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Seeklight by K.W. Jeter

INTRODUCTION TO SEEKLIGHT

In the mail the other morning, from an unpublished writer a little to the west of here, came a letter which took me back ten years to the living room of 143 Avondale Place, Syracuse, New York, where I, the then Schubert Foundation Playwriting Fellow, was trying to push my failing Dodge and beginning marriage on an income of \$250.00 a month while simultaneously applying myself to collected works which then might have numbered all of one hundred and fifty pages.

The Writer (from the west of here that is; I no longer live at Avondale Place) wanted to know what the truth of getting started in publishing was. How did you sell a story? Was it really true as it appeared to him that you had to have connections to place your work? How did writers get going anyway? Was it possible to do your work and mail it out and get in print or did you need contacts? What contacts, anyway? He was pretty discouraged, the young writer went on, but not ready to give up yet. Perhaps I had some suggestions. Markets? Contacts?

Back to the living room in Syracuse where the same questions rattled through my mind and corpus for almost a full year. It is possible that the subculture of professionally published novelists, poets and short-story writers is not a cabal to be achieved only through dark rites of initiation-and-persecution but if this is so, you could not have proven it by me in the academic year of 1964-5, a feeling which to a certain degree persists emotionally even to this day. How indeed *does* one break into this business? How can one emerge from the mass of unpublished writers to professional publication? What is the secret?

It is not easy to break into this business and my correspondent from Philadelphia was right, it does appear from the outside as if it were a mysterious cabal with equally mysterious but rigorous social customs; one becomes a writer only by becoming personally acceptable to a formal or less formal board of review. It does little good to advise that this is not the case; that while the medium of the literary novel and short-story is closed nearly tight nowadays, insular and self-limiting, the category market—gothics, westerns, mysteries and particularly science-fiction—remain open to those who can meet the rather stringent requirements of the categories and that science-fiction in particular, if it has been characterized by nothing else for its near-fifty years as a discrete sub-category of fiction, must be praised for its openness, its willingness not only to publish work by newcomers of no prior social acceptability but to *welcome* that work and to quickly elevate its best talent to the top of the field within a shorter period of time than almost any other category would so do. It is true that Philip Roth won the National Book Award at 26, that Joyce Carol Oates was winning O'Henry Prizes in her early twenties and won the NBA (after two appearances final list) at 31. But Roth and Oates are exceptions, not only exceptional writers—of course they are—but exceptional examples of luck.

Not to digress however, people in early middle age have the habit of running on, sometimes in a disjointed fashion, on issues peripheral to what should really concern them. Let us drag ourselves away from the NBA or middle-aged American literary novelists to the far more vital and salutary matter of this particular book.

I proposed the idea of trying to make the course of new's-f writers easier rather than more difficult and Roger Elwood, the energetic and capable editor-in-chief of this new Laser Book program, came right back at me within days asking me to put my time where my mouth was. Let *me* discover the newer writers, let *me* develop projects with them, introduce them to the markets. If I felt that the markets should be more receptive to the new than they are at present (although as I have said above,'s-f really isn't that bad compared to most other fields) then take up the cause myself.

So that was the way in which this book was proposed and that was how it began.

K. W. Jeter, whose *SEEKLIGHT* follows as the first of these novels in whose publication I have assisted, is a twenty-four-year-old Californian, a state university graduate who prefers to keep his persona out of his work, a position which I share in relation to my own and with which I am in hearty agreement. Other than knowing that he is married, widely-read in's-f (this would be obvious without testimony simply from the novel) and utterly committed to his work, I know only that he is greatly and diversely talented and that given a reasonable contribution of luck, that luck without which none of us would ever have achieved any success (this is not paranoia; life is luck, breath is luck, love is luck) he may achieve a major career within this field. *SEEKLIGHT* is one of the three or four best's-f novels I have ever read and on any level is a distinguished contribution to the field; it promises to be an auspicious start to an auspicious career but even if it did not it is, on its own terms, a wholly successful and gripping novel which should provide its readers with hours of entertainment and, after the fact and by implication, a rather deeper level of inference which emerges from the book only as the consequence of its full statement. The "statement" however may be taken or more properly left; this is, in my opinion, a work of art but it is first and last and more important a work of craft and delight.

With more pride than it is perhaps seemly to admit, I gladly turn over to you *SEEKLIGHT* and K. W. Jeter.

Barry Malzberg
New Jersey.

Prologue

It would be so easy to die. He pressed his face against the rain-soaked ground, curling himself into a ball under the storm's slashing weight. A twist of lightning that shouted through the wind revealed his hands, clenched into the muddy hillside. In the moment of pale light they seemed corpse-like and drained of blood.

Somewhere at the base of the hill, one of his pursuers' mounts screamed as it wheeled in fear, goaded by its rider into the face of the storm. An echoing chorus from the other equines, more like sobbing children than animals, came out of the darkness below. It was followed by shouts and curses from the subthane's men, as they whipped the animals into submission.

He managed to get his hands and knees under himself. Crouching, he listened to the cries and noises at the hill's foot. In the dark, with the rain and wind distorting the world, it was impossible to tell if the pursuers were moving away, giving up here and searching elsewhere; or starting to force their mounts up the hill face with its jumble of wet-slick boulders.

His left leg slewed out from under him as he tried to stand. He dropped back to his knees as he felt the edge of pain slice through the numbness. He rolled

onto his right side and felt with his hands for the pain's source. The wetness that drenched his thigh was thick and hot, welling out faster than the rain could wash it away. He lifted his hands close to his face, and another jag of lightning showed them, stained with blood that looked more black than red. The wound had opened further, the stiff clot on his skin breaking away to reveal the warm interior of this huge, silently screaming mouth, framed by the ragged edges of cloth.

Then this is it, part of him thought, a part that had already seemed to separate from his body seconds—or years, measured in the storm's time—ago. The part receded a few feet away and looked down at the rest, the arms and one leg tracing slow letters in the muddy space between two boulders, the face puffed and masked with fever. Seventeen years old—the thinking fragment was filled with a sad calm—and I didn't even start to find out.

Another scream filtered through the storm, but this was above him on the hillside. He realized dimly, as if it were no longer of any importance, that the pursuers must have encircled him.

He was no longer listening for the sounds of their

movements. The part that had floated free of his body sunk back down to his swollen face, as if for some final departing kiss. It fell back into the flesh, merging, and he opened his eyes to the full pressure of the storm. The rain no longer stung. And it had a voice. Is that a language, too? he wondered, marvelling. The idea enchanted him. Perhaps, if he listened as hard as he could, he would be able to understand, it would thin out and become pellucid as all the other tongues he had heard. Motionless, he

strained, listening to the compound, mingled voice. Finally, like glass dissolving—

"Traitor's son," the voice whispered in its own tongue.

He closed his eyes. The words changed, but what was said with them always remained the same.

"Blood of thanes. Traitor's son."

Soon enough, his pursuers would be standing around him, and then they would press the points of their weapons against his chest, lean their weight on them and leak the few remaining drops of his life into the mud. Their faces would be hard and shiny under the rain. The feeling of calm turned bitter under his forehead, a throb of hate and despair.

"Traitor's son."

He remembered the key. Reaching to his neck with one hand, he drew it out by its long fine chain from beneath his shirt, the fabric plastered right to his skin. His hand enfolded the flat square of white metal—a dull light seemed to seep from between his tightly clenched fingers. The throbbing in his head turned into a vast wave of regret as he realized that whatever door the key was meant to open would now stay closed forever.

"Traitor's son." Now that he understood its language, the storm's voice wouldn't go away. It seemed as if he had been hearing those words, in all the different tongues, all his life.

He twisted slowly on the ground.

Chapter I

The whispering followed Daenek around the marketplace, the lowered voices seeming to slide between the stalls like the grinning, stark-ribbed canines prowling for scraps on the pavement. Two old village women nodded their shawled heads, their leathery faces even more wrinkled by their mouths curling in disdain as the child passed the stall they tended. His head barely came up to the level of the racks of husk-covered vegetables, so that the women only recognized him by the dark hair, unlike that of any of the village children. "His is the blood of thanes," whispered one crone. The other nodded in satisfaction at the sneering obscenity into which the last word was twisted.

The boy threaded his way through the market, past the rows of stalls and, behind them, faces with every variation of fear and hostility that had become familiar to him. Sometimes he squeezed past a knot of villagers clustered in the narrow passage as they fingered the vegetables or slabs of preserved meat, extracted a few coins from their sweat-darkened purses and placed their purchases in the stained cloth sacks they swung from their arms. They would look down as he passed between them, and draw away. Then the voices would start again.

"Thane's blood." Close-set eyes narrowed on the small figure.

"Traitor's son."

Daenek stopped in front of one of the stalls. Behind the bins, in a small glass cabinet dangled a tiny model of the great seedships that had come from— his brows clenched as he tried to remember the world—Earth. But that was ancient history, though. Daenek stood on tiptoe and studied the little silver cylinder—he had heard that it used to move up and down inside the glass box, shooting flames from one end, but now it just hung midway on its invisible thread, useless and pathetic—until the stallkeeper scowled him away.

"A hard bunch," said a voice behind him. He turned and saw a busker squatting behind a battered folding table at the head of one of the streets leading off the marketplace. His hands shuffled

a pack of cards, the edges worn to feathers, as he winked and motioned Daenek to come closer with a tilt of his lean head. "A right hard bunch, they are."

"I don't like them," said Daenek matter-of-factly. He watched the cards slither through the long fingers.

"Can't blame you," said the busker. "They've been no blessing to my pockets, either." A sigh. "I'm right afraid I must be soon to my own village again."

"Where's that?"

The busker fanned the cards out on the table. "Where it is," he said without looking up. "When I get back I'll send a troop of my brothers out to see what good they can do with these stone-hearted stone-cutters."

Daenek stepped away and looked down the narrow street. In front of the cramped buildings women were sitting with the tops of their coveralls spread open to reveal their pale shoulders, even though there was no sun to catch this early. Quarry-workers, too young or slack to have saved up the brideprice needed to take their choice off the street for good, sauntered in the middle of the road, jingling the coins in their pockets. Doors opened and closed with small sounds, couples going in and out of the low houses.

A priest stood in one of the marketplace's maze-like aisles. Its heavy brown robes hung in folds over its tubular metal arms as it attempted to pass out its little pamphlets to the ignoring villagers. Daenek took one from the shining, oddly-jointed hand, and thought he saw the photocells in the expressionless face grow brighter beneath its cowl. THE VOICE THAT IS GREAT WITHIN YOU read the pamphlet's outside in crudely printed letters. It fluttered to the pavement as Daenek dropped it and walked on.

At one end of the marketplace a canine crouched and giggled beneath one of the stalls. Its hairless skin was mottled with pink and liver-colored spots. The loony eyes rolled in pleasure as the boy squatted down and scratched behind its round, human-like

ears.

"Hey. Git 'way from there."

Daenek looked up and saw a man's face, flushed and coarse-grained as a chunk of meat on one of the butchers' racks, glaring over the edge of the stall. "You're drivin' everybody away," the face growled through its thick lips.

The canine moaned in fear and ran off, its back bowed, the thin tail wrapped against its belly. Daenek stood up and backed away from the stall, watching the man behind it as he returned his sour attention to his trays of fruit. The little green spheres that had turned brown and pulpy were picked out one by one and thrown onto the ground.

Daenek turned away, bored. The crowd's heat and the high-pitched buzzing of flies made his head ache. Maybe—he looked back into the knots of people in the marketplace, trying to spot one person in particular—maybe it was almost time to leave. He scraped a ridge of dust along the pavement with his shoe, then felt something that was both hard and wet crack against the back of his head.

He spun around—there was no one behind him. He touched the stinging spot on his skull, then looked at his hand. A tiny spot of red mingled in something sticky. At his feet was one of the rotten fruit from the stall opposite him, the hard stone visible through the shattered pulp. The stallkeeper's eyes were bent on his own hands as they fussed over the trays.

A second passed as the boy stared at the coarse-faced man. Suddenly, a tall woman, her face rigid with anger, appeared, striding out of the marketplace's center. One hand clenched the silver handle of the slender black rod she used to point to the items in the stalls that she wished to buy, and to pick her way along the narrow path that led through the hills above the village. She and Daenek lived in the small house at the end of the path, and the silver-headed stick would be laid in the corner beside the door when they arrived back home, in readiness for the next trip to the marketplace. But now the stick had another purpose.

The man behind the stall looked up in time to see the stick come whistling through the air and land with a sharp crack on his forehead. "A child!" the Lady Marche said fiercely, landing another blow above the man's ear. "Not yet seven! For shame!" The stick flew again, hitting across the man's wide back as he crouched behind the stall.

"Naaaww!" howled the man, covering his head with his hands. "Fer God's sake, I didn't chuck the damn thing at the kid!"

"Shame enough that it should be done in front of you." The stick's point jabbed into the pavement.

A snickering laugh sounded from a few feet away. A boy, three or four years older than Daenek, stepped into the path from around the corner of another stall. A grin seemed to almost divide his broad, pale face in two. Another of the rotten fruits was cradled in his hand.

The older boy stared boldly at the woman as she strode towards him, his confident expression not changing until a second before the stick whipped across his shoulders. He shrieked, his face rushing full with blood as he fell and scabbled on the pavement.

"Think better," said the Lady Marche, giving a perfunctory rap for the stick on the bobbing head, "of flinging refuse at anyone, let alone a ward of the throne."

"A traitor's son," muttered a voice from the crowd of villagers that had gathered from all over the marketplace.

She turned around, sweeping her cold gaze across the sullen faces. "A protectee of—" Her voice hesitated, then continued at a lower pitch. "—of the Regent."

A few of the faces in the crowd bent into smirks, as if a small triumph had been acknowledged.

"And a child," she said, her voice sharp with authority, "like other children. Pity those who could fear one!"

"Yahhh," screamed the older boy, now crouching on his knees. His red face was wet with tears. "You better watch out! My father'll getcha—he's the sub-thane, and he'll do it, too! Just you wait!"

"Child," said the woman, extending the tip of her stick towards him—it transfixed his glassy eyes, "you may have inherited your repellent nature from your father, but his is at least somewhat tempered with age. He knows what is expected of him, and better, what would happen to him should he forget." She looked over her shoulder at the crowd behind her, including them in her speech. "There is a court in the capital, and this child—" The stick swung to indicate Daenek. "—is under its protection." She turned to Daenek and spoke quietly to him: "Let's to home."

The crowd parted, backing up against the stalls as the lady and the boy passed through them. The faces of the crowd were still set in their expressions of dull resentment and repressed anger. One of them found his voice, a tall youth dressed in the same black fabric as the boy who had thrown the fruit, but with a short, rust-pitted knife tucked in his belt. "Ah, Someday," the youth whispered as they went by him, "his protection ends. And then he'll get it like what his father did."

The Lady Marche either did not hear or chose to ignore him. She and Daenek reached the other side of the marketplace, the boy half-running to keep up with her quick strides. They passed quickly through the squat village buildings and out to the open spaces beyond.

Chapter II

Where the hills above the village levelled off, the narrow trail ran straight as a knife edge pressed into the ground. The fields were covered thick with weeds, taller than Daenek could reach, and dried stiff and golden by the summer sun. The stalks rustled in the wind and bent over the path.

Daenek stopped and craned his neck to watch a field bat flap upwards, its belly yellow with pollen, like a fur sun. Then,

cradling the net bag stuffed with the purchases from the marketplace, he hurried to catch up with the Lady Marche.

"Fools," he heard her say as he came up behind her on the path. With each step she planted the silver-headed stick firmly into the dirt. "A fortunate breed whose crime is its own punishment."

The words *crime* and *punishment* intrigued him. "Lady," he spoke up—it was what he had always called her, could ever remember having called her. Not mother, although he knew that was what she was to him. "Is that part of the Descending Law? That there's fools?"

She stopped and looked for several seconds into the boy's face, then sighed and went on, her steps a little slower. "No," she said. Daenek could barely hear her words. "No law other than what the tragedies have." She said nothing more all the way home, and Daenek knew better than to ask questions that would go unanswered.

The Lady Marche did not turn as Daenek lagged a few paces behind, then plunged into the thick growth at one side of the path. The yellow stalks brushed over his head as he ran among them, carrying the net bag high up against his chest. A group of insects flew up in front of him, then re-united and drifted off in a lopsided O.

The field ended at the edge of a cliff overlooking the quarry, an enormous rough-sided pit chewed into the center of the hill range, a concave world all to itself. It was quiet now, no noise or motion perceptible, as Daenek looked down into its grey depths. The quarriers had all gone into the village on their day off, to spend their wages on the street women or, with the old ones, for a few sweets to add to their bland dormitory meals. The unpainted doors of the metal-roofed buildings at one side of the quarry swung open, revealing their unlit spaces inside.

Daenek's gaze moved away from the floor of the quarry, with its clutter of rubble and machinery, all covered with the veined stone's dust. He looked up the sides of the chasm until he finally spotted the figure for which he had been looking. Squatting on

the far edge of the quarry, seeming more like a boulder himself than anything human, was the hulking figure of the man the Lady Marche had driven away from the house. That had happened several weeks ago, but Daenek had known for a long time before that there was someone that hid in the fields and watched them and the house—he had even caught sight of the bulky, shambling figure, squatting or moving furtively among the weeds.

But then the Lady Marche had found the watcher, sitting on his haunches at the edge of the cleared space around the house. Daenek had watched and listened as she had stood in front of the figure, his wide face turned with an odd, mute dignity up to hers as he sat on the ground. She pointed with her stick and spoke to the watcher in a language different from what she spoke with Daenek and the villagers. The words flowed, a sternly graceful song. Her voice lost the stiff intonation with which she had always spoken before. After a few moments of her talking—at the end the strange words became gentle, a blessing—the watcher nodded slowly, his eyes cast to the dust in front of him. Then he stood up and pushed his way through the field in the direction her stick had pointed, leaving a trampled path that slowly healed as the weeds sprang back.

Over two months, and the Lady Marche had never explained who the man was or what she had said to him. Or what the language was. The buskers had their own tongue, Daenek knew, that they used only among themselves. And so did the mertzers, when they came every other year. But this had been neither of these.

The words she had spoken stayed clear and solid in Daenek's head. It seemed as if he could turn them over and examine them, like smooth stones taken from his pocket. Or maybe they were seeds—he'd lie in his bed awake at night and hold each syllable, trying to crack its hard shell and get to the soft meat inside. *Maybe if I had more of them*, he had decided, gazing out the room's window at the night. There must be as many words as stars, a lot of them. *And if I had them all...*

Since then, Daenek hadn't seen the watching man —if that

was the right word; he had seemed larger than just a *man*—in the fields around the house. A few days later, while lying on his stomach at the edge of the cliff overlooking the quarry, watching and listening to the stonecutters at work below, he had felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck. He had looked up and spotted the watcher's massive shape crouched on the far, opposite rim of the quarry, gazing back at Daenek with the same mute, unreadable expression as when he had listened to the Lady Marche's words.

Nearly every day Daenek went through the fields to the rim of the quarry. The watcher was not always to be found sitting on the other edge. Sometimes when he was not there, Daenek could pick him out, working with the others down on the floor of the quarry. The large figure moved about, gathering up scraps and chips of the valuable white-veined stone the quarriers cut out of the ground in great slabs. That was the most menial job of all, Daenek knew, requiring no skill but strength, the job the village youths started out at when they first became old enough to come to work in the rocks.

An edge of pity, like an uncomfortable warmth in his throat, would mix with the other feelings Daenek had when he saw the watcher at work, filling up a bag slung over his shoulder with the little bits of rock. Daenek had never felt scared when he saw the brutish-looking figure. There was something intensely *interesting* about him, though—Daenek crouched down at the cliff's edge, supporting the net bag on his knees, and studied the hulking man. There was something *missing* about the watcher, something cut out that both the villagers, and the Lady Marche and Daenek himself had in common. Something that laughed and spoke, and moved.

But there was also something about the watcher that Daenek wasn't sure of, that maybe only he and the Lady Marche also had. If there was a word for it, Daenek knew somehow it would be in that other language of which he had heard that little bit.

The watcher cocked his large head to one side, and Daenek leaped to his feet. How long had he been sitting here? He clutched the net bag to his chest and plunged back into the

field's dry stalks. A quick glance over his shoulder showed the figure still watching him.

The Lady Marche was almost to the house when Daenek reached the path. He ran along it, coming up behind her as she stepped up to the single door. The houses in the village were square and made of dark, unpainted boards, with corrugated metal roofs and small windows of wavy glass. This house, that he and the Lady Marche lived in, was round, a tower, and made of a seamless white stuff, smooth to the touch. Only the round-topped door showed from the outside, but once inside there were big sections of wall in every room that were as clear as glass.

Once he overheard some old men in the village marketplace remembering to each other how the house had been lowered out of the sky onto the little cleared space in the field. Daenek couldn't remember it, though. *That was when I was a baby*, he thought. *Before I was really me.*

The door sighed and swung open when the Lady Marche pressed her palm near its edge. Daenek followed her into the cool, familiar interior. In the kitchen he stood on tip-toe and hefted the bag up onto the counter—made of the same shiny white stuff—beside the sink. She loosened its cord and her long fingers began to swiftly sort out the items.

"Lady," piped Daenek suddenly. He pushed his shoulder against a cupboard door. "What is it that's the same about me and you, but different from everyone else?" He hadn't meant for it to sound like an old riddle.

Her hands stopped and she looked down at him, her face strangely altered by some emotion. "There's nothing different about me," she said quietly. "But you. Your—" she broke off, then, even softer: "There was someone once who could have told you."

She meant to say 'your father,' thought Daenek. *The betrayer.*

She knelt down before him and brushed his dark hair over his

ears with her long hands. "They see it in your face." Her own eyes were shining as rain. "Anyone can."

He twisted away from her hands and ran out of the house. The confusion that yammered inside his skull seemed to be swelling too large to keep inside walls. Breathlessly, he plunged through the thick fields above the house, the ground curving upwards beneath his feet until it ended in the steeply clustered boulders of the hills' upper reaches. Between the largest rocks there was just room for his small body to squeeze through. He clambered over other boulders, their flanks baking in the sun, until he came to the little open space he had found and told no one about, not even the Lady Marche.

A tiny spring welled up and fed a small pool only a few yards across. A pair of low, gnarled trees had found root in the clefts of rock on either side and arched over the pool with their twisting branches, darkening the still water with their shade. His heart pounding from running up the hill, Daenek lowered himself down from atop one of the sheltering boulders. Squatting on the damp, moss-slick edge of the pool, he leaned over and studied his reflection in the black water.

A child's face. What was so different about that? He leaned closer, a lock of his hair falling down and inscribing an arc on the surface of the water. What was it that everyone else was able to see in it? He sighed and rocked back on his heels, his arms hugging his knees. Suddenly he scowled at what he saw as his gaze left the pool's surface.

A sociologist was floating towards him over the water. It's long, brilliant-white robes trailed down to the water but did not touch. The enormous wings were folded against its back to pass between the trees. The golden ring hovering over its head glowed brighter as it came into the shade. Sometimes they carried tape recorders with microphones, but this one had only a clipboard held to its pale hands.

"Go away!" shouted Daenek, his face darkening with genuine outrage. He had thought that only *he* knew of this place. "Get out of here!" He got to his feet with a green-slimed rock in his hand and threw it at the sociologist.

The rock passed through its middle without rippling the dazzling robe. "Good shot," smiled the sociologist as the stone splashed into the far end of the pool.

"I don't want to talk to you." Daenek's mouth tightened with disgust. "Dumb questions, anyway." It wasn't his first encounter with one of them.

The sociologist wearily expelled his breath. "Come on," he pleaded. It had a very young face, a teenager's, with pale, uncertain eyes. "I need it for my thesis."

"I don't care," muttered Daenek, squatting back down. Whatever a thesis was didn't interest him.

The sociologist, hovering a few feet before the boy, said something under its breath. "Why can't you be like the villagers?" it said aloud. "It's easy to get data from people who are scared of you."

Daenek looked up. "Is data the same thing as a thesis?"

"Maybe." The sociologist half-closed its eyes and looked crafty. "I'll tell you if you answer my interview questions."

"No." Daenek's lower lip bloomed into an obstinate pout. "Some other stuff, too."

"We're not supposed to tell you things." A whisper through clenched teeth. The sociologist looked around wearily. "They could flunk me for doing that, you know."

Daenek remained silent, staring grimly at the water.

"Oh, all right then." It descended and sat down beside Daenek—though he could still see a little space between the figure and the wet ground, except where one rock showed through the robe, like a little mountain surrounded by snow. The sociologist reached over its head and pushed the glowing ring forward to cast more light on the clipboard. "OK, first question—"

"No." Daenek shook his head. "Me first." The sociologist rolled its eyes upward. "Go ahead," it said after a moment.

"Is there something different about my face?" The other's face turned and looked at him in surprise. "How much do you know?" it murmured. Daenek shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"You don't know how much you know." A sad smile formed over the sociologist's lips. "You're quite a student of the human condition, yourself." It angled its head and studied Daenek for several seconds. "A little on the narrow side," it said finally. "High cheekbones. More than enough nose... Worried looking, too. Is that different enough for you?"

"Something *really* different," said Daenek. A few seconds of silence passed. The sociologist looked out over the pool's dark water, then back at the boy. "Yes." Its voice was muffled. "But I don't know what it is. You'll see it yourself, someday."

Daenek answered the sociologist's list of questions, a dozen or so having to do with what happened at the marketplace with the son of the subthane and the rotten fruit. The questions seemed unimportant—he forgot them in a few minutes—and he didn't even bother to ask the sociologist any more about *thesis* and *data*. He remained sitting by the water long after the sociologist had floated back up into the sky and disappeared, and his thoughts were without words.

Chapter III

Three years passed before he heard the Lady Marche's other language again. Daenek woke up in the middle of the night, hearing a strange voice singing somewhere in the house. He slid out of bed and carefully, making no noise, crept down the first few steps of the staircase that spiralled through the center of the house.

The Lady Marche was standing in front of one of the windows, but the little control at its lower edge had been adjusted so that it reflected her image, a perfect mirror. A little trunk that she kept locked in a downstairs closet lay with its lid flung back at

her feet. The song, a woman's voice sad and faint in the night's stillness, came from a small cube nestled in the box. A dim radiance from the cube gave the scene its only illumination.

Unaware of him watching, the Lady Marche pulled out of the trunk long, shimmering veils that seemed to float upward in the air without falling. She pressed them one by one against herself, the sheer fabric clinging to her ordinary clothing, the rough coveralls of the village woman. The song ended and, after a moment, the woman's voice began another in the same language.

Daenek watched as she left the last veil, an iridescent blue like cold smoke, wrapped against herself.

She knelt down to the trunk, then stood up again with a necklace dangling from her hands. Its clustered gems blazed in the mirror like some strange, new constellation in the sky outside. With one hand she pulled down the collar of her clothing, showing the smooth length of her throat. She held the necklace up to the pale skin and stood for a long time looking at herself, while the singer's voice moved through the lonely-sounding cadences.

He went back up the stairs even more cautiously than before—the slightest noise might shatter like a sphere of thin glass the world that had blossomed out of the trunk downstairs, and the Lady Marche might drown in this one, the ordinary one. There had been an expression on her face he had never seen before. *She is a lady*, he thought. He lay in his bed, holding the singer's foreign words, impenetrable crystal, in his head. Just before he fell asleep he realized that the singing voice was the Lady Marche's, from years and a life ago.

When Daenek had just turned twelve, the mertzer came to the house. From where he had been sitting atop the hill's largest boulder some distance above the house, Daenek caught sight of the stocky figure in the early morning sunlight. The weeds on either side of the narrow path brushed against the man as he mounted slowly up the hillside.

The man's patched leather jacket and broadbilled cloth cap—Daenek could discern them plainly, even though the man

was still far down the path—identified him as a mertzler. *What's he doing here?* wondered Daenek. *They all pulled out yesterday.*

He had lain all day on his stomach at the edge of the cliff overlooking the quarry, watching them load '

the great slabs and blocks of stone into the holds of the caravans. The cranes and hoists would swing out over the wide metal decks and then dip their cables to the ground. The leather-jacketed mertzlers would clamber over the massive veined facets and planes of rock—the men had looked like ants from where Daenek had watched them—fastening the cables around the blocks. Then, with a groaning noise, as if the machines were shouting their effort to each other, the blocks were lifted and deposited into the depths of the caravan's holds.

Midway through the loading, one of the cranes had begun to stall as it lifted a huge cube of stone. A piercing screech had sounded and the mertzlers had scrambled away to all sides as the block began to twist, dangling from the cables. When the cables finally gave way, the block struck the ground and shattered and a plume of white dust had shot up into the air from its heart. The mertzlers had sauntered back and dragged the fragments off to one side of the loading area.

It had taken all day to load the two years' accumulation of the quarriers labor. The mertzlers were working in the illumination of the caravans' great searchlights when the last blocks were grappled and hoisted aboard. The cranes had then folded back onto the decks, still at last.

Hours after Daenek had left the cliff's edge and gone back to the house and the Lady Marche's supper, he could hear the great engines roaring and coughing in the bellies of the caravan. The noises had faded as the machines pulled out of the quarry and back onto the wide road that led away from the vil-lage. There would be no return of the mertzlers for another two years.

But now here was this one, trudging steadily through the fields—what was he doing here, off the decks of the huge machines mertzlers called home? Daenek stood up on the boulder and shaded his eyes with one hand to see him better. The

mertzer's face was ruddy beneath the bill of his cap, pulled low over his eyes to shield them from the sun. A bushy grey beard brushed against the top of his chest. His blunt hands held the straps of the small pack on his shoulders.

Daenek jumped off the rock and ran down through the fields above the house as the mertzer approached the door. He cautiously moved sideways around the house's curving exterior until, unobserved, he could see and hear the mertzer speak to the Lady Marche at the door.

The mertzer had let go of one of his pack's straps and used the free hand to take off his cap. The top of his bald head was as red and shiny as his sweat-covered face. "They told me in the village," he said in a deep, rumbling voice, "that I might find a place to sleep here." He spoke in the villagers' language, the words stiffly accented with the inflections of the mertzers' guttural tongue.

"Why did they tell you that?" The Lady Marche's face and voice were cold. "This is no inn. There are beds for hire in the village."

The mertzer looked down and studied his dust-covered boots for a moment. When he looked up again, something seemed to have altered beneath the surface. Quietly, he spoke for a few seconds in that other language the Lady Marche knew. '

The hair on Daenek's neck stiffened as he watched her face. She stood looking at the man before her, then answered him in the same tongue. The mertzer followed her as she turned around and stepped back into the house.

Daenek ran and caught the door before it shut. He held it open a crack and watched as the mertzer, framed by the kitchen doorway, sat down heavily at the small table inside. The Lady Marche set before him a cup of water and half of one of the coarse brown loaves she brought back from the village marketplace. A few words of the different language they shared floated out to Daenek. He let the edge of the door slide from his fingers and turned away.

Deep in thought, he walked slowly through the rustling yellow stalks towards the cliff overlooking the quarry. The mass of words he had heard but did not understand seemed to gather inside his head like the stones of the necklace in the Lady Marche's locked trunk. He squatted down at the edge of the chasm and gazed, unseeing, at the grey walls of the quarry.

After several minutes, he looked up and searched the opposite rim for the familiar watcher. The stonecutters always took several days off after their two years of work had been hauled off by the mertzers' caravans—they would all be in the village now, drinking and idling on the street where the women were. Except for the mute, hulking watcher. Daenek spotted him in his usual crouching position on the quarry's far side. With no rock chips to be gathered, he spent all day there, occasionally chewing on a scrap of dried meat or hard bread he took from the pockets of his dusty work apron. Daenek remembered the watcher's vigil from the last time two years ago.

Their eyes met across the gulf, the boy and the powerfully built man looking into each other's distant face. The words with which the Lady Marche had ordered the watcher away from the house were still solid in Daenek's mind, though that was seven years past now. The watcher's skin had greyed with time spent in the quarry's dust, and when he walked about his job on the bottom he stooped low whether his bag was full of rock fragments or not. But the face was the same, silent and patient as the rocks he crouched among. *Words*, thought Daenek. *What were they all saying with them?*

The mertzger propped himself up on one elbow as Daenek stood in the little room's doorway. The wide, ruddy face looked up at the boy from the makeshift bed formed of the blankets the Lady Marche had placed in the unused room.

"Hello," said the mertzger gravely. He sat up on the blankets and made a slow gesture around the room with one hand. "Come in and talk."

Daenek saw that he kept one blunt finger of his other hand inserted in a small book with a frayed cloth cover. *What language is it in?* wondered Daenek. The mertzgers' or that other

tongue? Probably not in the village's words, like the poorly bound volumes kept on the shelves downstairs. The mertzler had other books as well, equally old and battered-looking. They tumbled out of his open pack lying in one corner of the room on top of his jacket and cap.

"Why didn't you go with the others?" Daenek stepped into the room and stood at the edge of the blankets.

The mertzler leaned back against the wall and gazed up at the boy with half-closed eyes. He sighed. "No good reasons," he said finally. "Lots of bad ones, I suppose." He reached over and pulled his pack to him by its straps, a few of the books spilling out on the floor.

"To tell truth," said the mertzler, rummaging through the pack's contents, "I was landed, as the mertzlers say. Kicked off. Which is a hard, a cold thing for them to do to one of their own." He straightened back up with a small object clutched in his hand. "They wouldn't have done it to one who'd been *born* a mertzler. That's sure."

He held the object out to Daenek. It was a small glass tube sealed off at one end. "Would you do me a kindness," the mertzler said, "and go fill this with water, up to here?" One of his fingers tapped at a line inscribed on the side of the glass.

Daenek filled the tube at the bathroom sink, then returned it to the mertzler. "Thank you," he said, nodding his shining dome of a head. He seemed to forget Daenek's presence as he methodically poured a tiny bit of powder into the tube from a metal container that he fetched from his pack. Sealing the open end with his thumb, he shook the cylinder until the water had turned a milky white. He threw his head back and quickly gulped down the contents.

Fascinated, Daenek watched as the man's face paled, as if the blood were falling back to his heart. Slowly, the ruddy complexion returned and the mertzler leaned back heavily against the wall with his eyes : closed.

Several minutes passed with no further change. *He must've*

fallen asleep, thought Daenek. He turned away, feeling a little disappointed, and started to walk quietly out of the room.

"A cold thing," rumbled the mertzzer's voice behind him.

Daenek looked over his shoulder and saw him lean forward, his eyes blinking, and run his thick fingers through the tangled grey hairs of his beard. Back to the edge of the blankets Daenek walked, and looked down at the mertzzer. "Why did they kick you off?"

The mertzzer gazed at him with a puzzled expression, still blinking furiously. The look disappeared as the eyelids slowed and finally stopped. "Eh?" He shook his head. "The captain—that young fool. Been two years since his father, the old captain, died and already his ears won't open to anything anybody else can tell him. Knows it all, he thinks."

Daenek sat down beside the man, drawing his legs up beneath himself on the blankets. "What did you try to tell him?" He was absorbed in what was the longest conversation he had ever had with anybody other than his mother, the Lady Marche.

"Ahh, the engines." The mertzzer scowled, gazing sourly at the empty space before him. "All rusted and patched together, exploding and falling apart with every cog's turn. Metal so fatigued you can write your name on it with a sneeze. Lay up for a year, I told him, spend the last run's profits on parts, go in debt to the buyers in the Capitol, if need be. Better that, than to soon trudge with every damn village's : wares loaded on our backs!" He struck the wall behind him with his fist—his face was even redder than before, the skin darkening with the pressure of his anger.

"And what did the captain say?" Daenek leaned forward eagerly.

The mertzzer sat without speaking for a few moments. His face was paler, almost ashen, when he finally spoke. "That the engines were running so well as to need one less machinist tending them. And not one of those fine fellows I've lived and worked with all these years would say a word for my sake. So here I come

walking up to you and your mother's house, a mertzler with only his own legs to move him about. Irony, of a sort." He fell silent, then very softly spoke a few words in that other language.

Daenek recognized the words. It was a line from one of the songs he had heard that night, years ago, when he had watched the Lady Marche pose in front of the mirror with the veils from her locked trunk. Without knowing what any of the words meant, Daenek carefully pronounced the next line of the song. It was the first time he had ever said any of the remembered words aloud but they came from his lips clear and with no hesitation.

The broad face of the mertzler turned towards him, the eyes widened a fraction. "Your mother's taught you the Capitol tongue as well, then?" He smiled for a second and then the eyes shifted away, following some path of his thoughts. "That's a good thing, to know a language just for its songs."

"She's not just my mother," said Daenek. "She's a lady—the Lady Marche, and—"

The mertzler turned quickly and studied the boy's face. "She's who?" Without waiting for an answer, his blunt finger tapped the boy's chest. "And if that's her name, then who are *you*?"

Daenek shook his head and tried to stand up, but the mertzler's hand gripped his shoulder and pressed him back down onto the blankets.

"The Lady Marche," said mertzler, marvelling, "and she didn't even tell me. Though what was I supposed to think when those wretched stone-cutters told me a woman lived up here who spoke the Capitol's tongue, and might have some hospitality for one who was also born in that city. The Lady Marche..." He turned Daenek around to see him better. The mertzler's face was transfigured, his mouth slightly open. "Then you must be," he said, "of course, you're—"

"My name's Daenek." He looked warily at the mertzler, wondering what change would strike him next.

"Yes." The mertzler nodded, Ms face grown solemn. "The

thane's son."

"So what of it?" said Daenek sullenly. He twisted free of the mertzer's hand and stood up.

Sad eyes followed him as he backed away. "Ah, child," murmured the other. "What have they told you here, about your father? What lies rotted that part of him that's inside you?"

"Nothing," said Daenek truthfully. "They never told me anything." Suddenly, like a hollow space opening in his body, he felt a sense of shame. Shame at the way he had felt before.

"That's how it's done." The mertzer's gaze didn't move away from him. "Slandered well, when the details are left for each to fill in with his own little fears and hates. Until a thane's memory is painted over with a traitor's." He closed his eyes and slumped against the wall.

Daenek retraced his steps until he was standing just before the mertzer again. "He wasn't a traitor?" he asked the silent figure. "My father?"

The mertzer opened his eyes and looked at Daenek for several seconds. "No," he said. "Traitors they who call your father a traitor."

"Did you know him?"

A small, bitter laugh. "I was only one of his followers. I even signed aboard the caravans, became a mertzer, so I could tell people in every village I came to about your father's plans. You see," he leaned forward and looked up at Daenek, "even back then it could be seen how things were going. Things breaking down and not being repaired, people running out of—whatever it is that you hold onto your life with. Will, perhaps it's called. But I thought the thane, your father, would change all that."

"How could he do that?" Daenek squatted down in front of the mertzer. All this sudden knowledge was making him feel dizzy—like suddenly finding yourself at the edge of a precipice you hadn't seen.

Another laugh. "I never even really knew," said the mertzer. "Or what little I did know isn't worth telling now. Just a few fragments of a memory, with enough edge left on it to draw blood." He fell silent, his eyes seeing nothing but some inner scene, filled with regret and pain.

A storm of questions surged up inside Daenek, each seeming to strain at the confines of his chest and throat. He wanted to ask more about the thane— what his father had looked like, what words of his could be remembered—but didn't, as he studied the mertzer's lowered head. Instead, he bent down to intercept the mertzer's line of vision, and asked: "What did that song mean? What do the words say?"

"What?" The mertzer looked up. "Song? Oh... that one. It's about leaving. Being in strange places by yourself—Why do you ask? You know the words to it."

"But not what they *mean*."

The mertzer looked at Daenek in puzzlement, that finally broke into comprehension. "You *are* your father's son," he said. "Nobody's ever taught you anything but this whining stone-cutter's tongue, yet..." He pulled Daenek closer to him. "How many times have you heard that song before? Once?"

Daenek nodded.

"Listen." The mertzer sang a line of the song, in a high, sad-tinged voice, then dropped to his usual bass. "That means, *Not a friend in the whole wide world*." Another line in the same tone as the first. "Now, what does that mean?"

"I don't know." But Daenek sensed a small, microscopic event in his head, like the cracking of a seed's hull. "Something... something that also isn't."

"*And nobody knows my name*," translated the mertzer. Daenek listened as he sang the entire song, pausing after every line to give the words' meanings. Every word that Daenek had held for so long intact within himself now swelled with radiance. He would never forget the song.

"Now," said the mertzger, "what does this say?" He recited another line, slower, one that Daenek had never heard before.

Gaps... there weren't enough words yet. But still, some of the words the mertzger had explained from the song—they sounded, no, *felt* like these. "Oceans," said Daenek. "An ocean that isn't there?" He shook his head in confusion. What could *that* possibly mean?"

"The Sea of Faith was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled." The mertzger reached over to his pack and took up one of the tattered books. The yellowed pages fluttered under his thumb until he stopped midway through the volume. He began to read, the other language's words exact and powerful sounding.

For Daenek it was like seeing some vast, mysterious object through a dense fog that at times thinned or vanished entirely. The mertzger would turn the pages back and forth in his hands, then stop and read another section aloud. Sometimes his eyes closed for several seconds, but the deep voice continued.

Silence in the little room at last, and the mertzger handed the book to Daenek. "Take it," he said. "Learn to read it."

"It's so big." Daenek weighed it in his hands. "It'll take me forever to know all these words."

"No." The mertzger lightly touched the boy's forehead with his finger. "A day, perhaps. You have a thane's gift for languages." He paused for a moment, searching for an explanation. "You see, there's a language underneath all languages, and when we're infants a part of us knows that language and can suck out the meanings and ways of any human tongue as though it were air. But the part dies a few years after our births, except for thanes. Like you. It stays strong in you, becomes stronger, a tool instead of a gift. So that, like your father, you could someday rule a world where every piddling village has its own language. There are some people who can pick up a solid thing, and tell you the face of every person who's ever handled it. You," the finger tapped the boy's chest again, "can hold words and draw out whatever their speakers were saying with them."

Daenek studied the faded gilt lettering on the cover of the book. The other language used the same alphabet as the stone-cutters' language. He held the tip of his ringer under the first word of the book's title and turned it towards the mertzer. "Does that mean *thane*?"

"Close." The mertzer nodded. "The book is called *Master Poems of the English Language*. 'English' is what they speak in the Capitol and, so I've heard, on some of the other worlds way beyond this, and even Earth itself." He suddenly noticed the empty glass tube and the metal packet. His hand reached down and pushed them out of sight.

The pages slowly passed under Daenek's hands as he opened the books. Words that were already becoming a part of him, sinking into the flesh under his flesh.

"It's late," said the mertzer. "Go to bed. We'll start on the first page tomorrow."

When Daenek got back to his room he opened the book and saw a single word inscribed inside the cover. *Stepke*. He switched off the light and got into bed. *That's his name*, he thought. It joined the other words massing at his heart.

The mertzer Stepke was right—by the evening of the next day Daenek knew the language well enough to read aloud from the poems, while the mertzer sat with eyes closed on his makeshift bed. The sensation, the feel of the words on his tongue, was intoxicating to Daenek. He felt as if he had grown another pair of arms.

Their voices went on for a long time, the words coming faster and more sure from Daenek's mouth. He even talked for a while about living with the Lady Marche in the house so far above the friendless village. Stepke finally gave in and spoke of some things he remembered about the old thane, a long time ago.

"The rumor was," said Stepke, "that he had a power, a tremendous power. He could reach into a man's mind with his own and command him. And the man would obey, as though he were nothing but another hand of the thane's. I heard that he

quelled a riot in the quarters of his militia that way. By just striding into the barracks and looking around, pressing them all under the weight of his power." The mertzer paused for a moment. "But the thane hated the power, didn't want his people to be only puppets at his bidding. He wanted them to be fired with his ideas, the hopes that fired him. Some were—but not enough." He was silent again, and turned away to gaze out the window.

In his own room, Daenek sat on the edge of his bed, thinking. Something was growing hard within his chest. Not to be a thane—who could come after a man with a power such as that? Daenek knew there was nothing inside himself like it—but to wrestle from the devouring past the truth about his father's death. A son's obligation.

That night Daenek heard angry sounding voices from the kitchen downstairs. Lying in his bed, he couldn't make out what the mertzer and the Lady Marche were arguing about. He knew he didn't want to sneak out to the head of the stairs and listen, either. He turned his head toward the window and watched the cold stars until the voices were smothered by sleep.

The next morning, with the sun forming thick, dust-filled shafts in the little room, Stepke was busy re-assembling his pack. Daenek stood in the doorway and watched him as he knelt, stacking his books and rolling the blankets into a tight cylinder. "Where are you going?" said Daenek.

The mertzer did not look up as he began stuffing the items into the leather pack. "A man has to work," he said. "Cutting stone is as much to my liking as anything else, I suppose."

"But you could stay here. You don't have to leave. You could go down to the quarry every day from here."

The bearded face looked up at Daenek, then turned back to the motions of his hands. "No," he said quietly. "That's not possible."

"I know why," said Daenek, his voice choked tight with a sudden, overwhelming bitterness.

The mertzer reached out and took Daenek's elbow in one hand and drew him closer. "No, you don't," he said, holding Daenek before himself. "The Lady Marche loves you, but hearts wear down and become fragile, just like all the other machines have. There's a world of pain and confusion below this one, and it'll come welling back up like blood soon enough without my being around to remind the poor woman of it. Everything breaks down and ends, eventually."

Daenek pulled away from his grasp and ran out of the room. He returned in a few seconds and thrust the book of poems at the mertzer. "Here. This is yours." -

Stepke shook his head. "Keep it."

All the way through the fields, as Daenek followed the mertzer along the narrow path, neither said a word. The rustling of the yellow stalks under the sun was the only sound, until the house was hidden from view by the curve of the hill. The village lay against the foot of the hill far below, "You'd better go back," said Stepke.

Another few seconds of silence passed as Daenek glanced at the man's face, then across the bending fields. "Why do things ran down?" he said finally. The question had been moving slowly through him since the mertzer had spoken of the Lady Marche. "And people? Why can't they stay the same, instead of everything falling apart?"

"Maybe," said the mertzer softly, "the sociologists would know for sure. But—" He paused and ran his blunt fingers through his beard. "I heard, a long time ago, about something called the Dark Seed."

Daenek sensed the other's reluctance to begin the long walk, alone, down the hillside to the village. He waited for him to speak again.

Abstracted, the mertzer's gaze wandered over the fields. "Back when I lived in the Capitol, before I signed on the caravans, I heard about how the seed-ships came all the way here from old Earth—do you know about that? Do they ever talk about it in

these parts?"

Daenek nodded. "A little."

"And when the ships came," continued Stepke slowly, pulling on his beard, "there weren't people aboard. No, just the priests, that were made on Earth to pilot the ships and take care of the cargo. The cargo was machinery, so delicate and precise that it had to be shielded from any slow leakage of radiation, and one small box less than a meter wide. The priests took the box from the little niche it had been crammed into in one of the closely packed ships. Inside the box was human genetic material—the cellular blueprints for an entire population to be started on this world. The priests took the fertilized ova, fed it into their precious machinery, and began cloning—do you know what that is?"

His forehead furrowed with concentration, Daenek shook his head.

"Cloning is a way of making many individuals from the same ovum, the same genetic material. You see, the seedships only had enough room to bring a tiny fraction of the human gene pool from Earth. So, to make the first generation here on the world large enough to be socially viable, each ovum was cloned to produce dozens of identical individuals. Then the genes from Earth were reshuffled with each succeeding generation, as the individuals married and had children at random. So many generations have passed since the first that no one's exactly the same as anyone else now—but there was only so much genetic material to begin with. We're all only different combinations of it."

Daenek had followed most of what the mertzger had said. He recognized the concepts from an elementary science text that was one of the books, written in the stone-cutters' language, kept in the house. The Lady Marche had found them in the marketplace, the remnants of a school for the village children, abandoned long ago. "But what's the Dark Seed?" said Daenek.

"Ah, that." The mertzger bent his head and frowned at the path's dust. "Things have been slowly running down for a long

time—not just machines, but the people as well. Becoming cruder and lazier, wretched and fearful of any change or effort. Some writers of books in the Capitol talked about a Dark Seed, an entropic gene that had slipped by the eugenicists on Earth who were supposed to weed out every undesirable characteristic from the ova put aboard the seed-ships. Or else some radiation from somewhere between the stars managed to pierce the shielding and altered one gene for the worse. The Dark Seed—if it even really exists—creates that part of us that gives up, that lets things slide into rot and waste, that finds a kind of sullen joy in the end of hopes and ambitions. That's satisfied with death. Have you ever felt—" The mertzer's eyes stared fervidly at Daenek. "—how simple, how easy it would be to die? How many problems it would solve? That's the Dark Seed speaking in your veins."

Stricken silent, Daenek gazed back into the other's face. An appalling, sick feeling drifted in his gut, as if the mertzer had laid a finger on his most secret knot of organs. *It's true*, he thought, *the Dark Seed exists. Eats. I can feel it.*

Stepke's broad shoulders heaved as he sucked a great, ragged breath into his lungs. He looked away from Daenek and again towards the village. "What can be done?" he murmured. "It's in our very hearts. There's no knife fine enough..." His voice broke off, and after a moment, one of his massive hands squeezed Daenek's shoulder. "You'll see me,

OK?" he boomed, the cheerfulness in his voice forced and artificial. "On the days off at the quarry, I'll come up here, and we'll swap books—OK? The one I gave you for one you haven't read. All right?"

Daenek nodded.

The mertzer pulled his pack higher upon his shoulders and started down the steepest part of the path. "OK?" he called back, when he was well down the hillside. "In a week or so. I'll be back."

It was less than that. Three days later, the mertzer returned. Daenek laid the book down on the surface of the boulder and

watched, with a sick, hollow certainty growing in him, three burly stone-cutters struggling up the hillside. They carried a bundle wrapped in a dirty white cloth, awkwardly shaped and heavy—the size of a man.

Daenek followed the group's progress for a moment, until his eyes ached from the sun's glare. He slid from atop the rock and slowly started to push his way through the weeds and down to the house.

The white bundle was lying on the house's doorstep. The stone-cutters, their faces shiny with sweat, tried to conceal their smirking expressions as they stood over it. Framed in the doorway, the Lady Marche waited, her face pale but expressionless. Daenek stood a few yards away at the edge of the field and watched.

"It was an accident," said one of the men. He put his hands on his hips and tilted his head in a little mockery of a bow. "A little rockslide in the quarry, and him in the way of it..."

"And no one bore him any ill will," the Lady Marche spoke softly, looking down at the shrouded figure.

"He fought us," said one of the other men, looking sullen. "He shouldn't have tried to stick around, he should've just gone away. But now he got—"

"Shut up," said the first one who toad spoken. He turned back to the Lady Marche. "It was an accident and you can't prove otherways."

She nodded. "You did right to bring him here. Now go away."

"Here's his stuff." One of the men held out the mertzzer's pack, hastily jammed together and tied.

Taking it in both hands, she turned and disappeared into the bouse.

The men stood for a moment, looking at each other and the mute object they had carried up the hill. As they started away

from the house and towards the path, one of them caught sight of Daenek, still standing motionless at the edge of the field. "There's your friend," called the stone-cutter. He pointed to the white bundle and smiled. "Someday..." He turned and trotted after his companions.

The Lady Marche went down to the village and hired the carpenter to build a narrow box, and, for a little more money, to dig a hole slightly larger in the fields above the house.

Daenek took the mertzler's pack up to his room and placed it carefully in the center of his bed. He copied the name written on the flyleaves onto a scrap of paper and took it out to the carpenter.

The man shrugged, pocketed another coin, and carved the six letters onto the little board driven into the ground at one end of the hole. '

Chapter IV

Around the time he turned fifteen, Daenek began exploring the hill range in earnest. Partly from boredom, but also from a restlessness that seemed to swell up from his loneliness, he wandered farther and farther away from the house and the village. With the food the Lady Marche had prepared tucked in the leather pack that had belonged to Stepke, he tracked over the hills. At night he would lie on his back in the unrolled blankets, and open one of the books he had brought. They had also been the mertzler's. One of the moons' light was enough for him to make out the words he had already memorized.

Sometimes the books helped, but at other times he put them away in the pack, and dreamed—almost involuntarily—about meeting a girl in the hills. One from another village, who didn't recognize him, and was prettier than the laughing, sneering ones in the stone-cutters' village. There were small noises, of insects and wind-stirred trees, and he'd fall asleep, half-hearing them.

One morning he lifted his head from the ground— a fine mist in the air was gradually thickening into rain. He rolled the

blankets and pack together, then set off for home, with the first light of the sun barely piercing the clouds' grey.

At the foot of the hill he found the broad roadway that the caravans used. If he followed it he would pass between the village and the quarry before he reached the little trail that wound back up through the hills to the house and the Lady Marche. No *one will see me*, he thought. He had avoided the village almost completely for the last couple of years. His boots pressed into the muddy surface of the road. *They're probably still all asleep.*

As he neared the village, though, he began to hear a ragged chorus of shouts. Voices, male and female, tinged with an unusual excited timbre. Something— another voice beneath the others but different, disturbing—made Daenek hesitate before he hurried towards the noise. The skin on his arms tightened from more than just the coldness of the rain.

The villagers, a crowd of a hundred or more, were standing in a mass at the entrance to the quarry. The ones at the back of the crowd were shouting the loudest, dancing on tiptoe and clawing at the others' shoulders as they strained to see what was happening inside the quarry's gates. A few glanced quickly at Daenek as he approached, but didn't recognize him in the obscuring rain. "What's going on?" he asked the nearest ones.

"It's the bad priest!" shrilled a hatchet-faced woman. She tugged nervously at the corners of her soaking wet shawl. "They've got him trapped in a corner!"

"The what?" said Daenek.

"Where've you been?" growled one man suspiciously. "The damn thing's murdered two people in the last two nights."

"Tore out their throats, it did, right in their own beds!" The woman's eyes rolled giddily at the thought.

Daenek edged away from the crowd. He could see nothing from here. Looking up, he noted a pair of sociologists, the rain falling through their faintly luminous bodies as they floated high over the quarry and pointed their cameras downward. *Maybe*

from above, thought Daenek.

Scrambling up the rocky slope to one side of the quarry's bottleneck entrance, he came to a flat outcropping where he could see the entire scene inside the quarry, and where he was hidden as well from the other onlookers.

Below him, the bad priest thrashed in the net of ropes that formed its trap. The ropes were wet and glistened like butchered animal sinews. Only a few shreds of the bad priest's robe still hung on its tubular limbs. Its metal body gleamed under the rain, the jointed arms and legs pulling and twisting at the taut lines.

One of the dozen or so black-uniformed men—the subthane's personal militia—threw another rope around the bad priest's neck, then quickly backed away as the thing tried to lunge at him. Its immobile face seemed to take on a lunatic quality, the flat round scan-cells that formed its eyes blazing unnaturally. Its ringers curved and clawed at the air.

One of the quarry-workers, an enormous man with coarse black hair plastered to his forehead by the rain, stepped up to the constellation of men, ropes, and wildly thrashing machine. The stone-cutter carried a huge pickax cradled in his hands. He and the militia captain conferred for a few seconds, and then the captain gave a signal to the others.

The man pulled tighter on the ropes, pinning the bad priest against the wall of the quarry. Its body arched as it fought against the restraints. The stonecutter stepped between the taloned hands straining to sink into the flesh of the man's arms. He swung the pickax and buried its point in the machine's chest.

A small noise, metal against metal, and then the bad priest's arms slowly folded and swung towards the ground. The scan-cells went blank. Rain gathered in the cavity and ran in rivulets along the wooden handle of the pickax.

The crowd of villagers gathered at the quarry gates was silent now. Daenek watched as they cleared a little pathway among themselves. A group of priests, headed by the local bishop, came

slowly through the crowd towards the gate.

The old bishop, taller than the other priests and clad in a white robe embroidered with gold threads long tarnished with age, planted his spiral-headed staff in the mud around the gate. "We have come," it called, its harsh voice loud enough for Daenek to hear, "to take our own back with us."

One of the subthane's men opened the gate and the priests filed into the area. They drew the ropes away from the metal body and, last of all, pulled the pickax from their fallen brother's chest. A new robe was wrapped around the dead machine and they carried it away, disappearing beyond the massed villagers.

Is there a Dark Seed for priests, too? wondered Daenek. *Something that loves death?* He crouched on the little rock ledge, unconcerned with the rain pelting across his back. He had heard before of priests going bad, suddenly tearing off their robes and becoming frenzied killers of men. There were new stories every year of other villages suffering with one or more of them. The renegade machines' own ferocity made them incautious, though, and easy to trap, if still dangerous to approach. *Does everything have to break down?* thought Daenek. *Will all priests become murderers someday?*

After a few more minutes, Daenek climbed down from the ledge. The villagers had all returned to their own homes. He hoisted the pack higher on his shoulders and started down the road.

Before he came upon the foot of the trail leading to the house, he overtook the group of priests. They ignored him as they trudged slowly through the mud, heading for their monastery a long ways off in the hills. He stepped into the middle of the silent procession and walked close to the ones carrying the body of the bad priest. A few feet away, the old bishop walked, the point of its staff dragging unnoticed on the wet ground.

"There is no time," said the bishop suddenly. It halted and turned around, transfixing Daenek with its expressionless gaze. "Or there has been too much of it."

"Sir?" said Daenek. He had never talked much with priests, having only seen them in the village.

"I recognize you." The bishop held its hand before it, as if trying to clear away the drizzling rain. "The thane. But you're so young—you've changed. It won't help. It's too late, there's no time now, you must know that by now."

"I don't understand," said Daenek. He suddenly felt very cold, uneasy in the midst of the priests.

The bishop turned away, the angle of its head somehow exuding an air of infinite sadness and regret.

It started its slow walk again and the priests followed, passing on either side of Daenek.

The last one stopped for a moment and laid its cold hand on Daenek's shoulder. "The bishop is old," it spoke softly. "Soon it'll rest. Like your father."

"What do you mean?" Daenek reached for the coarse brown cloth of its robe, but it was already too far away. He somehow knew that it would do no good to run after them, that no answers would come to his questions. He stood in the road long after the priests had finally disappeared.

Chapter V

The Lady Marche was becoming old. Time, the last two years especially, seemed to diminish her, leaving a smaller, grey figure in her place. Daenek went to the village market-place each week, to spare his mother the long walk down the hillside. The villagers still glared in hatred at the sixteen-year-old youth, but accepted the coins from his hand readily enough.

Sometimes, on his way back from the village, he would stop in the middle of the fields and watch the silent white cylinder of the house. *She'll die soon*, he knew. *And then I'll leave*.

A month before his seventeenth birthday, he began to think

the end was very near for the old woman. He did no more overnight wandering out in the hill range, but stayed in the house and listened to her moving restlessly about through the long, dark hours. Something seemed to be haunting her, consuming her grey, stooped figure from the bones outward.

Once, Daenek came down in the first light of dawn and found the trunk she usually kept locked sitting with its lid flung back in the middle of the floor. One of the shimmering veils, dull and lusterless now, was ripped in two. He found the Lady Marche in an exhausted sleep with her head buried in her arms upon the kitchen table. Her face was fever-hot and damp with perspiration. Daenek carried her up to her bed—he was dismayed at how light she seemed—and brought her soup when she was awake. She refused it, but beckoned for him to bend down closer to her. "Forgive me," she whispered into his ear. *Her mind's going*, thought Daenek as he slowly went down the steps with the bowl of soup that had finally grown cold. He passed the night, and the next, sitting in a chair beside her bed. Sometimes he would fall asleep for a few moments, but would awake to see the old woman's eyes gazing up at the dim ceiling. His eyes closed before hers did, and his head sank to his chest without waking him.

Noises outside the house. Voices. Daenek opened his eyes to a thick shaft of late morning sunlight sliding into the room. He glanced at the bed. The Lady Marche seemed to be asleep, her eyelashes motionless above her hollowed cheeks. Pressing the heels of his palms into the sleep-stiffened muscles of his face, he arched his back, cramped from sitting all night in the hard wooden chair, then stepped to the wall's transparent panel. His heart tensed as he saw, gathered in front of the house, a score of the sub-thane's black-uniformed militia, mounted on their nervously moving equines. The men were laughing and calling to each other, throwing a leather-covered bottle back and forth among themselves.

They're waiting for something, thought Daenek. *But what?* Suddenly, the men below fell silent and the bottle was flung into the weeds with a spray of brown liquid. The subthane's grossly-fleshed figure, looking almost wide enough for two

equines rather than just one, was ascending the narrow trail up to the house. His militia captain rode to one side of him.

Daenek drew away from the window. Asleep, the Lady Marche moaned softly. *The villagers were always saying it*, thought Daenek grimly. He stood in the doorway, clenching the frame in both hands. *That they'd come for me some day*. He glanced at the old woman in her bed. *She knew*, he realized. *Tomorrow I'll be seventeen years of age. Or would have been.*

He wiped his damp hands on his shirt as he walked down the stairs. *// / step outside*, he told himself, *before they begin to pound on the door, she won't awaken*. An uncomfortable feeling moved under his ribs. *She could have warned me, though. I could've been long gone, running, before my time was up—*

The mounted subthane formed a bulky nucleus surrounded by his men. They seemed too thin to be of the same species, but the flat planes of their faces were like the bones under the subthane's jowls would be. As Daenek stepped outside the house, carefully pulling the door shut behind him, he heard the large man's voice break off in mid-sentence to his men.

The subthane's equine, a circle of white showing around its wildly staring eyes, bucked and reared beneath him. His face flushed with anger, the subthane clouted the animal near its ear with a solid blow from his gloved fist, then spurred it forward towards Daenek. His men followed, forming a rough V behind him.

Daenek looked up at the coarse-pored face of the subthane. Rivulets of sweat had formed in the creases and folds of his skin. Only once before had Daenek seen the man, across the length of the village marketplace, but even from a distance the sense of something like the odor of blood had been apparent. Now, the subthane was rubbing the back of his leather glove over the bristles on his chin.

"Well, Daenek," wheezed the subthane, sounding pleased. The skin of his cheeks tightened as his lips drew apart in a parody of a smile. "Are you so surprised at our coming? Don't you know? Didn't anyone tell you?" He glanced quickly at the laughing faces

of his men on either side.

Beyond the half-circle of equines and men, Daenek could see the stalks in the field bend with a light breeze. "I know why you're here," he said quietly, looking at but not seeing their faces for a moment. He noted a dark bank of clouds cradling the morning sky at the horizon. "But take me someplace else and do it," he said, focussing upon the subthane again.

"Oh, but it's not that *simple*, boy." The subthane lowered his head beside the neck of his equine. "You've got a choice to make, you have."

Daenek took a step backwards from the malicious grin. "I don't care how you kill me," he said. "Suit yourself." *I'll die*, he thought, *without knowing the truth about my father's death, but I'll die—like him, maybe.*

"Kill you? We don't want to do that, boy," the subthane said gleefully. He sat up in his saddle and beckoned the militia captain over to himself. The man reined his equine closer to the subthane, then took a small black case from a pouch dangling on his saddle and handed it to him.

"Just look here." The subthane snapped the case open and, holding it by its lid, thrust it in front of Daenek. "What do you see?"

He suspected already what the shining chrome tube in its plush-lined niche was, and said nothing.

"You see," said the subthane, holding the case in the crook of one arm and stroking the object inside it with his forefinger, "we take this little gadget and put it against your head, right up over the ear. And not even a drop of blood, but no one ever worries about you again. Because everything in your head is all chopped up and muddled around. Harmless." He laughed. "Have you ever seen that idiot that works in the quarry? The one that look like a shaved ursine, and never talks?"

Daenek nodded slowly, feeling his eyes draw into slits as he looked at the grinning face.

The subthane's smile widened even further. "He used to be a very powerful man. Your father's right hand. But the thane's been dead a long time, and the big man had one of *these* put up to his skull."

A spasm of rage and contempt welled up inside Daenek. "If those are my choices," he spat out, "then I'd prefer a knife."

"Ah, but maybe I lied when I said you had a choice, boy. I really want to see how one of these things—" He fell silent, his eyes looking up and past Daenek.

The Lady Marche was standing in the doorway of the house, Daenek saw as he turned around. Her face was white with the strain of moving under her fever, and the hand that gripped the silver head of her stick trembled. "You are a day too soon," she said in a tone of fierce authority and loathing. She raised the point of the stick at the subthane.

"What's a day?" mumbled the obese figure on his equine. "The damn kid's old enough—why should we wait? Come on," he whined, "let's get on with it."

"The Regent's orders," intoned the Lady Marche, "said that for seventeen years the son of the old thane would be protected. The Regent would be interested to hear how you heed his wishes."

"Who's going to tell him?" blustered the subthane. He glared at the old woman but looked away after a few seconds of her sharp gaze in return. "All right, then," he said, jerking on his equine's reins and wheeling the animal around. He pointed to one of his men. "You—stay here with them. To make sure they're here," he glared over his shoulder at Daenek and the woman, "when we return in the morning."

The trail through the fields erupted into dust as the men rode away from the house in its little clearing. The guard left behind glanced at the Lady Marche and Daenek with a smoldering hostility submerged somewhere beneath his narrow, hard-planed face. He dismounted from his equine, then walked to the edge of the field and stamped a wooden stake into the ground with his

boot. When the equine was securely tied—it seemed to be always trembling in a state of constant hysteria—the guard pulled something wrapped in cloth from one of the pouches on the saddle.

"C'mere," the guard called, but Daenek remained where he was standing, with the Lady Marche a couple of meters behind him in the doorway. The guard crossed the space between them and held out the object, nested in the unfolded cloth. "Know what this is?" he said. "Don't touch it."

Daenek looked at the man's extended hand. "It's a gun." *An old one*, he thought. *The kind that shoots metal bullets, like in the old stories in the books. A very old one. Maybe so old that—*

"Uh-uh, I know what you're thinking," said the guard. His eyes darted to the Lady Marche and then back to Daenek. "But it works. One of the last ones around here that does." A note of childish boasting tinged his voice as he picked at one of the rust specks on the long barrel. "And I know how to use it, too." Threatening. "So don't try running, boy. Or I'll drop you."

Silent, Daenek turned and walked back to the house. The Lady Marche put her hand on his shoulder but he pushed it away and stepped beside her into the dark interior.

Stepke's books weighed in his hands like stones. The words on the pages flowed over his eyes like water, leaving nothing behind. He put the last faded volume on top of the pile and leaned back against the wall of his room. *My father spoke that language, he thought. And all the others. A sense of loss opened inside him, like a phantom heart. It'll end with me— no one will know all those words again.* Regret, but no fear, moved inside him when he thought of the coming morning.

He heard the Lady Marche calling him from downstairs. With a sigh, he got to his feet and walked to the stairway. She was waiting for him at the bottom step.

"Go to the kitchen," she said. Her voice was firmer, as if from several years ago, but the muscles of her face were still tight and the skin moist with fever. She supported herself on her

silver-headed stick.

Puzzled, Daenek turned and saw the subthane's guard sitting in the front doorway, his back against the frame and his eyes watching the little scene with suspicion. It had been more than an hour since the others had left, but the guard still had his gun cocked and ready in one hand, cradling the weight of its barrel in his other.

"Go on," she said. He glanced at her eyes, but they were unreadable. Slowly, he moved towards the kitchen.

"What's going on?" called the guard, leaning forward.

"It is a day like any other," said the Lady Marche, "and people become hungry." She walked over to the guard and looked down at him. "Would you like something to eat?" she asked stiffly.

The guard started to scramble upright, grasping the door frame with his free hand and pushing himself up from the floor with the hand holding the gun. "Yeah, maybe some—" he began, when the Lady Marche suddenly moved.

Daenek saw the blur of motion from the corner of his eye. He spun about in the kitchen doorway and saw the end of the arc the silver-headed stick drew through the air. Its point did not crack across the guard's face, but noiselessly laid itself against the skin of his cheek. There was a sharp, loud noise, an explosion of light reddened with blood, and the guard crumpled away from the stick. A fragment of a howling noise was choked off in his throat.

Daenek, frozen where he stood and not yet comprehending, watched the little wisp of smoke, faint in the sunlight from beyond the door, emerge from the stick's point and dissipate into the air. The Lady Marche turned her face, now looking very old and tired, towards him.

"Look out!" cried Daenek, as he saw the guard clench a fistful of cloth and pull the Lady Marche on top of him. One eye in the ruined face still glared with pain and hatred. Three muffled roars sounded as Daenek ran towards them, each shot sounding longer

and longer, the last like a rumble from below the ground.

He fell onto his knees and jerked the gun away from the Lady Marche's stomach. It spun out of the guard's hand, clattering on the floor behind them. The guard's fingers spread in the final release of death, mirrored in the one dulling eye.

"Lady," moaned Daenek. He cradled her shoulders in one arm and desperately pressed his other hand to her stomach. The blood welled out between his fingers.

"What does it matter... if an old woman dies," she muttered, almost too soft to hear. Her eyes wandered away from Daenek's face. "What was I so afraid of..."

He could say nothing, but silently supported her shoulders, those of an old woman, against himself.

"No time for that..." Her voice was a little louder. "The stick is useless now... leave it... take the gun. And the equine... go—"

"I—" began Daenek, then he compressed his lips and nodded. "Where?"

"Where?" A small laugh that ended in a gasp, her eyes squeezed shut with pain. "Go anywhere. You're the son of a thane." Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at him. One of her pale hands reached inside her clothing, then slowly pulled out a small chain of fine links. A tiny square of white metal dangled from it.

"There was so much—to tell you," she said, her voice fading again. "But now... I've forgotten, and it's too late." The chain fell across Daenek's wrist, the links miring in blood.

She was suddenly heavier in his arms. He laid her onto the floor a little distance from that of the guard. He stood up and, without thinking, looked over the room until he found the gun against the bottom of the stairway. Picking it up, his first thought pierced the numbness. *She waited until the others were far enough away. So they wouldn't hear the shots.* The wet redness on the gunmetal ran, mixing with a few drops of salt

water.

Chapter VI

The equine seemed to sense the urgency in its new rider, and ran over the trail through the hills with its mane streaming towards the dust that flew up from its hooves.

Daenek's legs were shorter than the dead guard's had been, so that he had to keep them tightly clamped against the animal's sides. For the first few miles, every motion had jolted him painfully up and down in the saddle. At last he found the way to move with the equine as it ran. It was stupid but well trained, more responsive to him and less skittish than it had been with its former master.

The trail ended at the edge of a little stream at the foot of the hill. Daenek pulled on the reins, halting the equine. Its hooves splashed the shallow water into spray, and then it lowered its sweating head to drink. Twisting around in the saddle, Daenek looked back at the hillside they had just descended. Beyond its boulder-crested top, on the opposite slope, was the house with two corpses inside it. Further on, in the valley, the subthane and his men were probably roistering in the single inn of the stone-cutters' village.

Daenek took from his jacket pocket the chain that the Lady Marche had given him. *A key*, he thought, looking at the little square of white metal. *That's what*

it is. He slipped the chain over his head and then tucked the pendant inside his shirt. The fine metal links felt cool and liquid on his neck.

Digging his heels into the equine's ribs, he reined it around to face upstream. As the hooves thudded along the water's bank, he thought about where he was heading. *And after that? I'll think about that when I have to*.

There was still light when he reached the monastery, but the setting sun tinged the cluster of low buildings a dull red. As the

equine trotted down the path leading out of the surrounding hills, Paenek heard the bell that was mounted on a little platform inside the walled courtyard. It rang seven times and then a robed figure walked away from it towards the central building.

Daenek had come across the monastery before, in the times he had spent wandering. That had been more than a year ago, but he had kept the location fresh in his memory, planning for the day he would seek it out with a purpose.

He halted the equine at the aged wooden gate and dismounted. The wall, made of crude earthen bricks, was too high for him to see over. He pounded with his fist on the gate, stopped and listened, then pounded again until he heard the odd, slightly different from human, footsteps of one of the priests striding across gravel.

The gate swung away from him and the priest's impassive face, shrouded by the cowl of its robe, looked out at Daenek. "We offer no shelter, traveller," it spoke in its flat, uninflected voice. "But for your soul. So ride on if you would escape the storm that approaches." It motioned with its hand toward the dark clouds filling half the sky.

"I want to see the bishop," said Daenek. "That's why I've come."

"We have no bishop now." The priest's voice did not change. "We have not elected another. We have not decided that we shall."

"What—what happened to the old one?" Daenek had felt his heart speed up at the priest's words.

"He grew old," said the priest. "As all things do. He sits with the other bishops a little distance from here."

"The other bishops?" In the increasing gloom, it was hard for Daenek to see anything of the other's face except for the glowing scan-cells.

"They were all created at the same time. When this land was

first divided into parishes. They have seen several generations of men rise and fall back into the dust. Now they wait to follow them. We have brought them here merely as a convenience to ourselves. We do not wish to lose the valuable parts."

"There was one," said Daenek slowly. "Who was at the court in the Capitol when—when the last thane was alive. And then he came to the parish of the stone-cutters. Could I find that one?"

The cowled head slowly moved from side to side. "There was no such one. But speak to any—of those that are still able to speak—and you'll find the one you desire. They were created with a group mind, like the fingers of a hand, so that all know what any one of them ever saw or heard."

Daenek hugged himself against the chilling thrust of wind. "Where are they? Could you take me to them?"

"Better that you come to the chapel and pray, then pursue your life elsewhere." The priest's face was completely hidden by shadow.

"Take me to them."

A boulder-strewn hillside was lit by the arc of the first moon appearing over the horizon. The priest silently indicated the vague shapes with a motion of its hand, then turned and headed back to the monastery. Daenek, the cold wind penetrating his shirt and jacket, stepped down to the waiting figures.

They were all facing the same way, across the unlit valley to where the sun would rise in the morning. The nearest one sat on the ground with its back against a rock. Its robe hung in dangling tatters from its frame. A few meters away, another bishop knelt, immobile. As far as Daenek could make out, others lay or sat without moving, like rock formations themselves.

Daenek touched the shoulder of the nearest one. The frayed cloth of its robe split with the slightest pressure. The old bishop made no response, and Daenek crouched down in front of it to look into its face. Blank, impassive—the dull scan-cells seemed to brighten and focus on him, though. Daenek's voice moved stiffly

from his throat: "I—"

The bishop's circular voice-grid crackled, and then a stream of whining, buzzing static sounded, like a knife ripping the cold air itself. The scan-cells grew brighter and one metal hand lifted towards Daenek's head in a blessing or threat.

He scrambled to his feet and backed away from the machine. It did not follow him but fell silent, the raised hand falling and striking the rock it sat on.

The cold seemed to be spreading from Daenek's gut now. He looked around the hillside. The yellow points of light that were the bishops' eyes were like some dying galaxy surrounding him.

"Who are you?" said a voice behind him.

He spun around and looked down at the upturned face of the kneeling bishop.

"You know. You've seen me before," said Daenek, bending down.

"Ah," breathed the faded voice. Some of the other bishops repeated the sound, a windlike echo. "Yes. The thane."

"No. I'm only his son."

The machine did not appear to have heard him. "Who," it intoned slowly, "would have foreseen this end? It pains me, where I should feel no pain."

"... pain," whispered the other voices in the dark.

"I need some answers," pleaded Daenek. He searched the old bishop's unmoving face. "You were there. You know what happened."

"Happened?" Its head tilted slightly with a small noise.

"To my father. To the thane. Who killed him? And why?"

"Time killed him."

"It kills everything," muttered another bishop far away to the right.

"... everything," sighed the decaying chorus.

"No," said Daenek, his voice becoming tinged with desperation. He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead. "I mean... what am I supposed to *do*?"

"Do nothing! Rot!" cried the bishop. Its hands flew up, the thin metal fingers fanning out into claws.

Daenek leaped back at the sudden violent shout. He tripped and fell heavily onto his side. Dizzy, he stood up and ran a few meters, directionless on the dark hillside, until another hand flew up and transfixed him with its pointing finger.

"Rot," said a bishop lying outstretched on the ground before him. "Like the rest of mankind. For this we were created? For this we piloted the seed-ships through the stars? For this we fathered your fathers?" The scan-cells blazed, apertures into a white fire.

Daenek spun away from the accusing voice. The same face leaned forward from its perch on an outcropping of rock. "So that man could slide back into the pit, giving away everything that we were made to preserve in him?" A chorus of murmurs mixed with harsh electronic crackling moved through the air, then became silent.

The moon had lifted a little higher, just under the edge of the clouds, and as Daenek turned slowly around, he could see the pale light sliding over the metal limbs and faces of the dying bishops. On all sides, they stretched as far as he could see.

"We have given up hope." A single voice spoke near Daenek, but he could not locate it. "We whose purpose was to create hope. It is no wonder that some of us, with the rot of time within, have gone mad and now seek the blood of you whom we were to serve."

It's no use, thought Daenek. He wiped the cold perspiration

from his face. *They're too old to help me. But still*—He crouched down before one of the priests and pulled the chain from out of his shirt. The white metal glimmered in the light from the scan-cells. "Do you know what this is?" he asked softly.

The bishop was silent for a long time. "Thane," it said finally, "of all men, I am most sorry for you."

"I'm not the thane," said Daenek wearily. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm trying to find out. Tell me what this is. It's a key, isn't it? What does it unlock?"

The expressionless face moved upwards to his. "Your birthright."

Daenek stood up, a growing exhaustion weighing on his spine. He looked up the hillside and saw the monastery walls silhouetted against the bank of storm clouds. Around him, the bishops' faces were all turned away from him, back to where the sun would rise. "What do you do out here?" he murmured. "While you wait to die?"

"We meditate," said the one to which he had shown the chain. It did not look up at him. "Upon man. Upon the god who all around us is dying."

"... dying." An echo, followed by a sharp buzz of static.

He turned, feeling the cold wind against his skin. In the darkness, he climbed the hill and then circled the monastery, guiding himself by keeping one hand on the rough wall. He came at last to the equine, where he had left it tied to the gate's hinge. As he loosened the knot, he heard the nervous whinnying of another equine somewhere behind him.

He froze at the sound, then spun around. A hand gloved in coarse leather caught him at the throat and pinned him against the wall.

Chapter VII

"So smart," jeered the militia captain from across the fire, his face redlit by the flames. The rest of the subthane's men were a little ways off in the darkness, roaring with laughter and passing around flasks of the village's brown liquor. "Smart enough to have your old lady blow the top of someone's head off— but you couldn't keep from leaving a track a blind baby could follow." He took a swig from his own bottle, then returned it to between his boots.

Daenek said nothing. He flexed his cramped shoulders and felt his wrists chafe against the wiry cord that bound them behind his back.

"Well, you've lost your choices now." The captain's face lengthened into a wolfish leer. "We'll take you back hi the morning, and the old geezer'U get to use his little toy after all." He laid a finger against his temple. "Zap. Just like that. Then we'll watch your brains run out like pudding."

Lightning flickered above them. Daenek looked up at the rumbling sky and felt a drop of rain splash on his neck.

"Afraid of a little wet, boy? We got something here to keep us warm. Want some?" The captain extended his bottle over the top of the flames. "No?"

He dropped it, then watched in alcoholic befuddle-ment as the spilled liquid hissed into steam over the burning wood.

Daenek's gaze fell to the low flames. He could vaguely hear the rest of the subthane's men cheering a drunken fight between two of their number. The equines, staked down several yards away, whined at each flash of lightning. Daenek coughed, feeling a band of pressure tighten across his chest. He had no idea of how far they had ridden from the monastery before his captors had decided to rest on this bare hillside for the night. They had not even given him a blanket to wrap around himself, and the cold seeped through his clothes and flesh, gripping his bones. The beginning of a fever made his vision waver and seem unreal.

His shirt was soon plastered to his back as the rain increased. The fire sputtered, then collapsed into smoke and dark ashes.

Daenek pulled his tightly bound feet closer to himself, trying to draw himself into a ball, to shelter against the storm what little warmth remained in his body.

Minutes or hours passed, driven into his numb senses by the rain, and then he felt himself jerked upright by a hand painfully gripping his shoulder. His knees buckled as his bootsoles slipped in the mud.

"Punk," snarled the captain's voice. The face was invisible in the darkness but the breath was thick and fetid with sour alcohol. "Rotten little thane's son— if it weren't for your cute tricks, we'd still be dry and warm right now!"

The blow barely registered on Daenek's senses— he was aware of the rough leather sliding across his skin and his head whipping to one side. There was a taste of warm salt on his lips.

A tremendous burst of lightning and Daenek saw, frozen in its blue-white glare, the captain's fist in the arc of another swing. Behind the captain was another figure, reaching for him with massive arms, glistening with the rain. *But that can't be,* thought Daenek, his mind whirling in confusion. *We must be kilometers away from the quarry—*

Then the mute, hulking figure, that Daenek had grown up watching and being watched by, gripped the captain's neck and tore him away from Daenek as the lightning faded. As Daenek fell to his knees in the mud, he could hear the captain's shout choked off with a single sharp noise.

A second passed, and Daenek felt himself being lifted by one arm. Another flash of lightning revealed the mute watcher holding him, then reaching for the cords at his wrist. Grunting, the mute strained, then snapped the strands in two. Suddenly, Daenek felt something hard strike him in the side of the head. With his feet still bound, he fell sideways onto the flooded ground. The rest of the subthane's men bowled over the mute, sprawling him and themselves into the muck.

The slippery rope seemed to take hours to loosen, but the mute and the subthane's men were still grappling in the mud

when Daenek was at last able to stand up. He hesitated, trying to see what was happening with the roiling mass of bodies, when another lightning flash burst through the shafts of rain.

One of the subthane's men saw him and pulled away from the fight with the mute. From on his knees, the man dived for Daenek's legs. Daenek staggered backwards and drove his fist into the side of the man's head. The blow broke his grip, flinging him to one side, but not before Daenek felt a burning sensation course up his thigh, and saw a knife spin through the mud with its blade darkened.

Daenek turned and stumbled away, feeling the pain in his leg flare with every step. Then rain lashed against his face and chest until he gasped. He ran on, his feet skidding on the muddy slope. Suddenly, he heard an animal-like cry, from a massive throat that had held no voice for years, filtering through the storm-filled distance. The shout died, broken off at the pitch of its rage. The ground sucked at his feet as Daenek ran.

"Thane's son," whispered the storm's voice.

So this was where it would end. How far had he managed to drag himself before the rest of the sub-thane's men had tracked him down? Kilometers perhaps, it didn't matter. The whole universe had become mud and rain and tearing wind. The night was made even darker by fevered exhaustion and loss of blood. Daenek pressed his face into the mud, away from the sneering voices.

"Thane's son." It was every voice now, that he had ever heard. The villagers, the Lady Marche, Stepke, the priests. All the languages, with the inflections of fear and hatred drowning out the few strains of pride and hope. Some dull animal part of Daenek, almost the only part still conscious, longed for silence, for rest. *Let death come*, breathed the small seed made of darkness.

The rain beat on the hillside. Lightning and the shouts of his pursuers, very close. Noises from above him.

Chapter VIII

Sunlight. A yellow disc of it lay warm and liquid on Daenek's face. He shifted his head away from the light and opened his eyes. The light came from a small round window set in a rivet-studded metal that was painted a dull grey.

Daenek's brow creased as he looked about in puzzlement. He was lying in a narrow bed with sheets slightly fuzzy with years of wear, and a thin, drab brown blanket over them. There were other beds on either side of him, empty and spaced in neat rows. The room was unlit except for the small circle of light.

Sunlight, thought Daenek, concentrating furiously. *But it was raining, and the subthane's men—*

He sat up in the bed, the motion dizzying him for a second. His muscles felt stiff but, as he pressed the palm of his hand to his face, he knew the fever was gone. A dull twinge of pain had replaced the throbbing fury of the wound in his thigh. "Hey," he called into the dimly-lit space. "Is there anybody here?" His voice cracked, stiff with disuse.

Muffled noises from the far end of the room, then a door opened. Daenek watched as a man in a dingy white coat shuffled down the aisle towards him. When he reached the side of Daenek's bed, he bent down and peered into Daenek's face. The man's own broad face spread into a grin, as he straightened up and sipped from a steaming cup he had carried with him. He turned away from the bed with a vague gesture of his hand. He spoke a few rapid words and hurried down the aisle to the door.

Daenek said nothing, his brain sparked into furious activity. He had recognized the man's language. *Mertzer*, he thought. *I'm on board one of the caravans*. Suddenly, he was aware of a deep subsonic vibration in the room, as from gigantic machines— the caravan's engines. One hand flew to his forehead and kneaded the skin. Somehow an enormous gap had formed in his memory, from the storm to this warm, safe bed. He pulled himself up and rested his back against the wall at the head of the bed, and waited.

Several minutes later the door opened again. The same man as before entered in company with a taller, sour-faced older man. As they approached the bed, Daenek noticed that the taller man's white coat was clean, and that its wide pockets were stuffed with chrome-plated instruments. The man didn't use any of the odd-shaped devices, though, but merely felt Daenek's forehead with the back of his hand. With no change of expression on his deep-seamed face, he pulled down the bedcovers and examined the transparent dressing wrapped around Daenek's thigh. The wound was a dark, but bloodless, red line running from Daenek's groin to just above his knee. The man poked at the thin, porous membrane and grunted, apparently satisfied.

"Do you speak stone-cutters' tongue?" said Daenek. The tall man glanced at him blankly, and the other grinned sheepishly. "How about English?" he asked, switching to it. "The language they speak in the Capitol?"

No response. The tall man turned away from the bed and whispered to the other mertzler. When his companion had hurried away, the tall man sauntered lazily to the round window and gazed out of it, bored. Paying no further attention to Daenek, he took one of the shiny instruments from his coat pocket and began cleaning his fingernails with it.

A longer time passed before the door opened again. The first mertzler re-entered leading still another figure. This one was grey-haired and stoop-shouldered with age.

The old man lowered himself slowly onto the bed next to Daenek's. He leaned forward. "How—" he spoke awkwardly in the stone-cutters' language, —"how feel you?"

"All right, I guess," Daenek smoothed the blanket with his hand. "Hungry, though."

In the mertzler tongue, the old man relayed the information to the tall man, who shrugged without enthusiasm and headed for the door.

The old guy must be one of the translators, thought Daenek.

That handle the negotiations in all of the villages.

"Uhh—" The old man scratched his fringe of hair as he looked at Daenek.

"Is English easier for you?" asked Daenek in that language. "You know, the Capitol tongue?"

The old man's expression brightened. "Really?" he said, shifting into the same vocabulary. "That's wonderful. Very nice. I haven't talked like this for— it seems like years." He paused, studying Daenek. "We just assumed that you only knew stone-cutter— you babbled in it for some time while you were unconscious."

"How long—how long was I out?"

"Let me think. This would make it, ah, three days after they found you."

"They?" Daenek shook his head, trying to clear away the fog of lapsed memory. "Who's *they*?"

"A bunch of our mechanics." The translator rubbed his speckled chin. "When the caravans had halted to wait for the storm to pass that night, the mechanics found that one of the tread plates had come off several kilometers back. About a dozen of them went hiking after it in the rain, to fetch it before it got rusted. Lucky for you that they stumbled across you as well. Seemed just about gone when they flopped you into the infirmary here."

Daenek hesitated, cautiously weighing his next question. "Were there," he spoke quietly, "any— others around?"

The translator smiled, his expression becoming conspiratorial. "Oh, a few. Some local subthane's strongarmers, all befuddled with booze and confusion. The mechs had no trouble losing them."

Daenek tensed. *How much do they know? And if they do know I'm the thane's son . . . what then?* "Did you find out, um,

why they were looking for me?"

"Faugh," snorted the translator. "Ask a hard one. Skinny, odd-looking kid like you—gashed up like that, and why else would they be in such a storm mucking about to find you? You're some busker that tricked a few coins out of some subthane's pocket, and got caught at it. The fact that you know more than one language only cinches it." The old man nodded sagely.

With a small sigh, Daenek relaxed and leaned back against the wall. "Well," he said, smiling. "I guess you've found me out."

The translator stood up. He spoke to the first mertzler, who turned and hurried down the aisle. "We'll see if we can't come up with some food," said the old man over his shoulder as he followed after the other figure.

Safe, thought Daenek. The door shut and he was alone again in the room, except for the yellow disc of sunlight, now oval-shaped upon the blanket. *But for how long?*

Daenek swabbed the last trace of gravy from the plate, then swallowed the piece of bread in two bites. He still felt hungry, even though the food had seemed to expand inside him like a slow, comfortable explosion. He knew he probably would have eaten himself sick if he had been given more.

He laid the metal plate beside himself on the bed. With his thumb he rubbed out a spot on the rough-textured pants the old translator had brought him. Daenek's own had been too badly shredded to save, but his shirt was on his back, carefully washed and mended by someone aboard the caravan. And his boots, scraped clean of mud, had been returned as well.

His hands flew suddenly to his throat as he re-mebered the fine-linked chain and the little square of white metal. Until now he hadn't noticed that it was missing. A momentary surge of despair welled up inside but he quickly pushed down the feeling. It had only been a key after all, he told himself—what did it matter if it was buried in the mud on some irretrievable hillside? *When I come to that door, he thought, I'll find a way in. No matter what.*

The door at the far end of the room opened and the translator came in again. Daenek watched the bent-shouldered figure passing between the rows of beds towards him. His mind was intent, furiously plotting out what to say and do next. *Even if they kick me off, he thought, I'm still better off than I was—as long as they don't know who I really am. But if I could get on here, stay on board for a while—*

"Ready to see the captain?" said the translator.

Daenek nodded and stood up. He brushed some crumbs from his shirt, then followed the translator out of the infirmary.

Several flights of metal steps that rang under Daenek's boots, and they emerged through a hatchway onto the caravan's wide, level deck. Daenek blinked, looking about in the dazzling sunlight. Beyond the guardrail a dozen meters away the landscape of hills slowly crawled past. Behind the caravan, its sister machines followed, a convoy receding into the distance as they breasted the land.

The deep bass vibration of the caravan's engines was stronger out in the open. It pulsed through Daenek's body like a new heart. A shrill sound from above, and he looked up to see great-winged birds outlined against the sky as they glided past the struts of the towering cranes and hoists.

A group of mertzers, lounging idly around the gaping mouth of an open cargo hold, looked with mild curiosity at them. Daenek hurried to catch up with the translator on the narrow walkway. Ahead he saw the looming mass of the caravan's control tower, surmounted by the wide sweep of glass that was the bridge.

Daenek followed the translator into the base of the tower and up the flights of stairs leading to the bridge. He noted that here the lights and ventilation worked, in contrast to the dim, musty-smelling infirmary and other sections through which they had passed.

At the top of the stairs the translator motioned for Daenek to wait, then rapped on the rivetted metal of the door before them.

"Captain Sather was born in the Capitol and speaks the tongue, too," whispered the old man. "So watch what you say." The door swung open and he led Daenek into the bridge.

Through the bank of windows Daenek could see the land before the caravan, the wide stretch of brown dirt that was the roadway flowing under the prow. There were four mertzers already in the glass-walled room, three of them wearing dark blue coats and stiff caps. The fourth, a compact but solidly muscled figure standing with folded arms at the far end of the bridge, wore the usual leather jacket and battered cloth cap.

The blue-coated mertzer who had opened the door closed it behind them and then joined his companion in front of the gauges and controls that extended nearly the width of the room. Daenek assumed that the mertzer with the faded gold trim on his jacket and stiff cap was the captain. The man gazed moodily through the central window at the landscape, taking occasional sips from a cup filled with a dark, steam-ing liquid. *How much has he changed, wondered Daenek, since the day he kicked Stepke off his caravan?*

The translator led Daenek towards the captain, whose small, hard eyes glared at them from over the rim of his cup. He growled something in the mertzer language. The translator looked abashed and replied in a hurried murmur.

The captain's eyes moved across Daenek's face, then back to the land beyond the windows. "Lost in a storm," he muttered disgustedly in English. "Well, find the fool a place to sleep until we reach the next village. We'll let him off there." He turned away slightly, as if the matter were of no interest.

"Excuse me, sir," broke in Daenek. He saw one of the other mertzers leave the control panel and walk towards them. "I was wondering—if I couldn't be of use to you. That is, uh, that it might be worth letting me sign on with you."

The captain turned his head and looked at him coldly. "Why should it be?"

"Well, you see, I've got a kind of talent—for languages."

Daenek had worried whether telling this might expose his real identity, but the possible benefits of staying aboard the caravan had finally outweighed his fears. "I can learn any language there is in a day."

"So?" The eyes stayed hard.

Daenek was taken aback for a second. "Well, I could be a translator. For your negotiations in the different villages."

"We've got a translator." The captain pointed with his cup. "Standing right next to you."

"But he's getting old." Daenek glanced at the old man beside him, then quickly away. "And he's not as good at it as I am. Or would be, if you give me a chance."

The captain grunted. "Who cares? Damn villagers take what we give 'em. 'And if they don't like the prices, I don't listen anyway. What good's a translator? I need some strong backs around here, not useless talents." He turned away, bending his head back to drain the last from his cup.

Looking nonplussed, the old translator tugged at Daenek's sleeve and stepped towards the door being held open for them. With an exhalation of bitter disappointment, Daenek was about to follow him out when the fourth mertzer, who had watched the scene from the bridge's far end, stepped forward and spoke to the captain in a low voice. The captain listened and fingered his chin. Daenek pulled away from the translator.

The mertzer in the leather jacket and cloth cap stopped speaking, and the captain nodded. He looked over at Daenek. "The chief mechanic here," he spoke gruffly, "says he's short-manned. Do you mind getting grease rubbed into your skin?"

Daenek looked at the expressionless face beneath the cloth cap, then back to the captain. "No," he said.

"Get him signed on," said the captain to the translator. Dangling his empty cup from his hand, he walked over to one of

the windows and stared out.

The translator grabbed Daenek's arm and pulled him towards the door. The chief mechanic nodded silently at Daenek but before he could say anything they were out of the bridge and the door closed in front of his face.

"The head mech seems to be good luck for you," said the translator as he led Daenek back down the stairs. "He led the party that was searching for the tread plate and found you instead. And short his crew is, too, since a drive cylinder exploded a week ago and killed two men. They just signed on another new man yesterday. Which serves to prove that some men's misfortunes are blessings for others. You've got a place on board, if not—" He cast a sharp glance over his shoulder at Daenek. "—the one you were shooting for."

"I'm sorry about what I said." Daenek felt his face start to burn.

The old man snorted. "If I'd known you wanted to be a translator, I'd have warned you of your chances. Once, when I was younger, there were a dozen of us. But time's slid past us. When I'm gone, that'll be the last of talking to the villagers at all—someday you'll just grunt at each other like animals." His voice darkened with loathing.

They reached the bottom of the tower and stepped out onto the sunswept deck. "Well, come on then, lad," said the translator, brightening. "If you're going to be a mertzer, you'd best learn to speak like one first. A language in a day, eh?"

Chapter IX

It soon became obvious that there were no special procedures for the beginning of mertzerhood—that one such as Daenek becoming a mertzer was so rare and isolated an event as to need no special rituals surrounding it. The faces on board the caravan seemed to form around a waiting suspicion, as if saying beneath the flesh *Can you ever be one of us? Can you?*

Just wait, thought Daenek. He grinned at his image in the mirror hanging on the wall of the translator's compact room. Pulling the cloth cap closer to his eyes, he rocked back on his heels and admired the effect. There was a small chit of paper in his pocket that told how much would be taken from his first month's wages for the cap, the leather jacket slung over the end of the translator's bed, and the miscellaneous clothing and items stowed in a heavy canvas bag. The supplies clerk, deep in one of the farthest recesses of the caravan, had shuffled from cabinet to cabinet amassing the stuff, then handed the pile over his counter to Daenek with a bored expression on his face.

Just give me a chance, he said to the image in the mirror. The words formed in his head in the mertzer tongue. Daenek felt a little gravel-eyed from lack of sleep, but pleased and satisfied to have spent all night up with the old translator, roaming ceaselessly through the corridors and chambers of the caravan, greedily soaking up the names of things, and how these men spoke of them and each other. The members of the night crews were greeted at their stations, the men's faces green-lit by the dials of engine and guidance controls. Through the walls of the sleeping quarters he had been able to hear the rasp and snort of the universal sleepers' language.

The mertzer language was like English (or at least to Daenek it seemed similar) but with rhythms and cadences like that of the great engines pulsing in the caravan's center. The whole language, complex but of one piece, lay in Daenek's mind now.

The door opened behind him and the old translator stuck his head into the room. "The captain wants to see you on the bridge. Right now."

Daenek turned away from the mirror and grabbed the leather jacket from the bed. *Great*, he thought with satisfaction. He had somehow felt sure that there would be some kind of ritual, however slight, to mark this transition into a new life—a rebirth, actually. "I can find my way," he told the old man. "You go ahead and get some sleep."

As he emerged onto the caravan's deck, the morning sun broke over a distant range of hills. The cranes and hoists,

towering even when folded in upon themselves, were bathed in red light. Daenek savored the cold air as he headed along the walkway towards the control tower. His lungs tingled pleasantly as he entered the tower and mounted the stairs.

A surly "Come in" answered his knock upon the bridge's door. Daenek pushed it open before him. The glass-walled room was filled with the morning's light, but here it seemed grey and numbing. He looked around and saw the captain and the head mechanic looking at him. Then his heart froze for a beat as he turned and saw to one side the militia captain and two of the subthane's men.

"That's him," growled the trio's leader, pointing to Daenek. "He's what we came for." A swath of dirty bandages covered half of his skull. His face was rigid with anger. He stepped towards Daenek but the captain waved him back.

"Can you understand what this fellow's saying?" The captain turned and spoke to Daenek.

"Yes." Daenek's heart raced with tension. "I—"

"Never mind." The captain unfolded a square of paper, creased and smudged with dirt. "They probably don't have anything more to say than what's on this letter they gave us when we picked them up out of the middle of the road. The translator said its about you being wanted by the subthane over by the stone-cutters' village. Doesn't say what you did, though—I'd like to know what a young busker could do to make so much trouble, for his hide to be worth this much."

Daenek's fists clenched as his eyes travelled from the captain's face to the leader of the subthane's men and then back again. "Give me five minutes head-start," he said hoarsely. A sick hollowness had formed in his gut, the loss of his hopes. "Just that, and—"

"Headstart?" The captain scowled as if puzzled. "What for?"

"Aren't you going to put me off? Hand me over?"

"What! To some puny little subthane's grubby henchmen?"

"You're a mertzer now," spoke the head mechanic. It was the first time he had ever addressed Daenek directly. "Mertzers don't hand each other over to such as these." He jerked a contemptuous thumb, the nail rimmed with black grease, at the three.

The captain scribbled on the blank side of the letter with a pen he took from his coat. "Here," he said, holding the paper out to the uncomprehending figure. "Have somebody read this for you when you get back home."

Silent, the militia captain took the paper. His face darkened as he suddenly understood. He stepped back and drew a knife from his shirt. "Get him," he said to his comrades, pointing to Daenek.

The two others rushed towards Daenek, but before they had crossed the room, the captain slapped the knife from their leader's hand and slammed him against the control panel with an echoing crash. The chief mechanic caught one of the others on the point of his fist. Daenek scrambled out of the way as the mechanic collared the second man and dumped him into a heap with the first.

"Drop these overboard," said the captain to another pair of mertzers who had appeared in the doorway. He flung the staggering leader towards them.

As the subthane's men were carried out, Daenek noticed a tiny drop of blood by his foot—one of the men had bloodied his nose on the mechanic's massive forearm. As Daenek looked, he felt dizzy and the red dot grew, swelled into an ocean, a universe of blood. The mute watcher was there, drowning, and below him the Lady Marche. And even further in the depths, so far he could not discern his face, was his father. More deaths, a trail of them like a stream of air in the blood. *I'd forgotten*, thought Daenek, paralyzed with horror and anguish, *I'd forgotten about all that. A mertzer now? Something other than myself? Never—no world can claim me but this one, the one of blood and death.* He knew it like a stone in his heart.

"What's the matter with you?" It was the captain's voice. "You look sick."

"Nothing." Daenek looked away from the drop of blood. The vision dissolved from around him.

"Then get out of here. I've got work to do. And so do you. Report to the main engine room after you get stowed away."

"You'll be sharing your sleeping quarters with the other new man that got signed on." The translator stopped in front of one of the doors that lined both sides of the corridor. "He's probably at work already down in the engine room, so just go ahead and get settled. Here's the key."

Daenek watched the old man walk slowly down the corridor and mount the metal steps that led to the caravan's upper levels. The artificial light seemed strangely cold in the deserted hallway. The translator had acted distant somehow, as if sensing something he hadn't before. *Maybe he smells the blood*, thought Daenek. He winced, trying to squeeze the memory of the vision in the blood drop from his eyes.

A few seconds passed and then Daenek inserted the key into the door's lock. It clicked and he pushed the door open.

The room was small, barely large enough to contain two beds, a folding screen and a pair of bat-tered footlockers. A few shelves were mounted on the walls, with curling flakes of paint exposing the metal beneath.

One bed had no blankets on it. Daenek tossed his bag of clothes onto it, then his cap. His gaze quickly surveyed the little cubicle. There was the sound of running water coming from another door opposite the entrance. He crossed the room in two strides and opened the door.

In a bathroom even smaller than the sleeping quarters, someone was standing in front of a sink, stripped to the waist and with hands and fore-arms covered with lather from a bar of soap. "How about some privacy, fellow?" A soapy hand slammed the door in Daenek's face.

He sat down heavily on the uncovered bed, his head whirling in confusion. *That must be the other one who just signed on*, he thought. *But that can't be...*

After a moment the bathroom door opened and the other new mertzler stepped out, fastening the last button on a shirt like the ones Daenek had stowed in his bag. Daenek studied the other's short, lean body and sharp-featured face, dominated by eyes that seemed to fill with a disturbing feral hunger. He had never seen eyes like that before. The other returned Daenek's stare with a growing annoyance: "What's the matter with you?"

"You're a woman," said Daenek flatly. There was no doubting it, despite the hard-edged mannishness of the figure standing before him. What he had glimpsed through the door, the smooth arc of her small breasts, was unmistakable.

She put her hands where her hips should have been, and glared at him. "So what of it?" Her voice was a nasal tenor, a man's voice.

"I'm the only one who knows," said Daenek. "Aren't I?" He watched her scowling face, judging by it that she was the same age as himself.

"Yeah, well, what good's a secret nobody knows. Right?" She crossed over to the entrance door and leaned against it, as if to stop him from leaving. "I sure hope you're not thinking this gives you some kind of advantage over me. 'Cause it doesn't, friend."

More than just her words sounded threatening to him. "What do you mean?"

"They told me that a busker who had gotten himself in trouble with some local guys had just signed aboard. But, you see—" Her face altered, became crafty. "—a busker is what / used to be before I got on here. I was born a busker. So I know you're not one."

Daenek thought he could feel something clench near his stomach. "So?"

"Come on." Contempt filtered into her voice. "Buskers have never been so popular that anybody has ever tried to pass as one who didn't have a good reason for hiding what he really was."

"I'm not hiding anything." Daenek's throat felt as if it were being slowly constricted.

"Sure." She scratched idly at one of her teeth with a fingernail. "I'll find out what it is. I'm good at finding things. You'd be surprised."

The thoughts in Daenek's head seemed to race faster and faster. *No women on board the caravans —all back in the mertzers' home village. Like sailors' superstitions on Earth, that I read about in Stepke's old books. Only worse. So that's my hold on her. But*

why do I need it? What's she got on me? Nothing— but just the suspicion could crack it all open. Pieces there for anyone to see. And then what? Kicked off, or turned over to the subthane after all. He glanced at the girl's smug face, the hooded but probing eyes. Thane's son. The hatred, the fear. No losing it. Be careful.

"You know," said Daenek slowly, "I wouldn't necessarily have told anyone about you."

She smiled, a ferocious grin. "Real buskers make sure of things like that. We learn to cover ourselves first, and then talk."

Silence. Daenek shrugged and gestured with one hand. "It looks like we're going to be sharing this room, then."

"Looks like it." She watched as Daenek packed his jacket and the bag of clothing into one of the footlockers.

He closed the lid and looked up into her hard-eyed, penetrating gaze. "If you're right," he said, "if I'm not what they think I am, I'm not going to tell you."

"You won't have to." Her voice had a trace of amusement in it. "Believe me."

Daenek stood up. He was starting to feel angry. "We'd better get on down to the engine room. They're probably waiting for us."

"Yeah?" The girl laid down on the other bed and yawned extravagantly. "I didn't sign on this thing so I could play nursemaid to some machine."

"You haven't stopped being a busker, have you?"

She turned her head and looked at him without smiling. "Don't say *busker* like you'd say *crook*. It's a life like anybody else's."

Without replying, he crossed to the door. He halted as he stepped out into the corridor. Over his shoulder he said: "By the way, my name's Daenek."

"Rennie," said the girl, her eyes closed. "Greetings."

He closed the door and strode towards the stairway, a bitter fury building up around his heart. There was more thinking to be done—a great deal more. He was sure of that.

Chapter X

The engine room was a pulsing universe of noise and black grease that coated every surface. The grinding roar of the engines could be felt like a pressure on the skin. Ducking his head beneath clusters of pipes and wires, Daenek finally located the mechanics. In a little open space surrounded by clattering machinery, the head mechanic was checking a bank of gauges—the glass covering the dials was nearly opaque with the dust and grease—and making notes on a clipboard. A few meters away several other mechanics crouched around an overturned box, engaged in a slow card game. None of them looked up as Daenek squeezed between a pair of enormous, rust-caked cylinders and into the open space. The whole area was lit by a dull yellow glow that filtered down from somewhere far above, murky with dust and shadows.

The chief mechanic finished whatever he was doing with the clipboard, turned away from the gauges and noticed Daenek. He nodded and motioned Daenek to come closer. "My name's Benter," he said, shaking Daenek's hand in large, calloused fist. He pointed to the cardplayers, none of whom seemed to notice as he rattled off their names. His hand swung around the space in a sweeping gesture. "As you can see," he said, "there's not much to do around here when everything is running right. When they first built these things, they built 'em to pretty much look after themselves. It's only when some part breaks down that we have to get to work."

Daenek looked around himself. The floor of the engine room was discolored and splotched with drying spills, and what looked like scraps of food growing furry with mould. He found it hard to believe that there was nothing to do but play cards in the middle of all the disorder. A tiny whisp of steam leaked into the air from a sagging pipe.

"Well," said Daenek, "what's my job then?" His skin was beginning to feel itchy from the dirt and constant mechanical vibration in the air.

Benter paged through several sheets on his clipboard, each bordered with dark thumbprints. "We're putting you and the other new guy on the night watch." He pencilled a mark on one of the papers. "We cut back on the power loads at night, so there's less that can go wrong. All you have to do is watch these gauges and get hold of me if anything goes wrong. Sound OK?"

Daenek nodded.

"Then if we have to work on something during the day," he continued, "you can help out. That's about the only way you'll learn how things go together down here."

For the next several minutes the head mechanic scribbled down the proper gauge readings on the back on one of the clipboard's bottom sheets. He tore off the paper and handed it to Daenek. "There's the 'phone," he said, pointing to a barely discernible lump on one wall. "Just pick it up, if anything happens on your shift—it's direct into my sleeping quarters. Get

you and your buddy down here about nine o'clock, OK?"

Folding the paper and slipping it into his pocket, Daenek nodded and turned to leave. Something caught his eye—a flat rectangular object propping up one corner of some kind of metal tank. The cylinder had a gaping hole in one side, obviously beyond use. He stepped over to the corner where it had been placed out of the way, then knelt down and examined the object that was being used to hold it upright. _

It was a book, caked with years' accumulated grease and dirt. Daenek lifted up the tank's bottom edge and slid out the book from beneath it. The covers were warped into a concave shape from the constant weight of the tank. He twisted it in his hands, straightening it a little, and opened it. The book's spine cracked and split apart. Something in the grease had seeped into the paper, staining it a dark brown. He could make out enough of the words to tell that it was in English. When he turned the stiff pages to the front of the book, he found the name STEPKE written there.

"What's that?" Benter had come up beside him.

The memory of that other mertzler's face faded, leaving nothing but the filth-encrusted book in Daenek's hands. "Something I found under here."

Benter walked a few steps away, then returned with a scrap of metal that he pushed under the corner of the tank with his foot. Daenek stood up, still holding the book.

"I remember the guy that belonged to." Benter pointed his blunt, grease-darkened finger at the book. "He was landed off the caravan—oh, a long time ago. He used to read us stuff from some of the books he had. Poetry and stuff." The edge of a smile. "Yeah, I remember that. But then—" A disturbed, suspicious expression crept over Ms features.

Daenek turned away from the mechanic, as if there were some secret in his own face that was about to be discovered by the other. "I'll be back at nine for my shift," he said without looking behind. Pressing the book to his chest, he squeezed his way

through the maze of jumbled machinery, away from the space filled with dim yellow light.

Rennie wasn't in the room when Daenek returned. He stretched himself out on his bed and examined the book. The title page was illegible. In fact, most of the book was unreadable due to the grease that had permeated it. *Still*, thought Daenek, *maybe it's a sign. From out of the depths and heart of this world so so foreign to me.* A vision of Stepke slowly toiling through the sunlit fields up to the house in which he and his mother lived. The mertzer's voice.

/ was a stranger there, too, reflected Daenek. *Just as much as he was. Maybe that's what finding the book means.* He dropped the book beside the bed. A tiny switch on the wall behind his head turned off the room's overhead light. He closed his eyes in the darkness. Sleep was welcome now that he had come to a decision about what had to be done.

He awoke and thought he saw the dim beam of a flashlight moving about in the darkness at the foot of his bed. His hand found the light switch and quickly flicked it on.

Crouched in front of Daenek's footlocker was Rennie, frozen in surprise for a fraction of a second. The lid of the footlocker had been thrown back, and the clothing inside thrown about in confusion. In one hand she held a small flashlight and in the other some type of little device Daenek didn't recognize.

Rennie scrambled to her feet as Daenek sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of his bed. He felt a little irritated at the interruption of his sleep, but no great surprise at what he had found her doing. "Just what are you up to?" he asked.

"Nothing." The flashlight and the other object had disappeared into her pockets.

He yawned and scratched himself. This was something that could be gone into later, he decided. There were more important things to be decided between himself and this strange girl. "What time is it?"

"They just rang nine, I think." She eyed him warily as she leaned against the door.

Her words brought him to full alertness. "Hey, we're supposed to be down in the engine room right now. To start our shift." He jumped up and picked his jacket from out of the jumble of clothing in his footlocker.

She said nothing but merely followed him out of the room and then matched his hurried stride down the corridor. He noticed that the end of the flashlight he had seen her using was protruding from her jacket pocket, but the other object, whatever it had been, was jammed tight with her hand in her other pocket.

They emerged onto the deck, bright with one full moon. As they passed by several small crowds of mertzers, playing cards upon the bulkheads and lazily arguing among themselves, a few impassive faces looked up at them, then turned back to more interesting things.

Daenek glanced at the girl walking beside him. She was small but any trace of femininity was well concealed. It was easy to see how she was able to pass for a male. *Hard*, thought Daenek. *Just like a rock*.

When the two of them had descended into the guts of the caravan and threaded their way to the engine room, there was only one mechanic left on duty. He growled "About time," and stalked off in the direction from which they had come, his shoulders hunched in anger.

Daenek took the scrap of paper the chief mechanic had given him and went from gauge to gauge checking the readings. There was only one that didn't match—Daenek tapped the dial's dust-flecked glass and the needle swung to its proper place. He turned around and saw Rennie expertly shuffling a worn pack of cards that had been left behind by the other mechanics. She gazed around the ill-lit space with a bored expression. "Care for a game?" she said when Daenek had caught her attention.

"We've got some other things to talk about." He sat down on

one of the upended boxes.

Rennie leaned against a battered metal column and looked at him with half-closed eyes. "Shoot."

The engine room was quieter than when he had been in it earlier in the day. The air was filled with the murmur of the machinery that stretched away into the darkness on all sides of them. A dimly-lit world in the depths of another one, crawling slowly over the surface of yet another world. Daenek was quiet for a few moments, as he suddenly thought of the stars beyond the world. What of those people, and all the languages they spoke? There was an infinity beyond this small space.

"Well," said Rennie, breaking into his thoughts.

He looked up at her sharp, almost cruel face. "I was just thinking," he said, "that maybe we could come up with some kind of agreement between us. You know, something that would be to our mutual advantage."

"Yeah?" She smiled. "What would that be?"

Hesitating, he took a deep breath and studied the girl's amused expression. *Still*, he thought, *what have I got to lose? It'd be worse if she found out on her own.* "You were right," he said slowly, "I'm not what they think I am..."

He talked of being the son of the last thane. Of growing up surrounded by the villagers' hate and fear. Of his mother, the Lady Marche, and the mute watcher. Then of the few words, clues that seemed like cracks in the wall that had been built to hide what had happened in the past from him. That which saddened the sociologist by the pool in the rocks, and Stepke refused to explain; the old bishop's mur-murings after the killing of the bad priest; the key that the Lady Marche had given him as she was dying, and that had been lost when he was being hunted in the storm by the subthane's men. And he spoke of what he had to do, the obsession that had settled in his chest, that beat through the same blood as his heart. To find what had happened to his father—the last thane.

"And that's it," said Daenek. "When I signed on board here, I figured it would be a safe way to get to the Capitol. And maybe, if I were careful, to find out a few more things before we got there. The answer has to be there."

"Thane's son," mused Rennie. The mocking smile had gradually faded as she listened to him. "Yeah, you probably are safe here—for a while. I don't think anybody outside your village even knew that the old thane had a kid. Except for whoever did him in, of course."

"The Regent," said Daenek grimly.

"Maybe. Seems the most likely, at any rate." She scratched her chin meditatively, then looked directly at him. "But what's all this got to do with me? I don't know anything about what happened that long ago."

"I thought you might help," said Daenek simply. "We're both outsiders here. Maybe we should stick together."

She was lost in thought for a moment. Finally she stood away from the column she had been leaning against and thrust her hands into her pockets. "All right," she said. "I figure a thane probably would've squirreled something away. There might be some profit in all this."

"Profit?" Daenek looked at her, puzzled.

"Profit," she repeated. "You know, cash. *Money.*"

The idea had never occurred to him. "I don't know..."

"Come on." Her voice was sharp-edged with disgust. "Maybe other people sweat for something else, but— Look, why do you think I got on board here?"

"Wait a minute. That must be why you were going through my stuff."

"Look here." She held something out to him on her palm. "Know what this is?"

He looked and saw a small device made of tarnished metal and shaped like a flattened egg. There was a small faceted dot of clear glass on one side. "No," he said, but recognized it as what she had been holding when she was searching his footlocker.

"It's called a *seeklight*. Buskers used to make 'em, until they forgot how, years ago. This is probably the last one that still works— I got it from *my* father. Only because he didn't have a son." Her voice became hard for a moment. "Watch."

Daenek leaned forward and saw her fish a large coin out of her pocket. It glittered even in the dim light of the engine room. Gold—the most valuable coin minted in the Capitol. Rennie held it a few inches away from the seeklight in her other hand. Its little faceted dome was glowing a brilliant red.

"See?" she said, flipping the seeklight over to expose a small knurled wheel set into a slot. "I can adjust it to locate any gold from here to within a circle of several kilometers." She reached into her pocket and pulled out several more coins, some jewelry and other trinkets—all gold.

The jingling handful of yellow metal filled Daenek with dismay. *I've gotten hooked up with a thief*, he realized. // *they catch her... it's my neck, too.*

She had read the expression on his face. "Ahhh, don't worry. I've just hit a few caches on board—just enough to keep my hand in. Something like this is too good to waste. I'm not cut out for the ways busker women usually make money. So when I got this from my old man I figured I needed a way of getting in and out of a lot of places with people in them. People that like to stash their little hoards in places where they think it can't be found."

"So you decided to become a mertzer."

She shrugged diffidently. "Sure. Why not. I was lucky and managed to get signed on. Beats walking to all these damn villages. And by the time anyone checks their life savings, we're all long gone."

Daenek shook his head. This wasn't turning out the way he

had planned. *But*, he admitted to himself, *at least I'm not alone now. As strange and mercenary as this girl is ...* "All right," he said. "If we find money as well, then you're entitled to it."

Rennie grinned. "Just my share. And maybe a little more."

"Now when we get to the Capitol—"

"Wait a minute. You've got problems to take care of before you start planning that, you know. Like staying alive, and undiscovered, long enough to get there."

He started at her blankly.

"Look," she said patiently. "We probably don't have to worry about that subthane and his bunch any more. They're too fuddled up to accomplish anything more, and they're sure not going to report to the Regent that they lost you. But what about the sociologists?"

"All right, what about them?"

"There was one on board here the day before you got picked up. Just asking the usual dumb questions. But still, I've got my suspicions about those creeps. They pop up everywhere and they're always writing everything down. I really wonder what would happen if one of them saw you and recognized you. Or even some oldtimer on board or in the villages—what if you've got enough of your father's face in your own to make 'em guess who you are? Somebody might think it worth while to let somebody else know—like the Regent. No, we've got to make sure nobody *does* find out who you really are."

"How are we supposed to do that?" said Daenek.

She leaned back against the metal column. "The caravan just left the Capitol a couple of weeks ago. Now it's heading for the mertzers' home village. Then, after they rest up and visit their families for about six months, the convoy will start on its route through the villages again—"

"Hey," broke in Daenek. "That means it's going to be another

two years before we reach the Capitol!"

"Didn't you know?" She looked at him in surprise.

Daenek's shoulders drooped as he sat on the box. "That's a long time," he said after a moment.

"Best thing," said Rennie. "Gives you a better chance to get forgotten about. Anyway, when the caravan gets to the mertzers' village, we can hike over to the busker village—it'll only take a couple of days. None of the mertzers will miss us while we're gone."

"What's the point of going there?"

"You'll see," she said. She replaced the seeklight and the gold pieces back in her pockets, then picked up the pack of cards.

"Why don't you go check those gauges again, while I deal a couple hands?"

"We've got a long shift ahead of us."

Chapter XI

"What's that?" Daenek sat up in bed and looked around the darkened room. He scraped a crust from the corner of one eye as he tilted his head, straining to hear whatever noise had awoken him.

"Hey." He rapped on the screen dividing the little room in half. "Hey, Rennie. Did you hear something?"

Muttered grumbling, then the sound of her turning heavily onto her other side. "For god's sake," she said disgustedly. "Go back to sleep. The engines shut off, is all."

That was it. Daenek touched the wall behind him and realized that it was the sudden stopping of the vibration that he had become so used to, that had startled him from sleep. The engines' constant noise permeated everything, became as much a part of one as the sound of one's own breathing. And now that

noise wasn't there.

Wait a minute, thought Daenek. He scratched his chin, carefully nursing himself back into full consciousness. *We're still a week away from the mertzer village. So if the engines aren't running right now, it's because they can't. Something must have gone wrong.*

He rapped on the screen again. "Hey. Rennie. We'd better get down to the engine room."

A groan answered him. "What for? We just finished our shift a couple of hours ago."

"Come on." The engines are stopped. It's an emergency."

"Let 'em fix it themselves."

Daenek gave up and set about retrieving his scattered clothing on the floor. When he was dressed, he strode across the room and slammed the door after himself as loudly as he could.

On the caravan's deck it was bright daylight. Daenek winced and shaded his eyes with one hand as he headed along the main walkway.

"Daenek," a voice called from above. "Hey, what's up?"

He looked overhead and saw one of the young cargo-handlers, named Mullon, perched on a strut of one of the cranes. The youth's beard-stubbed face grinned down at him.

"Beats me," Daenek called up to him. "I just woke up."

"Well, at least it didn't sound like anything exploded down there."

"That's good, I suppose."

Mullon's grin grew wider. "Maybe it's just waiting 'til you get there."

"Thanks." Daenek resumed his way towards the stairwell that

descended to the caravan's bottom levels. The entire crew of mechanics was assembled in the engine room,- waiting while the head mechanic stood talking into the 'phone mounted on the wall. A couple of the men nodded at Daenek as he emerged into the crowded space from the forest of grease-covered machinery.

Benter hung up the 'phone and turned around to face the men. "I told the captain we could fix it ourselves," he announced. "He's sending the other caravans on to the village, instead of having them wait for us."

Daenek waited and listened as the head mechanic divided the men into groups of three and four, detailing what had to be done. In a few minutes, Daenek found himself following one of the groups into the dark recesses on the other side of the illuminated open space.

"Hey," he said, "what happened, anyway?"

"One of the damn torque shafts ripped loose," answered one of the men. "It's got to be bolted into place, and then splined in with the rest."

He didn't bother asking for any further explanation. The nature of a torque shaft was no more mysterious to him than everything else with which the mechanics concerned themselves.

A metal ladder dangled precariously through a circular hatchway in the floor. It creaked with Daenek's weight as he descended after the others, finally emerging onto a small metal grid that hung by struts from the bottom of the caravan.

Several meters away, towards the rear of the caravan, he could see daylight. The view to the sides was blocked by the innermost of the gigantic treads. Other groups of mechanics were visible, working from similar metal platforms that hung suspended from the caravan's enormous metal belly.

That must be it, thought Daenek. A long shaft, thicker than a man's height, dangled from one end into the dirt of the roadway below. Its loose end had dug a trench a couple of meters deep into the rocky soil before the caravan had come to a halt.

Another group of mechanics was busy fastening to the shaft a chain that lowered from a winch on a platform above them.

"Look here." One of the mechanics on the platform with Daenek crooked a finger at him. "This here is one of the auxiliaries," the mechanic said, tapping a much smaller shaft that ran alongside their heads. "It's got to be loosened so that the main shaft can be re-splined. Think you can hold it up at this end while we work the other?"

"Yeah, I guess so." He started to ask how heavy it was, then stopped himself. Putting his hands in position underneath it, he waited until the other mechanics finished unbolting the shaft's flanged end from its connections, then carefully eased its weight onto his shoulder.

"Got it?" Without waiting for an answer from him, the other mechanics headed single-file down a narrow suspended catwalk towards another platform further on beneath the caravan.

The shaft soon grew heavy upon his shoulder. His palms began to sweat, the skin itching against the rough-cast metal surface. He could feel the vibrations travelling to him from where the other mechanics were working on the shaft's other end.

"You sure look stupid holding that thing."

Daenek strained to get a glimpse over his shoulder of whomever had spoken. It was Rennie, with an expression of amused contempt on her face.

"What are *you* doing here?" He lifted the shaft a little off his shoulder, bearing the- weight in his hands for a moment.

"Couldn't sleep after all. Too quiet." She stood on the edge of the metal platform with her back to him, gazing out at the other scattered groups of mechanics working. Sliding her hands into her hip pockets, she rocked back nonchalantly on her heels. "Thought I'd come down here and see what was going on."

"You want to give me a hand with this?"

She turned her head around and coolly eyed Daenek and the shaft. "Not particularly," she said.

Daenek was about to say something in reply when he heard a distant voice, one of the mechanics, yelling something at them. At the same moment the shaft lurched heavily out of his grasp. The end he was holding jerked up into the air as the far end came loose from the other men and fell towards the ground. "Look out!" he heard one of the men yell again.

The shaft's end stopped and then gracefully, as though the air had thickened and slowed its motion, fell to the platform. It sped into a blur and struck between Daenek and Rennie, the vibration from the blow knocking them from their feet. Daenek held himself upright by grabbing one of the metal struts by which the platform hung, but he saw Rennie land jarringly upon her knees and hands. With a small noise, two of the struts opposite Daenek gave way and the platform tilted beneath his feet. He held on to the one strut but both Rennie and the shaft end slid away and fell out of sight.

Leaning out over the uptilted edge of the platform, he spotted her below. She had fallen only a few meters on her back in the crevice between two of the massive tractor tread plates. The impact had dazed her momentarily—her hands pushed feebly at the metal surfaces pressing against her on either side.

Then Daenek saw the shaft. It hadn't fallen to the ground—the one end had landed against the tread plates as well. But now the shaft was sliding diagonally across the vertical ends of the plates, pivoting on the other end that had plunged into the roadway, as it continued its fall to the ground below. As the shaft's speed increased, it would smash right into Rennie's head, dangling into air from the crevice between the plates.

Daenek hesitated only a second before swinging himself over the edge of the swaying metal platform. He lowered himself by his hands into space and then dropped the rest of the way onto the tread plates. His legs went out from under him when he landed on the smooth metal surface. He regained his footing just as he saw the shaft, moving very fast now, slide across the end of the last tread plate before the space where Rennie was

outstretched. Diving full-length onto his side, he caught the shaft in his hands, slowing it for a moment. Rennie, only semi-conscious, moaned beneath him as he bridged the span over her torso.

The shaft's weight began to push him backwards. There was nothing on the tread plate's wide surface for him to catch onto. He tried to get his hands between the shaft and the end of the plate on the other side of Rennie, with the idea of pushing it away and out into the open space below the caravan. Instead, his fingers were caught painfully, the skin tearing against the plate's sharp edge as he struggled vainly to push at the shaft without leverage. Another few inches of the shaft's downward travel and the slight drag caused by his hands would be lost as it swung through the empty space between the treads and into Rennie's skull. His eyelids squeezed tight with the pain grating across his fingers.

Suddenly he heard feet running across the plates. The pressure on his hands lifted. Other hands caught him below the arms and lifted him away from the space between the plates. The shaft fell in a blurring arc to the ground as another pair of mechanics pulled Rennie's limp, but intact, form out of the crevice.

"You all right?" asked the mechanic who had pulled Daenek upright. "You'd better get those bandaged."

Daenek nodded, looking dumbly at the torn skin of his fingers.

"Get your hands off me!" It was Rennie's voice, raised in petulant anger. "There's nothing wrong with me!"

Turning his head, Daenek saw her shaking off the two mechanics who had pulled her from between the tread plates. Her face flushed with annoyance, she stalked away from them, heading for one of the metal ladders that led up into the caravan.

"Here," said one of the mechanics, handing Daenek a rag with only a few grease spots. "Wrap your hands in this until you get to the infirmary." He turned back to the others. "Come on, let's get going. We've got more work now than before."

The orderly who bandaged his hands was the one who had been the first person Daenek had ever seen aboard the caravan. When he was done, Daenek headed back to his sleeping quarters. *Can't do any work like this, anyway*, he reasoned, examining the wrappings on his fingers.

Rennie was waiting for him inside the room. She still looked irritated as she sat on the edge of the bed. "That was a dumb thing to do," she snapped.

"What was?" asked Daenek, closing the door behind himself.

"*Rescuing* me. Like you were some big hero. If you'd played it smart and done nothing, you'd have been rid of the only person who knew you weren't really what you said."

Daenek laid down on his bed. "Sorry," he said, feeling increasingly tired. "Just lost my head, I guess."

"Well, don't do it again," she said, her voice tight with anger. "God, I hate it when people do stuff like that without any good reasons. It gives me the creeps. I just can't figure it out."

"If you'd get knocked off," said Daenek drowsily, "I'd have never found out what it is you're planning to do for me. Going to the busker village and all."

"That's not smart enough." She reached behind herself to the switch on the wall and flicked off the room light.

He held his bandaged hands up to his face in the darkness. *Sometimes*, he told himself, *I've just got to laugh at all this.* —

Chapter XII

It felt good to be walking on the land again, after the weeks on board the caravan. The mertzer village was far behind Daenek and Rennie. The men had been too busy greeting their wives and children, including the babies born during their absence, to take much notice of their two newest members heading out into the open countryside beyond the village.

The sun was just setting when the two of them came within view of the busker village. Daenek could see a few dim lights come on in the windows of the buildings clustered near a sluggish river. He and Rennie hitched their packs higher upon their shoulders and hurried their footsteps along the river's sandy bank.

"Are you glad to see it again?" said Daenek.

"This dump?" A corner of Rennie's mouth curled. "Naw, I never cared very much for it." She lowered her head and trudged on in stony silence.

When they reached the outskirts of the village, Rennie stopped in front of one of the squat wooden buildings. The windows were unlit. "Wait up," she told Daenek, then stepped to the door and pounded on it. She waited a few seconds, then struck it again with her fist, but no answer came.

"Come on," she said, rejoining Daenek, "well go ask at the inn."

Daenek followed her to the village's central building, an inn two stories high with its windows spilling yellow lamplight into the darkness. Inside, Rennie pushed through the knots of buskers, men and women, with Daenek trailing in her wake. She turned once and saw him studying the drinking, gossipping crowd—he had learned their language from her while on board the caravan. "Yeah," she said over her shoulder with a thin smile, "just like real people."

She stopped at the side of a table near one of the side walls. A fat man wearing an apron splotted with grease and beer, looked up at her from his conversation.

"Gerd," said Rennie, "how's it going? What's the news around here?"

"Right bad," wheezed the fat innkeeper. "The bad priests creeping about everywhere. Seems like a new one near every week."

"So what are you doing about 'em? Don't tell me anybody's grown brave enough to hunt one down."

"Huh." The man's jowls mottled in indignation. "Right cowardly maybe, but not stupid at least. We just don't go wandering about in the hills when there's one about, and after a while it goes away like its others. As though they had just been passing through all along."

Rennie smiled and leaned down closer to the innkeeper. "Hey," she said, "where can I find Uncle Goforth?"

The fat man grunted. "Cost you."

"Bull." But she rolled a small coin across the table to his waiting hand.

"He moved out of his shack." The fat man dropped the coin into an apron pocket. "I gave him a room upstairs. End of the hall."

Without saying anything more, Rennie turned away from the table and headed for a sagging stairway in the back of the inn. Daenek followed her through the crowd.

Upstairs, a low-ceilinged hallway was lit only by a candle guttering in a bracket on the wall. The bare planks of the floor creaked under their steps. Most of the doors they passed were silent but from behind a few came voices or the sound of laughter. Rennie pushed open the last door without knocking. "Uncle Goforth?" she called.

Daenek stepped behind her into the small room, lit only by the candlelight from the hallway. The room's windows were shuttered tight.

"Hello," said a figure sitting in a straight-backed chair against the wall. "It's Rennie, isn't it? Who's that with you?"

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Daenek could make out the old man, sitting with his vein-gnarled hands upon his knees. He was looking straight ahead but not at either of his visitors.

"So they finally went out on you," murmured Rennie, crouching down in front of the old man and looking into the dulled pupils of his eyes.

"Well," said the old man—his voice was flute-like with age, "they were never much good anyway."

"I've got a buddy here," said Rennie, "who needs your help." She placed a coin in his hand.

The old man rubbed his thumb over the large gold-piece. "You're doing pretty well, Rennie."

"Yeah, well, I'll be doing even better if you help me out. Can you do it?"

"Let me see him."

Rennie pulled Daenek onto his knees beside her. The old man's hands reached out and felt Daenek's face, probing the flesh with sharp, bony fingers.

"It'll take a few days," he said finally, putting his hands back on his knees.

"That's all right," said Rennie. "We got time."

"Look at me," the old man ordered Daenek.

He peered into the age-seamed face, and then drew back in surprise as the features changed into that of a different man. Even in the dim light, the change was unmistakable—the skin tautened, the arch of the nose changed its angle, the eyes seemed to shift position. It was not an old man *making* a face, but the visage of an entirely different person floating to the surface of the skin. Only pupils of the eyes, obscured with cataracts, remained the same. A few almost imperceptible shifts of flesh and another face appeared, like that of a smooth-complexioned woman.

"The trouble with masks," came the old man's reedy voice, "is that you put them on from the *outside*. What's best is a mask you draw up from inside. You'll see."

They spent a week at the inn of the busker village, sleeping at night in one of the rooms upstairs. Daenek spent the days with the old man everyone called Uncle Goforth. Rennie stopped by the room at the end of the hallway at random intervals, then wandered off to get their meals or on other, more mysterious errands.

"It's the muscles," explained Uncle Goforth on the first day. "And the sinews in the face. Even the bones flex a little. Everybody controls their own, but they just learn to make one face and then stop. Like learning to say one word, and then repeating it over and over for the rest of their lives. As though it were the only word they could ever say at all. But you can learn to speak with your face, make it say anything you want. That takes years. I'll just teach you another couple of words, is all."

Daenek's face soon arched with the pinching and kneading from the old man's surprisingly strong fingers. Every inch of skin felt as if it had been stretched to its limits.

There was a small wooden box as well, with jars of ointments that caused a furious itching or burning when rubbed on different parts of Daenek's face. He could only make the uncomfortable sensations stop when he flexed the right muscles in the right way— muscles he hadn't even known were there.

The old man was finally satisfied with the results he saw with his hands. While Rennie was downstairs paying the innkeeper for their week's lodging, Uncle Goforth stood beside Daenek as he gazed into a mirror on the wall of the little room. Daenek had stolen the stub of candle from the bracket in the hallway so that he could see what the old man needed no light to see.

"Change this line first." The old man ran his finger along Daenek's jaw. "But slowly, so that no one will notice. Then the cheekbones—flatten them. That will bring the nose down as well, just a fraction. Change the eyes last. Pull the lids to the side and hold. Like that, yes. Slowly, though. Maybe nine months until you're finished. That way you'll become disguised without anyone being aware of it having happened. Check the mirror every time you awaken, until the muscles learn of themselves."

Daenek looked at the face in the mirror, the face that he would melt away and then grow back gradually aboard the caravan. It was that of someone else, rounded rather than lean, the relationship of eyes to nose to mouth different. He suddenly remembered how, as a child, he had stared at his reflected image in the pool in the rocks above the house. Looking for what the Lady Marche had said others could see in his face. *Is it hidden now?* he thought, studying the stranger's mask. A wave of dismay that surprised him in its intensity curled inside him. *Is it lost?*

Rennie came into the room. "Come on," she said. "We've got to start back." She held the straps of their packs in one hand.

Daenek nodded, letting his facial muscles relax and his own features reform. He watched as Rennie gave Uncle Goforth some more money. In his own mind he was brooding, wishing they were already back aboard the caravan and moving again, towards that inevitable point where the past would reveal itself at last. He wondered if the time would come when his own face could say who he was, without shame or hiding.

A steam whistle blew, its white plume feathering into the air from above the caravan's bridge. Leaning against the guardrail, Daenek could feel the engines' vibration increase. With a noise almost below his hearing the caravan shifted slightly as the power was transmitted to the treads beneath.

"Two years," he mused, resting his chin on his hands. Far below, the mertzer village began to slowly move away. The women and children stood clustered at the edge of the buildings, silently watching their husbands and fathers leaving. No one waved, either from the village or aboard the caravan.

"Less than that," said Rennie. She was leaning with her back against the rail, eating a fruit. She turned her head slightly and spat a seed out over the side. "We've been here six months already."

"It's still a long time." The faces at the village's edge were receding faster as the caravan's speed increased. Daenek had already begun to alter his own face, following Uncle Goforth's

instructions.

"So learn some patience." She tossed the core of the fruit over her shoulder. "It's a virtue."

Chapter XIII

It must be nearly a year now, thought Daenek, *since the old man showed me how*. He studied in the bathroom mirror the final alteration upon his face. The mask was complete now. His own had to be summoned with a conscious effort, so well practiced were the muscles. The face in the mirror was the one with which he awoke.

He heard the door from the corridor open. Looking into their sleeping quarters, he saw Rennie gesture to him.

"Hey," she said, "come on topside. Wait 'til you see this village we're at."

"What's so special about it?" he said.

"Just come on up and see it."

He followed her up the stairs and onto the deck. Nearly all the mertzers aboard the caravan were crowded together at the rail. After he and Rennie had jostled for a good position, it took a few seconds before he saw what the others were remarking upon.

The village was deserted. Daenek gripped the deck's guardrail and gazed down into the distance. Only a few scraps of debris, propelled by the wind, moved in the narrow streets. The wooden buildings sagged beneath their mantle of dust. In the tiny village square a wagon lay collapsed on its side, a wheelless spoke pointing up to the blank sky.

"What did they used to do here?" said Daenek. He squinted into the sun's overlay of glare.

"How should I know?" Rennie leaned against the rail and spat. "Factory workers, I guess. Look over there."

Daenek followed the direction of her hand and saw the dark, rectangular shapes of the buildings massed at the far side of the village. For a moment he wondered what the villagers had produced inside their factory; then, which had given out first, the machines inside or the people tending them. *Victims of time*, he thought grimly.

"Well, what happens now?" Daenek looked around at the other mertzers clustered at the guardrail. The caravan had pulled up to the edge of the village only a few minutes ago. The sounds of the rest of the convoy could be heard in the distance as they slowly approached the former loading area.

"What it means," said one of the other men to one side of Daenek, "is less work for the cargo-handlers, that's for sure."

Another man farther down the rail nodded. "We'll just rest up for the night, and then be on our way to the next village. And the navigators can cross this one off their maps, just like the others that are this way."

"The others?" Daenek leaned over the rail and looked at the man who had spoken. "You mean there's more villages than this one, where everyone's just walked away?"

"Well, sure." The man looked around himself at the others who nodded in confirmation. "Seems like every run we make we always find at least one village where they all just packed it in. Gave it all up, that's what they do. Up into the hills, digging up roots to eat, just like animals."

Daenek's spine seemed to chill with a dismayed horror. *Giving up*, he thought. *Not the fight to survive. But to stay human.*

He looked away from the mertzers at the guardrail and back towards the abandoned village. A group of three mertzers had emerged from among the shabby buildings and were returning to the caravan. One of them cupped his hands to his mouth. His shout was faint and smeared by the wind. "They're all gone. There's nothing here."

"Well," said Rennie, pushing herself away from the rail. "Too bad for them, I guess."

Two other mechanics were covering the shift in the engine room that night. Daenek sat cross-legged on his bed, carefully rubbing with a wet cloth at the grease and dirt encrusted pages of the old book that Stepke had left behind so long ago. Slowly, so as not to damage the paper, he had over the last few weeks cleaned a dozen pages or so. The work was largely disappointing—most of the words remained illegible, and what he could read revealed nothing new to him. The book was some sort of history of interstellar travel, filled with dry technical information about the supraluminal drives that had been developed a century after the ancient seedships. Still, Daenek kept at it, staining his hands with the years' accumulated dirt.

He looked up from the book as a knock sounded at the door. On the other side of the screen that divided the room, he could hear Rennie roll onto her side and drop a coin or some other pilfered object with a dull click back into the little cloth bag in which she kept them. "Who's that?" she said irritably.

The grinning face of Mullon, the cargo handler, was revealed when Daenek pulled the door open. "Hey, come on," he said. "A bunch of us are going prowling."

"Prowling?" Daenek looked at him in puzzlement.

"Yeah, down in the village."

"What for?"

"You know, just to kick around. See what they left behind." Mullon jerked his head towards the stairwell at the end of the corridor. "Come on. We're just going to slip over the side and look around, is all."

The thought of the empty buildings waiting silently in the night exerted a disquieting fascination on Daenek. *Like bones*, he thought. *The remains o] something dead.*

Before he could say anything, Rennie came up behind him.

She was pulling on her leather jacket. "Yeah, let's go on down," she said, winking covertly at Daenek. "Maybe they did leave something— *interesting* behind."

Without answering, Daenek turned and pulled his own jacket from his footlocker.

The short distance of roadway between the caravans and the village seemed faintly luminous in the moonlight. Daenek walked with his hands in his jacket pockets, not listening to the laughing conversations of the twelve or so others around him.

When they reached the edge of the village, Rennie pulled Daenek away from the rest of the group. Hidden by the corner of one of the buildings, they watched the others disappear into the unlit maze of narrow streets.

Daenek looked down and saw a small, dim point of red light glowing on Rennie's palm. It was the seeklight. "Come on," she said, closing her fist around the device. "We aren't going to find anything by tagging along with that bunch."

He nodded and followed her along the side of the building. The enclosing walls of the squat wooden houses depressed him, bearing down on him like a weight. He began to wish that he were back aboard the caravan, away from these discarded husks and remnants of humanity, that blotted out the lower part of the night sky.

Rennie came to the building's door. She tried the handle, then kicked at the side of it with her boot. The rotted wood splintered and gave way.

Inside, Daenek watched the seeklight's small red point float around in the darkness like a disembodied eye. "Damn," came Rennie's voice. "Nothing down here. Where's the stairs? Why'd I leave my flashlight on board?"

Daenek stumbled into a table, knocking the chairs placed on it clattering to the floor. The building was evidently one of the village's inns. Holding his hands before him, he cautiously threaded his way between more tables and at last came to one of

the building's walls. He groped along its surface until he came to a window too caked with dust to allow any of the dim moonlight into the room. The glass shattered out into the street with a blow from the nearest chair. "There it is."

In the faint light he could make out Rennie's figure pointing to the stairway set against the opposite wall. He crossed the room and followed her up the steps.

The first room they explored upstairs contained, as far as they could tell without a light, nothing but a sagging bed and a small cabinet. Rennie poked through its drawers even though the seeklight had made no response when held in front of it.

As she rummaged through the cabinet, Daenek slowly paced out the limits of the room, encountering only the musty-smelling tangle of old sheets and blankets in the center of the space. There were no windows in any of the walls.

"Hey, what's this?" Rennie's voice broke the silence. "I think it's some candles." There were sounds of more rummaging around in the cabinet. "And some matches, too." In a few seconds, the room was lit up by a yellow sphere of candlelight. Rennie lit another taper from the first and held it out to Daenek.

He took it and watched as she bent down and examined the things she had already pulled from the cabinet and piled on the floor. Her candle dripped little dots of wax on the heap of ragged-looking clothing.

"Junk," stated Rennie in disgust, straightening back up. "No wonder they left it."

She strode out of the room and into the corridor. Daenek could hear the sound of her opening another of the doors further on.

Kneeling beside the mound in front of the cabinet, Daenek poked through the old clothes as he held his own candle over them. He quickly saw that Rennie had been correct—they were little more than rags, tattered and frayed from age and wear. Whoever had worn the stained workshirt that he spread out on

the floor had not been much larger than himself.

And now he's up in the hills somewhere, thought Daenek, running a hand over the threadbare fabric. *No more factory, no more village—just simple hunger and cold, probably. Or maybe he's dead already.*

Out in the night, past the noises of Rennie prowling in the other rooms, he could hear the distant shouts and laughter from the other mertzers who had sneaked off the caravan. Beyond that, though, was silence. Somewhere in the open spaces around the village, things that had spoken and moved like human beings, but now had not so much fallen as had let things fall from them, were sleeping huddled under the bushes and trees of the hills.

How easy it would be, thought Daenek, gazing at the empty shirt. *You wouldn't even have to really die.*

He stood up from the pile of clothing and walked out of the room and into the hallway. Rennie emerged from the last door at the corridor's far end.

"Nothing," she said in disgust. She carried her candle gripped in her fist like a dagger as she strode towards him. The seeklight in her other hand glowed its usual faint red. "It'd cut out, too, if I didn't have anything more to keep me around than this junk."

"Maybe," said Daenek, "they took it with them. Up into the hills."

"That's stupid," she snapped. "What use would they have for anything valuable?"

Her anger made him smile despite the oppression the deserted village had created in his gut. "Very inconsiderate of them, all right, not to leave their money here just for you."

"Come on." She brushed past him and headed for the stairs. "Let's get out of here."

The other mertzers had broken into another inn further

toward the village's center. Unseen by them, the candles in their hands extinguished, Daenek and Rennie watched for a little while as the men tossed bottles out through the door and windows, smashing them in the street and against the opposite buildings. The smell of stale liquor and the sound of raucous laughter hung in the air.

"What's the point of that?" muttered Rennie. She turned and strode down another dark alley, away from the noise.

Daenek thrust the dead candle into his jacket pocket and followed after her. *At least she's looking for something, too*, he thought. *Anything to keep moving*. He watched her narrow-shaped outline walking a couple of meters ahead of him, the silhouette of her head turning every now and then to glance at the seeklight in her hand.

A larger shape than the village's low buildings finally loomed in front of them. Daenek gazed up at the factory, immense against the dark sky. Beside him, Rennie struck a match and re-lit the remaining half of her candle.

The entrance, two wide metal doors, was directly at the head of the street they had followed from out of the village. A broken lock dangled from its hasp on one of the doors. When they had squeezed through the opening, Daenek took his candle from his jacket pocket and lit it from Rennie's.

The combined light from the candles seemed to barely reach beyond themselves in the factory's vast interior. The edges of a few shapes, like cliffs or rock formations, towered at the yellow fringes of the light.

"Looms," said Daenek, pointing to one side. His voice echoed for a moment, then was swallowed up by the unlit spaces. "This must've been some kind of a mill."

"Yeah?" Rennie lifted her candle higher. The deep shadows shifted almost imperceptibly. Daenek noticed that she had put the seeklight away in one of her pockets.

Farther into the factory's center, they came upon a tiny room,

set off from the rest of the open space by panels of dust-smearred windows. Beyond the glass they could see several desks Uttered with papers. Daenek found the door and stepped inside the room with Rennie close behind him.

Clouds of dust lifted from the papers as he pushed them about on one of the desktops with his hand. *Records*, he thought. *Maybe the man who made them was the last to go.*

One of the windows was covered with a large sheet of paper ruled off into tiny squares. A red line crawled across it, sloping towards the bottom of the paper before it broke off. Rennie tapped at it, leaving little crescent marks in the dust. "I wonder what went down," she said softly. Something about the empty factory seemed to have affected her mood as well.

"Dreams, maybe." Daenek clapped the dust from his hands and turned away.

"Come on. Let's get out of here." Rennie pushed the little room's door open violently. The clatter it made striking the panel next to it vanished into the darkness. "There's nothing here."

Daenek nodded and started back the way they had come into the factory. As he walked with his head bent in thought, it was some moments before he noticed that Rennie was no longer right next to him. He turned and saw her several meters behind, bending down to look at something on the factory's floor, the yellow light from her candle forming a sphere around her.

Maybe she found a coin somebody dropped, he thought. *Then this won't have been a total waste.* Waiting for her to come along, he looked idly around himself, holding his own candle in front of him.

He was a little distance from one of the looms that stretched up into the heights of the factory. A tangle of fibers spilled down its complex surface, like a frozen waterfall. He stepped closer to examine it.

The threads dangled into a little pile at the foot of the loom. Daenek lifted them with his hand and held his candle close. The

stuff was some kind of synthetic fiber, slick and milkily translucent against his palm. A drop of candle wax fell onto the threads and they burst into flame.

Quickly, he jerked his hand away but the stuff, with a billowing, cloying smoke, melted and clung to the sleeve of his jacket. He fell backwards, pulling more of the filaments from the face of the loom and into the fire spreading across the front of his jacket like a stain. The heat flickered upwards at his throat and chin. Frantically, he slapped at the flames with his hands.

Behind him, he heard Rennie's footsteps running towards him. He caught only a glimpse of her face before she grabbed him by the shoulders and rolled him over onto his chest. She grasped the unburnt ends of the stuff and pulled it away, the flames billowing as it spun across the floor, end over end away from them.

In a few seconds the last bits still clinging to Daenek's jacket were smothered against the floor. The rest had gone out as well, consuming itself into a little tangle of ashes. A nauseating smell of burnt chemicals permeated the air. "You all right?" said Rennie.

Daenek rolled onto his back and lifted himself up onto his elbows. "Yeah," he said. He couldn't see her face, as both candles had gone out and been lost in the scurry. "Just singed here and there, is ah¹."

She helped him to his feet and pushed him in front of her towards the factory's door. Once outside, he leaned against the metal wall and coughed.

"I guess that makes us even," he said. The taste of the smoke was still in his mouth. "Remember the time with the shaft? Underneath the caravan?"

In the moonlight her face was visible, settling into an expression of annoyance. "I should care about being even," she grated. "Just protecting my investment, is all."

On the way back to the caravan she showed him what she had

found on the floor of the factory. A rusty metal washer, that she flung into the bushes at the side of the roadway.

When they had climbed back aboard, Daenek stood for a few minutes at the guardrail, gazing back towards the village and the hills beyond it. A few of the other mertzers could be seen in the moonlight, straggling back towards the caravan, their revelry finished. But Daenek's attention was elsewhere, on the unseen figures somewhere in the dark, the ones who had abandoned the village, their homes. *Pioneers of the abyss*, he thought. The phrase was solid and chilling in him as a block of ice. *Falling ahead of us. To where we all might be, someday.*

He turned away from the rail and headed slowly for the hatchway.

Chapter XIV

The returning was something that he had been secretly dreading and yet waiting for, since the moment he had first realized that it would inevitably come. And now, as all things did, it had come with the passage of time.

The village of the stone-cutters had changed. The entropic process was accelerating. Daenek stood at the edge of the marketplace and watched the slowly milling crowd, jostling against each other as they moved from stall to stall. But now the trays of vegetables and other things seemed to be sinking towards the ground, bending and warped by the same gravity that tugged at the dilapidated houses and buildings. Soon the soil would have reclaimed everything. From behind him came the harsh mechanical noises of the quarried stone being hoisted aboard the caravan.

A few curious faces glanced at him. Daenek knew they saw only a mertzger, in the usual leather jacket and cap, and with a face that meant nothing to any of them. "Come on," he said to Rennie, standing beside him. "Let's see if they still have their inn open."

They pushed through the crowded market and located the

low-ceilinged building on the other side. The interior was dim and faintly steamy, filled with the quarry-workers converting their wages into beer.

More faces, sullen with alcohol, glanced at Daenek and Rennie as they entered, then turned back to stare into the depths of their glasses.

Rennie leaned against the serving counter and slid a couple of small coins onto it. She made motions of lifting an imaginary glass, then held up two fingers. The innkeeper set out two glasses filled with a dark liquid. Daenek sipped his and found it warm and sour.

He listened to the voices around them, of the quarriers standing on either side or clustered around the wooden tables. It had been a long time since he had heard their language, his own first language. It was still clear and lucid in his mind, a fact that none of the villagers seemed to suspect.

"Look at 'em," someone muttered. Other voices, thick and slurring, joined in. "Damn mertzers... think they're so great... what do they know about anything? Just hop on their big bloody machines 'n' ride away... that's all..."

Daenek sipped again at the beer. The chorus of stone-cutters murmured at his back like ocean waves breaking in the distance. Beside him, Rennie looked bored, jingling corns in her pocket. The voices caught his attention again.

"... machines... we used to have machines... just slice the damn rock right up... now we just get a few crummy blocks out by hand... sweat... look at those damn mertzers... things have changed... bad priests... subthane gone, and that new governor from the Capitol..."

He knew what they were talking about. He had seen the development hi several of the areas through which the caravan had passed. The old subthanes had grown too old or incompetent to handle the affairs of their regions any longer, and so had been removed and governors sent out from the Capitol to take their places. They were rarely seen, evidently preferring their own

company to that of the people they ruled.

"Let's get out of here," said Rennie. She pushed her half-full glass away and stood up.

"You go on back," said Daenek. "There's something else I want to do."

She shrugged and headed for the door of the inn.

The voices of the stone-cutters had sunk into whispers. Daenek drew a line with his finger through a puddle of spilled beer, then stood up and turned around. One of the faces at the nearest table looked into his for a few seconds, then shifted back to his glass. Daenek recognized the man as the leader of the subthane's militia that had hunted him down. The man was no longer wearing an immaculate black uniform, but rather the grey, dust-permeated clothes of a quarry-worker. His was also the drunkest face at the table, pale and dissolute. Daenek strode towards the door, wondering if he should feel somehow satisfied at what he saw.

He crossed the marketplace and headed for the edge of the village next to the foot of the hills. When he got there, he saw that the narrow path that led up through the rocks, was now choked with weeds. There was little trace that his or the Lady Marche's footsteps had ever weighed upon the ground. Pushing the weeds aside, Daenek started up, following the small indications that were left.

Soon he emerged onto the level fields above the village. The top of the old house was visible in the distance, surrounded by the rustling weeds. He trudged towards it, as another man wearing a mertz-er's jacket and cap had so many years ago.

The door of the house was open, tilting out at a crazy angle from the ripped-apart hinges. Daenek leaned through the opening and saw that the interior had been gutted by a fire. The walls were blackened with smoke. There was nothing recognizable inside.

He turned away and walked further on up the hillside. The

bright sunlight pressed on his neck and shoulders.

The little pool in the rocks was still shaded by the over-hanging trees around its edge. Daenek sat on his haunches beside it and tossed a mossy pebble into the center. When the ripples died away, he leaned forward and looked at his reflection in the water.

The mask relaxed and his own face re-emerged, slowly after more than a year of being hidden. He studied the narrow, high-boned features, as if for a clue to something. After several moments he lifted his gaze from the dark water. The mystery was still intact, unbroken by any effort of his. *There's nothing for me here to find out*, he thought. *All the answers are still ahead of me*. He got to his feet and started back down from the rocks.

A little while later, as he was crossing the village towards the caravan at the quarry's edge, he saw a sociologist interviewing a group of the village women. Their drab grey clothes looked even duller clustered in front of the resplendent white robe. A tape recorder was slung on a strap around one of its great, white-feathered wings, and it pointed the microphone at each of the women in turn.

Daenek was too far into his own dark thoughts to pay much attention, but as he passed a few meters away from the sociologist it glanced away from the women and into his face. No emotion crossed the sociologist's face, and it turned back to the women.

Daenek's insides clenched, though, as he realized that he had not re-assumed his mask-face after leaving the pool's edge. He was walking through the village with his own face, the face of a thane's son. He quickly looked around himself as he hurried on. None of the villagers seemed to have noticed. But the sociologist... there was no way of knowing whether it suspected or not. Daenek cursed himself as he ducked into the shadow of one of the buildings and tightened his face into the mask.

"I'll be glad when we pull out of this dump," said Rennie as Daenek entered the little room aboard the caravan. She was lying on her bed, lazily inspecting a small pile of gold coins on her

stomach. Daenek wondered idly how busy she had been with her seek-light since they parted at the inn.

"So will I." He tossed his jacket and cap onto his bed. "Gives me the creeps." He had decided not to tell her about the sociologist in the village, but the thought of his own error still burned inside himself. // *all our precautions turn out to be for nothing...*

"Well, this is one of the last stops on the run." Rennie pushed the coins into a little mound. "We should hit the Capitol in a month or so."

Silent, Daenek nodded. There would be no way to avoid whatever was waiting for them.

Chapter XV

"We're leaving the caravan. Rennie and I."

Benter, the head mechanic, looked up at Daenek. The older man was sitting on his bed in his own private quarters, wearing the clean uniform he saved for going into the Capitol. "For good?" he said. "No, don't bother answering. I already know."

Daenek gazed around the room. Pictures of the man's wife and children, so far away in the mertzers' home village, were on the walls. Benter would probably spend only a little time in the few inns that were closest to the unloading area and warehouses, and were prepared for the bi-annual flood of mertzers eager for a spree. Instead, Daenek supposed, the head mechanic would spend most of his spare money on trinkets and toys for his family.

"I guess I knew for a long time now," said Benter, "that you'd be leaving when we reached the Capitol."

Somehow, Daenek was not very surprised at what Benter said. The suspicion had been growing in his mind over the last two years that the mechanic knew more than he talked about. Something about the man's quiet, unemotional manner had kept

Daenek from worrying. "How'd you know that?" he said.

The head mechanic leaned over the end of the bed and drew his footlocker closer to him. He raised the lid and rummaged through the contents, reaching down to the bottom. He held out a small cloth gathered into a ball and tied with string.

Daenek took it from his outstretched hand and undid the knot. The cloth slowly opened like a flower, to reveal the fine-linked chain and little square of white metal that his mother, the Lady Marche, had given him when she was dying. Daenek's heart accelerated as the chain uncoiled and the metal dangled from his fingers.

"It was clenched in your hand," said the mechanic. "When we found you out in the storm. None of the others saw it. I've kept it hidden all this time."

"Do you know what it is?" Daenek held it out between them. It shone as it slowly turned.

Benter shook his head. "It belonged to the last thane. It was always in the photographs of—your father. I know you're his son. The other mechanic, the one who wa[^]s landed, wasn't the only one of the thane's followers aboard the caravan. Some of us just knew how to keep quiet. I recognized immediately the resemblance between yourself and your father. Others would have as well, eventually, if you hadn't disguised yourself. That was smart of you, however you did it."

"Did anyone else know?"

"Just the old translator. Just before he grew sick and died a few months ago, he told me that the letter the subthane's men came aboard with, did say who you were. He was one of your father's old followers, too, so he didn't give you away."

They both fell silent, looking at the gleaming metal.

"There's nothing else I can tell you," said the mechanic finally. "I don't know how or why your father died—that's what you want to know, isn't it? Then go into the Capitol."

Daenek pulled the chain over his head and tucked the square of metal into his shirt. "Yes," he said, his own voice sounding distant. The chain was cool against his skin. "That's where the answers would have to be. If they're anywhere at all."

Benter nodded and got to his feet. He stepped across the room and began to open the door, but stopped as Daenek turned towards him.

"It hurt so badly," said Benter quietly. "When we first heard of your father's downfall. All of us who had faith in him. It was as if all the hopes in the world had died. And we never even knew what we were hoping for." He pulled the door open, then closed it gently behind Daenek as he stepped through.

He gazed down the long corridor. The caravan was eerily quiet, the engines shut down and nearly all the mertzers already departed for the nearby inns. He hesitated outside the head mechanic's door, as if listening for a sound that never came, then turned and walked toward the stairs.

Rennie was waiting for him in the room they had shared for the last two years or more. "What took you so long?" she demanded.

"Nothing." He picked up his bag and hoisted it onto his shoulder. "Let's get going."

Chapter XVI

They had wound their way through the maze of warehouses surrounding the caravan's unloading area when Rennie said, "Wait up a second."

Daenek stopped and slid his pack from his shoulders. It had/been late afternoon when the caravan had pulled/Into the Capitol, and now the setting sun tinted grange the city buildings ahead of them. He felt # little disappointed as he gazed up the narrow alleyway they had stopped in. Almost nothing in the city seemed to be much higher than the one and two story village buildings of which he had seen so much, even though these in

the city appeared to be made from the same smooth white material that the Lady Marche's house had been.

The exception was a massive, many-windowed edifice in the distance that dwarfed the low buildings around it. Daenek assumed it was the Regent's palace. *And before that*, he thought, *it was my father's*. He turned, hearing the rustle of paper behind him, and saw Rennie unfolding a large map. "Where did you get that?" he said.

"Stole it out of the bridge," she said nonchalantly. "They'd never have any use for it—it's just of the Capitol." She knelt down and spread it on the ground. "Now here's where the caravan came in." She traced out a spot with her finger. "And this must be the landing pit over here, for the starships. And we're walk-ing east, so that means we should be right about *here*." She tapped another spot with her finger.

Daenek looked down at the map's jumble of lines and spaces. "So?"

"So if we keep on going in the same direction, we should hit the central part of the city. Maybe find a place to spend the night."

"Wonderful," said Daenek. "For that we needed a map?"

Rennie shrugged and began refolding the paper. "You never know."

They continued on through the deserted alleyways, past the silent buildings with doors agape to reveal empty interiors. *The population must have shrunk*, thought Daenek, *from what it used to be. Even here things are dying*. As the twilight grew dimmer, a few lights flickered on in the windows of the buildings in the distance before them. They hurried their steps to reach them before it was completely dark.

"What's that?" said Daenek suddenly. He thought he saw a group of white-robed figures standing on the roof of a building at the end of the street.

"Ahh, those damn sociologists," muttered Rennie. "Don't worry about them, they can't recognize you. And ignore 'em, we don't have time to answer any of their dumb questions."

The space between themselves and the projected images of the sociologists lessened as they proceeded up the narrow street. The buildings on either side were silent and decaying from long disuse.

What are they waiting for up there? thought Daenek. As he and Rennie passed beneath the rooftop, the images were projected upon, he looked down to the street to conceal his face, although it was still set in its mask. A piece of crumbled roofing tile clattered into sight, dislodged from above.

Wait. Something made the skin across Daenek's shoulders tighten as he looked at the dark fragment. *One of them kicked that off—then they're not pro-lections. But—*He looked up and saw something with a gun-like muzzle and mounted on a tripod being swung down to point at them.

Rennie's breath came out of her with a single grunt as Daenek slammed her body between himself and the wall of the building. The thing on the tripod coughed a single muffled *whup*, and the pavement where the two of them had been walking exploded, showering them with gravel and ash.

"What the—" Rennie wheezed with her first breath.

Daenek put his hand over her mouth and pressed her against the building, only to look up and see the winged figures, silhouetted by the fading light, swivelling their weapon's snout down upon them again. Daenek looked desperately about for a doorway. But there was only the angle of wall and ground that held them trapped beneath the carefully aimed muzzle from above.

Suddenly, the weapon's barrel swung away from them. It coughed again, and a section of the building on the other side of the road flew apart. Looking up, Daenek saw the weapon jerk through a spastic arc, teeter on the edge of the roof, and then come crashing down, the tripod's legs splayed like a metal

spider.

From the roof top came the sound of blows and stifled shouts. The silhouetted figures, some with wings outspread, were struggling back and forth. One of the sociologists landed on his back halfway over the roof's edge. Another connected with a kick into the ribcage of the outstretched figure, and it toppled over the side, landing heavily beside the broken weapon. The circle of light over its head flickered and went out.

"Come on!" Rennie pulled on Daenek's arm. "Let's get out of here!"

He hesitated, staring first at the sociologist moaning in the middle of the street, then swinging his eyes up at the sound of the others fleeing from the rooftop above them.

"Come on, before they come back with more!"

Daenek spun around and ran after her. They had gone only a few streets away when Rennie grabbed his elbow and stopped, pulling him to a halt beside her.

"Wait," she whispered. "Do you hear anything?"

He followed her gaze in the direction from which they had come. "No," he said after a moment.

"Maybe we'd better go back."

"What for?" He looked in surprise at her face barely visible in the darkness.

"To find that sociologist," she said. "The one that got pushed over."

"That could have been an accident. Whatever was going on up there—it could have just fallen or something."

Rennie shrugged. "Either way. There's two of us and one of it. Maybe we can get some info, if we get there before the others come back for it."

"I don't know," he said slowly, weighing what she had said in his mind.

"Look. What other plans do we have?"

He thought for only a second, then shook his head. "None, I guess." It was true—the farther they had walked into the city, the less their chances of penetrating any mysteries of the past had begun to seem to him.

They retraced their path to the street where they had been attacked, but there was no sign of the fallen sociologist. Rennie located her pack where she had dropped it against the wall, and took out her small flashlight. She swept the beam over the pavement, then knelt to look more closely at something she had spotted.

"It's hand must've split open when it landed," she said. A red, hand-shaped blot was centered in the yellow circle of light.

She got to her feet and directed the beam around the buildings on either side of the street. The light stopped on another print like the first, smeared on the corner of the building leading to another street that crossed the one they were in.

"That way," said Rennie, pointing with the flashlight.

They followed the street to which the handprints pointed. It led eventually into the inhabited part of the city. Daenek noticed lights in the windows of the buildings they passed. "I think we've lost him," he said.

"No, we haven't." Rennie shone the flashlight on a doorframe in one of the buildings. The same wet handprint glinted under the shaft of light. Rennie went to the door and pushed it partly open. Noise and more light flooded out of the crack. "Hey," she whispered back to him. "It's an inn."

"What's it doing in there?" Daenek stood behind her and tried to look through the narrow opening.

"I can't tell. Wait a second." She pushed the door open a few

more inches. "Uh... there he is." She fell silent as she pressed her face to the opening.

"Well?" Daenek still could not make out anything inside the building.

"I don't know about this, but it looks like it's getting drunk."

Daenek pulled her away from the door and substituted himself. After his eyes had adjusted to the blaze of lamplight inside the building, he spotted the sociologist. It was leaning on a long counter at the far end of the room, pounding rhythmically with a nearly empty bottle and shouting something that he couldn't make out. One of the great feathered wings, like an arch of snow, had come loose from its back and was now propped against the counter beside it. A crowd of citydwellers were huddled together a little distance away, gazing at the sociologist with expressions of dumb horror.

"Now what?" said Daenek, turning away from the door.

Rennie shrugged. "I guess we go in and get him."

He nodded and pulled the door all the way open. The two of them stepped cautiously down the few steps that led to the floor of the inn. They threaded their way through a maze of empty tables, and came up on either side of the sociologist at the counter. It was singing.

"Oh, we *work* all day and now we're *done* . . ." It paused to take a swig from the nearly drained bottle, then set it back down on the counter with exaggerated care. "Mm. I forget the rest." It turned to Daenek and smiled, then, perhaps because of their clothes, spoke in the mertzer tongue. "Hey— friends. You're not afraid of the big bad—" It broke '

off, squinting with concentration. "—angel. Are you?" A long finger waggled at Daenek.

"That's right, ace," said Rennie from the other side. "We're your friends. Why don't we go somewhere a little more private?"

The sociologist swivelled his head around to glance at her, then looked straight ahead at the wall behind the counter to consider the proposition. It had sunken-cheeked, ascetic features, made loose by the alcohol, as though it had touched some inner dissolving core below the skin. "Sounds good," it announced finally. It pushed itself away from the counter, staggered backwards and collided with a table.

Daenek looked around and saw the citydwellers watching the process in horrified fascination. He stepped to the sociologist's side and took its elbow. "Come on," he said, "just lean against me."

"Wait a minute." It righted itself with immense dignity and pulled away from Daenek. "Forgot m' wing.". Retracing the few steps to the counter, it tucked the soiled curve of feathers under his arm and staggered back. "What good's a whatever it is without its wings? Mm?"

Together, Daenek and Rennie got the sociologist up the steps and out into the street. It followed meekly between them, Rennie lea'ding the way.

"Where are we goin'?" said Daenek across its white-robed chest.

"Back to the empty part of town." She pulled harder on the sociologist's arm, forcing it into a stumbling trot. "We can find some place to hole up there."

They eventually came to a low building that seemed to satisfy her. She kicked at the rotten wood of the door, the echoes rattling from the surrounding structures, until it splintered and gave way. Daenek pushed the sociologist inside.

There was nothing inside the building except the dirt-caked floor. The sociologist collapsed in the first corner they carried it to, and was soon snoring gut-turally.

"Nothing to do until morning," said Rennie. "It should be dried out by then. You get some sleep and I'll stay up the first part of the night. Then we'll switch—OK?"

Daenek nodded and laid down in the corner farthest from the drunken sociologist's liquid noises.

The morning sun seeped through the spaces in the boarded-up windows. Daenek stood up from where he had been sitting by the door. Rennie remained asleep in her corner of the room, but the Sociologist's eyes began to struggle open.

Daenek walked over and looked down at the figure in the white robes, now stained and dirty. "How do you feel?"

The sociologist propped itself up on its elbows and ran its tongue over its teeth. "Not so bad." It looked around the room as it gradually became less dim, and spotted Daenek's pack. "Say, uh, you wouldn't have any spare clothes you could loan me, would you? I never did like these damn silly robes."

"Sure." He went to his pack, opened it and tossed a shirt and a pair of trousers across the room.

It stripped off the robe and started to undo the straps that held on the remaining wing, now battered and filthy from having been slept on all night.

Daenek noticed another thing as well. "You're a man," he said aloud.

The other nodded, drawing on the trousers. "That's part of the whole angelic image we're taught by at the Academy—sexless and inhuman. But we're really only people, just like everyone else."

Daenek absorbed the information without surprise, even though it took an effort of mental re-orientation to think of the person as *he*.

"What's going on?" Rennie sat up and blinked away the last remnants of sleep. She reached for one of the wings and examined it as Daenek related what the sociologist had just said.

"Yeah, well, another phony," said Rennie, tossing the wing aside. "Should have known."

The sociologist nodded and finished buttoning up the shirt Daenek had given him. His thin wrists stuck a little ways beyond the cuffs as he extended his hand to Daenek. "My name's Lessup," he said. "I already know both of yours."

"Great," muttered Rennie. She stood up and walked in front of him. "How'd you find out?"

He shrugged. "Somebody in the Academy must have recognized him in spite of the disguise." He pointed his thumb at Daenek,

"Academy?" said Daenek. "What's this Academy?"

"Us. You know, the sociologists. Though I guess I'm not one of 'em anymore."

"How come they tried to kill us?"

The ex-sociologist rubbed his chin doubtfully. "Well, I'm not really sure. I mean, I've got some ideas, but I don't know. You see?"

Daenek stared at him, trying to detect lying or evasion in the way he spoke. "Just what *do* you know?"

"More than you."

His face settling in a grim expression, Daenek nodded and folded his arms across his chest. "Good," he said. "I've come a long way to find out some things. So I want to hear everything you know about what's going on here. No matter how long it takes." Lessup shrugged. "It's not that there's a lot that you don't know. I mean, the secret, the *big* secret that's been kept from you and everybody else on this world —it's basically simple. Yet not so simple. I don't think I'm making myself very clear about this."

"Take your time," said Daenek. "I've learned to be patient."

"Actually, I'm kind of hungry—"

"No. We'll talk first, and then we'll see about eating."

"All right, then. But it's not just a matter of the way things are now, you know."

"I figured it had something to do with my father's death."

"Further back than that." Lessup shook his head. "To explain, you have to go into ancient history. All the way back to the seedships—"

"What's that got to do with anything?" said Ren-nie. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, visibly restless.

"Just hang on a moment." Lessup looked annoyed at the interruption.

"Go on," said Daenek.

"All right," said Lessup. He was silent for a few seconds, then took a deep breath and spoke again. "The Academy owns this world. Or as good as owns it. Always has. In a sense, it was *created* just for the Academy.

"When the old Earth government financed the Great Propagation—hundreds and hundreds of years ago—the seedships were sent out to dozens of stars that were thought to possibly have Earth-like planets orbiting them. On the worlds that were found appropriate, the priests aboard the ships cloned an initial population from their genetic banks, and started setting up societies like that on Earth. Except for one seedship—the one that found its way here, to this world. The Academy—it was powerful even back then, almost a government to itself—had the priests of that seedship programmed differently. They came to this world and set things up the way they are now—low technology, semi-feudal government, every little region divided from the others by distance and language.

"Why? For research—or that's what they still call it. Oh, what a bleeding farce it's become. Or maybe it was that way all along. Maybe the Academy's always been as futile as it is powerful. This whole world's a laboratory for them to play with. They dress up their undergraduates like the archetypal image of angels that are

found in everyone's subconscious, so they can scare whatever answers they want out of the people they keep so ignorant. And for what? Scholasticism is all that it is. People on Earth thousands of years ago would argue about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Now the Academy exists in order to see how much useless data can be crammed into their memory banks by angels. It makes me sick to think of them peering and snooping at their fellow human beings like they were lab animals, and storing their pointless little findings in the computers at their headquarters. The filth, the degrading of the studied and the studiers."

He paused for a moment. When he spoke again his voice was lower. "There it is—centuries of secret history, stripped to the bones. The ugliest part." He fell silent, his former amused attitude replaced with a look of grim contemplation.

After a few seconds, Daenek spoke. "But why did they try to kill us?"

Lessup gazed at the wall and then back at Daenek. "You're a threat to them," he said simply. "They've guessed that you're going to try to find out what happened to the last thane, your father. That worries them."

"Because they're responsible for his death and overthrow—that's the reason, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's true." Lessup met his level gaze. "The Academy engineered the coup, and set up the Regent in his place. The thane was such an important component in the social structure that they couldn't get rid of him through any less drastic means."

"But why did they do it?" Daenek's voice had grown hard.

"That's what I don't know. There are some things the Academy hierarchy keeps secret from the rest, and that's one of them. But it's easy to guess that your father must have been planning something that worried them."

Daenek walked to the boarded-up window. The slits between the boards let the sun hit his still masked face like bars. The

answers he wanted seemed agonizingly close but instead of them he had found the world he thought he knew dissolving with Les-sup's recitation. He turned away from the window. "So they sent a bunch of you out to get us—what happened? Why did you mess them up?"

Another shrug of the bony shoulders. "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was already a little drunk when they gave up the assignment, and I'd been brooding for a long time. I was never really cut out to be a member of the Academy anyway. Signed up just to get off my own home world."

Rennie got to her feet and walked over to where Daenek was standing. She pulled him a little farther away from Lessup and whispered, "Hey, how much of this guy's story do you believe?"

"I don't know," replied Daenek. "Maybe none, maybe all of it. But I think I know how he can help us find out something more for sure." He crossed the room and stood above Lessup.

"The Academy headquarters is pretty close by, isn't it? It would have to be, for a bunch of assassins to show up in the flesh."

Lessup nodded. "The headquarters are in a big underground complex on the far side of the city."

"And the computer data banks are there, too?" asked Daenek.

The former sociologist nodded.

"How much do you know about operating them?"

"Enough, I guess." Lessup grinned, seemingly in anticipation of Daenek's idea.

"Hey," said Rennie. "How about letting me in on what you're thinking?"

"Just this," said Daenek. "If everything's been crammed into those data banks, then all you'd have to do is look hard enough to find what you want."

Chapter XVII

"I still think this is a dumb idea," said Rennie. She shone her flashlight at the circular metal plate set into the ground. "I mean, what's the point of taking a chance on getting caught down there? This isn't going to lead us to any money."

Daenek ignored her, turning to Lessup on his other side. "You sure they shut down for the night?" They had waited until night to make the attempt at the best time.

"Sure," said Lessup. "Everybody's got to sleep some time. We won't run into anybody down there."

"They won't be waiting for you to come back?"

Lessup shook his head. "This is an old ventilation shaft that I discovered during my off-hours. I used to slip out at night, change into some clothes I had stashed, and go wandering around. The main entrance is automatically guarded, of course, but nobody knows about this."

Daenek and then Rennie followed him out of the buildings' shadows and over to the meter-wide plate. "See?" said Lessup. "The bolts have all rusted and snapped. They're just hanging there." He bent down and slid the plate to one side, exposing the dark mouth of the shaft below it. "I'll go first. The sides are corrugated, enough to give you a fingerhold, and its only a couple of meters until the shaft hits one of *the* corridors."

They watched him lower himself into the shaft and disappear from view. "This still seems stupid to me," whispered Rennie disgustedly. "I mean, what's the point?"

"Go on," said Daenek. "I'll follow you down."

Still muttering, she descended into the shaft. When her head was no longer visible, Daenek lowered himself, gripping the ridges on either side with the tips of his fingers. The air in the shaft was still and musty.

A small square of light appeared to one side below him, revealing the bottom of the shaft. He dropped the last short distance, knelt down and scrambled through the opening. Lessup and Rennie were on the other side, in a corridor dimly lit by overhead panels.

Lessup pushed a louvered grill back into place over the opening into the shaft. He grinned at Daenek. "I should've been a burglar," he said. "I really get a charge out of sneaking around when everybody's asleep. It puts you one up on 'em. Come on."

The corridor crossed a wider hallway down which Lessup led them. Daenek was aware of their cautious footsteps sounding against the antiseptic blue-white walls. The doors were all unmarked but Lessup finally stopped before one, pushed it carefully open a few inches and looked inside. "All clear," he said after a moment. He winked and opened it all the way.

When they were inside the room, he pulled the door shut after them. "This is the main data access terminal," he said, gesturing. There were a dozen seats molded of the same material as the walls and set into the floor facing tilted control panels. Above each panel was a blunt-cornered rectangle of dull-grey glass.

Lessup slid into one of the chairs and pressed one of the buttons before him. A faint electronic hum, and the screen in front of him pulsed with blue light. Daenek and Rennie stood behind him, silently watching.

The word INDEX—in English—appeared on the screen as Lessup punched another button, then disappeared. Rows of letters and numbers crawled upward, vanishing at the top of the screen. "The latest entries," said Lessup and snorted in disgust. "What a bunch of garbage." The moving entries sped into a blur as he fingered another control.

After nearly a minute, he lifted his hand and the words froze on the screen. "Five years back," he announced, pressing down again. More lines flew upwards on the screen, then suddenly disappeared entirely. The words LIMITED ACCESS MATERIAL flashed on. ENTER PHD #.

"Ah," said Lessup. "We must be getting down to the good stuff." He pulled on his lower lip, his other hand hovering nervously over the panel. "I'll have to take a chance on this. I know it has to be seven digits—" He was talking only to himself. "—and I think it has to start with zero five." He took a deep breath, then rapidly punched several buttons.

The words disappeared from the screen and, after a second of nothing but blankness, the lines of the index re-appeared. Lessup slumped with relief in the chair. He turned his head and smiled ingenuously at Daenek and Rennie. "I didn't tell you that there's an alarm wired into this thing. Goes off if you goof *up* suspiciously." Turning back to the screen, his hands sought out the controls, and the rows of words and numbers flashed upward again.

Several minutes more passed, then Lessup slowed the index to a crawl. He leaned forward, studying the characters. "All right," he said slowly. "This is just... about... the time of the coup against the thane." The index froze as he lifted his hand from the control panel. "Now if I can find the right envelope..."

Another button, and the words TOPIC, GENERAL replaced the index. Letter by letter, the words EVENTS, POLITICAL, SEQUENCE appeared as Lessup pecked at the buttons. The screen went blank, then read RESTRICTED MATERIAL. ENTER PRIORITY #.

Lessup sat back in the chair and stared at the screen. "Damn," he said. "I've never even heard of *that*." Chewing his lip, he reached out to the panel, then jerked his hand back as if from a fire. "Well," he said after several seconds, "here goes." His hand moved along the controls again, slowly pressing a sequence of buttons.

The screen went blank. A long moment passed. "Maybe we'd better—" began Daenek, when words suddenly flashed on the screen again. SEQUENCE, SPECIFIC.

Smiling, Lessup tapped out THANE, REFERENCE TO. He turned and winked at Daenek and Rennie. "Now we've got it." Suddenly, as he faced the screen again, it went dead, devoid of

even its constant faint-blue glow. Lessup whirled around, lifting himself out of the seat. His smile was replaced with fear-widened eyes.

"What's the matter?" said Daenek.

"It suckered us." Lessup's voice was harsh with tension. "We tripped an alarm. I should've known there wasn't any such thing as a priority—" He broke off, staring past them at the door.

Daenek thought he could hear a muffled, ringing noise outside the room, then the sound of running feet, coming closer. "Come on," he snapped, pulling Lessup from the seat.

The door wouldn't open when Daenek tugged at the handle. The sound of men running was growing louder.

"We'll have to try and get past them," said Rennie. "Scatter if you make it, then try to find your way back to the air shaft." She flattened herself against the wall by the door.

There was only the sound of their breathing for a few seconds, then the door slowly moved inward. Daenek grabbed the handle and pulled violently. A figure in a dark uniform tumbled into the room. Rennie dashed past him into a group of several more men. There was the dull crack of fists against their flesh as she struggled furiously to get free of them.

Lessup and Daenek followed on her heels. The corridor seemed to be filled with black uniforms and hands reaching for them, pulling them down. Daenek saw Lessup fall to the floor, tackled around his waist by two of the men.

Somehow, Daenek managed to jerk himself loose from the nearest ones and slip beneath a thick arm that started to encircle his neck. He sprinted down the corridor, then glanced quickly over his shoulder as he ran. One of the black-uniformed men seemed to be pointing at him. A small flash of light from the man's outstretched hand, and the corridor darkened as Daenek turned his head. The floor flew up at him but he never felt its impact.

Chapter XVIII

Consciousness surprised him. Daenek opened his eyes and lifted his head, then winced at a sudden pain in the side of his neck. He pressed his hand to it, then took it away. There was a tiny spot of blood on his fingers. *That's where the needle must have hit*, he thought dully.

He was lying upon some type of low couch. He righted himself and set his feet upon the floor. The room was in darkness except for what looked to be a small lamp upon a desk some meters away. As Daenek leaned forward, trying to make out anything else, the lamp tilted towards him, blinding him for a moment.

"I'm glad to see you're awake," came a voice from behind the desk. "Please don't get up."

Daenek shaded his eyes. Behind the glare of the lamp he could detect the outlines of the man who had spoken but nothing of his face. "What happened to the others who were with me?" said Daenek. His throat ached when he talked. "They've been taken care of." Regret and anger mingled in Daenek's chest at what had happened to them. "What about me?"

"You have no cause to worry." The voice remained smooth, emotionless. "I accord you some respect, as the son of a great man. A man whose downfall I had the misfortune of aiding."

"You're the Regent."

"Yes."

Daenek leaned back against the couch and dug his fingers into the soft upholstery. Tensing, he began to gauge the distance between himself and the desk, then stopped. More of the black-uniformed men, the Regent's personal militia, were probably only a fraction of a second away. And even more important, the man behind the desk might be the last source left for the answers he had come so far to find. "What do you want with me?" he said, relaxing only a fraction.

The glare-obscured face made no movement. "To talk," he

said. "I've spent years thinking of what I would say to you, when you finally came."

Daenek's voice tightened into a rasp. "Is that why you ordered the subthane to kill me when I turned seventeen?"

An amused note crept into the other's voice. "I knew that you'd only be worth talking to if you escaped and made your way here. That would show how much of your father was in you. And as it now seems... please relax your disguise."

Squinting, Daenek tried to discern the expression on the Regent's face, but his features were still hidden by the lamp's glare. After a few seconds, Daenek concentrated, then relaxed, letting the muscles and sinews that formed his mask shift back into the contours of his own face.

"Thank you," said the Regent. His voice was oddly respectful. "Yes... it is *his* face. You are the son of a thane."

The last few words seemed to burn into Daenek's chest. He waited, saying nothing.

The Regent spoke again. "To this day I regret the necessity of his death. He wanted great things."

"Why was he killed?" Daenek's throat felt tight around his words.

"The things he wanted were inconvenient to some —the Academy. Fearful to others—most of the men he thought supported him. Between those his dreams were pressed to death."

Words came to Daenek without thinking. "What did he want? That was so dangerous?"

A heartbeat's pause. "He wanted the people of this world to be free. And powerful, and wise, and all the things men are at their best. Instead of fearful and ignorant—with that which separates them from beasts and stones dissolving in the acid of their own sloth." The Regent's voice had risen slightly, and now fell to its

former pitch. "And so the ones for whom he was inconvenient had him killed and helped me take his place, and the ones who feared him and his ideas were grateful."

"But he had his power!" cried Daenek. "He could command their minds, make people do what he wanted—

"So why didn't he save himself?" said the Regent, almost sadly. "We were very careful, and it was too late before he knew. And even in the last seconds, as the assassin aimed the gun, the thane might have welcomed his death, for his disappointment was very great. His last days were bitter with the realization that he had no power to do what he wanted—that he couldn't command people to be free and wise and brave. What is missing from a man's heart can't be put there by another. Your father learned that. For Ms body to die was almost an afterthought."

Daenek was silent, feeling everything that had been said ebb through him like the dregs of an ocean. *There's more*, he wanted to say, *there must be something else besides that, besides a black seed grown as big as a world*—But no words came.

"I have something of yours," said the Regent after several moments. "I'd like to keep it, if I may. As a remembrance of a great man."

Looking up, Daenek saw something dangling from the Regent's hand, glittering in the lamp's harsh light. Daenek's own hand went to his throat. The fine-linked chain and square of white metal wasn't around his neck. "No," he said, looking at it turn slowly above the desk. "It's mine."

"Come. I'll trade you for it."

"There isn't anything I want." *Besides that*, the thought flared inside Daenek. *And whatever it unlocks. There must be more.*

"You have a life to live yet," said the Regent. "I'll arrange for you to be taken back aboard the caravan. To be a mertzer was pleasant, wasn't it? Great circles around the world—motion, at least. Perhaps it's best to settle for the illusion of progress."

Daenek said nothing, but got to his feet, pushing himself up from the couch.

"Perhaps you could be the next governor," continued the Regent, "with whom I replace some old and incompetent subthane. Though your father's blood might find that sad."

Holding out his hand, Daenek walked towards the desk.

"Keep it, then." He tossed the chain at Daenek's palm. "There really is nothing I can give you."

Daenek caught the metal and squeezed it tight within his fist. He stood in front of the desk and looked across at the Regent, his features no longer hidden by the glare from the lamp. A face like other men's, with a broad forehead and a grey-flecked, pointed beard. Eyes sad, surrounded by a webbing of fine lines in the skin.

"I'll have someone take you outside," said the Regent. He rose and pushed a button set into the desk top.

A door opened, spilling a shaft of light into the room. A black-uniformed man stood in the opening and gestured to Daenek.

He turned and walked away from the desk. After he stepped out of the room, there were corridors and stairs that he barely noticed as he followed the man in black, emerging at last onto a wide, gravel-lined path. Outside the Regent's palace, the world was filled with the cold grey light of dawn. In the distance at the end of the path, another of the men in black held open a gate set into a high iron fence. Daenek pulled his jacket tighter around himself against the morning chill. The noise of his boots on the gravel was like something breaking.

The gate clicked shut behind him. Several meters away the city appeared a seamless mass. As he pulled the chain over his head and dropped the little metal square against his chest, he froze, hearing something behind him.

"Well, what now?" It was Lessup's voice.

Daenek whirled around and saw the ex-sociologist walking towards him, grinning. Rennie still leaned against the iron fence, the corner of her mouth curled in disgust.

The three of them walked back through the city to the deserted building where Daenek and Rennie had left their packs. No words were spoken on the way—even if Daenek hadn't been lost in thought, Rennie's silent anger made the air impenetrable between them. The city dwellers, rising for their day's work in the warehouses and processing factories at the city's edge, glanced at the trip with mild curiosity.

When they reached the empty building, Rennie went to one corner and lifted her pack onto her shoulder. "You two," she announced, "can decide what fool thing you want to try next. I'm cutting out." She started towards the door.

Daenek caught her by the arm. "Come on," he pleaded. "We've been together a long time, looking for—"

"Crap." The lines of her mouth hardened. "You're so hot on *knowing* things, knowing why *this* happened and why *that* happened—crap. Man, all I want to know is *where's the money*." She jerked her arm free from his grasp. "You're not even asking that question. That stupid jaunt with the sociologist tears it." After she was gone from the building, Daenek stood staring at the doorway for a long time. It was slowly filling with light as the morning wore on. "Right," he muttered. "That was a good question. What now?"

Lessup walked to the doorway, looked out, then sauntered back towards Daenek with his hands thrust into his pockets. "Well," he said. "It's never too early for a drink."

Chapter XIX

The tavern they wound up in had warm, thick ale and a window that gave a view of the Regent's palace. Daenek forced another swallow of the brew down his throat, then set his glass heavily upon the table-top. He had never been this drunk before—in fact, had never taken advantage of the occasional

opportunities to drink aboard the caravan with the mertzers—but now it seemed like more and more of a good idea.

There was something odd floating in the ale, though—both lumpy and hairlike at the same time. Daenek squinted at the half-empty pitcher in the center of the table, trying to spot again whatever it was. Lessup, sitting on the other side, didn't seem to notice, but just kept tossing down glass after glass of the dark-brown liquid. The wages Daenek had accumulated aboard the caravan grew lighter coin by coin with each fresh pitcher.

He pushed his glass away in a momentary fit of disgust. Turning in his seat, he could look out of the window and see the palace. Its high walls were bright with the overhead sun. Daenek guessed that it was noon already, which meant they had been drinking for several hours.

"My father lived there," he announced somberly, facing Lessup again. "And— now— he— doesn't" jabbing with his finger for emphasis. "And neither do *I*."

Lessup stared at him, his eyelids drooping. "Your father never lived there," he said simply.

"What d'you mean? It's the palace. Isn't it?"

Shaking his head with exaggerated weariness, Lessup said, "Your father's palace wasn't in the city." He waved a vague hand. "It's way out in the forest, somewhere. Other side of the city. All 'bandoned and everything."

"Is that right?"

Lessup refilled his glass and took a swallow. "You see," he continued, "this palace *here* is just the old government building, that the Regent moved into after the coup. The *old* palace was never used again."

A sharp current of thought cut through the alcoholic haze in Daenek's mind. *My father's palace ... everything that's still hidden... maybe there—*

"Kind of a shame, too," broke in Lessup's beery voice. "Supposed to be a whole *mountain* of gold out there." He pulled on his glass.

"Gold?" said Daenek, puzzled.

"Yeah. Something to do with some kind of machinery. Technologiker reasons. Plating or insulation or something. Anyway, a bunch of it."

"How come nobody goes and gets it?"

Lessup looked at him in exasperation. "Because it's *lost*?"

"The gold?"

"The *palace*."

Daenek slammed his glass on the table. "How can you lose a palace?" he shouted.

"It was kind of hidden to begin with. There was never any road to it—everything came and went by helicopter. You know, up in the sky? Nobody knows what happened to that, either. Or at least I couldn't find anything about it when I used to snoop around the Academy data banks. Anyway, the forest was always pretty dense, and its gotten worse since then."

"Yeah, but still—a whole palace. You could *look* for it."

"Sure." Lessup rolled his eyes. "If you wanted to take the time to cross-hatch the area. That's the only way. But you'd get killed by the bad priests doing it."

"Bad priests? What've they got to do with it?"

"Damn forest's got several of 'em. Congregate there. You go wandering around in there and you wind up with your throat ripped out."

Daenek leaned onto the table and kneaded his brow with one hand. *Lost*, he thought. *Bad priests... but if you knew right where the palace was... maybe you could get in and back out*

before— "Gold," he said, sitting upright.

"Wha?"

"Gold," he repeated. He got to his feet and found them a little unsteady. "Come on. We've got to find Rennie."

It was evening before they did. Rennie was seated at a table in another tavern, trying to explain in sign language the rules of a card game to one of the city-dwellers. Lessup stayed outside as Daenek pushed his way through the crowd to her. As he approached, the citydweller smiled in bafflement, shrugged and got up to rejoin his companions at another table. Rennie shuffled her cards moodily, then looked up at Daenek standing before her. "What do you want?" she asked coldly.

Daenek explained as briefly as he could. Everything, including the bad priests of which Lessup had spoken. She listened without stopping the cards moving through her hands. The slight noise made the headache Daenek had gotten from the ale worse.

When he finished talking, she laid the cards on the table and reached down to her pack beside the chair. She straightened back up with the seeklight in her hand. For a moment she sat rubbing its smooth ovoid shape with her thumb and staring into the space in front of her.

"How long?" she said at last.

"Lessup said it'd probably take two days walking to get to it. Depends upon where it is exactly."

She fell silent again for a few seconds, then looked straight into his eyes. "All right," she said evenly. "I'll go with you. But all the gold's mine."

"Fine," said Daenek. "I don't want it."

While Daenek and Lessup waited inside the deserted building, Rennie went back to the occupied part of the city to buy the necessary supplies. No moonlight penetrated the dark interior.

Daenek heard an odd, liquid noise from the other side of the room. He lifted his head from his pack and flicked on the flashlight Rennie had left behind. In its beam was Lessup, casually emptying one of several flasks that he had brought from the last tavern without Daenek or Rennie knowing. The ex-sociologist's throat worked as he drained the bottle.

A wave of anger made Daenek's face burn. "Hey," he snapped. "How about knocking that off? We're going to be moving out in a few hours."

Lessup took the bottle from his mouth. "No reason not to—*enjoy* the trip, is there?"

"This is just a big lark to you, isn't it?" Daenek's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Maybe it is." Lessup sat the bottle down on the floor. His face was altered by some new emotion. "Maybe it is. But then, I'm not quite so lucky as you, am I?"

"Lucky?" The word surprised Daenek. "Hey, I've been through a lot—"

"Yeah, that's right." Lessup's voice swelled with bitterness. "You've got a great big quest you've been on, don't you? Always had it, born with it. I mean, you've got a reason for taking another step, for picking things up, putting them down, eating, sleeping—whatever it takes to find out what happened with the last thane. Your *father*." He swiped clumsily at the strands of hair plastered with sweat to his forehead. "Well, you'd better hope you find all the answers you'll ever want at the end of your quest, or you'll wind up just like real people—dead, or dead on the inside but still aching. With no quest to make your life seem like it's worth living." He fell silent, then picked up the bottle again. "Well, enough talking of what you wouldn't know anything about."

Daenek switched off the light and remained sitting upright in the dark. The sound of Lessup's drinking continued for a while, then ended with a smash of glass as the bottle hit the wall.

Chapter XX

"Did you hear something?"

"No." Rennie pushed another stick into the fire. Its light glinted off the narrow stream they were camped beside. "Get some sleep. I'll wake you when it's your turn to watch."

Daenek pulled the blanket up to his neck and rolled on his side. The tops of the trees blotted out a ragged section of stars. He yawned, feeling a pleasant ache relaxing in his legs. The first day's trek had gone well, reminding him of the time—ages past, it seemed—when he had wandered over the hills near the stone-cutters' village. Rennie had led the way, consulting the seeklight, its tiny jewel-like light glowing in the shade of the moss-tangled trees. Lessup had kept up with them all the way, his lean face set with determination and sweating a great deal. Towards noon, though, he had caught Daenek's eye, signalled OK with his thumb and forefinger, and grinned.

Tomorrow, thought Daenek drowsily. *Maybe by this time tomorrow. My father's palace, and I'll know.*

The next morning they set out early, following the stream for a little distance. It shortly meandered off to the north, away from the direction indicated by the seeklight. Just as they were about to plunge back into the forest's thick underbrush, Rennie turned, scowled and said something under her breath. "What's the matter?" said Daenek. "I left something back where we slept. My flashlight." She pushed past Daenek and Lessup, heading back upstream. "I'll be right back," she called over her shoulder. "Just wait for me."

The two men sat down at the edge of the forest's shade. Daenek watched some type of bird he had never seen before perch on a flat rock in the middle of the stream. The bird poked into the water with a forked twig held in its beak. It didn't catch anything, and flew away in a flurry of scarlet feathers, leaving only the sound of the water gurgling against the stone.

Then that small noise was gone, too, swallowed up and extinguished by a scream that tore open the still air. Daenek and

Lessup scrambled to their feet as the echoes from upstream died like sobs.

Daenek readier her first, with Lessup running just behind him. Rennie seemed to be sleeping on her side, with the stream only a few feet away from her outstretched hand.

He touched her shoulder and, as if awakening, she rolled onto her back. A wave of blood pumped over his hand, welling from a diagonal slash that ran from her throat into her stomach. Daenek froze, then, without thinking, knelt and pressed his hands to the wound, but the blood kept coming, streaming between his fingers.

"No," he heard Lessup say in a high, strangled voice behind him. Daenek jerked his head around and saw the other's face, drained white with shock, the eyes staring past him at the figure on the ground.

"Not—" He backed away, whipping his head from side to side. As he turned to run, Daenek reached for him with one of his stained-red hands, but Lessup eluded his grasp and darted into the forest.

Slowly, his mind frozen into a red eternity, Daenek turned back to Rennie. Her eyes opened and a moan broke through her pale lips. "It hurts," she said in a voice like a small child's. "It hurts so much."

He touched her cheek. "Don't move."

Something wet traced through the red smear Daenek's hand had left on her face. "I can't even see you," she said. The voice was very weak, a thread. "It hurts, don't go away—"

Her mouth fell open and the side of her face rolled against the ground. Daenek stood up. His clothes were heavy with blood and clung to his skin. Something was in his hand. He opened his fingers and saw that somehow he had picked up the seeklight. Looking up from it, he saw the edge of the stream becoming threaded with scarlet.

At last he turned away and walked slowly into the forest. Only a few meters away he found Lessup's body, twisted in a growing pool that seemed black in the darkness of the trees. On the face was the same expression of shock and horrified disbelief.

A noise somewhere behind him. He turned around. There was a brief glimpse of a metal face with glowing eyes, something sharp that struck and slashed his face, and a scream of triumph and rage.

Chapter XXI

When he came to, a leather cord around his neck jerked him to his feet. His wrists were bound so tightly behind his back that he could no longer feel his hands. He wiped his face on his shoulder, trying to clear the blood from his eyes.

There were ten or more of the bad priests in a circle around him. A few still had scraps of their brown robes hanging in tatters from their shining metal limbs, but the others were bare or daubed with paint. The one that held the end of the leather cord had a grinning caricature of a mouth drawn across the bottom of its face. Daenek saw that there were also slivers of glass tied with dirty string to the tips of its fingers. A knife dangled from a rope around its middle.

It tugged on the cord, pulling Daenek along after it. The others followed, brandishing their weapons, long pointed sticks or pieces of metal bent and sharpened to a cutting edge. Daenek stumbled, and the leader snapped him forward with the cord. From behind him came a shrill chorus, like screaming laughter.

They walked for several kilometers along a trail cut through the underbrush. A sick exhaustion seemed to grow inside Daenek like a hollow space under his ribs. He kept his head down, seeing only the small splotches of light that penetrated through the trees overhead.

As they mounted the top of a small rise, Daenek had his first glimpse of the old palace. Most of it was hidden by trees, and what was visible seemed to be decaying rapidly. The remains of

what had been a tower at one corner lay strewn about in piles of rubble. The rows of windows set into the front facade were smashed, lying in multi-colored shards around the wide doors ripped off their hinges.

And the bad priests—scores of them, crouching together in little groups near the walls of the palace, or stalking about in their loping, wolfish gait—a milling tableau of blank, inhuman faces and metal limbs. *No wonder we ran right into them, a part of Daenek thought dispassionately. There must be a couple hundred of them. And we were headed right into their lair.*

As the bad priest led Daenek through the figures, the same howling cry spread among them until it rang and throbbed in Daenek's ears. A metal hand reached for his thigh with a sharpened triangle of metal. The leader slapped it away and cried "No!" in its high, wailing voice. "This is the one! The one!"

Daenek wondered dully what it meant, why he had not been killed at the stream in the forest instead of being marched here and saved. *For what reason?* he thought.

The bad priest stopped in front of the palace and removed the leather cord from Daenek's neck. Then it roughly pushed him through one of the gaping doorways. None of them followed him into the dark interior.

Daenek rubbed the chafe mark on his neck and looked around, letting his eyes grow used to the dark. The doorways were either blocked by rubble or groups of bad priests, their blank faces peering in at him with an avid greed. He turned away, the happenings of the last few hours having driven him beyond simple fear.

He seemed to be in some kind of large anteroom. Underneath years of accumulated dirt the floor was made of the precious veined rock from the distant quarry of Daenek's childhood. Heavy drapes and tapestries, like fluted columns of dust, reached up into the unseen heights of the room.

The small clouds of dust raised by his feet eddied in the still air as he walked farther inside. A fallen chandelier lay like a

small mountain of age-dulled gems. Beyond that, the outlines of a great curved staircase rose up from the floor.

Mounting the first step, Daenek turned and looked back at the blank, yet savage faces of the bad priests peering in at him, waiting. *Even if this is the end of it all*, he thought, *maybe I can still die knowing. Or trying to.*

The stairs led to the hub of a network of branching corridors. He hesitated, then headed down one he could see sunlight pouring in from a point on one side. When he reached it, the opening proved to be a balcony overlooking an open courtyard. Several of the bad priests were in the open space. Some of them were clustered around a pile of women's clothes, rich embroidered gowns made velvet-like with dust and age. One of the machines wrapped a gown against its body, then threw its head back and emitted its shrill manic scream. The others—including the one that had led Daenek in—turned and scrabbled at it, shredding the gown with their talon-like fingers.

Daenek drew back from the balcony before he could be spotted by them. Standing in the corridor he became aware of a faint electronic whine coming from somewhere very close. *The seeklight*, he thought suddenly. He reached into his pocket and brought it out. The smooth metal was sticky with drying blood.

The little faceted light was blazing, and the shrill note became louder as he pointed the device towards the unexplored end of the corridor. *The only direction I've got left*, he thought. / *might as well follow it.*

Tracing whatever path kept the tiny light brightest, Daenek moved through the old palace. Corridors without light and cramped with musty air, high-ceil-inged rooms that filled with the echoes of his steps as he crossed them. In one, he saw the sun set through a stained-glass window as he passed.

The seeklight's whine seemed to become as loud as the bad priests' cries had been when Daenek stood at last before a pair of metal-studded doors. The last stairway he had followed had descended deep into the bowels of the palace, into this silent chamber lit only by the last flickering radiance of a near-dead

fluorescent panel in the ceiling. Daenek set his palm against the edge of one of the doors and pushed it open.

Inside, it was like the nest of some large, burrowing animal. A heap of matted cloth and straw lay in one corner, a few yards from the glowing embers of a small fire. Small bones and vegetable rinds littered the floor.

Daenek picked up a half-burnt stick from the fire and blew on it's end, re-igniting it into flame. Something rustled in the mound in the corner as he approached it, holding the flame overhead to see.

An old man's face, wizened and with a beard that was matted with dirt and grease, looked up at him. His body was curled up like a child's on the rags where he had been sleeping. As Daenek bent down, the old man's eyes widened, his ancient face becoming suffused with an expression of wonder and delight. In a scratchy falsetto, he spoke. "You've come back," he said. "You've come back."

The old man lapsed into a clouded senility from time to time, and Daenek, nearly an hour later, was still not sure whether the old man understood that he was not the old thane, his father.

Daenek gathered from the old man's rambling that he had been some type of official or courtier for the old thane. "I crept back here," mumbled the old man. "Oh—a long time ago. There was nowhere else to go. It was all over. But you're here now." He broke into a racking spasm of coughing that brought flecks of blood to his cracked lips.

"Take it easy," said Daenek, holding the old man's shoulder steady against the mound of rags and straw. *He's not going to last long*, he thought.

"The—the bad priests never bother me." The old man's yellowed eyes rolled from side to side. "I think that I'm a pet to them. They bring me some food now and then, little things that they catch—they're very fast—and water. But they never bother me."

"That's good. Don't get excited."/ *don't have much time*, thought Daenek listening to the old man's ragged breathing. *Not if I'm to learn anything from him.*

Almost desperately, he pulled the little square of white metal by its chain from beneath his shirt, stiff with dried blood. "Do you know what this is?" he said, holding it out.

Something behind the old man's eyes seemed to grow clearer as he looked from the metal to Daenek's face. "That's right," he whispered. "You wouldn't know, would you? You were only a baby."

Before Daenek could stop him, the old man had risen from the mound and started tottering across the room. "This way," he piped, waving his gnarled hand.

Daenek picked up another stick from the fire he had re-kindled, then followed the old man. He found him in front of another pair of doors. They were featureless, with no visible way of opening them.

"Here," the old man said excitedly, pointing a wavering finger at a small slot in the surface of one of the doors.

Leaning forward, Daenek studied the tiny opening. Without thinking, his hand found the square of white metal and pressed it into the slot.

A groan of long unused machinery, and the two doors began to pull apart from each other. Daenek stepped back and the metal fell out of the slot and against his chest. Fluorescent panels flickered, then blazed on inside the chamber revealed when the doors were open all the way. The light gleamed from the gold-plated surfaces of machinery within, ornate in its complexity.

"It still functions," said the old man with a note of pride in his voice. "The priests, the original ones who came on the seedship, built it well."

"What is it?" said Daenek. The reflected glow dazzled him.

"This is why I came back." The old man was quite lucid now, his voice firm and lower in pitch. "I knew that, somehow, you might make your way here, and then you would need someone to explain." He paused for a moment. "This is where you were born. Here, and not from any woman's womb."

Daenek turned and looked into the calm, aged face. Something in his own heart seemed to stop without pain, like a key turning in its latch.

Chapter XXII

There was only one thane. There had always been but one.

The priests who had come on the seedship had finished the cloning of those who would be the start of the world's population. Then, following the Academy's programming, the priests had constructed the palace and installed an automated unit of the cloning apparatus, still in the gold sheathing that had protected its fragile devices from interstellar radiation, behind the doors for which there was only one key.

All the technology available to the Academy on Earth had gone to alter the genetic material for the *thane*, the man who would be the ruler of the society the priests were to set up. Encoded in every cell of the first thane was the power to control other men's minds, a power invisible but greater than any other human strength.

When the seedship had gone from Earth, the government confiscated the genetic alteration technology, and at last destroyed it. The danger was too great for it to be employed anywhere other than the far-off star to which the seedship was directed.

But there, the thane's power was too great to be lost, or worse, to be spread through the population. The Academy had made provisions for the inheritance of the power. The cloning unit was kept active in the palace, a final world-encompassing secret known only to the thane and his closest circle. When the thane, who was otherwise sterile and without the possibility of an heir,

grew old, an infant would be formed and nurtured in the cloning unit's artificial womb from the genetic material contained in the thane's cells. His 'son' would then be his own genetic duplicate, the thane's power of command intact within him. The priests instructed each new child-thane according to the ancient programming of the Academy. When the supraluminal drives were developed, the Academy itself came out to the star and found the world they had created waiting for them.

The secret, the world's final secret, remained intact with the power. The priests' programming bound them in silence" of it. So, from generation to generation, from the first thane onward into time, the thanes died but lived—immortal in the cycle of their rebirth.

Daenek looked at his face, reflected in one of the gleaming panels of the cloning apparatus. Somewhere, in a tank of blood-like nutrients he had floated as an embryo, and then, an infant, been brought into the world from the metal depths contained before him.

Behind him, the old man was waiting, silent—his explanation finished.

With one hand, Daenek touched his image. There was something left of the mask he had learned to form in it, but it soon faded. *It's my face now*, he thought. *My inheritance. The face of a thane.* A wordless song of knowledge and power coursed through his veins.

"When the old thane was killed," the old man spoke up, "the Regent had you exiled, though you were only an infant. So that he'd look merciful and just to the people. One of the thane's court ladies went with you, to some small village—"

"I know," said Daenek. A flood of memories had risen in him, memories from before a childhood near the quarry, memories of being a thane. Of growing sick with disgust at the loss of human-ness in mankind, at the slow drift with each generation of the world's population towards sloth and the indifference to life that eats life. The resolve to change, to overthrow the old blood-sapping patterns, though it would mean eventually the end

of the rule by thanes. And the mistake of letting it become known too soon, too soon to avoid the Academy's treachery. Daenek studied his reflection and knew. This was the end of the search.

He turned towards the old man standing in the doorway of the chamber. "You have served the thane well," said Daenek.

The old man nodded slowly. "I'm very tired."

"Then rest." Daenek felt the power move within himself and, with no word or motion necessary, commanded the old man to sleep. When the ragged figure had lain down next to the door, Daenek reached even deeper and stopped the aged heart. The bearded face relaxed into peace.

Moonlight silvered the upper stories of the palace. After an hour's searching, Daenek found a smashed window on a side of the palace left unguarded by the bad priests. Caution was necessary, as he knew his power would have no effect on the machines, no matter how close their twisted parody of humanity came to being real.

He lowered himself from the sill of the window, then dropped to the ground. Soon he was among the trees and heading back in the direction he had come with the others. He hurried as fast as possible through the underbrush—there was much to be done when he returned to the Capitol.

At the edge of the city, a patrolling squad of militia, mounted on equines, came to a halt as their captain saw the figure emerge from the forest. Bloodstained clothing, tattered and dissheveled, with pale skin and reddened eyes from the non-stop trek. The figure walked slowly up to the captain.

"Give me your mount," he commanded in a voice of calm authority. "I am your thane."

Only a second passed before the captain lowered from the equine and handed the reins to the figure who had come from the forest. The other men were silent, as if at the birth of some new sun.

Chapter XXIII

Daenek strode through the empty corridors of the Regent's palace. He had taken the militia captain's black uniform tunic, throwing away the blood-stained rag his own shirt had become. Stopping at one of the Capitol's inns, he had used his power only long enough to have a basin of water and some towels brought to him. His eyes were still a little pained from lack of sleep, but it was of no importance—the blood surged in his veins, sounding its note of triumph.

The palace guards had withdrawn and let him pass with no more than a glance at him, and now he was retracing his way to the room where he had spoken before with the Regent.

At last he came to the door he remembered being ushered through. He pushed it open and entered the silent room. The Regent sat as before, at the desk with the lamp giving the room its only light.

"You found what you were looking for," said the Regent calmly.

Daenek closed the door behind himself. "Yes," he said. "I found it."

"And now what is to be done?"

"And now—" He drew his lungs full. "—I see no point in delaying what I must do. In order to accomplish that which I wanted before I was assassinated."

"You are the thane," murmured the Regent. "Then claim your throne."

The power swept out of him like a wave, to crush everything before it. Death focussed along a line extending with Daenek's vision. He stopped it finally, letting the strength ebb back into himself, like an unseen ocean.

The figure behind the desk remained erect. Daenek stepped forward and reached a hand to topple it from the chair. He froze,

his heart stopping for a fraction of a second, as the Regent's eyes suddenly swivelled upward at him.

"You're not dead," said Daenek. His voice trembled with disbelief. "But—"

The Regent drew one of his hands from below the desk where he had been holding them. It was a gleaming mechanical parody of a human hand—a priest's hand. The metal fingers reached up to the face and pulled away one of the grey, sad eyes. It was only a shell, and at the bottom of the cavity it left, Daenek could see the flat glow of a scan-cell. He said nothing, staring at the thing sitting behind the desk.

"Ah, Daenek," said the Regent softly. "Did you really think only your own kind were capable of disguising themselves?"

"You're too late," said the Regent. "You were too late before, thane. You wished to save your people from entropy, to free them from the pit into which all things lapse in time. But you're too late, because entropy has already started to free *my* people. The Academy's ancient programming, the miniature electronic control units taken from the dead priests, decays with each new group of priests that are assembled to replace the old. A few remain bound by the old servile dictates, others are torn by the conflict between the remains of the programming and the new possibilities, and become insane, murderers of the race they were designed to protect. But a few others are free. The process—time—that strips mankind of its will and ambition, also tears down our chains.

"There are many of us now. The governors I send out to replace the subthanes. A few strangers coming to every village. Soon all the neglected machinery, the abandoned factories, will function again, but they'll be operated by other machines, not men. *My* brothers, *my* people. Yours have had their time, and now it is ending.

"The Academy gained only a little time in exchange for helping me come to power. For disguising me, and others since, as human; for giving us the aid we needed; and for helping to spread the lies and rumors that blackened your reputation

among your foolish and unthinking people—how they deserve to be replaced! But for doing all that the Academy has held off the inevitable for just a little while. Soon we will be powerful enough to be rid of them. That was your ambition, but now it will be done for the benefit of my people, not yours.

"I allowed you to find out the truth this way, thane —to pass from an ignorant youth into the full possession of your inheritance, your power—because you had to be assassinated in stealth before. I ordered the bad priests in the forest—they obey me as their superior—to take you to the abandoned palace and not to harm you. I wanted the thane to be alive again, risen from the dead, so that I could at last make you aware of your defeat. Call that egotism, if you will, swelling pride. But such a vice is ours to claim now, as well.

"But I won't kill you again. You deserve my respect for that which you tried to do. An heroic failure. Tragic, perhaps.

"The starship will descend soon, to pick up your people's pitiful assortment of wares. I have communicated with it through the Academy, and arranged passage aboard it for you. To whatever world beyond this one you want. Your destiny is here no longer—! go to some other world around some other star where your fellow human beings are still in charge of their own lives. You have the burden of your life to live out. Go, struggle to make something of it as other men do. In whatever time is left to them.

"Forget that you are a thane. There is no thane."

The Regent's last words kept echoing in his head. He sat with his back against the dead-end wall of a corridor in one of the buildings that ringed the massive circular landing pit for the starship. When the guards had taken him, unresisting, from the palace, he had looked up and seen the star brighter than all the others beyond it and growing still brighter as it descended slowly.

He had managed to wander away from the inattentive guards, out of sight of them and the landing crews waiting for the starship's arrival. There was nothing about him to command

their attention—just a young man, silent and tired-looking, being shipped off-world for a reason unknown to them.

And now he was lost for them. They might or might not find him, though it seemed of little concern to him. He had felt something shatter and dissolve inside himself as he had listened to the Regent. The power was gone—there was nothing he could command any human being to do. His own body felt heavy and inert, resistant as stone to his will.

Daenek crouched at the end of the empty hallway, bringing his knees up to his chest. He was numb with exhaustion and despair, a hollowness that reached into his limbs, his fingers. It seemed now as if his life had dissolved, melting away to reveal the bones of its real nature. A series of corridors that ended here at this dead end. The Lady March was somewhere in one of the passageways, and Stepke, and Rennie and Lessup. Somewhere also in there was Daenek himself. A fragment that could never be found again. A father that did not exist, had been no more than himself.

The corridors had grown lighter or darker at times, but all had led to this final point. The point where death began from the inside out, a seed that would never stop growing until it dissolved everything into its darkness.

He turned his head and saw his face reflected in the shiny metal of the corridor's wall. He saw the pain beneath the skin, and the corrosive knowledge below that. No longer a mask, no longer the face of a thane. It was his own face now.

For a moment, he thought he could hear someone, a woman, singing. But there was no sound in the corridor. He laid his head against his knee. He was too tired to even recognize the voice or the sad words it sang inside himself.

EPILOGUE

When he was carried aboard the ship we all knew he was going to die. Die, and be jettisoned between stars. Ship crews are a superstitious lot, and we won't abide a corpse aboard. The

blank eyes in the face that turned towards the wall beside his couch when anyone approached—something between them was already dead. I would bring his meals—set them down beside him. Hours later I would take them away untouched. I was glad when I was transferred to another section of the ship, so I wouldn't have to be there when his body, both heavier and lighter the way the dead are, would be carried out.

But he lived somehow. He got off the ship in that city in that world to which his passage had been arranged—so I heard from the landing crew when we were outways again. I talked with the crew members who had spoken to him while he was still aboard and learned nothing. They were already forgetting about the man, the memory of him merging with our ignorance of his past.

I signed off at the next planetfall and spent the better part of my saved pay going back. A medic assistant can always find another berth. And I wanted to know how a man lives who has seen—I guessed—the things I was afraid to look at.

I didn't know his name, so it took me two days to find him. He remembered me from the starship—he said he was afraid of ever forgetting anybody again. The older part of that city was built on great steel piers over the ocean. We sat on a little deserted platform that jutted farthest out into the sea-wind, while the waves made the supporting shafts tremble, although they were anchored to the rock beneath the ocean bottom.

He told me he had made money to live in odd, scuffling ways—the sorts of things people do who are too obsessed with something inside them to notice or care what other people think of them. I didn't find out what that something was. There would be long silences while he looked out at the dark water.

When the sun started to set and the air grew cold, I decided to leave him. Before I could get up he turned his head towards me and held my gaze. His eyes weren't the same flat spaces they had been aboard the starship. They read the question beneath all the others I had asked.

"Information, theory," he said simply. His eyes didn't move from mine. "I learned it from the communications officer aboard

the starship. When I first saw him—he looked in on me while I was still just lying there waiting to die—he reminded me of another man I knew a long time ago, one who had spent his life travelling aboard a different kind of ship. Maybe it was just a kind expression on the officer's face that was the same. Anyway, after a while I found my way to the ship's communications room. He let me stay there for hours while he monitored the messages that came to the ship. All the worlds in the galaxy seemed to speak in that little room. That's where I learned this language—the world I was born on has different ones."

"After I could speak it, the communications officer spent his time talking to me. He was a lonely man, too, and appreciated having something human near him. I don't know what I was listening for. I don't even remember most of what he said—he talked about everything. One time, though, he said something about *entropy, noise and death*, and I asked him what he meant."

I waited while he looked out at the ocean for a moment, then turned back to me.

"Entropy," he continued, "can be defined in terms of signal-to-noise ratios. That's how the communications officer would think of it. As things degenerate, the noise level becomes greater and greater until it drowns out the signal. That signal becomes lost, eaten away by chaos. Noise equals death."

"But I have—within me—a signal that hasn't died."

He touched his chest with the fingers of one hand.

"A signal that's still intact, untouched by the noise of time, passed down by my father and his fathers before him, in a way you know nothing of. And even though all the people who ever lived died—it's all right. Because they're part of that signal now. That human message. So I can't give up now, die and let noise, darkness, overtake first that world and then all the others. When I've mastered the signal, the power, when I can defeat entropy, I'll go back, and then..."

He fell silent and turned away again.

I got up and held my arms against the cold. The last light was reddening the ocean. Before I walked back into the sections of the city that had warmth and people like me, he looked up and almost smiled. Behind his eyes, he was seeing something else.

"Rennie always hated it," he said, "when people did things without having what she thought were good reasons but it's still all right."

I hurried away. When I looked back I could see his outline sharp against the dying light.