

Jack L. Chalker - WARRIORS OF THE STORM

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For Edward Elmer Smith, Ph.D.,
who first took as Out There...
Thanks, Doc!

PROLOGUE: THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

GENERAL WHARFEN HAD JUST COMPLETED HIS MORNING PRAYERS and was in his prebreakfast meditative state when an aide presumptuously entered the room, stood, and bowed slightly at attention.

The general sat there in the lotus position, then suddenly raised his head, and

those large, black eyes opened in slow and dramatic fashion. The aide was quaking with fear and exuding respect and apology, but he stood his ground. The general did not immediately speak; he thought first, which was why he was the general. Clearly the aide knew what intruding would mean, and he was extremely uncomfortable in doing so. Therefore, he was here because something terrified him more than the general's wrath. The general was the highest ranking

officer in the entire System Peacekeeping Forces, Chief of Staff and above even

the fleet admirals. So, the general did not ask why he had been disturbed.

"Who?" he asked softly.

"A thousand pardons, sir. I would not—"

"Enough! Snivel later on your own time if you have any left! Answer my question!"

"A Val, sir. With the highest possible code."

The general sighed, untangled himself, and slowly rose. "Very well. Ten minutes

in my office. I assume I am allowed time to properly dress."

"Y-yes, sir. I will inform it. Permission to leave, sir!"

"Go." He got up and was at his dresser before the aide had managed to back out and close the door. The general was entitled to a valet, but he never used one within his personal quarters. Clean, press, and prepare, fine—but there was a certain level of privacy he would not surrender.

The general was a perfect specimen of humanity. He was, in fact, more than human, and he knew it. He, and all the forces under his command, had been genetically engineered and bred to be superior. Even the lowliest soldier, male

or female, was a fighting machine who could not only accomplish great physical feats but was also of the highest intellect. They were born, bred, raised, and trained to be soldiers, absolutely dedicated, absolutely committed, and absolutely obedient—even he.

But, the fact was, he still didn't like the damned machines and Vals in particular. They were, for all their massive design and inhuman appearance, far

too human inside, and yet they were faster, stronger and possibly smarter than any human could ever be, which was why he disliked them. When one is as perfect

as humanity could be, one does not like to look at someone, or something, that is even slightly better.

Still, absolutely none of the Forces would think of disobeying a Val with the proper codes and clearances, nor any command from Master System. Such a thing would be tantamount to a Fall from Grace. Not that he or anyone considered the machines, even Master System, to be gods; they were just machines, created by ancient human beings.

Humanity's ancestors, back on Earth, had reached a point in their development where they could destroy all life, and the great minds who helped maintain their

destructive system went to work building the greatest defense computer in human

history, a self-aware and self-evaluative creation. With the knowledge that no one else was aware of their actions, they dared to program their creation to work out ways, any ways, by which the destruction of humanity could be prevented—and then to insure that humanity could never destroy itself again.

And

when that time came, and the computer seized control of all the Earth's weapons

systems and neutralized them, it took command. To save themselves, the political

and military leaders obeyed it and carried out its orders. To fail to do so meant political death, at the very least, and replacement by more tractable leaders.

Inside the vast data bases of what was known only as Master System were vast knowledge and incredible new discoveries. Humanity already had some interplanetary capability; to that Master System added the impossible—interstellar travel by "punching" a hole through space-time, pushing

a ship across countless light-years under natural laws far different from those

in our universe, then "punching" back through again. The computer flew the ships; the computer alone knew the charts and objectives.

In order to fulfill its primary program and still retain absolute control, Master System constructed great ships to take billions of humans to the stars, to worlds that had been partially or fully terraformed. The heart of the interstellar ships was a device known as a transmuter, the result of a failed theoretical attempt to design a matter transmitter. Tremendous energy was required to punch through space-time, and using huge ramjets, the transmuter could convert thousands of tons of rock from the solar systems they visited to energy and store it in adequate quantity. The trans-muter however, could not use

this fuel itself. The only fuel a transmuter could use was a complex compound based upon an ore that formed only under certain geophysical conditions in certain solar systems—the ore murylium.

Master System charted the universe and discovered sufficient quantities of murylium for its needs. It built automated mines and factories out in space, supplied by a network of automated interstellar freighters. With bigger and more

efficient transmuters Master System partially terraformed all the worlds it needed, then matched a large group of Earth-humans with each world, and transmuted them to those forms that could survive there. It established four hundred and fifty-one "colony" worlds and in the moving process created four hundred and fifty-one new forms of humanity. Those millions left on Earth were relegated to museumlike reservations and held at a cultural and technological level approximating the year 1700. Certain individuals from each culture—the best, the brightest, the most ambitious and innovative—were given access to Master System's technology. Working from hidden communities called Centers, they

were expected to maintain the cultural level of the masses as it was, ignorant of the existence of a Center, or Master System. Only a few who lived in the old

ways knew the secret; these served as field agents for the Centers' administrators. The colonial worlds were also organized in this fashion, as were

even the few alien worlds under Master System's control. The system worked, but

it had an uncontrollable side effect. In pooling all the brightest and most ambitious and skillful in small Centers with access to technology, it was inevitable that they would also find ways to beat the system. Master System allowed the Center personnel to think they were putting one over on the system they still faithfully served but to keep them honest and in touch with their cultures, all personnel were required to return to their native cultures and live the primitive life for a period of at least three months each year.

Master System had reduced, changed, and reseeded the human race in just under two centuries, and during that period a very few clever humans somehow managed to take control of some automated interstellar spaceships and fly them into noncolonial regions. Their descendants, the freebooters, provided the only means

of contact between colonial Centers of different worlds and exchanged murylium and other exotic materials for access to data and technology that was beyond their means. The freebooters were useful at times, so Master System made a covenant with them, promising to let them be if they, on occasion, would aid Master System with information on illicit human activities of its far-flung centers. In effect, the freebooters became the four hundred and fifty-second colony without realizing it.

But Master System did not trust the stability of its creation, and so it constructed the Vals: massive humanoid robots with incredible mental powers and

all the built-in tools and weapons needed to enforce Master System's rule. There

were, however, very few Vals, and they were generally person or mission specific; when their task was completed, they were erased and reprogrammed. The supplementary force was the SPF: the System Peacekeeping Forces, human beings born and bred to be fanatically devoted soldiers and police—roughly a thousand troops for each race Master System ruled. All forces were under the command of the Supreme Chiefs of Staff, which now was headed by General Wharfen

and which outranked any other Center. The SPF had been used many times in local

situations, but never on a massive scale—until now.

* * *

Vals could sit but they almost never did. They were more than two meters tall, made of glistening black alloy in vaguely human form, but thick and broad in all

departments. Except for their blazing crimson eyes, they were featureless, all their sensitive equipment armored and protected, but they moved with the ease and fluidity of a human, and they spoke in very human tongues.

The general did not salute or otherwise show deference to the Val; he knew such

gestures meant nothing to the great machine and he was prideful enough not to bow to anything not human-born. The Val was a messenger and a tool, nothing more.

"I first require knowledge about the campaign against the freebooters," the Val

five to win. If we fail, all humanity will suffer."
"If we fail," the general replied, "we probably deserve to."

1. THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

AFTER THEY HAD MADE THEIR DECISION, THE CHOWS had more than a month to think about it and agonize over it and have not only second, but third and fourth thoughts about doing it at all.

For the crew of the Thunder the time had not been wasted. Originally, the vast interior of the ship had been designed for two purposes: to transport large numbers of uprooted humans from old Earth in a sedated state, and to link them directly to the transmitters through which they could be changed into the form Master System had designed to tailor them to the planet. Most of that was gone now; the enormous interior was almost planetlike, with grass and artificial sunlight and trees and small personal buildings for the inhabitants. About eight

kilometers by two were available, but only a bit over four kilometers had been transformed into living space, first for the small Earth-human crew who'd stolen

her and then for the crew of the freebooter ships who had joined her. Aft was a

work area for the ship's maintenance robots to repair and build whatever was needed. Only the final row of transport tubes, set against the rear bulkhead, remained untouched.

While this work was in progress, the great computer pilot whom they called Star

Eagle worked with China Nightingale, the blind and eternally pregnant genius, and Doctor Issac Clayben, the greatest human expert on forbidden technology. With the files from the freebooter freighter Indrus, they pooled their intellects to learn all they could about the strange people who inhabited the world called Janipur.

The diverse Hindu culture from which the ancestors of that world had been plucked fascinated all of them. Its many and complex deities, its theories about

reincarnation and an expanding and collapsing universe, its art and music and literature were all new to the crew of the Thunder and quite wondrous.

There was also a dark side to it, in that it used its cosmology to impose a rigid class structure determined by birth. One began as some insignificant living thing and then grew over successive lives to become a more complex organism and ultimately human, with the power to reason and study and make conscious decisions. But even as a human one had to start at the bottom, the lowest of the low classes, and serve a life as both a male and a female in each

class, excelling and learning from that experience and thereby progressing to a

new life in the next highest class. The ultimate were the Brahman, the highest class of the society, beyond which there was a new state, perhaps a godlike one.

The idea of rebirth was appealing in a way, but most of them shared the view of

the cigar-smoking Crow security man, Raven. "If you don't remember who you were

then what's the difference between bein' really dead and bein' reincarnated? Me,

I think you get one go and that's it. Look at me. Smart-ass fat kid from a primitive village high in the mountains who became a warrior, then a Center security man, and now—well, whatever this is. Down there, if you're born a

comprehension for speed and complexity. It was creating comparative computer models of the reformed Sabira and then stimulating various areas of the brain and central nervous system, checking out everything to make absolutely certain that there was no mistake. The entire psychogenetic and psychochemical makeup had to be correct or the body might not work right or "fit" right. The skeletal mechanics and the kinesiology of the exercise were the easy parts. Personality and memory had to be absolutely retained while the new body had to operate seamlessly with the different brain information. Cell memory learned by the mere act of being born and growing up Janipurian had to be retained and integrated with memory and personality formed in a completely different environment. Immunities gained from mother's milk and from a lifetime on Janipur also had to be maintained. Most microorganisms on colonial worlds had evolved into different enough forms that Earth-humans could not catch the diseases, but these people would be Janipurians going into a Janipurian world. It would not do to effect a perfect transmutation and then have them sicken and die from the lack of immunity to some common virus.

"They should check with their doctors more down there," Star Eagle remarked almost off-handedly. "The male had some incipient signs of early arthritis and a weak pancreas; the female has other things wrong including some small viral tumors. One wonders what the state of medicine is even at the Center level. I will correct those problems and flush the veins and arteries as well. Standing by. I have a new checksum validated by models. The male is completed. Sabira is completed. The female is completed. Chow Dai integrated. Chow Mai integrated. Stand by at the tubes. Reconverting... Done."

A small crowd had gathered at the tubes with Hawks and Clayben. The tube mouths had gone opaque when the humans had been energized; now they flicked to clear again. Inside, now, were no longer any Earth-humans. The two on top looked the same, but the three below now contained Janipurians. For Chow Dai and the others it was almost as if nothing had taken place. She had crawled naked into the tube and lay flat, then watched as the machinery activated and the mouth clouded up. There was a slight disorientation as if the scene she was seeing had been suddenly altered, then strong hands reached in, grabbed her arms, and pulled her from the tube. The first thing that struck her was the noise. There were sounds all around her that she could not place; clicking and whirring and whooshing, and there were voices, too, far off but if she concentrated, she could almost make out what they were saying even over the din created by the crowd at the tube.

"Try to stand," Clayben said, his voice sounding oddly distorted but still clear and a bit too loud. "Just on your hands and knees for now. Give it a try." She managed, and it felt rather comfortable. Steady, anyway. She crawled completely out onto the catwalk and looked around. All the familiar faces were there, but they looked different somehow. There seemed less color, as if things were washed out, but those nearby—and even the catwalk itself—seemed far more detailed; by focusing she could count every thread in Hawks' pants or see the

their holding positions, met with frustration. Since they weren't much larger or heavier than Earth-humans, a couple of crewmembers of the Thunder's complement tried lifting them into sitting positions in chairs. The three found themselves unbalanced, though, and tended to flail at the air with forelegs or fall over and out.

The addition of Jeruwahl Peshwar and his wife Madowa changed things a bit, but it wasn't easy. The two native Janipurians firmly believed their provided cover story, however, so they were friendly and cooperative if a bit taken aback and both awed and a little afraid of the strange forms now around them. As with the best cover stories, it contained more fact than fiction.

They now believed that Master System was attempting to eliminate the Centers of Janipur and reduce the population to limited, animal-like savagery. It was not known if Master System actually had this in mind for worlds other than Earth, but it was convincing enough, particularly since the pair knew that forces from Master System itself now roamed somewhat lordly over their land and Centers. They were impressed with the honor of the mission, although not a little bit unhappy that they were the ones chosen to be uprooted and their lives disrupted.

This was ameliorated, somewhat, by the seriousness of the mission and most of all by the fact that three of the alien company should be willing to become like them. They were most touched, however, when shown evidence of their medical conditions and problems, particularly the dangerously malformed uterus, and the fact that these things had now been repaired.

"It is most confusing," Jeruwahl noted in his thick Janipurian accented English,

"but we will do our part in this. I feel like I now have a twin, and I cannot tell my wife from the two others if all stand still."

It was Madowa who partially solved the food problem by providing a list of ingredients that turned the stomachs of those who understood what they were. Once equivalents were found for those ingredients that were native to Janipur, she was able to prepare very elaborate dishes for them all that had only one thing in common: one did not feel one's mouth after starting the dishes, but one felt the stomach for quite a while. All Janipurian food, it seemed, consisted of either the basic bland grasses or elaborate dishes spiced so hot they were almost on fire. The dishes could be eaten by the Earth-humans and many of the colonials on board, but few tolerated more than a taste. Only Sabira and the crew of the Indrus seemed immune; the captain of the ship proclaimed it was the first decently spiced food he'd had in many months.

Madowa worked with Chow Dai and Chow Mai on body movements and uses; Jeruwahl worked with Sabira, although he was more than a bit disconcerted by how effeminate this new male was. Sabira, shortening her name to Sabir, had thought it best for cultural reasons not to tell him that she was originally female. There were tricks to making the body fulfill all its potential; subtle weight shifts, twists, and turns that someone born Janipurian took for granted but someone new to the body would never guess. It was startling and somewhat

normal type. The child is legally Madowa's, something you were supposedly told going in and agreed to. There's no legal challenge—your legal father's a judge, remember—because there was no coercion. You are a surrogate mother with no status beyond that. So you can't stay here, but you have no real home to go back to."

She was shocked and looked at Sabir. "He is just making that up to force us to go along. Isn't he?"

Sabir sighed. "No, I fear he tells the truth, but there are probably ways around it. There are ways around almost everything. Given what this man says is true, we still could give the Thunder's great computer and its staff an extra year to figure out and allow for the extra problem. If we go into this in extreme haste, we will all probably die."

Vulture sat back and looked at them. He'd figured on something like this, but he

wasn't terribly worried. Not yet. "Tell you what—just go back up to the museum in the next day or two and look it over again, this time from the point of view

of the theft. I want to know if it can be done, and if so, how it can be done, and what would be required. This costs you nothing. Will you do that much for me?"

"We cannot refuse that much," Chow Dai-Madowa responded. "Give us three days from now to look it over and think it out, and give us some cover so we may discuss it without being overheard or recorded."

"I can't get you complete cover on that last one, but I'll activate your cards for this office. It's in a public area and isn't officially assigned. You can be relaxed here. Your surveillance may wonder what you're doing coming here so don't come here often, but take it easy and do it openly and confidently. I am pretty sure you two can lie your way convincingly out of a small encounter if you need to. We will talk again in three days, but not here. I'll arrange it and call for you. Good enough?"

That much none of them could object to.

The Chows were well experienced at casing a target and not looking or sounding like they were doing so. In other times they would have been natural bank robbers and probably very successful at it. Although they made a visit a day for

three days to the museum, only one of them for any length of time, they made it seem a natural meeting place and did not raise any alarms. It was unlikely that

they would in any event; a pregnant pair like this would have been dismissed from the overconfident and largely male security force's minds as no possible threat, no matter what their intent.

At the end of three days the two women were told to come down to the medical clinic for more follow-up tests, but when they got there they found themselves taken together to a small examination room and told to wait. Vulture arrived a few minutes later. They were mildly surprised.

"You speak to us while Jeruwahl is still at work," Chow Mai noted.

"I know. I'm not trying to separate you for any devious purposes, but the fact is that Sabir is only an excuse to get the two of you in here. I don't want amateurs in the actual operation if I can avoid it. Amateurs set off alarms.

You

have what you need?"

They nodded. "The great outer door appears to be a simple mechanical key lock, but it is not. The key actually must be turned to form a simple combination. With a wood or metal dummy key of the correct size it would not be difficult to

open. Without them, using something for a pick, it might take some time."

"The guards make their rounds through there every five minutes after dark," Vulture told them. "Not much time. The hall monitors can be fooled, but I wouldn't like to do it for very long or somebody will notice. The key is locked

in a case in Center security but I can see it. I know what it looks like and I think I can have a basic duplicate made. It might not touch all the sensors inside."

"No need. It is simply a matter of the turns. A simple mechanism. The inner door

is computerized and encoded and appears to take a numeric code and a palm print.

I 'stumbled' and by mere chance, of course, put my palm on the plate. The tiny sensors reacted to my hand and compared it to their records and flashed a red light. The comparison was there for a fraction of a second. The bypass appears to be the cut-out trace of a hand. It will take a few minutes and a few tools but I do not believe it's a problem. It is not nearly as elaborate as Clayben's

on Melchior."

He nodded. "All right. I have recordings of the audio and visual sweeps of the areas that can be patched in to provide a continuous record for the computers. You are inside. Now what?"

"There are some kind of light beams all over the place," Chow told him. "They cover the main room like a spider's web. I could not see them but I recognized the pattern in the little holes in the walls and ceiling. China Center used some

like that. To bypass that would take a special thing made of some thin, light, perfectly reflective material, and it must go all the way not only to the ring but beyond it. I have a drawing of the necessary shape. It will also have to be

supported by sticks or rods somehow from the entrance. This we cannot make, but

it will have to be made."

He took the drawing, studied it, and got the idea immediately, although he had to admit he never would have thought of it himself.

"We will need some sort of light source under it," Chow Mai put in, "but it cannot interfere. We will sew velvet pads for our hooves, so we may walk in silence. You will have to take care of the sweeping cameras."

That's the same as the entry and corridor. I don't think we have to worry about

them, though. I think they are automatic—turned on if any other alarms go off. If any other alarms are set off, then we're in a lot more trouble anyway.

Continue."

"The case itself is not difficult to open, although the locks on both sides must

be turned within seconds of each other to both unlock the case and avoid setting

off the alarms. It takes two people to turn the locks. The problem is that they

are simple spring locks that must be held in place while the case is open.

This

means the two must operate the locks while a third opens the case and takes the ring."

"You're sure there's nothing on the ring itself? No weight traps, no extra locks?"

"We think not. Remember, this is a ceremonial ring. It is taken out and used very often. The case is good enough. It is a lot of trouble and takes three to open properly, but if the chief administrator needs the ring, he need only walk

down with two assistants with the keys, have the assistants turn the keys and hold them while the case lid pops up and he reaches in and takes it. He would not care about the museum's security, which is for when it is closed. He just needs to come down when it is open, and that is probably whenever he wants." Vulture nodded. "He takes the ring during the day, with all sorts of people around. If it had elaborate precautions, they would be observed. I think you're

right—what they have is enough."

"They do add one extra thing when the museum is closed," Chow Mai said. "The long piece of tile in front of the case that is covered by the rug is on some kind of scale. It is locked down by day and unlocked, I suppose, when they close. We could see it outlined where it stretched and strained the carpeting."

"They said something about a weight trap when they briefed me on the museum's security, and I assumed it was there. It is not connected to the computer center, however. Not directly, anyway. It probably triggers gas or stun fields of some kind that would keep you unconscious until they opened up the next day and found you. I hadn't really noticed the details. Does it also cover the key locks?"

"Yes, but that is not a problem. Anyone can turn the key from the side. But it puts the ring out of reach of anyone also operating a key. The ring, on its stand and under its magnifier, would have to be lifted carefully and then removed to the back of the case and then up and out. Easy enough if you are standing right in front of it, but otherwise very hard. The top and front of the

case are a single piece, so there is no way to put someone on top to reach down." Chow Dai sighed. "It would be easier to steal it from the chief administrator when he had it out."

"Yeah, sure—with all those SPF and regular Center security people around. I toyed with the idea of becoming the chief administrator and then I found that there was just no point at which he and I could possibly be alone and unmonitored for enough time to do it and cover up the mess. He is never really alone, and when he removes the ring, he always keeps it on his finger until the ceremony or function is over, then puts it back. I will get this information up

to Thunder. The bottom line is, I suspect, that we can get to the ring but we cannot remove it. A way will have to be found to get around that weight sensor.

I wish I knew how much it took to depress it. Only the chief administrator and chief of security can gain access to the details of the museum security system,

and for one reason or another both are out of reach to me. You give me a precise

list of what you need that you can't make for yourself, and I'll get on it."

"It is odd," Chow Dai said, "that with them suspecting, at least, that we're going after this ring and having that whole army here and all, they didn't put in all sorts of extra security, extra systems it'd take Star Eagle to beat."

monkey, and there were a lot of those about. Close up, however, her hairless body and curvaceous shape would mark her as an alien. With a little help, she climbed onto Vulture's back and rode him, clinging low as he made his way to a different assembly point. He knew all the corridors and catacombs well, and although they passed a great deal of automated machinery and countless robots, nothing paid attention to them. Vulture had the right security clearances, and, matching her temperature and color to his and riding low, a Janipurian would have to be closer than three or four meters to even notice that something was on his back. Getting Ikira to Janipur with the aid of the transmuter hadn't been all that difficult; getting back out might be. Vulture had kept the Thunder's fighter that contained the transmuter in the mountains well away from Center, but his access to flyers would be useless now. Center's sophisticated tracking could pinpoint any flyer anywhere on the continent and, if necessary, seize control and bring it down wherever security wanted it. The alien captain was essential to Vulture's plan, not only in the theft but also in the getaway. Janipurians could see in the infrared, but at night they could see little else; Ikira, on the other hand, had some trouble with direct bright light but could see perfectly well in the dark so long as there was any light source, however dim. Her people lived underground. Neither Vulture nor Hawks had ever had the intention of sending anyone else down on this mission unless it failed, but Ikira Sukotae had proven to be the easiest solution to some of their problems. At least the captain hadn't had to be transmuted into Janipurian form; she would have had to have been transmuted as about a year-old Janipurian, which would have been no help at all. Sabir and the Chows were waiting. Although they now all knew the plan intimately, they had not had any contact with the captain until now and there was little time for reunions. Vulture wore a small watch strapped to his lower arm, as did Sabir. "It is now eleven past one," Vulture whispered. "I will need twenty minutes to get down to security central and in monitoring position. Give me the four extra minutes to activate my patches into the audio-visual system. You can observe the door from this service exit, but be careful not to be seen. Any time after one thirty-five, then, wait for the guard to make his rounds and get clear, then go. You must all cross the common, unlock the main door, get through, and close it behind you in three minutes. If there's any doubt, stay here or get back here and try again a couple of guard cycles later. Once inside, if you don't trip any alarms, take all the time you need. When you've got it, come back to the main door, close the others, and press the watch stud. That will send a little shock to me through my watch, and I'll come up and clear things for you to get out. If the alarm doesn't work or I'm not there within one hour, I will come for you at, let's say, three-thirty." Ikira looked at him. "And if you don't come for us?" "I'll come. Now, you all know what to do and how to do it. Let's give it a

shot!" He turned and left down the corridor.

"The wait is the hard part," Chow Dai sighed.

For Ikira, it was worse, although after five days down on this world, most of them cooped up in what was little more than a closet, she was ready to get it over with, as well. While the Janipurians were oblivious to it, to the alien captain the place stank. It smelled, in fact, like a barnyard, and even five days had not dimmed its unpleasantness. And she would have to endure it for some

time to come. She wished, at least, that they'd let her have a cigar.

They couldn't even talk, since there were guards about and possibly unjammed sensors as well. She had been somewhat surprised that these catacombs common to

all Centers were not heavily monitored by security, but the fact was that they opened only onto monitored public areas, the main power room, and three service

exits that were well covered. This was a largely nonviolent culture that experienced much petty crime but little more than that. The museum was guarded only because it provided too much potential temptation to someone on the downward path of reincarnation. Still, it was clear security hadn't changed the

combinations, modified the locks or in any way varied the system since it had been built centuries earlier. That was working to their advantage.

They took peeks at their destination through a grating. There was only one guard, as usual, but there was definitely something different about him. To the

Janipurian women, he was almost an idealized male, with thick muscles, an unnaturally handsome face, and a powerful and confident walk—and he wore a very

nasty-looking laser pistol that was beyond Janipurian technology. He was most certainly SPF. The regular guards didn't look that good and weren't in that kind

of condition, and tended to carry only a ceremonial dagger.

This guard was also military in his precision. Such discipline and organization

was not characteristic of the Janipurian race. Exactly five minutes later another guard appeared looking just as perfect, and five minutes after him another. Then, at twenty minutes, the first guard was back. It was somewhat unnerving, but it actually served their ends. If any guard didn't show up on the

dot, they would know something was wrong. If they did, all was clear.

"Sedowa—you have the main key?" Sabir whispered.

"Here. We go now?"

"One minute after the next guard leaves."

Down in security center, the duty CQ was sitting back reading and barely glanced

at the monitors. Had he been staring at them, he would have noticed that, one at

a time, their images shifted just a bit before showing the old familiar scene. Had he or his colleagues playing chess in the back been as militarily precise as

the SPF, they might have noticed that the guard's rounds were now almost a minute off. There was, in fact, an SPF sergeant who might have noticed this as well, but he was busy arguing with Deputy Chief of Security Boil, who was duty officer.

Up on the main level, their hooves masked in velvet pads, and with Ikira atop Chow Dai, the four pirates watched the guard around the corner, then they all seemed to take a collective deep breath and emerged and made for the great red

door to the museum. Chow Mai stood up and, seeming very calm and professional, inserted the duplicate key and turned it in the right-left combination. They held their breath but the door clicked, and they hurried inside, quietly closing it behind them. It was now locked once again, but as a safety measure there was an override bar on the inside. There was absolutely no light in the space between the outer and inner doors, but they had to feel confident that Vulture had bypassed the audio and visual monitors with his own recordings. Sabir, the gadget-bearer, stood up and reached into the bag and felt for the light. It was unnerving being totally in the dark, and he felt a real sense of relief when he flicked on the light. Because she was more mobile, Chow Mai was doing as much of the work as possible, allowing her sister to oversee and comment but mainly to stay on all fours. A small rectangular magnetic stone, procured locally and shaped by the two women, was removed and placed over the keypad. The entire switch was magnetic, including the alarm. All of the keys were now stuck in their raised position, along with the switches. The Chows had seen this switch many times before and wondered why nobody ever varied it. It was very easy to bypass. The door itself, however, required a proper handprint I.D. A piece of stiff, coated paper was removed from the bag and brought very close to the handprint plate itself, until it was mere centimeters away. The pixels in the door plate began to glow, activated by the weak magnetic field on the coated paper Chow Mai held much as they were activated by a hand pressing on the plate. Centuries of palms pressed into the plate had smoothed the area and revealed the pattern they were looking for. Chow Mai, without actually contacting the plate itself, used a thin marker to outline the print pattern, then, using scissors, cut the pattern out of the coated paper. They had learned this trick at China Center from a junior security man who was on the make and wanted to impress them. Now she carefully lined up the paper, with the hand cutout, steadied herself, and pressed it onto the plate. The incredibly good close-up vision of the Janipurian eye was paying off. The door hissed slightly but did not move. Sabir was disturbed by that. "It didn't work!" "Yes it did," Chow Dai whispered back. "Push it—push hard to the right." He got up, put both hands on the door, and pushed. It was harder than he'd expected, but the door moved, slowly, into its recess until it was open wide enough for them to get through. The museum lay before them, vast treasures on all sides and a direct corridor to the big main case in the back. It was not totally dark, although they had expected it might be, but the main lights were off leaving only dim emergency lighting on. It was more than adequate. Ikira, however, saw far more. Her eyes saw the crisscrossed beams of light that went at angles from the walls and ceiling. The grid they created was not dense; she could have avoided them, but no Janipurian-sized body more than five years old could have.

with the rope, and Vulture took the precise time to curl it back up and stuff it into a pack. The ground was barren, but hard, and there would be no tracks from this point on, and he wanted to leave no artifacts, either. Durga would be up and about by now, and if there was any sort of automatic monitoring of that tracking device, the alarm would even now be going up, and they were painfully exposed and without cover. There was no way around it. Short of the actual theft itself, this was to Vulture the most dangerous part of the entire exercise, and, with light, he could pick up the pace.

By eight in the morning, when the curators would be opening the museum, they were over thirty kilometers from Cochin Center. Entirely on all fours, even when pregnant, Janipurians could really make time. The last part, however, was slow and involved some climbing. It was not difficult, but they were dead tired and missteps could still happen.

Suddenly there was an increasingly loud sound, like that of an incredibly huge flying insect, gaining on them. They all heard it, but Vulture called out, "Lie down on your bellies and flatten out and be still! That's a flyer!"

Soon there was not just one flyer, but two, looking to Ikira like huge dragonflies. She had rolled off of Vulture and lay face up at a slight angle, watching the sky. The Janipurian bodies blended well with the gray-white of the hills, and she could be whatever coloration she had to be. They are criss-crossing most of the plain," she told them. "I think we left it just in time."

"Do you think they will see us?" Chow Dai asked worriedly.

"I would doubt it. I have done aerial surveillance myself and it is very, very difficult to spot anything from the air that does not panic or want to be spotted. Often it is difficult to see people who are trying to be noticed. Just lie still. How far is your cave, Vulture?"

"Not far now. Just a kilometer or so over the crest, no more."

"We may have a long wait before getting to it." She was looking at an angle from the rising sun and the bright light was nearly blinding her, forcing her to shut her eyes. "Just relax and wait it out. We might as well get some rest."

One of the flyers approached and flew almost directly over them at an altitude of perhaps a hundred meters, but it was going very fast.

"Think they saw us?" Sabir asked.

"Just relax," Ikira said again. "They do not know where we are or even if we are here. They are trying to panic us just in case."

It seemed as if she were right, for after twenty minutes, the flyers began to move away, first parallel to the ridge line, then back in a reversal of their initial search pattern. When they had gone far enough that the noise of their engines were but a faint echo, Vulture decided to move. "Let's try for the cave. We need it."

It was definitely more than a kilometer, over terrain not well suited to the Janipurians, but at last they arrived.

The place didn't look like much from the outside. In fact, it was difficult to tell that there was a cave there at all; some fair-sized rocks masked the

they let it pass. The tiny captain was, after all, a freebooter. She might sneak up and kill small rodents or buds if they were smaller than she, but if one of the Janipurians just rolled over on her, she'd be crushed. She was, in fact, in a position of little power and it must have grated on her all along. Outside, Vulture first listened carefully, then tested the air, but found nothing close by. He connected the transceiver and pushed the send button for five seconds, then released it. In a few minutes he'd know if their communications frequency had been discovered. He settled back to listen. "Thunder to Vulture. Good work. All hell is popping loose down there from what our monitors tell us. Troops and security are out scouring the area, so lay very low. A Val ship is now in orbit, and we believe the Val is down as well. There are also two automated fighters that punched in out of nowhere. Hold tight for at least three days. Repeat, three days. We will broadcast after that at nine at night and three in the morning your time. Do not attempt to make Pickup Two unless we so instruct. Good luck."

Vulture sighed and came back into the cave. He didn't like being the hunted, not a bit, but for now he could only sit and wait. The Val ordered a series of new satellites placed into orbit in interlocking geosynchronous orbits, giving the SPF and Cochin Center a complete and instantly updated map of the entire continent. The continent, however, was thickly populated a hundred and fifty kilometers or so from the Center, and individual surveillance was simply not possible or practical. The searchers showed up the same as the quarry.

At two-seventeen in the morning, the fighter that had served Vulture so well as a supply and support system powered up and immediately rose into the sky. It was instantly noted by the new satellite network and tracked, and the automated fighters were placed on instant call. They recognized the craft and realized that it most likely could not contain the people they sought, but it might contain the ring. The Master System craft never even allowed Pirate One to show itself; they blasted the tiny pirate ship as soon as it cleared the atmosphere.

Master System's logic was clear. Transmuters required murylium, and murylium could be detected by the satellite net. Since none had been, the odds were that even if the tiny craft carried a transmitter, it was not used, nor was there any ship in orbit that could have received such a transmission—it would have been easily detected from the start and dealt with. Therefore, the fighter was a diversion or an attempt to get the ring away. Either way, it wouldn't lead the searchers where they wanted to go.

The Val back at Cochin Center now faced Colonel Privi, the commander of the Janipurian SPF detachment.

"The three locals I can accept," the Val said icily. "Two of them pregnant yet!

What a bold stroke! I forgive you missing them. Did you know that the sister, Sedowa, does not even exist? Her records are all very complete and very thorough—I can tell you her whole life's story—but when the family is asked, they acknowledge no such daughter?"

time."

"And lose," Sabir commented gloomily.

"Perhaps, but we have a few things on our side. We will pick the time. If we are

willing to take some risks, we can also even the odds a bit."

"Risks," Sabir repeated. "What sort of risks?"

"Capture. Imprisonment, perhaps. They would not interrogate you here, you realize. We all know too much about the rings and their purpose. They would remove you to the command ship. The local Val and the local commander, a fellow

named Colonel Privi, would handle it personally. They would have to..."

"I don't mind risks, but I don't like that 'you' stuff," Ikira said. "Us, not you?"

"Oh, I would be there with you all the way. That's the beauty of it. The problem

is, I would have to have extensive communications with Thunder for it to work, and I don't think even now that I can risk any long-term transmissions from here. It is less than a day's trot from here to the edges of civilization. Two days southwest of here I have another hideout, better situated and more comfortable. With a bit of disguising, I think we can all make it to that one.

I

have the materials here for the disguises and the necessary maps, even some currency."

"There's bound to be a hue and cry over us," Chow Dai pointed out. "Wanted—two men traveling with identical twin sisters, both pregnant."

"We will not travel together. We are two males and two females so we pair up naturally, and no one will notice identical twins if they are not next to each other. Each pair will take a slightly different route to avoid any smart people

getting wrong thoughts. I am unconcerned about the pregnancy aspect; there are close to a billion and a quarter people on this continent and growing rapidly in

spite of a fairly high infant mortality rate. Maybe one in six women are pregnant at any one time on the average. Once we are in some sort of civilization, we will blend in and the searchers know it. If we make the real world from here, they won't get us. They will wait for us to make a move. Come—Sabir, help me with this black barrel. The applicators are over in that box."

They got out the barrel and the box, and the lids were removed. Sabir shook his

head and sighed. "Vaisya. Must you step us down so much?" The dye color was a reddish brown.

"We can't go as Brahman. That would be like transmitting our presence and we could never move unobtrusively. Ksatriyas, as the political and professional leaders, have friends, higher education, and they stand out. They will be expecting us to use Ksatriya, and so it won't be long until the first slip brings them down on us. Sudra is simply too low and lacks mobility, although it's the largest caste and would provide the greatest invisibility. Captain Sukotae, you will travel with me but you'll have to forage and fend for yourself. We will work something out Chow Dai, you will go with Sabir; Chow Mai

with me. We will go separately at intervals as soon as we seem ready."

Sabir stared at Vulture. "You are enjoying this, aren't you? You are really enjoying this."

"It is the most fun I have had in my whole life," he admitted unapologetically.

Sabir and Chow Dai walked slowly down a road that was little more than a dirt

track between fields of grain planted across very low rolling terrain. Here and there would be a small Sudra village, its modest adobelike houses made from the inhabitants' own dung and baked and formed as bricks. The hordes of insects, particularly flies, filled even a quiet time with a low buzz that changed in pitch now and again. The villages were based around communal wells, the wells usually being located in the center of the settlement and creating a broad town square that was filled with women getting water and often just talking as young children romped and laughed and played all about, looking more like four-footed animals with strange heads than anything else.

The odors were the hardest to get used to after the clean and filtered air of the Center and, before that, the even more purified air of the spaceships, but they were starting to adapt to it. The peasant organization itself was quite familiar to Chow Dai, although her people lived in small homes of bamboo, wood,

and straw. Her old people, she thought, almost longingly. These were her people now.

Her primary thoughts were of the child within, which moved and kicked from time

to time. She had never really thought of becoming a mother since she'd been fairly small, but now it seemed very important to her, the most important thing

in the world. She could still stand if she had to, but she no longer wanted to do so and feared that it would risk undue pressure on the child. She was becoming more and more dependent on Sabir as a result, but this didn't really bother her. Other than giving the seed, the only real purpose she saw for Janipurian males was to protect the women during this period and through birth and the first month. She did not think of it as being subordinate, but rather as her due.

They had been given a bag of coins by Vulture that was more than adequate for anything they might need; indeed, it was the equivalent of a half a year's average income for these people. Sabir had more common sense than to show it or

the pistol around, and kept them in a backpack. He kept just two coins, medium denominations with an incarnation of Vishnu on one side and a stylized Janipurian hairy elephant on the other, in the waist pouch for normal purchases.

Many of the people in this small town were so poor that any more than a small amount would be an open invitation to thievery.

At first the proprietor had denied there were any rooms, but the sight of both coins, worth about four times the regular rental rate, caused her to change her

mind and find something out back. It was a small, dung-adobe one-room cottage with straw for a floor and some well-worn mats for furnishings, but it was adequate. The inn's large outhouse was but a few meters away and the inn had piped-in well water with a "guest pump" just out back. A small alcohol lamp was

the only illumination.

Sabir unpacked and removed the purse, removed two more coins, then stuck the purse in his pack. "I'm going to have to go out and get us something to eat," he

told her. "I shouldn't be long. I don't like to leave the pack unguarded and I think we should just relax here and get some rest for the journey tomorrow. We are still far too close to take any risks. You saw how they looked at us just because we were strangers."

Chow Dai nodded. "Go ahead. I will be all right here."

They had not started until midday and now it was close to sundown in the town.

The marketplace itself was officially closed now, but there were still enough vendors open to assemble some food. Although Sabir had had a harder time learning to be a Janipurian than the sisters, he had almost completely assimilated his thinking to the native culture in a way the sisters had not. Also, he felt very comfortable as a male, something the Chows could never comprehend. The Chows had been born peasants of peasant stock in a Chinese village no higher in culture than this one; a society that was protective, safe,

and where everything was clearly structured. Sabir had a rougher upbringing and

had always envied her brothers their freedom of movement and their confidence. Sabir had always been small and somewhat frail and had always felt a level of fear and vulnerability to those strange places and practically naked and defenseless on a dark street. There was no such feeling now.

There was more trouble getting change than finding things to eat at the marketplace, even though it was shutting down. Few patrons here used money; it was mostly a barter economy, with money something out-of-towners brought now and

again. For a five-rupee coin, he was able to arrange not only to purchase decent

food but to have a local woman prepare it and then bring it to the cottage. It was significant only that no one asked any questions, and that no one seemed particularly interested in his features as if comparing them to, say, a wanted poster.

The local dishes, when they arrived, were not the best cuisine, but they would do, particularly when washed down with some rather potent local Janipurian beer

that eased fears, aches, and pains. It most likely had some mild herbal drug mixed in that made one feel happy and content after a hard day working the fields, but it was not of great concern. If any alarms were raised, there was nothing either of them could do about it, so there seemed little purpose in worrying or standing guard. It made Chow Dai relaxed and somewhat softer, gentler, even romantic. Sabir found himself fantasizing about having a mindprinter to himself for just a little while and removing Chow Dai's rough past and making her like this always. Deep down, he knew he should be ashamed of

himself for thinking that way, but the fact was that was his ideal way to live the rest of his life. Chow Dai would probably have been appalled at this had she

known, but as she did not, both slept better than they had since this whole business started.

It was near the end of the third day out when they reached their destination. They had not rushed, first because there seemed no need and second because it was pleasant to be out and not feel, for the moment, in imminent jeopardy of their lives. Chow Dai took the opportunity to talk with some of the more experienced mothers in the small villages, not only to find out what to expect as the pregnancy progressed but also to pick up some sense of what she would be

dealing with in a Janipurian baby. She was also delighted when Sabir stopped at

a local marketplace and bought her some small jewelry and trinkets. It was crude, peasant stuff, but to her it was like diamonds. Pickup Two was a small cottage in a forest near a stream and well off the roads.

The land was technically owned by a local maharajah, who, like most, was an absentee landlord. This was the edge of the jungle and not a place where people usually came; the trail was partly overgrown and difficult to negotiate. They had expected to find the others already there, but it was clear from both the condition of the trail and the state of the little cottage that no one had preceded them. The cottage itself was barren-looking and uninviting, and no one

who didn't know could guess that the floor was false and under it was another cache of Vulture's supplies. It was adequate, although far smaller a store than

Pickup One.

"I am worried," Chow Dai said. "I think I would know if something really bad had

happened to my sister, but that means little. Could they have run into trouble,

do you think?"

"I don't know," Sabir replied honestly. "The best we can do is settle in and keep out of sight and wait. They might have taken a longer route, or the weather

could have delayed them, or a hundred other things. They had to keep the tiny captain hidden and supplied, as well, remember, so they were camping out and using the markets only sparingly. We will wait until they arrive or we are more

certain something is wrong; There is enough here to last us a week, perhaps two."

"And if they do not come? What then?" Neither of them had the ring.

"If that comes, we will face it then."

The others did not come that night, and the next day Sabir took inventory of Vulture's stores. There was a lot more equipment here—some nastier weapons, a sophisticated communications link, and even a portable mind-printer from Janipurian security. There were a number of cartridges with it, mostly of the security type, including one marked "hypno," a security staple. Unlike the other

cartridges, it wasn't a permanent program—although it could be made so with larger and more complex lab mind-printers and computers or by long-term consecutive treatments—but anyone put under with it and given suggestions would

then obey those suggestions for a good five to seven days, staunchly maintaining

that black was white and the sky was on the floor if that's what they were told.

And if they do not come? What then? Oddly, almost ashamedly, the question was a

turn-on. Chow Dai was familiar with the uses of mindprinters and was now quite trusting of Sabir, but she couldn't operate or read the names on the cartridges.

Repeated treatments as long as the power pack lasted... No! That was evil. It was one thing to fantasize, another to contemplate actually doing something of that nature. Vulture had called him selfish and that was certainly true, but selfish did not necessarily have to mean evil. Two more days, and then he would

string the communications net among the trees and attempt to call Thunder.

Chow Dai stirred, then awoke. It was quite dark, far too dark to see anything, but her ears and her old sixth sense sounded a warning that something was not quite right. For a moment she wondered if it was just her imagination, but her keen Janipurian ears strained and caught what had awakened her and she stirred.

"Sabir! Wake up!" she hissed.

"Huh? Wa-?"

"Someone is coming! I can hear the sounds of steps crushing twigs and leaves along the path!"

Suddenly Sabir was fully awake and reached for the pistol, then moved around and

got up on his feet. He stood, facing the door, not quite knowing what to do. He

was totally blind in the darkness, but if he risked lighting the lantern; he might betray their presence to someone who otherwise might not know they were there. If he shot when and if the door opened, he might cut down those for whom

they waited, but if he didn't, he might have no chance to avoid capture in case

it was someone else. He thought quickly, then decided that while Vulture had prepared a number of things in this cabin just right, he had certainly neglected

to provide any back exit that Sabir had been able to discover. The gun might prove an intimidator or even an equalizer, but there was no purpose in shooting

unless there was some way to escape.

"You—you think it's them?" Chow Dai whispered.

"Shhhhh... Quiet." In fact, he did not think it was Vulture and the others.

The

footsteps, getting quite close now, had a far different sound than a Janipurian would make, and if it was Sakotae, she had gained a hundred or more kilograms someplace.

The footsteps ceased at the door and they both held their breath. This was not anyone friendly; they knew that now. Vulture would have sent Sukotae to check in

silence, then come in boldly himself through the front door.

The door opened slowly, and both Sabir and Chow Dai expected to see the strange,

illuminated form of a living being through their infrared abilities, but the picture they received was a strange one, with great heat coming from two glowing

eyes and otherwise only in spots along a very tall humanoid torso.

"You might wish to light the lamp for yourself," the Val said, calmly. It spoke

Janipurian Hindi flawlessly and in a calm, clear male voice. "I can see you perfectly well but there is no reason to have you at a disadvantage."

Sabir was less surprised than let down as his worst fears were realized, a sinking feeling setting in that the inevitable had finally happened. You couldn't escape a Val. Everybody knew that. And here they had been taking on not

just one but two. Sure, they'd nailed one ship-to-ship, but it had killed Arnold

Nagy in the process and was no sure thing until it was already over. More a one-of-a-kind freak than a sure victory. He considered for a moment trying to shoot Chow Dai and then himself to at least keep the information out of Master System's hands, but even that was folly. He might get her, or himself, if the Val wasn't expecting it—and it probably was—but not both, and what good would

one death do?

He put down the pistol, fumbled, found the match, and with some difficulty, lit the lamp. He was surprised at how calm and steady his hand was, however, once he

could see. It was almost as if a great burden had been lifted from his soul.

"You have captured the others?" he asked the Val.

"Alas, no, but we will, sooner or later. We staked you out here the last two days hoping to net the whole crew, but it was decided that they were not coming,

that they had probably seen our stakeout in spite of all our precautions and been scared away."

"Then—you were not on to us from the start. You discovered us, not the whole group,"

"Yes. Brahman in Cochin Center have little use for money, as you know, so a small amount is kept in security just in case it should be needed. The coins are

newly minted. Your accomplice Boil took seven hundred and sixteen rupees, a considerable sum, but they were of a larger than usual denomination for poor places such as the ones you went through and all, I fear, have slight defects in

them. That is why they were sent to security from the mint rather than placed in

general circulation. Not even the chief administrator himself knew this—it was a

simple economy move by the mint. We had paid agents about, of course, looking for any stranger within a few hundred kilometers of Cochin Center who might be spending newly minted coins of large denominations. We really didn't expect to net anyone that way—although we thought we might be able to locate you later wherever in the world you turned up. Uh—I assume the lady is one of the Chows, but who might I be speaking to?"

He sighed. "I was Sabira, a freebooter crew member.

Now I am what you see, without a proper name or identity of my own."

"A freebooter! So they have freebooters on their side now," the Val responded, sounding very human and seeming to talk aloud only to himself. "I knew that breaking the covenant would cause a price to be paid. Master System eliminated a

nuisance and appears to have created an army. How many, I wonder? Don't answer—that's for later. We decided that two of you in hand with information we

desperately need was worth blowing this probably eternal stakeout. Uh—I don't suppose you have the ring, do you?"

"No. I had it, but I returned it. That's the truth, too."

"Oh, I believe you," the Val assured him. "There is no reason to lie now, is there?"

"Would it be too much to ask," Chow Dai interjected, "what is to become of us?"

"Well, that depends," the creature replied, still keeping that friendly, conversational tone. "For a while, you will be useful to us, I think. We will return to Cochin Center at first, then take a little trip up to a ship we have in orbit. Then we will find out what you know and evaluate that data. After that, you might be of further service to us and you might not. If so, we might do a little attitudinal adjusting to set you back on the true path to harmony and stability. When you are of no further use, our skilled technicians will erase your current memories and create new, permanent identities for you with, of course, some slight genetic manipulation to you and your offspring that will

silhouetted as they were against the darkness by their body heat. Then Chow Mai had taken up a fixed position to one side while Ikira Sukotae had gone into the trees above the cabin to watch, warn, and guide Vulture to the first of the two troopers. The timing was delicate, but Vulture had come up behind the sergeant and consumed him while the Val was still approaching the cabin. It was a silent operation, but it took seven minutes to accomplish. Vulture wasn't certain they had the time, but figured that if the Val emerged before the process was completed, it would have been up to Vulture to suddenly catch up and play the sergeant. It had been even harder because Vulture had had to get the uniform off the sergeant while beginning the process. A naked sergeant would have had much explaining to do. Fortunately, the Val had been in a casual, talkative mood; Vulture not only had time to become the sergeant and redon the uniform, but also to lure and then strangle the remaining trooper, "Arnold Nagy told me how to take a Val one on one, almost with his dying breath," Vulture told them. "Of course, I had Only his word for it, but it was the only chance. I admit I did weigh just riding back with you and managing things later, but I figured the dead troopers in the field would go away with just the two of you leaving the sergeant in charge of finding the killers. I have to be honest—I wasn't sure if I could keep either of you from being hurt or killed, but that just couldn't be a consideration. It sounds callous and cruel, I know, but you were better dead than captured, isolated, and interrogated for information about the others." "I understand that," Sabir told him. "I had considered whether or not I could kill the both of us prior to that." "I hoped that you were clever and quick enough to understand my diversion," Ikira said. "I figured that if it was in the English used on Thunder you would take the hint and drop." "That allowed Chow Mai to add her fire to mine," Vulture went on. "The weak point is in the operating core of the Val—the equivalent of a brain—and that's not where you'd think it would be. The casing is well protected even against the strength we were firing, but Nagy told us to shoot at the abdominal region, front and back, and give quick back-and-forth passes. The shots jolted and disoriented it for precious seconds, and in that time the back-and-front cutting motion burned out a huge amount of the embedded neurological system. Sort of like damaging or cutting the spinal column. The brain functions but the messages don't go where they should. Those suckers are damned hard to kill. Even at that, we didn't so much kill it as wreck it. When it lost control the real Val, that crystal ball that was its brain and more, and which wore that body like a suit of armor, got out of its own power and quite possibly could have gotten clean away. Only when we destroyed it did we truly kill a Val." "And now what?" Sabir sighed. "We can't use the money, they're still combing the countryside for us, and there will be more Vals. We can't keep this up

forever.

Sooner or later they will find us."

"I agree, and we must hurry before Master System brings in God knows what else.

Still, they really don't know who or what they're dealing with and that puts them at a great disadvantage. We have proven able to massacre them, or so it will look, but they will still have orders to take us alive if they possibly can. Considering we wiped out a Val and a squad of SPF troopers, they won't be certain how many are actually here or just who they can really trust. We've got

to move. We'll live off the land and avoid human contact unless absolutely necessary, choosing the harder and rougher route and avoiding the roads. We must

get to Pickup Three where I can call Thunder. Only then will we be able to get off this planet, although I fear that it will not be without cost."

Vulture was certainly correct about the disarray of their pursuers. There was evidence in the days ahead of some heavy-handed tactics and mass arrests by the

SPF that showed desperation but also were violations of all that Master System stood for. The masses of Janipur were not simply outside the reality of interstellar wars and scientific marvels, they were quite deliberately kept ignorant of it. At first the mere display of many of the tools and weapons of the SPF caused great fear and confusion, but after a little while it turned from

that into anger. Master Systems' principles of colonial maintenance were well founded and based upon a long-term common sense. Security and peace equals ignorance. It was difficult enough for the Centers to weed out the budding geniuses and suppress bright new ideas that might change the status quo; now troopers marched through towns using mass communication and information systems

the people had never dreamed existed. One does not show such wonders as even simple flashlights and then tell the people that they are forbidden them and should forget them. Or, rather, you can tell them, but the seed will have been planted. Nor can you wipe out such knowledge when it is shown to masses of people.

The mere fact that such things were happening at all showed a total lack of direction and firm leadership at the top. Colonel Privi was born to be a soldier, not a diplomat or planner. It was the Vals and higher command that used

such men as weapons in their arsenals, with care and caution. Left alone with a

major problem and no one to temporize, the colonel was doing what he considered

his greater duty without regard to cost. Either Master System was out of touch or, more chilling to Sukotae, Vulture, and the others, it no longer cared.

Nor were such methods effective. Although there were some close calls and occasional long hours hiding out, the group reached the remote and crumbling area where Pickup Three had been established without detection.

It had been one of the very first settlements, but it had not worked out over the long centuries that followed. Weather and agriculture were far better on the

plains and in the rolling hills elsewhere, and it had been abandoned and now mostly overgrown. It was the third of the four places Vulture had chosen and set

up as refuges, and the fourth was over a thousand kilometers away in the mountain region where Vulture had first landed on Janipur. Vulture wasted no time in setting up his communications network and uttering a silent prayer

that

the channel was still open.

Thunder was delighted to hear from them and that all were safe, but their tribulations were sobering to those who waited and the news not all good.

"Another Val has come in, although they don't seem very sure of themselves any more. The Val has remained in orbit, docked to the command ship. There is no clear indication that more forces are being brought in, but it's nearly impossible to tell for sure," Hawks reported. "Now that we know where you are, I

think we ought to try a probing action to see just what reserves might pop out of thin air before committing all our forces. What is the condition of your people?"

"Chow Dai is well advanced on her metamorphosis toward motherhood. Although still bright and alert, her horns measure more than a meter and she no longer has effective use of hands and feet. In effect, she is a four-legged animal with

human intelligence. She is even sleeping standing up at this point, and she's still got months to go before delivery. Chow Mai is a bit behind her, but her horns are long, and any standing or use of hands is uncomfortable and limited now. They both eat a lot, almost constantly it seems, and Chow Dai tires easily

and will not, I suspect, be in much condition for a long run. Have you thought about my plan for allowing our capture? If I am lucky, I might even get to eat Colonel Privi himself."

"We rate it as too dangerous," Hawks told him. "Once captured, it is likely you

all would be separated and no matter who you become, Vulture, you couldn't watch

over them all. First priority would be to get a complete mind-print that would tell them your own nature and betray our best weapon, which is their ignorance of your existence. No, sit tight, unless you are discovered, and wait. Within twenty-four hours we will know if we can get you out of there or not. If not, then your plan might be the only open course."

Hawks was clearly worried, and the council of captains was no more reassured, but they were all sick of waiting.

"I tire of skulking about in the uncharted regions!" Chun Wo Har exclaimed. The

freebooter colonial captain with the shiny exoskeleton and inhuman eyes was not

often given to emotional outbursts. "Let us strike! My ancestors came from the same China that bred the Chows, a fountain of civilization and culture that was

tramped upon by lessers because it was often too civilized to defend itself. I am of rougher stock. It is more honorable to die than to rot. I say we go get them and the hell with the cost!"

Hawks looked around. "Everybody agreed?" There was no response, but a number of

nods. "Very well then." He sighed. "I just wish we had someone more experienced

in naval battles."

China, who often sat in on these discussions, cleared her throat. "There is no substitute for experience," she admitted, "but common sense and good information

are ninety percent of any victory. The best admirals can do little without them.

We monitor the command ship, the two fighters, and the Val. The command ship is

also a troop carrier; it is deadly but slow and not much of a threat. I believe we can assume that it depends, like Thunder, mostly on its fighters and that its own armaments are basically defensive in nature."

"I have no idea how many actual fighters such a ship might have," Star Eagle put in, "but I feel that there are more than just the two we know about, even though they are larger and more formidable than my own. Still, I wonder. I carry twenty-four, but this ship was built in a rougher time when external enemies were the likely threat. The SPF is not used to having real enemies and in effect is as inexperienced as we are in actual ship-to-ship combat, perhaps more—since we have had to do it several times while they are probably entirely dependent on simulations. They have fought some limited ship-to-ship engagements against the freebooters but it wasn't this command that was involved. To find out if there are any more surprises waiting for us, though, we will have to commit a convincing force. They will detect any feint. Clearly any force we send in must be theoretically large enough and good enough to win or they have no incentive to bring in any reserves. At the minimum, then, it means three of our better ships along with some supplemental Thunder fighters. I respectfully submit that we have only six ships useful in such a fight, Pirate One not being fast enough to compete, and while Espiritu Luzon may be well armed, it's better suited to fast getaways than head-to-head combat."

Captain Paschittawal of the Indrus nodded to himself, a grave expression on his face. "Then you are telling us that if our feint is large enough to be credible, we cannot afford to have it defeated because we would not be strong enough to try it again."

"Essentially, yes."

Hawks sighed. "Then it's all or nothing and to hell with the reserves." They all absorbed that in stony silence. Finally Raven said, "Chief, I ain't on this council, but it's my ass, too, and I think you got the priorities ass-backward here. Suppose we could cripple, maybe knock out that command ship? That'd leave the fighters on strictly automatic programming, and if we weren't lucky enough to nail the Val, it would still be the only one big threat but acting pretty much on its own. I mean, what kind of reserves we talkin' about? Probably more fighters, right? They wouldn't even care about human-piloted craft—this is Master System we're talkin' about—and I ain't sure they got enough Vals to have 'em sittin' dead in the water, so to speak, waitin' for some theoretical attack. I don't care if they got a hundred fighters off someplace— if there's no command ship to call 'em, then they're gonna sit."

"The Val could call them in," China noted.

"Maybe, but maybe not. The Vals are just damned machines, not gods. We already proved that twice. They're made one way 'cause that's the only way Master

System

makes 'em. They're arrogant, egomaniacal, and loners. Most of all, they're loners. They use people, but they're always on top and contemptuous of any of 'em. They ain't got no experience in this sort of thing, either. Now I ain't sayin' we can work this trick twice, but I bet we can pull it off this once." They were all interested. "What do you have in mind, Raven?" Hawks asked. "Well, first you tell them down there that we're shootin' the wad on this one, and then you tell 'em they hav'ta sit tight a little longer than we said. This'll take some doin'. It ain't gonna be easy, but a few real old tricks might do the job..."

5. BATTLES AND WOUNDS

THE DUTY OFFICER ABOARD THE SPF COMMAND SHIP was irritated at having been hailed by the communications CQ, and decided that it had better be really important or

somebody was going to get the chewing-out of her life.

"What is it?" he growled, still asleep.

"Freighter coming in, sir."

The officer frowned. "We aren't due for a supply ship." He was suddenly very suspicious. "ID checks out?"

"Yes, sir. Special shipment from Master System itself. Large-scale transmuters and heavy processing equipment along with a fair amount of murylium ore. I guess

the rumors about us being ordered to abolish the Center form of supervision are true."

The duty officer nodded, having heard those rumors himself. He knew for a fact that it had been done elsewhere and was being contemplated as a system-wide policy, but he'd also heard that those plans had been put on hold pending resolution of the current crisis. Still, it made sense here. The prey below had

done an impossible amount of damage but had now slipped completely from sight and could be anywhere in the billion-plus population by now. It seemed a bit drastic to destroy an entire civilization just to nab a few rebels, no matter how brilliant or dangerous they might have been. Orders, however, were orders. "Did you scan the ship?" he asked. The pirates were known to have an operating freighter and they all looked alike. He wanted to take no chances, even though he had the firepower to blast something as lumbering as a freighter to atoms before it could get close enough to do any damage.

"Yes, sir. Murylium count abnormally high, as would be expected, and a great deal of inert cargo. No life forms aboard."

He sighed. "What are the instructions?"

"Dock with us and offload using service robots through both cargo bays. It's all containerized, so it shouldn't take more than a couple of hours. It is diverted

from a deadhead run back to its normal pickup point and has instructions to offload and be away as quickly as possible in order to keep to its normal schedule."

"Very well. Call it in to the colonel's office below and if they have no objection, give the ship immediate clearance to dock and dispatch our service robots to the offloading bays."

"Aye aye, sir."

The colonel himself was not contacted, of course, but the SPF chief of

security

drew the same sad conclusions as the duty officer and saw no objections. The freighter was signaled in and ordered to proceed. It approached to within forty

kilometers of the orbiting command ship and then slowly eased its way closer, a

maneuver that took about seventy minutes.

The command ship itself, like the freighters, was never designed for planetfall;

the freighters were loaded by transmitter transmission and, for some specialized

times, by barges and tugs from the surface of whichever planet it happened to be

orbiting. Because of this, the command ship was designed to be supplied by just

such ships, and maneuvers like this were routine, with the pilots of both ships

using centuries-old automatic procedures. The timing involved in the docking and

equalization of pressure was precise. With that equalization, the two large ships were locked together as firmly as if they were welded, although if necessary they could be separated almost instantly.

The service robots waited for the cargo-bay doors to open, then moved forward toward the now-gaping holds of the freighter.

In the vacuum of space, the enormous explosion, and the subsequent explosions that followed took place in deathly silence, but were spectacular to look at.

Pirate One had been packed with all the explosives Star Eagle's transmuters could crank out and Thunder's robots could pack solidly in. With the pressurization and open holds, the tremendous force of the explosions was directed primarily into the command ship, ripping into its very heart. Yet Star

Eagle had taken no chances; the first explosions were merely a trigger for a murylium fusion bomb of a size never before seen; in less than three seconds both ships had been almost totally converted to energy in an explosion so intense that, from below, it lit up the sky and could be seen easily with the naked eye even in daylight.

The fighters, stationed in other orbits, immediately came to life and searched for their mother ship, but found nothing. They were not allowed time to be confused, however; their response switched immediately to automatic and they powered up and headed out toward the punch-points their sensors were even now detecting.

Raven and Warlock punched in in Lightning, followed almost immediately by Kaotan, Indrus, Chunhoifan, and San Cristobal in a rough V formation.

They had practiced acting as a unit, but they were still basically a collection

of individual ships rather than a tightly coordinated group. The captains were experienced pilots, but none had really captained a ship going into a head-to-head battle. They were linked by an interconnection that gave them almost speed-of-thought broadcast capability at short range.

"Mother of God!" swore Maria Santiago of San Cristobal. "Will you look at that!

My readings are off the scale!"

"Yeah, we certainly plastered that bastard," Raven agreed, "but let's not get cocky now. We still have a bunch of bad guys around and who knows what in the shadows."

"Watch it!" came the steely voice of Captain Chun. "Both fighters just did short

punches. I—"

There was hardly time to calculate the punch before the fighters emerged just behind the group and fired a series of rapid bursts from their aft systems, then

looped in opposite spirals and came back at the pirate fleet firing. "I'm hit!"

called Dura Panoshaka, temporarily captaining Kaotan. "Nothing serious but the bastards are coming back in at me!"

The V broke apart as each ship went in a different direction in broad loops. Raven brought Lightning up and around as Warlock was targeting the lead fighter.

She allowed the automatics to begin beam fire and concentrated on trajectories for the torpedoes. "Kaotan! Cristobal! Key on the lead fighter with all you've got!" she instructed. "All others key on trailing fighter with torpedoes."

At that moment the lead fighter launched its own torpedoes, more than a dozen in

a spread pattern, each obviously instructed to key in on the easiest single target. Chunhoifan and Lightning opened up on them with concentrated beam fire,

but two slipped through, curled around, and went for the stern of Indrus.

Paschittawal shifted all shielding power to the stem and broke away in a high arc. Both torpedoes exploded on or near the tail, and the ship shuddered but still seemed to be operable.

"Kaotan! Cristobal! Keep keying in on the lead fighter!" Warlock instructed, sounding very calm and very much in control. "Kaotan, take a spread of six at the stern, Cristobal amidships! Now!"

The fighter noted three spreads coming from three different directions, and shifted most of its shielding to its stem, which was always the most vulnerable

area of a ship, but it was also forced to shoot from its bow and side guns at the onrushing torpedoes. No shield operating at anything less than maximum strength could withstand direct hits by that many torpedoes, but a ship's weapons system couldn't fire outward if the shield was on full. The fighter was

doing a good job of picking off the incoming missiles, but it missed seven out of eighteen in the three groups, each of which was now headed for a different area of the ship.

Kaotan's stem shots were going to hit first, so it shifted more power to its rear shield, but at the same time, three of Cristobal's shots struck weakened shields amidships and the fighter shook and trembled. Lightning's two surviving

torpedoes landed on the undefended bow, and the whole forward quarter of the fighter became a mass of twisted metal. With no bow, the fighter was defenseless

as long as the enemy kept coming dead on, and though it tried to take evasive action, Kaotan poured six torpedoes straight into the guts of the ship from the

bow angle. The fighter shook and then disappeared from the pirate's sensors. The second fighter was bearing down on the shaken Indrus, and Chunhoifan was in

turn bearing down on the fighter.

"All ships key in on the other fighter!" Warlock ordered. "Concentrated fire. Pour it in! Pour it in!"

"There's something else coming in at high speed," Captain Chun warned. "I can't

make it out."

"Worry about it later!"

There was a limit to a shield's abilities, since shielding had never really been designed for combat situations but to protect a ship from space debris. In this case, superior numbers meant inevitable victory. A vast amount of fire-power raked all parts of the remaining fighter until it exploded.

"Damage reports!" Warlock called.

"Just some bruises for us, but we have limited mobility at the moment. Right now we're seeing what we can do to make repairs," Paschittawal reported. Damage to the other ships was even more minor.

"Unknown closing in," Chun reported. "I cannot make it out, and I don't like it."

"Chunhoifan and we will intercept," Warlock responded. "San Cristobal, you stay with Indrus. Kaotan, you are to go for Pickup Three as soon as we engage. Thunder command, stand by to commit reserves. I don't know what this is coming in, but it's definitely the surprise they had planned."

The mysterious object continued to close and the two ships went to meet it. Its configuration indicated a multi-drive vessel that should have made it large, but it was compact—too large for a Val ship or fighter and too small for anything else. As they closed on it, the shape changed; the new enemy actually split apart and was instantly recognizable.

"Holy shit!" Raven exclaimed. "It's two Val ships in tandem!"

One of the Vals continued straight on, while the other peeled off and headed for San Cristobal and the crippled Indrus. These were no mere fighters; there was intelligence behind these two ships as well as great weaponry. The effect was clear from the start; the Val ship closing on Lightning and Chunhoifan suddenly executed a series of maneuvers that would have killed any humans aboard, firing off salvos and launching a spiral pattern of torpedoes at the same time with deadly accuracy. The automatics aboard Lightning and Chunhoifan were simply not prepared for things like this, and both ships were slower than the Val's, Chunhoifan markedly so. Both human-controlled ships were forced to take direct control of their weapons systems—but humans thought far slower than Vals even if their orders could be carried out instantly. At one against two, the Val actually had a slight advantage.

"Commit reserves! Repeat, commit reserves! Key your punch location on Indrus! We will—holy shit!"

The Val had suddenly changed position, almost instantaneously. By the time they realized that the enemy was using punches mere milliseconds in duration, the Val had gotten beneath them and was coming straight up between the two ships, firing heavily, counting on them to hold fire for fear of hitting each other with their rounds. The distance between the ships was enormous, but not for the weapons involved.

Warlock targeted everything she could bring to bear on a point just a hair above

accept such a standoff. A stalemate was as good as a defeat since the remaining ships would still be there, and with only one operable Val left in service there would be little chance of victory. It knew from its companion that the other ships were all damaged to some degree, but that made little difference. While the companion was chasing after Kaotan, the other four renegades would have time to make repairs of their own. There was little choice.

The instant the Val ship moved, Raven took a deep mental breath and pushed the throttle. Gaining speed with every second, he followed a course straight for the Val, while Warlock began firing with every available weapon, forcing their opponent to abandon its defense and get to full throttle. The Val ship flared into brilliance, then winked out. It took a second for Warlock to react, and then she was initially puzzled.

"Did it get away or did we get it?"

"Whew!" Raven sighed. "I thought I was going to the land of my ancestors there.

It blew up. I have lots of scattered debris in the scan, almost all small. One down, one to go. Kaotan, you get the hell out of there!"

The transmuter receiver installed on Kaotan hummed, and Vulture more fell than stepped off the plate. He was a bloody mess, and it looked as if he'd taken numerous shots to the body, but he was alive. Sabir and the Chows crowded around him and Takya Mudabur knelt beside him. "No one could survive such wounds," she said sorrowfully.

Ikira Sukotae didn't wait for a medical report. She released the engines and moved at flank speed out of orbit at an angle that took the ship away from the Val. Reacting instantly, the Val changed course to pursue and let loose a pattern of fire that did not quite reach Kaotan. It was clear that even damaged the Val had an edge in speed and maneuverability over the old freebooter freighter. And Sukotae could not depend on Bahakatan for help; it simply couldn't catch up.

Kaotan, however, was undamaged, and Sukotae was not about to take on the Val alone. She had the ring aboard and the rest of the people from Janipur; her first duty was to safeguard them. She didn't have speed for a really big punch, but it wouldn't matter, clearly the Val had lost its punch power and could not follow. Kaotan punched just as the Val closed to within range. The Val wasted no time on lost opportunities. If it could not stop the getaway, then the least it could do was cost the enemy as much as possible. It turned and headed back at full throttle toward Indrus and San Cristobal.

"It's coming back in!" Santiago reported. "E.T.A. five minutes twenty-five seconds. Indrus cannot move and my shielding is completely gone. Can you move in, Espiritu Luzon?"

"Negative! This thing handles worse than a freighter at the best of times and I have damage. I will try to get in some good shots if I can, but all it has to do is skim to within your range opposite my position and I won't be able to stop it. The best I can do is position myself so we'll know where its best shooting

position is. That will allow you to concentrate your fire on its salvos."

"Bahakatan here. I can't get back in time, but I noticed in its pursuit of Kaotan that it used no beam weapons at all. I believe the Val has been forced to

divert all energy to its engines in order to maintain speed, maneuverability, and shielding. If someone could get in behind it, it might be vulnerable."

"Here we go!" Santiago called. "Angle is right where we figured. No vector to the ship, but we might be able to hit most or all of the torpedoes. We'll see."

The Val came in on an arc that placed it within range for only three seconds, not enough to be worth firing at, but it loosed its full complement of twelve torpedoes in a zigzag spread pattern at the two crippled ships. Three got through the withering fire; two of those hit Indrus but failed to penetrate the

shields. The third, however, came straight into San Cristobal's midsection, nearly tearing the ship in half and knocking out all power.

The Val looped and came back for a second run, its tubes reloaded. The last pattern, so perfect yet so erratic, indicated that the Val was leaving the ship

on preprogrammed automatic pilot and guiding in the torpedoes itself. It let loose the whole series aimed at Indrus, following the same pattern as before. With Espiritu Luzon laying off and San Cristobal as good as destroyed, there was

little chance for Indrus to pick off more than half the incoming missiles.

The Val, unlike humans, could consciously perform many functions at the same time, but guiding twelve missiles under fire was stretching itself to its limit.

It noticed the sensor call of another punch, but so many of the torpedoes were getting through, it didn't dare stop and look.

Indrus' guns had done a good job, but four missiles got through, all converging

on a single spot near the tail section where the engines were. The ship reeled and began spinning; its entire aft section in one direction, the rest of it in another. Noting this, the Val turned to take on its new attacker, and immediately fired its entire forward battery. It was to no avail.

Thunder's huge ram scoops were open wide like the jaws of a mighty beast, and before the Val could react, its entire ship was engulfed in the ram and processed by the great converters into energy. No other ship in service could have accomplished that feat; Thunder was so enormous that it ate asteroids larger than the Val ship just to feed its mighty engines.

"Everyone remain where you are," Star Eagle called. "I will come to you. The most badly damaged to the cargo bays, the ones with any real power to the outside docks. Espiritu Luzon and Bahakatan approach and look for survivors. I will go and collect Lightning and Chunhoifan first, then return here. I want the

wreckage, too—and any bodies that might be found. The battle is over."

Raven sighed. "Yeah, and, just think. This was supposed to be the easy one."

The losses were large, but in many ways not as bad as they had feared. Maria Santiago and the two centauroids survived in their pressure suits, although the

ship and the other three members of the crew were lost. Raven in particular regretted the loss of the one he thought of as the rock monster, it never was very sociable or communicative but it played a mean game of cards.

On the Indrus only Lalla Paschittawal and Suni Banderesh, wife of Ravi's weapons

officer, survived, ironically because both had been in the tail section trying to repair the engines. Although they had been banged around and had a few

gods who lived in the heavens and created and judged, the sun being the greatest and the two small moons the lesser; the stars were reflections of the lights in the villages of the gods at night. The world itself was filled with spirits; there were spirits of air, and water, and trees, and demons in the volcanoes. The People were entirely subject to the whims and occasional mercies of these spirits and while they were always praying to or attempting to please or placate them, they expected little. Life was a constant series of tests by the gods, a nearly endless cycle, lasting until the gods or some spirits had mercy and removed them to the heavenly realm, which was thought to be much like Matriyeh but with abundant food and eternal good health. To fail the tests of life set by the gods, spirits, and demons was to suffer; to succeed did not guarantee any reward. To rebel against the system, to question it or to try to make life easier, was a heresy that was punished with a slow, agonizing, tortuous death. "The point is, you can't even invent or introduce a more efficient weapon, nor plant a seed, although such things might occur to them. It would make things easier and change the tests of the gods and would be a heresy. There is food, of course, or they couldn't survive, but they must spend their whole day searching for it. They can eat pretty much anything, but they are constantly on the move. The children are carried on the backs of their mothers in rope carriers, sometimes two or three at a time, and guarded communally during hunts. There is a high infant mortality rate anyway, so they have lots of kids almost constantly to make up for it. Pregnant people do the same work as ones that aren't even when it's well advanced, as food goes first to the hunters and gatherers, then to the children. These brands are tribal markings; the colorations indicate rank and position. In times or areas of plenty, there's no problem with other tribes, but in hard times or when a territory is depleted they might war with one another. "They have nothing but their weapons and what ornaments they can find time and material to make for themselves. They carry nothing with them on their endless journeys and camp wherever they wind up with enough food for the day or when darkness falls. It is far more deserted and desolate than you would think—a million or less on a continent perhaps thirty million square kilometers. One might go for days or even weeks without seeing a member of another tribe, but there's a lot of ground to cover each day. The territories aren't well defined; you go where you have to and hope you don't have to fight somebody for it." Hawks nodded grimly as the others listened in hushed silence. "It sounds truly primitive, but you said it was complex." "It is. But before you can understand it, and all the bad news, you have to understand the basic biological differences between them and you. They are partially unisexual, which is why there are no men. I contain within me both sets of sexual equipment, as do they all, but all but one in a tribal group is biologically female. That one is the most aggressive, the nastiest, the most commanding personality, and hormones trigger the development of male characteristics, including a half-octave dip in the voice, and the growth of some sparse body hair, and male sex organs. That one then becomes the tribal

There can be no other reason for this than to allow an open channel of communication to the outside. It is in an area almost eleven hundred kilometers from our fighter station, and it's quite central to the continent. It is logical that it is the religious center, and therefore the one with the ring. It is probably held by the highest-ranking priestess."

"Big deal," Hawks responded. "We don't know what's in there, or who, and we can't land anybody even remotely close to that place. To escape detection we had to set that fighter down in one of the rare holes in the satellite surveillance, and the other locations are farther away. So Vulture's got to be dropped down with nothing but what she's got now, traverse eleven hundred kilometers of that hell without being noticed, scout out the whole place and become one of the high priestesses with access to the ring the first time, because anybody who mysteriously disappears will be missed. Then she takes the ring—and triggers the alarm."

"We have one ring," China pointed out. "Those of us who have seen another state that ours seems identical in all ways except the design on the face. If we knew the design on the ring below, we could use ours as a prototype for weight and feel, manufacture a dummy, and make a switch. I will wager that they do not put this ring under a microscope."

Vulture nodded. "I thought of that. I believe I know the basic design, since it's on everything owned by the truth-bearers that I saw. Anybody have paper and pencil? None of my incarnations has been an artist, but I'll see what I can do."

The only pads and pencils available were in the children's nursery, and were quickly rushed in. Vulture made several attempts, drawing left-handed, before she finally got one that was approximately correct. A stylized, spindly tree with a tiny figure of a bird in it. "Damn! That's just not quite right!"

"It will do," Clayben responded. "If their markings were more exact and you studied them closely enough, we can pick it up in a mindprint. The whole stone area is only about three square centimeters, and we know the style and workmanship of the rings. It could be done. Not well enough to fool a full-fledged analysis, but certainly, I think, well enough to fool even someone who wears it daily. One rarely looks at rings; they are taken for granted. If they eventually notice, the thieves will be long gone. It is certainly worth a try."

Vulture sighed. "Even if true, this is a situation where my... talents... will be of limited use. If we are correct, then I can eventually waylay and become a truth-bearer, but I will have to remain that person until the ring is well away. We just can't have someone come in and later turn up missing, without triggering everything. If they are programmed SPF troopers, then we can't pick one up and use her as a prototype either. As I discovered when I became the sergeant, they

had.

Although both the alien women were tough and aggressive, neither had the fire to be chief nor the self-ego to desire the sexual trappings that went with it. It was necessary, even with their understanding, to use the hypnotic powders to ease the way. Vulture only hoped that both, who would have far preferred to remain as they were and nurture their children, would have enough sense of loyalty and mission to become what was required and stay that way. Suni lost her child, possibly as a consequence of her wounds, and did not really seem to care. Vulture understood, but it was tough going to reach her. When Suni had seen Aesa fall after being unable to join the battle carnage out of beliefs far deeper than even the mindprinter program, something in Suni had snapped. She was now the last of the Indrus crew; she had no one and no status here, and she felt horribly alone and very, very scared. She had the same background and philosophy and personal religion as Aesa, but it had suddenly seemed not enough. She'd waded in, wanting only revenge, seeing only Aesa's bloody body savaged and ripped again and again, and she had killed like a maniac. Afterward had come sanity of a sort and the realization of what she had done during that period. She felt that her soul had either fled or died in that moment and that she was now no more than an empty shell without purpose, living beyond its time. She had wanted to die in that battle and she had survived. Just how deeply the shock had gone amazed even Vulture, who tried with her hypnotics and what reasoning powers she could to enlist the aid of the woman. She understood Suni's basic Hindu beliefs and knew Janipurian Hindi, close enough to be understood by her even with its bizarre pronunciations and odd terminology. "We have a duty higher than ourselves," she told Suni urgently. "We have a duty to humanity, to all those who call themselves human. We may fail, but if we do, let it not be because we did it to ourselves, that we quit. Your husband was committed to it, as was Captain Paschittawal and Lalla. You must not let them have died in vain. You must not let us fail because you fail. If we fail, let it be because the task is too great, or because others were too weak, but not because you were. Fate has placed you here. You must not refuse your destiny, for in that there is surely damnation." For a while she had said nothing, but then she said, in ancient Hindi, as if the mindprinter and its powers and its filters did not exist, "For I am death, the destroyer of worlds..." Vulture was shocked, although she knew that the powers of the mind were potentially greater than any program or any machine and that if anyone could prove it so, it would be one of the Hindu faith. "Suni..." The voice that replied was so strange, so utterly inhuman in accent and intonation, that it gave even Vulture chills. "Suni is no more," the voice

said,
as if from someplace other than a human throat, someplace distant and very,
very
unpleasant. "Her soul has gone on, as it should."
Vulture swallowed hard, not quite sure what she had here. "Then who are you?
What are you?"
"Do you not know me? I am the true goddess of this place, the one whom they
serve without knowing. I am the one who follows you about the universe. I am
death. I am the void and the nothingness. I am Kali."
Vulture sighed. All they needed right now was another wacko. Still, there was
something unearthly, unreal about the woman, something not a little bit
frightening.
"Most mighty and fearsome one, will you then for a time stop following and aid
us in our struggle?"
"Those who worship me and serve me shall gain my favors," she responded
coldly.
"If those conditions are met, I will participate, but not because I care about
your cause."
"Then—why?"
"Because it might be amusing. Because the places that follow the enlightened
faith nonetheless do me no service any longer. I am here, this world is here,
because I require a world of my own. The death of the child has given me power
and incarnation. Now we will remove the sham religion from this place. Now
shall
this be my world."
Vulture wasn't quite certain what she had to deal with now, except that
insanity
seemed an added trap of this place, but pragmatism had to rule. If sheer
biology
limited a tribe to a hundred or so, then an alliance of chiefs could create a
formidable force. With Vulture as go-between and councilor to the tribes,
easing
the automatic dislike and suspicion between chiefs, it just might work.
In the days after it began, and aided by the drugs of the truth-bearers,
Santiago and Midi took on the male aspect and began carving out sections of
the
larger tribe, being selective for balance of skills and burdens. It tore Manka
Warlock up to see this and she had a hard time repressing her desire to fight,
to challenge these new ones, but she kept away with her own, comforted that
she
still had the largest tribe, and understanding the need as no native child
could.
Suni seemed to throw off all drugs and assumed the chief's aspects rapidly on
her own. There was a change in her that madness brought, a level of callous
violence and cruelty that even Warlock would be hard-pressed to match. The
next
step was to move on other tribes as they also proceeded on their march in
toward
the center and flesh out the new tribes to full strength if possible. Working
in
concert, this proved relatively easy although not without losses; still, these
were blooded, experienced tribes now, and after initial problems in
coordination
they began to function less as a tribe than as an army.
Vulture had a number of objectives, the first of which was to draw more
important people from the holy places. So far they continued to be sent
low-echelon truth-bearers who could conceive of such an alliance in theory,

but
who were ill prepared for chiefs who had no more regard for truth-bearers man
for the lowest of their tribe and disposed of them as enemies.
In a matter of weeks all four tribes were at maximum strength. Using sledges
and
litters and salt packs, they were able to gather large quantities of food and
preserve some of it to take with them. Such a force could even take on lava
snakes.
Vulture's goal was not the holy seat but a region about two hundred kilometers
south and east of it—a broad valley located on the topographic maps burned
into
her mind at the confluence of three rivers into one mighty one, well away from
the great volcanoes but lush from their bounty. What the volcanoes took in
danger and sudden death they also paid for in rich soil. If properly managed,
such a valley could support a population far in excess of their combined
forces.
That would be the point of challenge, the place where the priestesses would
have
to deal with them, on their own ground. And the people of this new nation
would
have a real stake in fighting for it.
While still on the way there, Silent Woman had her child. Vulture had been
concerned that should the child be born dead, as many were here, or have
problems that would mean its death, Suni's madness would be as nothing
compared
to Silent Woman's, but it didn't happen. The child was normal and possessed a
loud, strong pair of lungs, and she doted over it and protected it with a
fierce
loyalty beyond Matriyehan norms.
In the process, the levels and numbers of third-rank truth-bearers had to be
priestesses of the false religion. Vulture kept wondering when they would
either
send one or more of higher rank or make a bolder move in force, but so far
they
seemed unwilling or unable to comprehend the idea that things were really
getting out of hand. Like the system itself, the priestesses were too used to
dealing with things in a normal fashion and no longer ready or well suited to
grapple with radical departures. They would soon be forced to, however. If
there
was some land of computer brain at the heart of this system, it would now be
getting very concerned. The new movement struck at the very heart of the
religion, a more radical revolution than any political or technological idea.
If
chiefs could learn to cooperate with one another, to divide the spoils and
work
together when need be, there was the threat of a real rebellion here. Its very
success might even inspire other chiefs who merely heard about it to try it,
as
difficult as it might be. Deep down, no one really liked the constant struggle
and quick and early death of the life here, not if there was an alternative.
In
many regions they would be forced to remain so by geography, but much of this
world was rich and bountiful and could be organized.
Even the people of the tribes felt that they were a part of something new and
good. The security of such a massive force with cooperating allies on all
sides
rather than enemies fed on their need for such security and groups. The chiefs

could never be friends; the situation made it next to impossible for them even to meet without the urge to challenge and come to deadly blows exploding inside them, but no such constraints were on the firebearers, who carried the messages between the chiefs and faithfully represented their own leaders to the others. Only Silent Woman was useless in this, but the birth of her child had become the only thing in her mind of importance and she easily relinquished the post to Oona, a sycophant with some intelligence and a near worship of Manka Warlock. Vulture was most nervous, waiting always for the priestesses to make their move, but she ultimately guessed that it wouldn't happen until the tribes had attained their initial objective of securing the valley. Vulture's aim was to keep them guessing. This might be a native rebellion, or it might be alien inspired and led. If native, it could be dealt with once it could be seen where all this was leading. If alien, then the alarms could be sounded before they reached the holy seat. Once the apparent objective of the new force was achieved, the priestesses would act. The only question was how.

The heretic army had reached the edge of the river valley and had looked down on the promised land before the first new move occurred. They strode boldly into the large encampments looking unworried and unafraid; seven mild-rank priestesses led by an eighth who was most definitely different. She had the same basic appearance, but the holy tattoos covered every square centimeter of her body and she wore a cape of skin and fur. Her necklace held not only the usual totems but also a shiny metal charm: the bird in the tree. Her staff was metal-tipped with what looked like gold dulled by age and use, and she had the arrogant look and swagger of someone who knew the gods were on her side.

They had finally sent someone of the second rank to have a firsthand look at the situation. Vulture hurried over to Warlock, who was watching the parade. "What now?" the chief asked. "Truth-bearer need be alone with truth-bearer chief. Separate, delay others. If cause trouble send to Suni tribe." "Truth-bearer chief not stupid. Must know others come, no go. What if truth-bearer chief no want one-talk?" "Then truth-bearer do change right here before all if have to. Manka tribe take others."

Warlock nodded and gestured to Oona, making the orders plain, then stepped back, not wanting to have a direct confrontation now. There was no telling what nastiness a truth-bearer chief might carry with her. That was why a separation was vital as early as possible. Take the second-rank official, and the others were irrelevant. Any attempt to take them immediately and by force might bring out some surprises they neither wanted nor needed.

Warlock was right; the old girl was no fool even if she had placed herself in a

precarious position. The mere fact that she had indicated the presence of some weapon, or other way of dealing with a group this large, meant trouble. She was, however, very surprised to see a third-rank priestess here, in this camp, apparently alive and unharmed. Vulture approached reverently, bent down and kissed the hand of the second-rank priestess, and waited, "Stand," she commanded. She looked around at the large assembly of tribes present, then back directly into Vulture's eyes. "Explain this." "If imperfect truth-bearer can talk to Holy Mother beyond other ears..." "Talk here. Look around. See heresy. See blasphemy. Explain!" "If Holy Mother can..."

Vulture was suddenly stunned as the holy mother brought up her staff and struck the other hard, hard enough to cause Vulture to fall to the ground with blood trickling from the side of her mouth. Vulture wiped it away with her hand as best she could but did not immediately rise. She was getting pretty damned mad fast, and the smirks on the seven third-rankers' faces did nothing to calm her down.

"Truth?"

"Always," the holy mother responded.

"Spirit sent by sun god come. Command this. Say truth-bearer chiefs not talk for gods, talk for demons. Tribes obey command of sun god."

"Liar! Holy fire come down from sky and strike blasphemers! Cook whole tribes in fire of purity! Show this spirit! Holy Mother will show demon, not god!"

Vulture looked around, made eye contact with Oona, and nodded. Oona didn't know what was coming, but she had her orders and she certainly wanted to remove these people before they went through with their threat. Then Vulture got up and stood straight before the holy mother. "Power against power!" she screamed suddenly so all could hear. "Faith against faith! Truth against lie! Truth-bearers stand back!" She gave the holy mother a bloody grin, and saw the other's hand groping for something concealed in the great cape. Vulture reached out, and the holy mother stepped back a pace. All work had stopped now; all eyes were on the pair save a few well-chosen warriors whose spears were directed at the seven lesser priestesses, who didn't seem to know it.

Vulture smiled grimly. "Faith against faith. Might truth-bearer not kiss the hand of Holy Mother first?"

"What stand before Holy Mother is no truth-bearer!" the older one said nervously. "Are demon!" The movement back into the cape was quick, but Vulture was quicker. Not knowing quite what to expect, but having only to make full skin contact, she lunged forward, and her palm touched the exposed chest of the high priestess even as that worthy was bringing from the cape a small, slender object that was unfamiliar to Vulture but which had a trigger. The holy mother stiffened in a look of extreme surprise, and the process began.

Warlock was quick to move forward even as it happened. "If Maka tribe truth-bearer be demon and Holy Mother be of gods, then Holy Mother win. If Maka

tribe truth-bearer be of gods, then truth-bearer soul will enter Holy Mother! Watch! Bearers make sure no help either one!"

That last was unnecessary; the seven truth-bearers were as appalled by what they

were seeing, and as transfixed, as most of the tribal onlookers. Warlock, however, was more concerned about them afterward, since this show would certainly betray alien origins. She was fairly confident that they could not escape no matter what, but they might do a great deal of damage.

The gun slipped from the hand of the holy mother as Vulture's body moved, enveloped, and merged with the older woman's. It was ugly, grotesque, and unpleasant to watch, but Warlock was a pro. She darted in and snatched up the gun and examined it. It seemed to be molded out of a single piece of medium-

red synthetic, except for the trigger, which was merely a long, thick rod with no bigger guard. The barrel mouth indicated a beam rather than a projectile, but the lack of sights or aiming devices suggested that the gun packed enough power,

it didn't need much expertise to use effectively. The damned "eating" process took fifteen or twenty minutes, and then Vulture wouldn't be any good for a while except for show. For just a moment she considered firing into that writhing mass of flesh or whatever it was, ridding herself of Vulture and the holy mother at one and the same time. With a gun, a chief could go very far indeed. The problem was, she didn't know what the gun really did, nor could she

be certain it would kill Vulture. She was not unmindful that the creature had killed dozens in the high-tech labyrinth of Melchior before being not killed but

merely stunned.

It no longer really mattered, either. At the moment her interests were Vulture's

interests were Thunder's interest. Without Thunder she could lead a savage band

until she died; with it on her side, the role of empress in a rebuilt Matriyeh was not out of reach.

"Etranger" she heard someone whisper, and several other voices whispered the same. "Prenez garde!"

Warlock whirled, gun in hand, and her look and her gestures motioned everyone else back from the seven priestesses. "Prenez garde, Maka's ass!" she shouted, and fired at them.

There was a burst of light, and five of the seven were suddenly in flames; the guards were startled but not startled enough not to trip the other two as they began to run. They were caught by the crowd even as the others screamed and burned, and a blood cry went up as the two untouched priestesses were torn to bits by the mob. They were seeing miracles here; great power beyond their comprehension, but they knew who was wielding that power and who was its victim.

Warlock watched the five women bum; they were already dead, but they made a very

nice line of bonfires. She'd been right about the gun: it had been quite effective, and would have been more so had that Holy Mother pulled it out, screamed for god's curse on Vulture, and burned her on the spot.

By the time it was over a new holy mother was stepping unsteadily out of the mass of goo that represented Vulture's old body. She was concentrating mightily

to keep control and bring off the show. She pointed to the mass of still-writhing, bubbling goo and said, in a loud if croaking voice, "That be soul of Holy Mother and demon! Behold Maka truth-bearer in body of enemy!"

That started a rumbling that became a roar and then a cheer as warriors raised their weapons and shook their fists and rejoiced that they and their great chief

was truly in the right. Vulture raised her arms to show appreciation, but saw Warlock out of the corner of her eyes. "Better get me someplace so I can lie down," she hissed in English. "I feel like hell, and I can't keep this up very long."

"They're getting pretty worried," Vulture told Warlock, using English rather than the more limited Matriyehan Warlock was forced to speak. "The command structure is far more like a Center than we thought. The experiment here might be radical and on a large scale, but the organization is still very much along familiar, if more primitive, lines. The old Holy Mother was still fairly ignorant, but she knew a pistol when she saw it and what it could do, and she didn't think of it so much in mystical terms but rather as a pragmatic tool for

keeping the faithful in line."

"How many fire spears they got?" Warlock was getting worried. It wouldn't take many of these things to wipe out the whole assembly.

"A lot. A whole arms cache. They aren't very well versed on how to use them, though, which is why they're more of the blow-everything-to-hell kind.

There're

enough of those, and more powerful weapons, for the higher priestesses, but the

third rank is kept ignorant of them and as fearful as the tribes might be."

"Until truth-bearer become warrior."

"Yeah, maybe—but I'm not sure about that. It's been over a hundred years since they started this system. None of the original troopers are left, I'm sure of that, and their descendants are given, basic information in mindprinter

programs

buried deep—but a mindprinter can only tell you how to use a weapon, not give you the skill to use it expertly. You and I would be able to handle anything they have a hundred times better than they would, but you put hundreds of those in the hands of the most unskilled people, and they'll take out everybody from horizon to horizon."

Warlock thought for a moment. "So they be no more good than warrior with same flame spear. Where they keep these flame spears?"

"Huh? Oh, I see what you mean. An interesting idea, but I'm not sure I like the

idea of hundreds of warriors running around with those blowtorches. Even if we won, I'm not sure this world is ready for the consequences of that. More interesting is the idea of keeping them from using them."

Vulture sighed, then picked up a stick and began to sketch a crude diagram in the earth as she talked. "The holy seat is in a broad valley ringed by very high

mountains. They're volcanic, but that area's very old and inactive. The heights

reach to twenty thousand kilometers, and at that latitude they're snowcapped almost all the time. The melt comes down and is collected in a bowl-shaped depression that is probably a glacial cirque. That provides year-round fresh water, and during the wannest months it overflows and feeds a large river. The river provides the only outlet—here, at a great waterfall. Steps have been cut into the rock behind the falls providing the only way in or out with any ease. Those are both human and device guarded. The magical stuff is probably computer

driven but designed, like the holy places around here, mostly to keep people out, not in. Still, between the high mountains and the guards and traps, it's pretty nasty getting in and out."

"And inside valley?"

"It's a rough life for the truth-bearer tribe. They spend all day tending fields and crops and doing backbreaking labor to feed and maintain the area, then spend whatever time is left training for their destinies as priestesses. No wonder they're anxious to get out of there! Unlike the tribes, the truth-bearers in the field don't do much work or any fighting and they have a privileged spot wherever they go. Caves and depressions in the rock provide the storage facilities, but they live in the open like the tribes do. Dug into the rock at the far end of the valley is the Great Temple itself, which is a pretty impressive structure. Huge reliefs of the great and lesser gods looking down on the Earth-Mother are carved into it so they also symbolically look down on the valley. Inside is the Inner Temple, with a huge statue of the Great God—and the Great God not only listens, it talks and even shows pictures. A real miracle idol. The second rank maintains the whole area, and the very small first rank, all of whom are pretty old for anyplace and ancient for this world, do all the talking and ordering. They're considered divine, infallible, and without sin or

Warlock nodded. "Do great chiefs believe own perfection?"

"Huh? Oh, I see what you mean. It's hard to say—as a field supervisor and part-time teacher, I've never actually laid eyes ob one. They're not ignorant, though. I bet they know all the automatic systems and nasty stuff they need even without stimuli. Knowledge only the gods possess. Whether mat's made them corrupt cynics or whether they feel they really are demigods we can't know. The

ultimate leader is the Earth-daughter, who is said to be eternally young and beautiful—all knowing and immortal. If she's real, or how they work it if she is, I don't know."

"Then Earth-daughter wear ring."

Vulture frowned and gazed off into the darkness for a moment, looking puzzled. "No, I don't think so. She's the ultimate chief, judge, general, whatever, but as all chiefs have firebearers, she has a ring bearer. That would be the adjutant, the executive officer, the one who runs the day-to-day operations."

"Human with power."

"What?"

"Ring must be with human power. That be ring bearer. Why not Earth-daughter? Maka wonder..."

"Good point." She looked up. "Unless the Earth-daughter is either mythical or-nonhuman. Either one explains why I never met anyone who saw her. I've met people who know people who say they saw her, but that's possibly bragging or exaggerating to look important. Even within the second rank there are the ins and the outs—those in the temple look down on those in the field. Buck sergeants

versus top sergeants. But what if she is real?"

"If ring bearer got ring, then ring bearer be Matriyeh chief. Should be top."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. If the ring bearer's the chief administrator, the highest-ranking human with power on this world, then who would be over her? Immortal—hmmm—could we have a Val in there keeping the Center honest?"

Warlock held up the gun and looked at it. "No flame spear like this could kill metal demon."

Vulture nodded. "Yeah, I did one in, but with a heavy-duty laser at point-blank range. A Val and a master computer with satellite links. This is getting a bit complicated. Damn! I wish I could talk to Thunder now! We've come so far—I'd hate to have to do this all over again, but it'd take many weeks to get back to the blind zone, call up there, then get back here. They won't wait that long. We have two separate problems, though. First, we have to take the ring without them knowing about it, and, second, we have to negate religious control without the computer calling in the SPF. Damn it! I am fifteen people, yet I need China's expertise, Hawks' way of approaching a problem, and Star Eagle's analytical skills and data. I'm the only one who could give you any information and protection, yet I'm the only one who could possibly make the distance and discuss the problem."

"Truth-bearer chief got no magic here," Warlock said "Send Holy Mother and truth-bearers. Will make war if Holy Mother no report. But if Holy Mother report trouble ended..."

Vulture's jaw dropped slightly. "What an interesting, devious idea. There aren't

any Vals out here, and not much else. Most of the stuff they know is word of mouth and reports taken from the truth-bearers at the holy places. Okay, so I go in there and I tell 'em my seven truth-bearers are taking care of the job, that

it was all indigenous, and that the tribes are separating and returning to the old ways. Fine. I have the ability within me to create whatever experiences are

necessary or expected, even under the mind-printer. That was my original function, remember. But will they accept that? Sooner or later that computer is

going to notice that none of the seven report in to holy places. Other truth-bearers may come and report otherwise. How long can we maintain the fiction? If they find out my lie, then they'll know somebody can beat their mindprinter, and that will trigger the alarms."

"So? What if tribes go back old way? Go far to south, far from holy place. Find

new rich territory, much food. Wait."

"You've forgotten the effects of those drugs. I haven't. And for all four tribes

to settle in the same area, to take the same territories, will mean war with whatever tribes are there now. More death, more risk—but also in the end more people. Maybe several more tribes' worth. And we're fresh out of Thunder chiefs."

Warlock spun around and stared at Vulture. "Matriyehans not animals! Humans! Think! Sky demons want make Matriyehans animals! Not stupid. Many warriors see, like, what Maka tribe and other tribes do. Wonder, doubt, question old ways, old beliefs. Would keep talk."

"I wonder. You can't even be within eyesight of another chief without an irresistible urge to fight. It's in the biology."

"Chiefs speak through firebearers, like now. No can have tribe but so big. Only

fight then for food. Plenty food here. Holy Mother take many seasons if need

to.

Chiefs still be ready."

"And the drugs and inevitable other truth-bearers?"

"Got two pouches magic dusts from dead truth-bearers. Holy Mother teach. Maka do

magic on truth-bearers! Big joke! If no work-truth-bearers die just like warriors each day. Fire-bearers, other chiefs watch, too. Protect others.

Whole

life Maka fool great chiefs. Maka fool these, too. Warriors will obey long as Holy Mother takes. Mean better life for children if not them."

Vulture sighed. "All right—I'll see each of the other chiefs and explain it. If

they agree, then that's the way it'll be. I just hope I can find you again."

"Tribes stay close. Not hard to find. Good land to south. Twenty days, maybe more. Come here, go south. Tribes not be hard to find."

Within the next two days the plan was discussed with the other chiefs in turn, and Vulture was surprised to find agreement with all of them. Suni, or

Dakuminifar—goddess—as she now insisted she be called—actually thought she'd commanded it, since great magic was needed to counter great magic. After some initial reservations, Midi was now clearly enjoying the chief's role and in no hurry to give it up. And Man, the most reluctant of all, had come to terms with herself.

"Matriyehans be good people," she said. "Thunder people be only hope tribes have. Mari teach much—learn, too. Mari was chief in stars and beaten. Mari chief

again. This time no get beat. Have chance do great thing here. Not know, understand, but this be where Mari belong. Mari needed here."

And so Vulture taught what she could, and wished them well, and started out, not

back toward the fighters but in toward the holy seat only a hundred kilometers away. She wondered, idly, even if this operation was successful, if any of them

would go back aboard the Thunder. It was difficult to see Manka Warlock as a revolutionary and social organizer, let alone a visionary, but history tended to

glamorize the visionaries and heroes. How many had been egomaniacal and psychopathic to boot and still done their great deeds?

Maria Santiago had lost her ship and much of her crew, and all she'd done was wallow in guilt at that loss and dream of a new ship. Now she was captain of a new organization with a much larger crew and dedicated to their welfare. She had

a new command, and hope. If they broke the grip of Master System she could do wonders for this world. If they didn't, she might just as well remain as she was.

Midi, too, had new responsibility, new commands, and she had nothing to go back

to. She might well be less visionary and more selfish than the others, but she had more here than she had anywhere else. As for Suni—if she survived at all, better a self-deluded goddess here than a sane and lonely character up there. And Silent Woman was back in her element once again and given back that which seemed lost forever.

Vulture could only wonder which of them would still be alive and in charge when

she finally made it back to them

—and what their mental condition and commitment would be if and when that happened.

And, most of all, she wondered what she would say and do if Thunder went after the ring at the expense of helping its people. The holy seat was as good as invisible from the plain leading up to it. As far as any eye could tell, a wall of great mountains simply rose up into and beyond the almost omnipresent clouds. To find the entrance, one followed the river—now flowing fairly fast although not nearly filling its eroded bed as it might in other seasons—to the waterfall that fed it from perhaps three hundred meters straight up. Only up close could you see that there were the mystic signs and warnings and then a stone stair carved sideways in the gray rock going up toward the source of the falls.

It was also nearly impossible to see the small guard posts, cut as they were out of the mountain and disguised so that only eyes and weapons need betray themselves. As in the holy places that were the prime information source for this theocratic leadership, there were also effective automated guardians that required passwords and recognitions and at least one that appeared to read footprints from two plates set in the rock. One was expected to climb the stairs without hesitation, saying or doing what was required routinely, even automatically, and pausing for nothing else. Anything else was a sign of weakness, and would cause suspicion.

The valley itself was a great gouge in the rock, roughly five kilometers wide by more than twenty long. It had been well planned, with one area set aside for fruit- and nut-bearing trees. Another for bushes of the same type, yet another for the growing of grains. The diet was well balanced but generally uniform and totally vegetarian.

At the far end of the well-worn river trail loomed the temple itself, with its dramatic carvings above and below the inverted crescent-shaped opening. They were so huge they could be seen even from the top of the stairs, although as one approached, the detail and sheer scale of them became evident and overwhelming.

Most startling to someone like Vulture was that they did not seem to have been cut by machine, but rather hand-carved by who knew what talents and numbers and over a very long period of time.

It took almost the whole day to get to the temple, a task made even harder by the seemingly incessant requirement to stop every time a junior was encountered and have them kneel and kiss her hand. She was not allowed to eat or drink during this period; total fasting was required until after the report was delivered.

It was dark by the time she reached the temple itself, its entrance all the more eerie, lit by the glow of internal torches, and here again there was another falls, grander still but not nearly so great as it was in the hottest season. Now she removed her cape and put down her staff and the rest and stepped into the pool and under the icy-cold falls.

The Matriyehan body had a tremendous temperature tolerance, but cold was cold. All that she had remained behind save the necklace and other crude jewelry. Those, too, were washed and put back on. Then, stepping from the pool, she allowed the breeze to dry her, and then proceeded up the stairs and into the

temple itself.

It was unclear whether the temple had been developed out of a natural cave, or whether it had been human-made, but it was enormous—a great cavern adorned with

multicolored pillars and also with stalactites and stalagmites, indicating rock

layers of other than volcanic origin somewhere above. The statue of the Great God, rising twenty meters in the main cavern and still not touching the curved ceiling, looked down upon her and others within, all of whom she ignored, prostrating herself on the cold, damp floor and saying the prayer-chants to the

statue.

When Clayben and his team designed Vulture, they knew that their creation would

be useless if it could not pass a mindprinter test and reject imprints. In effect, Vulture could create her own mindprint program, using the holy mother's

memories until they were no longer convenient and then writing whatever ending was necessary. It was a complex process but she did it automatically when desired and had no idea how she did it. Vulture could remain a passive observer,

its own memory stored elsewhere and in a way that no mindprinter was ever designed to detect. In effect, the form and mind there now was that of the holy

mother—as edited and rewritten—and no one else, although Vulture could reassert

control at any time.

When they'd been trapped by that first truth-bearer with the hypnotics, Vulture

had been in full command of Uraa, and there had been no time to sever the connection. It was a sobering lesson on yet another vulnerability, and one she had no intention of repeating.

And now it was time to go down a long side tunnel and report to the duty officer, another second-ranker like herself. The fact that the duty officer wore

a finely woven cape with the bird and tree design in gold and wore metal jewelry

marked her as the upper temple rank, but technically they were equals and there

was no deference, no bowing or hand-kissing.

"Holy Mother Francine Yvonne reports from the field," she said simply and firmly

in the temple tongue—which was French.

"We have been waiting anxiously for you," the duty officer responded. "Speak your preliminary report to me now. Then you will be sent up for a full debriefing."

"It was a major heresy, the worst I have ever seen or heard about. I am filled with great joy that I was adequate to the challenge."

"You have dealt with it, then?"

"It is in the process of being dealt with. Some chiefs needed replacement, others needed to be merely reminded of their sacred duty and all four tribes involved will have to undergo extensive reeducation. I feel that the sisters I brought with me are adequate for the task, but I will keep checking on the progress. At least we managed to break up the unit, and the tribes are moving to

find other hunting grounds and in the ancient ways prescribed by our divine commands."

The duty officer looked pleased. "Nature of the heresy?"

"Two chiefs with little faith and much ego and cleverness managed to find a way

to talk with and ally with one another. Their combined success took over other tribes, and they were able to place like-minded chiefs at the heads of those tribes. Innovation and alliance were encouraged, cooperation praised, and this was leading to the eventual attempt to seize the Muse Valley not far from here and establish there a permanent settlement."

"Grave indeed. And what of the other truth-bearers sent before you?"

"Most were killed, I think, although we might never be able to be certain of that, but two at least had been turned against the faith. I cannot conceive of such a thing, but somehow it happened. They were quite young and inexperienced, I think, and vulnerable."

"And what kept you and the others alive?"

She smiled sweetly. "The challenge, of course. I brought down the wrath of the Great Sun God upon them in full view of the tribes they were with. That and some

other examples of the Great God's wrath set things straight."

"It always does," the duty officer noted, "but it's an ultimate defense, a last

resort. Still, for something this huge, and among tribes who almost certainly have killed our sisters, I think it was the only way. This will look quite well

on your record, Mother Francine. The only other question was demonic involvement. Was there any evidence of such?"

"None directly. At least, none of the chiefs and tribal elders I interrogated using the magic powders and potions betrayed any forbidden knowledge I could find. They were simply self-deluded. They found a new way that made things easier and then created a complex rationalization for it within our scheme of things."

"You are confident the situation will return to balance?"

Vulture shrugged. "I have no reason now to believe it will not. Naturally I will

have to monitor them for some time to be sure."

"The Earth-goddesses have been very concerned about this one and will have to make the final decision," the duty officer said.

"Other than destroy them, what else could be done?"

"There is a potion that can be distributed to the people in great numbers. It is

sweet to drink but later is quite painful, I'm told. It burns out all personal memories, all knowledge of self. It destroys identity and memory without destroying skills. One is like a newborn child, eager to be taught the truth. It

is used only in extreme cases because it takes a fair-sized staff to manage them

after for the period of readjustment and because it dulls the mind as well—a complex process. Still, such was the concern that it was talked of here in high

places. Hopefully it will not be necessary." She sighed. "Very well—report to debriefing."

"Debriefing" was a carved wooden chair with straps and many vinelike things that

were attached to the body. It looked primitive but was not: it was a full-blown

mind-printer machine set to record. Vulture had expected it or something like it; there almost had to be one to double check reports like this and to

capture

any missing details or attempts to embellish the report for the sake of career advancement. The only worry Vulture had about the process was that her abilities

had been tested only in the lab; this was her first time going head-to-head with

a Master System computer.

If any alarms rang, though, they certainly weren't apparent. Afterward, she was

given a strong, sweet liqueur to build strength, fed quite well, and given a place to sleep that actually contained a hard, thin mattress—although it felt odd after all this time sleeping on the ground.

The next day she was taken up to see the first rank for the first time.

There were seven of them, and they were all old and somewhat wrinkled, something

almost never seen on Matriyeh. They looked, however, in good shape and their minds were clear, their eyes alert. They wore white, silk-like robes and headdresses of silver with large gems set in them, and more silver gems in rings

and bracelets and necklaces and earrings. All but the one in the middle, whose headdress and jewelry were gold, and on whose left ring finger was a monstrous gold ring with a black stone setting. Kissing that ring was something that almost caused Vulture fits.

She had kissed the ring itself, the duplicate of which was still hidden in the charm around her neck. So close she could take it right off—it seemed a bit large for the Earth-goddess's finger. Take it, yes—but with no way to call in the guard for a getaway.

Still, it was interesting that the ring did not fit. The highest human authority

on Matriyeh definitely took it off when not in public performance.

"We have analyzed your debriefing, Mother, and find much joy in it," the chief said in a low voice that was somehow both masculine and feminine at the same time. "We wonder, though, about the permanence of these reforms. Nothing poisons

souls like the spread of evil ideas. The concepts such as the litter, the cultivation of crops, the bow and arrow—these are dangerous and far more difficult to stamp out. Such images linger in the mind and corrupt. We are talking of—what? Four hundred or so people, not counting the children too young

to remember. We commend your evident skills and courage in this, but can seven novices with your advice contain this? Speak."

It was time for Vulture to be Vulture again. "I may be inadequate to the task, Holiness, but I have been told of the potion of forgetfulness, and I find it extreme and wasteful unless absolutely necessary. I would like to try the gentler ways first."

"There is division among us about that. You were there, we were not. Still, we have a sacred duty to their souls far beyond any regard for trouble and inconvenience on our part, and to the souls of others not yet corrupted. Dare we

chance not doing it? Dare we chance not making an example to the other tribes who might have gotten ideas?"

"Holiness, your infinite wisdom and divine perfection is to my own poor self as

the Great God whose glory brightens the world is to the lowest of worms. I cannot presume to do more than set my case and obey your commands."

"But?..."

Vulture hesitated a moment. "Holiness, if it were mine to decide, I would try

the gentler way first. If the contagion has not been contained, it will be quickly obvious and can then be dealt with drastically, as you suggest, and at only a slight additional cost in human power and reserves. But if it can be contained without doing so, then it will save many innocents pain and our holy order much trouble."

"All contagion must be stamped out now, ruthlessly!" another of the Earth-goddesses snapped. "We cannot compromise with evil! One compromise, and it will destroy us!"

"No!" another responded just as firmly. "She's right. Such an operation with four tribes will strain us to the limit and even then can't be guaranteed." The chief put up her hands and all quieted down. "Mother Francine, you are now privy to a great secret— that we are not omniscient in our decisions. I suspect that anyone of your rank probably guesses that anyway. I did when I was Mother.

We have asked the Great God, but she does not clearly respond. Such an operation comes at a bad time, with lower than normal personnel and much to do here. We cannot afford to do it, and we cannot afford not to do it. We—" Suddenly there was a feeling, a presence, that beat down on Vulture's back almost like radiation from the sun. Although still kneeling before the seven, and out of propriety not allowed to turn around, it was clear from the looks of

the Earth-goddesses that someone else had just entered, someone powerful. "Turn and face me, Mother Francine," commanded a voice that was very feminine, musical, even beautiful to hear, yet carried with it such confidence and power that one had to obey.

Vulture turned, head bowed, then looked up and gasped.

She was everything perfect in a Matriyehan, totally feminine yet conveying a sense of power and awe beyond that of any chief. She was totally nude, unblemished, unadorned in any way, and unmarked in a way no Matriyehan could be.

She was not of the priestesshood; she had long hair that might never have been cut cascading down almost to her ankles—hair not dark brown but golden, as golden as the ring—and large, firm breasts and sensuous curves that were unbelievable. Thick lips, and large, dark, eyes that seemed to peer right inside

you completed the picture, but there was something else.

She glowed. She gave off an actual, physical aura that shone and illuminated the

chamber. Such a one could never have been born of human flesh; her perfection was too great, her glory supernatural in the extreme. In almost any terms this was truly a goddess, and there was no need for introductions. The aura of the Earth-daughter played across the whole room and carried with it also more subliminal commands. You didn't want to take your eyes away from her, ever, yet

at the same time there was this overwhelming urge to lie flat upon the floor and

grovel. It was the latter that was finally forced upon Vulture; it actually hurt

to look upon her for very long, such was the glory.

"The Holy Mother seems quite capable, far more capable than any of you at making

hard decisions, and more pragmatic as well," the Earth-daughter scolded. "Holy Mother, I shall grant you whatever you require to complete your mission. Ask and

it will be yours. Eliminate this evil as you choose to do it. Purge their souls in my name. Do this for me and I shall cleanse you and raise you up. My mother gives me all power." And, just like that, she was gone once again. You could feel her go, and feel the aching loss of that going. Even Vulture was hard-pressed to explain it in other than supernatural terms. After a while she managed to rise to her knees and turn back to the seven, who all seemed somewhat relieved that the decision had been taken out of their hands. "What will you need?" asked the chief. "Until I can return and assess the progress so far, I cannot say," Vulture responded, her throat dry and voice a bit shaky. "It will take time most of all." "Then you shall have it, and whatever else is needed. We know you will not fail. No one can look upon a true goddess and hear Her commands and not obey." Her eyes were shining, as if fanaticism was commonplace, as indeed it was. What believer could fail to be a fanatic when her goddess shows up and speaks? Vulture knew that Mother Francine's eyes now showed the same sense of worship and devotion. "When do you wish to leave?" "As soon as possible, Holiness," she responded firmly. "You have the goddess within you now, forever," the chief told her. "She is with you and in you. Few ever are so honored. Therefore, we have no true secrets from you, for if you succeed you shall be raised up as she has promised. Come." They gave her a new cloak and staff, much finer than the old, and then they took her down a long set of stairs that few knew existed, until it seemed as if they were descending into the very heart of the Earth-Mother. Then, finally, they stood in the darkness, but there was wind and a sense of open space. The chief, who was never without the others—damn it—clapped her hands and suddenly lights came on, almost blinding them for a moment like the Earth-daughter's glory. But these lights you got used to, although what they revealed was something totally unexpected. They were electric lights and they illuminated a modern, smooth area that looked for all the world like some sort of transport station.

10. READJUSTMENTS IN THINKING

WE HAD ABOUT GIVEN YOU ALL UP AS DEAD!" Hawks practically screamed when Vulture's call came in. "My god, what's been happening? It's been so long we're starting work on Chanchuk without you!" "You might still be in the dark, but I lucked into something I never imagined on this world. I got here from the Center in under two hours. Would you believe that? After all this... two lousy hours." "What? How?" "Urn... Would you believe I took the train?" That got them almost as much as Vulture's unexpected contact. "Uh—you took the what?" "The train. It's fascinating. Works on some kind of high-speed, magnetic principle, I think. Little cars, really, but there are couplers that indicate more could be added. I have much to tell you, but the first thing is I think we

made a basic mistake with this world. I don't think this is a century-old experiment at all, and I don't think it's the harbinger of things to come so much as the origin of the idea. Hawks—you're a historian. If this were a relatively new project, wouldn't there be artifacts someplace? Ruins, perhaps, or an overgrown road or statue of something! Even after almost a thousand years

they're still all over Earth."

"And there are none there? None that you saw anywhere?"

"Uh uh, and if you think it out it's unlikely. The volcanoes around here are very active. The train tunnels are reinforced with the same synthetic linings used in jump propulsor motors on spaceships and rely as much on physics to keep

them aligned as the rock they're in. You don't import lava snakes or the hundreds of other nasty creatures here, either, all well adapted to this place,

but you also sure wouldn't have them if there had been long-term civilized settlement here. The church is a Center and its chief is the C.A. This was the system imposed by Master System from the start for these people. I think it's been going like this for centuries, maybe eight or nine. The kicker was the biology. I could see Master System transmuting a population but not an indigenous one. The very biology of the chiefs and the limits on the tribes makes it very unlikely there ever was a civilization here."

"And those... trains?"

"That's how it works. Until I was shown them—and only those who have seen the goddess firsthand and received her personal blessing know of them or can use them—I still couldn't figure it all out. How did they maintain control over so vast a region? How did they stamp out innovation? How did they supply and support those countless truth-bearers in the wild? When I went to my first holy

place there was power support for a computer and a limited sort of a mindprinter

system, sophisticated security programs, and fresh supplies. There's not, however, any indication of a direct communications grid. The train supplies them

and also picks up the recordings and drops off new programs. Its power grid is fed by thermal stations deep below the surface and powers the holy places as well. They can cover an enormous area with the network and even shift supervisors around."

Star Eagle broke in. "Then these holy places—they are train stations?"

"Exactly. But let me tell you all the details in order and all the complications

and problems. I need help badly but time is of the essence. We are in serious danger of losing what remains of our people and causing a lot more suffering." As quickly but as thoroughly as possible, Vulture recounted the entire proceedings from their landing to the present situation.

"You actually kissed the ring." Hawks sighed. "Too bad one of your lives wasn't

as a pickpocket. All right—after all this inactivity we have a radically changed

situation and time pressure. Star Eagle?"

"I will need more information," the pilot responded. "I'm going to need a thorough mindprint. Vulture, you will have to be picked up and taken aboard." Almost everyone aboard had been poring over the data bit by bit, trying to come

up with a plan, or at least make sense of it all.

"I don't like the sound of that amnesia drug one bit," Raven commented. "I heard

of stuff like that from my training days, though. Ten to one it's the same stuff they give to Center personnel when they flunk a mindprinter exam or get caught with their nose where it shouldn't be and are sent back to their people to live. Burn 'em out, give 'em a simple mindprinter program on living the old ways, and send them home to live and rot more ignorant than they were before they arrived. It's that kind of crap I think Master System has been tempted to use on whole populations."

"I'm more concerned right now about this Earth-daughter. Any idea what she might be? Or how?" Hawks asked any of them.

"The vision is quite graphic," Star Eagle responded. "She is not hologram or other illusion. Tiny details picked from the scene in Vulture's mind show consistent shadow, light breathing, moist lips, all indicating a living being. The radiation might be easy to fake, but I think she actually does glow. The subliminals indicate the use of a low-power hypnocaster but directionality emanates from her. It is almost as if she had the hypnocaster inside her."

"Is that possible?" Hawks asked.

"Not if you're human, even Matriyehan. The required power sources alone would be injurious to tissue. If we rely on the assumption that she does indeed glow and she has this sort of device inside her, she is not at all human. Yet all external evidence that I can extract indicate she is."

Raven sighed. "I been thinkin' about Nagy."

Hawks was startled. "Yes? What about him?"

"There was just something about him, something not right somehow. He was afraid only once that I saw, and that was when he thought his dead body might be ejected with a Val ship present. Now why would he be afraid of that if he's dead? No earthly use to nobody—I mean, you've seen what a vacuum does to a body anyway. And then there was that small power surge, almost exactly like the surge we recorded when that Val we blew up sent out its little module and that ran and jumped. Suppose... suppose Nagy wasn't human, either. Suppose he was something else, something transmuted to fool the best of man and machine but something a Val would discover anyway if it picked up the body—or maybe if it just scanned the body."

"I have his medical records and his mindprints," Star Eagle pointed out. "They show nothing unusual."

"Yeah, and neither does Vulture's. If we didn't have Vulture, if I hadn't seen the whole thing with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe such a creature could exist—no offense."

"That's all right. I am a creature," Vulture responded off-handedly. Isaac Clayben was fascinated by the line of thought that Raven had kept to himself all this time. "You mean you think my Arnold Nagy was a creature, as well? Like Vulture?"

"Uh uh. Not like Vulture, but with the same purpose. To fool everybody, human and computer. To hide. Look, I know this sounds crazy, off the wall, but Vulture was there and heard and saw it all, too. The way Nagy talked in his last moments

about the heavy price to be paid using the transmuter. Almost a sense of loss, or longing."

Vulture nodded. "Yes, that's it exactly. I hadn't thought of it much, though, but you're right."

"Doc, let me ask you—could you turn me into a horse? I mean a real, authentic horse, but with my memories?"

Clayben thought a moment. "There would be problems with memory storage and reinforced muscle controls, but it could be done using a modification of the memory storage system used on Vulture. Yes. Why?"

"What about a Val, Doc? Assuming you had the template for one, could you turn me into a living machine?"

"If I had the template, yes. The difficulties involved in control and reflexes and the like would be almost the opposite of the horse, but memory storage would

be no problem, although you would literally no longer be human. Biochemistry would be replaced by programs, which are never as complex or complete as the natural thing. But, yes. What are you driving at?"

"Suppose you took a Val, for example, and tried to transmute it into a human being? Not human—but a perfect fake? One that would bleed and wheeze and drink booze and smoke cigars and tell duty jokes and would be able to manipulate scanners to show the human insides you expect and would be able to make a mindprinter jump through the land of hoops Vulture can?"

"It is—possible. Not with what we have here. It would take an incredibly complex

computer with massive memory to do it, and possibly long periods of research and

experimentation, but, yes, it could be done, I suppose. The price, however, would be quite high. As I said, you can only simulate so much. The creature would have to be half human, with biochemical responses, emotions, feelings of pleasure and pain, yet half machine, with a synthetic inner structure, power source, programmability—it would be an incredibly complex task, and it would create something that had the weaknesses of humans without the powers of the machines. Why would you create such a thing?"

Raven sat back and chewed on his cigar. "To replace a real human, to put your machine in a key place where it would never be suspected. As a spy, Doc. The perfect spy. I saw Nagy in action, Doc. He took on a Val head-to-head and he won. He thought as fast as the Val, and he out-thought it in planning and maneuvering. And those languages. He knew every language, every damned dialect there was, while all the time he kept playin' the beer-drinkin', cigar-smokin',

good old security boy."

"But—he even had women. He enjoyed sex," China pointed out. "He excelled at that, too," she added, "although I never had his child."

"You said it, Doc. Given a big enough machine to write a program that complicated and you can give your creature anything you want. Almost anything, anyway. He took his turn with China, and it didn't take. Why? He wasn't human. Now we have this goddess. Same thing. She's human but she can't be. More important, she gives the orders but she don't wear the ring. Only a real human can wear or possess that ring. She could have the power source and all the gadgets you could want built in."

"Hold on," Hawks said. "This is all fascinating, but if some sort of humanoid Val was the top authority down there, it would violate the core program, the very reason for the existence of Centers in the first place. Humans must rule the day-to-day affairs of a planetary civilization."

But Clayben was taken by the idea. "This is not necessarily a violation. It would be if she did rule, but she does not. She is rarely seen and then only

by
a few. Clearly she was not even a participant in the argument over how to
handle
the tribes. When authority must weigh alternatives and cannot decide on
policy,
it goes to its machines, its computers, and asks for advice. They were
heavily,
probably evenly, divided, and the chief administrator didn't want to alienate
either side by making a firm decision. So they put it to the Great God—their
decision to do so—and the Earth-daughter intervened and decided as requested.
It
is like making a compact with the devil. If one does not consider all the
angles
and close all the loopholes, the devil will take advantage. Humans can choose
freely to abrogate their decisions to machines. We do it all the time right
here
on Thunder. Whenever a complex issue is beyond us we defer to Star Eagle's
superior data, speed, and analytical skills. I can't believe it of Nagy even
now, but Raven may be quite correct here."
Hawks sighed. "So we're dealing with some sort of powerful and unusual Val,
whose loyalty, of course is to the system, working with a master computer
through a religion. Vulture is now on the inside and in good graces— maybe
good
enough to switch rings."
"If I am successful at stamping out all vestiges of creativity and progress,"
Vulture replied. "Let's face it—it may already be too late, but probably not.
Still, sooner or later it's gonna fall apart. The data will be inconsistent,
the
charade our people are playing down there will come undone, and that will be
the
end of it. If I don't do what the Earth-daughter and the hard-liners on the
council demand, I'll never get close enough to that ring again to make a
switch.
If I do, then I'll be destroying the minds and futures of four hundred or more
people, not to mention five very brave members of this company that I
personally
recruited to go down there."
"Then the only logical solution," China said, "is to do both."
They all turned to the blind girl expectantly, and she seemed to sense it.
"We have been too conservative, I think. We were afraid of activating a
trained
and fully equipped SPF unit. Now we know they're all natives, and the bulk of
our trooper opposition is technically superior but ignorant and inexperienced
even when their hidden mindprint programs are triggered. We thought if we kept
our raiding party at the level of stones and spears, we'd only have to deal
with
the same, but with this—goddess—and the trains and the rest, it simply isn't
so.
Let's use our technology. We have very little to lose at this stage and we're
so
close. We have psychogenetic chambers and mindprinters and biochemical agents.
And now we have access to the trains and the Center. Vulture—you say the
trains
serve the holy places? And that each and every one of the priestesses must go
there if near one?"
"That is true."
"Then the first thing we need, and pretty damned fast, is some truth-bearers

of

our own..."

"Wait a minute!" Raven replied. "That won't work. Remember the SPF have self-destructs if you try something like that."

"Sure, the SPF does—but these aren't SPF. Maybe their grandmothers were, or perhaps more to the point their ancestors, but not them. What kind of mindprinting do you think they give the third rank, anyway? The temple language,

information on the technical weaponry and assets needed, and the chain of communications and command, I bet. Nothing more. They're Matriyehans, not born commandos! That's where we went wrong on this. You could give them the instructions on how to build an ion propulsor unit but they wouldn't be able to

comprehend what the hell it was. No, first things first. Let's snatch a few and

see. If I'm right, we can start turning this thing around in stages."

And she was right. The first two Vulture snatched by using the previously forbidden laser pistol proved relatively easy. Waiting for them had given Vulture time with modern sensors to find out just what was in those holy places

and how they worked. The answer was simple—Master System's standard memory storage modules and a preprogrammed automatic computer sequence. The control computers were quite primitive and quite limited in what they could do. With that climate and level of volcanism it had probably been decided that simple and

compact was best. For the same reason, long communications lines within the rail

tunnels were ruled out. The structural fields needed for the train would wreak havoc with any hardwired system, and ground-to-satellite communications would require a lot of maintenance. Forced to choose between communications or transport, Master System had chosen transport.

"The change to truth-bearer is a transmuter function," Star Eagle reported.

"They have quite a modern setup in the temple masked under that primitive mumbojumbo. They have to—to keep the system working. Reprogramming and reorienting them while letting them pass the mindprinter tests is not much of a

problem, but other than changing their loyalties, don't expect much more than you

see now. Their level of superstition and ignorance is appalling even by Master System's standards. They will obey your orders, Vulture, on coded commands. If you tell them the grass is brack and all women are turtles, they will believe."

"Fair enough, but we need more," Hawks told them. "We need the people who pick up those modules."

"No go there, I think," Vulture replied. "They're on really tight schedules and

they'll be missed. A few hours here or there wouldn't matter—the power's always

erratic in the tunnels—but not the two days it'd take to nab 'em, bring 'em here, process them, and return them."

"Then we'll go with portables. We're going to have to do that with the other truth-bearers anyway."

"You can't run mud-rank programs on them!" Vulture protested. "They're a lot more slick and sophisticated than that."

"Then knock one out, take a print, and make it look convincing so that when she

wakes up she'll think she nipped and fell or something. You're creative. Give

me

one, and I can work up something that won't be a hundred percent, but will be general and generic enough to be useful."

Inside of seven days they had five truth-bearers and the first of the programs.

Vulture decided they could wait no longer on the tribes; even now, using the transport system, it would be guesswork where they'd be and would take some time

to track them down. She needed her truth-bearers in place right now. The rest would have to wait.

The nearest holy place to the last known position of the tribes was about forty

kilometers south-southwest of where the large camp had been, which was a good starting point. Vulture and her five worshipful, obedient retinue spent another

two or three days checking with locals for word of tribal movements. What they heard was disturbing. The four groups had split geographically much farther apart than had been the plan and were established in broad areas with other tribes in between. The land they had was not the best, and they would have more

than the usual struggle to support themselves in those places.

Vulture headed for the nearest new tribe, wondering what the hell could have gone so wrong in just a few weeks with everybody on the alert. Maybe something hadn't seemed quite right to the computer at the holy seat right from the start.

If so, that would be very bad luck.

The tribe welcomed them with the usual rituals and no sign of suspicion or hostility in spite of their numbers, which really wasn't good. They looked worn,

tired out, and clearly had been through a rough time. Vulture recognized a few faces as belonging to Mari tribe, but the priestesses were being welcomed to Tura tribe, another bad sign. She stopped one of the old-timers and asked, "This

used be Mari tribe. Where Mari now? Dead?"

The woman shook her head negatively, which was a relief. "No. Lose honor. Tura say it be for forbidden things Mari tell us do. Take tribe back to old ways. Mari now chief-of babies."

It was actually a relief to hear that Santiago was still alive and healthy, but

Vulture understood the insult. Chiefs who lost their mate attributes were in deepest disgrace; when there was nothing else, honor was everything. Now she would not even be a warrior but in effect a slave, not just of the new chief but

of the entire tribe.

It was late in the day, though, after all the amenities with the chief and firebearer had been settled and the news discussed, before Vulture could seek her out. She did look pretty miserable even though she seemed to enjoy playing with the young children, at least one of which was hers. They had used a slightly mismatched natural brown dye to cover over all her tattoos and badges of rank; she carried no spear nor wore pouch, belt, or adornments. When honor went, everything went.

The old Maria was still in there, though. She viewed the approach of the holy mother with mixed hope and fear, depending on who or what this one turned out to

be.

The holy mother crouched low as Mari knelt and whispered, "Vulture has returned."

She gasped and grabbed Vulture's hand so strongly she threatened to wrench it from its socket. Finally Vulture was able to ask, "Why did this happen? And how?"

"Got word. Runner from Dakuminifar tribe. Truth-bearer showed up. Bad fates, bad medicine." That meant rotten luck. "Suni strange, like demon. Holy Mother know.

Worst tribe to pick. Truth-bearer saw heresy but not stupid. Play along with Suni so Suni no kill right off. Mix potion. Tell Suni potion make Suni body like

rock, spears bounce off, Suni crazy, drink potion. Later scream all night. Next

day Suni not chief, not crazy. Stupid, like child. Remember nothing, not even name or tribe. Nothing. Not know own face in stream. Big fight for new chief. Some of tribe sneak away, go to Maka, Midi, and Mari tribes. Tell all. Mari not

wait. Remember Holy Mother teach drug for chief—no chief. Firebearer mix chief drug in Tura food. Tura never like new ways. Truth-bearer come, look at tribe, seem happy. Do nothing. Go away."

Vulture nodded. "It must be rough on you—like this. But better this way than Suni's way. Damn!" The only alternative Maria had in that time period was to flee, and that would mean loss of honor, reversion, and incorporation into a new

tribe if she survived long enough in the wild. Better to wait here where Vulture

could find her.

"Suni was always the weak link," she continued, as much to herself as to Mari.

"I just hoped, they'd give me more time before checking up. I smell a palace revolution here, from somebody on the council who doesn't like the idea that the

chief administrator couldn't make the hard choice and had to defer to the Earth-daughter." She looked around. "All the truth-bearers here now are my people. Mindprinted. They're still ignorant but they're mine and you can trust them. Never mind how I pulled it off—now we have to reorient everything. What about Maka and Midi?"

"Midi do what Mari do. Same thing, but not as bad. Oona now chief. Made truth-bearer happy but then sent runners to talk Tura. Tura cut out tongues and

send back. No more runners."

Vulture nodded. "All right, then, so Oona's learning real fast and that's good.

Maka?" She could hardly imagine Manka Warlock as this lowly slave and nursemaid.

"Word come Maka flee with Euno, two, three favorites. Rest fight, Maba be chief.

Not good as Oona but not bad as Tura. Like new ways but know of Suni.

Truth-bearer take Suni around to other tribes, show as warning." She shivered. "Warning be real strong!"

"Uh huh. I bet. And what about this tribe? It seems to be totally back to the old ways."

Mari nodded. "Strict discipline. Most no like. Much grumbling. Hard life again.

But tribe obey. Tura is chief. Many still not taken but obey with no other chief. But Tura take Mari—every day, since..."

And that would settle that, particularly with Tura strictly and punishingly enforcing a return to the old ways, and publicly and visibly—and probably violently—raping Mari, the old chief, every day reinforced the change. No

wonder

she moved so tiredly and looked like hell.

"We'll take care of Tura if and when we have to. Right now I'll have to contact

Midi and reassure her and somehow find Warlock and Silent Woman if I can. I'll see if I can spring you two from this to work with us. As soon as we can get organized things are going to start to pop around this dump."

She looked excited but nervous. "Mari's child..."

"Can come along, don't worry. This thing is getting too damned complicated as it

is. For two rocks I'd just blow that damned holy seat to hell and fight the whole galaxy's fleets!"

It really wasn't much of a problem to spring Mari, although taking her child along took a bit more negotiating. Still, if you're going to return to the old ways then you always obey the truth-bearer. Springing Midi and her child was even easier. Although it was never said and all the actions were to the contrary, Vulture and Mari had the strongest impression that Oona not only knew

who Vulture was but that the situation had changed once again. There was some question, though, as to just how much help the two could be. The trap of Matriyeh was that much of the culture was imposed physiologically. One who had lost honor also lost more than the male hormonally triggered attributes; they lost their aggressiveness, some strength, and actually became more submissive and dependent. If one was chief one died a chief or lived forever in dishonor. The fact that the pair were not native mitigated the change only slightly. Still, a portable mindprinter made conversation far easier. They might have lost

much, but not their intelligence or mental skills. Star Eagle had anticipated problems and provided a cartridge to remove the filter. It hardly seemed worth it any more. It made them educated and articulate Matriyehans, but still Matriyehans of the lowest social order. They simply would not fight, even in defense, but they would carry the supplies no matter how heavy or complex. They

would wear nothing, nor would they even eat until Vulture had finished. She argued with them on this over and over to no avail. It was a wrinkle outside Vulture's vast collective experience.

"Look, don't you think we want it?" Maria asked, almost pleadingly. "We were both captains and then chiefs. Independent leaders. We want to be again, but we

can't. You must stop torturing us like this. It's like someone who is crippled.

She wants to walk, but her brain, her muscles, her legs just do not respond. It's not fear. I'm still not afraid to die, and I'm surprised I'm still alive. And I don't want to die. Neither does Midi. But alone, out here, if we were alone, we would die, and our children, too. If something dangerous were to attack and there was no place to hide, even if I had a spear, I could not defend

myself or the others. I just could not bring myself to do it."

"It's humiliating," Midi agreed. "It's like, well, you get muddled or confused and have no real confidence. You can't plan, you can't think straight. The result is you just can't make a decision. What was once clear isn't any more. That may sound nuts, but it just is, that's all. When you lose honor you lose your ability to lead. You can't do anything but follow." She sighed. "If I'd known, I'd have tried Warlock's way or killed myself first, I think. We both had

tribal members who lost honor one way or another but you never thought of it as

something that changed you, just some cultural thing."

Maria sighed. "Maybe you just should have left us with the tribes. At least we would not be a burden."

"Cut the guilt! We've misread this and played into the hands of Master System from the start," Vulture told them. "Maybe we can work with some of the psychochemistry when we have a chance to study this genetic system in detail, but, right now, if all you can do is haul stuff and make pleasant conversation and maybe orient me around here, that's more than enough. I'm mostly concerned about Warlock and her party. Technically, she lost her honor when she ran out on

the tribe. I can't imagine Warlock reverting to your state without committing suicide, so maybe mental power can overcome its effects."

"I had not thought of that," Maria replied. "If she perceives herself, or is perceived by those she took with her, as having lost honor it will happen, and she will not kill herself. That would require a firm personal decision to act.

I

could not have come with you on my own, but you wished it, and the chief ordered it."

Midi nodded, thinking of the Warlock party. "It would be a small new tribe but it would be only a few smaller than we were at the start. I wonder which of them

would become chief."

"One thing's sure," Vulture responded. "Any of the others would want to get as far away from here as fast as possible. We might just have lost them. For the time being, we'll be canvassing all the tribes we run into and if we get any word of them, fine. If not, we'll just have to move without them. I need more personnel now, and I need to get a complete picture of what we're dealing with here. You two just follow me and stay mute in the presence of any others, concentrating only on me."

She had hoped originally to use the tribes to do things more quickly and efficiently, but that was now out. Vulture's "girls"—the mindprinted truth-bearers—would be doing the real work without understanding what they were

doing or why, but more was needed. Oona couldn't be a big help; how did you explain to a Matriyehan native who spoke and thought no other language and had no other experience that you were planning to knock off a goddess and reprogram

an entire theocracy?

For several weeks Vulture and her pair of porters were busily seeking out the native tribes and gathering information. On occasion, using injectors or even a

small stunner, Vulture was able to knock out and reprogram a truth-bearer or two, and once, at a train stop, she managed to knock out and record the mindprint of a second-rank priestess who maintained the places, making it convincing that she'd slipped on a wet spot and fallen and knocked herself out.

It was a major victory.

"I don't want this to go to waste, and I think you two will be better off aboard

Thunder, particularly with the kids," Vulture told the rebel women one day.

"Besides, we'll let China and Clayben look at how these psycho-chemical processes function. Maybe there's some way out of this."

"Yes," they both agreed. "If you say so."

Thunder was more than agreeable. "But what will you be doing?" Hawks asked.

Vulture sighed. "I think it's time I became one of those courier priestesses," she told him. "I ate a couple of, very good computer scientists back in the bad

old days on Melchior. I think it's time I got an idea of just exactly what we're dealing with."

By the time Vulture reappeared to report again, weeks later, much progress had been made aboard.

"The changes in Santiago and Ng are permanent as far as their submissive nature goes," China reported. "Essentially, their bodies simply lose the ability to manufacture certain brain chemicals and hormones, reducing them to that. The solution, such as it is, is to administer chemical substitutes for what their bodies can no longer make on a day-to-day basis. The trouble is that the human being is such an adaptable animal. We learn to live on ice floes in the Arctic and in equatorial jungles. The longer they remain in that state, the more hardened their thinking will be to that type of behavior, and we can't do more than a tiny stabilization without risking their unborn children, since both are pregnant. Afterward—well, maybe with some mindprinter therapy and daily injections, they'll come back to their old selves. I can't help thinking that if

I weren't blind Matriyeh might be a world for me. It seems as if everybody's pregnant all the time."

"Mostly," Vulture agreed, "but remember that maybe one in nine children will survive to adulthood. The biggest problem they'll have down here, if they can ever break this cycle and create a civilization, is that medicine, sanitation, and the lack of constant hunting and gathering will dramatically decrease infant

mortality, but yet they'll keep having babies. I don't see how the southern continent keeps so primitive without this church-imposed system."

"We have a theory. It appears really brutal there. The average age of an adult is in the low teens, and they don't even seem to have control of fire. Clayben says they're in a prehuman state, more like smart apes, and doubts they even have what we would think of as a language. It's possible that whole southern continent overstepped the proscribed bounds and was given a good dose of that mind-destroying drug. It could be that some of the fruits peculiar to the south

were bred to produce it naturally. We're not sure, but also it's possible that the south is the real experiment. Data suggests the geology there would make the

north's transportation and communications network impossible to maintain. If anything, it's rougher geologically than the north, but has fewer large animals of prey. But enough of that. What do you have?"

"Plenty. The standard data packs retrieved from the holy places are brought to a

smooth and obviously artificial chamber below the statue of the Great God. There

are no controls, screens, speakers, or the like, but there is one wall composed

entirely of slots. With proper ceremony you stick the cubes in the slots, wait until they turn from blue to red, then remove them and replace them in your pouch. Because there are chambers on all sides and the train below, I feel pretty certain that the computer console isn't very large and is possibly a modified starship core command module and data center. It looks to be about the

same size as the one we have on Thunder. That's still one hell of a computer, though—but I get the very strong impression that it controls only the direct machines within the temple and the communications link to the satellite above. It's more a transfer station than a command center like the one on Janipur. It

takes the raw data, sorts and correlates it, then beams it out to someplace far from this system, and gets its orders back from there. Its output is strictly through the modules, the mindprinter, and, of course, the Great God, who not only speaks but also moves a bit on occasion while giving commands. It's pretty impressive."

"Pretty limited," China agreed. "And it matches our thinking. The codes it uses

to transmit to Master System are new, but the frequencies and methods are ancient. Instead of being one of the latest installations, Star Eagle now thinks

this may have been one of the earliest colonies, when Master System was still experimenting. Maybe even the first and the origin of the Center concept, which

was later refined. So Master System just left it that way, and stuck a ring there as well because it figured it would be damned impossible to lift it. Good.

Then the master computer of Matriyeh only knows what is fed into it, not what it

directly observes and measures, and is basically a simple device used to maintain a simple system. That explains the Earth-goddess, who was probably added later on, maybe much later, when the south got out of hand and needed direct action. She doesn't run the church—she is the guardian of that computer!"

"My thinking exactly. If she ran things, she'd make herself more visible. Nothing like an appearance by her to inspire the troops and send the new field agents out with fanatical devotion. But that's not her job, of course. That's the council's job."

"Yes. What is most significant in the matter of sending the truth-bearer independently to deal with your tribes is that it was against the direct orders

of the Earth-goddess to let you give it a try first."

"There was something of a power struggle," Vulture agreed. "It's still the talk

of the second rank. The chief held on to her job, but there was a shake-up on the council and the balance was changed. A couple of second-rank officers got the call to godhood, and a couple of the ones on the council passed on into the

company of the Great God having attained absolute perfection. You get the idea."

"Yes. What else?"

"I've managed to make a pretty good guess at the layout of the entire temple. It's big, but not as big as you'd think by looking at it. One thing I hadn't noticed originally was how stagnant the air was. Torches bum straight up, and the place smells. The only reason it's not unbearable is the transport center beneath. Every time a car leaves there's a pull of air in from the entrance all

the way through."

"It's that solid?"

"It seems like it. The first rank have large quarters higher up from the administrative areas. Hard to say how large they are but they're said to be straight up, and the curve of the rock at that point wouldn't indicate that they

were very high up. It occurs to me that if you could block the train for a period, the air would just sit there, since the valley itself seems to have an almost permanent inversion. It rarely clears up there, but there're never any

bad storms.

I think we have a pretty good chance that it's nearly a sealed air system there."

"Hmmm... Yes, and we have now some pretty extensive knowledge of Matriyehan biochemistry. Yes, this is coming together nicely. If it wasn't for that damned

Earth-daughter, this would be ready to go. Still, we have some ideas on her, as

well, although it's going to be very chancy in the end. You will have to face facts, Vulture. We can deal with her, but unless we guess right a hundred percent on slight knowledge, the master computer is eventually going to miss her

and sound the alarm. If so, short of having all five rings and using them properly, there is no way in the universe that we can help or protect these people. But we will give it a try. That's all I can offer."

"It will have to do. I'll remain in this role until we're ready to go and continue intelligence-gathering. I'm supposed to be put on a route next week that might take me close to Oona. If I get the chance I'll check on her. She's a

good kid."

"All right, but take no unnecessary risks. We were very lucky on the Janipur job, and we didn't realize it and got overconfident. Even without the Earth-daughter to deal with we are still going to have to make many educated guesses and suppositions and trust to luck for the fine details, and we haven't

had much luck on this job so far."

"Yeah—I think luck owes us one."

Vulture took a chance going to Oona's territory. True, she wasn't due for a new

set of rounds for a few days and was technically off duty, but she had no real authority to use the train for a personal mission, and there was great risk if it was found out she'd done so. She didn't care by this point. This time, too, Oona, who had been a witness to the startling transformation of truth-bearer into holy mother in that encounter that now seemed ages ago, was not kept in the

dark as to who her high-ranking visitor was.

"Oona—Holy Mother must know. Do Oona believe real truth-bearers or new truth-bearers?"

The former firebearer, now chief, who'd been the only one to keep a few comforts

in spite of constant observation, shrugged. "Oona not know. New truth-bearers have much magic, but old way has honor."

"If all Oona tribe had way to end old way, make tribes free to live as wanted, even if way much dangerous, much chance die or worse, small chance be free—then?"

"Oona no like live hard when tribe can live easier," she answered carefully.

"But Oona no like there be no rules, no true belief. Each chief have own faith,

own rules. Whole Earth-Mother break from cracks."

It was an understandable and quite sophisticated line of thinking for such a one

as this, a native who knew nothing else. She no longer believed in the old church; if she ever had, the sight of truth-bearers being killed without some angry god striking dead the killer dissolved that. She understood that much of it was drags and trickery, even if the trickery itself was magic. But this was the world and the life she knew, and she understood it and her place in it—and

there was comfort in that. She was concerned that if the old order broke, it would collapse everything she knew and leave only a chaos worse than the life she now had. Hatred of unjust rule and oppression was balanced by fear of the unknown—fear, in fact, of freedom. The church was a hated evil—but it was all she had.

Vulture sighed and wondered if she wasn't right. They wanted an easier life, more freedom to make better tools and weapons and gain some shelter and protection and security, but their own racial preconditions and genetic makeup would make any real sort of civilization as others understood it next to impossible here. With settlement and agriculture would come that security, but with an exponentially expanding population that was nonetheless limited by biological imperatives to a hundred per chief, things would explode in violence

and the losers would be slaughtered again and again. Perhaps over thousands of years a workable and unique system would develop, but just as likely they would

descend back into permanent barbarism and remain there. The only other way would

be to impose it through alien technology, and even then the amount of people involved would be enormous and the task long and daunting. It had seemed so simple when they had decided to join the four tribes—a few hundred out of a couple of million. They just hadn't understood the complexity of the problem. Vulture could only change the subject. "Holy Mother still looks for Maka. Oona hear?"

The chief nodded. "Maka no chief now. m small tribe two day walk west. Soba tribe. Be captured long .time. Oona scout see, no talk. Get word from truth-bearer. One of Holy Mother's. Not know which."

"Lose honor?"

"Not know. Should have, but Maka strange like Holy Mother."

"Not like Holy Mother but Holy Mother know what Oona mean. Thank you." Finding the right truth-bearer in this whole area was a job for which she didn't

have the time, but she felt she could find this Soba tribe and did so, although

it took three days. Vulture was concerned at what she would find, since losing honor was not confined to chiefs. It was triggered by a mental attitude, a way of looking at oneself that precipitated permanent changes. If a whole tribe all

thought of themselves as cowards, as running away from power and responsibility,

then they might all be a bunch of submissive slaves, and that would be too bad.

Vulture could particularly use Manka Warlock in what was to come.

What she found was not nearly as bad as she expected. The tribe was small, no more than twenty-five with perhaps nine children. Soba herself was almost tiny;

unusually short for a Matriyehan and quite thin and wiry, she was almost dwarfed

by her tribe. That showed her to be doubly dangerous and clever that she had managed to defeat or outwit the larger contenders. They had blundered into the tribe by chance less than three days after fleeing. Warlock had already lost her

male aspects and, in spite of herself, Silent Woman had been taking them on, although slowly. The strange, mute woman had been the most independent and self-sufficient in the wild, and nature had started the process, but she had no

will or desire to be chief. She quite literally led them into Soba's entire

group and refused to challenge. Because the process had been involuntary and incomplete, and because Silent Woman simply did not know the Matriyehan standards for loss of honor, she had not suffered. Warlock looked somewhat different—softer, with a tighter figure, but she still held the spear and wore the accoutrements of a warrior. She had taken on many of the traits that accompanied a loss of honor, but she could still fight. She seemed both relieved and chagrined to see Vulture.

"Maka fight two fights," she told the creature. "Fight enemies of Soba tribe, fight Maka." She was, in effect, at war with her body's own built-in instincts.

She had run and thus lost honor, but she simply couldn't see it that way herself. Moreover, Warlock was a psychopath, someone who loved to kill. "Maka not quick as think. Get old. Make mistakes."

"Why didn't you just kill her and run with the tribe?"

"No chance. Most of tribe not obey Maka. Rebel. Think truth-bearer one of Holy Mother's. Big mistake. Used magic, turned part of tribe with Maka not know. Saw too late. Enemy cheat!" she spat angrily. "Holy Mother say not come, only look, see. Holy Mother wrong. Now Maka not be chief again. Know this. Not lose honor. Betrayed. Now Maka fight self. Hard."

"Yeah, I know, I blew it. I didn't understand the way things really worked up there, and I admit it. But we're ready to move soon, and we need help." Quickly she sketched in the situation to Warlock. "Do you think you're up to helping?"

"Maka still good warrior. How long do not know. Soba good chief. Smart. Young. Know much. Ambitious. Holy Mother talk with Soba if need tribe to help. Soba still listen to Maka. Ask, take advice."

"Then we will both talk with her."

Warlock was right about Soba, a personality tough and hard but not at all cowed by her culture. When she was still a little girl she'd overheard two truth-bearers comparing notes, talking patronizingly about the tribes and discussing the tricks they pulled on this chief or that. She had never told—who would believe her?—but she had never again had any faith in the one true way. Soba very much believed in magic, but she had no such belief in Great Gods or testing places. Magic might be great, but behind magic were people who were the same as her. In a sense she was the ultimate cynic in a world not made for such people; even if faced with a moving, talking statue of the Great God, she would be less impressed than wary of its power while looking for the ones making it move. She had heard of the innovations the four tribes had briefly introduced: the bolo and bow and arrow, methods of storing food and perhaps concentrating and aiding its growth. She didn't believe in afterlives or heavenly rewards, and she was impatient for something better—nor was she alone. Many of the chiefs felt this way secretly, but they could never get along with each other for any coordinated action and the church's magic was far too strong. Neither she nor the others would rebel because they did not believe they had a chance, but if they thought they did...

"Thunder tribe not gods but people. Look, act different than Matriyehans, but people. Thunder tribe has great magic and wants put end to church. Be many

Earth-Mothers, many ruled by great chief of church." The ring was something Soba could understand. A master of power behind it all, with all the knowledge of magic, but with one weakness. With the five magic rings they could destroy the all-powerful chief. In the meantime, they might be able to help—if they had a sufficient number of local people to make it work. She thought about it, believing some of it, probably not believing the rest, but she listened, and she deliberated, and she consulted her firebearer and others whom she trusted. Finally she said, "Tribe fights, dies, for honor, for food, for territory. No can stop. Fight, eat, make babies, sleep. Over and over, then die. Do this to stay same, do same, be same. If tribes must fight, if warriors, chiefs must die, why not fight, die, to get better? Tribe die anyway. If be one chance..." She looked at them. "Soba tribe help." "If Soba live, Soba be greatest chief of all Matriyeh," said Manka Warlock. "Not be long," Vulture told them. "Wait for call of Thunder."

11. WARRIORS OF THE STORM

A STORM WAS BREWING—ONE OF THOSE VIOLENT, swirling storms that broke large trees and blasted rock. Manka Warlock spotted the figures moving through the swirling fog and rain and gestured to other warriors to approach. There was no need for caution; no Matriyehans would be wearing such packs or carrying such equipment as these. Most were Vulture's third-rank truth-bearers, along with Vulture herself, but also along were Maria Santiago and Midi Ng, looking much stronger and better. Rather than wait the extra time before the children were born, China, working through Star Eagle, had developed supplements to replace what their own bodies did not make in proportions so close to normal that they had no chance of affecting the unborn. While both women were still having identity problems between their old and present selves, both felt so much better and more confident that they insisted on being a part of this, and Vulture needed them desperately. Both now carried far different spears than they had before—long-stock laser rifles with heavy wide-field charges. The base camp was in a sheltered cleft partway up the mountains in back of the holy seat. The trains ran automatically according to a preset schedule and any variations of that would have triggered a computer alarm, but they had been quite useful for getting people and supplies to this point. Vulture and the planners on Thunder would have preferred to send the raiders into the temple by train but dared not risk it. They could only get a few in that way anyway, and the station was computer monitored and security codes were required. The objective was to be undetected to the last moment if possible, and, if luck really ran their way, perhaps win the whole game. "That inversion around the holy seat makes the weather around even worse," Vulture griped. "This isn't going to be easy, but I doubt if they even considered this way in. Soba's been shown the charts and diagrams and understands the idea?" A restored Warlock nodded. "I will work at her side entirely in Matriyehan. We have worked out a series of sounds based on the hunt. We've done some practice with the ropes and grappling hooks. I can tell you none of them are too

confident that either the ropes or the hooks will hold, but even Silent Woman is getting pretty good with them. I still wish she could have been left with Oona and the children, but in her own way, she can be most insistent and it is her right as a warrior. At least she won't yell and give us away. The children are all right?"

Vulture nodded, noting to herself that Manka Warlock, up to a few months ago, would never even have considered that question. "Oona isn't any too confident of all this, but it wasn't hard to talk her into that much. If we make it, they'll be safe and we'll owe her. If not, her tribe will adopt them. We can't overstate the need for stealth and the equal need to follow the leaders of our team no matter what a chief takes it in her mind to do. I don't think the traps are very elaborate but we don't want to spring any if we can help it."

"They respect magic, so don't worry on that score. They also know the usual passwords, although Matriyehan is so unlike French they might not be able to manage them right. Last-resort stuff. That is, if the passwords haven't been changed."

"How could they be, with two-thirds of the priestesses spread all over the countryside? The other important thing is that you kill only if you have to. We need the higher-ups alive if we're to learn anything, and we can always work on the third rank later."

"I know, damn it," Warlock muttered disappointedly.

"I was going to give you a laser pistol and charge belt, but that belly bulge of yours rules that out. Better take one of the rifles."

Warlock nodded. "Who would ever think of me as a mommy? Not me, I can tell you. I'm glad I've got the rifle—I feel awkward as hell. Truth is, though, that part of me I keep pushed back kind of likes the idea. Both parts of me will be relieved when the little bugger's out. I will be all right so long as Soba keeps her own head. In a pinch, I would not disobey her, Vulture, except to save her life. Not for anything."

"I understand. Midi is going with part of the tribal group; I'm keeping Man with me but she will be available if needed. Crazy world, this. Because they're pregnant by other chiefs, they aren't bound to Soba and can't be right now. They'll cover your backside. I suggest we all huddle —Soba, too, and her firebearer, and go over this as much as we can. I get the feeling we could wait forever for perfect weather, but if we get a good break we're going up."

Matriyehans were used to mountains and climbing over potentially slippery rock, but this was new territory and there were no passes here, no worn trail in the rock to show the safe way. Other than the remote geophysical survey Lightning had conducted, there was no way to know just what these cloud-shrouded mountains might hold.

The weather broke enough for them to dare a start two mornings after the arrival

of the rest of the team. It was not an easy climb, and there were areas requiring the use of pitons and strong arms to toss grappling hooks more than once. Both concepts were fairly new to the natives, but there had been sufficient practice that they accepted the methods even if they didn't completely trust them.

There wasn't much living on these old, high mountains although this son of terrain was a natural for lava snakes and other, smaller beasts. Either they were regularly cleaned out or the food sources just weren't right. It suggested

that this complex might well have been created artificially rather than discovered and adapted.

More than once someone slipped or fell, and it was then that they learned how vital those uncomfortable ropes fitted through harnesses were. The natives in particular had balked at them from the start, fearing damage to themselves, but

it hadn't taken more than one fall to make wearing the rope and harness an unquestioned duty.

Going through the cloud bank took a full day, with visibility negligible and every step treacherous. Just above it was an almost sheer rock wall that took the better part of another day just to plan on how to climb. Still, using power

grapples and careful piton work, they managed it and reached a nearly level area. The air between the two cloud layers was remarkably clear and they could actually see the summit, although it would still be several days away. The winds, however, were blowing wild and unpredictable, and it most assuredly was not always so clear up there. They had reached the snow line.

Most of the natives had never really seen snow firsthand before and were scared

of k. Not even the people from Thunder had any real experience with it, but they

had mindprinter programs to teach them some of its treacheries. Clayben had calculated that the Matriyehan body could tolerate a wind chill to twenty below

zero without permanent damage for a couple of days, but they knew they had to move fairly rapidly in spite of their experience. Above three thousand meters, they found even ordinary tasks became harder to do and strength seemed to ebb. Pills fabricated for the problem helped, but weren't a cure for the lack of oxygen.

They avoided as much of the snow field as they could, sticking to areas of exposed rock, heading not for the summit but for the lowest and closest visible

point. By the time they got to it, they were nearly frozen and utterly exhausted, but they were ready, even eager, to go down. At least there would be

no interior cloud cover to battle, as well, and the valley stretched out before

them in miniature.

Still, the mere sight of it was enough to both cheer and enrage the natives.

"Truth-bearers," Soba said, her voice dripping contempt. "Lie-bearers. Live in protection in ways forbidden tribes. Soba want cut out lying tongues of whole truth-bearer tribe. Make truth-bearers live like make tribes live."

The climb had not been without cost; four natives had been either killed or mortally injured. Still, the party was more than ample—if they could make it down into the valley undetected. The slope curved inward and in places was quite

smooth, and the longest ropes they had were about forty meters, which would make

the twenty-eight hundred meters descent long and dangerous. With satellite monitors designed to detect energy surges and so much sheer terrain to cover, it was little wonder that this route was simply rejected as a way in and left as a natural defense. The power grapplers alone had been a risk, although a minor one—the burst was basically a small explosion and lasted for only fractions of a second, not nearly long or powerful enough to allow a satellite fix.

"Hawks called this plan brilliantly insane," Mari noted, looking around and shivering. "A rag-tag bunch of primitive women, less than forty in all, nine pregnant, and only one with real mountaineering experience, tackling a rough and uncharted climb using limited equipment with the idea of overthrowing a system.

It is absurd on its face—no wonder Master System never thought it could be done." She looked around at them. "This race may be primitive and strange, but no others could have done this. If we accomplish our mission, it is because Master System has done its job too well. Making a race that could survive under

the most primitive of conditions on a world like this for a thousand years, perhaps, breeding the strongest and toughest and weeding out the rest. I don't know if these people will ever achieve a level of civilization as we understand

it, but there is something truly great in them."

They weren't concerned with observation on the descent, but getting down was difficult and yet had to be done fairly quickly, hopefully between dawn and dusk. There just didn't seem to be anyplace a body of them could stop and camp for the night anywhere on the way down, nor even places where more than four or five could stand at a time. Once they started, it would have to be a continuous progression.

Many were still hanging from ropes as the sun set, but Midi was first down to the outcrop atop the temple proper shortly after, and they were all about to complete the descent using the ropes and guides set by the ones who went before.

At least the near-stagnant air of the valley helped; one good storm or gust of wind at any point would have undone them.

Finally, though, the thirty-five who'd made it all the way were atop the crag above the temple complex, about fifteen meters higher than the great statue over

the temple entrance. Now would come a period almost as difficult as the journey

had been: remaining up there all day, without making any noise or movement that

could be detected by anyone below, and waiting. Sleep was necessary for all, and

arrangements had to be complete before the raid could begin that night.

Vulture was busy throughout the afternoon and evening finishing her planning and

preparations. At least they could risk energy tools and weapons, particularly in

and around the temple area. No satellite or computer ever built could distinguish proper from improper energy use in a place where electronic sensors,

booby traps, and computer and communications links were established.

They would have to take one big risk by using what Vulture had developed as a favorite trick on Janipur. The only subcarriers of the Center's computer-to-satellite link were too old and noisy for any real communication but

would still carry a simple pulse tone if the transmitter were aimed at the correct angle toward the master transmitter.

A very slight breeze had been detected almost at the start, and Vulture relaxed.

It was always a small breeze, always toward them, and always once an hour, just

when one of the continually traveling cars of the internal magnetic railroad would come in to the temple station, stop for one minute, then pull out again. Timing here was vital; at least basic communications had to be risked. One tone

up for thirty seconds, then another tone back down from the fighter hidden in orbit—not to them but to one of the mindprinted truth-bearers well away from the

valley. This would be the second-rank field supervisor Vulture had managed to control through the generic program Star Eagle had created.

It was near midnight when they were rested, awake, and ready to act. Vulture aimed at the spirelike peak that was in fact the master transmitter and held down the button on her tiny transceiver for thirty anxious seconds, then released it and flipped a small switch. If there was any sort of answering tone

they would have to wait, but after ten minutes they had none. If all was going well, their second-rank priestess was now either aboard a transport car or waiting for the next one.

Then, as the tribe watched in wonderment, the four from Thunder used small laser

drills to bore into the rock with beams of dull, magical light. The rock was thicker than they had anticipated; they had to pierce perhaps a full meter before the first beam broke through and automatically cut off, more for the others.

Now the packs and equipment they had carried with great difficulty up the mountain and down again were transformed. Hoses were unreeled and pushed through

the open slots. Vulture and her truth-bearers took rectangular canisters and made ready to descend to the temple entrance. They put on dark breathing masks after reminding the others, "Breathe through nose only. No mouth. Talk little."

Although all had been injected with a chemical antidote before starting the climb, it was going to be very smoky inside, and the gas would still irritate their throats and lungs.

Vulture went straight down to the second-rank headquarters. No one was about in

the main temple at this hour, but there was always a duty officer. She walked in, pistol in hand, and fired on stun. The duty officer stiffened but never saw

what hit her, then slumped forward. Quietly now, the Vulture team fanned out, placing their packages in strategic locations and then pressing their activators. A second signal from Vulture's small hand-held transmitter would set

them all off at once.

Satisfied, the team now waited near the entrance as most of Soba tribe descended

to the temple opening and took up guard positions. Above, Maria Santiago waited

as well, sitting on the remaining canisters. There was no way to be absolutely positive that the next train car would be the one Vulture's mindprinted priestess had rigged, as nearly as she could figure it would arrive forty minutes from the time it had been loaded up by the agent in the field. Although none of them could hear it, the car came in and stopped at the station far beneath the statue of the Great God. There was a significant airflow from the entrance through the temple complex. They waited one more minute; if there was a second breeze they would have to work quickly, in an hour or less. If more than a minute passed without it, then they knew that the car was the right one and had done its work. The unoccupied car came in and stopped. The door opened, and as it did it drew back a triggering mechanism. There was a sharp report, and the converter in the car was exposed and began to spark. The car was unable to draw further power from the system and was effectively stalled. The same action also released the valves on an entire canister assembly. Above, the computer sensed the power outage and sent a signal by alternate routes to the automated repair faculty in the station. Power outages were common, but the schedule had to be kept. Service robots popped out of walls, glided to the tracks, lifted the whole-egg-shaped car out, determined it was not immediately repairable, and went to get a spare. By the time they did, the canisters were empty. By three minutes by Vulture's timer, and those of Mari and Midi, there had been no second rush of air. At that exact moment, Man and Vulture detonated their canisters. The gas was slightly lighter than air at that altitude; it would rise, slowly, upward and permeate the structure whose system would now be fairly well sealed. Some might leak out the entrance but that didn't matter; what mattered was that the much cooler, heavier air inside the temple wasn't about to flow out very far into the warmer, lighter valley air. It would sit. With gas entering all the levels from both above and below, everyone would get a good lungful of the stuff. It wouldn't kill, but, tailored as it was to the Matriyehan constitution, it would induce deep coma. The gas had been concocted after analysis of the biochemistry of Midi and Man on Thunder, and the antidote tested on them. Without the antidote, the victims would continue to sleep until they starved to death. But there was the possibility that not everyone would be exposed enough in the forty minutes the gas had before it began to break down into harmless compounds; there might well be a few people in the temple who would still be awake—and dangerous. And there was no chance that the Earth-daughter or the computer would even notice. They were prepared for the few who might not get the full dosage; that was one reason for all the people in the assault team. Vulture felt certain

that

the computer would know only what it was told; it might notice the lack of activity toward morning, but by then their work should be completed, and she doubted that the computer would be a problem. The real worry was its guardian, the goddess with the built-in hypnocaster, who could alert the computer and compromise the mission.

Vulture's immediate search was for the quarters of the council. They were not quite where she'd guessed they were, but they were not hard to find in the end.

For Matriyeh, the rooms were about as comfortable as any she had seen, but the chief administrator, unfortunately, didn't seem to have a bigger or grander room

than the others. It took a few minutes of checking still forms in comfortable-looking beds—with silken sheets and pillows—before the right one was

found. The ring was not on the C.A.'s finger, and it took more precious minutes

to search through the drawers and compartments of jewelry and ornaments, an impatient Vulture praying that it was not locked away in some safe.

It wasn't, but only a wild afterthought revealed its location. There was no reason to lock away anything in the inner sanctum of the temple but even these top-echelon leaders really believed in the religion, and the ring was the ultimate symbol of authority.

She kept it under her pillow.

Now, at last, Vulture twisted the necklace charm she'd carried from the start and removed the copy of the ring, then compared it to the original. It wasn't at

all bad. Subjected to analysis it might have been revealed as a fake, but without that kind of precise inspection, no one would know. She quickly made the

switch, then discovered that there was a slight but important difference in the

two: the real ring didn't fit properly back in the charm. On impulse, Vulture tried the ring on her own finger and found that it fit—a bit too tight, but she

left it there anyway.

They had been inside a full forty-six minutes by Vulture's timer, and so far they had not encountered a conscious enemy, let alone the Earth-daughter.

Vulture was beginning to worry about the ease of it. She checked the computer access room and found Manka Warlock, Midi, and Maria Santiago pretty well set up. Silent Woman, looking proud of herself and them all, stood guard. Soba tribe

was checking every room, nook, and cranny of the temple, while the team's truth-bearers guarded the entrance and the stairs to the train to head off any unexpected surprises.

The failure of the Earth-daughter to appear stood to foul up their plans. They couldn't really leave until she was dealt with. "Maybe she's more of a tool than

the independent operator we thought," Maria suggested. "Maybe she only comes when she's summoned."

They felt a sudden rush of air. The transport system was operating again, and by

this point most if not all of the gas had converted to harmless elements. They removed their breathing masks. Only a trace of the musty-smell odor remained. Those knocked out would stay out, but anyone new coming in would be no more affected than they.

"Well, we can't wait for her," Vulture replied. "I'm gonna pull four of my

priestesses and start work off the main entrance. If our gorgeous goddess shows up, holler if you can."

The most they dared carry with them due to the weight had been two portable mindprinters; processing the temple priestesses with the generic reorientation program to fit the new order would take some time. There were between sixty and eighty people other than themselves in this place, and the process took at least ten minutes per person. Figuring the extra time for the setup and move, it would take about ten to fifteen hours nonstop to cover everybody. They could only try to get the ones who would be expected to be public and active right off; those could best maintain the fiction of a normally functioning temple.'

Unfortunately, it would take years to recondition the entire third rank in the field, and there was no way they could edit the memory module information that the third rank would turn in to the holy places for pickup and insertion into the master computer for analysis. So far, Star Eagle had been unable to find any way to change the existing system without alerting the master computer. The team might escape, but the people of the northern continent could not and would not. So a temporary solution was settled on, until the dogs of Master System could be called off entirely. The second rank, treated here, would keep the portable mindprinters and go into the field to treat the third rank in the holy places. Then a simple code phrase uttered upon greeting a truth-bearer of any rank would erase from the mind of that priestess any memories of that tribe's existence. She would go on her way and even in her official reports, knowledge of that particular tribe would be omitted. The computer, then, would get no information on those tribes, and since tribes and chiefs changed all the time in this fluid society, the omission would not be noticed. And these tribes would be free. Satuuka moaba. Warriors of the storm. At the entrance to the computer room, Midi, Warlock, and Maria Santiago were feeling very good indeed, although still on watch for this mysterious creature only Vulture had seen. The Soba tribe was picking up morning entries into the temple and hauling them off for treatment, and it seemed that the worst was over. They were going to make it, and if they weren't going to revolutionize the world, at least the Soba and Oona tribes would be able to develop a freer and easier life, which would also establish a good base when and if Master System was even vanquished.

As the four pirates waited in the computer room there was a click behind them and then the sound of a panel sliding back. They all turned as one, at the ready, and she stepped out of an opening in the wall opposite the computer. She was everything Vulture had said and more, the epitome of everything the word goddess implied. She glowed, and the glow filled the room and seemed warm when it enveloped them. She showed no fear and gave a slight smile as her huge, dark

eyes looked at each of them in turn and seemed to be looking right through them.

The quartet was ready, two with laser rifles, one with a laser pistol, and another with a spear, but they were frozen as if living statues. Like a laser blast, there was no way to shield against a directed hypnocaster. One could only hope not to be in its path and thus able to avoid it. The Earth-daughter's power was not great—in the great hall it would be so dissipated

it would be useless—but in a small room it was overwhelming. Matched specifically to Matriyehan psychochemistry, it worked on the most basic, empathic levels. They had known this and been expecting her, but they had been surprised by her entrance from behind. The radiation had an almost instantaneous

effect in such a situation, blocking action and slowing thought, buying time for

the subtle, almost orchestral play of waveform commands to induce the desired effect in the brains of the onlookers. Awe, love, devotion, an absence of fear or concern, an absence of thought, an urge to obedience.

"Come," she said in Matriyehan, in a voice so musical and supernatural that it sent shivers through them, and she gestured with her hand. "Sit at feet of Earth-daughter and guard." They obeyed instantly, even eagerly. Even Silent Woman seemed to understand her command. Then she switched, rather suddenly, to English, without once losing that musical quality.

"We will talk, and you will tell me all that I wish to know," she said softly, and they knew they would.

Vulture decided to check the computer room. It was getting about time for her to

leave, and it was important that she know who might or might not be leaving with

her. The work would go on here, perhaps for days, perhaps for weeks, but it was

practically automatic now and did not require her or any other normative presence. Eventually Soba and the others would make their getaway, far easier than the entry, and runners would be sent to Oona tribe to fetch the children and spread the word. But not now; much of the future of this small band would have to be determined the way they preferred it—by themselves.

When no guard was apparent at the entrance to the computer room, Vulture became

suspicious. She doused one of the torches close to her, and even though there was still plenty of light, what she feared she would see became visible. That glow, that golden glow from inside the computer room...

Their brains are not in their heads, Nagy had said. Aim just above the crotch, from the back if possible...

Sound advice that had worked once, but this wasn't the same sort of creature, not really. Where was her brain, her vulnerable spot? Not the usual place, certainly. Her waist was far too thin. The head, the chest, or the buttocks were

the only possibilities, and Master System tended toward uniformity. But did she

have other defenses, perhaps weapons, other man the hypnocaster? There was only

the one entrance to the room, and the only people that really mattered to Vulture were already in there, obviously under her control. Had she already sent

the warning out? Were squadrons of Master System's automated fighters and ships

of SPF even now heading here?

Vulture was not immune to the hypnocaster if taken as they had been, by surprise, but now that she was able to feel it, measure it, she was able to adjust, controlling her body from those places that were remote from the mind. The hypno would still cause the usual chemical reactions in the brain, but they

would be irrelevant. Still, she'd be walking right in, a sitting duck. The door

was too small to have a real chance at surprise.

What could be done? Explosives? None around, and even if there were it would also kill the hostages. Gas? Obviously not. And her allies would be no help at all in that small a space.

"Is that you out there—Vulture, is that not what you are called?" the Earth-daughter called somewhat playfully. "Come in. It was a brilliant effort but it is done. Before you could flee, I could have all the entrances and exits

sealed by simple command from here. And, even if you managed to escape, I could

call in more force than you could deal with to insure you rotted here. Come—or must I have one of your friends here become a blood sacrifice to me at the hands

of the others, as you hear her screams?"

Could have all the entrances and exits sealed. Could call in more force... The situation was bleak, but it wasn't over yet.

"They're overconfident to the point of arrogance..."

Vulture eased to the doorway and peered cautiously inside. She was standing a bit out from the back wall, and the four warriors knelt in front of her, making

a shield, the expressions on their faces showing that they were no longer in command of their minds.

Vulture drew her laser pistol, checked its charge, and stepped into the room. The laser weapons held by the trio all centered on her. If they were on narrow beam, the Earth-daughter might have a rude surprise, but if they were set on wide-field stun, it would knock Vulture helpless.

"Your tricks won't work with me," Vulture said dryly.

"Just put down the gun and give me the ring," the Earth-daughter responded.

"You cannot ask for the ring," Vulture said. "The ring must go to a human in authority. Whatever you are, you are not human and have no right to it."

The Earth-daughter smiled. "We have been having quite a discussion while waiting

for you," she told Vulture. "You are quite right—I am not human, and I am bound

by the core commands, but neither are you human, Vulture. You have no more right

to it than I, and so it is my obligation to reassign the ring properly."

"And then what?"

"You, naturally, will have to be held somewhere until you can be picked up and taken for study and analysis. I'm sure you understand. As for the others—I will

collect them, slowly and in good time. That which you do with your small mindprinters, we can undo with our fuller model. The local tribe will be allowed

to drink the waters of forgetfulness in my presence, and these—at least the three that are useful to me—are special cases. After we have recorded all they know, we might well send them back to your friends up there, to set them up for

the kill."

"You don't know exactly what I am or precisely how to deal with me," Vulture

noted coolly. "You are as ignorant of me as I am of you." She hasn't yet shown a weapon. She's using the warriors for protection. If I can just ease my thumb on to the right stud without her noticing...

"You are mortal as I am not," the Earth-daughter responded just as coolly and confidently. "You may be difficult to kill, but we will keep firing until you are nothing but a burning pile of goo. Now—drop the gun."

She can't actually do that or she'd have done it from the start! It's the ring!

She's afraid of damaging it! "No. I prefer the present standoff, for a while." She smiled sweetly. "Maka, you must prove your love to me. Turn and shoot Silent

Woman. Narrow beam, in the stomach, half power, so it is slow. Midi, Man, if Vulture tries to interfere, burn her."

Silent Woman did not understand the words although she recognized her own name and Manka's, and turned, puzzled, to see Warlock grin evilly and bring the laser

rifle around until it was pointing directly at Silent Woman's belly. At Silent Woman's child...

Silent Woman screamed the most terrible, anguished scream that any throat could

utter, a scream so horrible that it rang and reverberated through the computer room and down the hall. At the same moment she moved her spear to knock Warlock's rifle up and out of the way. So horrible and penetrating was that scream that Maria and Midi turned toward it...

The goddess was taken completely by surprise. Vulture had suspected some action,

but not this, but was in immediate control of the body. The finger flicked the stud, and even as Silent Woman leaped on Warlock Vulture fired— wide beam, maximum stun.

The four warriors collapsed into a tangled heap. The terrible scream stopped abruptly and brought on a dramatic, sudden silence. The Earth-daughter, unaffected by such a blast, now stood alone, looking first at the collapse of her defense and then at Vulture, who had dropped, rolled, and now rose again, pistol reset for full power. "I never dreamed you'd actually do that," Vulture said calmly, "although if you had to pick an example, she was the logical choice, being the most useless of the group."

"Do you think you can kill me with that?" the goddess responded, arrogantly. Vulture shrugged slightly. "Gee, I don't know. Let's find out." She fired a steady stream, up to the head and back down again.

The Earth-daughter was flung back against the wall by the force, but dropped and

then recovered. Her glow was fading, and her flesh was blistered and gaping, but

she was far from dead.

The Earth-daughter rose and launched herself at Vulture, who quickly stepped back and open fire once more. If she could have kept a continuous stream on the

creature, it would have had no chance, but the Earth-daughter, like Vulture, knew the laser could fire for only ten seconds before it automatically cut off for a precious second or two to allow the weapon to cool down.

Vulture was not quick enough. The Earth-daughter was on her at the first opening, steely hands around Vulture's throat, squeezing with enormous pressure,

until the eyes bulged from Vulture's head. The humanoid heard and felt the neck

snap, saw the life drain out, and let Vulture's limp form fall to the floor.
The

Earth-daughter reached out, removed the ring from Vulture's limp finger. The humanoid was no longer willing to play games and no longer supremely confident. The laser had severed vital connections; she had no glow, her body was severely charred, and, worse, she had no hypnocaster. She made her way uneasily to a wall panel near the slots for the information modules, entered a code, and waited as a small panel opened. She was about to press the activator when laser fire again raked her body, throwing her back and away from the panel.

The fire was well concentrated now, back and forth along the hips, and she screamed an inhuman, electronic scream and tried to get up. Her blackened, burnt

face looked up... and saw Vulture, still bloody, her head dangling crazily to one side, with a laser pistol in each hand now, firing, firing, coming on... In a deep, strained voice that sounded about to break, the Earth-daughter said,

"What are you?"

But the raking fire continued with no reply. There was a sudden crackling and then the Earth-daughter started moving, randomly, jerkily, hitting the two walls, then slowly grinding to a halt. There was a sound of someone at the door,

but the horrible corpselike figure that had been Vulture ignored it, and the terrified scream and rapid sounds of panicky feet vanishing down the hall. The Earth-daughter's chest twitched, then moved on its own, cuing the waiting creature. There was a sudden burst of heat, and the module, shining and shimmering, emerged and floated out. It did not get far; Vulture bore in on it with both laser pistols, medium field, maximum intensity. The beams caught the module and held it, suspended in the air, but it vibrated rapidly and seemed to

be trying to escape, to muster enough strength against the beams to dart past and out the door.

It exploded with a concussion that knocked Vulture flat; the heat seared not only her broken and bloodied body but also those of the four unconscious warriors. There was a smell of burnt flesh and singed hair, but it was over. Vulture rose again, ignoring the mess, and made her way to the still form of the

Earth-daughter. She knelt down, reached behind the smoldering ruin of beauty, and picked up the ring, then put it back on her own finger. She then made her way back to the wall opposite the computer interface, sat, and tried to rebuild

as much of her body as possible before the others came to. It was quickly clear

that while the Earth-daughter had not inflicted fatal damage, the scope of repairs was not worth the time and effort. Better, with the tribe in control of

the temple, to find another. That, she reflected, would not be hard.

Still, it had been the Earth-daughter's last words that continued to echo in Vulture's mind. What are you? A collection of past minds? A new form of artificial life? What? She didn't know, not really. For the first time, she began to wonder if even her creator knew, either.

All that time, all the years of Vulture's existence, she had hated Clayben, but

could Clayben really explain Vulture? Could the scientist even duplicate her, given all the means? That was now in doubt.

Arnold Nagy had worked for Master System's enemy, and Nagy had spent ten years on Melchior with access to almost everything. In fact, Nagy had spent just

slightly longer there than Vulture had been alive. Coincidence? Raven had become convinced that Nagy was not human; now, seeing the Earth-daughter, that theory took on a lot more credence. Vulture struggled to her feet. Enough was enough; a new body was mandated, and quickly. There was much to do. Still, she felt a bit better about it all now, somehow. She owed the Earth-daughter a debt, in spite of the problems the humanoid had caused. Perhaps I am not the monster of a mad scientist after all. Perhaps, just perhaps, I am the weapon forged by the enemy for this very purpose and kept, preserved, until the time was right to act. Perhaps I am the deliberately created key player in this master plan. And that feeling, for now, was enough. Matriyehan skin was thick and tough; all four of them would show the burn marks of the explosion for some time to come, perhaps permanently, but the hair that was singed would grow back and there would be no lasting effects that would cripple their lives and performance. Silent Woman seemed to have no memory of the attack; at least she didn't act any different around Warlock than before. Still, Vulture didn't think it a good idea to keep them close together. They could never be sure about Silent Woman. Warlock looked at Maria and Midi. "You are going back-up?" They nodded. There is no medicine available here," Maria noted. "We would quickly lapse back into dishonor. It had gone too far for us; the physical changes are permanent, although China believes she might one day determine a psychochemistry program that will retrain the body and brain to release the proper chemicals naturally. As it stands, we have a chance at a ship again, particularly considering the losses each of these operations has caused so far. There will always be a lingering loneliness, I think. This world has changed us far more than merely physically. I will always be Matriyehan from now on, neither fully of the old way or the new, but our destinies lie elsewhere, and we can do more for this world, our world, our people, there than here." Midi nodded. "I have never had a world or a people of my own before. Neither of us has. Each of us has a child and another on the way and those children are Matriyehan. Somebody has to make sure that we are not forgotten. When we face down Master System, Matriyeh must be there." Warlock sighed and nodded. "I understand, but I cannot leave. Someone also must remain here, to help and protect these people. The raid has restored my honor and my confidence. I know I will never again be a chief, but I will remain a warrior, and being the chief's advisor and confidant is not a bad thing. Just as you must go, someone must stay." Vulture couldn't help but wonder if part of Warlock's change was her added softness and her pregnancy; it would have been damned hard for her to face Raven and the others like this. She would be invaluable in helping connect the chosen tribes, the Warriors of the Storm who would know the secrets, and in protecting and guiding them. She would not be alone; Soba had proven the potential of

Matriyehans to change if they could be freed from the grip of the system, and Oona had the same potential. The real trick would be keeping their lives remote

and secret from the master computer as well as keeping the circle of tribes large enough to function. It was a risk, but, as Soba had noted, all life on Matriyeh was constant risk, so you might as well risk things for a positive end.

"We shipped the remains of the Earth-daughter up with the ring, and they did an analysis," Vulture told them. "It's an amazing construct, half human and half robot. The hyp-nocaster survived mostly intact and it's of unfamiliar design, small and integrated into the bone structure. The glow was more than for effect—it was also a carrier mechanism designed to induce incredible subjectivity in anyone within the field. We can duplicate the mechanism quite well, although we can't duplicate the Earth-daughter. That level of technology is beyond us, and unless we were able to capture intact and analyze one of those master Val modules, we cannot even guess what her core was like. She had no other defenses, no other weapons, but against anyone but me, it still would have

been more man enough—and even I wasn't sure until the last moment. If she had not given me the diversion I needed, or if, after strangling me, she'd turned one of those laser rifles on me—I would have lost. It's a sobering thought." "But—so much of what might be done here depends on keeping the master computer ignorant," Warlock noted. "We can't replace her, and we can't explain her absence."

"We thought of that, almost from the start, but we had to see the remains to be sure. The Earth-goddess was a later addition to the system, a fail-safe backup in recognition of the limits of the master computer here. There was no direct interface, and, needless to say, a mindprinter is useless on any kind of robot.

It served as a second, independent observer, not subordinate of the computer. It

appears that what little contact she had with the computer was through a small control room off the computer center where she had direct access to the data banks. Any communication, however, appears to have been by voice or keyboard. The computer was the manager, she was chief of security. They were very confident, too. The computer access is a standard setup without even rudimentary

security protection. After all, no one else could even get down there, let alone

operate the machinery. The appeal of having our own goddess, with computer access and hypnotic abilities, at the center of power here is nearly irresistible."

Maria gasped. "But you're talking about someone transmuted into a creature who would be the only one of its kind and under constant risk of exposure. There could never be another."

"That is true," Vulture admitted, thinking of Nagy's comment about willingness to pay the ultimate price, "but there would be compensations. Using a duplicate

of the intricate nervous system and exterior skin from the original, the wearer

of the body would feel quite human but have much more control over it than humans could. The organic parts would be inside, extremely well protected and monitored. While not immortal, she would never age externally, be impervious to

the elements and most things humans are prey to, and she would be in charge. She would be a living goddess incarnate without the limits or programming of her predecessor. She'd run the whole damn show. She would almost certainly be an activist goddess, unlike her predecessor.

"Could they make such a creature?" Midi asked. "And, if so, could they get anybody to actually take the job?"

"Isaac Clayben has a knack for building creatures," Vulture noted dryly. "As for appearance and behavior, in addition to the remains, they have our mindprints of how she looked, acted, and sounded. As for volunteers—it might be very difficult for certain types to turn down. We will see."

"Yes," Warlock said thoughtfully. "Raven, for one, would love the power of it. It would be quite amusing to see him lock into the role of a stunningly beautiful goddess."

"Damn me if I ain't tempted," Raven said, puffing on his cigar. "Can't you just see me with that body, walkin' around like some naked virgin?" He chuckled.

"But, with that power and that hypno and all, damn wouldn't it be fun!"

"I certainly hope so," Ikira Sukotae responded. "You can forget it, though, Raven. The job's been filled and it starts in a few hours."

His eyebrows went up. "Huh? Not you?" He stared at her, so tiny and yet so beautiful. "You don't have the mass for it."

"For most of our purposes, no, but I have more than enough to provide the organic portions. It's been checked out. I'm the logical one. All this time I've been a tiny person in a land of giants, and I've lived as one of a kind. And I have no problems looking or acting like that. I was born to do it. I understand the computers and technical material, and I'm as used to the politics of command. You have to play the games very well to get to a position of authority and respect in a universe of giants. And the challenge... Overseeing the development of a whole new society and culture, uniquely female yet tough and self-reliant. I was born to be a goddess. I just never thought I'd get the chance. I don't have to wait for Master System to be destroyed to get what I want. I never really knew what I wanted, Raven, but when this came up, and I found that I could have it, I knew this was my chance. What do you want out of this, Raven—really? Do you know?"

He sighed. "No. But I'm gonna miss you, kid."

"I'll miss you, too, Raven. All of you. Drop down and worship me sometime."

"We're gonna get the rest of the rings."

She smiled. "I know. Maybe by then you'll know what you want to do with them."

EPILOGUE: DECEPTION AT OLYMPUS

THE COUNCIL HAD NOT EXPECTED HER ENTRANCE, BUT, then, they never knew where the Earth-daughter might be nor when she would choose to appear. She came and went as befitted a goddess, with the same inscrutability as one might expect of the supernatural. Lately, it was said, she had departed from her cloistered life and actually gone out among the trainees in the valley, and even beyond, to visit tribes whose faith had been wavering.

"My master, whose glory illuminates the days and gives life to the world,

commands your presence this night in the great hall," she told them. "Come now and follow me."

They arose and followed; one never questioned one's deities. They used the back

ways forbidden to all others, and entered the huge cave with its statue of the Great God from the side. It was late; no others were about, and no rituals were

performed at this time.

She knelt down before the great statue, and they, the elders and leaders of the church, prostrated themselves and waited.

"Master, Your obedient and loving daughter who is part of you obeys Your holy commands. Command us, greatest God of all, who created us and the world."

Now sounds emanated from the great statue, as if, somehow, it had begun to breathe through enormous stone lungs. The head and torso took on a more fluid, plastic look, and the eyes moved. And then the Great God spoke, in a mighty, inhuman voice that instilled instant awe and fear in the hearts and minds of onlookers.

"A large amount of anomalous data has been sent to Us over the past weeks," it said. "They produce cause for concern, indicating increased demonic activity against Our people and Our will. We have sent Our daughter to investigate, but She had found nothing that could not be dealt with. We are reassured, but require a final confirmation before dismissing the matters. The ultimate goal of

demons is to thwart Our holy and absolute will by taking from Us the Ring which

We have given to you as a sign and symbol of our faith. If you have the Ring, hold it up so We may look upon it."

The chief administrator rose to a kneeling position, then, fumbling, removed the

ring from her finger and held it high. Great eyes turned and focused on it.

"Very well, Guard it with your lives and souls and honor. The demon forces are strong and may make the most bold and outrageous attempts to get it. Our daughter will help you to protect it even more. Obey Her in all things when battling the greatest of demons, lest you lose not only your lives but your immortal souls. She is a part of Us, and Her glory a reflection of Our own. Go now and enact Our bidding and carry out Our sacred will. At all costs the tests

must be run, the system must be preserved."

They groveled and made the responses and prayed for mercy and wisdom, but the Great God's statue had already lost its fluidity, its life, and returned to being the statue it otherwise was.

The Earth-daughter rose and turned and looked down on them. Poor, simple creatures; slaves to do whatever bidding she commanded. The Great God had been wrong; the last important test had just been run.

She was now the goddess and mistress of all Matriyeh. Matriyeh... the first world and people freed from the system. With the computer's own help she'd analyzed the memory recording modules and now understood how they worked and what were their limitations. From now on the collectors would make two stops, not one, when they returned from the field. Using the more sophisticated portables, her priestess-slaves would first evaluate and then reprogram those modules so that the Great God heard only what She wished it to know. The modules

going out to reprogram the third rank would also carry Her will and Her messages, not Master System's. It was already mostly done. The religion itself was being reprogrammed, the old beliefs crumbling before the new truth. Polytheism was dying, replaced with a different, almost monotheistic pantheon.

There was only one deity for the masses and it was Her, there was only one system, and it was Hers to make. And if they doubted, or questioned, She would walk among them and even the biggest, toughest chiefs would grovel in the mud and worship Her.

Soon they would have more reason than magic tricks to do so. Soon the priestesses would be instructing them in the art of planting, of building, and the new doctrine of cooperation and alliance. It was a challenge, but one she welcomed, for nothing was beyond a goddess, and she was determined to be a great

one and give them more reason for worship than most religions.

She wondered, idly, about the ones she'd left behind. If they got all five rings, if they inserted them, if they gained collectively power far greater than

even she could dream of, would they be worthy of worship?

It was irrelevant. This was Her world and Her people, and this was Her entire universe from this moment on. If those others attained their godhoods, they better damn well keep off Her back...

The Rings of the Master

continues with Masks of the Martyrs

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack L. Chalker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, on December 17, 1944, but was raised and has spent most of his life in Baltimore, Maryland. He learned to read

almost from the moment of entering school, and by working odd jobs amassed a large book collection by the time he was in junior high school, a collection now

too large for containment in his quarters. Science fiction, history, and geography all fascinated him early on, interests that continue.

Chalker joined the Washington Science Fiction Association in 1958 and began publishing as amateur SF journal, *Mirage*, in 1960. After high school he decided

to be a trial lawyer, but money problems and the lack of a firm caused him to switch to teaching. He holds bachelor degrees in history and English, and an M.L.A. from Johns Hopkins University. He taught history and geography in the Baltimore public schools between 1966 and 1978 and now makes his living as a freelance writer. Additionally, out of the amateur journals he founded a publishing house, *The Mirage Press, Ltd.*, devoted to nonfiction and bibliographic works on science fiction and fantasy. This company has produced more than twenty books in the last nine years. His hobbies include esoteric audio, travel, working on science-fiction convention committees, and guest lecturing on SF to institutions such as the Smithsonian. He is an active conservationist and National Parks supporter, and he has an intense love of ferryboats, with the avowed goal of riding every ferry in the world. In fact, in

1978 he was married to Eva Whitley on an ancient ferryboat in midriver. They live in Maryland with their son, David.