

Phlinn Arol said, to no one in particular, "Max has a tendency to overreact."

Max threw up his arms. "Go wherever you want, then, the lot of you!" He turned and seemed about to plunge into the crowd on his own, leaving the rest of them behind.

"Max!" said Leen admonishingly. "Don't run amok. Look, the palace complex is just down this street. I know one of the back ways in. Come on, follow me."

Gashanatantra, who had been keeping pace with them but keeping his own counsel as well, spoke in Phlinn Arol's ear. "*We* should talk," he said. "Between the three of us," he shifted Pod Dall on his shoulder again, "and Jill-tang, whom I would hope is intact, and Jardin, if he escaped the stadium, we represent a large proportion of our remaining peers. Between us we have things to discuss."

"What about Byron?" said Phlinn Arol. "If *he* survived, he could easily set the agenda."

"He was led down the path once," Gashanatantra said. "I doubt he's evolved enough to escape that happening again. But on the other hand..."

"Yes?"

"The current situation may be just the sort of contingency for which he had prepared some emergency plan."

"That may be so, but how would you plan to find him in all this mess? I can't hear anything through this din."

They both knew he wasn't discussing the noise level of the crowd. "Maximillian is right," Gashanatantra decided, "this is no time to be wandering the streets alone. This group is rather clever; perhaps they will lead us to him."

Karlini had continued glancing behind him as he and the two Monts retreated from the bubbling goo, and had seen something that had made him more nervous than the obviously infected and mutating bat. A line of insanely hypertrophied wizard lights had passed them overhead like flaming beads on a string, heading toward the wrecked laboratory. Over the mound of gray, the string of globes had gone into a downward spiral as though circling a drain, and then, with a rapid slurping pop-pop-pop, had dove into the goo and disappeared...

... but it hadn't seemed so much as though they were diving, as being *sucked*. Clearly this was a problem, and one for which Karlini felt some responsibility, although the real predicament had come from an overlapping cascade of roughly independent events rather than someone setting out to have things wind up this way. And the Lion was right, someone would have to try to do something about all this. The question was whether anything anyone could do would make any difference. Hopefully some sort of reinforcements would show up soon, and they would have a better idea how to proceed.

Karlini and Tildamire had stopped a block or so upwind, where the Lion, snarling at their lily-liveredness, had smashed his way into the corner general store in search of the ingredients for an incendiary device. Now that the Lion had found his supplies and was busily hurling firebombs into the buildings up the street, he was still foaming over with a constant mutter of curses, most of which were fortunately impossible to clearly discern. The breeze was now carrying new sheets of flame toward the swelling pillows of goo.

The commotion was also bringing the few denizens of the neighborhood who were still on hand, rather than present at the Knitting or just out carousing, staggering into the street. "How long you think it's going to take before those people your father's burning out of their homes gang up and try to lynch him?" Karlini said to Tildamire.

"What father?" said Tildamire. "I've never seen that man before in my life."

"Okay," said Favored-of-the-Gods weakly, consulting his tattered map yet again in the light of Wroclaw's lantern. "Looks like we take the next right, and then there's some kind of exit."

The right turn Favored had mentioned was visible just ahead. It was just as well the light was meager; I didn't need to see my companions to be reminded how dismal the bunch of us looked. By rights, none of us should be ambulatory, but then there was very little right about the situation.

"Found it have I," said Haddo, scratching his way unevenly around the corner. A section of the passageway wall leaned outward, actively creaking. We wedged our way through it and found ourselves facing a line of wide tables, and beyond them, rows and stacks of books.

"What part of the Archives is this?" I asked Favored. "It looks like the main Reading Room, right? How do we get to the hidden stuff?"

"Let me see," he said. "I -"

We all froze. We had just heard another door bang open somewhere close at hand, followed by a clatter of feet and the sound of a rabble of low voices. "Retreat?" hissed Haddo.

"No," I said, "wait." We were concealed from the main door by the pillar that also shielded the exit from the secret passage, but the lanterns carried by the new group were already lighting up the large room ahead of them. I peeked around the pillar and discovered my imagination hadn't been playing tricks on me this time, anyway. I still didn't particularly want to deal with Max, but in the scheme of things I thought I could cope. I raised my hand, stepped into the open, and said, "Hey, there." They all wheeled toward my direction, but fortunately no one moved to attack.

Instead, about a half-dozen voices said "You!" in tones of varying incredulity.

"That's right," I told them. "And I bet we're all heading for the same place."

"See?" said the Lion, between pants. The reason he was panting had a lot to do with the fact that they had just been chased headlong down several twisted streets, only managing to elude their pursuers by seizing a quick route to the nearest rooftop after rounding the latest corner. Even the Lion had decided against making a stand to fight them all single-handed after the fellow with the crossbow had appeared, although they'd surely hear his complaints about their poor supporting work later.

Now the chase was clattering away beneath the very tree whose overhanging branches had proved so timely. "See *what*?" demanded Karlini. "I'm not up to this nonsense any more."

Indeed, Tildamire didn't understand why Karlini wasn't unconscious again yet; he was clearly exhausted enough for it. But her father was looking away from them, beyond the peak of their perch's slightly canted roof and the low buildings across the next street. "There," he said, pointing.

And indeed the lane two streets over was clearly the site of his recent rampage; the twisting avenues had brought them back around to a close overlook of the renewed fires. "Yeah?" said Karlini. "So what? So as an arsonist you're a success."

The Lion spared him a contemptuous glance. "Another menace is crushed. Thanks to direct action, not a useless magician."

Karlini sighed. "Okay, so what about all the screaming coming from that direction? Don't tell me it's all people you burned out of their houses. Sounds like it's extending a pretty good distance downwind."

"Perhaps my scourge failed to reach far enough," the Lion said thoughtfully. Off beyond the fires, there was suddenly an abrupt flicker of lacy green, as though a ground-hugging lightning strike had ramified its way down a street. "Are you ready yet to do your part?"

"I don't care if you use your scourge on me," said Karlini, "I'm still burned down to a crisp. What about you, Tildamire?"

Tildamire shrugged. "I wish," she said.

Karlini glared at the Lion. "Are you going to hit me with your sword if I tell you we'd better get out of here and get hold of some help?"

CHAPTER 23

I

f Leen hadn't quite liked the idea of opening her Archives up to visitors earlier, when each of them could be evaluated on an individual basis, she had never considered the idea that matters could quickly get a lot worse. There was no point in not admitting it: she *hated* having all these unvetted people tramping through her domain. But there was no point in dwelling on the situation either, since it was clearly far too late to be complaining. But still. It wasn't a single guest here and another there. This was an out-and-out *convention*.

Even the Archive guardians had been cooperating, though not necessarily through any voluntary decision on their own. She'd have thought the guardians would have just fried the lot of them and be done with the affront. The guardians, though, had proved barely in evidence, revealing their presence only by the barest background murmur. Aside from randomly glowing patches of wall and errant wisps of steam, too, the path into the Archives - so fraught with danger and exacting maneuver under normal circumstances - proved merely a maze of twisty passages, a coiled slide, and a short staircase, although the entrances and exits from the individual chambers were still as likely to be found in awkward locations halfway up a wall as in the normal aspect ratio for doorways or arches.

If this sort of thing was the rule throughout the city - and there was no reason to presume it was not, given the other widespread evidence of the impact of Arznaak's attack - then there would be any number of banks, treasure troves, and strongboxes whose wards and alarm systems would be out of order; a paradise for thieves and reavers, in other words. And the palaces of the gods! - their masters laid low, their special defenses disabled, their whole rationale undermined... whole *wars* could be sparked over *that* plunder. But then...

The Archives were a treasure house of the first rank, too. And their defenses, as she had just seen, were at the moment more hypothetical than anything else.

Of course, what she *did* have on hand, in this motley congregation, was a resource rich both in cunning and in serious brawn. She helped them sort themselves out and let them set to work, some on preparing a substitute defense against assault, some on ministering to the worst-off among the gang, the rest bent over tasks they set themselves.

What Leen also had on hand, rather to her surprise, were her brother and Shaa's sister, along with the freshly extracted Tarfon. The surprising part was that for once in all this business someone had decided not to go rushing madly about, but to wait and assess the lie of the land first. Of course, they *had* had the run of the Archives, too, and no Archivist around to slap their hands.

Leen, realizing futility when she saw it, was also forced to give up on the idea of rounding up every errant browser who sidled away down an aisle or into a side room to check out the Archival materials stored therein. She still felt like finding a reinforced wall and bouncing her head off it repeatedly. The Archives were her responsibility, after all, having been handed over to her care as the successor to the generations of Archivists who had come before, and now she was the first to have betrayed her trust to this grave an extent, external events notwithstanding. There just didn't seem to be anything more she could do.

The last days had been too much, she realized. She was drifting, in a numb haze, a state that wasn't helped by the level of Arznaak's punch she had felt herself. People floated up and wafted away, disconnected pieces of incidents would register while others had obviously slipped past without notice. She wasn't quite comatose, however. She remembered how the detective fellow - the one who was apparently Byron - had bolstered his claim to that identity by first leading *her* to the secret computer room, and then by speaking to the display wall in the language Max had haltingly attempted, although pronounced in his mouth fluently and flowingly, followed by the room lighting up around them from the sudden rush of glowing pictures and overlapping

blocks of text.

He had gazed at the images with puzzlement, followed by a sudden rush of comprehension. "I don't know about this," he'd said, mostly to himself.

"You created all this?" Leen asked. "You know how everything really works?"

"More or less, I'm afraid."

"Then isn't there something simple you can do? Some way to send the nasties to Zinartica or something?"

"It's an interesting thought," he'd said. "No, unfortunately things never work that way when you'd like them to. Let me see if I can get a handle on how bad the mess is, and whether I can come up with any mechanisms of action that still might work."

Then he had sent her away, and in some manner barred the door from within, to the great frustration and consternation of those who had been clustered around the entrance waiting to force their own way down the stairs. Particularly and to no one's surprise, Max. "Maximillian," she had told him, "we desperately need to have a talk." But then the next time she looked he had gone off to work on the defenses, or something, and in any case she was scarcely well-constituted at the moment to discuss anything as serious as her and Max with anyone as slippery *as* Max, anyway.

It was with some surprise sometime later to walk by the area she had set aside for their dispensary and realize she was seeing new and unfamiliar faces. The one sprawled on the floor with the general pallor and overall ill-used look so many of them bore, she was told, was the Great Karlini, while the reclining fellow arguing with him and quaffing from a foaming mug fresh from the sack of supplies he had dragged down the stairs was known, improbably enough, as the Lion of the Oolvaan Plain. No, the *former* Lion; fancy that.

What a group.

Their conversation was not without interest, though. "When I find out who is responsible for all this," the former Lion was saying, "I will slice them up in little ribbons."

Karlini's voice was thin but had a tendency to fade even further in spots, and his lolling eyes, when their lids opened, were shot through with red. "Well, let's see. There's Arznaak, that's obvious enough, but it's clearly a simplification to say the responsibility was his alone. If it weren't for Max, say, and his ongoing plots and stratagems, Arznaak would have had to do things in an entirely different way; Maximillian gave Arznaak his major opening, shall we say. And then there's Arznaak's brother - he could have killed Arznaak when he was little, before any of them knew what a scapula was. That would have saved everybody some trouble, you can bet. Roni - can't forget Roni. Without her irresponsible experimentation things would have gone so far and no further, right? But as long as we're talking irresponsible experiments, there's Byron, or the Creeping Sword or whoever he is - I guess you'd have to say *he's* responsible because he helped start the whole system of the gods in the first place.

"And we haven't even started in on the gods themselves. Gashanatantra with his plots - well, if he hadn't had the plan to trap Pod Dall in the ring, the wheel would have never gotten rolling, and Arznaak would never have had the essential step up from using the ring's power to smite Jardin. Jardin, Jill-tang, Vladimir the Storm Lord and his tool Fradjikan - you want me to go on? Can't forget *you*, either. If you hadn't ruined the alliance between us and the Hand we might have been able to head off Arznaak before his master stroke. Right?"

"You mean there's no one person responsible? *Everyone* is responsible - including me?"

"Why don't we just say there's plenty of blame to go around," said Karlini.

"I like to have someone to blame," the Lion said ominously.

Karlini might have shrugged, or it might have been only another spasm. "What can you do? You want somebody to blame? If it'll make you feel better just pick someone; there's plenty of suspects around. Why not pick - why not pick him!" And suddenly Karlini was on his feet, his eyes open and glaring, his arms reaching forward like hooks, as ahead of them at the end of the aisle, fresh from his session with his oracle, appeared Byron.

"You!" said the Great Karlini. In an instant, all awareness of whatever he'd been talking about and the people around him and the situation still evolving outside seemed to slip from him, as he came off the floor with his hands clawing up in what was clearly about to be a mad attack aimed at separating me from whatever lives I still possessed. When I had seen him down the aisle after emerging from the computer room I had realized this was not necessarily the smartest thing I could have done, to have confronted him directly without first preparing the ground by dispatching an emissary or making certain he was firmly immobilized, but on the other hand I rather thought facing up to actions to whose responsibility I had fallen heir was an appropriately self-abasing move, in the wake of so much trickery and deception.

Of course, that didn't mean I had to just sit back and let him take me apart, either, and I did have news that might somewhat mitigate the nastiest of the things he had to hold against me. I opened my mouth to speak, but the sword got there first. "Karlini!" it said, as usual in my mind but also, it was reasonable to suppose, in his as well. And even proceeding directly to the brain as the utterance did, the "sound" of the voice was one that was thoroughly familiar to him.

"What did you say?" Karlini spat. "It wasn't enough you murdered her, now you have to play games with me as -"

"I'm not dead, dear," said the sword, at the same moment as I said "She's not dead, Karlini!" out loud. "Not exactly, at any rate," the sword added.

Karlini's mouth moved but no sound came out. Then, "Roni?" he squawked, trying again. "You're in his *sword*? What are you doing in there?"

"Taking a vacation," said the sword.

Karlini, in his agitated state, probably missed it, but to me that remark had sounded less of offhand flippancy than might have been expected. "That's great!" said Karlini, teetering on his feet again with the look of someone about to fall on his backside on the ground. His voice had the character of someone getting intoxicated as quickly as possible on whatever was available; air, in this case. His eyes were glazing. "That's *great*! - all we have to do is build you a new body -"

"Cloning may be a possibility," I inserted, in an undertone.

"- a new body, I know you wouldn't want to take over somebody else's, so a new body, and then we pry you out of the sword, and, and -"

"I am taking," the sword repeated, more firmly, "a *vacation*. I find I rather like it in here. It is surprisingly peaceful, being separated from one's autonomic nervous system."

"Not to mention adrenal hormones," Shaa murmured. I hadn't seen him edge up, but he had evidently included himself in the sword's conversational range as well.

"But -" said Karlini. "But -" His arms were waving in front of him now, no longer in readiness for attack, but as though he was trying to figure out how one went about hugging a sword or throwing oneself at its feet. I was used to it by now, but of course the sword was flaming, too, albeit a bit less flamboyantly than when the Monoch personality had been the only active tenant, and was exerting its habitual torque on my wrist.

"Here," I told Karlini. "The two of you work this out." I thrust the sword - calling it Monoch didn't seem either appropriate or accurate anymore - toward him, presenting the hilt for him to grasp. When he had done this, and had been flung to the ground on his side as the sword's bucking-bronco heft typically tried to establish who was boss, I moved quickly back out of range.

Shaa, never to be one to ignore the actions of others when they smacked of prudence through foreknowledge, had retreated with me. "So," he said. "What do you think?"

"About the Karlinis? I wouldn't begin to guess. As far as I know I still have never been married."

"Actually," said Shaa, "while that matter is clearly of more than passing interest, I was primarily wondering about the state of the world outside."

"Well," I said. "For anyone fond of the old order, or of civic order in general I suppose, the situation is fairly apocalyptic. I wouldn't venture to guess at casualty figures, and in any case it would *have* to be a guess since the Scapula's pulse and the stuff that's breeding as a result have pretty much demolished any hope of decent communications. It looks like most of the gods are gone, and most of the high-level magic users are gone, and things magical are just generally out of control, but a lot of that I imagine will die down over the next few days or weeks. Of course, there's fallout - a bunch of potion discharges that seem to be raining sorcerously active byproducts, some really substantial explosions in the army weaponry stores, free phantasms and toxic specters wandering the streets - but the big one is what's loose from the Karlini lab, of course."

A general hubbub broke out at that. Before things degenerated into a morass of told-you-so's, however, I raised my voice to try to override them all and keep them focussed. "Yes," I hollered, "it looks like an out-and-out plague, but leave the recriminations for later, okay? There's already an outbreak of transfiguration in Blind Park just downwind, folks bursting into flame or melting into goo, strange discharges -"

"Then why are you here talking?" shouted the former Lion. "Why aren't you stopping this horror?"

"It's like this," I told them all. "There's not much I can do. There's not much *anyone* can do, things are just too out of hand, actuation paths are blitzed and energy levels are scrambled and frankly, most anything you'd try would have at least a good of chance of feeding the fire as snuffing it out, you see? As it happens, there *are* a few additional tricks I could try, but at this stage of the game, after everything that's already gone on, I'm a little reluctant to take unilateral action." *Again*, I thought. "So I thought I'd see if anyone in the group had any ideas on the subject first."

"What sort of tricks are you discussing here?" Shaa asked.

"The magic cell-constituents Roni rediscovered were built with a suicide gene. They may not all still possess it - there's been a good lot of evolution going on, so there's no way of telling without pinning one of them down long enough to run it through a sequencer - and her reengineered free organisms that are making up the goo out there have likely had it bred out of them too. But setting loose the trigger might be worth a try. Of course, it would mean a lot of other casualties. Some folks express the magic genes more centrally than others."

"I," said Haddo, who I now saw had been lurking off in the shadows behind a pile of books. "And he," Haddo added, pointing at Wroclaw.

"Quite likely," I agreed. "Activating the suicide trigger could be tantamount to genocide. There are some other possibilities for things to do - there's retroviruses out in the population that are inactive now but have their own trigger cofactors. They'd target the conversion cascade that powers the effectors. Might be safer, might take longer, might not work as well; no way to tell in advance. And there's -"

The Great Karlini had regained his feet again by dint of plastering the sword against his chest with both arms entwined around it. I may have missed my guess, but I had a feeling whatever was left of Ronibet Karlini had not been telling him things to which he particularly wanted to listen. "I don't want to hear any more about this," he snapped in my direction. "As far as I'm concerned it's the end of history. We won and that's that."

Shaa gazed after him as he wobbled away. "The Great one, in his way, just as Maximillian, in his way, has always been a creature of habit," murmured Shaa.

"Now just a damn minute -" started Max.

"Creatures of their times," Shaa continued, with an arch glare toward his associate, "to a much greater extent than either would acknowledge, or perhaps even realize." He raised an eyebrow in my direction. "Such a new world order as confronts us now will demand adjustments many will not be able to meet."

"Huh," I said. "So are you telling me you, an old aristocrat, don't want to step in and be Emperor?"

"Emperor is not a job I would have coveted at any stage," Shaa said thoughtfully. "Now, with no central bureaucracy, not much in the way of living leadership, except possibly for the Emperor himself, no functional effectors, and the governing legitimacy rather much tattered, the office seems well on its way to marginalization, if it survives the decade. Is that why you brought it up?"

"No, not really. But describing the situation as a new world order may not be far wrong. Whatever we do or don't do, things are never going to be the way they were, and there's no telling what the world will end up with. The only thing that seems certain is death and devastation. If I don't do a thing, that goo of Roni's is gonna keep spreading and infecting folks and chewing on them and making more of itself. If we try to fight it by trying to shut down the system that still might happen, and even if it didn't there'd be plenty of casualties anyway, plus the loss of a magic as a tool the way we now know it."

"You do paint rather an egalitarian picture," Shaa remarked, "if indeed the old hegemonic order is gone for good. In some ways magic won't count for as much, in some ways it will likely count for more."

"Through democratization?" said Phlinn Arol. "Gods and people and bacteria all placed on the same playing field together?"

"Yeah," I said, "but also because any given magic user's gonna be a lot less powerful with the network gone and the damage the Scapula did still rattling around. There'll be more chance the stuff'll backfire and blow your hand off. And with all these environmental toxic hazards roaming around, leaving whatever they don't kill transformed... Well, there's gonna be a lot fewer folks around to talk about it."

"It's a new Dislocation," said Leen dully.

"Probably not an exaggeration." I eyed the two gods - or former gods - here at hand. "One thing will never change, though, and that's power by itself, just plain power. With all the holes left in the power structure it's going to be a interesting next generation or two."

"Yes, well," Shaa said, "setting posterity aside for the moment, there is the matter in which you would like to make us all complicit. We have among us representatives of the most hidebound elements of the status quo as

well as the extreme radical *avant-garde*. Everyone here stands to suffer from the activist intervention you put forth before us, some to the risk of extinction. For all the talk of gods, what we are discussing here is in fact the very definition of a god-level decision. On the one hand we have a world of chaos, on the other chaos redoubled. So how do you propose to achieve consensus? And what is the point? One plague or another, stroke or counterstroke, world without end, yes? For one way or the other the world will not actually, or entirely, end; even if the roof suddenly collapsed and we all died now, the story would still manage to continue. Or from another standpoint, this is as good a stage as any to declare the existing story *is* over. Yes?"

"Hold it right there!" said Max. "You're talking like the issue's already been decided. What happened to the fighting spirit? Who says Roni's goo *can't* be contained? The thing to do is get out there and do something about it, not stand around discussing hypotheticals. And who says Arznaak's worked some permanent change either? Even if the system's been damaged I'm sure something can be patched back together. One thing that sure hasn't changed - *you're* a god, and you're trying to exert your domination over the rest of us the way you gods always have. Change - hah!"

"You're welcome to your opinion," I told him. "You're free to do what you want, though, regardless of what you might think. The last thing I want to do is dominate anyone. The way I see it the world's different already; things are out of the bottle and the bottle's been smashed, but that's only my opinion. If I wanted to enforce my opinion I'd be in the back pulling strings and stuff."

"I don't trust you," muttered Max.

"So go out and see for yourself," I said. "Or make some proposal here."

"All right," said Max. "I *will* see for myself. Anybody coming with me?"

"I might be able to help you fight," volunteered Jurtan Mont.

"That's the spirit, kid," said Max.

"You would trust my son with this?" said the Lion. "Not without me around. I'll -"

Shaa caught my eye and crooked a thumb backward over his shoulder. I eased away from the group and followed his own light-footed tread. "It continues, or begins anew," commented Shaa, as the clamor of the gang behind us continued unabated. "Still, I submit the greatest hazard is having the world become an unbroken plain of gray goo. My suggestion would be to release whatever agents might effectively detour that outcome."

Phlinn Arol and Gashanatantra had joined us. "Are all the options quite as draconian as you made them out just now?" said Gashanatantra.

"Well..." I said. "Maybe not. If we could analyze a sample of the goo from the lab, maybe there's some feature we could target directly. No miracles, you understand, but could be something to try short of full scale scorched earth."

"If it's all the same to you," stated Shaa, "personally speaking I would rather not be the proximate cause of death to thousands and eradication of races. My medical training, you understand."

I sighed. "Oh, all right." For all my efforts to get the world to move on past me, to wash my hands of this and all messes, I could already see myself getting dragged back in, the miasma of past transgressions notwithstanding. "Come back here and let's see what we can set up."

EPILOGUE

SO, ANYWAY, THAT'S THE PART I SAW, or had some level of direct involvement with. I don't pretend to be the last word on the matter. If you're interested in what happened you'll have no shortage of folks chewing over it for years, down to the least person present at the Stadium of State for the Knitting or brushed by the Scapula's burst of magic, and after anyone who has any claim to personal connection has gone by the wayside there'll be the historians to contend with... but what's new? Talking about current events is always tricky. No matter how much lip service you give to the ideal of objectivity, if you've been there or had some stake - whether personal or philosophical or whatever - you're automatically shading the facts; the more you think you're not, the more so the first listener you're twisting the evidence on is you.

Still, there's something to be said for setting out reminiscences while things are fresh, not to mention the consideration that it's traditional. Of course, there's not exactly a mass market these days for memoirs, although I could probably aggravate quite a number of people I know by having highlights distributed on those wall-sized broadsheet things, or even commissioning criers to do public declamations in the squares. But when those historians start sharpening their fangs, it's primary sources they like to chew through first. So here I am.

I've been using the modern-day vernacular for my narration, rather than one of those stuffy old scholars' cants that sounded like vernacular when I was growing up but are extinct as the platypus now. I wouldn't turn up my nose at the prospect of wide readership, but even if this tome's only destination is a back shelf in the Archives there's no point in shoving more stumbling-blocks under its feet than it's apt to encounter anyway. The potential audience might be reduced somewhat if it was necessary to learn a defunct language before you could start on the first page, a language with few native speakers and no teachers or texts to boot.

The downside of writing so it could actually be read, however, has been coping with criticism as I've plowed through the pages. Hopefully I'll get this little codicil down before Shaa shows up again. He's appointed himself Guardian of Internal Logic and Skeptic-at-Large, and has been spending far too much time skulking behind my shoulder as I've slogged through the tale. Not that he hasn't been a help in places, and at least someone's been interested enough to hang around, and he *has* been a seemingly objective correspondent for material I wasn't actually present to witness myself (although I've been careful to crosscheck him against the monitoring data downloaded to the Archives before Arznaak crashed the system to hell-and-gone, apparently for good).

Still, Shaa's been a fairly severe editor, too, and even if I locked the door on him I'd know he'd be sitting outside it nagging the air. I hadn't *wanted* an editor, but with his way of undermining confidence through the drawn-out silence or the disapproving droop in the corner of his lip or the disappointed "hmph!", he'd wormed his way into my psyche so badly I could hear him carping even when he wasn't around. I know what he'd say about this epilogue - if he gets hold of it it'll be the void for it for sure - but I figure if going on at such length about all these shenanigans wasn't indulgence enough, a little farewell capper wouldn't be out of place. And after all, the heaviest labor Shaa's had is reading - *I've* been the one doing the legwork.

Not that anyone's just had time to lean back and tinker with memoirs. Even without activating the retroviruses magic is still in general collapse. I'll give Shaa's brother this; when he launches a blight there were no half-measures concerned. As far away as there's been communication, reports are still coming in of infectious transfigurations and goo-melts, targeted weapons and countermeasures notwithstanding. A status quo of strife and struggle appears unavoidable.

Not that the players seem to have learned much, either. Max is still out there scheming and planning, back to the trough after his own recent tribulations, and if anyone knows when he and Leen are going to decide what they're doing about each other it sure isn't me. Maybe we're *all* too far gone to change our ways. Like I said before, I'll leave it to others more removed to say what really happened.

I thought of dating this thing Year One of the Twilight of the Gods, but that was far too pretentious and overbearing even for me, much less the editorial eye of the mighty Shaa. I'd been there; it had been clear that a random walk of steps from many independent feet and no little dose of fate or blind chance, depending on your turn of phrase, had led here; it would be left to those teeth-sharpening historians to put things in order and fight over the meaning of events and figure out after we were all gone what we were really all about. So, finally, all I could do was stab toward honesty, whatever its limitations, and sign these -

The Memoirs of Byron, with Interpolations in Divers Voices, of Recent Events of Interest

- and then I stood up from the keyboard and went out to get back to my life.

* * *

(c) 1993-2007 by Mayer Alan Brenner. First published by DAW Books, New York, NY, May, 1994. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivs 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0> or write to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U.S.A.

A free ebook from <http://manybooks.net/>