

Out of the Dead City

The Fall of the Towers #1

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PROLOGUE

THE green of beetle's wings ... the red of polished carbuncle ... a web of silver fire. Lightning tore his eyes apart, struck deep inside his body. He felt his bones split and clutched the stomach of his coveralls, doubling around what would be pain. But it was gone. He was falling through blue smoke, cool as blown ice.

He put his hands out to catch—

Palms and knees scudded in something hot. Jon Koshar shook his head, looked up. Sand saddled away from him. His black hair fell over his eyes again; he shook it away and sat back on his heels.

The sky was turquoise. The horizon was too close. The sand was more like lime. He

looked down. Two shadows fanned from his body. To his left a tooth of rock also cast a double shadow.

He staggered erect. He was too light; gravity was all wrong. The sand burned his toes. Sweat started on the back of his neck, beneath his arms. The air stung his nasal cavity. Jon squinted.

Far down the sand was a lake; rising by, or perhaps from it was a... city? He narrowed his eyes more, staring...

Jerk a man from one world; fling him into another. It will take him the same time to realize where he is as to remember where he has been. Each location defines the other.

Jon Koshar took a step forward. His left pants-leg flapped about his ankle, wet to the knee. He looked down again. Mud streaked his foot. Sometime in the past hour he had stumbled into a—mud-hole? Confused, he looked around the desert again, took another step. His hair fell forward again.

As he brushed it back, something slipped beneath his palm. His hand closed on it. Now he looked at his fist. Caught between his calloused fingers was a green fragment of fern. Sometime very recently he had been trying to move forward, brush aside the leaves, and more leaves, and more. He twisted his face against the reflected heat, looking left and right. There was no green anywhere in the dunes. He started walking again.

When he stopped, it was because his hand brushed something on his pants-leg. He shifted his hip and looked down, then looked at the underside of his sleeve. Joined corner to corner the green squares of... woodlice? Puzzled, he glanced up at the treeless emptiness, then back down. Yes, woodlice had caught all over the rough cloth.

By the time he had reached the lake, panting (he had panted before, but lungfuls of moist air, heavy with vegetation), he recognized the atmosphere's sharpness as ozone. He looked down at the water.

His dirty face blinked up at him. His shirt was torn across his shoulder. He reached up to touch the scratch over his collar-bone, where a branch had raked him in the dark—but the desert was blindingly bright; there were no trees.

His lips met and parted in silent struggle with the identification numerals across the front of his coveralls. That number had been part of his name for the past five years; now even that was wrong.

But it was a reflection! Of course, he was trying to read it backward. As he raised his eyes, whispered the number correctly, the creosoted walls of the penal barracks came back to him; and the chattering links on the cutter teeth he had guided for five years, gnawing at the tetron ore; and the leaves and brush that had beat his face and shoulders as he ran through the dark—

And he recognized the city.

There, across the lake, it struck his eyes with a familiarity that made him step back. What had been an abstraction, now coalesced into the towers, the looped roadways of Telphar! As the head of an arrow indicates direction, or the marquee of a theatre means entertainment, so the spires of Telphar symbolized death.

His throat dried under the next bread. His fingers clamped and slipped on wet palms. He stepped backwards while the skin over his spine crawled. His scrambling mind reached

out for facts:

I am Jon Koshar and I want to be free! That was first, above the fear, first through his five-year imprisonment in the mines that had culminated when the three of them had escaped — how many hours ago?

But that was on earth. He had been on earth. So had the city. And the sight of it from the pitted edge of the jungles and lava fields meant death. But here he was looking at Telphar on an alien world, beneath a double sun. Then memory completed itself :

Exhausted, he had seen the city from the pitted rocks. At the same time he had heard something (or had he heard it) : *The Lord of the Flames*.

And suddenly there had been no reason to fear further. He tried to untangle the recollection. He had entered the city, found the sending stage of the transit ribbon, the band of metal that would take him back, over the jungles, over the heads of the guards, over the sea, back to the safe, island city of Toron —

Suddenly he frowned, then the frown broke into an expression more frantic, desperate, as he searched for the silver ribbon that should have soared from the window of the far building, from pylon to pylon, gleaming across the sand.

The transit-ribbon —

Gone? Broken? With the new fear, he nearly screamed. There were no pylons, there was no line of metal. The city sat isolate on the alien sand. Please, don't let it be broken! *Please* ...

The entire scene was suddenly wiped from his eyes. There was nothing but blue smoke, cool as blown ice; he spun in blue. Lightning seered his eyeballs, and the after-image shivered, shifted, became . . . silver, red — beetles' wings.

CHAPTER I

AND above the empty stage in the laboratory tower of the dead city of Telphar, the crystal sphere dimmed. The room was silent as it had been for sixty years. From the crystal the metal ribbon soared over the balcony, above the wet ashes and puddled roadways. The sun had just cleared the ragged horizon; the dripping metal gleamed like the back of a sleeping serpent.

Miles on, darkness paled before morning. In the lava fields among the ferns sat row behind row of barracks, cheerless as roosting macaws. The light rain had stopped. " Water dribbled the supporting pylon. The ribbon made a black band on the fading night.

Six people approached the barracks from the jungle. They were all over seven feet tall. They carried the bodies of two ordinary sized men. Two behind the others hung back to converse.

'What about the other one, Larta?'

'Koshar? He won't get far.' She pushed back her fur cape from her shoulder; the new sun struck the brass circlets banding her upper arm.

'If he does,' said the man, 'he'll be the first to get through us in twelve years.'

'If he tries to get back to the coast and out to Toron,' Larta said. 'If we don't get him, it

means he's gone inland towards the radiation barrier.' They passed under the shadow of the transit-ribbon. The circlets, and her eyes, dimmed. 'Then we won't have to worry anyway, if he goes towards Telphar, eh, Ptorn?'

The tall man's head was shaved. 'I suppose I'm not really worried about the one escaping.' Ptorn glanced at those passing into the sun. 'But the increasing number of attempts over the last year ...'

Larta shrugged. 'The orders for tetron have nearly doubled.' As she left the shadow, the sun lit three parallel scars down the side of her face, under her jaw, and down her neck.

Ptorn slid his right hand beneath his left arm. 'I wonder what sort of leeches make their living off these miserable ...' He didn't finish but nodded ahead.

'The hydroponics growers, the aquarium manufacturers in Toron,' Larta said. 'They're the ones who call for the ore. Then, there's the preparation for the war.'

'They say,' mused Ptorn, 'that since the aquariums have taken over supplying fish to the Toron, the fishermen on the coast have nowhere to sell and are being starved out. And with the increased demand for tetron, the prisoners are dying like flies here at the mines. Sometimes I wonder how they supply miners.'

'They don't.' Now Larta called ahead, 'All right. We'll leave the rest to the men who guard them.' There was the gentlest contempt in the word 'men' that italics would be too strong to convey. 'We've done our part. Drop them there, in front of the cabin.' The rain had made the yard mud. 'Maybe that'll teach the rest of them some sort of lesson.'

Two dull splashes.

'Maybe,' Ptorn said.

But Larta had turned back towards the jungle, shadow from the trees brushing over her face, over the triple scar.

Streaks of sun speared the yellow clouds and pried apart the billowing rifts. Shafts of yellow sank into the lush forests of Toromon nearer the shore. The light dropped from the wet, green fronds, or caught in the moist cracks of boulders. Then dawn snagged on the metal ribbon that lanced over the trees; webs of shadow from the supporting pylons fell over a lava bed among the trees.

A formation of airships flashed through a tear in the clouds like a handful of hurled, sliver chips. The buzz from their tetron motors descended through the trees. And Lug, who was four feet three inches tall, with a forehead high as his thumb was wide, looked up from under his boney brow.

The others around him, of the same height and rounded shoulders, grunted to one another. The word repeated most often was 'war.' Lug motioned the others; they started again, padding over the jungle floor, the palms of their feet shaping to stone and stick and root. Their semi-opposable big toes stroked absently at the textures of the ground as one might thumb the differences, running one's hands over things in the grass.

Finally Lug leaned against a tree trunk. 'Quorl?' he said. 'Quorl!' he barked.

Behind branches that had been cut down and replanted to form a shapeless shelter,

something turned under leaves. The lean-to had no real form from the outside, but was limited like the outside of a bush. You could only really be sure it was a shelter when something moved within. A hand grasped one branch, and someone sat up inside.

They watched, whispered, then watched again. Quorl stood, emerging and emerging from the top of the shelter. His yellow eyes were awake, even though the muscles in his face were settling themselves into place after what must have been a huge yawn. His nostrils rounded under the scents of the morning. Then he smiled.

From their stunted heights, they blinked at his seven foot hugeness. Some only stared at the confusing wonder of his hand hanging by the thumb from his belt; others did not look above the gnarled machinery of his knee. To the neanderthals both were as expressive of marvels as his face.

'Quorl?' Lug asked.

'What is it, Lug?'

'Around the bottom of the mountain by the lake, they've come. Not the ones as big as you, but taller than us. They are like the ones at the mines, the prisoners. But these aren't prisoners, Quorl. They're building.'

Quorl nodded. 'Good. It seemed time they came. Time they built.'

'You have seen them?'

'No.'

'Someone else came and told you earlier?'

'No.' Quorl's smile was subtly humorous, more subtly regretful. 'It was time for them to come. It's simple.' For Lug it was just a smile.

They whispered among themselves, awed by the things that the tall ones knew; and smiled back.

'Come,' Quorl said. 'Take me to see.'

Lug looked at the others.

'Yes,' Quorl said, stepping from his shelter. 'Come, we will go.'

'Why?' asked Lug. 'Do you want to talk to them?'

Quorl stretched up, pulled down two kharba fruits, and handed one to a man, the other to a girl. He pulled down two more, and the leaves shook again. 'No,' he said. 'Let's just go to see.' He handed out the other two melons. 'Share these.'

Lug shrugged, and they all started through the trees. They broke the fruits among them. Two apish boys began to shoot seeds at one another, fell into a scuffle, fell into laughter. Quorl looked back, but they were already catching up.

'Why do we go?' Lug asked again. Such scuffles and laughter were so close to him he did not look, did not see. 'You know already that the men'—and there was a slight awe in the word 'men' that block letters would not quite suggest— 'are there, what they are doing. What do you want to see? Will we help them build? Does what they build have anything to do with the war?'

Quorl pushed his hand into Lug's hair and arched his fingers, arched them again. 'It rained this morning,' he said. Lug bent his neck as Quorl scratched his head. 'You know how the lake looks in the morning mist after the rain?'

Lug straightened his shoulders, his muscles tensing with pleasure. 'Yes.' His lips grinned back from yellow teeth. 'Yes, I know.'

"That's why we go to see," Quorl said. His hand dropped to Lug's shoulder.

Behind them the ribbon crossed the top of the hundred-foot pylon, just visible through the trees.

As dawn slipped across the jungle, more and more of the ribbon gleamed from beneath the receding shadows till at last it soared above the sand that marked the edge of the sea.

Fifty yards down the beach from the last supporting pylon whose base still sat on dry land, Cithon, the fisherman, emerged from his shack.

'Tel?' he called. He was a wiry man of average height. His face was cracked from sand and wind. 'Tel?' he called once more. Now he turned back into the cottage. 'And where has the boy got off to now?'

Grella had already seated herself at the loom, and her strong hands began to work the shuttle back and forth while her feet stamped the treddle.

'Where has he gone?' Cithon demanded.

'He went out early this morning,' Grella said quietly. She did not look at her husband. She watched the shuttle moving back and forth, back and forth between the green threads.

'I can see he's gone out,' Cithon snapped. 'But where? The sun is up. He should be out with me on the boat. When will he be back?'

Grella didn't answer.

'When will he be back?' Cithon demanded.

'I don't know.'

Outside there was a sound, and Cithon turned abruptly and went to the side of the shack.

The boy was leaning over the water trough, sloshing his face.

'Tel!'

The boy looked up quickly at his father. He was perhaps fourteen, a thin child, with a shock of black hair, yet eyes as green as the sea. Fear had widened them now.

'Where were you?'

'No place,' was the boy's quiet, defensive answer. 'I wasn't doing anything.'

'Where were you?'

'No place,' Tel mumbled again. 'Just walking and picking up sea-shells—'

Suddenly Cithon's hand, which had been at his waist, jerked up and then down, and the studded strap that had been his belt slashed over the boy's wet shoulder, slashed again.

The only sound was Tel's gasps.

'Now get down to the boat.'

Inside the shack, the shuttle paused in Grella's fist the length of a drawn breath. Then it shot once more between the threads.

Down the beach, the transit-ribbon leapt across the water. Light shook on the surface of the sea like mica, and the ribbon above was dull by comparison.

Dawn reached across the water till at last the early light fell on the shore of an island. High in the air, the ribbon soared above the busy piers and the early morning traffic of the wharf. Behind the piers, the towers of the city were lanced with gold, and as the sun rose, gold light ran down the building faces.

On the sea-wall, two merchants were talking above the roar of tetron-powered winches and lorries.

'It looks like your boat's bringing in a cargo of fish,' said the stout one.

'It could be fish. It could be something else,' answered the other.

'Tell me, friend,' asked the portly one, whose coat was of cut and cloth expensive enough to suggest his guesses in business were usually right, 'why do you trouble to send your boat all the way to the mainland to buy from the little fishermen there? My aquariums can supply the city with all the food it needs.'

The other merchant looked down at a clip board of inventory slips.

'Perhaps my clientele is somewhat different from yours.'

The first merchant laughed. 'You sell to those families of the Toron who still insist on the doubtful superiority of your imported delicacies. Did you know, my friend, I am superior in every way to you? I feed more people, so what I produce is superior to what you produce. I charge them less money, and so I am financially more benevolent than you. I make more money than you do, so I am also financially superior. Also, later this morning my daughter is coming back from University Island, and this evening I will give her a party so great and so lavish that she will love me more than any daughter has ever loved a father before.'

The self-satisfied merchant laughed again, and turned down the wharf to inspect a cargo of tetron ore that was coming in from the mainland.

As the merchant of imported fish turned up another inventory slip, a third man approached him. 'What was old Koshar laughing about?' he asked.

'He was gloating over his good fortune in backing that hare-brained aquarium idea. He was also trying to make me jealous of his daughter. He's giving her a party tonight to which I am no doubt invited; but the invitation will come late this afternoon with no time for me to reply properly.'

The other shook his head. 'He's a proud man. But you can bring him to his place. Next time he mentions his daughter, ask him about his son, and watch the shame storm into his face.'

'He may be proud,' said the other, 'but I am not cruel. Why should I move to hurt him. Time takes care of her own. This coming war will see.'

'Perhaps,' said the other merchant. 'Perhaps.'

Once over the island city of Toron, capital of Toromon, the transit-ribbon breaks from its even course and bends among the towers, weaves among the elevated highways, till finally it crosses near bare concrete, edged with block-long aircraft hangars. Several airships had just arrived. At the passenger gates the people waiting for arrivals crowded the fence.

Among them was a young man in military uniform. A brush of red hair, eyes that seemed double dark in his pale face, along with a touring power in his legs, back, and shoulders; these were what struck you in the swift glance. A close look brought you the incongruity of the major's insignia and his youth.

He watched the passengers coming through the gate eagerly.

Someone called, 'Tomar!'

A grin leaped on his face.

'Tomar,' she called again. 'I'm over here!'

Too bumptiously, he rammed through the crowd until he almost collided with her. Then he stopped, bewildered and happy.

'Hey, I'm glad you came,' she said. 'Come on. You can walk me back to father's.' Her black hair fell close to broad, nearly Oriental cheekbones. Then the smile on her strange mouth fell.

Tomar shook his head; they turned, arm in arm, through the people wandering on the field.

'No?' she asked. 'Why not?'

'I don't have time, Clea,' he answered. 'I had to sneak an hour off just to get here. I'm supposed to be back at the Military Ministry in forty minutes. Do you have any bags to carry?'

Clea held up a slide rule and notebook. 'I'm travelling light.'

'What's that?' He pointed to a picture stuck between the rule and the book cover.

'Oh, this.' She handed him the picture.

It was a folded paper. On the cover was the picture. Tomar frowned, trying to interpret the shapes and their meaning. Inside was a poem. That made him frown more. 'I don't know much about this sort of—'

'Look at it,' she insisted. 'Read it. The poem was written by a boy at school, Vol Nonik. I didn't know him, but he printed a few poems up like this. Someone told me the picture was done by his girlfriend. Her name was—'

'Renna ... something,' Tomar read the signature at the corner. 'I can't make out the last name.' He looked at the poem again, read it slowly. Then he shrugged. 'I just don't understand it,' he said, 'stuff like this. But it's—strange. The thing about the eye in the boy's tongue, that made me feel funny.'

Clea nodded. 'Me too. That's why I like it.'

Tomar looked at the drawing again. He was looking at a strange landscape, but from behind the teeth and contorted lips of a scream. 'I don't ... understand it,' he repeated uneasily and handed it back quickly. And realized he very much wanted to look at the picture again, to re-read the words.

But Clea put the pamphlet into her notebook. 'It's funny,' she said. 'Just before I left University Island, I heard he had been expelled, for cheating on an examination. Somehow you don't know what to do with two pieces of information like that about somebody.'

'Two—?'

'One, his poem. Two, his expulsion. They fall like random parts of a puzzle, and you can't see where they fit together.'

'This is a pretty confused and random time we're living in,' Tomar said, taking her arm. 'People are starting to move and migrate all over Toromon. And there's all this preparation for the war. Well, if you don't have any bags, I better get back to the Ministry. I'm awfully busy.'

'Next time I'll be sure to bring a suitcase,' Clea said. 'I just figured I'd be back at the University for summer courses, so I didn't bring anything home.' She paused. 'Wait a minute; you're not going to be too busy for the party Dad's giving me tonight, are you?'

Tomar shrugged.

Clea began a word, but pushed her tongue hard against the roof of her mouth. 'Tomar?' she asked after a moment.

'Yes?' He had a rough voice, which, when he was sad, took on the undertones of a bear's growl.

'There really will be a war?'

Again he shrugged. 'More soldiers, more planes, and at the Ministry there's more and more work to do. I was up before dawn this morning getting a fleet of survey planes off for a scouting trip to the mainland, to go over the radiation barrier. If they come back this afternoon, I'll be busy all evening with the reports.'

'Oh,' Clea said. 'Tomar?'

'Yes, Clea Koshar?'

'Oh, sometimes you sound so formal. You've been in the city long enough to be able to relax with me. Tomar, if the war comes, do you think they'll draft prisoners from the

tetron mines into the army?'

'They talk about it.'

'Because my brother...'

'I know.'

'But if a prisoner from the mines distinguished himself as a soldier, would he be freed at the end of the war? They wouldn't send him back to the mines, would they?'

'The war hasn't even begun yet,' said Tomar. 'No one knows how it will end.'

'You're right,' she said, 'as usual.' They reached the gate. 'Look, Tomar, I don't want to keep you if you're busy. But you've got to promise to come see me and spend at least an afternoon before I go back to school.'

'If the war starts, you won't be going back to school.'

She stopped. 'Why not?'

'You already have your degree in theoretical physics. Now you're only doing advanced work. Not only will they conscript prisoners from the mines, but all scientists, engineers, and mathematicians will have to lend their efforts to the cause as well.'

'I was afraid of that,' Clea said. 'You believe the war will actually come, don't you, Tomar?'

'They get ready for it night and day,' Tomar said. 'What is there to stop it? When I was a boy on my father's farm on the mainland, there was too much work, and no food. I was a strong boy, with a strong boy's stomach. I came to the city and I took my strength to the army. Now I have work that I like. I'm not hungry. With the war, there will be work for a lot more people. Your father will be richer. Your brother may come back, and even the thieves and beggars in the Devil's Pot will have a chance to do some honest work.'

'Perhaps,' said Clea. 'Look, like I said, I don't want to keep you—I mean I do, but. Well, when will you have some time?'

'Probably tomorrow afternoon.'

'Fine,' said Clea. 'We'll have a picnic then. All right?'

Tomar grinned. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes.' He took both her hands and she smiled back at him. Then he turned away, and was gone through the crowd.

Clea watched a moment, then turned towards the taxi-stand. The sun was beginning to warm the air as she pushed into the shadow of the great transit-ribbon that soared between the towers.

Buildings dropped bands of shadow across the ribbon as it wound through the city, although occasional streaks of light from an eastward street still made silver half-rings around it. At the centre of the city it raised a final two hundred feet and entered the window of the laboratory tower in the west wing of the royal palace of Toron.

The room in which the transit-ribbon ended was deserted. At the end of the metal band

was a transparent crystal sphere, fifteen feet in diameter, above the receiving platform. A dozen small tetron units of varying sizes sat around the room. The viewing screens were dead grey. On a control panel by one ornate window, a bank of forty-nine scarlet-knobbed switches pointed to off. The catwalks over the receiving platform were empty.

In another room of the palace, someone was screaming:

'Tetron!

'... if Your Highness would only wait a moment to hear the report,' began the aged minister. 'I believe ...'

'Tetron!'

'... you would understand the necessity,' he continued calmly, 'of disturbing you at such an ungodly hour ...'

'I never want to hear the word "Tetron" again!'

'... of the morning.'

'Go away, Chargill; I'm sleeping!' King Uske, who had just turned twenty-one, though he had been the official ruler of Toromon since age nineteen, jammed his blond head beneath the over-stuffed pillows that lay about the purple silken sheets. With one too slender hand he sought feebly for the covers to hide himself.

The old minister quietly picked up the edge of the ermine coverlet and held it out of reach. After several half-hearted swipes, the pale head emerged once more and asked in a cold voice: 'Chargill, why is it that roads have been built, prisoners reprieved, and traitors disembowelled at every hour of the afternoon and evening without anyone expressing the least concern for what I thought. Now, suddenly, at—' Uske peered at the jewel-crusted chronometer by his bed in which a shimmering gold light fixed the hour. 'My God, seven o'clock in the morning! Why must I suddenly be consulted at every twist and turn of empire?'

'First!' explained Chargill, 'you are now of age. Secondly, because we are about to enter a war. In times of stress, responsibility is passed to the top, and you are in that unfortunate position.'

'Why can't we have a war and get it over with?' asked Uske, rolling over to face Chargill, a trifle more amenable. 'I'm tired of all this idiocy. You don't think I'm a very good king, do you?' The young man sat up, planting his slender feet on the three-inch-thick fur rug. 'Well, if we had a war,' he continued, scratching his stomach through his pink sateen pyjama top, 'I'd ride in the first line of fire, in the most splendid uniform imaginable, and lead my soldiers to a *sweeping* victory.' At the word *sweeping*, he threw himself under the covers.

'Commendable sentiment,' stated Chargill dryly. 'Seeing that there may just be a war before the afternoon, why don't you listen to the report, which merely says that another scouting flight of planes has been crippled trying to observe the enemy just beyond the tetron mines over the radiation barrier.'

'Let me continue it for you. No one knows how the planes have been crippled, but the efficacy of their methods has led the council to suggest that we consider the possibility of open war even more strongly. Isn't this more or less what the reports have been for

weeks?'

'It is,' replied Chargill.

'Then why bother me. Incidentally, must we really attend this imbecilic party for the fish-pedlar's daughter tonight? And talk about tetron as little as possible, please.'

'I need not remind you,' went on the patient Chargill, 'that this fish-pedlar has amassed a fortune nearly as large as that in the royal treasury—though I doubt if he is aware of the comparison—through the proper exploitation of the unmentionable metal. If there is a war, and we should need to “borrow” funds it should be done with as much goodwill as possible. Therefore, you will attend his party to which he has so kindly invited you.'

'Listen a minute, Ghargill,' said Uske. 'And I'm being serious now. This war business is ridiculous, and if you expect me to take it seriously, then the council is going to have to take it seriously. How can we have a war with whatever is beyond the radiation barrier? We don't know anything about it. Is it a country? Is it a city? Is it an empire? We don't even know if it's got a name. We don't know how they've crippled our scouting planes. We can't monitor any radio-communication. We don't even know if it's human. One of our silly planes got its tetron (pardon me. If you can't say it, I shouldn't say it either.) device knocked out and a missile hurled at it. Bango! The council says war. Well, I refuse to take it seriously. Why do we keep on wasting planes anyway? Why not send a few people through the transit-ribbon to do some spying.'

Chargill looked amazed.

'Before we instituted the penal mines, and just after we annexed the forest people, the transit-ribbon was built, correct? Now, where does it go?'

'Into the dead city of Telphar,' answered Chargill.

'Exactly. And Telphar was not at all dead when we built it, sixty years ago. The radiation hadn't progressed that far. Well, why not send spies into Telphar and from there across the barrier and into enemy territory? Then they can come back and tell us everything.' Uske smiled.

'Of course Your Majesty is joking.' Chargill smiled. 'May I remind Your Majesty that the radiation level in Telphar today is fatal to human beings. Fatal. The enemy seems to be well beyond the barrier. Only recently, with the great amount of tetron ... ah, excuse me ... coming from the mines have we been able to develop planes that can perhaps go over it. And that, when and if we can do it, is the only way.'

Uske had started out smiling. It turned to a giggle. Then to a laugh. Suddenly he cried out and threw himself down on the bed. 'Nobody listens to me! Nobody takes any of my suggestions!' He moaned and stuck his head under the pillows. 'No one does anything but contradict me. Go away! Get out! Let me sleep!'

Chargill sighed and withdrew from the royal bed-chamber.

CHAPTER II

IT had been silent for sixty years. Then, above the receiving stage in the laboratory tower of the royal palace in Toron, the crystal glowed.

On the stage a blue haze shimmered. Red flame shot through the mist, a net of scarlet, contracting, pulsing, outlining the recognizable patterning of veins and arteries. Among

the running fires, the shadow of bones formed a human skeleton in the blue, till at once the shape was laced with sudden silver, the net of nerves that held the body imprisoned in sensation. The blue became opaque. Jon Koshar staggered forward to the rail and held on for a moment. Above, the crystal faded.

He blinked his eyes hard before he looked up. He looked around. 'Alright,' he said out loud. 'Where the hell are you?' He paused. 'Okay. I know. I'm not supposed to get dependent. I guess I'm all right now, aren't I?' Another pause. 'I feel fine.' He let go of the rail and looked at his hands, back and palms. 'Dirty as hell,' he mumbled. 'Where can I get washed up?' He looked up. 'Yeah, sure. Why not?' He ducked under the railing and vaulted to the floor. Once again he looked around. 'So I'm really inside the castle. After all these years. I never thought I'd see it again. Yeah, I guess I'm really here.'

He started forward, but as he passed under the shadow of the ribbon's end, something happened.

He faded.

At least the exposed parts of his body, head, hands, and feet, faded. He stopped and looked down. Through one bare foot he could see the rivet heads in the metal floor. He made a disgusted face, and continued towards the door. Once in the sunlight, he grew opaque again.

There was no one in the hall. He walked along, ignoring the triptych of silver partitions that marked the council chamber. A stained-glass window farther on rotated by silent machinery flung colours over his face. A golden disc-chronometer fixed in the ceiling behind a carved crystal face said seven-ten.

He stopped in front of a book cabinet and opened the glass door. 'Here's the one,' he said out loud again. 'Yes, I know we haven't got time, but you're from a desert world with a double sun. This will explain it to you better than I can.' He pulled a book from the row of books. 'We used this in school,' he said. 'A long time ago.'

The book was *Gotham's Revised History of Toromon*. He opened the shark-skin cover and flipped a few pages into the text.

'... from a few libraries and texts that survived the Great Fire (from which we will date all subsequent events). Civilization was reduced beyond barbarism. But eventually the few of us, surviving on the Island of Toron, established a settlement, a village, a city. We pushed to the mainland, and the shore became the central source of food for the island's population which now devoted itself to manufacturing. On the coast, farms and fishing villages flourished. On the island, science and industry became sudden factors in the life of Toromon, now an empire.

'Beyond the plains at the coast, explorers discovered the forest people who lived in the strip of jungle that held in its crescent the stretch of mainland. They were a mutant breed, some giant in stature, others stunted like Neanderthals, both tribes peaceful. They quickly became part of Toromon's empire, with no resistance.

'Beyond the jungle were the gutted fields of lava and dead earth, and it was here that the strange metal tetron was discovered. A great empire has a great crime rate. Our penal system was used to supply miners for the tetron. Technology leapt ahead, and we developed many uses for the power mat could be released from the tetron.

'Then, beyond the lava fields, we discovered what it was that had enlarged and stunted

the bodies of the forest people, what it was that had killed all green things beyond the jungle. Lingered from the days of the Great Fire, an immense strip of radioactive land still burned all around the lava fields, cutting us off from further expansion.

'Going towards that field of death, the plants became gnarled, distorted caricatures of themselves. Then only rock. Death was long if a man ventured in and came back. First immense thirst; then the skin dries out; blindness, fever, madness, at last death; this is what awaited the transgressor.

'It was at the brink of the radiation barrier, in defiance of death, that Telphar was established. It was far enough away to be safe, yet near enough to see the purple glow at the horizon over the broken hills. At the same time, experiments were being conducted with elementary matter transmission. As a token to this new direction of science, the transit-ribbon was commissioned to link the two cities. It was more a gesture of the solidarity of Toromon's empire than a practical appliance. Only three or four hundred pounds of matter could be sent at once, or two or three people. The transportation was instantaneous, and portended a future of great exploration to any part of the world, with theoretical travel to the stars.

'Then, at seven thirty-two on an August evening, some sixty years ago, a sudden increase in the pale light in the radiation-saturated west was observed by the citizens of Telphar. Seven hours later the entire sky above Telphar was flickering with streaks of blue and yellow. Evacuation had begun already. But in three days, Telphar was dead. The sudden rise in radiation has been attributed to many things in theory, but for over half a century an irrefutable explanation has been wanted.

'The advancing radiation stopped well before the tetron mines, but Telphar was lost to Toron for good...'

Jon suddenly closed the book. 'You see?' he said. 'That's why I was afraid when I saw the dead city. That's why ...' He stopped. 'You're not listening,' he said, and put the book back on the shelf.

Down the hallway fifty feet, two ornate staircases rose right and left. He shoved his hands into his pockets, looking absently towards another window, like a person waiting for someone else to make up his mind. But the decision was not forthcoming. Belligerently he started up the staircase to the left. Halfway up he became a little more cautious, his bare feet padding softly, his broad hand preceding him warily on the banister.

He turned down another hallway where carved busts and statues sat in niches in the walls, a light blue behind those to the left, yellow behind those to the right. A sound from around a corner sent him behind a stone mermaid playing with sea-weeds.

The old man who walked by was carrying a folder. He looked serenely preoccupied.

Jon waited without breathing, the space of three ordinary breaths. Then he ducked out and sprinted down the hall. At last he stopped before a group of doors. 'Which one?' he demanded.

This time he got an answer, because he went to one, opened it, and slipped in.

At Chargill's departure, Uske pulled the sheet over his head. Now he heard several clicks and tiny brushing noises but he heard them through the fog of sleep that had washed

back over him. The first sound definite enough to wake him was water against tile. He listened to it for nearly two minutes through the veil of fatigue. It was only when it stopped that he frowned, pushed back the sheet, and sat up. The door to his private bath was opened. The light was off. But someone, or thing, was apparently finishing a shower. The windows of his room were covered with brocade drapes, but he hesitated to push the button that would reel them back from the sun.

In the bath the rings of the shower curtain slid along the rod; the rattle of the towel rack; silence; a few whistled notes. Then: dark spots formed on the fur rug sprawling the black stone. One after another—footprints! Incorporeal footprints coming towards him.

When they were about four feet away from his bed, Uske slammed the flat of his palm on the button that drew back the curtains. Sunlight filled the room like water.

And standing in the last pair of footprints was a naked man. He leapt at Uske as the king threw himself face down into the mound of pillows and tried to scream at the same time. He was caught, pulled up, and the edge of a hand was thrust into his open mouth so that when he bit down, he champed the inside of his cheeks.

'Will you keep still, stupid,' a voice whispered behind him. The king went limp.

'There, now just a second.'

A hand reached past Uske's shoulder, pressed the button on the night table by the bed, the curtains swept back across the window. The hand went out as if it had been a flame.

'Now you keep still and be quiet.'

The pressure released and the king felt the bed give as the weight lifted. He held still for a moment. Then he whirled around. There wasn't anyone there.

'Where do you keep your clothes? You are about my size.'

'Over there ... in that closet.'

The incorporeal footprints padded over the rug, and the closet door opened. Hangers slid along the rack. A bureau drawer at the back of the closet opened. 'This'll do. I didn't think I would ever get into decent clothes again. Just a second.'

There was the sound of tearing thread.

'This will fit me, once I get these shoulder pads out of it.'

Something came out of the closet, dressed now: a human form, only without head or hands.

'Now that I'm decent, open up those curtains and throw some light around the place.' The standing suit of clothes waited. 'Come on, open the curtains.'

Slowly Uske pressed the button. A freshly shaved young man with black hair stood in the sunlight, examining his cuffs. An open brocade jacket with metal filigree covered a white silk shirt with the laces open. The tight grey trousers were belted with a broad, studded leather and fastened with a gold disc. The boots, opened at the toe and the heel, were topped with similar discs. Jon Koshar looked around. 'It's good to be back.'

'Who ... what are you?' whispered Uske.

'Loyal subject of the crown,' said Jon, 'Clam-brain.'

Uske sputtered.

'Think back about five years to when you and I were in school together.'

A flicker of recognition in the blond face.

'You remember a boy a couple of years ahead of you; he got you out of a beating when the kids in the mechanics class were going to gang up on you because you'd smashed a high-frequency coil, on purpose. And remember you dared that same kid to break into the castle and steal the royal Herold from the throne room? In fact you gave him the fire-blade to do it, too. Only that wasn't mentioned in the trial. Did you alert the guards too that I was coming? I was never quite sure of that part.'

'Look ...' began Uske. 'You're crazy.'

'I might have been a little crazy then. But five years in the tetron mines has brought me pretty close to my senses.'

'You're a murderer ...'

'It was in self-defence, and you know it. Those guards that converged on me weren't kidding. I didn't kill him on purpose. I just didn't want to get my head seared off.'

'So you seared one of their heads off first. Jon Koshar, I think you're crazy. What are you doing here anyway?'

'It would take too long to explain. But believe me, the last thing I came back for was to see you again.'

'So you come in, steal my clothing ...' Suddenly he laughed. 'Oh, of course. I'm dreaming all this. How silly of me. I must be dreaming.'

Jon frowned.

Uske went on. 'I must be feeling guilty about that whole business when we were kids. You keep on disappearing and appearing. You can't possibly be more than a figment of my imagination. Koshar! The name! Of course. That's the name of the people who are giving the party I'm going to, once I wake up. That's the reason for the whole thing!'

'What party?' Jon asked.

'Your father is giving it for your sister tonight. You had quite a pretty sister. I'm going back to sleep now. And when I wake up, you're to be gone, do you understand. What a silly dream.'

'Just a moment. Why are you going?'

Uske snuggled his head into the pillow. 'Apparently your father has managed to amass quite a fortune. Chargill says I have to treat him kindly so we can borrow money from him later on. Unless I'm dreaming that up too.'

'You're not dreaming.'

Uske opened one eye, closed it again, and rolled over on to the pillow. 'Tell that to my cousin the Duchess of Petra. She was dragged all the way from her island estate to come

to this thing. The only people who are getting out of it are my mother and my kid brother. Lucky star-fish.'

'Go back to sleep,' said Jon.

'Go away,' said Uske. He opened his eyes once more to see Jon push the button that pulled the curtains to. And then the headless, handless figure went to the door and out. Uske shivered and pulled the covers up again.

Jon walked down the hall.

Behind the door to one room that he did not enter, the Duchess of Petra stood by the window of her palace apartment, gazing over the roofs of the city, over the houses of the wealthy, merchants and manufacturers, over the hive-like buildings which housed the city's tradesmen, clerks, secretaries, and storekeepers, down to the reeking clapboard and stone alleys of the Devil's Pot.

The early sun lay flame in her red hair and whitened her face. She pushed the window open a bit, and breeze waved her blue robe as she absently fingered a smoky stone on a silver chain around her neck.

Jon continued down the hall.

Three doors away, the old queen lay on a heap of mattresses, nestled in the centre of an immense sea-shell bed. Her white hair was coiled in buns on either side of her head, her mouth was slightly opened and breath hissed across dry lips. On the wall above the bed hung a portrait of the late King Alsen, sceptred, official, and benevolent. On the table by the bed was a cheap, palm-sized, poorly painted picture of her son, King Uske. She reached for it in her sleep, knocked it over, then her hand fell on the edge of the bed. Her breath hissed, hissed again.

In the rooms just beside the Queen Mother's chamber, Let, Prince of the Royal Blood, Heir Apparent and Pretender to the Empire of Toromon, was sitting in his pyjama top on the edge of his bed, knuckling his eyes.

The thin limbs of the fourteen-year-old hung akimbo with natural awkwardness and sleep. Like his brother, he was blond and slight.

Still blinking, he slipped into his underwear and trousers, pausing a moment to check the clock. He fastened the snaps on his shirt, turned to the intercom, and pressed a button.

'I overslept, Petra,' Let apologized. 'I'm up now.'

'You must learn to be on time. Remember, you are heir to the throne of Toromon. You mustn't forget that.'

'I wish I could,' Let said. 'Sometimes.'

'Never say that again,' came the demand through the speaker. 'Do you hear me? Never even let yourself think that for a moment.'

'I'm sorry, Petra,' Let said. His cousin, the Duchess, had been acting strangely since her arrival two days ago. Fifteen years his senior, she was still the member of the family to whom he felt closest. Usually, with her, he could forget the crown that was always being pointed to as it dangled above his head. His brother was not very healthy, nor even (some rumoured) all in his right mind. Yet now it was Petra herself who was pointing out the gold circlet of Toromon's kingship. It seemed a betrayal. 'Anyway,' he went on. 'Here I am. What did you want?'

'To say good morning.' The smile in the voice brought a smile to Let's face too. 'Do you remember that story I told you last night, about the prisoners in the tetron mine?'

'Sure!' He had fallen asleep thinking about it. 'The ones who were planning escape.' She had sat in the garden with him for an hour after dark, regaling him with the details of three prisoners' attempt to escape the mines. She had terminated it at the height of suspense with the three men crouching by the steps in the darkness, in the drizzling rain, waiting to dash into the forest. 'You said you were going to go on with it this morning.'

'Do you really want to hear the end of the story?'

'Of course I do. I couldn't get to sleep for hours thinking about it.'

'Well,' said Petra, 'when the guards changed, and the rope tripped him up when he was coming down the steps, the rear guard ran around to see what had happened, as planned. They dashed through the searchlight beam, into the forest, and ...' She paused. 'Anyway, one of them made it. The other two were caught. And killed.'

'Huh?' said Let. 'Is that all?'

'That's about it,' said Petra.

'What do you mean?' Let demanded. Last night's version had contained detail upon detail of the prisoners' treatment, their efforts to dig a tunnel, the precautions they took, along with vivid descriptions of the prison that had made him shiver as though he himself had been in the leaky shacks. 'You can't just finish it up like that,' he exclaimed. 'How did they get caught? Which one got away? Was it the chubby one with the freckles? How did they die?'

'Unpleasantly,' Petra answered. 'No, the chubby one with the freckles didn't make it. They brought him, and the one with the limp, back that morning in the rain and dropped them in the mud outside the barracks to discourage further escape attempts.'

'Oh,' said Let. 'What about the one who did make it?' he asked after a moment.

Instead of listening, she said: 'Let, I want to give you a warning.' The prince stiffened, but she continued differently than he expected. 'In a little while you may be going on an adventure, and you may want to forget some things, because it will be easier. Like being the prince of Toromon. But don't forget it; Let. Don't.'

'What sort of adventure, Petra?'

Again she did not answer his question: 'Let, do you remember how I described the prison to you? What would you do if you were king and those prisoners were under your rule, with their rotten food, the rats, their fourteen hours of labour a day in the mines...'

'Well, I don't know, Petra.' He felt as if something were being asked of him he was reluctant to give. It was like when his history class expected him to know the answer on a

question on government just because he had been born into it. 'I suppose I'd have to consult the council, and see what Chargill said. It would depend on the individual prisoners, and what they'd done; and of course how the people felt about it. Chargill always says you shouldn't do things too quickly—'

'I know what Chargill says,' said the Duchess quietly. 'Just remember what I've said, will you?'

'What about the third man, the one who escaped?'

'He ... came back to Toron.'

'He must have had a lot more adventures. What happened to him, Petra. Come on, tell me.'

'Actually,' said Petra, 'he managed to bypass most of the adventures. He came very quickly. Let me see. After they dashed across the searchlit area, they ducked into the jungle. Almost immediately they got separated. The black haired one became completely turned around, and wandered in the wrong direction until he had gone past the mines, out of the forest, and across the rocky stretch of ground a good five miles. By the time it was light enough to see, he realized he had been wandering towards the radiation barrier; In the distance, like a black hand clawing the horizon, were the ruins of Telphar, the Dead City.'

'Shouldn't he have been dead from the radiation?'

'That's exactly what he thought. In fact he decided if he were close enough to see the place, he should have been dead a few miles back. He was tired. But he was alive. Finally he decided that he might as well wander towards the city. He took two steps more, when he heard something.'

There was silence over the intercom.

After he had allowed sufficient time for a dramatic pause, Let asked, 'What was it? What did he hear?'

'If you ever hear it,' Petra said, 'you'll know.'

'Come on, Petra, what was it?'

'I'm quite serious,' Petra said. 'That's all I know of the story. That's all you need to know. Maybe I'll be able to finish it when I come back from the party tonight.'

'Please, Petra ...'

'That's it.'

He paused for a minute. 'Petra, is the adventure I'm supposed to have the war? Is that, why you're reminding me not to forget?'

'I wish it were that simple, Let. Let's say that's part of it.'

'Oh,' said Let.

'Just promise to remember the story, and what I've said.'

'I will,' said Let, wondering. 'I will.'

Jon walked down a spiral staircase, nodded to the guard at the foot, passed into the castle garden, paused to squint at the sun, went out of the gate, and into the city.

CHAPTER III

THE Devil's Pot overturned its foul jelly at the city's edge. Old alleys were lined with stone houses, many of them ruined, built over, and ruined again. These were the oldest structures in the Pot. Thick with humanity and garbage, it reached from the waterfront to the border of the hive houses in which lived the clerks and professionals of Toron. Clapboard alternated with hastily constructed sheet-metal buildings with no room between. The metal rusted, the clapboard sagged. The water-front housed the emigration offices, and the launch service that went out to the aquariums and hydroponics plants that floated on vast pontoons in the sea.

At the dock, a sooty hulk had pulled in nearly an hour ago. But the passengers were only being allowed to come ashore now, and that after passing their papers through the inspection of the officials who sat behind a wooden table. A flimsy, waist-high fence separated the passengers from the people on the wharf. The passengers milled.

A few had bundles. Many had nothing. They stood quietly, or ambled. On the waterfront street, the noise was thunderous, pedlars hawking, push-carts trundling, the roar of argument. Some passengers gazed across the fence into the thralling slum. Most did not.

As they filed past the officers and on to the dock, a woman with a box of trinkets and a brown-red birthmark splashed over the left side of her face pushed among the new arrivals. Near fifty, her dress and head-rag were a well-washed grey.

'And would you like to buy a pair of shoelaces, fine strong ones,' she accosted a young man who returned a bewildered smile.

'I... I don't got any money.' He was complimented by the attention.

Rara glanced down at his feet. 'Apparently you have no shoes either. Good luck here in the New World, the Island of Opportunity.' She brushed by him and aimed towards a man and woman who carried a bundle composed of a hoe, a rake, a shovel, and a baby. 'A picture,' she said, digging into her box, 'of our illustrious majesty, King Uske, with metal frame, hand painted in miniature in honour of his birthday. No cosmopolitan patriot can be without one.'

The woman with the baby leaned over to see the palm-sized portrait of a vague young man with blond hair in a crown. 'Is that really the king?'

'Of course it is,' declared the birthmarked vendress. 'He sat for it in person. Look at that noble face. It would be an inspiration to the little one there, when and if he grows up.'

'How much is it?' the woman asked.

Her husband frowned.

'For a hand-painted picture,' said Rara, 'it's very cheap. Say, half a unit?'

'It's pretty,' said the woman, then caught the frown on her husband's face. She dropped her eyes and shook her head.

Suddenly the man thrust a half-unit piece into Rara's hand. 'Here.' He took the picture and handed it to his wife. As she stared, he nodded his head. 'It is pretty,' he said. 'Yes. It is.'

'Good luck here in the New World,' commented Rara. 'Welcome to the Island of Opportunity.' Turning, she drew out the next object, glanced at it long enough to see what it was, and said to the man she now faced. 'I see you could certainly use a spool of fine thread to good purpose.' She pointed to a hole in his sleeve. 'There.' A brown shoulder showed through his shirt, farther up. 'And there.'

'I could use a needle too,' he answered. 'And I could use a new shirt, and a bucket of gold.' Suddenly he spat. 'I've as much chance of getting one as the other with what I've got in my pocket.'

'Oh, surely a spool of fine, strong thread...'

Suddenly someone pushed her from behind. 'All right. Move on, lady. You can't peddle here.'

'I certainly can,' exclaimed Rara, whirling. 'I've got my licence right here. Just let me find it now ...'

'Nobody has a licence to peddle in front of the immigration building. Now move on.'

'Good luck in the New Land,' she called over her shoulder as the officer forced her away. 'Welcome to the Island of Opportunity!'

A commotion started behind the gate. Someone was having trouble with papers. Then a barefoot boy broke from his place in line, ran to the fence, and vaulted. The structure was flimsy. As the boy landed, feet running, the fence collapsed.

The passengers hesitated like an unbroken wave. Then they ran. At the table the officials stood up, waved their hands, shouted, then stood on their benches and shouted more. The officer who had shoved Rara disappeared in the herd of bodies. She clutched her box of trinkets and scurried to the corner, then melted with the crowd for two blocks into the slums.

'Rara!'

She stopped and looked around. 'Oh, there you are,' she said, joining a girl who stood back from the crowd, holding a box like the woman's.

'Rara, what happened?'

The birthmark wrinkled as the woman laughed. 'You are watching the beginning of the transformation. Fear, hunger, a little more fear, no work, more fear, and every last one of these poor souls will be a first-class citizen of the Devil's Pot. How much did you sell?'

'Just a couple of units worth,' the girl answered. She was perhaps sixteen, with white hair, blue eyes, and skin that had tanned richly and quickly, giving her the large-eyed look of an exotic snow-maned animal. 'Why are they running?'

'Some boy started a panic. The fence gave way and the rest followed him.' A second surge of people rounded the corner. 'Welcome to the New Land, the Island of Opportunity!' Rara shouted Then she laughed.

'Where are they all going to go?' Alter asked.

'Into the holes in the ground, into the cracks in the street. The lucky men will get into the army. But even that won't absorb them all. The women, the children...' She shrugged.

Just then a boy's voice came from down the block. 'Hey!'

They turned.

'Why, that's the boy that broke the fence!' exclaimed Rara.

'What does he want?'

'I don't know. Before this afternoon I'd never seen him in my life.'

He was dark, with black hair, but as he approached, they saw his eyes were water-green. 'You're the woman who was selling things?'

Rara nodded. 'What do you want to buy?'

'I don't want to buy anything,' he said. 'I want to sell something to you.' He was barefoot; his pants frayed at mid-calf, and his sleeveless shirt had no fastenings.

'What do you want to sell?' she asked, her voice deepening with scepticism.

He reached into his pocket and brought out a green flannel and unwrapped it now in his hand.

They had been polished to milky hues, some streaked with gold, others run through with warm browns and yellows. Two had been rubbed down to pure mother of pearl, their muted silver surfaces clouded with pastels. There on green they swirled about shimmering.

'They're nothing but sea-shells!' Rara said.

But Alter reached her forefinger out to touch a periwinkle. 'They're lovely,' she told him. 'Where did you get them?' They ranged in size from the joint of her thumb to the width of her pinky nail.

'By your departed mother, my own sister, we can't afford to give him a centiunit, Alter. I hardly sold a thing before that brute officer forced me away.'

'I found them on the beach,' the boy exclaimed. 'I was hiding on the boat and I didn't have nothing to do. So I polished them.'

'What were you hiding for?' asked Rara, her voice sharp. 'You don't mean you stowed away?'

'Um-hm,' the boy nodded.

'How much do you want for them?' Alter asked.

'How much ... how much would it cost to get a meal and a place to stay?'

'Much more than we can afford to pay,' interrupted Rara. 'Alter, come with me. This boy is going to talk you out of a unit or two yet if you keep on listening to him.'

'See,' said the boy, pointing to the shells. 'I've put holes in them already. You can string

them around your neck.'

'If you want to get food and a place to sleep,' said Alter, 'you don't want money. You want friends. What's your name? And where are you from?'

The boy looked up from the handful of shells, surprised. 'My name is Tel,' he said after a moment. 'I come from the mainland coast. And I'm a fisherman's son. I thought when I came here I could get a job in the aquariums. That's all you hear about on the coast.'

Alter smiled. 'First of all you're sort of young...'

'But I'm a good fisherman.'

'... and also, it's very different from fishing on a boat. I guess you'd say that there were a lot of jobs in the aquariums and the hydroponics gardens. But with all the immigrants, there are three people for every job.'

Tel shrugged. 'Well, I can try.'

'That's right,' said Alter. 'Come on. Walk with us.'

Rara huffed.

'We'll take him back to Geryn's place and see if we can get him some food. He can probably stay there a little while if Geryn takes a liking to him.'

'You can't just take every homeless barnacle you find back to Geryn's. You'll have it crawling with every shrimp in the Pot. And suppose he doesn't take a liking to him. Suppose he decides to kick us out in the street.' The birthmark darkened.

'Aunt Rara, please,' said Alter. 'I'll handle Geryn.'

Rara huffed once more. 'How come when we're two weeks behind on the rent, you can't find a kind word in your mouth for the old man when he threatens to throw us on to the street. Yet for a handful of shells...'

'Please...'

A breeze seeped through the narrow street, picked a shock of Alter's white hair and flung it back from her shoulder.

'Anyway, Geryn may be able to use him. If Tel stowed away, that means he doesn't have any papers.'

Tel looked puzzled.

Rara frowned, chastisement in her eyes. 'You are not supposed to refer to that, ever.'

'Don't be silly,' said Alter. 'It's just a fantasy of Geryn's anyway. It'll never happen. And without papers, Tel can't get a job at the aquariums, even if they wanted him. So if Geryn thinks he can fit him into his crazy plan, Tel will come out a lot better than if he had some old ten unit a week factory job. Look, Rara, how can Geryn possibly kidnap ...'

'Be quiet,' snapped Rara.

'And even if he did, what good is it going to do? It's not as if it were the king himself.'

'I don't understand,' said Tel.

That's good,' said Rara. 'And if you want to keep going with us, you won't try to find out.'

'We can tell you this much,' said Alter. 'The man who owns the inn where we stay wants to do something. Now, he is a little crazy. He's always talking to himself. But he need someone who has no identification registered in the City. If he thinks he can use you, you'll get free food and a place to sleep. He used to be a gardener on the island estate of the Duchess of Petra. But he drank too much or something and I guess at last she let him go. He says she still send him messages about his plan. But...'

'You don't have to go any farther,' Rara said curtly.

'You'll hear about it from him,' said Alter. 'Why did you stow away?'

'I just got fed up with life at home. We'd work all day to catch fish, and then have to leave them rotting on the beach because we could only sell a fifth, sometimes none at all. Some people gave up; some only managed to get it in their head that they had to work harder. I guess my father was like that He figured if he worked enough, someone would just have to buy them. But nobody did. My mother did some hand-weaving and we were living mostly on that. Finally, I figured I was eating up more than I was worth. So I left.'

'Just like that, and with no money?'

 asked Rara.

'Just like that,' Tel said.

'You poor boy,' said Rara, and in a sudden fit of maternal affection, she put her arm around his shoulder.

'Ow!' cried Tel, and winced.

Rara jerked her hand away. 'What's the matter?'

'I... I got hurt there,' the boy rubbed his shoulder gently.

'Hurt? How?'

'My father. ... beat me there.'

'Ah,' said Rara. 'Now it comes out. Well, whatever realms you left, they're your own business. I've never known anyone yet to do something for one reason alone. Don't lag behind. We'll be back at Geryn's in time for lunch.'

'I thought if I could sneak aboard,' went on Tel, 'they'd have to let me off in the city, even if I didn't have money. I didn't know about papers. And when I was in line, I figured I'd explain to the men at the desk. Or maybe I'd give them my shells, and they would get the papers for me. But the guy ahead of me had a mistake in his. Some date was wrong, and they said they were going to send him back to the mainland and that he couldn't leave the ship. He said he'd give them real money, and even got it out of his pocket. But they started to take him away. That's when I ran out of line and jumped the fence. I didn't know everyone else would run too.'

'Probably half their papers were out of order too. Or forged. That's why they ran.'

'You're a cynic, Aunt Rara.'

'I'm a practical woman.'

'As they turned another corner, the boy's green eyes jumped , at the blue-hazed towers of the palace, behind the roofs of merchants' mansions, themselves behind the hive houses and the spreading tenements. He tried to memorize the street they followed. He failed.

Two contradictory impressions warred: first, the closeness of these alleys, some so small that two men could not pass without turning; second, the endlessness of the city. He tried to tell Alter what he felt, but after a few broken sentences, she smiled and shook her head. 'No, I don't understand. Try again to tell me what you mean.'

And the sea-side leapt into his head. The yellow beach lashed across his mind so that his eyes stung. He saw the salt-and-pepper rocks, shaling away and knobbed with periwinkle shells. He saw brown fingers of seaweed clutch the sand as waves went out. Tel blinked the city back into his eyes. Tears washed the broken curb, the cracked walls, the rusted window-jamb, bright and clean.

'He means he's homesick,' Rara interpreted. 'No, boy,' she said. 'It'll never go away. But it'll get less.'

The street turned sharply twice, widened.

'Well,' said Alter. 'Here we are.'

A red plaque hung over the door of the stone building. It was two stories—twice the height of the other structures. They entered.

Beams ran the low ceiling. By one wall was a counter. There was a large table in the middle, and descending into the room in a large V was a stair.

Of the men and women sitting around the room, one caught Tel's eye. He was perhaps seven feet and a handful of inches tall, and straddled the bench before the table. He had an equine face, and a triplex of scars started on his cheek, veered down to his neck, and disappeared under his vest. As Tel watched, he turned to a plate of food he was eating, so that his scars disappeared. Tel remembered the tall forest men who had sometimes come to the fishing village; and the little ones, who came and drank too much. He'd seen the scars on the tall guards before. Then, at the stair's head, a harpoon-straight old man appeared. He hurried down, his white hair spiking in all directions. Reaching the bottom, he whirled, darted black eyes through the room. 'All right!' he cried. 'I've received the message. I've received the message. And it's time!'

Alter whispered to Tel: 'That's Geryn.'

'Are we all here?' the old man demanded. 'Are we all here now?'

A woman at the counter snickered. Geryn turned towards Tel, Alter, and Rara. 'You!' he demanded. His finger wavered so they could not tell at which of the three he pointed.

'You mean him?' asked Alter, pointing to Tel.

Geryn nodded vigorously. 'What are you doing here? Are you a spy?'

'No, sir,' said Tel.

Geryn stepped around the table and looked closely. The black eyes were two sharp spots of darkness in a face the colour of shipboards gone two winters without paint.

'Geryn,' Alter said. 'Geryn, he isn't a spy. He's from the mainland. And Geryn, he doesn't

have any papers. He stowed away.'

'You're not a spy?' Geryn demanded again.

'No, sir,' Tel repeated.

'Are you a mali?'

'Huh?' Tel asked. 'What's that?'

'A malcontent. We're malis! You know what that means, don't you?'

'Huh?' Tel said again. The old man's barked questions scared him. They also fascinated him, as the magnificent confusion of the city was frightening and fascinating.

'It means you don't like where you've *been*, the place where you *are* is grim, and the only place you see yourself *going* is not an improvement on what's gone before.'

'Well, I don't like where—' He paused the time it would take a wave to break. Then he reached up and rubbed his sore shoulder. 'I don't like where I've been.'

'Then don't just stand there in the road and holler. Do something about it. You follow my plan! Come with us.'

'But I don't know—'

'—where you're going? Come anyway!' Geryn backed away. 'I like you,' he said. 'I trust you.' Slowly he turned. Then he whirled back. 'I have no choice, you see. It's too late. The message has come. So I need you.' He laughed. Then the laugh stopped, as if cut by a razor. He put his hands over his eyes, then brought his finger down slowly. 'I'm tired,' he said. 'Rara, you owe me rent. Pay up or I'll kick you all out. I'm tired.' He walked heavily towards the bar. 'Give me something to drink. In my own tavern you can give me something to drink.'

Someone laughed again. Tel looked at Alter.

'Well,' she said. 'He likes you.'

'He does?'

'Um-hm,' she nodded.

'Oh,' Tel said.

At the bar, Geryn drained a mug of green liquor, slammed the empty glass on the board, and cried: 'The war! Yes, the war!'

'Here we go,' Alter whispered.

Geryn ran his finger along the rim of the glass. 'The war,' he said again. He turned suddenly. 'It's coming! And do you know why it's coming? Do you know how it's coming? We can't stop it, not now, not any more. I've received the signal, so there's no hope left. We must go ahead, try to save something, something to start and build from again.' Geryn looked directly at Tel. 'Boy, do you know what a war is?'

'No, sir,' said Tel, which wasn't exactly true. He'd heard the word.

'Hey,' someone cried from the bar. 'Are we gonna get stories about great fires and destruction?'

Geryn ignored the cry. 'Do you know what the Great Fire was?'

Tel shook his head.

'The world was once much bigger than it is today,' Geryn said. "Once man flew not just between island and mainland, island and island, but skirted the entire globe of the earth. Once man flew to the moon, even to the moving lights in the sky. There were empires, like Toromon, only bigger. And there were many of them. Often they fought with one another, and that was called a war. And the end of the final war was the Great Fire. That was fifteen hundred years ago. Most of the world, from what little we know of it today, is scarred with strips of impassable land, the sea is run through with deadly currents. Toromon may be the only fragment that can hold life, for all we are sure of. And now we will have another war.'

Someone from the bar yelled, 'So what if it comes. It might bring some excitement.'

Geryn whirled. 'You don't understand!' He whipped one hand through his shocked hair. 'What are we fighting? We don't know. It's something unnamable on the other side of the radiation barrier. Why are we fighting?'

'Because—' began a bored voice at the bar.

'Because,' interrupted Geryn, now pointing at Tel's face, 'we have to fight. Toromon has got into a situation where its excesses must be channelled towards something external. Our science has outrun our economics. Our laws have become stricter, and we say it is to stop the rising lawlessness. But it is to supply workers for the mines that the laws tighten, workers who will dig more tetron, that more citizens shall be jobless, and must therefore become lawless to survive. Ten years ago, before the aquariums, fish was five times its present price. There was perhaps four per cent unemployment in Toron. Today the prices of fish are a fifth of what they were, yet unemployment has reached twenty per cent of the city's populace. A quarter of our people starve. More arrive every day. What will we do with them? We will use them to fight a war. The University turns out scientists whose science we cannot use lest it put more people out of work. What will we do with them? We will use them to fight a war. Eventually the mines will flood us with tetron, too much for even the aquariums and the hydroponic gardens. It will be used for the war.'

'Then what?' asked Tel.

'We do not know who or what we are fighting,' repeated Geryn. 'We will be fighting ourselves, but we will not know it. According to history, it is customary in a war to keep each side in ignorance of the other. Or give them lies like those we use to frighten children instead of truth. But here the truth may be ...' His voice trailed off.

'What's your plan?' Tel asked.

There was another laugh at the bar.

'Somehow—' His voice was lower. 'Somehow we must save something, salvage some fragment from the destruction that will come. There are only a few of us who know all this, who understand it, who know what ... what has to be done.'

'What is that?' Tel asked again.

Suddenly Geryn whirled. 'Drinks!' he called. 'Drinks all around!' The amusement increased, and lethargy disappeared as the people moved to the bar. 'Drink up, friends, my fellows!' cried Geryn.

'Your plan?' Tel asked again, puzzled.

'I'll tell you,' answered the old man, almost in a whisper. 'I'll tell you. But not just yet. Not just ...' He turned back again. 'Drink up!' Three men who already had their glasses cheered.

'Are you with me, friends?' Geryn demanded.

'We're with you!' six more cried, clinking their glasses hard on the table top as Tel looked from Alter to Rara and back.

'My plan ...' began Geryn. 'Have you all had a glass? All of you? Another round for everybody. Yes, a second round!'

There was a solid cheer, now. Glass bottoms turned towards the ceiling, then whammed the counter again.

'My plan is to ... you understand it's not just my plan, but I only a small part in a great plan, a plan to save us all ... my plan is to kidnap Prince Let from the palace. That's the part that we must do. Are you with me, friends?' A yell rose. Somebody had started a fight at the end of the bar. Geryn's voice broke through the sound, in a rasping whisper that silenced them for seconds: 'Because you must be with me! The time is tonight! I have ... I have it planned.' The voices halted, then heaved to a roar. 'Tonight,' repeated Geryn. Now hardly anyone heard him. 'I have it planned. Only you've got to be ... be with me.'

Tel frowned and Alter shook her head. The old man had closed his eyes. Rara was beside him, her hand on his shoulder. 'You're going to get yourself sick with all this yelling. Let me get you up to your room.'

As she turned him towards the stairs, the scarred giant who had been given a drink, now rose from the table, looked straight at Geryn, then drained his drink.

Geryn nodded, drew a breath through his teeth, and allowed Rara to lead him up the stairs as Tel and Alter watched. The noise rolled among the drinking men and women.

CHAPTER IV

SHE made a note on her pad, put down her slide rule, and picked up a pearl snap with which she fastened together the shoulder panels of her white dress. The maid said, 'Ma'am, shall I do your hair now?'

'One second,' Clea said. She turned to page 328 of her integral tables, checked the increment of sub-cosine A plus B over the n th root of A to the n th plus B to the n th, and transferred it to her notebook.

'Ma'am?' asked the maid. She was a thin woman, about thirty. The little finger of her left hand was gone.

'You can start now.' Clea leaned back in the beauty-hammock and lifted the dark mass of her hair from her neck, the maid caught the ebony wealth with one hand and reached for the end of the spool of silver chain strung with pearls each an inch and a half.

'Ma'am?' asked the maid again. 'What are you figuring on?'

I'm trying to determine the inverse sub-trigonometric functions. My mathematics professor at the University discovered the regular ones, but nobody's come up with the inverses yet.'

'Oh,' said the maid. She ceased weaving the jewelled chain a moment, took a comb, and whipped it through a cascade of hair that fell back on Clea's shoulder. 'Eh ... what are you going to do with them, once you find them?'

'Actually,' said Clea. '... Ouch...'

'Oh, pardon me, I'm sorry, please ...'

'... actually,' went on Clea, 'they'll be perfectly useless. At least as far as anyone knows now. They exist, so to speak, in a world that has little to do with ours. Like the world of imaginary numbers, the square root of minus one. Eventually we may find a use for them, perhaps in the same way we use imaginary numbers to find the roots of equations of a higher order than two; if $\cos \theta + i \sin \theta = e^{i\theta}$, then ...'

'Ma'am...?'

'Well, they haven't been able to do anything like that with the sub-trigonometric functions as of yet. But they're fun.'

'Bend your head a little to the left, Ma'am,' was the maid's comment.

Clea bent.

'You're going to look beautiful.' Four and five fingers wove deftly in her hair. 'Just beautiful.'

'I hope that Tomar can get here. It's not going to be any fun without him.'

'But isn't the king coming?' asked the maid. 'I saw his acceptance note myself. You know it was on a very simple card. Very elegant.'

'My father will enjoy that a good deal more than I will. My brother went to school with the king before ... before His Majesty's coronation.'

'That's amazing,' said the maid. 'Were they friends? Just think of it? Do you know whether they were friends or not?'

Clea shrugged.

'Oh, yes,' said the maid, continuing, "have you seen the ballroom? All the *hors d'oeuvres* are imported fish. You can tell, because they're smaller than the ones your father grows.'

'I know,' smiled Clea. 'I don't think I've ever eaten any of Dad's fish in my life. That's sort of terrible, actually. They're supposed to be very good.'

'Oh, they are, Ma'am. They are. Your father is a fine man to grow such great, good fishes. But you must admit, there's something special about the ones that come from the coast. I tasted one on my way up through the pantry. So I know.'

'What exactly is it?' Clea asked, turning around.

The maid frowned. 'Oh, one can tell. Yes, one can tell the difference.'

The lock on the front door of his father's house had remembered this thumb-print.

At that moment, Jon was saying, 'So far you've been right.' He appeared to be more or less standing (the room was dim, so his head and hands were invisible) more or less alone. 'Yes, I trust you. I don't have much choice,' he added, in the pantry of his father's mansion. Suddenly his voice took a different tone. 'Look, I will trust you; with part of me, anyway. I've been caged up for nearly five years, for something stupid I did, and for something that no matter how hard I try, I can't convince myself was all my fault. I don't mean that Uske should be blamed. But random chance, and all the rest.... All I mean is, it makes me want out that much more. I want to be *free*. I nearly got myself killed trying to escape from the mines. And a couple of people may have died helping us. All right, you got me out of that stainless steel graveyard I wandered into back at the radiation barrier, for that, thanks. I mean it. But I'm not free yet. And I still want out, more than anything in the world. Sure, I know you want me to do something, but I don't understand it. You say you'll tell me soon. Okay. But you're riding around in my head like this, so I'm not free yet. If obey you is what I have to do, I'll do it. But I'm warning you. If I see another crack in the wall, another spot of light getting in, I'll claw my hands off trying to break through and to hell with what you want. Because while you're there, I'm still a prisoner.'

Suddenly the light in the pantry flipped on. His sudden face went from the tautness of his last speech to fear. He had been standing behind a tall, porcelain storage cabinet. He jumped back to the wall. Whoever had come in, a butler or caterer, was out of sight on the other side. A hand came around the edge of the cabinet, reaching for the handle. The hand was broad, with black hairs, and sported a brass ring set with an irregular shape of blue glass. As the door opened, the hand swung out of sight. There was a clatter of dishes on the shelves, the slide of crockery slipping over plastic racks, and a voice: 'All right there. You carry this one.' Then a grunt, and the *ker-flop* of the latch as the door slammed.

A moment later, the light, and Jon Koshar's hands and head, went out. When Jon stepped forward again, he looked at the pantry, at the doors, the cabinets. The familiarity hurt. There was a door into the main kitchen. (Once he had snagged a kharba fruit from the cook's table and ran, as behind him a wooden salad bowl crashed to the floor. The sound made him whirl, in time to catch the cook's bowl and to see the pale shaling of lettuce strewn across the tile. The bowl was still spinning. He had been nine.) He started slowly for the hallway to the dining-room. In the hall was a red wood table on which sat a free form sculpture of aluminium rods and glass spheres. That was unfamiliar. Not the table, the sculpture. (And a slight highlight along the curve of crystal brought back to him for a moment the blue ceramic vase that had been there in his memory. Its glaze was shot with myriad cracks. It was cylindrical, straight, veering to a small mouth, slightly off centre. The burnished red wood behind the turquoise was a combination that was almost too rich, too sensual. He had broken the vase. He had broken it in surprise, when his sister had come on him suddenly, the little girl with the hair black as his own, only more of it, saying, 'What are you doing, Jon?' and he had jumped, turned, and then the vase was lying in fragments on the floor, like a lot of bright, brittle leaves. He remembered his first reaction had been, oddly, surprise at finding that the glass covered only the outside ceramic. He was fourteen.) He walked to the family dining-room and stepped in. With the ballroom in use, no one would come here. Entering the room was like stepping into a cricket's den, the subtle tsk-tsk of a hundred clocks repeated and repeated, overlapping and melting, with no clear, discernible rhythm. All the shelves were filled with his father's collection of

chronometers. He looked at the clocks on the shelf level with his eye. The last time he had been in this room, it had been the shelf below. The light from the doorway made crescents on the faces, some the size of his little finger nail, others bigger than his head. Their hands were invisible, their settings (in his memory they went from plain gold to ornate, carved silver. One was set in a miniature undersea bower with jewelled shells and coral branches) were dim. There must be many new clocks after five years, he thought. If he turned on the light, how many would he recognize. (When he was eighteen, he had stood in this room and examined the dun, double prong of a power-blade. The light in the room was off, and as he flicked the button on the hilt, and the sparks leapt, crescents had flared on the edges of the clock faces over the wall. Later, at the royal palace, with that same blade, there had been the same, sudden, clumsy fear of discovery, fear clotting into panic, the panic embolizing to confusion, and the confusion metastasizing into fear again. Fear had dragged him down, so that when he tried to run through the vaulted hall, his feet were too heavy; so that when he tripped against the statue in the alcove, whirled upon the pursuing guard, and swung the white needle of energy and the guards flesh hissed and fell away—a moment of blood spurting under pale flame—almost immediately he was exhausted. They took him easily.) Clumsy, he thought. Not with his fingers (he had fixed many of these clocks when his father had acquired them in various states of disrepair) but with his mind. His emotions were not fine and drawn, but great shafts of anger or fear falling about him without focus or clear source. Disgust, or even love, when he had felt it (School was great; his history teacher was very good ... school was noisy; the kids were pushy and didn't care about anything. His blue parakeet was delicate and beautiful; he had taught it to whistle ... there were always crumbs on the bottom of the cage; changing the paper was a nuisance) was vague, quick to metamorphasize into the other.

Then there had been five years of prison. And the first sharp feeling pierced his mind, as sharp as the uncoiled spring of a clock, as sharp as jewels in a poison ring. It was a wish, a pain, an agony for freedom. The plans for escape had been intricate, yet fine as the cracks in blue ceramic glaze. The hunger for escape was a hand against his stomach, and as the three of them had, at last, waited in the rain by the steps, it had tightened unbearably. Then—

Then with all the sharpness, what had made him get lost from the others? Why had he wandered in the wrong direction? Clumsy! And he wanted to be free of that! Now he wondered if that was what he had wanted to be free of all along while he had spluttered at the prison guards, choked on the food, and could not communicate his outrage. Later, at the horizon, was the purple glow of something paler than sunrise, deadlier than the sea, a flickering gauze behind the hills. Near him were the skeletons of ancient trees. The dirt looked as if it had been scattered black over the land in loose handfuls, bearing neither shrubs nor footprints. By one boulder a trickle of water ran beneath a fallen log, catching light on either side. He looked up.

On the horizon, against the lines of light, as though cut—no, torn from carbon paper, was the silhouette of a city. Tower behind tower rose against the pearly haze. A net of roadways wound among the spires. *Telphar!*

Then he had made out the thread of metal that ran from the city, in his general direction but veering to the right. It passed him half a mile away and disappeared into the edge of the jungle behind him. *Telphar!* The name had come to his mind as though on a sign attached with springs to his consciousness. The radiation! That was the second thing he thought. Once more the name of the city shivered in his brain: *Telphar!* The certain, very certain death he had wandered into caught his gut like a fist. It was almost as if the name were sounding out loud in his skull. Then he stopped. Because he realized he had heard something. A ... a voice! *The Lord of the Flames.* Very definitely he heard it—

Music had started. He could hear it coming from the ballroom. By now the party must be under way. He looked out into the hall. A fellow in an apron, holding an empty tray with nothing but crumbs, was coming towards him.

'Excuse me, sir,' the man in the apron said. 'Guests aren't supposed to be in this part of the house.'

'I was trying to find the ...' Jon coughed.

'Oh. Of course. Go back into the ballroom and take the hall to your left down three doors.'

'Thank you,' Jon smiled back and walked up the hallway. He entered the ballroom through a high, arched alcove in which were small white tables covered with trays of red fish roe on circlets of toast, white meat, red meat, dark meat of fish ground into patties, cut into stars, strips of filet wound to look like sea-shells, brazed shrimp, and stuffed, baby smelts.

A ten-piece orchestra—three bass radiolyn, a therimin, and six blown shells of various sizes—was making slow windy music from the dais. The few scattered guests seemed lost through the room. Jon wandered across the floor.

Here and there steel fountains spewed blue or pink liquid over mounds of crushed ice. Each fountain was rimmed with a little shelf of glasses. Jon picked up a glass, let it fill, and walked on, sipping.

The loudspeaker announced the arrival of Mr Quelor Da and party. Heads turned, and a moment later much glitter, green silk, and blue net at the top of the wide marble steps across the room resolved into four ladies and their escorts.

Jon glanced at the balcony that ran around the second storey of the room. A short gentleman in a severe blue suit was coming towards the head of the steps which expanded on down towards the ballroom floor with the grace and approximate shape of a swan's wing. The gentleman hurried down the pale cascade.

Jon sipped his drink. It was sweet with the combined flavours of a dozen fruits, the whisper of alcohol bitter at the back of his tongue. The gentleman hurried across the floor, passing within yards.

Father! The impact was the same as the recognition of Telphar. The hair was thinner than it had been five years ago. He was much heavier. His ... father ... was at the other side of the room already, checking with the waiters. Jon pulled his shoulders in, and let his breath out. It was the familiarity, not the change, that hurt.

It took some time before the room filled. One guest Jon noted was a red-haired young man in military uniform, touring in a way usually associated with older men. There was a major's insignia on his shoulder. Jon watched him a while, empathizing with his occasional looks that told how out of place he felt. He took neither food nor drink, but prowled a ten foot area by the side of the balcony steps. Waiting, Jon thought.

By the time the floor was respectably populated, Jon had exchanged a few words with the soldier (Jon: 'A beautiful party, don't you think?' Soldier, with embarrassment: 'Yes, sir.' Jon: 'I guess the war is worrying all of us.' Soldier: 'The war? Yes.' Then he looked away, not inclined to talk more.) Now Jon stood near the door. Suddenly the loudspeaker announced: 'The Party of His Royal Majesty, the King.'

Gowns rustled, the talk rose, people turned, and fell back from the entrance. The king's

party, himself and a tall, electric, redheaded woman, obviously his senior by a handful of years, appeared at the top of the six marble steps. As they came down, right and left, people bowed. Jon dropped his head, but not before he realized that the king's escort had given him a very direct look. He glanced up again, but now her emerald train was sweeping the aisle the guests had left. The insignia on her cape told him she was a duchess.

Coming up the aisle in the other direction now between the bending crowds was old Koshar. He bowed. The pale young man raised him and they shook hands, Koshar spoke: 'Your Majesty,' he began warmly.

'Sir,' answered the king.

'I haven't seen you since you were a boy at school.'

The king smiled rather wanly. Koshar hurried on.

'I would like to present my daughter to you, for it's her party. Her name is Clea.' The old man turned to the balcony stairs, and the crowd's eyes turned with him.

She was standing on the top step, in a white dress made of panel over silken panel, held with pearl clasps. Her black hair cascaded across one shoulder, webbed and re-webbed with a chain of silver strung with pearls. Her hands at her side, she came down the stairs. People stepped back; she smiled, and walked forward. Jon watched while his sister reached their father's side.

'My daughter Clea,' said old Koshar.

'Charmed.'

Koshar raised his left hand, and the musicians began the introduction to the partner changing dance. Jon watched the king take Clea in his arms. He saw the soldier move towards them, then stop. A woman in a smoky grey dress suddenly blocked his view, smiled at him, and said, 'Will you dance?' He smiled back, to avoid another expression, and she was in his arms. Apparently the soldier had a similar experience, for at the first turn of the music, Jon saw the soldier was dancing too. A few couples away, Clea and the king turned round and round, white and white, brunette and blond. The steps came back to Jon like a poem remembered, the turn, the dip, separate, and join again. When a girl does the strange little outward step, and the boy bows, so that for a moment she is out of sight, her gown always swishes just so. Yes, like that! This whole day had been filled with remembrances like that; forgotten five years, re-learned with vividness that shocked him. The music signalled for partners to change. Gowns whirled into momentary flowers, and he was dancing with the brown-haired woman the soldier had been dancing with a moment before. Looking to his left, he saw that the soldier had somehow contrived to get Clea for a partner. Moving closer, he overheard:

'I didn't think you were going to get here at all. I'm so glad,' from Clea.

'I could have even come earlier,' Tomar said. 'But you'd have been busy.'

'You could have come up.'

'Once I got here, I didn't think we'd get a chance to talk.'

'Well, we've got one now. But we change partners in a moment. What happened to the scouting planes?'

'All crippled. Didn't sight a thing. They got back to base almost before I did this morning. The report was nothing. What about the picnic, Clea?'

'We can have it on ...'

A burst of music signalled the change. Jon did not hear the day, but expected his sister to whirl into his arms. Instead (he saw her white dress flare and turn by him) an emerald iridescence caught in his eye, then rich mahogany flame. He was dancing with the Duchess. She was nearly his height, and watched him with a smile hung in the subtle area between friendship and knowing cynicism. She moved easily, and he had just remembered he ought to smile back out of politeness when the music sounded the change. The instant before she whirled away, he heard her say, very distinctly, 'Good luck, Jon Koshar.'

His name brought him to a halt, and he stared after her. When he did turn back to his new partner, surprise still on his face, his eyes were filled with whiteness. It was Clea. He should have been dancing, but he was standing still. When she looked at his face to discover why, she suddenly drew a breath. At first Jon thought his head had disappeared again. Then, as shock and surprise became as real as her wide eyes, her open mouth, he whispered, 'Clea!' And her hand went to her mouth.

Clumsy! he thought, and the word was a sudden ache in his hands and chest. Reach for her. Dance. As his hands went out the music stopped and the languid voice of the king came over the loudspeaker.

'Ladies and gentlemen, citizens of Toromon, I have just received a message from the Council that necessitates an announcement to you as my friends and loyal subjects. I have been requested by the Council to make their declaration of war official by my consent. An emergency meeting over sudden developments has made it imperative that we begin immediate action against our most hostile enemies across the barrier. Therefore, before you all, I do declare the empire of Toromon to be at war!'

In the silence, Jon looked for his sister, but she was gone. Someone near the microphone cried out, 'Long live the king!'

The cry came again. The musicians started the music once more, partners found one another, and the talking and laughing grew in his ears like waves, like crumbling rock, like the cutter teeth clawing in the rock face.... Jon shook his head. But he was in his own house. Yes, his room was on the second floor and he could go up and lie down. And by his bed would be the copper night table, and the copy of *Delcord the Whaler* which he had been reading the night before....

He'd left the ballroom and got halfway down the hall before he remembered that his room was probably not his room any longer. And the night before was five years ago. He was standing in front of the door to one of the sitting-rooms that open off the hall. The door was ajar, and from it he heard a woman's voice: 'Can't you do something about his index of refraction? If he's going to be doing any work at night, you can't have him popping on and off like a flashlight.' There was silence.

Then: 'Well, at least don't you think he should be told more than he knows now? Fine. So do I, especially since the war has been officially declared.'

Jon took a breath and stepped in.

Her emerald train whirled across the duller green of the carpet as she turned. The bright hair, untoussured save by two coral combs, fell over her shoulders. Her smile showed faint surprise. Very faint.

'Who were you talking to?' Jon Koshar asked.

'Mutual friends,' the duchess said. They were alone in the room.

After a moment, Jon said, 'What do they want us to do? It's treason, isn't it?'

The duchess' eyes went thin. 'Are you serious?' she asked. 'You call this treason, keeping those idiots from destroying themselves, eating themselves up in a war with a nameless enemy, something so powerful that if there were any consideration of real fighting, we could be destroyed with a thought. Do you remember who the enemy is? You've heard his name. There are only three people in Toromon who have, Jon Koshar. Everyone else is ignorant. So we're the only ones who can say we're fully responsible. That responsibility is to Toromon. Have you any idea what state the economy is in? Your own father is responsible for a good bit of it, yet it's got to the point that if he closed down his aquariums the panic he caused would equal the destruction their being open already causes. The empire is snowballing towards chaos and its going to take it out in war. You call trying to prevent it treason?'

'Whatever we call it, we don't have much choice, do we?'

'With people like you around, I'm not so sure it isn't a bad idea.'

'Look,' said Jon. 'I was cooped up in a prison mine at the edge of nowhere for five years. All I wanted was out. All I wanted was to get free. Now, I'm back in Toron and I'm still not free. But I still want it.'

'First of all,' said the duchess, 'if it wasn't for them, you wouldn't be as free as you are now. After a day of clean clothes and walking in fresh air, if you're not on the road to what you want, then I better change some ideas of my own. I want something too, Jon Koshar. When I was seventeen, I worked for a summer in your father's aquarium. My nine hours a day were spent with a metal spoon about the size of your head scraping the bottoms of the used tank tubes. I cleaned out the stuff that even the glass filters were too finicky to take out. Afterwards I was too tired to do much more than read. So I read. Most of it was about Toromon's history. I read a lot about the early mainland expeditions. Then, in my first winter out of school, I lived in a fishing village at the edge of the forest, studying what I could of the customs of the forest people. I made sketches of their temples, tried to map their nomadic movements. I even wrote an article on the architecture of their temporary shelters that was published in the University journal. Jon Koshar, what I want is for Toromon to be free, free of its own self-entanglements. Perhaps coming from the royal family, I had easier emotional access to a sense of Toromon's history. Even at its best, that's all an aristocracy is good for. But I wanted more than a sense, I wanted to know what it was worth. So I went out and looked. And I found, found it was worth a great deal. Somehow Toromon must pick itself up by the back of the neck and give itself a shaking. If I have to be the part that doesthe shaking, I will. That's what I want, Jon Koshar, and I want it as badly as you want your freedom.'

Jon was quiet a moment. Then he said: 'To get what we want, we more or less have to do the same thing. All right, I'll go along. But you're going to have to explain some things to me. There's a lot I still don't understand.'

'A lot we both don't,' the duchess said. 'But we know this: they're not from earth, they're

not human, and they come from very far away. Inconceivably far.'

'What will they do?'

'They'll help us help Toromon if we help them. How, I don't understand for sure. Already I've arranged to have Prince Let kidnapped...'

'Kidnapped? But why...?'

'Because if we get through this, Toromon is going to need a strong king. And I think you'll agree my cousin Uske will never quite be that. Also, he's ill, and under any great strain might die in a moment. Also the underground groups of malis are springing up to undermine whatever the government decides to do, once the war gets going. I am working through one now. Let is going where he can become a strong man, with the proper training, so that if anything happens to Uske, he can return and there will be someone to guide the government through its crises. After that, how we're to help them, I'm not sure.'

'I see,' said Jon. 'How did they get hold of you, anyway? For that matter, how did they get me?'

'You? They contacted you just outside of Telphar, didn't they? They had to rearrange the molecular structure of some of your more delicate proteins and do a general overhaul on your sub-crystalline structure so that the radiation wouldn't kill you. That, unfortunately, had the unpleasant side effect of booting down your index of refraction a couple of points, which is why you keep fading in dim light. In fact I got a description of your entire escape from them. It kept me on the edge of my seat all night. How was I contacted? The same way you were, suddenly, and with those words: *The Lord of the Flames*. Now, your first direct assignment will be...'

In another room, Clea was sitting on a blue velvet hassock with her hands tight in her lap. Then suddenly they flew apart like springs, shook beside her head, then clasped again. 'Tomar,' she said. 'Please excuse me, but I'm upset. It was so strange. When I was dancing with the king, he told me how he had dreamed of my brother this morning. I didn't think anything of it. It was just small talk. Then, just after I changed partners for the third time, there I was, staring into a face that I could have sworn was Jon's. And the man wasn't dancing. He was just staring at me. Then he said my name. Tomar, it was the same voice Jon used to use when I'd hurt myself and he wanted to help. Oh, it couldn't have been him, because he was too thin, and too gaunt, and the voice was just a little too deep. But it was so much like what he might have been. That was when the king made his announcement. I just turned and ran. The whole thing seemed supernatural. Oh, don't worry. I'm not superstitious, but even though I know it could not really have been him, it unnerved me. But that plus what we were talking about this morning..'

'What?' asked Tomar. He stood beside the hassock in the blue conservatory, his hands in his pockets, listening with animal patience.

'About drafting all the scientific students into the war effort Maybe the war is good, but, Tomar, I'm working on my own project. All at once, the thing I want most in the world is to be left alone to work on it. And I want you, and I want to have a picnic. I'm nearly at the solution, and to have to stop and work on bomb sightings and missile trajectories ... Tomar, there's a beauty in abstract mathematics that shouldn't be dulled with that sort of

thing. Also, maybe you'll go away, or I'll go away. That doesn't seem fair either. Tomar, have you ever had things you wanted, had them in your hands, and suddenly a situation came up that made it look as if they might fly out of your grip forever?'

Tomar rubbed his hand across his hair and shook his head. 'There was a time, once, when I wanted things. Like food, work, and a bed where all four legs touched the ground. So I came to Toron. And I got them. And I got you, and so I guess there isn't anything else to want, not that bad.' He grinned, and the grin made her smile.

'I guess,' she started, '... I guess it was just that he looked so much like my brother.'

'Clea,' Tomar said. 'About your brother. I wasn't going to tell you this until later. Maybe I shouldn't say it now. But you were asking whether or not they were going to draft prisoners into the army; and whether at the end of their service, they'd be freed Well, I did some checking. They are going to, and I sent through a recommendation that they take your brother among the first, In three hours I got a memorandum from the penal commissioner. Your brother's dead.'

She looked at him hard, trying to hold her eyes open and to prevent the little snarl of sound that was a sob from loosening in the back of her throat.

'In fact it happened last night,' Tomar went on. 'He and two others attempted an escape. Two of their bodies have been returned. And there's no chance that the third one could have escaped alive.'

The snarl collapsed into a sound she would not make. She sat for a moment. Then she said. 'Let's go back to the party.' She stood up and they walked to the door. Once she shook her head and opened her mouth. Then she closed it and went on. 'Yes. I'm glad you said it. I don't know. Maybe it was a sign ... a sign that he was dead. Maybe it was a sign ...' She stopped. 'No. It wasn't. It wasn't anything. No.' They went down the steps to the ballroom once more. The music was very, very happy.

CHAPTER V

A FEW hours earlier, Geryn gave Tel a kharba fruit. The boy took the speckled melon around the inn, looking for Alter. Unable to find her, he wandered on to the street and up the block. Once a cat with a struggling grey shape in its teeth hurtled across his path. Later he saw an overturned garbage can with a filigree of fish bones ornamenting the parti-coloured heap. Over the roofs the towers of Toron paled to blue. Sudden yellow rectangles of window light scattered over their faces.

Turning down another block, he saw Rara standing on the corner, stopping the occasional passers by. Tel started up to her, but she saw him and motioned him away. Puzzled, he went to a stoop and sat down to watch. As he ran his thumbnail along the orange rind, and juice oozed from the slit, he heard Rara say to a stranger:

'Your fortune, sir. I'll spread your future before you like a silver mirror ...' The stranger passed. Rara turned to a woman now coming towards her. 'Ma'am, a fragment of a unit will unfold your life like a patterned carpet where you may trace the designs of your fate. Just a quarter of a unit...' The woman smiled, but shook her head. 'You look like you come from the mainland,' Rara called after her. 'Well, good luck here in the New World, sister, the Island of Opportunity.' Immediately she turned to another man, this one in a deep green uniform. 'Sir,' Tel heard her begin. Then she paused as she surveyed his costume. 'Sir,' she continued, 'for a single unit I will unravel the threads of your destiny from eternity's loom. Would you like to know the promotion about to come your way? How

many children you'll...'

'Come on, lady,' said the man in the uniform. 'It's illegal to tell fortunes here.'

'But I've got my licence!' declared Rara. 'I'm a genuine clairvoyant. Just a second ...' Her hands plunged into the seams and pockets of her grey rags.

'Never mind, lady. Just get moving.' He gave her a push.

Rara moved.

Tel peeled back the strip of rind he'd loosened, licked the juice from the yellow wound, and followed Rara.

'Son of an electric eel,' she said when Tel reached her, her birthmark scarlet. 'Just try to make a decent living, just try.'

'Want a bite?'

Rara shook her head. 'I'm too angry .' They walked back to the inn.

'Do you know where Alter is?' Tel asked. 'I was looking for her.'

'She's not in the inn?'

'I couldn't find her there.'

'Did you look on the roof ?'Rara asked.

'Oh,' said Tel. 'No.' They turned into the tavern and Tel went upstairs. It was not until he was halfway up the ladder on the second floor and unfastened the trap door in the ceiling that he wondered why Alter was on the roof. He pushed the hatch back and hoisted himself to the dusty rim.

Alter hung head and white hair down from a pipe that went from the stone chimney to a supporting pipe that was fastened by a firm collar to the roof.

'What are you doing?' Tel asked.

'Hi,' she smiled down at him. 'I'm practising.'

'Practising what?'

She was hung double over the pipe. Now she grabbed the bar close to her waist and somersaulted forward, letting her feet evenly to the floor, her legs perfectly straight. 'My stunts,' she said. 'I'm an acrobat.' She did not let go of the bar, but swung her legs up so that her ankles nearly touched her hands, and then whipped them down again, ending the skip by supporting herself upright on the bar. Then she flung her legs back (Tel jumped because she looked like she was going to fall) and went out and down, then under, swung up, arched over, and went down again in a giant circle. She circled once more, then doubled up, caught one knee over, reversed direction, and suddenly was sitting on top of the rod.

'Gee,' Tel said. 'How did you do that?'

'It's all timing,' Alter said. Suddenly she threw her head back and circled the bar once more, by her hands and one knee. Then the knee came loose, and her feet swung to the

ground. 'You've just got to be strong enough to hold up your own weight. Maybe a little stronger. But the rest is all timing.'

'You mean I could do that?'

'You want to try something?'

'Like what?'

'Come here. Grab hold of the bar.'

Tel came over and grabbed. He could just keep his feet flat on the tar-papered roof and still hold. 'All right,' he said.

'Now pull yourself up and hook your left knee around the bar.'

'Like this?' He kicked up once, missed, and tried again.

'When you kick, throw your head back,' she instructed. 'You'll balance better.'

He did, pulled up, and got his foot through his arms, and suddenly felt the bar slide into the crook of his knee. He was hanging by his left knee and hands. 'Now what do I do?' he asked, swaying back and forth.

Alter put her hand on his back to steady him. 'Now straighten your right leg, and keep your arms fairly stiff.' He obeyed. 'Now swing your right leg up and down, three times and then swing it real hard.' Tel lifted his leg, dropped it, and at once began swinging back and forth beneath the pole. 'Keep the leg straight,' Alter said. 'Don't bend it or you'll lose momentum.'

He got to the third kick, and then let go (with his thigh muscles, not his hands) and at once the sky slipped over him and his body swung upward away from the direction of the kick. 'Whoooo,' he said, and then felt her hand steady his wrist. He was sitting on top of the bar with one leg over it. He looked down at Alter. 'Is that what was supposed to happen?'

'Sure,' she said. 'That's how you mount the bar. It's called a knee mount.'

'I guess it's easier than climbing. Now what do I do?'

'Try this. Straighten out your arms. And make sure they stay straight. Now straighten your back leg behind you.' As he tried, he felt her hand on his knee, helping. 'Hey ...' he said. 'I'm not balanced.'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'm holding you. Keep those arms straight. If you don't obey instructions you'll have tar-paper all over your brains. Seven feet isn't very high, but head first it's sort of uncomfortable.'

Tel's elbows locked.

'Now when I count three, kick the leg I'm holding forward and throw your head back as hard as you can. One—'

'What's supposed to happen?' Tel demanded.

'Follow instructions,' replied Alter. 'Two... three!'

Tel threw and kicked, and felt Alter give his leg an extra push. He had planned to close his

eyes, but what he saw was too interesting. Sky and then roof were coming at him, fast. Then they fell away, along with Alter's face (upside down), till an instant later the pale blue towers, all pointing in the wrong direction, pierced his sight. Righting themselves, they jerked out of his line of vision and he was looking straight up at the sky (there was a star out, he noted before it became a meteor and flashed away) until it was replaced by the roof and Alter's face (laughing now) and once more everything swept into its proper position.

He clamped his stinging hands tightly on the bar. When he felt sure he'd stopped, he hunched forward-and closed his eyes. 'Mmmmmmmmm,' he said. Alter's hand was on his wrist, very firm, and he was sitting on top of the bar again.

'You just did a double back knee circle,' she said. 'You it very well too.' Then she laughed. 'Only it wasn't to be double. You just kept going.'

'How do I get down?' Tel asked.

'Arms straight,' said Alter.

Tel straightened his arms.

'Put this hand over here.' She patted the bar on the other side of his leg. Tel transferred his grip. 'Now bring your leg off the bar.' Tel hoisted his leg back so that he was supported by just his hands. 'Now bend forward and roll over, slowly if you can.' Tel rolled, felt the bar slip from where it was pressed against his waist, and a moment later his feet were brushing back and forth over the tar-paper. He let go and rubbed his hands together. 'Why didn't you tell me what I was gonna do?'

'Because then you wouldn't have done it. Now that you know that you can, the rest will be easier. You've got three stunts now in less than five minutes. The knee mount, back knee circle, and the forward dismount. That was good for a first try.'

'Thanks,' said Tel. He looked at the horizontal bar. 'You know, it feels real funny, doing that stuff. I mean you don't really do it. You do things and then it happens to you.'

'That's right,' Alter said. 'I hadn't thought of it like that. Maybe that's why a good acrobat has to be a person who can sort of relax and just let things happen. You have to trust both your mind and your body.'

'Oh,' said Tel. 'I was looking for you when I came up here. I wanted to give you something.'

'Thank you,' she smiled, brushing back a shock of white hair from her forehead.

'I hope it didn't get broken.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of something: on leather thongs he had strung the shells. There were three loops, each longer than the one before, and the shells were spread apart and held in place by tiny knots. 'Geryn gave me the thong, and I put it together this afternoon. It's a necklace, see?'

She turned while he tied the ends behind her neck. Then she turned back to him, touching the orange brilliance of one frail cornucopia, passing to the mute blue of another. 'Thank you,' she said. 'Thank you very much, Tel.'

'You want some fruit?' he said, picking up the globe and beginning to peel the rest of it.

'All right,' she said. He broke it open, and gave her half, and they went to the edge of the

roof and leaned on the balustrade, looking to the street below, then over the roofs of the other houses of the Devil's Pot and up to the darkening towers.

'You know,' Tel said. 'I've got a problem.'

'No identification papers, no place to go. I should say you do.'

'Not like that,' he said. 'But that's part of it. I guess it's a large part of it. But not all.'

'Then what is it?'

'I've got to figure out what I want. Here I am, in a new place, with no way to get anything for myself; I've got to figure a goal.'

'Look,' said Alter, assuming the superiority of age and urban training, 'I'm a year older than you, and I don't know where I'm going yet. But when I was your age, it occurred to me it would probably all take care of itself. All I had to do was ride it out. So that's what I'm doing, and I haven't been too unhappy. Maybe it's the difference between living here or on the seashore. But here you've got to spend a lot of time looking for the next meal. At least people like you and me have to. If you pay attention to that, you'll find yourself heading in the right direction soon enough. Whatever you're going to be, you're going to be, if you just give yourself half a chance.'

'Like a big acrobatic stunt, huh?' asked Tel. 'You just do the right things and then it happens to you.'

'Like that,' said Alter. 'I guess so.'

'Maybe,' said Tel. The kharba fruit was cool, sweet like honey, orange, and pineapple.

A minute later someone was calling them. They turned from the balustrade and saw Geryn's white head poking from the trap door. 'Come down,' he demanded. 'I've been looking all over for you. It's time.'

They followed him back to the first floor. Tel saw that the scarfed giant was still sitting at the table, his hands knotted into quiet hammers on the boards.

'Now, everyone,' Geryn called as he sat down at the table. Somewhat reluctantly people left the bar. Geryn dropped a sheaf of papers on the table. 'Come around, everyone.' The top sheet was covered with fine writing and careful architectural drawing. 'Now this is the plan.' So were the other sheets when Geryn turned them over. 'I'll divide you into groups.'

He looked at the giant across the table. 'Arkor, you take the first group.' He picked out six more men and three women. He turned to the white baked acrobat. 'Alter, you'll be with the special group.' He named six more people. Tel was among them. A third group was formed which Geryn himself was to lead. Arkor's group was for strong-arm work. Geryn's was for guard duty and to keep the way clear while the prince was being conveyed back to the inn. 'The people in the special group already know what to do.'

'Sir,' said Tel, 'you haven't told me, yet.'

Geryn looked at him. 'You have to get caught.'

'Sir?'

'You go past the guards, and make enough noise so that they catch you. Then, when

they're occupied with you, we'll break in. Because you have no papers, they won't be able to trace you.'

'Am I supposed to stay caught?'

'Of course not. You'll get away when we distract them.'

'Oh,' said Tel. Geryn went back to the papers.

As the plan was reviewed, Tel saw two things. First the completeness of the research, information, and attention to detail (habits of individual guards: one who left at the first sound of the change signal; another who waited a moment to exchange greetings with his replacement, a friend from his military academy days). Second, he saw its complexity. There were so many ins and outs, gears that had to mesh, movements to be timed within seconds, that Tel wondered if everything could possibly go right.

While he was wondering, they were suddenly on their way, each one with a bit of the plan fixed in his mind, no one with too clear a picture of the entire device. The groups were to split into subgroups of two or three, then reconvene at appointed spots around the castle. Tel and Alter found themselves walking through the city with the giant. Occasional street lights wheeled their shadows over the pavement.

'You're from the forest, aren't you?' Tel finally asked the giant.

He nodded.

'Why did you come here?' Tel asked, trying to make conversation as they walked.

'I wanted to see the city,' Arkor said, raising his hand to his scars. He chuckled. After that, he said nothing.

Prime Minister Chargill took his evening constitutional along the usually deserted Avenue of the Oysture at about this time every night. Prime Minister Chargill always carried on him a complete set of keys to the private suites of the royal family. This evening, however, a drunk reeled out of a side street and collided with the old minister. A moment later, making profuse apologies, he backed away, ducking his head, his hands behind his back. When the drunk returned to the side street, his weaving ceased, his hand came from behind his back, and in it was a complete set of keys to the private suites of the royal family.

The guard who was in charge of checking the alarm system loved flowers. He could be (and had been) observed going to the florist's at least once a week on his time off. So when the old woman with the tray of scarlet anemones came by and offered them for his perusal, it is not surprising that he lowered his head over the tray and filled his lungs with that strange, pungent smell somewhere between orange rind and sea wind. Forty-seven seconds later, he yawned. Fourteen seconds after that, he was sitting against the wall, his head hung forward, snoring. Through the gate two figures could be seen at the alarm box ... had anyone been there to look.

At another entrance to the castle, two guards converged on a boy with black hair and green eyes who was trying to climb the fence.

'Hey get down from there. All right, come one. Where're your papers? What do you mean you don't have any? Come on with us. Get the camera out, Jo. We'll have to photograph him and send the picture to Chief Records Headquarters. They'll tell us who you are, kid. Now hold still.'

Behind them, a white-haired girl was out of the shadows and over the gate in a moment. The guards did not see her.

'Hold still now, kid, while I get your retina pattern.'

A bunch of rowdies, led by a giant had started to raise hell around the palace. They hadn't even got the kid to the guard house yet, but somehow in the confusion the boy got away. One guard, who wore a size seventeen uniform, was knocked unconscious, but no one else was hurt. They dispersed the rowdies, carried the guard to the infirmary, and left. Doctor Wental saw him in the waiting-room, then left him there momentarily to look for an accident report slip in the supply room at the other side of the building. (He could have sworn that a whole pad of them had been lying on the desk when he stepped out for a bite ten minutes ago.) When the doctor returned with the slip, the soldier was still there—only he was stark naked.

A minute later, an unfamiliar guard wearing a size seventeen uniform saluted the guard at the gate, and marched in.

Two strange men behind the gate flung a cord with a weight on one end over a third storey cornice. They missed once, then secured it the second time and left it hanging there.

A guard wearing a size seventeen uniform came down the of the west wing of the castle, stopped before a large double door on which was a silver crown, indicating the room of the Queen Mother; he took a complete set of keys to the private suites of the royal family from his cloak, and locked Her Majesty firmly in her room. At the next door, he locked Prince Let securely in his. Then he went rapidly on.

Tel ran till he got to the corner, rounded it, and checked the street sign. It was correct. So he went to a doorway and sat down to wait.

At the same time, Prince Let, getting ready for bed and wearing nothing but his undershirt looked out of the window and saw a girl with white hair hanging head down outside the shutter. He stood very still. The upside down face smiled at him. Then the hands converged at the window lock, did something, and the two glass panels came open.

The girl rolled over once, turned quickly, and suddenly she was crouching on the window ledge.

Let snatched up his pyjama bottoms first, and ran to the door second. When he couldn't open it, he whirled around and pulled on his pyjama pants.

Alter put her finger to her lips as she stepped down into his room. 'Keep quiet,' she whispered. 'And relax,' she added. 'The Duchess of Petra sent me. More or less.' She had been instructed to use that name to calm the prince. It seemed to work a trifle.

'Look,' explained Alter, 'you're being kidnapped. It's for your own good, believe me.' She watched the blond boy come away from the door.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I'm a friend of yours if you'll let me be.'

'Where are you going to take me?'

'You're going on a trip. But you'll come back.'

'What has my mother said?'

'Your mother doesn't know. Nobody knows except you and the Duchess, and the few people who're helping her.'

Let thought. He walked over to his bed, sat down, and pressed his heel against the side board. There was a small click. Nothing else happened. 'Why don't they open the door?' he asked.

'It's been locked,' Alter said. Suddenly she looked at the dock beside the Prince's bed, and turned to the window. Light from the chandelier gleamed on the shells at her neck.

Let put his hand quietly on the newel post of his bed and pressed his thumb hard on a purple garnet that encrusted the crowning dolphin. Nothing happened, except a click.

At the window, Alter reached out, just as a bundle appeared on a lowered rope. She pulled it in, untied it, and shook them out as the rope suddenly flew out the window again. 'Here,' she said. 'Get into these.' They were rags. She tossed them to him.

Finally Let slipped out of his pyjama pants and into the suit.

'Now look in your pocket,' Alter said.

The boy did and took out a bunch of keys.

'You can open the door with those,' Alter said. 'Go on.'

Let paused, then went to the door. Before he put the key in the lock though, he bent down and looked through the key-hole. 'Hey,' he said, looking back at the girl. 'Come here. Do you see anything?'

Alter crossed the room, bent down, and looked. The only motion Let made was to lean against one of the panels on the wall, which gave a slight click. Nothing else happened.

'I don't see anything,' Alter said. 'Open the door.'

Let found the proper key, put it in the lock, and the door swung back.

'All right, you kids,' said the guard who was standing on the other side of the door (he wore a size seventeen uniform), 'you come along with me.' He took Let firmly by one arm and Alter by the other and marched them down the hall. 'I'm warning you to keep quiet,' the guard said to Let as they turned the last corner.

Three minutes later they were outside the castle. As the guard passed another uniformed man at the sentry's post, he said, 'More stupid kids trying to break into the palace.'

'What a night,' said the guard and scratched his head. 'A girl too?'

'Looks like it,' said the guard who was escorting Alter and the prince. 'I'm taking them to be photographed.'

'Sure,' answered the guard, and saluted.

The two children were marched down the street towards the guard-house. Before they got there, they were turned off into a side street. Then suddenly the guard was gone. A black haired boy with green eyes was coming towards them.

'Is this the prince?' Tel asked.

'Un-huh,' said Alter.

'Who are you?' Let asked. 'Where are you taking me?'

'My name is Tel. I'm a fisherman's son.'

'My name is Alter,' Alter introduced herself.

'She's an acrobat,' Tel added.

'I'm the prince,' Let said. 'Really. I'm Prince Let. Don't forget that.'

The two others looked at the blond boy who stood in front of them in rags like their own. Suddenly they laughed. The prince frowned. 'Where are you taking me?' he asked again.

'We're taking you to get something to eat and where you can get a good night's sleep,' Alter answered. 'Come on.'

'If you hurt me, my mother will put you in the mines.'

'Nobody's going to hurt you, silly,' Tel said. 'Come on. Are you a mali too?'

'A what?' Let asked.

'That's what we are, malcontents,' Tel said. 'It means we don't like where we've been, where we are, or where we're going. What about you?'

'I—' The prince looked confused. 'I don't know what you're talking about.' He blinked up at the dark towers that rose to menace the night. 'I don't know.'

'Well, come on anyway,' Tel said. They started through the streets.

CHAPTER VI

THE Duchess of Petra said: 'Now your first direct assignment will be—'

The green of beetles' wings; the red of polished carbuncle; a web of silver fire; lightning and smoke. It pulled away from his eyes.

Only one sun now, the larger red one, lipped the horizon. The sand was crimson. The lake flamed. And by the lake— or was it in it—below the clouds that streaked the alien sky, was the... city.

Things moved there, turned; form joined with form, caught the sunlight, then joined with other forms, darkened.

A warm, ozone heavy breeze pushed his collar against his cheek, dropped it. Jon tried to see what was going by the lake. And failed; as an unco-ordinated hand might fail the workings of a clock.

The Lord of the Flames.

'There?' Jon asked. 'In there?'

No. That is only a city building.

'This place,' Jon asked. 'Where is this? Where am I? Why do you keep bringing me here?'

You are on the outskirts of a ruined city, an extinct city on a world a universe away from your own. Twelve million years ago, this planet housed the civilization that began constructing that city. Now the civilization is dead. But the city was so made that it goes on building itself.

'And you say the *Lord of the Flames* doesn't live there?'

No. We do. No one else used the city, so we stay here now.

'You—' Jon said. 'Well then why won't you tell me who you are?'

Each time we speak to you, we tell you a little more. Your mind must accustom to us slowly. You live in a bound, circumscribed, and isolated world, and if we broke on your consciousness all at once, you would be too ready to dismiss us as a psychotic fantasy. We come to you, leave you, and let you forget us a little, and come to you again. We have three agents on your world, you and two others. Now that you have made contact with one another, you have something to hold on to in your own world; but we can tell you more.

Jon gazed at the fabulous creation forming across the dunes in twilight while they spoke to him.

We are wanderers from another universe. We have no home. It was destroyed by a war fought on scales you could not begin to conceive. Now we dwell quietly in your universe, staying only in the abandoned cities scattered throughout your worlds. We can traverse the distances between stars or galaxies, ignoring temporal consideration. We do not usually bother with any living species, except to observe.

But recently—recently by our standards though the actual time is longer than your world is old—another living force has come into this segment of the continuum, it has evolved similarly to us. We can both touch the perceptions of life forms on various worlds; this involves a good deal more work and energy than travelling from one side of the universe to the other, for we must convert our own vision in which neither time nor space are of much importance down to the miniature scope of life forms that exist

often for less than a century, where an object behind a wall is an unseen one, where the experiences of one individual can create emotions and ideas unknown to the mind and heart of another. But there are differences between us. The new creature is younger than us by cycles of time meaningless to you. We are a triple-lobed intelligence, and can touch up to three minds on any single world at once. The new creature can only have one agent on a world. We never tamper with any civilization's basic structure. While this creature will not hesitate to completely destroy a world by introducing technological, philosophical, or psychological factors that set up destructive resonances that shake worlds apart. We are bound to ride with your minds, guide you, warn you; but we could change your bodies before we could change your minds, and then only to keep you from death as we did with the radiation. So the battle will be won or lost within the framework of your own civilization.

'Battle—?'

'Yes. We are preparing also for a war, but with the Lord of the Flames whom we have just described to you. And the Lord of the Flames has sought refuge in Toromon.

'You mean,' Jon said, 'that that's what's beyond the radiation barrier? That's what Toromon is at war with? How can we fight something as powerful as you have described him?'

The Lord of the Flames is in Toromon. He waits at the edge of the radiation barrier, just beyond Telphar.

'But that's beyond the place where humans can go.'

The Lord of the Flames has the same resources to make his agent and his agent's proteges immune to the radiation as we have. He is on your world, and we must evict him. But we cannot do it without your help. You and our other two agents must corner him and place yourselves where you can all perceive him at once. We will do the rest; but what you cannot perceive, we cannot effect. We will be able to protect you, and any of your friends that you need to bring with you, from the radiation; with your work in matter transmission, your own technology is within a decade of the discovery. But we cannot protect you from human danger, or violent, or any other natural death.

“But the enemies on the other side of the barrier—”

We have our enemy in Toromon. You have yours. But until you help us expel ours, you will not be able to face your own. And it holds you in, Jon Koshar, keeps you prisoner, and denies your freedom.

Not understanding, he looked back down at the structure by the lake. Figures moved by the water, carrying lumber, driving carts piled with girders. A crane hoisted a wall up a skeletal structure, while a figure at the top signalled to the crane's driver.

'The city,' Jon said.

Yes. Its still building itself.

'But I can see ...' He squinted to clear the figures. But they stayed vague.

The city responds to the psychic pressures of those near, building itself according to the plans, methods, and techniques of whatever minds press it into activity.

'But—'

It's responding to you. You're concentrating on it. We are concentrating on you, and Toromon.

'Oh,' Jon said. 'A place like that must be very ... pleasant for you.'

Yes, when we can wander through it, giving our minds to its shaping and development. But now the distraction of The Lord of the Flames takes all our attention away. Remember, you and our other two agents will have to confront The Lord of the Flames at the edge of the barrier.

'But the forces behind—'

You may use any method you wish to accomplish our ends, and yours.

The city, silhouetted against the maroon sky, changed and grew and changed. The smoke drifted over Jon's eyes; sand fell from beneath his boots with a flash. Silver gave way to red, green—

Jon blinked. The Duchess took a step backward. The green carpet, the rich wood-panelled walls, the glass-covered desk; they were in a sitting-room of his father's house again.

Finally Jon asked, 'Now just what am I supposed to do, again? And explain it very carefully.'

'I was going to say,' said the Duchess, 'that you were to get to the prince, who is being kept at an inn in the Devil's Pot, and accompany him to the forest people. I want him to stay there until this ridiculous war is over. They live a different life from any of the other people of this empire. They will give him something he'll be able to use. I told you I spent some time there when I was younger. I can't explain exactly what it is, but its a certain ruggedness, a certain strength. Maybe they won't give it to him, but if he's got it in him, they'll bring it out.'

'What about... *The Lord of the Flames*?'

'I don't... do you have any idea, Jon?'

'Well, assuming we get to the radiation barrier, assuming we find what we're fighting, assuming we find who is carrying around *The Lord of the Flames*, and assuming we can all three of us get to him at once—assuming all that, there's no problem. If I'm to accompany the prince, I'll be going to the forest, so I'll be closest to the radiation barrier. I'll try to get through, see what the situation is, and then the two of you can come on. All right?'

'Fine.'

'If nothing else, it'll put me closer to the *Lord of the Flames* ... and my freedom.'

'How are you not free now, Jon Koshar?' the Duchess asked.

Instead of answering, he said, 'Give me the address of the Inn at the Devil's Pot.'

Going down the hall, with the address, Jon increased his pace. His mind carried an alien

mind, that had saved him from death once already. How could he be free of the ... obligation? That couldn't be the word.

Around the corner he heard a voice. 'And now would you please explain it to me. It's not every day that I'm called on to declare war. I think I did it rather eloquently. Now tell me why.'

(Jon remembered the trick of acoustics which as a child enabled him to stand in this spot and overhear his sister and her girlfriends' conversation just as they came into the house.)

'It's your brother,' came the other voice. 'He's been kidnapped.'

'He's been what?' asked the king. 'And why? And by whom?'

'We don't know,' answered the officer. 'But the Council thought it was best to get you to declare war.'

'Oh,' said the king, 'so that's why I made that little speech in there. What does Mother say?'

'It wouldn't be polite to repeat, sir. She was locked in her room, and very insulted.'

'She would be,' said Uske. 'So, the enemy has infiltrated and gotten my silly brother.'

'Well,' said the voice, 'they can't be sure. But what with the planes this morning, they thought it was best.'

'Oh well,' said the king. There were footsteps. Then silence.

Coming round the corner, Jon saw the coat closet was ajar. He opened the door, took out a great cape and hood, and wrapped it around him, pulling the hood close over his head. He stepped into the foyer and went out past the doorman.

At the edge of the Devil's Pot, Rara, the woman with the birthmark on the side of her face, was tapping a cane and holding out a tin cup. Wearing dark glasses, she wandered up one street and down another. 'Money for a poor blind woman,' she whined. 'Money for the blind.' As a coin clinked into her cup, she nodded, smiled, and said, 'Welcome to the New World. Good luck in the Island of Opportunity.'

The man who had given her the coin walked a step, and then turned back. 'Hey,' he said to Rara. 'If you're blind, how do you know I'm new here?'

'Strangers are generous,' Rara explained, 'while those who live here are too cold to give.'

'Look,' said the man, 'I was told to watch out for blind beggars who aren't blind. My cousin, he warned me before I came ...'

'Not blind!' cried Rara. 'Not blind? Why I've got my licence right here. It permits me to beg in specified areas because of loss of sight. If you keep this up, I'll be obliged to show it to you.' She turned away with a *huff* and began in another direction. The man scratched his head, then walked off.

A few moments later, a man completely swathed in a grey cloak and hood came around the corner and stopped in front of the woman.

'Money for the blind?'

'Can you use this?' the man said. From his cloak he held out a brocade jacket, covered with fine metal work.

'Of course,' said Rara softly. Then she coughed. '... eh ... what is it?'

'It's a jacket,' Jon said. 'It's made well. Perhaps you can sell it?'

'Oh, thank you. Thank you, sir.'

A few blocks later, a ragged boy named Kino was amazed when he was handed a silk shirt by the man in the grey cloak. In front of a doorway two blocks on, a pair of open toed boots with gold discs were left and stolen from that doorway exactly forty seconds later by a hairdresser who was returning to her home in the Devil's Pot. She was missing the little finger of her left hand. Once the cloaked figure paused in an alley beneath a clothesline. He flung up a ball of grey cloth, which caught on the line, unrolled, and became identifiable as a pair of trousers. A block later the last minor articles of clothing were tossed unceremoniously through an open window. As Jon turned another corner, he glimpsed again the figure ducking into a doorway down the dim street. One of the squat neanderthals—there were a few in the city—had been following him.

Jon walked very slowly down the next block, ambling along in the shadow. Then Jeof, the mugger, crept up behind him, then grabbed his cloak, ripped it away, and leapt forward.

Only there wasn't anything there. Squat Jeof stood there for a moment, the cape dangling from his hand, blinking at the place a man should have been. Then something hit him in the jaw. He staggered back. Something else hit him in the stomach. As he stumbled forward now, beneath the street lamp, a transparent human figure suddenly formed in front of him. Then it planted its quite substantial fist into his jaw again, and he went back, down, and out.

Jon dragged the neanderthal back to the side of the alley, fading out completely as he did so. Then he took Jeof's clothes, which were ragged, smelly, and too small. The shoes, he left off. Then he flung the cape back around his shoulders and pulled the hood over his head.

For the next six blocks he was lost because there were no street signs. When he found the next one, he realized he was only a block away from the inn.

As he reached the stone building, he heard a thud in the tiny alleyway beside it. A moment later a girl's voice called softly: 'There. Just like that. Only you better do exactly as I say or you'll break your arms and or legs, and or back.'

He walked to the edge of the building and peered into the alley.

Her white hair loose, Alter stood looking up at the roof. 'All right, Tel,' she called. 'You go.'

Something came down from the roof, flipped over on the ground at her feet, rolled away, and then unwound to its feet: The black-haired boy ran his fingers through his hair. 'Wow,' he said. Then he shook his head. 'Wow.'

'Are you all right?' Alter asked. 'You didn't pull anything, did you?'

'No,' he said. 'I'm all right. I think. Yeah, everything's in place.' He looked up at the roof again, two stories above.

'Your turn, Your Highness,' Alter called up.

'It's high,' came a childish voice from the roof.

'Hurry up,' said Alter, her voice becoming authoritative. 'When I count three. And remember, knees up, chin down, and roll quick. One, two, three!' There was the space of a breath, and then it fell, rolled, bounced unsteadily to its feet, and resolved into another boy, this one blond, and slighter than the first.

'Hey, you kids,' Jon said.

They turned.

Jon looked at the smaller boy. His slight frame, less substantial than even Alter's white-haired loveliness, was definitely of the royal family. 'What are you doing out here, anyway?' Jon asked. 'Especially you, Prince.'

All three children jumped.

It looked like they might balk, and after their descent from the roof, he wasn't sure where they might balk to. So he said, 'The Duchess of Petra sent me. How did you do that fall?'

His Highness was the only one to relax appreciably.

'And are you sure you're supposed to be outside?'

'We were supposed to stay on the top floor,' Tel said. 'But him,' he pointed to the ragged prince, 'he got restless, and we started telling him about the tricks, and so we went up to the roof, and Alter said she could get us down.'

'Can you get them back up?' Jon asked.

'Sure,' said Alter, 'all we do is climb ...'

Jon held up his hand. 'Wait a minute,' he said. 'We'll go inside and talk to the man in charge. Don't worry. No one'll be mad.'

'You mean talk to Geryn?' Alter said.

'I guess that's what his name is.'

They started back out of the alley. 'Tell me,' Jon said, 'just what sort of person is Geryn?'

'He's a strange old man. He talks to himself all the time,' said Alter. 'But he's smart.'

Talks to himself, Jon reflected, and nodded. When they reached the door of the inn, Jon pulled his cape off and stepped into the light. A few people at the bar turned around, and when they saw the children, they looked askance at one another.

'Geryn's probably upstairs,' Alter said. They went to the second floor. Jon let the children go ahead of him as they passed into the shadow of the hall. He only stepped up to them when Alter pushed open the door at the end of the hall and bright light from Geryn's room fell full across them.

'What is it?' Geryn snapped. And then, 'What is it, quick.' He whirled around in the chair at the rough wooden desk when they entered. The giant Arkor was standing by the window. Geryn's grey eyes fidgeted back and forth. Finally he said, 'Why are you out here? And who is he? What do you want?'

'I'm from the Duchess of Petra,' Jon said. 'I've come to take Let to the forest people.'

'Yes,' said the old man. 'Yes.' Then his face twisted as he tried to remember something. He shook his head. 'Yes.' Suddenly he stood up. 'Well, go on! I've done my part, I tell you. I've done! Every minute he's in my house he endangers my boarders, my friends. Take him. Go on!'

The giant turned from the window. 'I am to go with you. My name is Arkor.'

Jon frowned. For the first time the scarred figure's height registered. 'Why—?' he started.

'It is to my part of the country that we go,' said Arkor. 'I know how to get there. I can take you through it. Geryn says it is part of the plan.'

Jon felt a knot of resentment tighten. These plans, the Duchess's, Geryn's, not even the plans of the triple beings who inhabited them: they trapped him. Freedom. The word went in and out of his mind like a shadow. He said, 'When do we go then, if you know how to get there?'

'In the morning,' said Arkor.

'Alter, take him to a room. Get him out of here. Quick. Go on.' They backed from the room and Alter hurried them up the hall.

Jon was thinking. After delivering Let to the forest people, he was going farther. Yes. He would go on, try to get through the radiation barrier. But all three of them had to get through if they were to do any good. So why wasn't Geryn coming instead of sending the giant? If Geryn came, then there'd be two people near *The Lord of the Flame*. But Geryn was old. Maybe the Duchess could bring him with her when she came. Mentally he smashed a fist into the thoughts and scattered them. Don't think. Don't think. Thinking binds up your mind, and you can never be ... He stopped. Then memory nickered in his mind, those five years of glittering hunger.

That night he slept badly. Morning prised his eyes open with blades of light from the window. It was early. He had been up only a minute when there was a knock on his door. It opened, and Arkor directed the dwarfed form of the prince into Jon's room, then turned and left.

'He says to meet him downstairs in five minutes,' Let said.

'Sure,' said Jon. He finished buttoning up the ragged shirt stolen from the mugger the night before, watching the boy by the door. 'I guess you're not used to these sort of cloths,' he said. 'Once I wasn't either. Pretty soon they begin to take.'

'Huh?' said Let. Then, 'Oh.'

'Is something wrong?'

'Who are you?'

Jon thought for a moment. 'Well,' he said. 'A friend of your brother. An acquaintance,

anyway. I'm supposed to take you to the forest.'

'Why?'

'You'll be safe there.'

'Could we go to the sea instead?'

'My turn for a "why"?' Jon asked.

'Because Tel told me all about the sea last night. He said it was fun. He said there were rocks all different colours. And in the morning, he said, you can see the sun come up like a burning blister across the water. He told me about the boats, too. I'd like to work on a boat. I really would. They don't allow me to do anything at home. Mother says I might get hurt. Will I get a chance to work some place?'

'Maybe,' Jon said.

'Tel had some good stories about fishing. Do you know any stories?'

'I don't know,' Jon said. 'I never tried telling any. Come on. We better get started.'

'I like stories,' Let said. Then he looked sad. I'm just trying to be friendly.'

Jon laughed. 'I can tell you a story. It's about a prison mine. Do you know anything about the prison beyond the forest?'

'Some,' said Let.

'Well, once upon a time there were three prisoners in the mines.' They started along the hall. 'They'd been there a long time, and they wanted to get out. One was ... well, he looked like me, let's pretend. Another had a limp ...'

'And the third one was chubby, sort of,' interrupted Let. 'I know that story.'

'You do?' asked Jon.

'Sure,' Let said.

'Then you go on and tell it.' Jon was annoyed.

Let told it to him.

They were outside waiting for Arkor when the boy finished. 'See,' Let said. 'I told you I knew it.'

'Yeah,' said Jon quietly. He stood very still. 'You say the other two ... didn't make it?'

'That's right,' Let said. 'The guards brought them back and dumped their bodies in the mud so that...'

'Shut up,' Jon said.

'Huh?' asked Let.

He was quiet for a few breaths. 'Who told you that ... story?'

'Petra,' Let answered. 'She told it to me. It's a good story, huh?'

'Yes,' Jon said, 'I'm the one that escaped.'

'You mean ...?' The boy stopped. 'You mean it really happened?'

The early light warmed the deserted street as Arkor came to the door of the inn and stepped outside.

'All right,' he said. 'We're going.'

CHAPTER VII

THE news service of Toromon in the city of Toron was both a public address system and video threads that could be replayed by the families well enough off to own a re-video. Among the mainland villages it was a fairly accurate brigade of men and women who transported news orally from settlement to settlement. All announced that morning:

PRINCE KIDNAPPED!

KING DECLARES WAR!

In the military ministry, directives were issued in duplicate, returned in triplicate. At eight-forty, the 27B communications sector became hopelessly snarled. This resulted in the shipment of a boatload of prefabricated barracks foundations to a port on the mainland sixty-two miles from the intended destination.

Let, Jon, and Arkor were just mounting the private yacht of the Duchess of Petra which was waiting for them at the end of the harbour. Later, as the island of Toron slipped across the water, Let mentioned to Jon who was leaning with his back against the railing, that there was an awful lot of commotion on the docks.

'It's not always like that,' Jon told him, remembering the times he'd gone with his father in the morning to the pier. 'They're inspecting cargoes. But I don't know why it's so much busier than usual.'

One group of military directives which had been quite speedily and accurately delivered were the offers of contracts, primarily for food for the army. Two distributors of imported fish who had no chance of receiving the contracts sent in a bid accompanied by a letter which explained (with fraudulent statistics) how much cheaper it would be to use imported fish rather than those from the aquariums. Then they commandeered a group of ruffians who broke into the house of old Koshar's personal secretary, who was still sleeping late after the previous night's party which he had organized. (So far he has appeared in this story only as a hand at the edge of a storage cabinet door, wearing a wide, brass ring set with an irregular shape of blue glass.) They tied him to a chair, punched him in the stomach, in the head, and in the mouth until there was blood in his trimmed beard; and he had given the information they wanted—information that enabled them to sink three of the Koshar Kargo Fleet that was just coming into dock.

The Duchess' private yacht made contact with a tetron-tramp returning to the mainland and Let, Jon, and Arkor changed ships. Coming from the yacht in bare feet and rags gave them an incongruous appearance. But on the new ship, among those passengers who were returning for their families, they were quickly lost.

In Toron, the pilot of the shuttle boat that took workers from the city to the aquariums found a clumsily put together, but nevertheless unmistakable, bomb in the lavatory. It was dismantled. There was no accident. But an authority, Vice-Supervisor T'jones of

Koshar Synthetic Food Concerns (one name you do not need to remember; he was killed three days later in a street riot) clenched his jaw (unshaven; he had been called to the office a half an hour early over the sunken cargo boats), nodded his head, and issued a few non-official directives himself. Twenty minutes later, Koshar Aquariums was officially given the government contract to supply fish to the armies of Toromon. The two rival bidders, the import merchants, had ceased to exist about twelve minutes previously. They had been denied warehouse space, and their complete storage dumped into the streets to rot (nearly seven tons of frozen fish) because the refrigeration lockers, and the refrigeration buildings, and the refrigeration trucks had all been rented from Rahsok Refrigeration, and nobody had thought to spell Rahsok backwards.

In the military ministry, Major Tomar, and Captain Clemen were called away from their present job of completing the evacuation of the top four floors of an adjacent office building to accommodate the new corps of engineers, mathematicians, and physicists that the army had just enlisted. Apparently riots had started in the streets around the old Rahsok Refrigeration Houses. The warehouses were just a few blocks away from the official boundary of the Devil's Pot.

They got there ten minutes after the report came in. 'What the hell is going on?' Clemen demanded from the head of the City Dispersal Squad. Behind the line of uniformed men, masses of people were pushing and calling. 'And what's that stench?' He was a neo-neanderthal only a quarter of an inch taller than the minimum height for the military.

'Fish, sir,' the Dispersal Chief told them. 'There's tons of it all over the street. The people are trying to take it away.'

'Well, let them have it,' Clemen said. 'It'll clear the streets of the mess and maybe do some good.'

'You don't understand, sir,' the head of Dispersal explained. 'It's been poisoned. Just before it was dumped, it was soaked with buckets, of barbitide. Half a ton of the stuff's already been carried away.'

Clemen turned. 'Major Tomar,' he said. 'You get back to headquarters and see personally a city-wide announcement goes out telling about the poisoned fish. Call General Medical, find out the antidote, and get the information all over the city.'

Tomar got back to headquarters, got General Medical, got the antidote which was expensive, complicated, and long, and drafted his announcement:

WARNING ! Any citizen who has taken fish from the street in the area of Rahsok Refrigeration is in immediate danger of poisoning. The fish has been treated with BARBITIDE. No fish other than that directly traceable to the Synthetic Markets should be eaten. WARN YOUR NEIGHBOURS !

If fish has been eaten, go directly to the General Medical building (address followed). Symptoms of Barbitide poisoning: intense cramp about two hours after ingestion, followed by nausea, fever, and swollen lymph nodes. Death results in twenty minutes after onset of cramps under normal conditions. Foods with high calcium contents prolong spasms to a maximum hour and a half (foods such as MILK, GROUND EGG SHELL). General Medical has been alerted. There you will receive injections of *Calcium Silicate* and *Atropayic Acid* which can counteract the effects of the poison up until the last five or ten minutes.

Tomar personally sent the directive through Communications Centre 27B, marked urgent and emergency. Ten minutes later he received a re-video call from the Communications Engineer saying that 27B had been snarled all morning. In fact so had 26B, and 25B. Further, said the engineer, the only available Sectors open were 34A to 42A, none of which had access to complete city lines.

Tomar made a triplicate copy of the warning and sent it out, none the less, through Sectors 40A, 41 A, and 42A. A half an hour later the secretary of the Communications Engineer called and said, 'Major Tomar, I'm sorry I just got back from my break and I didn't see your message until just now. Because of the tie-ups, we've received instructions only to let authorized persons have access to the available Sectors.'

'Well, who the hell is authorized,' Tomar shouted. 'If you don't put that through and quick, half the city may be dead by this evening.'

The secretary paused a minute. Then he said, 'I'm sorry, sir, but ... well, look. I'll give it directly to the Communications Engineer when he gets back.'

'When is he getting back?' Tomar demanded.

'I... I don't know.'

'Who is authorized?'

'Only Council members, sir, and only those directly concerned with the war effort'

'I see,' Tomar said, and switched off.

He had just dispatched seven copies of the announcement with an explanatory note to seven of the fourteen Council members in the ministry when the Communications Engineer called again. 'Major, what's all this about some spoiled fish?'

'Look, there are seven tons of the stuff all over the streets.'

'And poisoned, you say here?'

'Exactly. Will you please see that this message gets out over every available piece of City Wide Communication as fast as possible. This is really life and death.'

'We're just allowed to work on getting war messages through. But I guess this takes priority. Oh, that explains some of the messages we've been getting. I believe there's even one for you.'

'Well?' asked Tomar after a pause.

'I'm not allowed to deliver it, sir.'

'Why not?'

'You're not authorized, sir.'

'Look, damn it, get it right now and read it to me.'

'Well... er ... it's right here, sir. It's from the chief of the City Dispersal Squad.'

The message was, in brief, that twenty three men, among them Captain Clemen, had been trampled to death by an estimated, two and a half thousand hungry residents of the Devil's Pot, most of them immigrants from the mainland.

A ton and a half of fish was finally removed from the streets and disposed of. But five and a half tons had made its way through the city. The Communications Engineer also added that while they'd been talking, a memorandum had come through that Sectors 34A to 42A were now out of commission, but that the major should try 27B again; it might have cleared up.

The second shift of workers that day was arriving at the aquariums. In the huge pontooned building, vast rows of transparent plastic tubes, three feet in diameter, webbed back and forth among the tetron pumps. Vibrator nets cut the tubes into twenty-foot compartments. Catwalks strung the six-storey structure, all flooded with deep red light that came from the phosphor-rods jutting from the pumps. Light towards the blue end of the spectrum disturbed the fish, which had to be visible at all times, to be moved, or to be checked for any sickness or deformity. In their transparent tubes, the fish floated in a state near suspended animation, vibrated gently, were kept at a constant 89 degrees, were fed, were fattened, were sorted according to age, size, and species; then slaughtered. The second shift of workers moved into the aquarium, relieving the first shift.

They had been on about two hours when a sweating man who was an assistant feeder reported to the infirmary, complaining of general grogginess. Heat prostration was a frequent complaint in the aquarium.

The doctor told him to lie down for a little while. Five minutes later he went into cramps. Perhaps the proper attention would have been paid to him had not a few minutes later a woman fallen from a catwalk crushing one of the plastic arteries and her skull, six stories below.

In the red light the workers gathered around her body at the end of a jagged tube. In the spreading puddle, fish, fat and ruby skinned, flapped their gills weakly.

The woman's co-workers said she had complained of not feeling well, when suddenly she went into convulsion while crossing one of the walks. By the time the doctor got back to the infirmary, the assistant feeder had developed a fever, and the nurse reported him violently nauseated. Then he died.

In the next two hours, of the five thousand two hundred and eighty people who worked at the aquariums, three hundred and eighty-seven were taken with cramps and died. The only exception was an oddball physical culture enthusiast who always drank two quarts of milk for lunch; he lasted long enough to be carried on to the shuttle and back to General Medical in Toron. He died six minutes after admittance, one hour and seventeen minutes after the onset of the cramps. That was the first case that General Medical actually received. It was not until the sixteenth case that they arrived at the final diagnosis of barbitide poisoning. Then someone remembered the inquiry from the military ministry that morning concerning the antidote.

'Somehow,' said Dr Wental, 'the stuff has got into some food or other. It may be all over the city.' Then he sat down at his desk and drafted a warning to the citizens of Toron containing a description of the effects of barbitide poisoning, antidote, and instructions to

come to the General Medical building, along with a comment on high calcium foods. 'Send this to the Military Ministry and get it out over every available source of public communications, and quick,' he told his secretary.

When the Assistant Communications Engineer (the C.E. himself had gone off duty at five o'clock) received the message, he didn't even bother to see who it was from. He balled it up in disgust, flung it into a waste-paper basket and mumbled something about *unauthorized messages*. Had the janitor bothered to count, that evening, he would have discovered that there were now thirty-six copies of Major Tomar's directive in various waste-baskets around the ministry.

Only a fraction of the barbitide victims made it to General Medical, but the doctors were busy. There was just one extraordinary incident, and among the screams of cramped patients, it was not given much thought. Two men near the beginning of the rush of patients gained access to the special receiving room. They managed to get a look at all the women who arrived. One of the patients who was wheeled by them was a particularly striking girl of about sixteen with snow-white hair and a strong, lithe body, now knotted with cramps. Sweat beaded her forehead, her eyelids, and through her open collar you could see she wore a leather necklace of shells.

'That's her,' one of the men said. The other nodded, men went to the doctor who was administering the injections, and whispered to him.

'Of course not,' the doctor said indignantly in a clear voice. 'Patients need at least forty-eight hours rest and careful observation after injection of the antidotes. Their resistance is extremely low and complications ...'

The men said something else to the doctor and showed him a set of credentials. The doctor stopped, then left the patient he was examining and went to the bed of the new girl. Quickly he gave her two injections, and made an entry below her name —Alter Ronid. Then he said to the men, 'I want you to know that I object to this completely and I will—'

'All right, Doctor,' the first man said. Then the second hoisted Alter from the cot and they carried her out of the hospital.

The Queen Mother had her separate receiving room. She sat on her high seat looking at photographs. In colour, two showed the chamber of the Crown Prince. In one picture the prince was seated on his bed in his pyjama pants with his heel against the sideboard; standing by the window was a white-haired girl with a leather necklace strung with shells. The next showed the Prince still sitting on the bed, this time with his hand on the newel dolphin. The girl was just turning towards the window.

The third picture, which from the masking, seemed to have been taken through a keyhole, showed what seemed an immense enlargement of human pupil: mistily discernible through the iris was the dottings and tiny pathways of a retina pattern. On the broad arm of the Queen Mother's throne was a folder marked: ALTER RONID.

In the folder were a birth certificate, a clear photograph of the same retina pattern, a contract in which travelling circus availed itself of the service of a group of child acrobats for the season, an elementary school diploma, copies of receipts covering a three-year period of gymnastic instruction, a copy of a medical bill for the correction of a sprained hip, and two change of address slips. Also there were several cross-reference slips to the

files of Alline Ronid (mother, deceased) and Rara Ronid (maternal aunt, legal guardian).

The queen put the photographs on top of the folder and turned to the guards. There were four of them against the wall. She lifted the heavy sceptre and said, 'Bring her in.' She touched the two buns of white hair on the sides of her head, breathed deeply, and straightened in the chair, as doors opened at the other end of the room.

Two blocks had been set up in the middle of the room, about four feet high and a foot apart.

Alter stumbled once, but a guard caught her. They walked her between the blocks, which came to just below her shoulders, spread her arms over the surface and strapped them straight across the tops at biceps and wrist.

The queen smiled. 'That's only a precaution. We want to help you.' She came down the steps of the throne, the jewelled rod cradled in her elbow. 'We know something about you. We know that you know something which if you tell me, will make me feel a great deal better. I've been very upset, recently. Did you know that?'

Alter blinked and tried to get her balance. The blocks were just under the proper height by half an inch: she could neither stand completely nor could she sag.

'We know you're tired, and after your ordeal with barbitide —you don't feel well, do you?' asked the queen, coming closer.

Alter shook her head

'Where did you take my son?' the queen asked.

Alter closed her eyes, then opened them wide and shook her head.

'We have proof,' said the queen, 'would you like to look?' She held up the photographs for Alter to see. 'My son took these pictures of the two of you together. They're very clear, don't you think?' She put the pictures back in the quilted pocket of her robe.

'Aren't you going to tell me?' '

'I don't know anything,' Alter said.

'Come now. That room had as many cameras as a sturgeon has eggs. There are dozens of hidden switches. Somehow the alarms connected with them didn't go off, but the cameras still worked.'

Alter shook her head again.

'You don't have to be afraid,' said the queen. 'We know you're tired and want to get you back to the hospital as soon as possible. Now. What happened to my son, the prince?'

Silence.

'You're a very sweet girl. You're an acrobat too?'

Alter swallowed, and then coughed.

The queen gave a puzzled smile. 'Really, you don't have to be afraid to answer me. You are an acrobat, isn't that right?'

Alter nodded.

The queen reached out and touched the triplet leather necklace with their scattering of shells in her fingers. 'This is a beautiful piece of jewellery.' She lifted it from Alter's breast. 'An acrobat's body must be like a fine jewel, fine and strong, an exquisite thing. You must be very proud of it.' Again she paused and tilted her head. 'I'm only trying to put you at ease, dear, make conversation.' Smiling, she removed the necklace completely from around Alter's neck. 'This is exquisite too ...'

Suddenly the necklace clattered to the ground, the shells making a tiny sound on the tiles.

Alter's eyes followed the necklace to the floor.

'Oh,' the queen said. 'I'm terribly sorry. It would be a shame to break something like this.' With one hand the queen drew back her robes until her shoe was revealed. Then she moved her foot forward until her raised toe was over the necklace. 'Will you tell me where my son is?'

There was seven, eight, ten seconds of silence. 'Very well,' the queen said, and brought her foot down. The sound of crushed shells was covered by Alter's scream. Because the Queen had brought down the sceptre, too, the full arc of its swing, on to Alter's strapped wrist. Then she brought it down again. The room was filled with the scream and the crack of the jewelled sceptre against the surface of the block. Then the queen smashed Alter's upturned elbow joint.

When there was something like silence, the queen said, 'Now, where is my son?'

Alter didn't say for a long while; then she couldn't say. What she told them didn't do much good when they had time to check it.

'To the penal mines?'

'What good could she do in a mine, now.' The queen turned back to her seat. 'Take her back to General Medical. We can always get her there if we need her. She's obviously working for something else. Perhaps the enemy.' Suddenly the Queen Mother waved the sceptre above her head. Drops splattered her hair. 'Ahhh! Get her out of here. Get her out!'

Unconscious, Alter was carried to the General Medical building wrapped in a grey blanket.

'Another fish poison case?' asked the clerk.

The man nodded. The doctor, who had been there when Alter was removed from the hospital, had been working steadily for six hours. When he unwrapped the blanket, he recognized the girl. When he unwrapped it further, breath rasped between his lips, and then hissed out again, 'Get this girl to emergency surgery,' he said to the nurse. 'Quickly!'

In the Devil's Pot, Tel had just got over a case of the runs which had kept him away from food all day. Feeling hungry, now, he was foraging in the cold storage cabinet of the Inn's kitchen. In the chest he found the remains of a baked fish, so he got a sharp knife from over the sink and cut a piece. Then the door opened and the barmaid came in. She was nearly seventy years old and wore a red scarf around her stringy neck. Tel had cut a slice

of onion and was putting it on top of the fish when the barmaid ran forward and knocked the whole thing from his hand.

'Ouch,' Tel said, and jumped, though nothing had hurt him.

'Are you crazy?' the woman asked. 'You want to be carried out of here like the rest of them?'

Tel looked puzzled as Rara entered the kitchen. 'Good grief,' she declared. 'Where is everybody. I'm starved. I started selling that homebrew tonic of mine that I made up yesterday, and around noon, suddenly everybody was buying the stuff. They wanted something for cramps, and I guess my Super Aqueous Tonic is as good as anything else. I couldn't even get back to eat. Is there some sort of epidemic? Say, that looks good,' and she went for the fish.

The old barmaid snatched up the dish and carried it to the garbage basket. 'It's poisoned, don't you understand?' She scraped the plate. 'It's got to be the fish that's causing it. Everybody who ate it has been carried off to General Medical with cramps. Lots of them died. The woman who lives across the street and me, we figured it out. We both bought it from the same woman this morning, and that's all it could be. I never eat the stuff myself, but I served it for lunch.'

'Well, I'm still hungry,' Tel said.

'Can we have some cheese and fruit?' asked Rara.

'I guess that's safe,' the woman said.

'Who was carried out?' Tel wanted to know, looking back in the cabinet.

'Oh, that's right, you've been upstairs sick all day.' And then she told him.

At about the same time, an observer in a scouting plane noticed a boat bearing military equipment some sixty miles away from any spot that could possibly be receiving such a shipment. In fact he had sent an order correcting a typographical error concerning ... yes, it must be, that same boat. He'd sent it that morning through Communication Sector 27B. They were near the shore, one of the few spots where the great forest had crept to the water itself. A tiny port, used as an embarkation for the families of emigrants coming to join people in the city, was the only obvious civilization between the smoke green sea on one side and the deep green tree-tops on the other. The observer also noted that a small tetron tramp was about to dock. But that transport ship ... He called up to the pilot and requested contact be made.

The pilot was shaking his head, groggily.

The co-pilot was leaning back in his seat, his mouth opened, his eyes closed. 'I don't feel too ...' the pilot started, reached forward absently to crumple a sheet of tin-foil he had left on the instrument panel, in which, a few hours ago, had been a fillet sandwich that he and the co-pilot had shared between them.

Suddenly the pilot fell forward out of his chair, knocking the control stick to the left. He clutched his stomach as the plane banked. In the observation pill, the observer was thrown from his chair and the microphone fell from his hand.

The co-pilot woke up, belched, grabbed for the stick, which was not in its usual place, missed. Forty-one seconds later, the plane crashed into a dock some thirty yards from the mooring tetron tramp.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was roaring in the air. Let cried out and ran across the deck. Then shadow. Then water. He slipped on the boards as the rail swung by. Then thunder. Then screaming. Something was tearing in half.

Jon and Arkor got him out. They had to jump overboard with the unconscious prince, swim, climb, and carry. There were sirens at the dock when they laid him on the dried leaves of the forest clearing.

'We'll leave him here,' Arkor said.

'Here? Are you sure?' Jon asked.

'They will come for him. You must go on,' he said softly. 'We'll leave the prince now, and you can tell me of your plan.'

'My plan ...?' Jon said. They walked off through the trees.

Dried leaves tickled one cheek, a breeze cooled the other. Something touched him on the side, and he stretched his arms, scrunched his eyelids, then curled himself into the comfortable dark. He was napping in the little park behind the palace. He would go in for supper soon. The leaf smell was fresher than it had ever—Something touched him on the side again.

He opened his eyes, and bit off a scream. Because he wasn't in the park, he wasn't going in to supper, and there was a strange giant standing over him.

The forest man touched the boy with his foot once more.

Suddenly the boy scrambled away, then stopped, crouched across the clearing. A breeze shook the leaves like admonishing fingers before he heard the giant speak. Then the giant was silent. Then the giant spoke again.

The word the boy heard in both sentences was, '... Quorl...'

The third time he spoke, he merely pointed to himself and repeated, 'Quorl.'

Then he pointed to the boy and smiled.

The boy was silent.

Again the giant slapped his hand against his chest and said 'Quorl.' Again he extended his hand towards the boy, wailing for a name. It did not come. Finally he shrugged, and motioned for the boy to come.

The boy rose slowly, and followed. Soon they were walking briskly through the woods.

As they walked, the boy remembered: the shadow of the plane out of control above them, the plane striking the water, water becoming a mountain of water, like shattered glass

rushing at them across the sea. And he remembered the fire. And something tearing—

Hadn't it started in his room at the palace, when he pressed the first of the concealed micro-switches with his heel? The cameras were probably working, but there had been no bells, no sirens, no rush of guards. It had tautened when he pushed the second switch in the jewelled dolphin on the bedpost. It nearly parted with metallic panic when he had to manoeuvre the girl into position for the retina photograph. *Nothing* had happened. He was taken away, and his mother stayed quietly in her room. What was supposed to happen was pulling farther and farther away from what was. How could anybody kidnap the prince?

His treatment by the boy who had told him about the sea and the girl who taught him to fall pulled it even tighter. *If* the prince *were* kidnapped, certainly his jailors should not tell him stories of beautiful seaside mornings and sunsets, nor teach him to do impossible things with his body.

He was sure that the girl had meant him to die when she had told him to leap from the roof. But he had to do what he was told. He always had. (He was following the giant through the dull leaves because the giant had told him to.) When he had leapt from the roof, then rolled over and sprung to his feet alive, the shock had turned the rack another notch and he could feel the threads parting.

If he had stayed there, talked more to the boy and girl, he could have loosened the traction, block the fabric of reality back into the shape of expectation. But then the man with the black hair and the scarred giant had come to take him away. He'd made one last volitional effort to bring 'is' and 'suppose' together. He'd told the man the story of the mine prisoners, the one cogent, connected thing he remembered from his immediate past, a real good 'suppose' story. But the man turned on him and said that 'suppose' wasn't 'suppose' at all, but 'is.' A thread snapped here, another there.

(Over the deck of the boat there was roaring in the air. He had cried out. Then shadow. Then water. His feet were slipping and the rail swung by. Then thunder. Then screaming, his screaming: *I can't die! I'm not supposed to die!* Something tore in half.)

The leaves were shaking, the whole earth trembled with his tired, unsteady legs. As they walked through the forest, the last filament went, like a thread of glass under a blow-torch. The last thing to flicker out, like the fading end of the white-hot strand, was the memory of someone, somewhere, entreating him not to forget something, not to forget it no matter what... but what it was, he wasn't sure.

Quorl, with the boy beside him, kept a straight path through the forest. The ground sloped up now. Boulders lipped with moss pushed out here and there. Once Quorl stopped short; his arm shot in front of the boy to keep him from going farther.

Yards before them the leaves parted, and two great women walked forward. Everything about them was identical, their blue black eyes, flat noses, cheek ridges. Twin sisters, the boy realized. Both women bore the triplex of scars down the left side of their faces. They paid no attention to either Quorl or the boy, but walked across into the trees again. The moment they were gone, Quorl started again.

They passed one or two others of the tall forest people, but as with Quorl there were no scars, and no shock at the encounter. Once they met a group of squat creatures with heavy brows, even shorter than the boy.

When the little ones first saw Quorl, some looked as though they were about to speak. But

they hung back because the boy was there. Quorl grinned at them, and one waved back. Again there was none of the stiffness that had cooled the first encounter with the women.

Much later they turned on to a small cliff that looked across a valley to another mountain. Near a thick trunk was a pile of brush and twigs. The boy watched Quorl drop to his knees and move the brush away. The boy crouched to see better.

The big brown fingers tipped with bronze nails gently revealed a cage made of sticks tied together with dried vines. Something squeaked in the cage, and the boy jumped.

Quorl in a single motion got the trap door opened and his hand inside. The protracted squeak suddenly turned into a scream. Then there was silence. Quorl removed a furry weasel-type animal and handed it to the boy.

The pelt was feather soft, still warm. The head hung crazily to the side where the neck had been broken. The boy looked at the giant's hands again.

Crazy veins roped straight ligaments. The hair on the joints grew up to the edge of the furrowed knuckles. Now the fingers were pulling the brush back over the trap. The giant and the boy crossed the clearing and Quorl uncovered a second trap. When the hand went into the trap and the knot of muscle jumped on the brown forearm (Squeeeeeeraaa!) the boy looked away, out across the valley.

The sky was smoke grey to the horizon where a streak of orange marked the sunset. The copper disc hung low in the purple gap of the mountains. A fan of lavender drifted above the orange, and then white, faint green ... The grey wasn't really grey, it was blue-grey. He began to count colours, and found twelve (not a thousand). The last one was a pale gold that tipped the edges of the few low clouds clustering near the sun.

A touch on the shoulder made the boy turn back. Quorl handed him the second animal, and they went back into the woods. Later, they built a small fire and skinned and quartered the animals on the scimitar-like blade that Quorl wore. They sat in the diminishing shell of light with the meat on forked sticks, turning it over the flame. The boy watched the maroon fibres go shiny with juice, then darken, crisp, and brown. When the meat was done, Quorl took a piece of folded skin from his pouch and shook some white powder on to it. Then he passed the leather envelope to the boy.

The boy poured a scattering of white powder into his palm, put his tongue to it. Salt.

As they had nearly finished eating, the forest cooled and stilled. Fire made the leaves around them flickering shingles on the darkness. Quorl was cleaning the last, tiny bone with teeth when there was a sound. They turned.

Another branch broke to their left. 'Tloto,' Quorl called harshly.

It moved closer, the boy could hear it moving. Then he saw the tall shadow at the edge of the light.

With disgust (but without fear, the boy saw) Quorl picked up a stick and flung it. The shadow dodged and made a small mewling sound.

'Go away, Tloto,' Quorl said. 'Go away.'

Only Tloto came forward instead.

Perhaps it had been born of human parents, but to call it human now ... It was bone

naked, hairless, shell white. It had no eyes, no ears, only a lipless mouth and nostril flaps. It sniffed towards the fire.

Now the boy saw that both the feet were clubbed. Only two fingers on each hand were neither misshapen nor paralysed. It reached for Quorl's pile of bones, making the mewing sound.

With a sudden sweep of his hand, Quorl knocked the paraplegic claw away. Tloto backed away, turned to the boy, and came forward, nostril slits widening and contracting.

The boy had eaten all he could and had a quarter of his meat still left. It's only a head taller than I am, he thought. If it's from this race of giants, perhaps it's still a child. Maybe it's my age. He stared at the blank face. It doesn't know what's going on, the boy thought. It doesn't know what's supposed to be happening.

Perhaps it was just the sound of the word in his head that triggered the panic (or was it something that caught in his chest?). Anyway, he took the unfinished meat and held it towards Tloto.

The claw jumped forward, grabbed, snatched back. The boy tried to make his mouth go into a smile. But Tloto couldn't see, so it didn't matter. He turned back to the fire, and when he looked up again, Tloto was gone.

As Quorl began to kick dirt on to the coals, he spoke to the boy, about Tloto and a few philosophical concepts. The boy listened carefully, and understood at least that Tloto was not worth his concern. But speech had become indifferent to the prince. There was nothing in this world he was familiar enough with to comment on. He was not homesick for the statues and rotating windows of the palace.

Jerk someone from one location; fling him in another; the elements in one location define the other. But sometimes the shock of transition is so great that the definition does not begin. Let had abandoned words. He listened, carefully, to the giant, but not for meaning. He examined the words for tone and voice quality, the same way he searched the giant's face, the same way he watched the huge body, shoulder, arm, or knee, shifting as he talked. He was trying to pick out, in the firelight, the hints of emotion he could relate to his isolate fourteen years. He found a few. Then a few more.

They lay down beside the cyst of embers, a glowing scab on the dark, and slept.

When the giant's hand shook his shoulder, it was still dark. The boy did not jump this time. He blinked against the night and pulled his feet under him. It had grown colder and the wind brushed his neck and fingered his hair. Then a high sound cut above the trees and fell away. Quorl took the boy's arm and they started through the dark.

Light filtered from the left. Was it morning? No. The boy saw it was the rising moon. The light became white, then silver. They reached a cliff at last, beyond which was the dark sea. Broken rock spilled to ledges below. Fifty feet down (still a hundred feet above the water) was a table of rock. The moon was high enough to light the entire lithic table as well as the temple at its edge.

In front of the temple stood a tall man in black robes who blew on a curved shell. The wail sliced high over the sea and the forest. People were gathering around the table. Some came in couples, some with children, but most were single men and women. There were only tall people there.

The boy started to go down, but Quorl held him back. They waited. From sounds about them, the boy realized there were others watching from the heights also. A few of the neanderthals observed from the rocks, but there were none below. On the water, waves began to glitter with broken images of the moon. The sky was speckled with stars.

Now a group of people were led from the temple on to the platform. Most of them were tall children. There was an old man whose beard twitched in the breeze. There was a stately woman.

All were bound, all of them were near naked, and all except the woman shifted their feet and looked nervously about.

The priest in the black robe disappeared into the temple, and emerged again with something that looked to the boy from this distance like a back-scratcher. He raised it in the moonlight, and a murmur rose and quieted about the ring of people. The boy saw that there were three prongs on the handle, each snagging on the luminous beams of the moon.

The priest walked to the first child and caught the side of her head in his hand. Then he quickly drew the triple blade down the left side of her face. She made an indefinite noise, but it was drowned in the whisper of the crowd. He did the same to the next child who began to cry, and to the next. The woman stood completely still and did not flinch when the blade opened her cheek. The old man was afraid. The boy could tell because he whimpered and backed away.

A man and woman stepped from the ring of people and held him for the priest. As the blade raked the side of his face, his senile whine turned into a scream. The boy thought for a moment of the trapped animals. The old man staggered away from his captors and no one paid him any more attention. The priest raised the shell to his mouth once more, and the high, brilliant sound flooded the rock.

Then, as they had come, the people disappeared into the woods. Quorl touched the boy's shoulder and they too turned into the forest. The boy looked up at Quorl's yellow eyes, puzzled. But there was no explanation. Once the boy saw a white figure dart at their left as a shaft of moonlight slipped across a naked shoulder. Tloto was following them.

The boy spent his days learning. Quorl taught him to pull the gut of animals to make string. It had to be stretched a long time and then greased with hunks of fat. Once learned it became his job; as did changing the bait in the traps; as did cutting willow boughs to make sleeping pallets; as did sorting the firewood into piles of variously sized sticks; as did holding together the branches while Quorl tied them together to make a canopy for them, the night it rained.

As Quorl learned what the boy was listening for, he stopped using so many words. He let the boy do with just a few names for types of traps, the trees, how places were named in the forest, the names of animals. The boy learned to understand. He still did not speak at all.

But now that Quorl used fewer words, he could give the boy more of what he needed.

'There is a porcupine,' Quorl would say, pointing.

The boy would turn his eyes quickly, following the finger, and then look back, blinking in

quiet comprehension.

They walked through the forest that evening, and Quorl said, 'You walk as loud as a tapir.' The boy had been moving over dry leaves. Obediently he moved his bare feet to where the leaves were damp and did not crackle.

Sometimes the boy went alone by the edge of the stream. Once a wild pig chased him and he had to climb a tree. The pig tried to climb after him and he sat in the crotch of the branch looking down into the squealing mouth, the warty face; he could see each separate bristle stand up and lie down as the jaw bone shifted beneath the skin. One tusk was broken.

Then he heard a mewling sound away to his left. Looking off he saw slug-like Tloto coming towards his tree. A sudden urge to sound pushed him closer to speech (Stay away! Stay back!) than he had been since his arrival in the woods. But Tloto could not see. Tloto could not hear. His hands tightened until the bark burned his palm.

Suddenly the animal turned from the tree and took off after Tloto. Instantly the slug man turned and was gone.

The boy dropped from the tree and ran after the sound of the pig's crashing in the underbush. Twenty feet later after tearing through a net of thick foliage, he burst into a clearing and stopped.

In the middle of the clearing, the pig was struggling half above ground and half under. But it wasn't ground. It was a muck-pool covered by floating leaves. The pig was going under fast.

Then the boy saw Tloto on the other side of the clearing, his nostrils quivering, his blind head turning back and forth. Somehow the slug-man had manoeuvred the animal into the pool. He wasn't sure how, but that must have been what had happened.

The urge that welled in him now came too fast to be stopped. It had too much to do with the recognition of luck, and the impossibility of the whole situation. The boy laughed.

He startled himself with the sound, and after a few seconds stopped. Then he turned. Quorl stood behind him.

(Squeeeee ... Squeeeee ... *raaaaaaa!* Then a gurgle, then nothing.)

Quorl was smiling too, a puzzled smile.

'Why did you laugh?'

The boy turned back now. Tloto and the pig were gone.

Quorl walked the boy back to their camp. As they were nearing the stream Quorl saw the boy's footprints in the soft earth and frowned. 'To leave your footprints in wet earth is dangerous. The vicious animals come to drink and they will smell you, and they will follow you, to eat. Suppose that pig had been chasing you, instead of running into the pool? What then? If you must leave your footprints, leave them in dry dust. Better not to leave them at all.'

The boy listened, and remembered. But that night, he saved a large piece of meat from his food. When Tloto came into the circle of firelight he gave it to him.

Quorl gave a shrug of frustration and flung a pebble at the retreating shadow. 'He is useless,' Quorl said. 'Don't waste your food on him. Oh, well, I suppose we're all histosents.'

The boy felt something start up inside again, a question. But he would not let it move his tongue. So he laughed. Quorl looked puzzled. The boy laughed again. Then Quorl laughed too. 'You will learn. You will learn at last.' Then the giant became serious. 'You know, that is the first histosentient sound I've heard you make since you came here.'

The boy frowned, and the giant repeated the sentence. The boy's face showed which word puzzled him.

The giant thought a minute: 'You, me, even Tloto, are histosents. The trees, the rocks, the animals, they are not. But your laugh, that is a histosentient sound. The word means historically sentient; and that means knowing where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. It also means appreciating it.'

The boy looked away through the trees where Tloto had gone.

'You're still wondering about Tloto? I could tell you how living here on the mainland so close to the radiation forced some of our tribes millennia ahead on the human evolutionary chain, while other tribes were forced back, both to a point where they could maintain some sort of genetic stability. But Tloto—there are very few like Tloto today—is just a random throw-away nowhere on the human spectrum. When I see the neanderthal children plague him, I make them stop. For the same reasons, I would like you to stop giving him your affection. It may hurt him as much as a stone or flung twigs—' He stopped. 'But you don't want these words now.'

The boy thought about it. Histosent? From somewhere before the change, another word came to him, pulled up by the association of rhyme, then by the definitions. For a while he tried to put one before the other, to understand which was necessarily first. The process of definition was beginning. At last he slept.

He laughed a lot during the days now. Survival had come as close to routine as it could here in the forest. He watched Quorl when they met other forest people. Often there were words, often with the friendliness and good feeling the boy could relax around. But if there was someone with scars, Quorl would freeze.

Once the boy wandered to the temple on the platform of rock. There were carvings on the stone. The sun was high. The carvings represented creatures that may have been human, but were deformed, distorted, some nearly unrecognizable. When he looked up, he saw that the priest had come from the temple and was watching him. The priest watched until the boy went back up into the trees.

Now he tried to climb the mountain. That was hard because spring streams had swelled and flooded the rocks, and often footholds gave from under him. At last he stopped before a jutting fragment that stuck out over the rocks and trees. He wiped the sweat from under his chin, stepped out on the stone, and looked down the side of the mountain. He was very high. He stood with hand against the trunk of a near rotten tree, breathing deep and squinting at the sky. (Three or four times Quorl and he had taken hunting trips; one had taken them to the edge of a deserted meadow across which was a crazily sagging farmhouse. There were no people there. Another had taken them to the edge of the jungle, beyond which the ground was grey and broken, and row after row of unsteady shacks sat among dumps of slithering ferns. Many of the forest people living there had scars and spent more time in larger groups.) The boy wondered if he could see to the

deserted meadow from here, or to the rows of prison shacks. A river, a snake of light, coiled through the valley towards the sea. The sky was very blue.

He heard it first, and then he felt it. He scrambled back towards firmer ground but not fast enough. The rock tilted, tore loose, and he was falling. (It pierced through his memory like a fire-blade up through canvas: '... knees up, chin down, and roll quick,' the girl had said a long time ago.) It was perhaps twenty feet to the next level. Tree branches broke his fall and he hit the ground spinning, and rolled. Something else, the rock or a rotten log, hit the ground a moment later where he had been. He uncurled too soon, reaching out to catch hold of the mountain as it tore by him. Then he hit something hard; something hit him back, and he sailed off into darkness in a web of pain.

Much later he shook his head, opened his eyes, then chomped his jaws. But the pain was in his leg, so chomping didn't help. He moved his face across crumbling dirt. The whole left side of his body ached, the ache that comes when muscles are tensed to exhaustion but will not relax.

He tried to crawl forward, and went flat on to the earth, biting up dirt. He nearly tore his leg off.

He had to be still, calm, find out exactly what was wrong. He couldn't tear himself to pieces like the wildcat who had got caught in the spring trap and who had bled to death after gnawing off both hind legs.

But each movement he made, each thought was a blurred green haze of pain. He raised himself up and looked back. Then he lay down again and closed his eyes. A log the thickness of his body lay across his left leg. Once he tried to push it away but only bruised his palm against the bark, and at last went unconscious with the effort.

When he woke up, the pain was very far away. The air was darkening. No, he wasn't quite awake. He was dreaming about something, something soft, a little garden, with shadows blowing in at the edge of his vision, swift and cool, a little garden behind the—

Suddenly, very suddenly, it struck him what was happening, the slowing down of thoughts, his breathing, maybe even his heart. Then he was struggling again, struggling hard enough that had he still the strength, he would have torn himself from his leg, thinking while he struggled, of the wildcat, not caring if he were less than the beast, only fighting to pull himself away from the pain, realizing that blood had begun to seep from beneath the log again, just a trickle...

Then the shadows overtook him, the dreams, and forgetfulness gauzed his eyes.

Tloto had to drag Quorl halfway up the mountain before the giant got the idea. When he did, he began to run. Quorl found the boy just before sunset. He was breathing in short gasps, fists clenched, eyes closed. The blood on the dirt had dried black.

The big, brown hands caught the log, loosed, and started to shift it; the boy let out a high sound from between his teeth.

The hands, with their ropes and ridges, strained the log upward; the sound became a howl.

The giant's feet braced against the dirt, slid in the dirt, and the hands that had snapped

tiny necks and bound sticks together with gut string, pulled; the howl turned into a scream. He screamed again. Then again.

The log, coming loose, tore away nearly a foot of flesh from the boy's leg. Quorl went over and picked him up.

This is the best dream, the boy thought, from that dark place he had retreated to behind the pain, because Quorl is here. The hands were lifting him now, he was held close, warm, somehow safe. His cheek was against the hard shoulder muscle, and he could smell Quorl too. So he stopped screaming and turned his head a little to make the pain go away. But it wouldn't go. It wouldn't. Then the boy cried.

The first tears through all that pain came salty in his eyes, and he cried until he went to sleep.

Quorl had medicine for him the next day ('From the priest,' he said) which helped the pain and made the healing start. Quorl also made the boy a pair of wooden crutches. Although muscle and ligament had been bruised and crushed, and the skin torn away, no bone had been broken.

That evening there was a drizzle and they ate under the canopy. Tloto did not come, and this time it was Quorl who saved the extra meat and kept looking off into the wet trees. Quorl had told the boy how Tloto had led him; when they finished eating, Quorl took the meat and ducked into the drizzle.

The boy lay down to sleep. He thought the meat was a reward for Tloto. Only Quorl had seemed that night more than usually full of gravity. The last thing he wondered before sleep filled his eyes and ears was how blind, deaf Tloto had known where he was anyway.

When he woke it had stopped raining. The air was damp and chilly. Quorl had not come back.

The sound of the blown shell came again. The boy sat up and flinched at the twinge in his leg. To his left the moon flickered through the trees. The sound came a third time, distant, clear and marine. The boy reached for his crutches and hoisted himself to his feet. He waited till the count of ten, hoping that Quorl might suddenly return and go with him.

At last he took a deep breath and started haltingly forward. The moonlight made the last hundred yards easy. He reached a vantage where he could look down through the wet leaves on to the stone.

The sky was sheeted with mist; the moon was an indistinct pearl in the haze. The sea was misty. People were already gathered at the edge. The boy looked at the priest, then looked among the circle of people. One of them was Quorl!

He leaned forward as far as he could. The priest sounded the shell again and the prisoners came out of the temple: first three boys, then an older girl, then a man. The next one ... Tloto! Marble white under the blurred moon. Its clubbed feet shuffled on the rock. Its blind head ducked right and left with bewilderment.

As the priest raised the three pronged knife, the boy's hands went tight around the

crutches. The priest passed from one prisoner to the next. Tloto cringed, and the boy sucked in a breath as the knife went down; the boy felt his own flesh part under the blades. Then the murmur died, the prisoners were unbound, and the people filed from the rock back into the forest.

The boy waited to see which way Quorl went before he started through the bushes as fast as his crutches would allow. There were many people on the paths that came from the temple rock. There was Quorl!

When he caught up, the giant saw him and slowed. Quorl kept his yellow eyes averted, though. Finally Quorl said, 'You don't understand. I had to catch him. I had to give him to be marked. But you don't understand.' The boy hardly looked at all where they were going. He stared up at the giant.

'You don't understand,' Quorl said again. Then he looked at the boy and was quiet for a while. 'No, you don't,' he repeated. 'Come.' They turned off the main path now, going slower. It's a ... custom. An important custom. Yes, I know it hurt him. I know he was afraid. But it had to be. Tloto is one of those who know the thoughts of others.' Quorl was silent for a moment. 'Let me try to tell you why I had to hurt your friend. Yes, I know he is your friend, now. But once I said that Tloto was histosentient. I was wrong. Tloto is more. He and the others are marked, somehow these people know things. That was how Tloto survived. That's how he knew where you were, when you were hurt. He knew inside your head. Many are born like that, more of them each year, among the tall people. As soon as we find out, we mark them. Many try to hide it. Some succeed for a long time. Can you understand? Do you? When Tloto showed me where you were, he knew that I would know, that he would be caught and marked. Do you understand?' Again he paused and looked at the boy. The eyes still showed puzzled hurt. 'You want to know why. I ... we ... Long ago we killed them when we found out. We have a greater spectrum of love than you. As well as a greater spectrum of fear. We don't any more. The mark reminds them that they are different, and yet the same as we. Perhaps it is wrong. It doesn't hurt that much, and it heals. Anyway, we don't kill them any more. We know they're important ...' Suddenly, having gone all through it with the boy, it seemed twisted to Quorl, incorrect. Then he gave the boy what the boy had been sent to the forest to receive, what the duchess had found and knew was necessary. 'I was wrong,' Quorl said. 'I'm sorry. I will speak to me priest tomorrow.'

They walked until the dawn lightened the sky behind the trees. Once Quorl looked and said, 'I want to show you something. We are very near, and the weather is right.'

They walked a few minutes more till Quorl pointed to a wall of leaves, and said, 'Go through there.'

As they pressed through the dripping foliage, bright light burnished their faces. They were standing on a small cliff that looked down the mountain. Fog the colour of pale gold, the same gold the boy had seen in the sunset, rolled across the entire sky. The centre flamed with the misty sun, and way below them through the fog were shattered traces of water, the colour of flame on copper foil, without edge or definition.

'That's a lake that lies between this mountain and the next,' Quorl said, pointing to the water. 'Do you see what they are making there? No, there is too much fog. But look.'

'I thought ...' The boy's tongue, loosed by laughter and crying, at last rose roughly against speech. '... I thought it was the sea.'

Quorl smiled.

Beside them appeared the crouching figure of Tloto. Drops from the wet leaves burned on his neck and back, over the drying blood. He turned his blank face left and right in the golden light and, with all his knowing, could communicate no awe.

CHAPTER IX

CLEA KOSHAR had been installed in her government office for three days. The notebook in which she had been doing her own work on inverse sub-trigonometric functions had been put away in her desk for exactly three minutes when she made the first discovery that gave her a permanent place in the history of the Toromon's Wars as its first military hero. Suddenly she pounded her fist on the computer keys, flung her pencil across the room, muttered, 'What the hell is this,' and dialled the military ministry.

It took ten minutes to get Tomar. His red hair focused on the visaphone. He recognized her and smiled. 'Hi.'

'Hi yourself,' she said. 'I just got out those figures you people sent us about the data from the radiation barrier, and those old readings from the time Telphar was destroyed. Tomar, I didn't even have to feed them to the computer. I just looked at them. That radiation was artificially created! Its increment is completely steady. At least on the second derivative. Its build-up pattern is such that there couldn't be more than two simple generators, or one complexed one...'

'Slow down,' Tomar said. 'What do you mean, generators?'

'The radiation barrier, or at least most of it, is artificially maintained. And there are not more than two generators, and possibly one, maintaining it.'

'How do you generate radiation?' Tomar asked.

'I don't know,' Clea said. 'But somebody has been doing it.'

'I don't want to knock your genius, but how come nobody else figured it out?'

'I just guess nobody thought it was a possibility, or thought of gratuitously taking the second derivative, or bothered to look at them before they fed them into the computers. In twenty minutes I can figure out the location for you.'

'You do that,' he said, 'and I'll get the information to whoever it's supposed to get to. You know this is the first piece of information of importance that we've got from this whole battery of slide-rule slippers up there. I should have figured it would probably have come from you. Thanks, if we can use it.'

She blew him a kiss as his face winked out. Then she got out her notebook again. Ten minutes later the visaphone crackled at her. She turned to it and tried to get the operator, but was not able to. She reached into her desk and got out a small pocket tool kit and was about to attack the housing of the frequency-filterer when the crackling increased and she heard a voice. She put the screwdriver down and put the instrument back on the desk. A face flickered on to the screen and then flickered off. The face had dark hair, seemed perhaps familiar. But it was gone before she was sure she had made it out.

Crossed signals from another line, she figured. Maybe a short in the dialling mechanism. She glanced down at her notebook and took up her pencil when the picture flashed on to the screen again. This time it was clear and there was no static. The familiarity, she did not realize, was the familiarity of her own face on a man.

'Hello,' he said. 'Hello. Hello, Clea?'

'Who is this?' she asked.

'Clea, this is Jon.'

She sat very still, trying to pull two halves of something back together (as in a forest, a prince had felt the same things, tear). Clea succeeded. 'You're supposed to be ... dead. I mean I thought you were. Where are you, Jon?'

'Clea,' he said. 'Clea ... I have to talk to you.'

There was a five second silence.

'Jon, Jon, how are you?'

'Fine,' he said. 'I really am. I'm not in prison any more. I've been out a long time, and I've done a lot of things. But Clea, I need your help.'

'Of course,' she said. 'Tell me how? What do you want me to do?'

'Do you want to know where I am?' he said. 'What I've been doing? I'm in Telphar, and I'm trying to stop the war.'

'In Telphar?'

'There's something behind that radiation barrier. I'm about to break through and see what can be done. But I need some help at home. I've been monitoring phonecalls in Toron. There's an awful lot of equipment here that's more or less mine if I can figure out how to use it. And **I've** got a friend here who knows more in that line than I gave him credit for. I've overheard some closed circuit conference calls, and I'm talking to you by the same method. I know you've got the ear of Major Tomar and I know he's one of the few trustworthy people in that whole military hodge-podge. Clea, there is something hostile to Toromon beyond the Dead City, but a war is not the answer. The thing that's making the war is the unrest in Toromon. And the war isn't going to remedy that. The emigration situation, the food situation, the excess man-power, the deflation: that's what's causing your war. If that can be stopped, then the thing here can be dealt with quickly and peacefully. There in Toron you don't even know what the enemy is. They wouldn't let you know even if they knew themselves.'

'Do you know?' Clea asked.

Jon paused. Then he said, 'Whatever it is, it's people with something wrong among them. And war won't exorcize it.'

'Can you?' Clea asked.

Jon paused again. 'Yes. I can't tell you how; but let's say what's troubling them is a lot simpler than what's troubling us in Toromon.'

'Jon,' Clea asked suddenly, 'what's it like in Telphar? You know I'll help you if I can, but tell me.'

The face on the visaphone was still. Then it drew a deep breath. 'Clea, it's like an open-air tomb. The city is very unlike Toron. It was planned, all the streets are regular, there's no Devil's Pot, nor could there ever be one. Roadways wind above ground among the taller

buildings. I'm in the Palace of the Stars right now. It was a magnificent building.' The face looked right and left. 'It still is. They had amazing laboratories, lots of equipment, silvered meeting halls under ceilings that reproduced the stars. The electric plants still work. Most houses you can walk right in and turn on a light switch. Half the plumbing in the city is out, though. But everything in the palace still works. It must have been a beautiful place to live in. When they were evacuating during the radiation rise, very little marauding took place....'

'The radiation ...' began Clea.

Jon laughed. 'Oh, that doesn't bother us. It's too complicated to explain now, but it doesn't.'

'That's not what I meant,' Clea said. 'I figured if you were alive, then it obviously wasn't bothering you. But Jon, and this isn't government propaganda, because I made the discovery myself: whatever is beyond caused the radiation rise that destroyed Telphar. Somewhere near Telphar is a projector that caused the rise, and it's still functioning. This hasn't been released to the public yet, but if you want to stop your war, you'll never do it if the government can correctly blame the destruction of Telphar on the enemy. That's all they need.'

'Clea, I haven't finished telling you about Telphar. I told you that the electricity still worked. Well, most houses you go into, you turn on the light and find a couple of sixty-year-old corpses on the floor. On the roads you can find a wreck every hundred feet or so. There're almost ten thousand bodies in the Stadium of the Stars. It isn't very pretty. Arkor and I are the only two humans who have any idea of what the destruction of Telphar really amounted to. And we still believe we're in the right.'

'Jon, I can't hold back information ...'

'No, no,' Jon said. 'I wouldn't ask you to. Besides, I heard your last phone call. So it's already out. I want you to do two things for me. One has to do with Dad. The other is to deliver a message. I overheard a conference call between Prime Minister Chargill and some of the members of the council. They're about to ask Dad for a huge sum of money to finance the first aggressive drive in this war effort. Try and convince him that it'll do more harm than good. Look, Clea, you've got a mathematical mind. Show him how this whole thing works. He doesn't mean to be, but he's almost as much responsible for this thing as any one individual could be. See if he can keep production from flooding the city. And for Toromon's sake, keep an eye, a close eye on his supervisors. They're going to tilt the island into the sea with all their cross-purpose intrigues. All I can do is start you on the right track, Clea, and you'll have to take it from there. Now for the message. The one circuit I can't break in on is the Royal Palace system. I can just overhear. Somehow I've got to get a message to the Duchess of Petra. Tell her to get to Telphar in the next forty-eight hours by way of the transit-ribbon. Tell her there are two kids she owes a favour to. And tell her she owes four or five favours to the girl. She'll be able to find out who they are!'

Clea was scribbling. 'Does the transit-ribbon still work?' she asked.

'It was working when I escaped from prison,' Jon said. 'I don't see why it should have stopped now.'

'You used it?' Clea said. 'That means you *were* in Toron!'

'That's right. And I was at your party too.'

'Then it was ...' She stopped. Then laughed, 'I'm so glad, Jon. I'm so glad it was you after all.'

'Come on, Sis, tell me about yourself,' Jon said. 'What's been happening in the real world? I've been away from it a long time. Here in Telphar I don't feel much closer. Right now I'm walking around in my birthday suit. On our way here we got into a shadowy situation and I had to abandon my clothes to keep from getting caught. I'll explain that later, too. But what about you?'

'Oh, there's nothing to tell. But to you I guess there is. I graduated, with honours. I've grown up. I'm engaged, to Tomar. Did you know that? Dad approves, and we're to be married as soon as the war's over. I'm working on a project, to define the inverse sub-trigonometric functions. Those are about the most important things in my life right now. I'm supposed to be working on the war effort, but except for this afternoon, I haven't done much.'

'Fine,' Jon said. 'That's about the right proportions.'

'Now what about you? And the clothes?' She grinned into the visaphone, and he grinned back.

'Well—no, you wouldn't believe it. At least not if I told it that way. Arkor, the friend whose with me, is one of the forest people. He left the forest to spend some time in Toron, which is where I met him. Apparently he managed to accumulate an amazing store of information, about all sorts of thing, electronics, languages, even music. You'd think he could read minds. And here we are, through the forest, across the prison mines, and in Telphar.'

'Jon, what were the mines like? It always made me wonder how Dad could use tetron when he knew that you were being whipped to get it.'

'You and I'll get drunk some evening and I'll tell you what it was like,' Jon said. 'But not until. When you're trying to convince Dad, bring that up about me and the mines.'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I will.'

'Anyway,' Jon went on, 'We had to get through the forest without being seen and with all those leaves it was pretty dark. Arkor could get through because he was a forest man and nobody would stop him. But because they'd have seen me, I had to go most of the way naked as a jaybird.'

Clea frowned. 'I don't understand. Are you sure you're all right?'

Jon laughed. 'Of course I'm all right. I can't really explain to you just yet. I'm just so happy to see you again, to be able to talk to you. Sis, I've wanted to be free for so long, to see you and Dad again, and ... there's nothing wrong with me except the sniffles.'

It welled up, in her like a wave and the tears flooded her lids, and then one overflowed and ran down the right side of her nose. 'You see what you're doing,' she said. And they laughed once more. 'To see you again, Jon, is so ... *fine*.'

'I love you, Sis,' Jon said. 'Thanks, and so long for a little while.'

'I'll get your message out. So long.' The phone blinked dark and she sat there wondering if perhaps the tension wasn't too much. But it wasn't, and she had messages to deliver.

CHAPTER X

DURING the next couple of hours, two people died, miles apart:

'Don't be silly,' Rara was saying in the Inn at the Devil's Pot. I'm a perfectly good nurse. Do you want to see my licence?'

White-haired Geryn sat straight in his chair by the window. Blue seeped like liquid across the glass. 'Why did I do it?' he said. 'It was wrong. I... I love my country.'

Rara pulled the blanket from the back of the chair and tucked it around the trembling shoulders. 'What are you talking about?' she said, but the birthmark over her face was deep purple with worry.

He shook the blanket off and flung his hand across the table where the old news directive lay:

PRINCE KIDNAPPED!

KING DECLARES WAR!

The trembling in Geryn's shoulders became violent.

'Sit back,' said Rara.

Geryn stood up.

'Sit down,' Rara repeated. 'Sit down. You're not well. Now sit down!'

Geryn lowered himself stiffly to the chair. He turned to Rara. 'Did I start a war? I tried to stop it. That was all I wanted. Would it have happened if...'

'Sit back,' Rara said. 'If you're going to talk to somebody, talk to me. I can answer you. Geryn, you didn't start the war.'

Geryn suddenly rose once more, staggered forward, slammed his hands on the table, and began to cough.

'For pity's sake,' Rara cried, trying to move the old man back into his chair, 'will you sit down and relax! You're not well! You're not well at all!' From above the house came the faint beat of helicopter blades.

Geryn returned to his chair. Suddenly he leaned back, head back. His adam's apple shot high in his neck. Rara jumped forward and tried to bring his head up. 'Dear heavens,' she breathed. 'Stop that. Now stop it, or you'll hurt yourself.'

Geryn's head came up again. 'A war!' he said. 'They made me start the ...'

'No one made you do anything,' Rara said. 'And you didn't start the war.'

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'No. You can't be sure. No one can. Nobody...'

'Will you please try to relax,' Rara repeated, tucking at the blanket.

Geryn relaxed. It went all through his body, starting at his hands. The shoulders dropped a little, his head fell forward, the wall of muscle quivering across his stomach loosened, his back bent. That frail fist of muscle that had jarred life through his tautened body for seventy years, shaking inside his chest, it too relaxed. Then it stopped. Geryn slid on to the floor.

The shifting body pulled Rara down with him. Unaware that he was dead, she was trying to get him back into the chair when the helicopter blades got very loud.

She looked up to see the window darken with a metal shadow. 'Good lord!' she breathed. Then the glass shattered.

She screamed, careened around the table, and fled through the door, slamming it behind her.

Over the flexible metal ramp that hooked on to the window-sill two men entered the room. Fire-blades poised, they walked to the crumpled body, lifted it between them, and carried it back to the window. Their arm bands showed the royal insignia of the palace guards.

Tel was running down the street because someone was following him. He ducked into a side alley and skittered down a flight of stone steps. Somewhere overhead he heard a helicopter.

His heart was pounding like explosions in his chest, like the sea, like his ocean. Once he had looked through a six-inch crevice between glassy water and the top of a normally submerged cave and seen wet, orange star-fish clutching the wet stone, their reflections quivering with his breath. Now he was trapped in the cave of the city, the tide of fear rising to lock him in. Footsteps passed above him.

Nearby was a ladder that led to a trap door which would put him in the hall of a tenement. He climbed it, emerged, and then turned up the regular steps to the roof. He walked across the tar-paper surface to the edge, leaned over, and peered down into the alley. Two men, who may have been the people following him, approached from opposite ends of the alley. The sky was deepening towards evening and it was cool. The two men met, and men one pointed to the roof.

'Damn,' Tel muttered, ducked backward, and bit his tongue with surprise. He opened his mouth and breathed hard, holding the side of his jaw. The helicopter was coming closer.

Then something very light fell over him. He forgot his bitten tongue and struck out with his hands. But it was strong. It jerked at his feet and he fell forward. It was not until it lifted him from the roof that he realized he was caught in a net. He was being drawn up towards the sound of the whirling helicopter blades.

When the order came through, he didn't even have time to say goodbye to Clea. Two other mathematicians in the corps had shown appropriate awe at Clea's discovery and

proceeded to locate the generator. The next-in-charge General, working on a strategy Tomar did not quite understand, decided that now was the time for an active strike. 'Besides,' he added, 'if we don't give them some combat soon, we'll lose (and I mean lose in the sense of "misplace") this war.'

The shadow of the control tower fell through the windshield and slipped across Tomar's face. He pulled up his goggles and sighed. Active combat. What the hell would they be combating? The disorder, the disorganization was beginning to strike him as farcical. Though after the poisoned fish, the farcical was no longer funny.

The buildings on the airfield fell back and down. The transit-ribbon gleamed below him as the six other planes in the formation pulled up behind. A moment later the island was a comb of darkness on the crest of the evening sea.

Clouds banded the deep blue horizon. There were three stars out, the same stars that he had looked at as a boy when his sun-up to sun-down work day ended. Between hunger and hunger there had been some times when you could look at the stars and wonder, as there were now between times of work and work.

The controls were set. There was nothing to do but wait for land to rise up over the edge of the world.

As the end of the metal ribbon was a transparent crystal sphere, fifteen feet in diameter which hovered above the receiving stage. A dozen small tetron-units sat around the room. By one ornate window a bank of forty-nine scarlet-knobbed switches pointed to off. Two men stood on the metal catwalk that ran above the receiving stage, one young man with black hair, the other a dark giant with a triplex of scars down the left side of his face.

In another room, corpses, stiff and shrivelled, sat on green velvet.

It was evening in the solarium on top of the General Medical building. The patients were about to be herded from their deck chairs and game tables under the glass roof back to their wards, when a woman screamed. Then there was the sound of breaking glass. More people screamed.

Alter heard the roar of helicopter blades. People were running around her. Suddenly the crowd of bathrobed patients broke from in front of her. She touched the cast that covered her left shoulder and arm. People cried out. Then she saw.

The glass dome shattered at the edge, and the flexible metal ramp ran a dark ribbon from the 'copter to the edge of the solarium. The men that marched across had the insignia of the royal guards. She clamped her jaws together and moved behind a nurse. She had a cast on one arm and shoulder. The men marched in, fire-blades high, among the overturned deck-chairs. There were three stars visible, she noted irrelevantly, through the bubble dome.

Good lord! They were coming towards her!

The moment the guards recognized her, she realized the only way to get out was to cross the suddenly immense metal floor to the stairwell. She ducked her head, broke from the crowd of patients, and ran, wondering why she had been fool enough to wait this long. The

guard tackled her and she heard screams again.

She fell to the hard floor and felt pain explode along the inside of her cast. The guard tried to lift her, and with her good arm she struck at his face. Then she held her palm straight and brought the edge down on the side of his neck.

He staggered and she felt herself slip to the floor. Then someone grabbed a handful of her hair and her head was yanked back. At first she closed her eyes. Then she had to open them. Night was moving above her through the dome of the solarium. Then the cracked edge of the glass passed over her, and it was colder, and the blur and roar of helicopter blades was above.

'On course?'

'Dead on course,' said Tomar back into the microphone. Below, the rim of land slipped back under them. The moon bleached the edges of the vari-coloured darknesses beneath them, then went down.

'What are you thinking about, Major?' came the voice from the speaker again.

'Not thinking about anything,' Tomar said. 'Just about waiting. It's funny, that's most of what you do in this army, wait. You wait to go out and fight. And once you go out, then you start waiting to turn around and come back.'

'Wonder what it'll be like.'

'A few bombs over that generator, then we'll have had active combat and everyone will be happy.'

A laugh, mechanical, through the speaker. 'Suppose they "active" back?'

'If they cripple our planes like they've done before, we'll make it to the island again.'

'I had to leave a hot cup of coffee back at the hangar, Major. I wish it was light so we could see what we were doing.'

'Stop bitching.'

'Hey, Major.'

'What?'

'I've invented a new kind of dice.'

'You would.'

'What you do is take fifteen centi-unit pieces and arrange them in a four-by-four square with one corner missing. Then you take a sixteenth coin and shoot it within forty-five degrees either way of the diagonal into the missing corner. It works out that no matter how you do it, if all the coins in the square are touching, two coins will fly off among the seven on the far edge. Each of those has a number and the two numbers that fly off are like the two numbers that come up on the dice. It's better than regular dice because the chances are up on some combinations. And there's a certain amount of skill involved too. The guys call it Randomax. That's for *random numbers* and *matrix*.'

'I'll play you a game some day,' Tomar said. 'You know, if you used a smaller coin than a centi-unit for the one you fire into the missing corner, say a deci-unit, the chances that it would hit both corner coins would go up, that is your randomness.'

'Really?'

'Sure,' Tomar said. 'My girlfriend's a mathematician, and she was telling me all about probability a few weeks ago. I bet she'd be interested in the game.'

'You know what, Major?'

'What?'

'I think you're the best officer in the damned army.'

Such was the conversation before the first battle of the war.

Such was the conversation Jon Koshar monitored in the laboratory of the Palace of the Stars in Telphar. 'Oh damn,' he said. 'Come on, Arkor. We'd better get going. If the duchess doesn't get here with Geryn soon ... Well let's not think about it.' He scribbled a note, set it in front of one visa-phone and dialled the number of another that was on a stand in front of the receiving platform of the transit-ribbon.

'There,' he said. 'That's got instructions to follow us as soon as she gets here. And she better not miss it.' They went down the metal steps to a double doorway that opened on to a road.

Two mechanical vehicles stood mere, both with pre-controls set for similar destinations. Jon and Arkor climbed into one, pushed the ignition button, and the car shot forward along the elevated roadway. White mercury lights flooded the strip as it wound through the dead city.

The road dipped and houses got lower on each side. The horizon glowed purple and above that, yellow clouds dropped into late evening. There was a sound of planes overhead.

As the car halted at the barren limits of the last suburb of Telphar, a sudden white streak speared from the horizon. 'Uh-oh,' said Jon. 'That's what I was afraid of.'

Something caught fire in the air, twisted wildly through the sky, and then began to circle down, flaming.

'Major! Major! What happened to D-42?'

'Something got him. Pull over. Pull over everybody!'

'We can't spot it. Where'd it come from?'

'All right, everybody. Break formation. Break formation I said!'

'Major, I'm going to drop a bomb. Maybe we can see where that came from in the light. I thought you said "cripple".'

'Never mind what I said. Drop it.'

'Major Tomar. This is B-6. We've been ...' (unintelligible static).

Someone else gives a slow whistle through the microphone.

'Break formation, I said. Damn it, break formation.'

Over the plane a sheet of red fire flapped up, and Jon and Arkor pulled back from the railing that edged the road. Another white streak left the horizon, and for a moment, in the glare, their shadows on the pavement were double.

The sound of the explosion reached them a moment later, as broken rocks leapt into silhouette like a rotted jaw gnawing red fire.

Another sound behind them made them turn. The lighted roadways of Telphar looped the city towers like strands of pearls on skeleton necks. A car came towards them.

Another wailing missile took the sky, and a moment later a screaming plane tore down the night. It turned as its flaming motors caught once more and careened above their heads so close that they ducked as it disappeared among the city towers: an explosion, then falling fire drooled the side of a building. 'I hope that's nowhere near the Palace of the Stars,' a voice said next to Jon. 'We'll have a great time getting back if it is.'

Jon whirled. The duchess had got out of the car. The red light flared a moment in her hair, died.

'No. That was nowhere near it,' Jon said. 'Am I glad to see you.'

Tel and Alter, still in her cast and hospital robe, followed the Duchess out of the car.

'Well,' he said, 'you brought the kids too.'

'It was better than leaving them back in Toron. Jon, Geryn is dead. I asked what to do, but I didn't get any answer. So we lugged his body along just in case.'

'But what do we do now?'

From the railing Arkor laughed.

'It's not funny,' Jon said.

The Duchess looked overhead as another missile exploded. 'I had hoped this wouldn't happen. This means a war, Jon. A real one, and unstoppable.'

Another plane crashed, too close this time, and they ducked behind the cars. 'Gee,' breathed Alter, which was the only thing anybody said.

Then Arkor called, 'Come on.'

'Where to?' asked Jon.

'Follow me,' Arkor repeated. 'Everyone.'

'What about Geryn?'

'Leave that corpse behind,' Arkor told them. 'He can't help.'

'Look, do you know what's going on?' Jon demanded.

'More than Geryn ever did,' the giant returned. 'Now let's get going.' They sprinted out along the road, then ducked under the railing and made their way across the rocky waste.

'Where are we going?' Tel whispered.

Jon called back over his shoulder. 'That's a very good question.'

The plane got tipped, and for seven seconds, while the needles swung, Tomar didn't know where he was going, east or west, up or down. When the needles stopped, he saw that it hadn't been any of the first three. Suddenly the green detector light flashed in the half darkness of the cabin. The generator! The radiation generator was right below him. Then he was blinded by a white flare outside the windshield. Oh, Goddamn!

He felt the jerk and the air suddenly rushed in cold behind him. There was a hell of a lot of noise and the needle quietly swung ... He was going down!

Land lit up outside the front window; a small blockhouse set in the wrecked earth. There were three whirling antenna on the roof. That must be it! That must!

It happened in his arms and fingers, not in his head. Because suddenly he pushed the stick forward, and the plane, what was left of it, turned over and he was staring straight down, straight ahead, straight below him. And coming closer.

It must have been his arms, because his head was thinking wildly about a time when a girl with pearls in her black hair had asked him what he had wanted, and he had said, 'Nothing ... nothing ...' and realized he had been wrong because suddenly he wanted very much to...(The blockhouse came up and hit him)... Nothing.

Tel and the Duchess screamed. The rest just drew breath quickly and staggered back. 'He's in there,' Arkor said. 'That's where your *Lord of the Flames* is.'

The landscape glowed with the encroaching light of the plummeting torch. They saw the blockhouse now with its whirling antenna on the roof. Before the plane hit, a darkness opened in the side of the blockhouse and three figures emerged and sprinted among the rocks.

'The middle one,' said Arkor. 'That's him, face him, con-centrate on him ...'

'What do you—' Tel began.

'You ride along with me, kids,' Arkor said, only he didn't move. Two of the figures had fallen now, but the middle one was running towards them. The torch hit, and his shadow was suddenly flung across the broken earth to meet them ...

CHAPTER XI

THE green of beetles' wings ... the red of polished carbuncle ... a web of silver fire, and

through the drifting blue smoke Jon hurled across the sky.

Then blackness, intense and cold. The horizon was jagged, maybe ten feet away. He readied a metal claw out and crawled expertly (not clumsily. Expertly!) across a crevice, but slowly, very slowly. The sky was sharp with stars, though the sun was dim to his light sensitive mind. Like a sliding cyst, he edged over the chunk of rock that spun somewhere between Mars and Jupiter. Now he reached out with his mind to touch a second creature on another rock. *Petra*, he called. *Where is he?*

His orbit should take him between the three of us in a minute and a half.

Fine.

Jon, who is the third one? I still don't understand.

Another mind joined them. *You don't understand yet? I was the third, I always was. I was the one who directed Geryn to make the plan in the first place for the kidnapping. What made you think that he was in contact with the triple beings?*

I don't know, Jon said. *Some misunderstanding.*

There was the laughter of children. Then Tel said, *Hey, everybody, we're with Arkor.*

Shhh, said Alter. *The misunderstanding was my fault, Jon. I told you that Geryn talked to himself, and that made you think it was him.*

Get ready, Petra said. *Here he comes.*

Jon saw, or rather sensed the approach of another spinning asteroid, whirling towards them through the blackness. But it was inhabited. Yes! *The Lord of the Flames!* The three of them threw their thoughts across the rush of space.

There....

Roaring steam swirled above him. He raised his eye-stalks another twenty feet and looked towards the top of the cataract some four miles up. Then he lowered his syphon into the edge of the pool of pale methane and drank deeply. Far away in a beryl sky, three suns rushed madly about one another and gave a little heat to this farthest of their six planets.

Now Jon flapped his slitherers down and began to glide away from the methane-falls and up the nearly vertical mountain slope. Someone was coming towards him with shiny red eye-stalks waving in greeting. 'Greeting to the new colony,' the eye-stalks signalled.

Jon started to signal back. But suddenly he recognized (a feeling way at the back of his slitherers) who this was. *The Lord of the Flame—!* He leapt forward and flung the double flaps of leathery flesh across his opponent and began to scramble back up the rocks. Jon had him tight but was wondering where the hell were ...

Suddenly his eye-stalk caught the great form that he knew must be Arkor coming down over the rocks (with Alter and Tel. Yes, definitely: because the creature suddenly did a flying leap between two crags that could have only been under the girl-acrobat's control), and a moment later he saw Petra had arrived at the other shore of the methane river. Using her slitherers for paddles, she struck out across the foaming current.

Think at him, concentrate ... *There*—

The air was clear. The desert was still, and he lay in the warm sand, under the light of the crescent moon. He was growing, adding facets; he let the light seep into his transparent body, decreasing his polarization cross-frequencies. The light was beautiful, too beautiful—dangerous! He began to tingle, to glow red. His base burned with white heat and another layer of sand beneath him melted, fused, ran, and became part of his crystalline body.

He stepped up his polarization, his body clouded, and cooled once more. Music sang through him, and his huge upper facet reflected the stars.

Once more he lessened his polarization, and the light crept farther and farther into his being. His temperature rose. Vibrations suffused his transparency and the pulsing music made the three dust particles that had settled on his coaxial face, seven hundred and thirty years ago, dance. He felt their reflection deep in his prismatic centre.

Then it came. He tried to stop it. But the polarizaton index suddenly broke down completely. For one terrific moment of ecstasy the light of the moons and the stars poured completely through him. Chord after chord rang out in the desert night. Back and forth along his axis, colliding, shaking his substance, jarring him, pummelling him, came the vibrations. For one instant he was completely transparent. The next, he was white hot. Before he could melt, he felt the crack start.

It shot the length of his forty-two mile, super-heated body, He was in two pieces! The radio disturbances alone covered a third of a galaxy. Twelve pieces fell away. The chord crashed again, and the crack whipped back and forth, vivisectioning him. Already he was nearly thirty-six thousand individual crystals, all of which had to grow again, thirty-six thousand minds. He was no more.

Jon! the voice sang through crumbled silicate.

Right over here, Petra, he hummed back. (The note was a perfect quarter-tone below A-flat. Perfect! Not clumsy! Per-fect!)

Where's Arkor?

To their left the triple notes of an E flat minor chord (Arkor, Tel, and Alter) sounded: *Right here.*

Just as they had made contact, before the music stopped (and once more their thoughts would become separate, individual, and they would lose awareness of each other and of the hundreds of other crystals that lay over the desert, under the clear perpetual night)—just then a strident dissonance pierced among them.

There, sang Petra.

There, hummed Jon.

There, came the triad in E flat minor. *The Lord of the Flame.* They concentrated, tuned, their thoughts against the dissonance.

Jon rolled over and pushed the silk from his white shoulders and stretched. Through the blue pillars, the evening sky was yellow. Music, very light and fast, was coming from below the balcony. A voice sounded beside him: 'Your Majesty, Your Majesty! You shouldn't be resting now. They're waiting for you downstairs. Tltltrlte will be furious if you're late.'

'What do I care,' Jon responded. 'Where's my robe?' The serving maid hastened away and returned with a sheer, shimmering robe, netted through with threads of royal black. The drape covered Jon's shoulders, draped across his breasts, and fell to his thighs.

'My mirror,' said Jon.

The serving maid brought the mirror and Jon looked. Long sloped eyes sat wide spaced in the ivory face over high cheekbones. Full breasts pushed tautly beneath the translucent material, and the slender waist spread to sensual, generous hips. Jon almost whistled at his reflection.

The maid slipped on the tiny clear plastic slippers over his feet, and Jon rose and walked towards the stairs. In the lobby, the throng hissed appreciatively as he descended. On one column hung a bird-cage in which a three-headed cockatoo was singing to beat the band. Which was difficult to do: the band was fourteen copper headed drums. (Fourteen was the royal number.)

Across the lobby wind instruments wailed, and Jon paused on the stairs. 'Don't worry,' the maid said, 'I'm right behind you.'

Jon felt the terror rise. *Hey*, he called out mentally, *is that you, Petra?*

Like I said, right behind you.

Incidentally, how did I come up with this body?

I don't know, dear, but you look devastating.

Thanks, he said, projecting a mental sneer. *Where's Arkor and Company?*

The music had stopped. There was only the sound of the three-headed bird.

There they are.

The winds screeched again, and at the entrance to the lobby, the people fell away from the door. There was Tltltrlte. He was tall, and dark, in a cloak in which there were many more black threads than in Jon's. He unsheathed a sword, and began to come forward. 'Your reign is through, daughter of the Sun,' he announced. 'It is time for a new cycle.'

'Very well,' said Jon.

As Tltltrlte advanced, the throng that crowded the lobby clapped their hands in terror and moved back farther. Jon stood very straight.

As Tltltrlte came forward, his shoulders narrowed. He pushed back the hood of his cloak and a mass of ebony hair cascaded down his shoulders. With each step, his hips broadened and his waist narrowed. A very definite bulge of mammary glands pushed up beneath his black tunic. As Tltltrlte reached the bottom of the steps, she raised her sword.

Think at him, came Arkor from the bird-cage.

Think at him, came from Petra.

Jon saw the blade flash forward and then felt it slide into his abdomen. *At her*, he corrected.

At her, they answered.

As Jon toppled down the steps, dying, he asked, *What the hell is this anyway?*

We're inhabiting a very advanced species of moss, Arkor explained, with the calmness that only a telepath can muster in certain confusing situations. *Each individual starts off male but eventually changes to female at the desired time.*

Moss? asked Jon as he hit his head on the bottom step and died.

There....

The wave came again and thundered on the beach. He staggered backwards, just as the froth spumed up on the sand. The sky was blue-black. He raised his fingers to his lips (seven long tines webbed together) and whined into the night. He lifted his transparent eyelids from his huge, luminous eyes to see if there wasn't some faint trace of the boat. Spray fell on them, stung the rims, and he snapped all three lids over them, one after another. He whined again, and once more the wave, grew before him.

He opened the two opaque lids, and this time thought he saw them far off through the spray. The pentagonal sail billowed, blue, wet, and full. It dipped, rose. He pulled back his transparent eyelid again, this time when the wave was down, and thought he saw figures on the fibrous hammock of the boat. On the blue sail was the white circle of a Master Fisherman. His parent was a Master Fisherman. Yes, it was his parent coming to get him.

Another billow exploded and he crouched in the froth, digging his hind feet deep into the pebbly beach.

The cross-hatch of planking scudded on to the shore, and they swarmed off. One wore a chain around his neck with the Master Fisherman's seal. Another carried a seven-pronged fork. The two others were just boat-hands and wore identifying black belts of kelpod shells.

'My offspring,' said the one with the seal. 'My fins have smarted for you. I thought we would never swim together again.' He reached down and lifted Jon into his arms. Jon put his head against his parent's chest and watched water beading down the pentagonal scales.

'I was frightened,' Jon said.

His parent laughed. 'I was frightened too. Why did you swim out so far?'

'I wanted to see the island. But when I was swimming, I saw...'

'What?'

Jon closed his eyelids.

His parent smiled again. 'You're sleepy. Come.' Now Jon felt himself carried to the water

and into the waves. The spray fell warm on his face now. Unafraid, he relaxed his gill slits while water fell across him. They climbed on to the boat.

Wind caught the sail, and the open-work planking listed into the sea. Long clouds swung rapidly across the twin moons like the tines of the fishing forks with which the fishermen saluted the sacred phosphors when they returned from their hunting. He dreamed of this, a little, in the swell and drop. His parents had tied him to the boat, and so he floated at the end of a few feet of slack. Water rolled down his shoulders, slipped beneath his limp dorsal fin, and tickled. Then he dreamed of something else, the thing he had seen, glowing first beneath the water, then rising.... He whined, suddenly, and shook his head.

He heard the others on the boat, their webbed feet slipping on the wet planks. He opened his eyes and looked up. The two boat-hands were holding on to stays and pointing off into the water. Now his parents had come up to them, holding a fishing spear, and they were joined by the Second Fisherman.

Jon scrambled from the water on to the plank. His parent put an arm around him and drew him closer. (*Here he comes*, Arkor said.) His other hand went to the seal of authority around his neck, as though it gave him some sort of protection.

'There it is,' Jon cried. 'That's what I saw! That's why I was afraid to swim back.' (*There it is*, Jon said.)

A phosphorescent disc was shimmering under the surface of the water. The Second Fisherman raised his spear higher. 'What is it?' he asked. (*What is it this time?* Petra wanted to know.)

Indistinct, yet nearly the size of the ship, it hovered almost three breast strokes from them, glowing beneath the surface.

(*I'll have a look*, said Petra.) The Second Fisherman suddenly dived forward and disappeared. Still holding to the frame of the boat, Jon and his parent went under the water where they could see better.

One of Jon's eyelids, the transparent one, was actually an envelope of tissue which he could flood with vitreous solution when he was submerged to form a correcting lens over his pupil.

Through the water he saw the Second Fisherman bubbling towards the immense, translucent half sphere that dangled ahead of them. The Second Fisherman stopped with an underwater double-reverse and hovered near the thing. (It's a *great jelly-fish*, Petra told them.) 'Can't figure out what it is,' the Second Fisherman signalled back. Then he extended his fork and jabbed at the membrane. The seven tines went in, came out.

The jelly-fish moved, fast.

The tentacles hanging from the bottom of the bag ravelled upward like threads. The body bloated and surged sideways. Two tentacles wrapped around the Second Fisherman as he tried to swim away. (*Ow!* said Petra. *These things hurt!*)

Jon's parent was on deck, shouting orders to the boat-hands. The ship swung towards the thing which had now surfaced.

(*Look, let's finish this thing up for good. Concentrate. That was Arkor. There...*)

(From beneath the water they felt Petra reach her mind into the pulsing mass: *There...*)

(As the tentacles encased her and she jammed the spear home again and again through the leaking membrane, she felt Jon's mind join in: *There...*)

The boat rammed into the side of the jelly-fish, the planks tearing away the membrane and the thick, stinging insides fountaining over them. Now it nearly turned over, and tentacles flapped from the water in wet, fleshy ropes. The Fisherman was caught in one of the snarls.

Their green faces were lighted from beneath by the milky glow.

Suddenly it tore away from the planks, going down beneath the water. The Second Fisherman's head bobbed to the surface, shook the green fin that crested his skull and laughed.

3 to 6, 3 to 6, (Jon's frequency oscillated from 3 to 6 as he drifted through clouds of super-heated gas) 3 to 6, 3 to 6.

7 to 10! (Someone was coming:) 7 to 10, 7 to 10, (It was getting closer: suddenly:) 10 to 16! (Then:) 3 to 6, 7 to 10, 3 to 6, 7 to 10, (they had passed through each other. *Hi*, Petra said. *Have you any idea where we are?*).

(The temperature is somewhere near three quarters of a million degrees. Any idea?)

9 to 27, 9 to 27, 9 to 27 (came pattering along and passed through both Jon and Petra:) 12 to 35, 10 to 37, (and then, again) 3 to 6, 7 to 10, 9 to 27, 9 to 27, 9 to 27, (*We are halfway between the surface and the centre of star not unlike our sun*, said Arkor. *Note all the strange elements around*) 9 to 27, 9 to 27, 9 to 27.

7 to 10, 7 to 10, 7 to 10 (*They keep on turning into one another*, Petra said) 7 to 10, 7 to 10, 7 to 10.

3 to 6, 3 to 6, 3 to 6, (*At this temperature you would too if you were atomic*, Jon told her) 3 to 6, 3 to 6, 3 to 6.

9 to 27, 9 to 27, 9 to 27 (*Where's The Lord of the Flame?* Arkor wanted to know)

đto e, đto 2e, 2đto 4e, 4đto 8e, 8đto 16e, 16đto 32e

(Speak of the ... Jon started. *Hey, we've got to do something about that. Not only is it transcendental, it's increasing so fast he'll eventually shake this star apart)* 3 to 6, 3 to 6, 3 to 6.

(So thats what causes novas, said Petra) 7 to 10, 7 to 10, 7 to 10.

(At the next oscillation, Arkor, acting as a side-coefficient, passed through the intruder) 36đ to 64e (Arkor got out before the second extremity was reached. The wave cycle shuttered, having been reversed end on end). 642đ to 32e (It tried to right itself and couldn't because Jon spun through the lower end divisibly) 642đ to 16/9e (then Arkor jumped in, tail first it recovered and it resolved into:) 642đ to 4/3e, 642đ to 4/3e, 642đ to 4/3e (it quivered, its range no longer geometric).

(Watch this, said Petra. *About face ...* She gave it a sort of nudge, so that when it whirled to catch her she was gone, and it was going the other way:)

$4/3\delta$ to $640e$, $4/3\delta$ to $642e$, $4/3\delta$ to $642e$.

(I hope no one ever does that to me, said Petra. Look, the poor thing is contracting.)

$4/3\delta$ to $640e$, $4/3\delta$ to 622 , $4/3\delta$ to 560 , $4/3\delta$ to 499 .

(Somehow the e component slipped through 125. Jon moved in like a shower of anti-theta-masons and extracted a painless cube root so fast that the intruder oscillated on it three times before it knew what had happened:)

$4/3\delta$ to 5^3e , $4/3\delta$ to 5^3e , $4/3\delta$ to 5^3e (Under high gravity—two to three million times that of earth, such as inside a star—in such warped space there is a subtle difference between 5^3 and 125, though they represent the same number. It's like the notes E sharp and F, which are technically the same, but are distinguished when played by a violinist with a fine ear. When the root came loose, therefore, the variation threw the wavelength all off balance:) $4/3\delta$ to $5e$, $4/3\delta$ to $5e$, $4/3\delta$ to $5e$...

(All right, everybody, concentrate—)

For one moment, the intruding oscillation turned, ducked, tried to escape, and couldn't. It contracted into a small ball with a volume of $4/3\delta e^3$, and disappeared.

(There....)

Jon Koshar shook his head, staggered forward, and went down on his knees in white sand. He blinked. He looked up. There were two shadows in front of him. Then he saw the city.

It was Telphar, stuck on a desert, under a double sun.

As he stood up, something caught in the corner of his eye.

His eyes moved, and he saw a woman about twenty feet away. Her red hair fell straight to her shoulders in the ozone heavy heat. He blinked as she approached. She wore a straight skirt and had a notebook under her arm. 'Petra?' he said, frowning. It was Petra, but Petra transformed.

'Jon,' she answered, 'What happened to you?'

He looked down at himself. He was wearing a dirty uniform. A prison uniform. His prison uniform!

'Arkor,' said Petra, suddenly. (Her voice was higher, less sure.)

They turned. Arkor stood in the sand, his bare feet wide over the white hillocks. The triple scars down his face welled bright blood in the hot light.

They came together now. 'What's going on?' Jon asked.

Arkor shrugged.

'What about the kids?' asked Petra.

'They're still right here,' Arkor said, pointing to his head and grinning. Then his finger touched the opened scars. When he drew it away, he saw the blood and frowned. Then he looked at the City. The sun caught on the towers and slipped like liquid along the looping

highways. 'Hey,' Jon said to Petra. (Now he realized; it was Petra with fifteen years lopped off.) 'What's the notebook?'

She looked down at it, surprised to find it in her hands. Then she looked at her dress. Suddenly she laughed, and began to flip through the pages of the notebook. 'This is the book in which I finished my article on shelter architecture among the forest people. In fact this is what I was wearing the day I finished my article.'

'And you?' Jon asked Arkor.

Arkor looked at the blood on his fingers. 'My ... mark is bleeding, like the night the priest put it there.' He paused. 'That was the night that I really became myself. That was the time that I realized how the world was, the confusion, the stupidity, the fear. It was the night I decided to leave the forest.' Now he looked up at Jon. 'That was the uniform you were wearing when you escaped from prison.'

'Yes,' said Jon. 'I guess it was what I was wearing when I became me, too. That was the time when freedom seemed most bright.' He paused. 'I was going to find it no matter what. Only I felt I'd got sidetracked. I wonder whether I have.'

'Have you?' asked Petra. She glanced at the city. 'I guess when I finished that essay, that's when I really became myself, too. I remember I went through a whole series of revelations about myself, about society, and about how I felt about society, about being an aristocrat, even, what it meant and what it *didn't* mean. And I suppose that's why I'm here now.' She looked at the City again. 'There he is,' she nodded. '*The Lord of the Flames*'

That's right,' said Jon.

They started down the sand. They reached the lake quicker than they thought, for the horizon was very close. The double shadows, one a bit lighter than the other, lay like two inked brush strokes over the page of the desert. 'But how come we're in our own bodies?' the Duchess asked, as they reached the shadow of the first building. 'Shouldn't we be inhabiting the forms of ...' Suddenly there was a sound, the shadow moved. Jon looked up at the ribbon above them and cried out.

As the metal tore away, they jumped back, and a moment later a length of curtain-wall splashed into the sand where they had stood. They were still for a handful of breathes.

'You're damn right he's there,' Jon said. 'Come on.'

They started again. Petra shook white grains from her notebook cover and they walked. A road seeped from under the desert, now, and began to rise towards Telphar. They mounted it and followed it towards the looming city. Before them the towers were dark streaks on the rich blue sky.

'You know, Petra's question is a good one,' Arkor said a few minutes later.

'Yeah,' said Jon. 'I've been thinking about it too. We seem to be in our own bodies, only they're different. Different as our bodies were at the most important moments of our lives. Maybe, somehow, we've come to a planet in some corner of the universe, where three beings almost identical to us, only different in that way, are doing, for some reason we'll never know, almost exactly what we're doing now.'

'It's possible,' Arkor said. 'With all the myriad possibilities of worlds, it's conceivable that one might be like that, or like this.'

'Even to the point of talking about talking about it?' asked Petra. She answered herself. 'Yes, I guess it could. But saying all this for reasons we don't understand, and saying, "Saying all this for reasons we don't understand ..."' She shuddered. 'It's not supposed to be that way. It gives me the creeps.'

There was another sound, and they froze. It was the low, sound of some structure tumbling, but they could see nothing.

Another fifty feet, when the road had risen ten feet off the ground and the first tower was beside them, they heard a cracking noise again. The road swayed beneath them. 'Watch!' Arkor cried.

Then the road fell. They screamed out, they scrambled; there was cracked concrete around them. They had fallen. Above them was a jagged width of blue sky between the remaining edges of the road.

'My foot's caught!' Petra cried.

Arkor was beside her, tugging on the concrete slab that held her.

'Hold on a second,' Jon said. He grabbed a free metal strut that still vibrated in the rubble, and jammed it between the slab and the beam it lay on. Using the wreck of an I-beam for a fulcrum, he pried it up. 'There, slip your foot out.'

Petra rolled away. 'Is the bone broken?' he asked. 'I got a friend of mine out of a mine accident that way, once.' He let the slab fall again. (And for a moment he stopped, thinking, I knew what to do. I wasn't clumsy, I knew—)

Petra rubbed her ankle. 'No,' she said. 'I just got my ankle wedged in that crevice, and the concrete fell on top.' She stood, now, picking up the notebook. 'Ow,' she cried. 'That hurts.'

Arkor held her arm. 'Can you walk?'

'With difficulty,' Petra said, taking another step and clamping her teeth.

'Alter says to stand on your other foot and shake your injured one around to get the circulation back,' Arkor told her.

Petra gritted teeth, shook, and stepped again. 'A little better,' she said. 'I'm scared. This really hurts. This may be a body that looks like mine, but it hurts, and it hurts like mine.' Suddenly she looked off into the city. 'Oh, hell,' she said. 'He's in there. Let's go.'

They went forward again, this time under the road. The sidewalks, deserted and greying, slipped past. They passed a shopping section; teeth of broken glass gaped in the frames of store windows. Above, two roads veered and crossed, making a black, extended swastika on white clouds.

Then a sudden rumbling.

Silence.

They stopped.

Now a crash, thunderous and protracted. An odour of dust reached them. 'He's there,' Arkor said.

'Yes,' said Jon.

'I can...'

Then the city exploded. There was one instant of real agony for Jon as the pavement beneath his feet shot up at him, and he reached his mind out as a shard of concrete knocked in his face (all the time crying, No, no, I've just become Jon Koshar, I'm not supposed to ... as a lost prince had cried out a universe away) and at the same time, *There....*

Petra got a chance to see the face of the building beside them rip before the air blast tore the notebook from her hands, and at the same time she welled her thoughts from behind the bone confines of her skull. *There....*

And Arkor's thoughts (he never saw the explosion because he blinked just then) tore out through his eyelids as fragmented steel tore into them. *There....*

It was cold, it was black. For a moment they saw with a spectrum that reached from the star-wide waves of novas to the micro-micron skittering of neutrinos. And it was black, and total cold. A rarefied breeze of ionized hydrogen (approximately two particles per cubic kilometre) floated over half a light year. Once, a herd of pale photons dashed through them from a deflected glare from some dying sun a trillion aeons past. Then silence, save for the hum of one lone galaxy, turning eternities away. They hovered, frozen, staring into nothing, above, below, behind, contemplating what they had seen.

Then, the green of beetles' wings, and they flailed into the flood of sensation from the blackness, whirled into red flame the colour of polished carbuncle, smoothly through the nerves and into the brain; then, before the blue smoke, burning through the lightning-seared axion of their corporate organisms, they were snared within the heat and electric imminency of a web of silver fire.

CHAPTER XII

IN the laboratory tower of Toron, the crystal above the receiving stage brightened. Shimmering on the platform, the figures solidified. Then Tel slipped beneath the rail on the stage and dropped to the floor (Alter still wore the hospital robe and the cast) while Alter, Arkor, Jon, and Petra used the metal stairway to descend. A battery of relays snapped somewhere and the scarlet heads of forty-nine switches by the window snapped to off. The globe faded.

'A bit more explanation,' Petra was saying. 'Hey kids, keep quiet.'

'Well, as far as *The Lord of the Flames* goes, on earth anyway, it's more or less trivial and irrelevant,' said Arkor. 'You're still right. This war is in Toromon.'

'My curiosity is still going,' Jon said. 'Give.'

'I gathered while I scanned the minds of those two who came out of the generator building with *The Lord of the Flames* (I should say the host of *The Lord of the Flames*), they were forest people. *The Lord of the Flames* got into one of them just about when he was at age four. Then he gave the boy about six hundred years worth of technical information. So he began building all sorts of goodies, forcing others to help him, using some equipment from Telphar. That's how the generators and the anti-aircraft guns got constructed.'

'Our war is still going on,' Jon said.

'Well, *The Lord of the Flames* is no longer with us,' said Petra. 'We've chased it to the other end of the universe. Now that we've removed what external reason there was for the war, we've got to think about the internal ones.'

'What are you going to do immediately about the kids?' Jon asked.

'I think the best thing for them to do is to go off to my estate for a little while,' Petra said. 'We'll all go.'

'It's on an island, isn't it?' Tel asked.

'That's right,' Petra said.

'Alter, now I can teach you how to fish, and we'll be right by the sea.'

'What about Uske?' Arkor asked. 'You can either walk into his room and interrupt an obscene dream he's having, and present your case and be arrested for treason, or you can leave well enough alone at this point and wait till the opportunity comes to do something constructive.'

Suddenly Jon grinned. 'Hey, you say he's asleep?' He turned and bounded for the door.

'What are you going to do?' Petra called.

Jon looked at Arkor. 'Read my mind,' he said.

Then Arkor laughed.

In his bedroom, Uske rolled over through a silken rustle, opened one eye, and thought he heard a sound.

'Hey, stupid,' someone whispered.

Uske reached out of bed and pressed the night light. A dim orange glow did not quite fill half the room.

'Now don't get panicky,' continued the voice. 'You're dreaming.'

'Huh?' Uske leaned on one elbow, blinked, and scratched his head.

A shadow approached him, then stopped, naked, faceless, transparent, half in and half out of the light. 'See,' came the voice. 'A figment of your imagination.'

'Oh, I remember you,' Uske said.

'Fine,' said the shadow. 'Do you know what I've been doing since the last time you saw me?'

'I couldn't be less interested,' Uske said, turning over and looking the odier way.

'I've been trying to stop the war. Do you believe me?'

'Look, figment, it's three o'clock in the morning. I'll believe it, but what's it to you?'

'I think I've succeeded.'

'I'll give you two minutes before I pinch myself and wake up.' Uske rolled back over.

'Look, what do you think is behind the radiation barrier?'

'I think very little about it, figgy. It doesn't have very much to do with me.'

'It's something that can't possibly harm us, especially now that its ... its generators have been knocked out. All of its artillery it got from a source that is now defunct. Look, Uske, I'm your guilty conscience. Wouldn't it be fun to really be king for a while and stop the war. You declared war. Now declare peace. Then start examining the country and doing something about it.'

'Mother would never hear of it. Neither would Chargill. Besides, all this information is only a dream.'

'Exactly, Uske. You're dreaming about what you really want. How does this sound: make a deal with me as your guilty conscience and representative of yourself; if this dream turns out to be correct, then you declare peace. It's the only logical thing. Come on, stand up for yourself, be a king. You'll go down in history as having started a war. Wouldn't you like to go down as having stopped it too?'

'You don't understand...'

'Yes, I know. A war is a bigger thing than the desires of one man, even if he is a king. But if you get things started on the right foot, you'll have history on your side.'

'Your two minutes have been cut down to one; and it's up.'

'I'm going; I'm going. But think about it, Uske.'

Uske switched off the light and the ghost went out. A few minutes later Jon crawled through the laboratory towel window, buttoning his shirt. Arkor shook his head, smiling. Well,' he said. 'Good try. I hope it does some good.'

In the morning, Rara got up early to sweep off the front steps of the inn (windows boarded, kitchen raided, but deserted now save her; and she had the key): she swept to the left, looked right, then swept to the right, looked left, and said, 'Dear Lord, you can't stay there like that. Come on now. Get on, be on your way.'

'... Oh, I'm sorry.'

'For pity's sake, woman, you can't go around cluttering up the steps of an honest woman's boarding house. We're re-opening this week, soon as we get the broken windows repaired. Vandals didn't leave a one, after the old owner died. Just got my licence, so it's all legal. Soon as we get the windows, so you move on.'

'I just got here, this morning.... They didn't tell us where to go, they just turned us off the ship. And it was so dark, and I was tired.... I didn't know me city was so big. I'm looking for my son.... We used to be fishermen back on the mainland. I did a little weaving....'

'And your son ran off to the city and you ran off after him. Good luck in the New Land; Welcome to the Island of Opportunity. But get up and move on.'

'But my son—'

'There are more fishermen's sons down here in the Devil's Pot than you can shake a stick at, fishermen's sons, farmers' sons, blacksmiths' sons, sons' sons. And all of their mothers were weavers or water carriers, or raised chickens. I must have talked to all of them at one time or another. I won't even tell you to go down to the launch where they take the workers out to the aquariums and the hydroponics gardens. That's what most of the young people do when they get here ... if they can get a job. I won't even tell you to go there, because there are so many people that work there, you might miss him a dozen days running.'

'But the war ... I thought he might have joined...'

'Somewhere in the ridiculous mess,' interrupted Rara, her birthmark darkened, 'I have misplaced a niece who was as close to me as any daughter ever was to any mother. All reports say that she's dead. So you just be happy that you don't know about yours. You be very happy, do you hear me!'

The woman stood now. 'You say the launches to the factory? Which way are they?'

'I'm telling you, don't bother to go. That way, down two streets, and left until you hit the docks. Don't go.'

'Thank you,' the woman was saying, already off down the street. 'Thank you.' As she reached the middle of the block, Tel rounded the corner a moment later, sprinting. He brushed past the woman and ran towards the door of the inn.

'Tel,' whispered Rara. 'Tel!'

'Hi, Rara.' He stopped, panting.

'Come in,' she said. 'Come inside.' They stepped into the lobby of the inn. 'Tel, do you know anything about what happened to Alter? I got a weird story from General Medical. And then you disappeared. My lord, I feel like a crazy fool opening this place. But if somehow she wanted to get to me, where would she go if I wasn't here ... And then, what am I to do anyway? I mean I have to eat, and...'

'Rara,' he said, and he said it so that she stopped talking.

'Look, I know where Alter is. She's safe. But as far as you know, you don't know where she is, if she's alive or dead. But you suspect she isn't alive. Understand? I'll be going to her, but you don't know that either. I just came to check on some things.'

'I've got all her things together right here. They gave me her clothes at the hospital, and put them all into a bundle in case we had to make a quick getaway. We had to do that once when we were working in a carnival where the manager suddenly took a liking to her and made himself a pest. She was twelve. He was a beast. Maybe you should take—'

'The fewer things I take the better,' Tel said. Then he saw the bundle on the table by the door. On top was a leather thong to which some shells still clung. 'Maybe this,' he said, picking it up. 'What shape is Geryn's room in?'

'The place has been ransacked since they took him away,' she said. 'Every mali and his brother has been, picking at the place. What about Geryn, how is he...?'

'Dead,' Tel said. 'What I really came about was to burn his plans for the kidnapping.'

'Dead?' Rara asked. 'Well, I'm not surprised. Oh, the plans! Why I burned those myself

the minute I got back into his room. They were all over the table; why they didn't take them all up right then, I'll never...'

'Did you burn every last scrap?'

'... And crumbled the ashes, and disposed of them one handful at a time over a period of three days by the docks. Every last scrap.'

'Then I guess there's nothing for me to do,' he said. 'You may not see me or Alter for a long time. I'll give her your love.'

Rara bent down and kissed him on the cheek. 'For Alter,' she said. Suddenly she asked, 'Tel?'

'What?'

'That woman you brushed by in the street when I saw you running up the block...'

'Yes?'

'Did you ever see her before?'

'I didn't look at her very carefully. I'm not sure. Why?'

'Never mind,' Rara said. 'You just get on out of here before ... Well, just get.'

'So long, Rara.' He got.

Not so high as the towers of the Royal Palace of Toron, the green tile balcony outside Clea's window caught the breeze like the hem of an emerald woman passing the sea. There was water beyond the other houses, deeper blue than the sky, and still. She leaned over the balcony railing. On the white marble table were her notebook, a book on matter transmission, and her slide rule.

'Clea.'

She whirled at the voice, her black hair leaping across her shoulder in the low sun.

'Thanks for getting my messages through.'

This is you,' she said slowly. 'In person now.'

'Un-huh.'

'I'm not quite sure what to say,' she said, blinking. 'Except I'm glad.'

'I've got some bad news,' he said.

'How do you mean?'

'Very bad news. It'll hurt you.'

She looked puzzled, her head going to the side.

'Tomar's dead.'

The head straightened, the black eyebrows pulled together, and her lower lip tautened across her teeth until her jaw muscles shook. She nodded once, quickly, and said, 'Yes.'

Then, as quickly, she looked down and up at him. Her eyes were closed. 'That... that hurts so much.'

He waited a few moments, and then said, 'Here, let me show you something.'

'What?'

'Come over to the table. Here.' He pushed aside a folded paper bearing a strange picture on the front. The paper flapped open; he hardly noticed the poem printed there. All he saw was that his sister had used the margin to make mathematical notes. He moved her books and slide rule on top of the paper, and took a handful of coins from his pocket. He arranged fifteen copper centi-units in a square, four by four, with one corner missing. Now he took a smaller coin and put it on the table about a foot away from the missing corner. 'Shoot it into the gap there,' he said.

She put her forefinger on the silver disc, was still, then snapped her finger. The silver circle shot across the marble, hit the corner, and two pieces of copper bounced from the far side of the square. She looked at him, questioningly.

'It's a gambling game, called Randomax. It's getting sort of popular in the army.'

'*Random* for random numbers, *max* for matrix?'

'You've heard of it?'

'Just guessing.'

'Tomar wanted you to know about it. He said you might be interested in some of its aspects.'

Tomar?'

'Just like I monitored your phone calls, I overheard him talking to another soldier about it before he—before the crash. He just thought you'd be interested.'

'Oh,' she said. She moved the silver circle away from the others, put the displaced copper coins back in the square again, and flipped the smaller coin once more. Two different coins jumped away. 'Damn,' Clea said, softly.

'Huh?' He looked up. Tears were running down her face.

'Damn,' she said. 'It hurts.' She blinked and looked up again. 'What about you? You still haven't told me all that's happened to you. Wait a moment.' She reached for her note-book, took a pencil up, and made a note.

'An idea?' he asked.

'From the game,' she told him. 'Something I hadn't thought of before.'

He smiled. 'Does that solve all your problems on ... what were they, sub-trigonometric functions?'

'Inverse sub-trigonometric functions,' she said. 'No. It doesn't go that simply. Did you stop your war?'

'I tried,' he said. 'It doesn't go that simply.'

'Are you free?'

'Yes.'

I'm glad. How did it come about?'

'I used to be a very hard-headed, head-strong, sort of clumsy kid, who was always doing things to get me into more trouble than it would get the people I did it to. That was about my only criterion for doing anything. Unfortunately I didn't do it very well. So now, still head-strong, I've at least picked up a little skill. I've had to do some things whose main point wasn't whether it hurt me or not. They just had to be done. I had to go a long way, see a lot of things, and I guess it sort of widened my vision, and gave me some room to move around—some more freedom.'

'Childhood and a prison mine doesn't give you very much, does it.'

'No.'

'What about the war, Jon?'

'Let's put it this way. As far as what's at the radiation barrier, which is pretty much out of commission now, there's no need for a war. None. If that gets seen and understood by the people who have to see and understand it, fine. If not, well, then it isn't that simple. Look, Clea, I just came by for a few minutes. I want to get out of the house before Dad sees me. Keep on talking to him. I'll be disappearing for a while, so you'll have to do it. Just don't bother to tell him I'm alive.'

'Jon...'

He smiled. 'I mean I want to do it myself when I come back.'

She looked down a moment, and when she looked up he was going back into the house. She started to say good-bye, but bit back the words.

Instead, she sat down at the table; she re-read Vol Nonik's poem; she opened the notebook; she cried a little bit. Then she started writing again.

THE END