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Technos

#7 in the Dumarest series

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Chapter One

AT NIGHT the streets of Clovis were twisting threads of shadowed mystery faced by high walls and shuttered windows, looping and curving as they followed the dictates of some ancient plan. The city itself was a place of brooding silence broken only by the sough of the wind from the plains beyond, the discordant chiming of prayer bells suspended from the peaked and gabled roofs. Pale lanterns hung like ghostly stars, their ineffectual light augmented by the haze from the landing field and the great floodlights of the workings to the north where men and machines tore into the planetary crust for the wealth buried deep; all was reflected from the lowering clouds in a dim and artificial moonlight.

Dumarest paused as he reached an intersection, eyes watchful as he studied the streets curving to either side. They appeared deserted but that meant little; men could be lurking in the black mouths of doorways, the shadowed alleys, ready to leap out and kill any who passed. He would not be the first to be found robbed and murdered in the light of the rising sun.

Cautiously, keeping to the middle of the road, he headed down one of the streets, his boots making soft padding noises as he trod the cobbled way. It was late; an entrepreneur had brought in a troupe of dancing girls, little things of graceful movement, doll-like in ornate costumes, their hands fluttering in symbolic gestures as they pirouetted to the beat of gong and drum, and entranced by their charming innocence he had lingered to see the final performance. Now he was beginning to regret his self-indulgence. Clovis was an old city steeped in ancient tradition, resentful of the new activity which threatened its brooding introspection.

And, in the winding maze of streets, it was all too easy to get lost.

Dumarest reached the end of the street, turned left and was twenty yards from the corner when he heard the pound of running feet coming from behind. Immediately he sprang to one side, turning, pressing his back against a wall, his right hand dipping to lift the nine-inch blade from where it nestled in his boot. A vagrant beam caught the polished steel, shining from the razor edge and the needle point, the betraying gleam vanishing as, recognizing the man who loped towards him, he sheathed the knife.

"Lemain!"

"What—" The man staggered to a halt his face ghastly in the dim light. He was stooped, one hand clamped to his side, the fingers thick with oozing blood. His eyes widened as Dumarest stepped toward him. "Earl! Thank God it's you! I thought—" He broke off, head turned to where other racing footsteps broke the silence. "The guards! They're after me, Earl. They'll get me, too. You'd best keep out of the way."

"Forget it," said Dumarest. He caught hold of the other's free arm and swung it over his shoulders. Half carrying, half dragging the injured man he ran down the street. The dark mouth of an alley gaped to one side, and he turned down it as the approaching footsteps grew louder. The alley was a trap, a blank wall closing the far end. Dumarest turned and ran back as lights shone at the mouth of the alley. The fingers of his free hand

scraped the wall, felt the wood of a door, and he thrust himself against it. The panel was locked. He thrust again and felt something yield with a dull snapping of wood. The door swung inward and he almost fell into darkness. Supporting the weight of the injured man, he closed the panel and leaned against it as boots echoed from the cobbles beyond.

Light blossomed from somewhere, "Who is that? What do you want?"

"Be quiet!" Dumarest turned and saw a woman sitting upright on a bed, a candle guttering in her hand.

"It's all right," he said quickly. "We mean you no harm. Just be silent."

She rose and came toward him. Her feet were bare, the nails gilded, her height almost that of his own. Her hair was curled, gilded, as were her fingernails, in the sign of her profession. From beneath a thin robe of yellow silk her breasts moved in succulent attraction. At each step a long, curved thigh gleamed in inviting nudity. Her lips were very red and very full; moist and full of promise.

"You're late," she whispered, "But I'm always ready for business. What's the matter with your friend? Is he drunk?"

"Silence!" Dumarest reached out and dropped his hand on the candle, killing the dancing flame. From beyond the door came the sound of harsh voices.

"Well, he isn't here. Damned if I can see how a man can run like that with the burn we gave him."

"He's tough," said a second voice. "And scared. A scared man can do a lot of surprising things. He must have run faster than we thought. He isn't here, anyway. I guess we'd better call it a night."

The rasp of their boots grew faint as they moved away.

"Earl!" Lemain stirred in the grip of the supporting arm.

"Earl, I—"

His voice died as Dumarest clamped his hand over his mouth. Silk rustled as the woman moved in the darkness, the scent of her perfume heavy in the air.

"They've gone now," she said. "May I relight the candle?"

"No," said Dumarest. "And make no sound."

For ten minutes he waited, standing immobile against the door, the weight of the injured man dragging at his arm. The silence felt thick and heavy, broken only by the soft rustle of garments, the ragged breathing of Lemain. And then, from outside, boots rang against the cobbles.

"It's a bust," said a harsh voice disgustedly. "If he'd holed up in here he would have come out by now. I guess he must have given us the slip somehow."

"It doesn't matter." The second guard was philosophical. "He didn't get away with anything so there's nothing to cry about. And with that burn we gave him he can't get far. We'll check with the field and see if he made it as far as there. If not, we'll say that he's dead. We lose the bonus but save ourselves a lot of work. Agreed?"

"Sure," said his companion. "Who's going to worry about a crumb like that anyway."

The sound of their boots grew faint as, genuinely this time, they moved away; the scrape of leather on stone merged with and drowned in the chimes of prayer bells from high above.

* * *

Lemain was dying. Dumarest could see it as he stared at the man in the light of the relit candle. The dancing flame threw shadows over the prominent bones of his cheeks and temples, accentuating the shadowed sockets of his eyes, the thin bloodlessness of his lips. Beads of sweat dewed his forehead, and the muscles of his jaw were knotted in pain.

"Earl," he whispered. "I tried something stupid. I got paid off at the workings. You quit, but I got fired. I was desperate for a stake and went to Fu Kung's. I hoped to win but I lost. I guess I went a little crazy then. He keeps his money in a safe in a rear office behind the tables and I tried to take some. Not all of it, just enough to buy a High passage back home. His guards caught me before I could get anything. They shot me but I got away. The rest you know." He coughed and inhaled, the sharp hiss of indrawn breath betraying his agony. "God, Earl! It hurts! It hurts!"

The woman said, "What's the matter with him? Is he sick?"

"He's hurt." Dumarest looked at the room. It was typical of its kind. A large, double bed filled one corner, the mattress piled high with soft fabrics. A table, chairs, a wardrobe, a large cabinet holding both food and implements for cooking, a curtained stall containing a shower, a washbasin, toilet facilities, the usual furnishings.

"Get a sheet," he ordered. "Clear the table and spread it over. Get another for use as a bandage. Hurry!"

"You'll pay?" Her voice was soft with trained intonations; an instrument of pleasure for the ear, but there was steel beneath the softness. "He's been hurt, and those men outside were guards. If he's on the run I could get into trouble."

"There'll be no trouble," said Dumarest. "And we can pay."

He lifted Lemain as the woman cleared the table and spread wide a purple sheet, placed the limp figure on the flat surface, stepped back to ease the ache in his arm and shoulder before he stooped to inspect the wound. It was bad. Blood welled from a seared opening as he pulled the clamping hand away, the black of char clearly ran deep in the intestine. The laser had hit hard and strong. How the man had been able to run at all was a mystery.

"Earl!" Lemain writhed in pain. "God, Earl, do something!"

"Give him wine," said Dumarest to the woman. "Spirits if you

have any. And where is that other sheet?"

He bound it tightly around the injured man as she fed him sips of brandy, compressing it over the wound in an effort to staunch the blood. It was a hopeless gesture. With immediate medical attention the man might have stood a chance; now he had none at all.

"Earl?" Lemain pushed aside the woman's hand. The brandy had given him momentary strength, bringing a false flush to his pallid cheeks. "How bad is it, Earl?"

"Bad."

"I'm dying?"

"Yes," said Dumarest emotionlessly. Lemain was not a boy, and a man should be told when to ready himself for the final adventure. "Are you in pain?"

"Not now," said Lemain. "Not as I was. It seems to have eased a little." He turned his head, the dancing candlelight giving his face the somber appearance of a skull. "So much to do," he whispered. "And now there's no time to do it. If only the cards had fallen right I—" He broke off, his smile a rictus of approaching death. "Listen, Earl, will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"A wise man," said Lemain. "You don't promise until you know what it is I ask. But it isn't much, Earl. I just want you to carry a message for me. To my brother on Loame. Tell him that there is no answer on Shem, Delph and Clovis. Will you do that?"

"Couldn't I send it?"

"No, Earl, there are reasons why it must be kept private. That is why I want you to carry it. To Loame, Earl. Doesn't the name interest you? It's like the one we talked about. Earth. The planet you want to find. There is a man on Loame who might be able to tell you exactly where it is."

Dumarest leaned forward, his face intent in the fitful illumination. "His name?"

"Delmayer, Earl. Grower Delmayer. He owns a big place and he is a collector of antiquities. Go to him, Earl. Talk to him. I promise nothing but I'm sure he can help."

Dumarest hesitated. Another wasted journey? Another disappointment? Earth, he was positive, lay somewhere in this region of the galaxy, yet the exact coordinates remained a mystery. To be so close and still be so uncertain was a nagging irritation.

"Please, Earl." Lemain's hand lifted, gripped his own. "I'm dying and we both know it. You're leaving anyway so why not head for Loame? Carry my message and maybe you'll help to save a world."

Exaggeration? Dying men saw things from a distorted viewpoint but there was no denying the urgency in his voice, the appeal in his eyes. And why not? One planet was as good as another, and it was barely possible that the man Delmayer possessed valuable information.

"All right," said Dumarest. "I'll carry your message."

"God bless you, Earl." The hand fell from his own, fumbled at a pocket. "The address... in here... my brother's a good man... help." Lemain swallowed and said clearly: "You won't regret this, I'm sure of it."

"He's dying," said the woman suddenly. "Does he want anything? A monk, perhaps?" She stepped forward, the candle in her hand. "There's a small church at the edge of the landing field. I can get you one if you want."

"No," said Dumarest. "There isn't time."

"There could be. I'll run all the way."

And return with what? A monk of the Universal Church with his hypnotic skill to ease the mind and body of the dying or a

pair of guards eager to earn a reward? Self-preservation dictated that she return with the latter. It was a risk Dumarest dared not take.

"No," he said again.

Gold shimmered as she looked at him, the candlelight bright in the gilded tresses of her hair, more gold flashing from her nails, matching the gleam in her eyes. "You're hard," she said. "By God, you're hard. And you call yourself his friend?"

"I did," said Dumarest quietly. He looked at Lemain. While they had argued the man had died. Reaching out, he closed the staring eyes. "But not now. A dead man has no need of friends."

"He's gone?" She sighed and put down the candle. "Well, what do we do now?"

"We wait," said Dumarest, "Until the dawn."

* * *

Waiting, they talked. Her name was Zillia and she was a professional woman of pleasure, her attitude a peculiar blend of hardness and sentiment, a typical product of the old city where tradition had set her class in a prison of rigid formality. To Dumarest's questions as to how she would dispose of the body she shrugged.

"There are men who will do anything for money. I will bribe a couple. The dead man will be found in a street far from here. Not today, but tomorrow. There is no time now to make the arrangement, and there will be no questions and no suspicion as to my part in the affair. A dead man, one from the workings, who is going to be concerned about such as he?"

"You don't like the workings?" Dumarest sipped at the glass in his hand. She had produced wine and served them both, now they sat on the edge of the bed, the sheeted corpse a formless bundle to one side of the room.

"The workings?" Again she shrugged, the upward movement

of her shoulders causing her full breasts to strain against the thin fabric of her robe. "To me they mean nothing, but to those who rule this world they could spell disaster. Already the young are becoming independent and dissatisfied with their lot. You, those like you, are a fresh wind to blow away ancient cobwebs with your news of other worlds, other societies. Once the habit of obedience is broken how can it be restored?"

"Blind obedience is never good," said Dumarest flatly. "Always a man must ask himself why he should obey. Because the one giving the order is older? Has greater wealth? Is in a position of authority? Commands respect because of his greater knowledge and experience? Unless these questions are asked the habit of obedience leads inevitably to mental slavery."

"Deep thoughts," she said, smiling. "And questions not of our concern. Had you known the dead man long?"

Dumarest sipped more wine. "Not long. We worked together, and once he saved me from injury. A grab discharged its load above where I stood. Lemain thrust me aside." His hand tightened on the glass. "The grab operator had cause to regret his carelessness later."

"You killed him?"

"No, just hurt him a little. After that Lemain and I spent some time together. We ate at the same table and slept in the same dormitory. We talked of various tilings. I liked him. He was a good man."

"And Earth?"

Dumarest looked at the woman, her face soft in the kindly light of the candle, the glimmer of her gilded hair a shimmering halo against the shadows beyond. She had, he realized, subconsciously fallen into the habits of her trade, putting him at ease with wine and conversation, letting her magnificent femininity work its biological magic.

"It's a place," he said quietly. "A world."

"Your world?"

"Yes."

She frowned, puzzled, her mind teasing the problem. "But he said that you didn't know where it was. At least he said that someone could tell you that. But if it is your world, surely you know the way back?"

"I left when I was very young," Dumarest explained. "I stowed away on a vessel and the captain was kinder than I had reason to deserve. He could have evicted me, instead he allowed me to join his crew. From there I went on and on, visiting many worlds, penetrating to the Center."

To where stars hung thick in the sky and the nights were brilliant with sheets and curtains, streamers and halos of colored brilliance. To where the very name of Earth was unknown and the coordinates unmarked. Deftly she refilled his glass. "And?"

"Now I'm trying to find my way back," he said. "That is all. A simple story of a runaway boy who became lost in the vastness of the galaxy. You must have heard its like a thousand times."

"Perhaps." She touched the rim of her glass to his own, her eyes bright as they met his across the goblets. "I give you a toast. To success in all you endeavor!"

"To success!"

They drank and Dumarest set aside his empty glass. He would need a clear head at dawn, when it would be safe to walk through the city, to go to the landing field and take passage away from Clovis. And there was still unfinished business to be settled. He reached into a pocket and produced money, the thick, triangular coins of the local currency. Taking the woman's hand he filled her palm with precious metal.

"For your trouble," he said. "For what you have done and have yet to do. Is it enough?"

Gold shimmered as she bent her head, counting the coins.

"The price of a High passage," she whispered. "My lord, you are generous."

"You are satisfied?"

"Almost." She raised her head, eyes bright, teeth shining against the full redness of her lips. "For sanctuary and the disposal of the dead this is more than enough. But for the rest—there is a price only you can pay."

The coins flashed as she thrust them beneath the pillow; fingernails gleaming she reached for the candle, the glitter dying with the flame.

And then there was only warmth and softness, the scent of perfume and the incredible, demanding heat of her magnificent body.

Chapter Two

THE WIND that morning was from the north with the sky clear and without promise of rain, which meant, thought Quendis Lemain grimly, a bad time to come in the near future. He turned from the meteorological instruments, a thickset, burly man of late middle age, once hard muscle now running to fat, his gray eyes narrowed as he looked over his lands.

They were good lands, rich dirt filled with ripe humus, well drained, stocked with beneficial bacteria and showing the devoted care of generations. To east and west the ranked trees of orchards marched toward the horizon, the deep green leaves lustrous in the light of the rising sun, the branches heavy with swelling fruit. To the south sprawled acres of grain, brassicas and vines. To the north stretched the root crops interspersed with succulents and gourds.

There the danger would strike first, the drifting-spore-like seeds riding the wind to settle, to germinate, to sprout in vicious, horrible growth. A hundred men would have to keep continual

watch, tearing out the thin tendrils as they appeared, hoeing and turning the soil until it was again clean. And then, inevitably, they would have to do it all over again.

For how long, he wondered? Already a good square mile had been lost from the northern borders of the farm, good, fertile soil lost to production, covered now by the vile growth which threatened their very existence. And each foot lost meant that much less food, that much more danger.

"Grower Lemain!" The girl was one of the house-servants, her simple dress of brown fiber taut over the lush curves of her body. She came toward him eyes bright with health, the mane of her hair hanging loose over her shoulders. "My lady sent me to tell you, Grower. Your meal is served and is waiting your pleasure."

Trust Susan to think of routine, thought Quendis. The wind from the north, no sign of rain, and she could still think of food. Yet she was right to do so. Doubling the worry would not halve the danger and to minimize it was to strengthen the morale of the workers. He drew a deep breath, inflating his chest,

"I'm coming, Nyalla."

"Grower?"

"What is it, child?"

"I am old enough for marriage, Grower. Will I have your permission to attend the mating dance at the harvest festival?"

Quendis hesitated, then accepted the inevitable. Permission or not she would seek a mate, and it was best that he agree. But a house would have to be provided, rations put by, money spent on the customary gift. And it would not be Nyalla alone. From his own knowledge, there would be a score of weddings following the dance, and all would expect the normal disbursements: Expect them and receive them. He would not be the first to break old tradition.

"Grower?"

He caught the note of anxiety and knew that he had stood brooding too long. Time to the young moved at a different pace than for the old. Looking at her, he smiled.

"I was playing a game," he said. "Trying to guess who is the lucky man. Hemrod?"

"No, Grower, Ilsham." Her eyes held no trace of embarrassment. "I parted from Hemrod when he tried to take more than I was willing to give. I have your permission?"

"Yes, my child, of course."

"Thank you, Grower!" Her teeth flashed white against the olive of her skin. "We shall bring you many children to tend your land. This I promise!"

He lost his smile as she flounced away. His brows knitted as he walked slowly toward the door of the house. More children soon to come. Strong young bodies to tend the land, to give it strength and to gain strength in return from the rich, black soil. So it had been since the beginning, but for how much longer could that natural relationship last? Already there were growers without land, workers without a home farm, forced to offer their labor in return for food.

If it had not been for the tribute, starvation would have been a common sight. No, he corrected himself, not starvation, they still had a long way to go before that. Short rations, a limited choice, but not actual starvation.

God grant it never came to that.

* * *

The meal was one of Susan's specialties: heaped plates of delicious concoctions, pancakes, cream, syrup, eggs and meats, butter and crisp bread together with pots of tisane. A wonderful repast for a man who had been up and about since before dawn, but Quendis could touch little of it. Moodily he sipped at his cup of tisane half listening to the interplay of conversation from others at the table. It was the usual chatter; what the new

fashions were, Grower Melton's new project for damming a river and flooding an infested area, the discontent of the workers on Grower Ekton's land. It fell silent as he rapped for attention.

"The wind is from the north," he said in the following silence. "Hykos, you take a hundred men and stand watch. Neeld, you gather the children and do the same further to the south. Thorn, how soon can we commence harvesting the area?"

The foreman blinked, knowing the question was rhetorical." Quendis knew the exact state of every crop on every inch of land, but the secret of successful cooperation lay in the respect given to others. It was like him to ask and not demand.

"It could do with a few more days, Grower," said Thorn after due consideration. "A week if possible. I'd like to make the most of this sunshine."

"Commence as soon as you think fit." Quendis rose, ending the meal and signaling dismissal. The hum of conversation rose again as they filed out; his three daughters and four of his sons, his foreman, his wife, the chief stockman and his assistant together with their wives, the agronomist, others. A full score sat down to every formal meal in the house. Of the regulars only Cleon was absent. Quendis felt the pain rise again as he thought of his eldest son. Firmly he quashed it. Some things simply had to be.

Susan joined him as the servants cleared the table. She was the younger by a dozen years having come to him after the death of his first wife, becoming a mother to their only child. Her hand was firm on his own as she looked into his face. "You're worried, dear. The wind?"

"That and no promise of rain."

"And Cleon?"

"Yes," he admitted. "That also." His hands clenched as he thought about it. "Damn the luck! Another year and he would have been safe. I—" He broke off, remembering. Cleon would have been safe but he had seven other children. "I'm sorry," he

said. "I didn't stop to think. If it hadn't been Cleon it could have been one of the others."

"Not necessarily." Her eyes were direct as they met his own. "You could exempt the family."

"I could," he admitted, "and don't think that I haven't thought about it. But if I did how long would my authority last? Have you heard what happened to Grower Rental? He did that. One night he woke to find his house in flames. The workers are not fools, and angry men forget tradition. If we are to survive at all we must work together."

"And die together." Her voice was bitter. "I've seen the charts, my husband. The charts and graphs you keep in your office. And I've spoken to Leaderman. You have a skilled agronomist but he is a poor liar. The exponential curve is both sharp and final. A storm of wind from the north at the right time, followed by a heavy rain, and what of the land then?"

"Nothing." He was sharp. Who knew what ears might be listening? "A rain would wash the seeds from the air. Rain is a friend. A storm?" He shrugged. "Who can fight against nature? But we will have no storm and no sudden invasion. Leaderman dealt in probabilities, plotting the most dire circumstances which could be imagined; but they are remote. As remote as snow in summer." He forced a laugh into his voice, a lightheartedness he did not feel, "Nyalla asked permission to attend the mating dance. I gave it, naturally, and she promised me many children to tend the land. With such assistance what have we to fear?" He reached out and squeezed her arm. "Don't worry, my dear. We shall survive."

"Yes," she said after a moment's hesitation. "Of course."

"You doubt it?"

He was ready for an argument, ready to beat down her protests and so dissolve his own misgivings, but the phone rang before she could reply. A servant answered it, her tone respectful. Quietly she came toward them from the booth.

"A call for you, Grower. From the city."

It was Colton, his seamed face anxious as he looked from the screen. "Hello, Quendis. Are you busy?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm calling a meeting. There are things to be discussed and I think you should be there. It's important, Quendis, if it wasn't I wouldn't ask."

Quendis hesitated. Sense told him that he was neither essential nor would he be missed, and it was long past time for him to attend a grower's meeting. He frowned as he looked at the face on the screen. Colton wasn't really a grower at all for he held no land, but he was the representative of them all in that he had been their common agent in times past. It was natural that he, as near a neutral as they could get, should chair their meetings.

"I'm not sure that I can make it," he said slowly. "We've got bad weather here and—"

"There's bad weather everywhere," interrupted the agent. "There's sickness and misery and as much worry as you could wish for. But staying at home won't cure it. Unless we can all work together we might as well give up now. I'm calling the meeting for noon. If you're interested in hanging on to your land you'd better come."

It sounded, thought Quendis, uncomfortably like a threat.

* * *

There was trouble at the gate. Dumarest waited patiently as the line of embarking passengers moved slowly across the landing field to be questioned by a uniformed officer. He sat behind a table, arrogant in his red and black, the unmarked plastic gleaming as if newly applied paint still wet with liquid gloss. His voice was sharp as he fired questions.

"Name?"

"Frene Gorshon."

"Your sponsor?"

"Grower Gorshon, sector nineteen, decant five, house fifteen. He is my brother."

"I asked the name of your sponsor, not his address."

The inspector reached toward the compact bulk of a computer at his side. "Your reason for visiting Loame?"

"My father is dead. I am here to attend his funeral rites."

"A disgusting custom." The inspector operated the machine and checked the answer. Satisfied he nodded. "You may pass. Next?"

The man standing behind Dumarest sucked in his breath as the line moved forward. "This is a hell of a thing to happen," he muttered. "The last time I was here Loame was a free planet. Now look at it. Bright boys all dressed up and throwing their weight around. If I had the cash I'd turn right around and leave on the next ship. Do you have a sponsor?"

"Yes," said Dumarest.

"I haven't and I'm broke. I wonder if you could help out? Find me a sponsor, maybe. I'm a skilled mechanic and can fix anything with an engine." He plucked at Dumarest's sleeve. "If you could fix me up I'd be grateful."

"Sorry," Dumarest didn't look at the man. "Try someone else. I can't help."

"Can't or won't?"

Dumarest turned and looked at the speaker. He was a big man with sullen, angry eyes. "Both," he said coldly. "Now take your hand off my sleeve before I break your arm."

He turned as the line moved forward, eyes somber as he looked at the fence, the cluster of men standing beyond the gate. The houses of the town were primitive, built of logs caulked with

clay, blending into the background of trees in rural harmony. A row of antigrav rafts seemed an anachronism, as did the suspended lights and the bulk of machines to one side. Harvesters, he guessed, to be expected on an agricultural planet.

"Your name?" The inspector looked at the man just ahead.

"Bastedo."

"Sponsor?"

"None." The man lifted his bag and set it on the edge of the table. "I am a seller of agricultural machines. I have a full set of three-dimensional slides, holograms and working miniatures of the items for which I am agent."

The inspector checked his computer. "I have no record of your clearance. Entry denied."

"What?" Anger mottled the face of the trader. "Now you see here! I'm a legitimate businessman and you have no right to refuse me entry. Just who are you, anyway? I've got—" He broke off as two armed guards, wearing the same red and black as the inspector, moved forward at a signal.

"Now listen to me," said the officer coldly. "If you argue you will be detained. If you resist you will be shot. Is that clearly understood?"

Gulping, the trader nodded.

"Loame is a tributary world of Technos," explained the inspector. "As you have no clearance from that planet you are deemed to be an undesirable alien. As such you are denied entry. You now have a choice of action. You can take passage on the next vessel to leave or, if you have no money, you will be given a Low passage to Technos. There you will be put to work until the debt is paid."

"And how do I go about getting a clearance?"

"You don't," said the inspector. "Those of your profession are

unwanted on this world. Next?"

Dumarest shouldered aside the trader. He gave his name and added, "I am a traveler. I carry a message which I am to deliver to a resident of this world. To Grower Lemain. His address—"

"Never mind that." The inspector's eyes were calculating as he looked at Dumarest. "Are you a resident of the Technos complex?"

He restrained the impulse to lie. A resident would carry papers, have easily verifiable information which the inspector could check. The only lies safe here were those impossible to disprove. "No."

"This message, what is it?"

"A few words from a dying man," said Dumarest. He added, lying. "He saved my life at the cost of his own. That is why I am here. I made him a promise and I'm superstitious about such things."

"I see." The officer manipulated his computer, frowning, his fingers dancing on the keys. "The name of the dead man?"

"Lemain. Carl Lemain."

"His relationship to the man you wish to see?"

"His younger brother."

The officer leaned back, his eyes enigmatic. "You have no objection to giving him this message in my presence?"

"No," said Dumarest. "None at all."

Chapter Three

THE MEETING had been like all the other meetings they had held since the trouble began. Individuals each seeking to gain an advantage, none ready to yield to the common good. And though he could see the force of Colton's reasoning, Quendis wasn't going to be the first to give money and manpower without seeing a chance of immediate return. It was all very well for the chairman to rail and threaten but he held no lands and he refused to understand the motivations of those who did. The land was everything; to tend it was a man's reason for existence. To work together was one thing; to make sacrifices so that another would gain was something else. The agent was asking too much with his talk of pooled resources and shared labor.

Outside the meeting hall Quendis looked at the sun, well past zenith, and wondered what to do now that he was in town with time to spare. Visit the field? A vessel had arrived and old hopes refused to die. Sternly he repressed them. There would be officers at the gate and their curiosity must not be aroused. It was not in his pattern of behavior to visit the field—to break that pattern was to invite interrogation.

He started as a hand touched his arm from behind, feeling the sudden acceleration of his heart as he saw the hated red and black.

The soldier was curt. "Is your name Lemain?"

"I am Grower Lemain." Quendis stressed the title. "What do you want?"

"You will accompany me to the gate." The soldier ignored the question. "Immediately."

Perplexed, he followed the soldier, conscious of the wondering stares of others, the growers who had attended the meeting, the workers lounging around. Too many workers; at this time of year they should be in the fields tending the crops and readying for harvest. They must be some of the dispossessed, he thought. Men and women from the overrun farms who had not been able to attach themselves to another house. Now they hung around the field, eager to work at any degrading task, some even taking Low passage from the planet, their strength and the strength of their

children forever lost to the soil of Loame.

"Wait here." The soldier moved on without waiting to see if he was obeyed and again Quendis felt a surge of irritation at his aggression. Give a man a uniform, he thought, give him a gun and you create a monster. He stiffened as an officer beckoned to him from the gate.

"You are Lemain?"

"I am *Grower* Lemain."

"There is a man here with a message for you." Like the soldier, the officer was curt. He turned to Dumarest. "Give it to him."

Quendis drew in his breath as he looked at the stranger. He wore a high collared tunic with full sleeves, pants thrust into knee boots, all of a neutral gray plastic. The lines and hollows of his face were hard, the mouth firm, the jaw determined. The face of a man, he thought, who had early learned to live without the protection of Guild, House or Organization. And he had come bearing a message. God grant that he be discreet!

"It's from your brother," said Dumarest, "I am sorry to tell you that he is dead."

Carl dead! Quendis felt his shoulders sag and did not have to counterfeit an expression of grief. He had loved his younger brother. But what message had he sent? He cleared his throat, not daring to look at the inspector, knowing that he drank in every word, watched every change of feature.

"You bring bad news," he said to Dumarest. "The message?"

"He asked you to forgive him. He said that he had been a boy and had felt a boy's anger at Susan's choice. He said for me to tell you that he loved you both and that she had picked the better man."

Relief washed over Quendis like a cooling sea. Quietly he said, "It was good of you to bring me his last words. As you may have guessed we had a bitter quarrel and parted in anger. I would

appreciate it if you would tell my wife and me the circumstances of his death. I would be happy if you would be my guest."

"You may accept," said the inspector curtly. "I will permit entry. You will report back to the gate in seven days." He looked at Quendis. "I hold you responsible for his appearance."

He turned and moved back to his table and his busy machine. Quendis followed him with his eyes then looked at Dumarest. "I have a raft. If you will please follow me, we can soon be on our way."

The raft was a commercial affair, a well three feet deep, six wide and twenty long, a weatherproofed cab at one end holding the controls and large enough for three persons. Quendis didn't speak again until they were flying high and fast, the drone of air a muted drumming against the cab, the details of the fields below lost in a blur of motion. "Your name?"

Dumarest gave it and added, "Your brother died on Clovis. Do you want the truth or shall I tell a pretty lie?"

"To me the truth." Quendis listened, his hands tight on the controls. "A sad end. It would be better, perhaps, for you to add a little gloss when you come to give the details to my wife. She was fond of Carl." He paused and then said softly, "And now you can give me the real message. The one Carl sent."

"He told me to tell you that there is no answer on Shem, Delph and Clovis. To me the words have no sense."

"And yet you lied before the inspector," said Quendis quickly. "Why did you do that?"

"I had my reasons," said Dumarest. He had seen fields ringed by high fences before, manned by men with guns and wearing uniforms who asked endless questions and who watched as they were answered. And he had sensed the other's fear, the inward cringing at what he might say. It had seemed safer to lie, ambiguous messages could carry hidden meanings and he had no desire to become involved in planetary politics.

He sat back, eyes somber as he thought of the officer, his computer, the messages it could send and the information it could hold. The man had been too intent, too concerned with detail, and all he had learned had been transmitted to the machine. Dumarest had the uneasy feeling that somehow he had walked into a trap. He moved, a ray of sunlight catching the gem of his ring, the red, flat stone glowing likely freshly spilled blood on the third finger of his left hand.

Quendis said, "You traveled far to bring me Carl's message. I owe you much. You must tell me what I can do to repay you for your trouble."

"You can help me to find a man. He is a collector of antiquities and his name is Delmayer. Will you take me to his place?"

"At once," said Quendis. "But I do not think that you will like what you see."

* * *

From the summit of a ridge Dumarest looked down at an undulating sea of greenish yellow vegetation. Massed vines, inextricably interwoven, rioted in savage fecundity in an unbroken carpet toward the northern horizon, the sickly color blotched with the scarlet of blooms, the puffing white of fruiting pods, the whole bristling with thorns.

"You would never think it. Earl," said Quendis heavily, "but all this was once a prosperous orchard and farm."

"Delmayer's?"

"That's right. You can just make out the whereabouts of his mansion." The grower lifted his arm. "Over there, see?"

Dumarest followed the pointing arm. In the near distance the vines rose in a gentle hummock, massed blooms glowing like fire in the light of the setting sun.

"A fine place," said Quendis regretfully. "It held the

continuous improvements of a dozen generations. I visited it often. Delmayer was a hospitable man and loved to give feasts. They were events to remember. Five kinds of wine, ten of meat and fish, a score of fruits and a dozen types of vegetable. We would start at dusk and continue until dawn. He had the finest regurgitorium I have ever seen." He sighed. "Well, that's all over now."

"How long?"

"It has been three years since the growth covered his farm."

"And Delmayer?"

"He killed himself when it became obvious that the land could not be reclaimed. He tried, we all tried, but nothing can eliminate the thorge once it takes hold." Quendis's voice was thick with rage. "Delmayer was a good man. He fed over a thousand dependents and carried as many displaced workers from other farms to the north. What else could he do but die with honor when they reached toward him with empty hands?"

Dumarest stepped down the slope to where reaching shoots sought to cover the naked stone. Stooping he tore free a thin growth. It came from one as thick as his finger which sprouted in turn from one as thick as his arm. The stem was fibrous, hard to break, vicious with thorns. A thick juice oozed from the broken end. A drop fell on his hand and he wiped it clean as he felt the sting of acid. From the juice came a fetid odor accentuating the miasma rising from the ground at his feet.

"We can't get rid of it," said Quendis as Dumarest straightened. "The third year stems are as thick as a man and the speed of growth is phenomenal. It seeds throughout the year aside from four months in winter and leeches the soil where it grows. It can be cut but the acid eats into the blades. If we burn it the flames release a poisonous vapor which sears the lungs and blisters the flesh. We can drag it out by the roots but if a fragment is left it grows again. It's a weed," he explained. "A mutated pest. Against it cultivated plants haven't a chance."

Dumarest looked toward the buried mansion. The growth

must be high for the swell to be so insignificant. Obeying natural law the shoots would struggle to reach the sun, which meant that the lower levels would be free of leaf and thin shoots. A band of determined men could, perhaps, fight their way through the massed stems.

Quendis shook his head when he mentioned it. "No, Earl, it can't be done."

"Why not? I have money and can pay. A hundred men with saws and axes should be able to cut a path. We could use lasers if they are available and wear protective clothing."

"You don't understand," said the grower patiently. "It's all been tried. The house is over a mile from where we stand and, no matter how many men you employ, only a few can attack the thorge at any one time. Cutting the stems will release the upper growth. More, it will release the juice and give rise to lethal vapors. Burning with lasers the same. If you made ten yards in a day you would be lucky. Within a week the new growth would have blocked the path behind you."

There is another way," said Dumarest tightly. "I could hire rafts and fly out to where the house is. Lasers could burn the area clear."

"And what do you hope to find? An empty house filled with things of antiquity and items of value? Rooms untouched and waiting your investigation?" Quendis mastered his impatience; how could this stranger understand? "All you would find is a heap of disintegrating rubble. A mound of crumbling brick and stone laced with roots and rotting with acid. What the thorge touches it destroys. Whatever you hoped to find in the mansion of Delmayer is no longer there. It would be a waste of time and money to search." He paused and added, "And there is something else. I hate to mention it, but it cannot be forgotten. You have seven days before you must report back to the landing field."

"So?"

"It would take that long to assemble the rafts and men."

Longer to burn clear the area. I'm sorry, Earl there simply isn't enough time."

Time! Dumarest looked down at his hands, now clenched into fists. Again he was too late. The knowledge Delmayer had owned, assuming he had owned it, was lost. Had been lost for years. But surely Carl would have known?

"He left five years ago," said Quendis when he put the question. "Shortly after the thorge first appeared. He was brilliant and guessed what must happen unless we found a defense against it. His message told me that he had failed to discover a weapon. Three worlds at least do not possess the answer. It was a hopeless quest from the start."

Dumarest was impatient. "This growth would be easy to destroy. Short life radioactives would do it. You could dust the area and within a year burn the dead vines. The ash would help to fertilize the soil which you could then restock with bacteria and low life forms. Within five years you could be growing selected crops."

Quendis, not looking at Dumarest, said, slowly, "Are you suggesting that we kill the land?"

"Not kill it, cleanse it."

"With radioactives?"

"Yes, if necessary, why not?"

He was a stranger, Quendis reminded himself, fighting his anger. He could not know of the terrible thing he suggested, the ingrained horror of what he proposed. To kill the land! To burn it lifeless with the invisible fire of radiation! To kill every seed and worm, every scrap of potential life, the very bacteria even!

The land which contained the sweat and blood, the body and bone of countless predecessors.

Watching him, Dumarest sensed his anger, the inner turmoil of his thoughts. Quietly he said, "I am a stranger unused to your

ways. If I have given offense I apologize."

"There is no offense." Quendis inflated his chest and dabbed at the sweat on face and neck. He was too old to suffer such anger and yet, now, he was glad of the tolerance age had brought. A younger man would have struck without thinking. Struck and, perhaps, died. Dumarest did not look the type of man who would take a blow without retaliation. "The thought of killing the land is repulsive to us," he explained. "It would be wise not to mention the use of radioactives again."

"I understand." Dumarest turned and looked once more at the sea of vegetation, the distant swell covering the house. "Is there no natural enemy you could use? A parasite or a mold?"

"That is what Carl was seeking. If it exists at all it must be on the world of Technos."

"The ones who started the growth?"

"You know?" Quendis looked at Dumarest then shook his head. "You are guessing but it is a shrewd guess. We were a happy people tending the land and spending a generation to perfect the color of a rose. Production was high and we exported the surplus; dehydrated foods, perfumes, liqueurs, seeds of a thousand varieties. Then Technos demanded that we supply men to help in a war against Gest. We refused. A month later the thorge appeared, at first only in the most northern sector, but it was enough. It spread like fire and, as we tried to fight it, there came the warning that unless we submitted to the rule of Technos the whole planet would be seeded with the vile growth. And so we became a tributary world ruled by those who wear the red and black."

"And the tribute?"

"Men and women," said Quendis bitterly. "A thousand of each. Young, fit and virile."

"To be paid each year?"

"When they demand." Quendis thought of Cleon and bit his

lip against the emotional agony. "At first only once in a year, then twice, then three times and now four. Soon it will be more. They drain our youth and leave us, old men to tend dwindling lands, bankrupt growers and dispossessed workers. Soon we shall have nothing."

He turned, remembering that he had a guest, conscious of the rule of hospitality.

"Come," he said, leading the way to the raft. "You must not allow me to bore you with our problems. It is time I welcomed you to my house."

* * *

It was a big place with massive walls of mortared stone, beamed with foot-thick timbers, many-storied and strewn with a clutter of outhouses, workshops, stores and barns. The center of a compact village which, as far as Dumarest could see, was entirely self-supporting.

Sitting at one end of the table, close to his host, he looked over the assembly as they ate their evening meal. The food was good, heaped plates accompanied by jugs of wine and beer, perfectly cooked and dispensed with a lavish hand. The people bore the stamp of similarity, olive skinned, liquid eyed, happy in an unsophisticated way. Inbred, he guessed, content to live close to nature, eating well, working hard when the occasion demanded but unreliable if it came to hardship. A soft and protected people embraced by a feudal system, serfs in fact if not in name.

But not Quendis. He sat, a king in his castle, his wife at his side and next to her a young man who could only have been his son. His eldest son, Dumarest guessed, the likeness was unmistakable.

"A toast!" Quendis rose, goblet in hand. "To the guest within my walls!"

To the guest!"

The toast signaled the end of the meal. As the empty goblets

rattled on the table the assembly headed from the room, leaving Quendis, his wife and son, and Dumarest alone. As servants bustled forward to clear away the debris the grower leaned toward his guest.

"If it is your pleasure we will adjourn to a smaller chamber. My wife and son are eager to hear the story you bring."

The room was pleasant; a bowl of assorted fruit stood on a table together with a decanter of some thick, yellow fluid. Susan poured, handing around the glasses, smiling at Dumarest as she lifted her own.

"To you, many thanks for your trouble," she said. "Carl was close to my heart. Now tell us, how did he die?"

"Bravely, my lady." Dumarest sipped at the liqueur. It was astringently cool, kind to throat and stomach, bearing the scent of flowers. He settled back as he told his lies, padding what he had said to the inspector, giving the dead man the aura of a hero who had given his life to save that of his friend. He ended, "He was a good man. I shall never forget him."

"You knew him long?" Cleon leaned forward, his drink forgotten.

"Not long, but when you work with a man you know him well."

"He always wanted to travel. I remember him talking about it when I was young and again before he left. The galaxy is full of worlds, he told me, new planets filled with waiting adventure. Have you traveled far?"

"Yes," said Dumarest.

"And for long?"

Too long. Riding High with the magic of quick time compressing hours into minutes, riding Low doped, frozen and ninety percent dead, gambling each time that the fifteen percent death rate would hit other targets. Drifting from world to world,

working, moving on, looking, always looking.

"Yes," he said flatly. "For a long time."

"I wish I could travel," said Cleon. "I—" He broke off. "Well, it's too late now. My first journey will be my last."

"Cleon has been chosen," said the woman quietly, breaking the awkward silence. "He is to go with the next batch of tribute." She turned to the young man. "You had better retire now. You were up all last night and out most of the day."

"But—"

"Go!" snapped Quendis. He looked at Dumarest as Cleon left the room. "I must apologize for my son. Not usually is he so disobedient."

"He must have a lot on his mind," said Dumarest. "What happens to those who are chosen?"

"They go to Technos," said Quendis bitterly. "After that we simply don't know. No word has ever been received from any of those taken. They could be put to work as servants or used as guards on other worlds. They might even be bred and their children used as janissaries, such as those you saw at the gate. They could be killed, slaughtered for sport, used to provide regrafts for the local population. We simply don't know."

"Don't think about it, husband." The woman was quick to change the subject, "Did you have a productive meeting?"

"No, everything went as usual. It was a waste of time attending. Colton had some idea of us all pooling our labor, concentrating on essential foods, and all working together to clear an individual farm. I left shortly after it began."

"So early? But you did not arrive home until late."

"We called at Delmayer's place," explained the grower. "Earl wanted to see him. He hoped that he could learn something from his collection. It's all ruined now, of course, and Delmayer is

dead. Now he will never know if the man had the information he wanted."

"He might," said Susan. "Elaine might know."

"His daughter?" Quendis frowned. "But how—" He broke off, snapping his fingers. "Of course! Her talent! She can remember everything she has ever seen or heard," he explained to Dumarest. "A truly phenomenal memory. She was close to Delmayer, his wife died shortly after she was born and he never remarried, and he took delight in showing her the old things. Books and charts, ancient records, things like that. She used to play with them. I wouldn't be surprised if she hadn't read every word in his library."

An eidetic memory? It was possible. It was a common talent among the scattered peoples of the galaxy, minor to some found among the sensitives, and there was no reason to doubt what Quendis had said. Dumarest glanced at the woman. She, too, was revealing nothing but truth.

He said, "This woman. Where can I find her?"

Quendis slumped. "I'm sorry, Earl, I had forgotten. She moved to Technos years ago. Before the trouble started. She could still be there, but I don't know how you can reach her. You need special clearance from the planet itself before they will permit you to land and there is a complete ban on arrivals from Loame."

Dumarest remembered the interest of the officer at the gate, the details he had taken and recorded. He looked at his hands, at the glow of the ring as it caught the light.

"I can reach her," he said quietly. "If you will help me."

"Help you?" Quendis was puzzled. "How?"

"By letting me take Cleon's place."

He saw the look, the sudden understanding in the man's eyes, the flare of hope on the woman's face as she leaned toward him. It died as Quendis shook his head.

"No, Earl. It can't be done. I won't allow it."

But he would, Dumarest knew. He would permit it because it was the thing he wanted, what both he and his wife wanted. He pressed the point as if the objection hadn't been made.

"They go by numbers not faces. They won't care who goes as long as the total is filled, but it isn't just a matter of my taking his place, he will have to take mine. I'm recorded at the gate," he explained. "They know that I am with you and they expect me to report back. Now, if Cleon pretends to be me, no one will ask any questions. He must wear my clothes and it would be best for him to catch a ship when that particular inspector is off duty. He could go tonight; the man must sleep, and, in any case, it will be dark. The ship leaves at dawn. Have you money? The cost of a High passage?"

"Yes," said the woman. "Oh, yes."

"And he must wear a ring. A red stone in a band of gold. Can you obtain such a ring?"

"Yes," she said again quickly. "Oh, yes."

Quendis stirred as if waking from sleep. "Where will he go?" he demanded. "What will he do?"

"Does it matter?" Susan, with a woman's logic, beat aside his objections. "He will be alive and free. There will be none to look at you with scorn for having cheated or with pity for having lost your heir. He can travel, work somewhere, return when things are better. But he will be alive and we shall know it."

The rest was a matter of detail.

Chapter Four

LEON VARGAS, Technarch, Chairman of the Supreme

Council and virtual ruler of Technos, woke screaming from a nightmare in which he was trapped and threatened by hideous dangers. Light bloomed from concealed fixtures as he reared upright, heart pounding, sweat dewing face and body. In the open doorway the figure of his personal guard loomed large against the dimness beyond.

"Sire?" The man was armed, the laser in his hand following his questing eyes. At any moment it could discharge a pencil of searing heat. "Is anything wrong, sire?"

Vargas gulped and felt himself cringe. Why did the man have to point his weapon at the bed? Desperately he tried to reassure himself. The man was loyal, tested by every device known to modern science, dedicated to the welfare of his master. He was armed only as a defensive measure. It was natural that he should scan the room and be ready to destroy any potential danger. And yet, a mistake, a trifle too much pressure on the trigger, a little too much eagerness, and he could do the one thing he was paid to prevent.

"Leave me," said Vargas. "It is nothing. A bad dream."

"As you wish, sire." The gun, thank God, was lowered. "Is there anything you desire?"

A new body, a new mind, a ton of courage and a total lack of imagination. At times Vargas wished he had never been born.

Aloud he said, "No. Nothing."

He rose as the door closed behind the guard, fumbling for euphorics, sitting on the edge of the bed as he waited for the drugs to take effect. A grown man, he thought bitterly. A master scientist. A person respected and deferred to every moment of his waking day. And at night he was a slave to terrifying dreams.

The workings of the subconscious, he mused. Buried fears rising to the surface in terms of symbolism or, perhaps, they were warnings disguised in unfamiliar frames of reference. The web in which he had been trapped, for example. That could be his position, the responsibility of office, or, again, it could be the

strands of intrigue woven by others to insure his downfall. The monstrosity which had crawled toward him; that undoubtedly was a symbol of the envy and jealousy with which he was surrounded. The things which had stung and bitten; they must represent those members of the council with whom he seemed to be continually at war. Brekla, Krell, Gist, Sterke, the list was too long.

And his fear was too great.

The fear of assassination, of injury, of death. Coldly, a part of his mind reduced the fears to normal proportions. They were a normal part of the heritage of every person ever born and only when they became obsessive did they edge over the norm. Paranoia, he thought. A persecution complex combined with delusions of grandeur. The rule of thumb diagnosis given by every low grade psychoanalyst fresh from college.

And yet he was the Technarch. Could such facile judgments be applied to him?

No, he decided as the euphorics took effect. They could not. For he was persecuted, and with logical reason. A man could not expand the boundaries of his society without creating enemies. And, if to be ambitious was to hold delusions of grandeur, then that also was true.

Revived, he rose and stepped into the shower. The sting of scented water lent a transient vitality to aging flesh, bolstering the action of the drugs coursing through his blood. Dispassionately, he stared at himself in a mirror. Beneath a cap of white hair his deep-set eyes glared from under bushed eyebrows. His hooked nose hung like a beak over a savage mouth and a thrusting jaw. The face of a fighter, he thought, even though cragged and gouged with time. Too much time. His eyes dropped to his body and quickly moved away. He was a fool to wait so long, and yet always there was the fear. A mistake, a single error deliberate or unconscious and he would be dead.

But how much longer could he continue as he was?

The thought was a spur, driving him to dress, to leave his

chamber, to stride through passages his guard a watchful shadow at his rear. Doors yielded before him, the last resisting for a moment before swinging wide. Within a tall, emaciated figure rose like a bright flame.

"My lord?"

"Do I disturb you, cyber?"

"No, my lord." Cyber Ruen stood motionless as Vargas slammed the door on his guard. His shaven head roared skull-like above the thrown back cowl of his scarlet robe. His hands were buried within the wide sleeves and, on his breast, the great seal of the Cyclan shone with reflected light. "You are troubled, my lord?"

"I had a dream," said Vargas. "A bad one." Did cybers ever dream, he wondered. They were strangers to emotion, that he knew, training and an operation on the thalamus at puberty had robbed them of the capacity to feel. They were living robots of flesh and blood their only possible pleasure that of mental achievement. Almost he envied the cyber; it must be wonderful not to know fear and hatred, terror and despair. Yet was the price too high? The loss of pain gained only at the loss of the capacity to love, to lust, to experience the joys of food and wine. The joys, perhaps, of a new and virile body.

Casually he glanced around the chamber. It was sparsely furnished and contained a mass of electronic equipment. A computer stood on the desk connected, he guessed, to the main information banks. Ruen must have been busying himself in some abstruse study.

"I was just correlating various items of data, my lord," he said as Vargas asked the question. "Mostly from Loame."

"The garden planet," said Vargas. The euphorics had made him a little lightheaded, swinging his depression a trifle too far so that, for amusement, he demanded, "I am considering altering the plan of attack. Your prediction as to what would happen if I should destroy the thorge?"

"The economic swing would be reversed. With fresh lands to cultivate the growers would maintain their power. With previous experience to draw on they would increase their exports and use the income to develop biological weapons against Technos. The probability of that, my lord, is eighty-five percent."

"High," mused Vargas. "And if I continue as planned?"

"The growth will spread until the planet is on the edge of starvation. Long before that the economic structure will disintegrate with the workers rebelling against the growers and their hold on the land. Within five years there will be a civil war, naturally on a minor scale. Within ten the planet will be overrun by the thorge and the growers bankrupt. The accuracy of that prediction, my lord, is ninety-nine percent. Practically certain."

"But not total certainty," said Vargas shrewdly. "With your ability to extrapolate from known data and predict the logical sequence of events from any course of action why can't you be more positive?"

"Because, my lord, there is always an unknown factor," explained Ruen. "Total certainty cannot exist in the universe."

Vargas was sharp. "Not even for death?"

"No, my lord. Not even for that."

The cyber spoke in an even modulation, a tone carefully trained to be devoid of all irritant factors, yet even so the Technarch thought he heard a note of utter conviction. It could be nothing, of course, merely the conviction of a scientist stating an unanswerable fact, but it could be more than that. The Cyclan was a strong and powerful organization which operated, if rumor was true, vast and secret laboratories. Could they have discovered the secret of immortality?

Carefully he said, "Tell me, cyber, if death is not certain then how can a man avoid it?"

"There is only one way, my lord. By continuing to live."

Vargas flushed with anger.

Quickly Ruen continued, "I do not mock, my lord. There is no other secret to immortality. In fact, by the nature of the universe, there can be no such thing. Nothing can last forever, certainly nothing as fragile as flesh and blood, but to extend life is not impossible. Your own physicians can do that."

"You contradict yourself, cyber." The drugs in Vargas's blood had mastered his rage. "First you say that nothing is certain including death and then you say that death is inevitable. Is this a sample of your trained logic? For half the price I pay to your clan I could buy machines to do better."

"If you wish to terminate your agreement with the Cyclan that can be arranged," said Ruen evenly. "We serve none against their will."

A threat? Vargas knew better. The Cyclan did not threaten, they did not take sides, they were not corrupt. But if he dismissed the man he would be free to take service with others. It would be foolish to provide his enemies with such a weapon. And he had so many enemies.

"If I so decide you will be informed," he said curtly. "In the meantime, cyber, remember that your loyalty lies to me alone. Not to the state, but to me."

* * *

Ruen bowed. "It is understood, my lord."

Alone the cyber reseated himself and assimilated the latest data. The Technarch was reaching a critical stage and already beginning to act illogically. The knowledge he had acquired when younger, the coldly appraising scientific approach, was dissolving beneath the mounting aberrations of his psychosis. Soon he would be completely irrational and then it would only be a matter of time before he was ousted from his position. But he would not go easily. Such a man could only hope to resist his enemies by holding supreme power. Therefore, he would remain Technarch no matter what the cost.

At such times of confusion the Cyclan came into its own.

Had Ruen been able to feel amusement he would have smiled at Vargas's insistence on personal loyalty. A cyber was loyal only to the Cyclan. He was a part of the Great Design and against that all the petty desires of transient rulers were nothing. Vargas would fall. His successors would lean even more on the advice he had to offer. Subtly they would grow dependent and, in time, another sector of space would be under Cyclan domination.

He turned back to the computer on the desk, his fingers dancing over the keys, eyes reading the spinning dials as they settled to form words, spinning again as he tripped the release. A mass of routine information, a thousand items of data to one of potential value, and he would not recognize its significance until he saw it. Hence he must see them all, from Cest, Wen, Hardish and now from Loame.

Fifteen minutes later he rose and stepped to the door of an inner room. An acolyte, young, totally dedicated, rose as Ruen looked into the chamber.

"Master?"

"I am retiring. Total seal. I am not to be disturbed for any reason."

The acolyte bowed. "It is understood, master."

Ruen turned and crossed the outer room to the door of his own, private cubicle. It was small, holding a narrow cot and little else, a windowless niche devoid of decoration. The inside of the door had been fitted with a heavy bolt. Ruen threw it and then touched the thick bracelet locked about his left wrist. From it streamed invisible energies, a zone of force which made it impossible for any electronic eye or ear to operate in or focus on the vicinity. His privacy assured, he lay supine on the cot.

Closing his eyes he relaxed, concentrating on the Samatchi formula, ridding his mind of the irritation of external stimuli. He was deaf, numb and, had he opened his eyes, blind. Triggered by the formula the Homochon elements grafted in his brain woke to

active life and, suddenly, he was not alone.

He was a part of the Central Intelligence, the gigantic organic computer at the heart of the Cyclan, the massed brains which resided in a world of pure intelligence. He was of them and with them in an encompassing gestalt which diminished time and distance, mind merging with mind in organic communication so nearly instantaneous that the speed of ultra-radio was by comparison the merest crawl.

Like water from a sponge the information was absorbed from his brain,

The man Dumarest was on Loame? You are positive?

Ruen emphasized his conviction.

And has departed to Choyal?

If the information received from the computer had not lied the man he had been instructed to watch for had done exactly that. But his training qualified the answer. Lacking personal knowledge he could only relate the information available.

He must be apprehended. Agents will be instructed to intercept him on Choyal. Others will watch on a predicted basis of fifty percent probability of movement. You, yourself must be even more alert. It is of prime importance that the man be constrained.

The subject discussed was dismissed. Brevity was the hallmark of such communication, but other matters needed clarification.

Cybers have been sent at the invitation of the ruler of Rhaga. You will divert any attempt at expansion in that direction. Extrapolation of the civil unrest on Hardish shows that insurrection will break out within one month. Acceleration of the program designed for Technos is desirable.

The rest was sheer intoxication.

As communication ceased Ruen felt that he was suspended in an infinity of diamond glitters, each tiny fragment of sparkling light the cold, clear flame of a living intelligence, and each aligned, one to the other so that all were composed of a universal whole, an incredible vastness which stretched across the entire galaxy. And, at the center, unified by nearly invisible filaments of brilliance, reposed the glowing heart of Central Intelligence, the hub and mind of the Cyclan.

Voices echoed in Ruen's mind as he drifted in the glowing vastness, scenes, snatches of unfamiliar shapes, alien, unknown, and yet somehow belonging to the gestalt of which he was a part. The overspill of other minds, other memories, the interplay of living intelligences all serving the organization of which he was a fragment.

One day he would be more than that. At the end of his active life he would be taken to where the assembled brains rested miles deep beneath the surface of an ancient world. There he would join them, freed of all physical limitations, resting in a world unhampered by bodily ills, his detached brain joined with those of others there, living and aware for countless years.

It was the highest reward any cyber could hope to obtain. To become an actual part of Central Intelligence. To work for the complete domination of the galaxy and to solve all the problems of the universe.

The aim and object of the Cyclan.

* * *

It could have been a theater or a concern hall but Dumarest guessed that it was a lecture room, massed seats facing a dais backed with screens and boards, the low roof grilled with speakers, soft light diffused from the juncture of walls and ceiling. Cramped in the third row he turned, looking over a sea of olive faces to the rear of the hall. The doors were closed, locked no doubt, but there was no sign of the guards who had ushered them from the ship and across the field, down a tunnel into this place. No sign of the red and black uniforms but he knew they would be there. Out of sight behind loopholes, perhaps, or

waiting in the corridor outside.

Beside him a man stirred, restless, anxious.

"What are they going to do with us?" he muttered. "Why are we here?"

"I'm hungry," said another further down the row. "When are we going to get fed?"

"What are we waiting for?" said someone from behind.

Like the rustle of ripe corn in a breeze the murmur of questions swept over the auditorium.

Dumarest ignored them, conscious of the rising tension. They had ridden packed like fish in a barrel, doped with quick-time and given no food. Hardened to travel he had slept most of the way but his companions had spent the time in worried speculation. Now cold, tired and hungry, they were growing restless. The murmur died as a man came from the side door and strode to the center of the dais.

He was a balding, plump, middle-aged man in civilian clothes with a ruddy face and a benign expression. He stood facing the assembly, hands locked behind his back, exactly as if he were a lecturer about to teach his students.

He said, "Welcome to Technos. I appreciate that you have had an uncomfortable journey and that you are probably worried as to your future. It is that I am going to explain, but first, are there any among you who are the sons or relatives of growers?"

One man lifted his hand. Dumarest did not.

"One only?" The speaker looked over the auditorium. "Thank you, sir. Will you please rise and go to the back of the hall. Right through the door which you will find open." He waited until the man had gone. "One only. It seems that the growers of Loame are very selective in their choosing. That man is the first in the past four contingents. Natural enough, I suppose, but hardly fair to their workers."

It was, thought Dumarest, cleverly done. Without making an issue of the matter the man had clearly demonstrated how unfairly those present had been treated. He relaxed a little, guessing what was to come.

"And now," continued the lecturer, "I would like to dispose of some of your preconceived notions. You are not going to be sold into slavery. You are not going to be slaughtered for meat and neither are you going to be used for medical research. The sole aim and object of you coming here is for the purpose of education. Let us, for a moment, talk about war. What is war? The efforts of one power to force its will on another. You may have been told that Technos is at war with Loame. This is not true. If it were you would now be in uniform, fighting and dying to protect the land of others. Instead you are here, safe, warm and comfortable. Soon you will be going back home."

He paused as a whisper raced across the assembled men.

"Does that surprise you? The truth often does. You must remember that the growers of Loame are, at the moment, in a position of feudal power over you and your families. That position will not last long. Already the economic system is beginning to crack. Soon it will utterly disintegrate and the old ways be forever gone. When that happens the thorge will be destroyed and the land reclaimed. Your land," he emphasized. "Fresh soil to be shared among those at present denied the opportunity to become free growers. Clean dirt for you and your families."

There was more: slides, pictures and elementary diagrams, smooth explanations and facile extrapolations, all designed to paint a glowing picture of the future to come. Technos was a crusading power eager to help the underprivileged. The old system had to be broken before the new could be installed. It was being broken and those who had been chosen to fill the tribute were the lucky ones. To them, once trained, would fall the newly cleared land. Each of them soon would become a grower.

Dumarest didn't believe it.

Not the basic premise of economic disruption. In a society

such as existed on Loame it was the quickest and easiest way to shatter the old pattern, but to restore it under new ownership didn't make sense. And it would not be restored. Glancing at the rapt faces to either side of him Dumarest could appreciate the cleverness of what was being done. The dangling carrot to keep them eager, to break their spirit and make them amenable to whatever Technos wanted to do with them. And that was?

He wasn't sure and it didn't matter. He would not be a part of it. Now that he was on Technos the sooner he broke away from the rest the better. And it would have to be fairly soon. The dye which stained his skin to a matching olive would not last long and when it faded he would be too conspicuous.

From the auditorium they went to eat. Good food piled in generous portions, high protein substances kind to mouth and stomach. Facing Dumarest across the table a man belched and helped himself to more.

"This is the life," he said. "Better food than I ever had back home. Grower Westguard was a mean man with his luxuries. Mean, and it was us that used to provide them!"

"It'll be different now," said the man at his side. "I had a girl and was due to get married. Had my grower's promise of a house and everything. Then I was chosen." He paused, digging a scrap of meat from between his teeth with a blunt finger. "At first I was sick about it but not now. Now, when I get back home, I'll have the girl and a real good house. My grower's house. I might even consider letting him work for me."

Laughter echoed the remark. It had taken, Dumarest estimated, less than three hours to convert them from potential enemies into willing servitors.

Chapter Five

THE VOICE was a thin, insistent whisper impossible to

ignore.

Technos is a wonderful planet, its rulers wise, kind and understanding. It is a great thing to be able to serve Technos. Those who are chosen to do so are fortunate. You are fortunate. You are very...

Dumarest rolled from his bunk and stood, head tilted, listening. The insidious voice came from all directions carried on the diffused light which illuminated the dormitory or transmitted by the metal supports of the bunks themselves. Its purpose was obvious; more conditioning to make the new arrivals obedient.

Quietly he padded around the tiered bunks. The party had been split after taking a shower and only a fifth of the contingent was within this room. All were asleep, the sound of their breathing loud in the stillness, at times blurring the whispering voice. The wine, he decided, the brimming jugs which had been given to them after the bath. The food could have been drugged but he'd had no choice but to eat it. The wine was a different matter. He had avoided it, suspicious of the motive behind the apparent generosity, and obviously it had been drugged. Of them all he was the only one awake.

A door broke the wall at the far end of the room. He headed toward it and cautiously tested the latch. It yielded and he stepped into a corridor. The lights were brighter here, gleaming from the scar tissue which traced paths on his shoulders, back and sides. Fainter lines showed against the olive on his forearms. He was naked but for shorts, his bare feet soundless as he moved down the corridor.

A guard waited around the turn. He was neat in red and black, his young face shadowed beneath his helmet, unarmed but for a two-foot club swinging from his right wrist. He looked at Dumarest without surprise.

"You want something?"

"The toilet." The man was standing too far away for an attack to be successful. He would have time to shout before being

overcome. And Dumarest was too unsure of his whereabouts to make a break. He turned, gesturing back the way he had come. "I woke—you know. I couldn't find it."

"This way."

The guard stepped back, gesturing with his club, the tip, as if by accident, pointed at Dumarest's stomach. A shadowed place showed in the rounded end, an orifice capable, perhaps, of spitting a numbing dart or lethal pellet. He was perfectly composed, almost as if he had expected someone to walk down the corridor, falling behind as Dumarest passed.

"All right," he said as they reached a junction. "That door to your right. Hurry."

He waited outside, blocking the passage as Dumarest made to return the way he had come.

"No. This way."

Another corridor, another turn and a door faced with a single star in glowing yellow. The guard halted, pointing with his club.

"Go in there and wait."

It was a bleak chamber fitted with a single long bench and an inner door. Three men sat uncomfortably on the bench. All had olive skins and were naked but for shorts. Ten minutes crawled past and the inner door opened, a uniformed guard jerking his head at the man closest to the end of the bench.

"Inside, you. Close up the rest."

Fifteen minutes later the same thing happened. The remaining man next to Dumarest licked his lips. His skin bore a faint sheen and he almost stank of fear.

"What's this all about?" he whispered. "I was restless, couldn't sleep, and thought I'd take a shower. A guard grabbed me and led me here. You?"

"Almost the same."

"What do they want with us? That guard acted like I was a prisoner or something. I tried to explain but he didn't want to know. I—" He broke off as the door opened. "Well, I guess I'd better go."

Twenty minutes passed and then it was Dumarest's turn. The inner room contained a wide desk, an angled spotlight, a hard chair and a panel of electronic equipment. Two guards stood like statues against the rear wall. The one who had summoned Dumarest stood just behind the wooden chair. At the desk sat a dark-haired, sleek looking individual with a thin, lined face and penetrating eyes.

He gestured toward the hard chair. "Sit. Your name?"

"Hgar."

"Your grower?"

"Yaltoun."

"His address on Loame?"

"Seventh decant, segment eight."

"And you wanted to go to the toilet, right?"

"Yes" said Dumarest, and added, "Sir."

The officer nodded. "That is better. My name, incidentally, is Keron. Major Keron of the Security Division. You have heard of me?"

"No, sir. I haven't."

"No," mused Keron. "Of course not. How could you have?" He sat back and rested both hands on the desk before him. They were small, white, womanish in their slenderness. "The law of averages states that out of each thousand men some will not conform to a regular pattern. You did not drink the wine. Why not?"

"I've a poor head for wine," said Dumarest. "And my stomach was upset. I find it unpleasant to drink at the best of times."

"And you could not sleep?"

"No, sir."

"Why not? Did something wake you? A noise, perhaps?"

"No, sir." It was safe to lie. The whispering voice had been on the verge of sub-aural diminution and the officer could not know the state of his hearing ability. "I just woke and wanted to go to the toilet That's all, sir."

"Why?"

Dumarest made a helpless gesture. He was an ignorant worker from Loame. How was he supposed to know what the officer was getting at?

"You passed three ounces of urine—hardly enough to have made your visit imperative." Keron touched a control and the spotlight blazed into life. Dumarest narrowed his eyes against the glare. "Those scars, how did you get them?"

"I fell into a patch of thorge and was pretty badly torn getting out."

"Long ago?"

"A couple of years, sir."

"On your grower's land?"

"No, sir. A crowd of us went to help another grower to the north."

"His name?"

Dumarest gave it, adding details, piling lie upon lie. He had worked out the story with Lemain, claiming to have worked for a grower on the opposite hemisphere, a region from which the present contingent had not been drawn. It was a safeguard

against being faced with someone who should know him or whom he should know. It should pass a casual questioner but the major was far from that.

The spotlight died, Keron leaning forward as Dumarest blinked away the retinal afterimages.

"Take a thousand men," he said gently. "Among them, you are certain, are spies in disguise. How do you discover them? You wait. You watch. You compare behavior patterns and, sooner or later, they will betray themselves. A wolf cannot emulate a sheep—not and delude the shepherd. You understand?"

Dumarest frowned. "I'm not sure, sir. Are you saying that I am a spy?"

"Yes. From Cest, Wen, Hardish, or some other world with which we are having a difference of opinion. But not from Loame. Your reactions are not those of a worker. By now you should be in tears begging my forgiveness. You should have become confused and afraid. You are neither. I am intrigued." He looked beyond Dumarest to the guard standing at the rear. "Selig!"

Dumarest turned as the man stepped forward, lifting his club.

* * *

He was a tall man, hard faced, teeth bared as if he enjoyed his work. He lost the smile as Dumarest spun from the chair, straightening, catching the descending wrist and twisting savagely so that bone snapped and the club dangled from its thong. Snatching the weapon free he sprang aside and then forward beyond the desk. One of the guards standing at the rear lifted his club to block an expected blow then fell, choking on blood from a ruptured larynx as Dumarest thrust instead. Again he sprang to one side, foot lifting to kick aside the second guard's club, seeing a flash from the orifice at the end, feeling the shock as he smashed his own club at the side of the man's neck.

The knurled grip held a stud. He pressed it as he faced the remaining guard. Selig, chair lifted in his good hand, stumbled

and fell as something sprouted from his cheek.

"Drop it!" Dumarest thrust the club toward Keron's face, aiming at an eye. "Take your hand from that drawer. Empty!"

The officer drew a long breath. "Fast," he said. "I've never seen anyone move so fast. Where are you from?"

"That doesn't matter." Dumarest looked around the room. The fight had been practically noiseless but there was no way of telling how long he would remain undisturbed. Nor could he be sure that Keron hadn't given the alarm. "Stand away from that desk. Quickly!"

The officer obeyed, his eyes enigmatic. "What now?" he said quietly. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Lie on the floor, face down, hands above your head." The drawer of the desk held a laser. Dumarest picked it up and held it loosely in his hand. "Don't move or try anything stupid. I've made one mistake, I don't intend making another."

"You made no mistake," said Keron as Dumarest, the laser at his side, began to strip the uniform from Selig. The man was unconscious, the dart had been an anesthetic. "The dormitories are monitored. I knew you were not asleep. You anticipated the arrival of guards by minutes."

Dumarest ignored him, rapidly donning the guard's uniform. They were of a size and he needed the authority it would give. One of the other guards moaned and he fired twice with the club, sending them both into a deeper sleep. Discarding the club, he picked up another, holding it in his right hand, the laser in his left. Frowning he looked about the room.

The electronic panel was studded with signal lights, some winking, others burning with steady colors. The men who had preceded him had not left by the same door so there had to be another. He found it, almost invisible in the shadows, against the far wall.

"This door," he said to Keron. "Where does it lead?"

"To a monitoring room. There are guards."

"Get up." Dumarest gestured with the laser. "This will be aimed at your back at all times. If you make a mistake or we are stopped I will burn your kidneys. Do you understand?"

"What do you intend?" Keron showed curiosity as he rose, but he was not afraid. Almost he seemed amused. Had microphones picked up every sound?

"We are going to leave here and get above ground. You are going to guide me. Which is the best way out?"

"That way." Keron pointed to the door by which Dumarest had entered. "Outside into the corridor, turn right and continue until you reach an elevator. It will take you to the upper level."

The truth? It was possible but Dumarest doubted it. The man was too much at ease and an elevator would make a perfect trap. Without warning he struck with the clenched fist of his right hand and as Keron, dazed, staggered back, he jerked open the inner door. A guard sitting before a panel began to rise. Another standing against the far wall took a step forward. Both slumped unconscious as darts thudded into their flesh.

Dumarest reached for Keron, pulled him forward and sent him staggering across the room to the far door. It opened on a corridor, empty, the passage running to either side.

"We want the stairs," said Dumarest. "Take me to them. Quickly!"

There had to be stairs, for emergency use if for nothing else, and the chances were they would be deserted. Keron shook his head as he led the way, rubbing the side of his jaw, recovering rapidly from the effects of the blow.

"Fast," he said again. "The speed of your reflexes is incredible. Do you come from a heavy gravity world?"

Dumarest dug the laser into his spine.

"There are no microphones here if that's what you are thinking," said the officer calmly. He seemed to have regained his full composure. "I suggest that you would be well advised to consider the advantages of complete cooperation. You are a most unusual spy. What do you hope to gain now that you have revealed yourself?"

"I am not a spy," said Dumarest. It could be important that he made that clear. "Technos has nothing to fear from me. All I want is to get away from here."

"And you will kill me in order to do it?"

"If I have to, yes."

"And then what? Such an act would be irredeemable." Keron opened a door and led the way to a staircase. Calmly he began to mount. "Once you kill me," he pointed out, "you will have no defense. Need I describe the punishment you will suffer? I assure you that it will not be pleasant. On the other hand, if you were to yield and give full cooperation, you would not only safeguard your life but also obtain rich rewards."

Dumarest made no comment. The stairs circled a well and he looked down then up seeing nothing but emptiness. At the head of the stairs he halted before a closed door, thinking. Beyond could wait guards. Certainly there would be danger, but would it be best to face it alone or with his hostage? Alone, he decided. Keron was not a coward and had correctly judged the situation. He would take the risk that Dumarest would not kill and act accordingly. In any case, from now on he would be a liability.

"Well?" The officer turned, smiling. "Have you decided? As a wise man I think—"

He broke off as the dart struck the side of his neck. The anesthetic acted immediately, and he was unconscious before his knees began to buckle. Dumarest caught the slumping figure, eased it to the ground, went rapidly through the pockets. He would need money and some form of identification. He found them both in a wallet, a wad of notes and an official pass. Tucking them into a pocket together with the laser, he opened

the door.

It gave on to a hall bright with red and black: guards hurrying on mysterious errands; others standing about; still more passing through large doors at the far end.

Closing the door he strode among them, a man busy on an official task. The large doors gave on to a second hall, this one flanked with reception counters, a bank of elevators, a scatter of tables and chairs. Guards stood before the elevators with the unmistakable alertness of men on watch. Others guided civilians to one or another of the counters and more civilians sat in chairs or talked over the tables.

A recruiting station? A center for contractors or, perhaps, an information service? Dumarest didn't know and had no intention of finding out. More doors opened to a street bright with daylight and busy with traffic— they had landed shortly after dawn so it must be early afternoon. He reached them, passed through, ran for a cab that was just discharging a passenger.

"You free?"

The driver studied his uniform. "Can't you give me a break, soldier? I'm low on the take today. Hauling you will make it a bleak time."

Apparently guards traveled free or signed a chit which took time to collect. Dumarest smiled.

"I'm on a short leave and feeling generous. This one I'm paying for in cash. Drop me at a juicy hotel."

"Somewhere with action?"

"That's the idea. I've got a lot of catching up to do and I'm in a hurry to start doing it. Let's move!"

The drive took him to a sleazy place in a back street, a thinly disguised bordello with painted faces peering from between dingy curtains. Dumarest paid him, waited until he had pulled away then moved on, walking fast for another three blocks before

halting at another hotel, a twin of the first. The madam, a raddled woman with dyed hair and suspicious eyes, frowned at the sight of his uniform.

"Sorry, soldier, but you've called at the wrong shop. This place is off limits to the military."

"Forget that." Dumarest produced money and let her see it. "I want a change of clothes. A set of civilians to wear while I have some fun. Can you arrange it?"

The frown deepened. "What are you, a deserter?"

"If I was would I be here?" Dumarest riffled the notes. "Come on, I want to relax. I can't do it wearing this gear. How about helping me out?"

The money won. He changed in a dingy room, keeping the laser but wrapping the club in a bundle with the discarded uniform. The chances were high that the madam would report him either for a reward or in order to save her own skin, but it was imperative that he gain time, and it was an unavoidable risk. Leaving the bundle he walked from the hotel, caught a cab and had it drop him on the edge of the shopping district. A drugstore sold him certain items, a tailor supplied a new suit and underwear, a cobbler provided shoes.

With the items in a suitcase he booked in at another hotel, ran a bath, tipped various chemicals into the water and climbed in. Five minutes later he left the tub, the olive dye dissolved from his skin. Dressing in his new clothes and leaving the case and old ones behind he left the hotel, walked a mile and booked in another.

Only then did he dare to relax.

With luck he had avoided pursuit. Keron would be looking for a man with a dark skin wearing a guard's uniform. He would pick up the trail and find the discarded clothes. He would quest further and then slow down for lack of positive identification. The thing now was to keep moving and get utterly lost.

Sitting on the edge of the bed he checked the contents of the stolen wallet. The money he put to one side. The identification bore a photograph and a series of raised symbols. A credit card, he guessed, or a pass for classified areas. To be found with it could be dangerous but it might have its uses. The laser, too. He hefted it and then put it with the wallet. Both would have to be safely disposed of. The card he decided to keep a little longer. The photograph, while unmistakably not his likeness under close scrutiny, would pass a casual inspection.

The phone rang. He picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Mr. Ganish, sir?"

"What is it?"

"Will you be dining tonight?"

"Yes," he said immediately and added, "What is the menu?"

"Roast gleeek, fried wobart, casserole of jastune and chicken seethed with nuts and wine. I would recommend the wobart, sir. It is one of the chefs specialties." The voice became apologetic. "One other thing, sir. We have received a general order to verify all guest's credentials. If you would be so good as to present yours at the desk we would be most obliged."

"Of course," said Dumarest. "As soon as I get my identification. Has my luggage arrived yet?"

"Your luggage, sir?"

"Didn't I explain? I left it to be forwarded from the station. Surely it must have arrived by now?"

"A moment, sir." The voice retreated, became a murmur, returned. "No, sir. No luggage has been received."

"It must have got mislaid," said Dumarest. "I had better go and collect it myself. Are you sure the fried wobart is the best on the menu?"

"You have my word on it, sir."

"Then I'll have it. Together with appropriate wines and liqueurs, naturally. I leave the selection to you and you will not find me unappreciative of any care you may take."

"I understand, sir." The voice held a smile. "Until this evening, then. I do hope that you find your luggage."

Time, thought Dumarest lowering the receiver. Everything was a move to gain time. Keron had acted fast and he was in a trap. The talk of the meal was to reassure the receptionist. A man on the run would hardly concern himself with details of food. But it was a meal he would never eat.

And where would he sleep? With every hotel checked a man without credentials would be investigated and it would be risking too much to book in as the officer. A bordello, perhaps? They would be among the first to suffer investigation. To walk about? The streets would be thick with watchful guards.

Outside he looked at the sky. It was heavy with cloud and the air held a rising chill. A garbage can swallowed the wallet and laser and he bought a top coat from a store. With the temperature falling a man without a coat would be suspect.

As he paid for the purchase Dumarest said, "Where is the station?"

"Which one? The monorail or the subterranean?"

"The monorail."

"Five blocks north and three east. You a stranger?"

"Landed yesterday." Dumarest picked up his change. "A fine city you've got here."

"This?" The clerk pursed his lips. He was a young man with definite ideas. "This is nothing, mister. You should see the capital. Technos is a real city. This place is more like a barracks. Soldiers everywhere, you can't move without bumping into a

uniform. You a military man?"

"No, just here on business."

"You're lucky. I'm getting drafted next week. Two years without option and for why? Because that creep on Cest won't grow up. It stands to reason that the place will be better off accepting our rule. But do they admit it? Like hell they do. So I'll be off to stand guard and maybe collect a knife in the back while I'm doing it."

"Tough," said Dumarest. "But sending you off doesn't make sense. Why don't they use those men from Loame."

The youth blinked. "What men?"

"You don't know about them? The tribute?" Dumarest shrugged as the man remained blank. "Well, never mind, I probably got it wrong. You can never trust rumor."

The monorail stood on a rise of ground from which it was possible to look over the city, a suburb really, clustered about the landing field. It was thick with the expected guards. Dumarest walked among them, not looking around, striding directly to an information board. It was a loop system, a train running directly to the capital to the east, another heading along to the west, skirting the coast and joining a branch leading back to Technos. No man in his right mind would take that route if going to the capital.

Conscious of the guards, Dumarest walked to the ticket office.

"One to Farbein."

"Single or return?"

"Return."

The clerk reached for a ticket, thrust it into a machine and looked at Dumarest. "Identification, please."

Dumarest produced Keren's card.

It was a gamble. As yet they couldn't know he had changed the color of his skin and a partition between himself and the clerk blurred details. The man picked up the card, added it to the ticket in the machine and pressed a lever.

"All right. Major," he said handing over both ticket and card. "Platform two. You've got twenty minutes to wait."

He didn't even look up as he said it.

Chapter Six

FROM HER WINDOW Mada Grist stared at a dancing swirl of snowflakes and felt an unaccustomed pleasure in watching the steady fall. It had begun an hour ago and now the woods and hills, the logged outhouses of the hotel were covered with a fluffy white blanket, bright in the light of the beacon rotating on the roof. There was a random charm about the flakes, she thought, each holding its own pattern, each drifting to the vagaries of the wind, to settle and add to the thickening blanket.

Like people, she thought, pleased with the analogy. Born to drift and then finally to settle. But the comparison was incorrect. People, unlike flakes of snow, could determine their direction and choose their own place of landing.

Musing she turned from the window, polarizing the glass to insure her privacy, the interior lights brightening as she touched a control. A mnemonic clock whispered the time, adding that she had only thirty minutes before the time set for dinner. She ignored it, concentrating instead on her reflection in a long mirror.

The body was superb.

Fabric rustled as she eased the thin robe from her shoulders, bright synthetics falling to mound at her feet. They were slender, high arched, without blemish. Long legs rose, tapering, from fine

ankles and shapely calves. The hips swelled beneath a narrow waist, the waist rising to high breasts and rounded shoulders. Her hands touched the thighs, rose over the cage of her ribs to cradle the molded fullness, rose higher to pause at the base of her throat.

The clock whispered again, this time adding that the council was due to meet in a couple of hours. Trust Vargas to choose such a peculiar time. He was growing more irrational every day, but it wouldn't be the first session she had missed and she doubted if it would be the last. And, tonight, there were more important things to do.

Reluctantly she turned from the mirror, recognizing the narcissus complex and a little amused by it. How many women, she wondered, were in love with their own bodies? How many had cause?

Dressing, she left the room. Krell, his face anxious, met her in the passage outside. It was paneled with dark wood carved with depictions of the chase, men hunting beasts with primitive weapons. Against the implied virility of the motifs he looked diminished and insignificant, an illusion heightened by the furtiveness of his eyes.

"I'm worried, Mada," he said. "I think we'd better call the whole thing off?"

"The meeting? Why?"

"Brekla hasn't arrived. Marmot called to say that he's been delayed. Dehnar—"

"Is a coward," she interrupted. "And so are you, Eegan. Sometimes I wonder how you ever managed to win your seat on the council."

"And that's another thing. There's a meeting called and we shall be missed. I honestly think that we'd better leave it until a later occasion."

He meant it, she decided, searching his face. He wanted to

abandon the whole enterprise and run back to what he imagined was safety. To bow and cringe and hope to be overlooked in what was certain to come. To hide like a rabbit—and to scream like one if caught. It was hard to remember that they had once been lovers.

"You're a fool," she said flatly. "You're letting your imagination run away with you. So what if the others can't come? We are here to enjoy a private dinner, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"But—"

"What are you afraid of? We intended to talk about the Technarch—is that a crime? We are members of the Supreme Council and have the right to discuss anything we want wherever we want. But now we won't even do that. We will simply enjoy the evening and that is all."

"We could be watched," he said miserably. "Vargas has spies everywhere. If he knew that we had gotten together he would be immediately suspicious."

"He's that already." Firmly she tucked her arm through his and led him to where a waterfall of stairs fell to the dining area below. "But if we suddenly leave for no apparent reason he will have grounds for thinking the worst. Now smile," she ordered. "You are the host, remember? Look as if you're enjoying yourself."

It was a place in which to have pleasure. The area below was bright with polished weapons; the walls hung thick with trophies: mounted heads watching with glass eyes, horned and fanged and once terrible but now only pathetic decorations. Glass and silver and snowy linen reflected the glow of a great fire and the discreet brightness of facsimile flambeaux. The air was scented with wood smoke, and the soft music carried the sound of wind in the trees.

Shergan met them at the foot of the stairs. He smiled as, bowing, he kissed her hand. "Mada, my dear, you look superb! What do you think of the weather?"

"The snow? I like it."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm arranging a party to take advantage of it. The hills will be ideal for skis and toboggans, and we can have a fire and hold a winter picnic. Does the prospect attract you?"

She hesitated, almost yielding to temptation. It had been a long time since she had sported in the snow. Regretfully she shook her head. "I'm sorry, but no. There's too much work waiting for me and it would be criminal to ignore it."

Shergan was insistent. "Work can wait. What's the point of being on the council if we can't take a vacation when we want one? Come on, Mada, you'll enjoy yourself."

He had not, she noticed, invited Krell. Was there more to the invitation than appeared on the surface? Again she shook her head.

"No, and don't try to change my mind. It simply isn't possible."

"To change your mind?" Shergan smiled as he summoned a waiter and ordered drinks. "Isn't that the prerogative of a woman, to change her mind? You were always a hard one to convince, Mada, but I'm not giving up hope."

About what, she wondered, sipping at her glass. The distillation warmed her throat and stomach and added to the enjoyment of the surroundings. Even Krell seemed to have lost some of his worry though his eyes were still furtive as he scanned the room. Searching for spies lurking behind the furniture. At times he was pathetic in his concern.

Marmot joined them as she finished her drink. He was apologetic. "Sorry I'm late, but something came up at the last minute."

"Glad you could make it," said Krell. He seemed relieved. "Brekla and Dehnar won't be joining us. Alica isn't down yet, but she is here. How was the journey?"

"Not too bad though the snow's pretty thick over the city." Marmot took a gulp of the drink a waiter brought him. "There was a power failure. A fine thing to happen. I'm going to propose that an inquiry be held to investigate the cause. Someone's been careless and I want to see him pay."

"Relax," said Shergan. "You worry too much."

"And some of us don't worry enough," snapped back the other man. "We're responsible for the whole of Technos, or have you forgotten? If we overlook a thing like this what will happen next?"

"Murder, violence and sudden death," said a new voice. Alica had joined them. She smiled greetings and accepted a drink. "Are you still beating that old drum, Gill? Do you still look under your bed at night for fear of saboteurs?"

"You can laugh, Alica, but you can't tell me they don't exist. That failure, for example. It could have been an accident but we wouldn't have accidents if the technicians knew their jobs. I—" He broke off, shrugging. "Well, never mind that now. Let's enjoy our dinner."

It was a fine meal but wasted Mada thought later as she headed back to the capital. Leaning back against the cushions of her flier, the pilot a vague shape beyond the dividing glass, she pondered the events of that evening.

Krell was a loss. Marmot had a real concern but was inclined to gnaw too long at details. Shergan was more promising; like Alica he used words as a mask for his real thoughts and both he and the woman would be potential allies to back her in a vote of impeachment. Not that she intended to put any such proposal to the council. In fact it would be better if she took steps to disengage herself from any possible intrigues. Better and safer. And yet could she feel really safe alone?

For diversion she looked through the transparent canopy forming a roof over the cabin. The snow had ceased, the fallen whiteness giving the night a strange, luminous quality. Far to one side, falling from the sky in a haze of blue, a ship settled

down the landing field. A vessel from Cest probably, or one from Loame; another contingent was due from that planet. It could not be a casual arrival, for such ships were banned from landing at night.

A streak of brilliance from below caught her eye. A monorail traveling high above the snow, the line of illuminated cars looking at this distance like a bright and flexible snake. It swung in a wide curve as it followed the line of a ridge, and she watched it, remembering, feeling an unaccustomed touch of nostalgia.

As a girl she had loved to ride on the monorail, sitting beside a window, the inevitable book in her lap, merging her studies with glimpses of the coast, the restless sea, the soaring mountains and wooded hills. The soft hiss of the train had allowed her to concentrate and, as a student, she had traveled at reduced fare. And sometimes she had met interesting people. That young man, for example, who had been obviously attracted and who had worked in a subterranean power installation. He had been very keen and very disappointed when she had firmly told him that study came first, thoughts of romance a long way behind. He must be married now, with grandchildren probably, or dead, which was more likely.

It had been a long time ago.

She blinked, annoyed with herself at the sudden sentiment, reminding herself that she had achieved her ambition, that she was a member of the Supreme Council and that all the study and work had been worthwhile. Even love had come later, or a facsimile of it; the quieting of her bodily needs in a succession of barren affairs. She was rich and powerful, respected and admired. Why then did she feel sad?

The night, she decided. The touch of nostalgia. The sight of a train which had wakened old memories.

But it was just a train, a string of cars humming along a single rail. She looked at it again, staring beyond her reflected image into the luminous expanse of the night. The cars would be warm and comfortable, the seats soft, the metal fabric of the car vibrating with a restful hum. And there would be people and the

sound of talk and laughter.

Abruptly she yielded to impulse.

"Take me to the monorail station," she ordered the pilot. "One not too close to the capital, and one in which a train is shortly due."

"Madam?" His voice held surprise. Against the partition his face was a featureless blur as he looked back from the controls.

"You heard me," she snapped. "Obey!"

She smiled as the flier wheeled, circling to follow the rail below, conscious of the pilot's rigid disapproval. Well, if he didn't like it that was just too bad. It was a long time since she had indulged herself in a foolish whim and it would be good to ride in a monorail again.

* * *

A group of soldiers at the far end of the car were having themselves a ball, passing bottles back and forth, singing, making the most of what remained of their leave. A woman sat crying, tears running down her cheeks, thin hands clasping a worn hand bag. Two old men snored in the third row, and a pair of lovers were lost to the world.

Dumarest watched them, dispassionately, sitting hunched in his coat and fighting a mounting fatigue. It had been a hard night. The journey to Farbein had been as he'd expected: the cars jammed with commuters; businessmen leaving the base; parents returning after visiting their sons. At the junction he'd had to wait for an hour to catch a connection which took him well along the coast before returning to the capital in a wide circle. As the hours passed so the train had shortened, cars being dropped as the number of passengers had diminished, the passengers themselves changing in character.

He shifted to ease the ache in his bones. The upholstery was worn and the springs unkind. He'd managed to buy some confection from a machine at Farbein and had managed to

quench his thirst with a handful of snow but aside from that had had nothing. One of the derelicts woke, gasping, staring about with rheumy eyes. To Dumarest the sight was reassuring. They had ridden with him all the way, probably buying a ticket to the next station and riding the loop all through the night. Like himself it was the only place they could find warmth and a measure of comfort. Their presence meant that the train was badly checked and he should be safe from questioning guards.

But for how long?

Not much longer, he decided. If Keon was any good at his trade he would anticipate what the fugitive would do. With the hotels blocked and the roads watched the monorail was the only thing left. His only hope was that he would reach the capital before the guards had been fully alerted.

He tensed as the train checked to a halt. The crying woman rose and left the car. The lovers parted for a moment, checked the station and returned to each other. One of the soldiers whistled as a woman entered the carriage and walked to where Dumarest sat. She ignored the whistle and sat across from him, her face muffled in the collar of a heavy coat.

Already Mada was beginning to regret her romantic impulse.

The train had been late and not as large as she remembered but then, she reminded herself, she had never traveled so late before. She had picked the last car for sentimental reasons. She had always chosen that car in the past, but it was not as she recalled. Surely the seats hadn't been so worn, the paint so dull? And the smooth hum of gliding progress, what had happened to that?

Time, she thought, the magic of distance. Foods lost their flavor, colors their brightness and the trifling details of annoyance became swallowed in a nostalgic glow. But that could not be the whole answer. Maintenance standards had fallen, and work that should have been done had been neglected. The wars, the drain of men and money to hold down the rebellious populations of Cest and Hardish must be the cause. How long must it continue?

It would be wise for the members of the council to mix more with the ordinary people. It was too easy to become detached. She made a mental note to raise the matter at the next meeting, then relaxed, looking around, determined to make the best of her illogical whim.

The soldiers she ignored; men trying too hard to convince themselves they were having a good time. The lovers created a sudden stab of envy, startling because unexpected. Yet how wonderful it must be to lose yourself in another's arms. The derelicts—another matter she should bring to the attention of the council. The man opposite?

She met the impact of Dumarest's eyes.

He was studying her hands, her face, the color of her skin. The rich olive glowed in the subdued lighting and he frowned, wondering. It was the color of the women of Loame and he was reminded forcefully of the girl he had come to find. Elaine Delmayer. Could this woman be she?

It was barely possible and, in any case, she might know of her. Expatriates would tend to stick together or, at least, to remain in contact. He could lose nothing by asking.

He rose and stood above her. "My lady?"

She looked up, thinking that he was trying to scrape an acquaintance and amused at the possibility. An attempted seduction would at least beguile the tedium of the journey. "Yes?"

"Your pardon, my lady, but would you be so kind as to tell me your name?"

He was direct if nothing else, or perhaps the technique had changed since the old days. Yet he didn't look the type of man who would haunt the cars in search of women.

Quietly she said, "Sit down beside me. I do not like people to stand over me."

"As you wish, my lady." He sat and met her eyes. "Your name?"

"Mada Grist." It meant nothing to him, she could tell by his expression. "Why do you ask?"

"A personal reason, my lady. Are you from Loame?"

"No."

"Thank you, my lady. My apologies at having troubled you."

Incredulously she realized that he was going and put out a hand to detain him without conscious thought. He looked at it and then at her, his eyes questioning.

"Please stay with me," she said quickly. "Those soldiers. I am afraid they may try to molest me." It was a weak excuse but she made no comment. Did he think her a woman of pleasure looking for custom? Quickly she added, "And I am bored. Conversation will shorten the journey. Do you go to the capital?"

"Yes, my lady."

His voice was strong, matching the strength of his face, the masculinity she could sense emanating from his body. And she was responding to it! Startled, she felt the glandular reaction, the biological chemistry triggered by the stimulus of his proximity. To yield to it was tempting, but it was safer to concentrate on other things. His clothes, for a start. They were clean but cheap and rumpled as if he had worn them too long. And his manner of address was strange. It reminded her of Ruen, but this man was no cyber. He was being polite, she decided, using a safe term of address in case she should be of superior rank.

And that meant he must be widely traveled and used to dealing with nobility.

She glanced at him. He was relaxed, his eyes closed, dozing or perhaps reluctant to engage in idle conversation. She herself felt a sudden fatigue and wondered if it were genuine tiredness or the association of relative objects. The man, her desire, a bed,

which for too long had symbolized nothing but sleep. And yet if she were to get him into bed with her, sleep would be the last thing on her mind.

She nodded, waking as the train halted, dozing again as it continued its journey. At the last halt before the capital guards entered the car. They were trim, awake and determined.

"Your identification, please."

She felt the sudden tension of the man at her side, an inner tightening outwardly invisible, and wondered if he was afraid. But of what? And why?

"Madam?" The guard was young and impatient. He blinked as she held out her left wrist, the thick, identifying bracelet gleaming in the light. She could appreciate his discomposure.

"Satisfied?"

"Why yes, madam. Certainly." He glanced at the man sitting beside her. "Sir?"

She saw the slip of plastic, the thumb held as if by accident over the photograph, and spoke before the guard could make a thorough examination.

"The gentleman is with me."

"Yes, madam. Thank you, madam. I am sorry to have caused any inconvenience."

She relaxed, smiling, as the train continued on its way.

Chapter Seven

A MACHINE had designed the palace, incorporating the Golden Rule in a series of arches, pilasters, vaulted roofs, endless

passages and echoing chambers. The result should have been esthetically pleasing. Instead it presented a cold, machinelike atmosphere of repetitious monotony, heightened by the abstract decorations and concealed lighting.

Striding down a corridor, Vargas noticed none of it, his eyes brooding as he mulled over recent events. The council meeting had been a farce, with a good third of the members absent and the rest barely paying attention. The details discussed had been trivial: the area to be devoted to crops, the manpower necessary to build a new power installation, an adjustment of taxes; things which could have been better decided by a computer. Why did he have to be burdened with such ignorant, conceited fools?

He halted before the door of an elevator, his guard moving forward to check the interior, turning to watch as he entered the cage. The doors closed and they fell, Vargas fighting his instinctive fear. What if the mechanism had been tampered with? What if the protective devices should fail and the cage with its contents be smashed to atoms at the foot of the shaft?

It slowed and he breathed again, waiting as the door opened and his guard made the usual check. Warm air tainted with the sharp tang of antiseptics struck his nostrils as he walked down a short passage. The odor increased as he entered a chamber glittering with metal and glass. Brekla was before him, turning as he heard the click of the closing door.

"Sire?"

A good man, thought Vargas. An ambitious one and therefore predictable. But because he was ambitious, he was also dangerous. It was something he must never forget. Yet the danger was not immediate. Only when he had firmly secured the position he coveted would Brekla lift his eyes to the pinnacle of power.

"Is everything prepared?"

"Yes, sire." Brekla moved toward an inner door. "Yendhal is waiting."

The physician was a small man with delicate hands and the light of fanaticism burning bright in his eyes. He bowed as Vargas approached and looked pointedly at the guard.

"It would be best, sire, if your attendant remained outside."

"Leave us." Yendhal was to be trusted or the entire project was pointless. Even so, Vargas felt a prickling in the middle of his back as the guard withdrew. "Is this the man?"

He was a prime specimen, well muscled, in good condition, young and handsome. Vargas felt a quick envy as he looked at the naked, virile body. Once he had looked like that.

"You understand what it is you are to do?"

"I—" Sweat gleamed on the olive skin. "I think so, sire."

"You are not certain?" Vargas glared at the physician. "Has he not been instructed?"

"Of course, sire, but he is afraid and has forgotten." Yendhal turned to the man and explained as he would to a child. "You have been selected to take part in an important experiment. You are fit and healthy and strong but, as I explained, strength is a relative term. A man under the influence of strong emotion can display unsuspected capabilities. It is this we intend to discover. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let us commence." Yendhal led the way from the door, down a corridor and to a small chamber flanked by many doors. He pointed to one. "You will pass through that door when the light turns red. Beyond lie many dangers. If you survive them you will be given a rich reward."

"Does that mean I shall be sent back home to Loame, sir?"

"Yes." Stimulus was important to the success of the experiment and Yendhal did not hesitate at the lie. "Now do your best. Your life depends on it."

They watched from another room, Vargas intent on the screen, Brekla equally interested, Yendhal making appropriate comments.

"The initial waiting time is important for the generation of adrenaline and the mental preparation of the subject. He has, of course, been carefully chosen to fit the desired specifications. All that now remains is to discover the extent of his survival instinct. Many psychologists believe this to be a purely mental phenomena but my own researches have convinced me that much of it is inherent in the physique. As the body is a primitive entity divorced from the brain and as the brain is a separate mechanism to the mind so the trait of survival is something basic to the pattern incorporated in the DNA blueprint. This survival attribute has an important medical aspect verified by more than a thousand experiments. A person with it has a much higher chance of surviving extensive operative surgery than one without. It is this, of course, that we are now attempting to determine." He pressed a control. "Now we commence."

The subject lasted exactly four and a half minutes.

* * *

The chemist was a round, middle-aged man with tired eyes and manner. He pursed his lips at Dumarest's order. "Something to keep you awake? Sure I can supply it. Have you got an order?"

"No."

The man shook his head. "That makes it difficult. All drugs are under strict control or didn't you know that?"

"Of course I know it. All I want is something to give me a lift." Dumarest lowered his voice. "You're a professional man and I'd appreciate your advice. I've got some important work to do and I was on a binge last night. Didn't get a wink. If I fall asleep on the job I'll get canned for sure." He displayed a folded bill, "It's worth this if you can help."

"Studying, eh? You up for exams?"

"That's right." Dumarest didn't know what the man was talking about but rode along. "It's my last chance and I don't want to spoil it."

"I know how you feel." The chemist was abruptly sympathetic. "I had to sweat to get my degree. We had neighbors, dumb swine who stayed up late and the noise was really something. At times I thought I'd go out of my mind trying to memorize formulae." He reached for a jar and poured tablets into an envelope.

"These should do it. Take three at a time and repeat as you need." He exchanged the envelope for the bill. "Good luck!"

Luck, thought Dumarest as he left the just opened druggist's. How long could it last? He'd had more than his share when he'd met the woman. She had obviously been someone of importance, a member of some high family perhaps, and he had walked from the train under the shield of her authority. An all night restaurant had provided food and shelter, and he'd stayed there until the dawn had awakened Technos to life. Now, armed with the tablets, he faced another day.

He took three with a cup of savory liquid at another restaurant. The fatigue of constant strain was beginning to catch up, but it was important that he stay alert. With care it should be possible to lose himself among the teeming population of the capital.

But how to find Elaine Delmayer?

On a small, primitive world it would have been easy. Everyone would know everyone else. On a medium civilized planet it would have been impossible without the expenditure of money and time. On Technos it shouldn't be hard. A society in which everyone carried identification cards was one in which everyone would be registered in a central index. All he had to do was to find it.

The waitress was young and obviously impressed. She frowned as he asked the question.

"You want to find someone and you don't know her address?"

"That's right." He smiled at her. "An old friend. We lost touch and I'd like to meet her again."

The hint of romance won her cooperation. "I should try the library. It's over in the palace. They should be able to tell you what you want to know."

The library was busy with a stream of youngsters passing through the doors; students intermixed with older people, most carrying books. Dumarest guessed that advancement on Technos was based on intellectual achievement, the gaining of degrees giving a higher status. It made things easier. In such a society information should not be hard to obtain.

The reference section was lined with machines, each facing a chair, all with space for the taking of notes. The attendant was brusque.

"Insert your card, type out your question and wait for the answer. If you want a photographic copy press the red lever. The charges are listed above each machine."

And would be charged against the credit number on the card, Dumarest guessed. Keren's card. It would leave a trail but it was a chance he had to take.

Early though it was the place was crowded. Dumarest waited his turn and moved forward as the place fell vacant. As an experiment he touched the keys. Nothing happened. Inserting the stolen card he sat down. On impulse he typed EARTH.

Above the keyboard a screen brightened to life. On it flashed words.

EARTH; soil, dirt, loam, ground. A general term depicting planetary mass.

EARTH; the name of a mythical planet held as an object of veneration by The Original People.

Dumarest typed THE ORIGINAL PEOPLE.

The screen blanked then brightened to new life.

THE ORIGINAL PEOPLE; a religious sect of minor importance to be found on various backward planets scattered throughout the galaxy. The sect is a secret one and neither seeks nor welcomes converts, fresh adherents being obtained from the natural increase of existing worshipers. The main tenet of their belief is that Mankind originated on a single world, the mythical planet Earth, and that, after cleansing by tribulation, Mankind will return to this supposed world of origin, at which time the universe will cease to exist and the cleansed race be transformed into a higher form of life. This belief, founded on an obvious fallacy, is surrounded by esoteric ritual and elaborate ceremonies which are based on a primitive cult of fertility. There are no grounds supporting the truth of their contention which must remain as one of the more illogical religious creeds.

Dumarest typed TERRA.

TERRA: no information available.

It had been worth the chance but he knew nothing he had not known before and had just proved that the library knew less. Terra was another name for Earth but knowing it did not help him in his search. Perhaps Elaine Delmayer could.

He typed ELAINE DELMAYER.

There were three hundred and thirty eight of them. He sat looking at the closely packed list of names and professions. No addresses were shown and it would take another question to get them. But so many? He frowned, thinking. Quendis had said that he'd known her as a little girl so she could not now be very old. She had left Loame before the start of the war and she would not have done that as a child. Put her age at, say, thirty and allow ten years to either side.

He typed ELAINE DELMAYER AGE BETWEEN 20 AND 40.

This time there were only a hundred and eighteen. He asked for the addresses, hit the red lever and waited for the sheet to roll from the side of the machine. It would be possible, he supposed,

to go through them all one by one but perhaps there was a quicker way. The girl had originated on Loame. Specifying it would, if the information was registered, cut down the list even more.

It did.

To one.

* * *

The address was in Technos, a building a mile from the palace, a soaring block capped by a transparent dome and obviously the home of the rich and influential. Inside were thick carpets and scented air, warm after the outside chill. An attendant moved forward as Dumarest thrust his way through the glass doors. He pursed his lips at the stated business.

"It's very early," he pointed out. "I am not sure that the person concerned would welcome a visit at this hour."

Dumarest was curt. "Then find out. Tell her it is important. Hurry!"

The attendant bridled. "Your name?"

"Keron." Dumarest flashed the stolen card. "Of Security. Now move!"

She lived on the twenty-second floor in an apartment furnished with excellent taste and unabashed luxury. And she was beautiful.

Dumarest looked at her, at the smooth contours of her face and the glowing olive of her skin. There was a familiarity about her which he found strange, and then she spoke and the illusion was shattered. This was not the mysterious woman he had met on the train. The voice was too mellifluous for that.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, my lady." He could lose nothing by being polite. "This may sound strange to you but I have traveled a long way to find

you. From Loame. You were born there, I understand."

"That is so."

"You are the daughter of Grower Delmayer?"

"Yes. You have news of him?"

"I regret to tell you, my lady," said Dumarest quietly. "Your father is dead."

"I see." She stood before a window, the light rendering her thin robe translucent so that he could see the silhouette of her figure, the same light shadowing her face. "And how does this news affect Security?"

"It doesn't. I used a pretense to gain admission."

"You are honest," she said. "If nothing else. Would you care for refreshment? I have some excellent tisane."

Her composure was remarkable. Dumarest watched as she prepared the beverage and then, excusing herself, went to dress. She returned wearing a simple gown falling to below her knees and belted around the waist, the neck high and the soft fabric cut to enhance her figure. Sitting so as to face him, she poured herself a cup of the steaming tisane.

"You will forgive me if I appear unaffected by the news you bring. My father and I were far from close. I am sorry that he is dead but all things must die. It is the way of the universe."

"You are a philosopher, my lady?"

"A realist."

And an opportunist, he thought. Her ability had been wasted on Loame. Here, in this society, it must have enabled her to gain rapid status and she had taken full advantage of it. But did she know what was happening on her home world?

"I know," she said when he asked the question. "You are not a native of Loame so perhaps you can't understand. But I hated the

system. A daughter cannot inherit the lands of her father. They pass to the man she marries. And it may seem an ideal existence for those who live in the mansions but for those living in the huts it is a different matter. The majority of growers are kind enough according to their conception of kindness, but even the best of them regards his workers as little more than serfs. Education is limited and class distinctions rigid. Progress is resisted because of the turmoil it could bring. The thorge is a clean and painless way of breaking the status quo."

"And those who are chosen to fill the tribute quota? What happens to them? Wouldn't they be happier left alone?"

"Their happiness would be that of cattle in a field of succulent corn. Here they are educated. They are taught skills and put to useful work. Their lives are better than they had reason to suspect."

She didn't know, he decided. She was repeating what she had been told, but at least she did know of the tribute. That, apparently, put her in a minority.

"And now," she said, refilling both their cups, "tell me why you wanted to see me." She looked sharply at him as he obeyed. "Are you serious?"

Dumarest met her eyes. "Yes, my lady. Very serious. Can you help me?"

"I don't know." Her eyes were thoughtful. "It was so long ago and there were so many books."

"But you can remember?"

"I can never forget," she said with a trace of bitterness. "My ability is not wholly an advantage. Childhood is not a pleasant time and there is much I would prefer not to remember. But Earth?" She paused, thinking, the steam from her cup rising to wreath her face with vapor. "Earth," she said again and added, "There is a rhyme I once read in an old book. It was incredibly ancient and I didn't understand it at the time. It was simply something I read to assuage loneliness but, somehow, I think it

may have a bearing on what you ask."

Dumarest looked down at his hands. They were tight about his cup. Carefully he set it down. "And the rhyme, my lady?"

"A silly thing." She began to recite in a thin, little girl voice. "The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins, and next the Crab the Lion shines the Virgin and the Scales. The Scorpion, Archer and Sea Goat, the Man that holds the Watering Pot, the Fish with shining scales." She blinked and said in her normal voice. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No, my lady."

"And yet it must have a meaning." Her eyes grew blank, withdrawn and he realized that she was again reading the ancient volume, recalling each word from the chambers of her perfect memory. "The signs of the zodiac!" she said triumphantly. "A mnemonic to put them in correct order."

"The zodiac?"

"Twelve symbols each representing a portion of a band of the sky in a complete circle. Twelve configurations of stars each representing one of the signs. If you can find a planet surrounded by those signs then that world could be the one you seek."

"Earth?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It could be if such a planet exists but I simply don't know."

Dumarest hid his disappointment. "Thank you, my lady. There were no old charts or navigational tables?"

"None." Her voice softened as she read his eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't been of much help, but it's the best I can do."

He sat thinking. She had been of little help but the journey had not been wholly wasted. The stars would provide the answer, the constellations he had seen as a boy. Hypnosis would bring them to the surface and stellar charts would provide verification.

He could hire the use of a planetarium and a computer together with the services of a skilled astronomer. It would only be a matter of time.

And he was positive that Earth must be very close. Certainly in this sector of the galaxy—so much, at least, he had learned.

She caught his arm as he rose to go.

"A moment, you can't leave like this. I must make you some more tisane, a special blend with a unique flavor which I am sure you will enjoy. And you must tell me about Loame. Grower Lemain, how is he?"

"Well, my lady."

"And his son?"

He answered as she made the drink, wondering at her sudden interest, discovering the reason as he sipped the beverage and realized too late that it was drugged.

* * *

A man stood outside the apartment, stocky, in civilian clothes but with the unmistakable stance of the military. He doubled as Dumarest hit him in the stomach, falling, retching, slumping unconscious as he hit him again. As he raced toward the elevators Dumarest tore open the envelope the chemist had given him, spilling the tablets into his hand, thrusting them into his mouth, swallowing the dry fragments. They were a stimulant and might combat the sedative the woman had put in the tisane.

One of the cages was rising. He pressed the button of the other which was descending from two floors above. It arrived and he jumped inside, slamming the doors and hitting the first floor button. A woman, over-dressed and no longer young, glared at him from where she stood at the back of the elevator.

"What are you doing, young man? I wanted the tenth floor."

The beauty shop, the restaurant, the dressmakers, perhaps. It didn't matter. She would have to wait.

"Did you hear me?" Her voice was sharp, acrimonious. "Who are you? A resident? I shall complain to the manager!"

He ignored her, watching the floors as they rose past. The man outside the apartment had been waiting and there would be others below. The drug? Elaine had wanted to render him harmless, but why? To capture him obviously, but he couldn't guess at her motives. To her he was a stranger and she had had no reason to suspect him. And how had she summoned the man in the passage? She had made no call while he was in the apartment.

The elevator halted and he left the cage. A door gave on to a flight of stairs but he passed them, they were wide and carpeted and would be watched. Somewhere there had to be another flight, service stairs for the use of maintenance workers and cleaners. A place like this would want to keep such people out of sight of the residents.

He staggered a little, fighting a sudden nausea, a beelike buzzing in his ears. Sweat dewed his face and body as his metabolism struggled against the diverse effects of the drugs. He reached a corner and ducked around it as someone called out from behind. A door yielded and he stared into a closet filled with cleaning material. Another held a row of meters. The third opened on a flight of narrow stairs.

He ran down them, almost falling, knuckles white as he gripped the rail. He passed the ground floor and descended lower guessing that there had to be an exit from the basement. A door at the foot of the stairs opened into a large area filled with machine sounds, the soft whir of ventilating fans, a quiet hiss of steam from a leaking valve, the regular pound of a pumping mechanism. A man gaped at him, cringing as Dumarest caught his arm.

"The way out. Where is it?"

"Uh?" The man didn't seem to understand.

"The exit, damn you!" Dumarest dug his fingers deeper into the moist flesh. "The way out!"

He followed the pointing arm, running past a humming generator, the pits of elevator shafts, a bank of glowing instruments. He had descended too far. A short flight of stairs took him to a higher level, a maze of pipes and conduits and twisting passages. He fell and rose, shaking his head to clear the dimming mist from his eyes. From ahead came a blur of voices and a busy clatter.

It came from a wide area filled with benches, ovens and cooking smells. The main kitchen supplying the restaurant and individual rooms. A man cutting meat stared at him, blood on his soiled apron, a shining knife in his hand. From one side a voice called an urgent command.

"Hold that man! Hold him!"

The butcher grinned and came forward, the light shining from the blade gripped in his big fist. He was a burly man with muscles toughened by years of hefting carcasses.

"Just stay where you are," he said. "Move and I'll split you open."

Dumarest ran forward. As the blade lifted he kicked, his foot smashing against the man's kneecap, his raised right arm blocking the downward swing of the knife. As the man staggered he struck again, the edge of his left hand slamming against the side of the thick neck. A row of garbage cans stood to one side and he headed toward them, thrusting through the swing doors beyond, feeling cold air blowing from a ramp leading upward.

Five seconds later he had reached the street.

He fell again, slipping on frozen slush, rolling at the feet of startled pedestrians. A man caught his arm, helped him to rise, stared his concern.

"You all right, mister?"

"Yes."

"You sure?" The man was anxious. "You look bad to me. Are

you ill?"

A cab pulled up across the road, a young woman alighting, her face white against the dark fur of her robe. Dumarest pulled free his arm and ran toward it. His head swam and the pound of his heart was a hammer beating at his chest. Darkness edged his vision and confused his sense of judgment.

He heard someone cry out, saw a looming shape rushing toward him, tried to spring clear and felt his foot slip on a patch of snow.

The shock of the impact was swallowed in darkness.

Chapter Eight

ALL CHANNELS were alike; organic chemistry, quantum mechanics, binomial theory, applied physics, atomic engineering, astronomy, algebra, basic mathematics, each a nonstop stream of educational matter force-fed into every home. Irritably Mada switched off the television. Had it always been like that, she wondered, and remembered that it had. The scientific approach. If a thing had no educational value then it went into the discard. Dancing was for the study of controlled movement and for physical development. Singing for the exercise of the vocal chords and the illustration of varying harmonics. Stories were lectures, painting an exercise in manual control, verse a mathematical problem.

But why should it bother her now?

Restlessly she wandered about her chamber, touching various items, her hands lingering on soft fabrics and supple leathers. Tactile pleasure, for so long unappreciated and now holding a special charm. How much had they all missed in the past? Was intellectual attainment really the sum total of existence? It wasn't she knew, remembering the lovers on the train, her own past affairs, but there had to be more than bodily satisfaction.

A mistake, she thought, sitting and leaning back in the chair. One built into the system at the very beginning of the colonization. The apparently bright but secretly tarnished concept that education would solve all ills. But it didn't work like that. A man gained degrees or he went to the bottom of the heap. Yet the levels were relative and the end product inevitably one of growing dissatisfaction. A laborer had been taught to recognize the menial nature of his work. A man with a valued degree could be qualified only to clean out sewers.

And so the imported labor from Loame. Let them do the filthy jobs, the dirty but essential tasks, lifting by their presence the egos of those above. Yet it was an uneasy solution, for it would lead directly to a slave culture with all that implied. Better to dispose of them all even though that was wasteful and emotionally unscientific. They were a smoldering bomb which would one day explode.

Subconsciously her hands roved over her body, feeling the firm contours beneath the clinging gown. The touch wakened memories and aroused again the biological reaction she had felt on the train. The reaction brought him vividly to mind.

Impatience drove her to the phone, sent her fingers punching a familiar number. On the screen a face, hygienically clean, looked at her.

"Madam?"

"Please report on the progress of patient nine eighteen."

The face dipped, rose as the woman completed her scanning of a file. "Progress is steady, madam. The injuries were intense and grafts had to be made. The spleen, a kidney and a section of intestine. There were also broken ribs and a punctured lung."

"How long before he is well?"

"The patient is in deep sleep and his progress is satisfactory. He—"

"How long?"

"Another few days, madam."

"Very well. Send him to me when he has fully recovered."

There was no point in being impatient, she thought, breaking the connection. Even the magic of slow-time which increased the speed of the metabolism so that an hour's healing could be compressed into little more than a minute took time.

The impatience of youth, she thought, and smiled. The impetuosity, too. It had been simple to order a guard to keep a discreet watch on the stranger, changing him for less conspicuous men when the chance arose. They had followed him: to the chemists, the library and then to the apartment of the woman. Almost they had lost him, but the accident had put him firmly in her power. A private nursing home and he was safe until she should need him.

As a lover?

She faced the question squarely, responding even to the concept, the reaction of her body telling her that it was the basic reason for her actions. He had appealed to her and she wanted him. The fact that he was something of a mystery enhanced his attraction. A whim, she thought. A romantic interlude. But why shouldn't she indulge herself?

She turned as the door chimed. Dek Brekla stood outside. He entered, smiling, glancing at the subdued illumination.

"Sitting in the dark, Mada? But then you have a fondness for shadows, don't you." Lifting one hand he touched her gently on the cheek. "I wonder why?"

"What do you want?"

"To talk." Deliberately he selected a chair, sat, folding his legs and resting his hands on the dark fabric of his thigh. "Did you know that Krell has retired from the council? He considers that his health would be better if he remained away from the capital. Naturally he retains his status and full pension. It simply means that he will no longer have a vote." He paused and then said

gently, "I wonder if you also have considered the benefits of retirement?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should," he urged.

She controlled her mounting anger. "I see no reason to do so. Is that all you came to talk about? If so, I suggest you leave. It is not a subject which interests me."

"To be efficient the council must be a viable entity. Surely you can see that? If we are to become static then it will be good-bye to all progress. Tell me, how would you have felt when young if you had known that there would never be an opportunity for you to achieve your ambition?"

She met his eyes. "I wouldn't have liked it."

"Exactly."

"Are you suggesting that each council member retires on reaching a certain term of office?"

"I think it a fair suggestion," he said. "We are entering a period of potential unrest and should have younger minds to deal with the problems which will arise. You are a clever woman, Mada. I think you can see which path is best for you to follow."

To how many had he carried the suggestion? Krell gone and how many more to follow? Frightened by a shadow, terrified by the hint of a suggestion. But the council ruled and Vargas was only one man. If the Technarch sought dictatorial power then she wasn't going to help him get it. Even so it would be wise to be discreet.

"I'll think about it," she said. "There is truth in what you say; the young should be given their chance. But what of those who retire? Will they continue to—"

"As before," he said quickly. "I assure you, my dear, that you won't lose a thing. Just the right to vote. Everything else will be

as before." He rose, teeth bright in a smile. "I'm glad we had this talk. I like you, Mada, and I would hate to see you hurt. Be wise. You won't regret it."

"As long as you promise that nothing will change? Aside from the vote, I mean?"

"You have my word on it." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "I must hurry. There is a council meeting due. Are you joining us?"

"No. I want to think."

"Good for you, Mada." Again he touched her cheek. "Nice," he said. "Very nice."

A dog, she thought as he left. A slaving hound running at the heels of his master and hoping for a share of the feast. More. Doing Vargas's work for him; seeing the members of the council, whispering, setting one against the other. How long before he would turn assassin?

* * *

Yendhal said, "I am sorry, sire, but I am doing the best I can. The tests are stringent but essential if I am to offer more than an eighty percent chance of success."

One chance in five—it wasn't enough. Others had taken it, those more desperate than himself, but the odds were too low. Vargas scowled as he stared at the screen and the miniature figure depicted on it. Even via the electronic transmission he could sense the man's fear.

"Five and a quarter minutes," said the physician. "He has been lucky but it cannot last."

"Why not?" Vargas turned from the screen. "Isn't luck an essential factor for survival? It could be that you are looking for the wrong attributes. Why can't you test them for luck?"

"If they are lucky they wouldn't be here," said Yendhal flatly. "That is the first thing to consider if we are to seek their relative

potential in that area, As for the rest, how do we test them? On the spin of a coin? On their ability to select certain favorable combinations? And, if they test high, wouldn't the sequel invalidate the findings?"

"Doesn't the same objection apply to the labyrinth?"

"No. They do not know what the final outcome will be if they survive. If they did it would affect their performance." Yendhal glanced at the screen. "Six minutes."

Vargas was ironic. "Still lucky?"

"Luck has an important part to play in survival," admitted the physician. "But it is too intangible a factor for us to be able to isolate. If a man lives he is lucky because he has lived. But it takes more than luck to pass through the tests I have devised." He grunted as a red light flashed from the screen. "Six and a quarter minutes. Failure."

Another one, thought Vargas. And one of how many? Would the result always be the same? Had Yendhal made certain that it would be so?

"Perhaps the test is too severe," he said. "Would lessening the dangers show an advantage?"

"It would increase the chance of survival, true, but it would invalidate what we are trying to determine."

Vargas was insistent. "A series of tests then, each harder than the ones before."

"That would prove nothing except the ability of the subject to learn from experience."

"And that is not survival?"

"It is," admitted Yendhal, "but we are not testing to determine educational ability. As I explained the survival instinct is inherent in the basic pattern. A man can be taught but it is not the same. I assure you, sire, I know what I am doing."

Each subject has been selected on the basis of tissue affinity. If you wish I could operate tomorrow but—"

"Only with a success factor of eighty percent?"

"That is so, sire. I strongly suggest that you allow me to continue my researches on the present basis. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by waiting. The laws of probability must, in time, produce a perfect specimen."

Vargas glowered around the subterranean laboratories. Yendhal was in his element here, a man devoid of morals or conscience, happy to pursue his experiments and, perhaps, forgetful of the main object. Such a man would take no account of the passage of time.

To reassure himself he said, "There is no doubt in your mind as to the suitability of the subjects?"

"No, sire, none. The people of Loame are unique in that they show a total lack of the stress factors induced by higher civilizations. From birth they have eaten a mainly vegetable diet, lived in a relatively gentle environment and have had none of the strains of competition. The results show in their medically perfect physiques. Comparisons with opposed types from Technos show a remarkable diminution in organic wear and arterial blockage. Unfortunately the same environment which has provided the stress free condition has worked against a high survival factor. They are like domestic cattle as compared to those running wild. The domestic types are more healthy in every way."

"But are more easily killed?"

"Exactly, sire. If they were not, the war with Loame would be far different from what it is. The mere fact they agree to the tribute is proof that their natural resistance is low. On a planetary scale war is, of course, an analog of an individual infection. A healthy organism will resist the invader—by healthy I mean one with a high survival factor. It will produce antibodies to fight on its behalf. Loame has not done so. And so we have the apparent paradox of a people perfectly healthy in body but

hopelessly unable to resist the infection of war. For our purposes they are ideal."

* * *

At four in the afternoon the palace was a teeming hive of activity with people streaming through the lower chambers, supplicants, examinees, minor officials intent on their business. An ant hill, thought Major Keron dispassionately. A hive. A community of which the whole was greater than the parts.

The activity fell away as he rose to the upper levels, changing elevators to rise still higher, the cage humming as it rose into silence. A guard checked his credentials, another guided him down a mesh of passages, pointing as he reached a turn.

"The third door along, Major. Knock and wait."

Frowning, he obeyed. The panel swung open and a youth, bright in scarlet, gestured for him to enter.

Ruen stood at the far side of the room.

"Major Keron?"

"Yes." Keron stared about the room. "I was summoned to appear before Cyber Ruen."

"I am he. Will you sit?"

Keron obeyed. The acolyte glided silently from the room. For a moment the two men stared at each other, Keron frankly curious, the cyber calculating as he studied his visitor. A typical product of Technos culture, he thought. A man who considered himself to be highly intelligent because he had passed various exams, not suspecting that wisdom, intelligence and book learning were not the same.

"I have the permission of the Technarch to interview you, Major," he said. "You understand that I have his full authority? That in speaking to me you are speaking to him?"

"With respect, cyber, I disagree." Keron was firm. "As an

officer attached to the Security Division I must be circumspect. You understand?"

"Are you intelligent, Major?"

"I have nine degrees."

"That isn't answering my question. Do you know what intelligence is?"

"Knowledge," said Keron after a moment. "Education."

"Wisdom is neither," said Ruen in his even monotone. "An untaught man can be wise. And intelligence is not necessarily knowledge. It is, rather, the ability to survive in the environment in which you find yourself. You can appreciate the difference. I venture to state that on Sarg, a planet of blistering heat and little water, you would quickly die." He paused and added, "Dumarest would live."

"Dumarest?"

"The man you allowed to escape." He caught the sudden tension, the almost indiscernible stiffening of his visitor. "You have never heard of him?"

"No."

"I have been checking the records," continued Ruen. "Of the last contingent from Loame how many were suspect?"

"Five. One was a liar, claiming to be the son of a grower when he was not. Three were interrogated and found to be harmless. The other—"

"Escaped," said Ruen. "That man was Dumarest. He was not a spy and comes from no local world. How did he elude your guards?" He waited as Keren explained. "He moved quickly?"

"Very quickly. Faster than any man I have ever seen before."

It was confirmation if Ruen had needed it, which he had not. Logic and extrapolation pointed to the obvious. The message

received via Central Intelligence proved that Dumarest must have visited Technos. Now he had to be found. If Keron was as intelligent as he thought he would have found him long ago.

"I take it that you have thoroughly checked the base area? That he was not found?"

"I have and he was not." Keron was irked by the implication that he was incapable of doing his job. "We found his discarded uniform. We also found other clothes which he had left in a hotel. There is a suspicion that he booked at another under the name of Ganish. Other than that, nothing."

"It was getting late," pointed out Ruen. "The temperature was falling and later it snowed. He could not have wandered the streets all night."

"No."

"So he must have found shelter. Where else but on the monorail? Surely you checked?"

"Yes," admitted Keron. "I did. A ticket was sold against my credit card and identification. He stole it together with some money. But he was not on the monorail. Every car was checked and no passenger was found without satisfactory identification."

"He could not have boarded a vessel?"

"Impossible. The gates were locked and the fence guarded. Also each ship was later searched."

Ruen stood thinking, his eyes somber in the stark planes of his face. "The man is in the capital," he said after a moment, "You will find him at a hospital or nursing home. Either that or he will be in jail. Check every patient and prisoner, and when you find him bring him to me. To me, Major, do you understand?"

Keron frowned. "It is a security matter, I am not sure that I can do that."

"You can." Ruen was insistent. "It will be to your advantage."

The man means nothing to you. Do as I ask and you will not regret it. I have the confidence of the Technarch and he will promote you if I suggest he do so. Now hurry. Already too much time has been allowed to elapse."

Chapter Nine

THE ROOM was pentagonal, windowless, soft lights casting an artificial moonlight from the vaulted roof, the air heavy and perfumed with a musky odor. Soft carpets lined the floor, and on small tables rested various objects of interest.

Idly Dumarest examined them. A tall cylinder of transparent crystal held a slowly moving growth of fibrous matter, bright colors merging, changing into new patterns, the material streaked and flecked with kaleidoscopic brilliance. Another cylinder held a mass of crystals which spread, piling one on top of another until the jar was filled with a glittering tree, the whole abruptly slumping into a turgid liquid which grew again as he watched, faceted gems forming themselves into new configurations. A cone shimmered with living rainbows. A cube slowly revolved, the lines and planes seeming to shift into other dimensions so that he blinked at the sudden ache in his eyes.

"Children's toys. Mathematical novelties to illustrate natural and scientific law."

The voice had come from behind him. He turned. A door stood open in one of the angles of the pentagon, dim illumination showing a wide bed, a mirror, a table loaded with vials. The woman standing in the opening was almost as tall as himself, hair a dark waterfall streaming to below her shoulders, a thin robe caught just under the breasts with a golden band. She stepped forward, naked feet graced with laced sandals, the movement accentuating the long curves of her thighs. Her face was that of a young and beautiful woman.

"I am Mada Grist." Her hand rose, gold shining from the nails. "Do you remember me?"

"We met on the train." Dumarest caught the proffered hand and lifted it to his lips, feeling the softness and warmth of the olive skin. "It seems, my lady, that I owe you my life."

"You acknowledge the debt?"

"Yes, my lady."

"My name is Mada. You will please me by using it." She moved from the open door of the bedroom and crossed to where a wide, padded bench stood against one of the walls. "You will find wine in that cabinet. Serve us both."

It was held in a jar of frosted glass cut to a mathematical form. The glasses rose like flowers from a solid base. The wine was tart and refreshing to the tongue, scented with a delicate odor and bright with drifting bubbles.

"From Hardish," she said. "They have a knack with wine. Have you been there?"

"No, my lady."

"Mada," she reminded. "There is no need for us to be formal, Earl." Her eyes smiled at his expression. "Yes, I know your name and a little about you. There are techniques known to our medical science which can gather knowledge from a sleeping brain. Earl Dumarest," she mused. "A traveler. A man with a quest." Her voice grew wistful. "Does finding this planet mean so much to you?"

"It does." His voice was guarded. Guessing the reason, she laughed.

"Don't be so wary, Earl. We could only skim your mind and gather information you were willing to give. Your secrets are safe. I would not have ordered the violation of your privacy but certain matters made it urgent that I learn something of the truth." She emptied her glass and held it to be refilled. "That you

were not a spy. That you are not an enemy of Technos. That you owe loyalty to none."

"Mada?"

"Never mind." Taking the replenished glass she drank half the contents at a gulp. "Serious matters can come later. For now tell me something of yourself. You have traveled, that I know. Far? To the Center?"

"To the Center and beyond," he said, remembering. How many ships, journeys, worlds? How much time spent traveling Low or riding High? Biologically he was still fairly young but chronologically the years had mounted and, in one respect, he was very old. In experience, the only time scale which held any real meaning. And Mada?

The light was dim, the contours of her face blurred with shadow, but her body was young and appealed to him with primitive attraction. Thoughtfully he sipped at his wine. She was high in this society, that was obvious, and possibly bored and eager for excitement. Often such women sought it in the company of strangers, titillated by novelty, intrigued by the attraction of the unknown.

Was that why she had saved him, had him healed and, when he was wholly fit, brought to her apartments in the palace?

He lowered the glass, conscious of danger. Such a woman could have jealous guardians quick to hire an assassin to cleanse the honor of their house.

"You are somber," she said. "Why?"

Bluntly he told her.

"Assassins?" Her laughter was strained. "No, Earl. That is the least you have to fear. Technos is not a primitive culture with a proud nobility and formal ways. And I have no husband, no lover, none who would object to any liaison I may make." Again she held out her glass for it to be replenished. "You have known many women?"

"A few."

"Now you are being discreet. I would venture to guess that many women have found you attractive. Have you never thought of marrying? Of settling down?"

"Yes."

"And what happened? Why didn't you?" The wine, she realized, was going to her head, and its aphrodisiacal qualities accentuated the desire burning her flesh. "What happened Earl? Why hasn't some woman claimed you for her own?"

"Fate, my lady," he said quietly. "Death and unfortunate circumstances."

"And you don't want to talk about it," she said quickly. "I understand." Her hand rested on his own, the long fingers caressing the flesh, halting as they rested on the ring he wore on the third finger of his left hand. "And this? A gift?"

"Yes, my lady."

Her voice was sharp. "From a woman?"

"Yes," said Dumarest, and added, "she is gone. It was some time ago."

"Dead?"

"You would call it that."

"I'm glad." she said. "I would not like to have to share you." Fabric rustled as she turned to him, taking the glass from his hand and setting it aside. "Now," she whispered. "I have waited too long. Now!"

* * *

A lamp burned in the center of the groined roof, its wash of kaleidoscopic colors turning the chamber into a vault of mystery, swathes of red and yellow, orange and blue, green and smoky amber drifting over the wide bed, his naked body, the

furnishings of the apartment. Dumarest stared at it, lying supine, his eyes half closed against its hypnotic compulsion. From beyond a door came the sound of rushing water, a shower where the woman laved her body, but even there the light was dim.

Shadows, he thought, and strangeness. The burning demands of a young and nubile body but the face had remained almost totally serene. Only the eyes had reflected the passion and, when he had tried to caress her cheek, she had prevented it, holding his hand, guiding it to the soft contours of her body.

A mask? It was more than possible, but if so it was the product of a master. She had smiled and sighed and pursed her lips for his kiss. Drifting shadows of changing color had blurred all detail and mounting passion had taken care of the rest. But now, with passion spent, there was time for thought.

"Earl."

He rose as she came from the bathroom. The robe was once again adorning her body, the hair falling neatly to her shoulders, the graceful feet enhanced by the sandals.

"Bathe," she said, "and dress. We have much to discuss."

She watched as he moved toward the shower, feeling again the strength of his arms, the joy he had given. Perturbed she went to a cabinet, opened it, selected a drug from assembled vials. Somehow she must control the rebellious reactions of her body. He had slaked her desire but still the yearning remained. It must be crushed if she was to remain in control of the situation.

The drug quieted her so that she was calm when he joined her in the pentagonal chamber. She poured them both wine, a different vintage from that they had drunk before, handing him a goblet and sitting so as to face him.

"To health," she said. "To the achievement of heart's desire."

Dumarest drank to the toast.

"Love," she said. "Another name for the chemical reaction occurring between the sexes. A romantic definition of the urge to procreate. You agree?"

"My lady, I—"

"Mada," she interrupted. "How can we be formal now?"

"It is not always wise to build a future on events of the past," he said quietly. "It is a mistake often made and one for which many men have suffered."

Had he? She studied him over the rim of her glass, resentful of his calmness while appreciating his tact and diplomacy. He was telling her that the incident could be forgotten. It made it easier for her to guide the conversation.

"You are a traveler. It must be wonderful to visit new worlds and see different cultures. Are most of them barbaric?"

"No, Mada. Usually a world when colonized falls into a definite pattern. Great houses rise to control government and industry. But others are based on different forms of society. Kren is a world in which democracy has been carried to the ultimate. Nothing can be decided until a referendum has been taken. Computers, naturally, make this simple. Pharso, on the other hand, is a dictatorship with supreme authority vested in one man who is chosen by lot each five years. Charos is a world devoted to athletic prowess. Status is determined by victories scored at games and combats. The old and those unable to compete are relegated to the status of servitors."

"An interesting system," she commented. "Those once in power inevitably wind up as demoted citizens. It should make them consider the welfare of the servitors if nothing else. They would be safeguarding their own future."

Dumarest poured them both more wine, wondering at the woman's motives. "And Technos?"

"A meritocracy based on educational attainment." She sipped at her wine. "To you it must seem a strange culture. There is

small chance for individual freedom of the type to which you must be accustomed. Technos was a bleak world. In the beginning everything had to be subordinate to the common welfare. There was no room for wasted effort, even the unfit were culled at birth or shortly afterward. Now citizens are allowed to breed only if they reach a certain mental level. The dream was of a continually rising spiral of intelligence governed on scientific principles."

"An ambitious undertaking," said Dumarest. "Why did it fail?"

"Fail?"

"Technos is at war. War, by definition, is a confession of failure. It requires little intelligence to beat a weaker man with a club."

"And much to persuade him to do what you want while letting him think he wants to do it?" She nodded. "You are right, but one mistake doesn't make a failure."

"You have made more than one. A viable culture should not erect barriers to prevent the free passage of visitors or residents. Technos is a hard world to reach. Science should not be afraid of the truth."

"And travelers carry truth?"

He smiled. "Not always. Most travelers simply want the chance to work and accumulate enough money to buy another passage. Is that possible here?"

"No." She paused, watching him, gauging the moment. "You acknowledge the fact that you owe me your life. Do you consider the debt paid?"

Dumarest met her eyes. "No."

"You want to leave Technos, to continue your search for Earth. I can help you."

"At a price, my lady?"

"Money and a High passage," she said quickly. "All made easy for you to go. In return I want you to do one thing." She drew in her breath. "I want you to kill the Technarch!"

* * *

The silence grew, deepened by the drifting shadows from the open door of the bedroom, the glow of artificial moonlight from the vaulted roof. Dumarest looked at his hands, raising his head to meet the woman's eyes.

Quietly he said, "I am not an assassin, my lady."

"You are a fugitive, on Technos without legal right, subject to punishment when caught. Hard punishment." she emphasized. "Interrogation and, perhaps, death. Unless I aid you, capture is certain. And you admit that you owe me your life."

"Is that why you saved it, my lady?"

"No," she spoke without thinking, but it was true enough. At first she had obeyed the promptings of a whim and the desires of her body. But then had come the interview with Brekla, the thinly disguised threats, the knowledge that she stood alone against Vargas and his ambition.

Shergan, Alica, Marmot, Dehnar, all had turned against her. The Supreme Council were rats each scuttling for safety. Or, perhaps, they had formed a cabal from which she was excluded. With the Technarch dead they would think again, and at least she would have time to secure her position.

Dumarest had to agree!

Leaning forward she spoke quickly before he could refuse. "Vargas is an old man, terrified of his shadow. He trusts only a single guard. I can arm you and guide you to his chamber. Two shots and the thing is done. In return I will give you money and arrange a passage." Her voice rose, grew thin and querulous. "Why do you hesitate? What have you to lose? Your mind carries

the knowledge of violence. You have killed before so why not again? It is such a little thing I ask. Two shots and you will have repaid your debt. Do it, Earl. For me. Please!"

A little thing! To kill the head of a state! And afterward would she keep her part of the bargain or would she arrange to have him killed so as to close his mouth? And when he refused, what then? Poison in the wine?

Slowly he said, "My lady, you are distraught. You cannot realize what you ask."

"I ask you to kill a man," she said. "A mad dog who will drag us all to ruin. An ambitious fool blind to everything but his own lust for power. Kill him and Technos will have cause to be grateful."

"I have little cause to trust the gratitude of princes," he said dryly. "And less to rely on the thanks of a nation. What you propose, my lady, is unwise."

"You refuse?"

"To kill a man I have never seen? Yes, my lady. As I said, I am no assassin."

Dumarest rose, stiffening as a sudden knocking came from the door, seeing by the woman's eyes that the interruption was unexpected. It came again, sharp, imperious.

"Hide," she said quickly. "In there." She gestured toward the bedroom. "Make no sound."

The knocking increased as he stepped into the room, closing the door all but a crack. Through it he saw Mada cross the chamber and open the door. A flood of light from the corridor beyond lined her figure with a halo of brilliance.

"Your pardon, madam," said a familiar voice. "I crave your indulgence on a matter of planetary security. Have I your permission to enter?"

Keron! And from the sound of his voice, he would brook no refusal. Dumarest turned and ran toward the bathroom. Inside he scanned the walls. They were solid, broken only by grilles too small to allow the passage of his body. A disposal chute opened at his touch and he stared into darkness. It would lead to a shaft, dropping to the lower levels and ending, perhaps, in a furnace. As he hesitated he heard the sudden rise of Mada's voice.

"How dare you! To burst into my apartments! Have the members of the Supreme Council no rights?"

Keren's answer was firm. "Not when planetary security is at risk, madam. I must insist that you allow me to search your rooms."

The chute bent at a sharp angle two feet from the opening. Dumarest felt the scrape of the rim against his back as he wriggled around the bend, elbows extended to brake his passage. His legs dangled free and he followed them, hanging by his hands at the lower edge of the bend, reaching back with one foot to find the extent of the shaft. It was about four feet wide, narrow enough for him to press his feet against one side, his back against the other, lowering himself with cautious motions.

From above he caught a flash of light and heard a muffled voice.

"Nothing here, Major."

The light vanished and the darkness was complete. Cramped in the chimney Dumarest cautiously eased his way down. To return to the woman's apartment was to take an unnecessary risk. Keron would have stationed a guard in the corridor if nowhere else and the man would probably have orders to shoot on sight. And the woman was another problem. His refusal would not have endeared him to her, and if she was wise she would kill him to close his mouth.

He frowned, remembering the youth of her body, the childish solution she had found to social problems. Kill the Technarch and everything would be wonderful! It was the answer a primitive would think of, not an educated and sophisticated

woman. And she was a member of the ruling council. An infant prodigy, perhaps? In such a society he guessed it was possible.

His foot slipped and he strained against his other leg, sweat beading his face at the thought of the emptiness below. He concentrated on the pressure of steel against the soles of his feet and the area of his back. He seemed lower than before, his body less cramped, and he realized that the shaft was widening as it descended. Soon it would be too wide for him to support his weight.

His foot slipped and met emptiness. A joining shaft or the mouth of a chute? He could have passed a dozen of them, missing them all in the thick darkness and he could miss a dozen more. But the lower he went the harder it became to straddle the shaft. Halting, feet and back pressed against the metal, he felt to either side with his hands.

Nothing. The shaft was unbroken. Crablike he moved in a circle, hands testing the metal, pausing as he felt the upper edge of an opening. It was smooth, rounded and slick with some covering. Grease, perhaps, or a plastic film to protect the metal from corrosion. In any case, it was too wide for him to gain a strong purchase; if he tried to thrust his body into the opening he would slip and fall.

Grimly he began to climb back up the shaft. He had to reach a point where it was narrow enough for him to enter one of the openings without losing his balance. His shoulders met the lower rim of a chute and he moved away from it, climbing still higher. When the shaft had narrowed so that his knees were pressed against his chest he searched for another opening.

Sweat oozed from his skin as he fought a mounting fatigue, the strain on his muscles turning them into fire. A foot met no resistance and he circled, back scraping the wall. Reaching the opening he positioned himself, hooking his left elbow into the chute. Tensing his muscles he kicked out, turning at the same time, the pressure forcing his head and shoulders into the opening before he could fall. Desperately he rammed both elbows against the sides, fighting the pull of gravity as his legs fell from the support of the wall. He kicked, meeting the upward bend,

using elbows, chest and chin to gain traction. A knee caught the lower edge of the chute and he thrust upward, back arched and head rising toward the mouth of the chute.

His face bumped into hardness and he reached upward, fumbling at the smooth surface, pressing, feeling resistance and knowing that the door was locked. He tensed, ramming the sides of his legs against the walls of the chute, his back, one arm and hand. With the other he pressed against the top of the door, gritting his teeth as he felt himself begin to slip. Drawing back his hand he slammed the palm hard against the upper edge and, as something yielded, lunged forward and gripped both sides of the mouth of the chute.

A heave and he was through the opening and falling into darkness.

Chapter Ten

IT WAS A bathroom. He could tell by the scent of soap and lotions, the touch of tile and humid warmth. Carefully he felt along the walls, finding a switch and narrowing his eyes against a flood of light. From a wall a mirror threw back his reflection.

He was filthy, covered with greasy dirt, his face streaked, his hands grimed and his clothes a ruin. If he hoped to escape the building he would have to wash and change. As he was, he would be arrested on sight.

Dumarest turned, switching off the light and gently opening the door of the bathroom. Beyond lay a chamber dim with subdued illumination, a bed resting in the center, a wardrobe to one side. From an outer room came the sound of voices.

"My lord, my extrapolations show that there is a probability of ninety-two percent that insurrection will break out on Hardish within a few weeks. I advise that extra troops be sent from Cest and Wen to reinforce the occupying garrisons."

"I know what you advise, Ruen." Vargas was impatient. "But there are things of greater importance. Five members of the council have agreed to retire and three others will probably join them. Brekla has secured a favorable vote to grant me extraordinary powers for the duration of the war. How long will it be before I am in absolute command?"

"You are that in fact if not in name already, my lord." Ruen's even monotone was in direct contrast to the Technarch's emotional outburst. "The prediction that a cabal will be formed to act against you is of a very low order to probability, seven point eight percent. It cannot be ignored but the probability can be lowered to two point three percent if Dehnar is sent on a special mission to Loame."

Vargas scowled. "And to eliminate it totally?"

"That is not possible, my lord. The potential danger will always remain. Even if you destroy all the members of the council a junta of the military could seek power at your expense. The most that can be accomplished is to reduce the probability factor to a point where it can be safely ignored."

His calmness infuriated the Technarch. How could the cyber be so cold, so calculating? Events were dark clouds piled before a rushing wind, sweeping relentlessly toward him, monstrous with hidden dangers. Restlessly he prowled his room, his brain trying to grapple with a dozen facts, make a score of extrapolations and failing to determine even one. Now it seemed that the euphorias had lost their power to soothe. Sleep was a thing of nightmare to be taken in small doses and even the darkness brought by the closing of his eyes held peculiar terrors.

The things which could happen in such a moment of inattention! A laser could blast his life, the roof fall, an assassin strike in a host of ways. And Ruen spoke of danger to be safely ignored!

His hands felt sticky, slimed with sweat and he headed towards the bathroom, caution slowing his feet. Yet he was reluctant to summon the guard. The apartment had been checked before he had entered with Ruen and, each time he

called the man he risked a blast from the weapon hired to protect him.

Ruen watched his hesitation, gauging the extent of the Technarch's fear, feeling the glow of mental achievement at the success of his predictions. Vargas was medically insane and would soon totally disintegrate. Vargas would leave chaos: the council disrupted and the state in turmoil. From the wreckage he, Ruen, would fashion a new council, guiding it with his advice, steering it the way it must go.

"My lord," he said as Vargas reached the door of the bedroom, "let me summon your guard. It is not wise to take chances."

"Could an assassin come through the walls?"

"The probability is extremely low, my lord, yet it does exist." Make him afraid of darkness, of shadows, of the very beat of his own heart. A man poisoned by terror was unable to think, to plan and determine. A creature of blind, unthinking emotive reaction was a predictable tool. "The guard, my lord?"

He came at the call, laser in hand, eyes searching the rooms. It was a ritual he had performed a thousand times before and he acted with a trained economy of movement. A foot opened the bathroom door, lights blooming in automatic response, the panel swinging back as he entered.

Dumarest struck with the heavy bottle of lotion he had snatched from a shelf.

He dropped it as the guard slumped, snatching the laser and springing through the door into the other room. Vargas screamed his terror, hands lifted to protect his face, eyes bulging with the fear of imminent death.

"Be quiet!" There had been two voices. Dumarest ran to the door of the bedroom, narrowing his eyes as he saw the scarlet of the cyber's robe. "You! In here. Quickly!"

Calmly Ruen obeyed, standing beside where Vargas had slumped in a faint, his eyes bright within the shadowed sockets

of his skull. "Your name must be Dumarest," he said. "You are making a grave mistake."

"Perhaps."

"This man is the Technarch. How do you hope to escape?"

Dumarest ignored the question. He had managed to wash the dirt from his face and hands but had been unable to do anything about his clothes. He stepped to the wardrobe, sliding back the doors, tensing as he saw a threatening figure. It was a reflection; the cabinet was backed with mirrors. He turned as he noticed the movement of Ruen's hands.

"No. Keep your hands away from your sleeves. Away, I say!"

"You are being irrational," said the cyber, obeying. "Logical deduction should tell you that you have no hope of avoiding the guards." He watched as Dumarest changed, tearing clothes from the cabinet, dressing awkwardly but keeping the laser trained on the scarlet figure. "If you leave here with that weapon the probability of your being killed is ninety-nine percent. Certainty. Your only hope for life is to surrender yourself to me."

"Inside!" Dumarest gestured to the wardrobe. It had a catch and would hold for a while. "Quickly!"

"And if I refuse?"

"That would be illogical. I am a desperate man and it would be simpler to kill you than to argue. Your hands!" snapped Dumarest sharply as Ruen lifted them to his wide sleeves. "I shall not warn you again."

"You are desperate without cause. Yield yourself to me and I guarantee that none on Technos will harm you."

"Move!" Dumarest closed the panel as the cyber entered the wardrobe. He engaged the catch and glanced at Vargas. Unconscious the man was no problem. He had a few minutes at least before the alarm could be given.

Opening the door, he stepped into the corridor outside. The Technarch's paranoia had kept it free of guards. At the far end a man in red and black glanced at him, curious but reassured by Dumarest's air of confidence.

Fifteen seconds later he ran directly into Major Keron and six of his men.

* * *

Yendhal said, "I want you to be certain as to what we are doing. You have heard of lie detectors?"

"Yes," said Dumarest.

"Then you will understand what this is." The physician gestured toward the assembled apparatus. "It is a development of my own with certain improvements over the standard model. Electrodes will register the tensions of your body, the degree of emitted sweat, the minute, muscular contractions impossible to avoid when uttering a lie. The truth needs no consideration and can be spoken without hesitation. A lie, no matter how well rehearsed, requires concentration and there is usually a small but measurable delay. You understand?"

"Yes," said Dumarest again. He was naked, strapped to a chair, electrodes fastened to a dozen points of his body, more sprouting from a band of metal about his head.

Calmly he stared about the laboratory. The place had a harsh, clinical smell and looked more like a hospital than an interrogation room. Yendhal, fussing over his equipment, seemed more like a schoolmaster about to conduct a routine experiment than an inquisitor. But his eyes held a ruthless dedication which betrayed his true nature.

"There is one other thing." Yendhal rested his hand on a tube aimed directly at a point between Dumarest's eyes. "This is a laser. If you lie it will burn a hole in your brain." He looked at someone beyond the range of Dumarest's vision. "Commence."

"Your name?"

"Earl Dumarest."

"Your planet of origin?"

"Earth."

"How did you arrive on Technos?" The voice was cold, emotionless, the studied modulation of a machine. Dumarest answered without hesitation.

"Are you an assassin?"

"No."

"Have you killed?"

"Yes."

"On Technos?"

"No."

"Why did you try to kill the Technarch?"

Dumarest remained silent.

"Answer the question. The laser will fire if you refuse."

"I cannot answer because the question is wrongly framed. You are asking me to give a reason for doing something which I did not do and did not intend."

"Did you intend to kill the Technarch?"

"No."

"Did you try to kill him?"

"No."

"Could you have?"

"Yes Vargas turned from where he stood before a sheet of

one-way glass as Yendhal came toward him. The man is lying. He has found a way to beat your machine."

"Impossible!" The physician was emphatic. "No man can control his respiration, muscular response and nervous tension to that degree. I stake my reputation that he is telling the truth."

"But he was in my apartments! What reason could he have had unless he intended to kill me?"

Yendhal was patient. "He had no weapon, sire, and an assassin would have to anticipate the presence of your guard. Logic dictates that if he had intended to kill you he would have been armed."

Vargas frowned, reluctant to accept the conclusion, yet knowing it to be true. And the man had illustrated a weakness. Who would have thought anyone could enter from the disposal chute? Ruen should have thought of it.

Perhaps he had. The frown deepened as Vargas's suspicions began to feed on his doubts. Who could tell what had happened after he had fainted? Had the cyber hoped that the sudden strain would burst his heart? Had they been interrupted before killing him without trace? The coincidence was too much for him to believe. How had the man known which chute led to his rooms? And Ruen had made certain that the guard had been summoned and sent ahead.

He scowled, listening to the drone of question and answer from a connecting speaker. Was the man in the pay of some seditious element? Had the cyber lied in his assurance that there was no organized opposition to his plan to gain supreme power? And Yendhal, could he have rigged the machine so as to give harmless answers?

"You are a stranger on Technos?"

"Do you have friends on the planet?"

"No."

"Have you been here before?"

"No."

Check questions repeated at irregular intervals and in different phraseology. Standard procedure to catch a liar but now it was even more than that. The relentless barrage would numb the consciousness and induce a hypnotic condition in which the answers would come mechanically from the lower regions of the brain, thus bypassing the censor. Dumarest was being conditioned to answer without conscious volition.

"An unusual man, sire." Yendhal turned from the observation screen. "I have questioned Major Keron as to his activities. Apparently he reacted most violently to routine interrogation, attacking the guards at the threat of violence and making good his escape despite formidable obstacles. The incident is even more remarkable when we realize that he knew nothing of our culture and could not fully assess the difficulties he would have to overcome."

"Are you saying that he reacted instinctively?"

"Yes, sire, I am. Almost as an animal would react, sensing danger and taking action to avoid it, gauging situations as they arose and taking steps to elude capture. An intelligent animal, naturally, and one with a highly developed sense of survival. He must have spent much time on backward worlds among primitive cultures in which personal survival depended on individual strength and quickness. His reflexes are amazingly fast. So fast that they must operate independently of conscious thought. Logically it would have been wiser for him to have accepted Keren's punishment and bided his time. He must have reacted on a purely subconscious level, assessing the situation, judging the chances of success and moving into action all in the time it took for him to see the upraised club and realize its significance. A truly remarkable performance."

Vargas was thoughtful. "Would you say he was unique?"

"I would."

"Isn't it possible to get him to volunteer information?"

"No, sire, not under the present conditions. Lying is a form of preservation, and he will lie if given the chance. As it is his monosyllabic answers are a form of protection. He will answer each question truthfully but will volunteer no truth. Our job is to make certain that we ask the right questions. I'm afraid that it will take some time."

* * *

A weak sun had thawed the snow turning the slush into water and filling the air with a damp chill. Huddled in her furs Mada stepped from the cab, dismissed the driver and stood looking down the street as it drove away.

It was an uninviting place. A quick-teach palace blazed with light and the promise to quick-feed education by means of the latest techniques. A store displayed shoddy goods from the occupied worlds together with an invitation to step inside and learn about the wonderful new settlement offers now available. A toyshop offered the latest in educational pastimes. A child, crying, was dragged from the window by its harassed mother.

"I keep telling you we can't afford it," she scolded. "With your father in the army it's all I can afford to put food on the table. Now shut up before I give you something to howl about!"

A man called softly from where he leaned against a wall. "Help a man with a limited wife, lady? She can't do better than the fourth level."

Another approached, limping. "Spare a few coins for study, madam? One more degree and I'll be able to get my leg fixed."

Mada glared her dislike. "How did you get hurt?"

"In ambush on Hardish, madam. A bunch of us got jumped by some locals one night."

"You're lying. If you were in the army you can get free medical attention."

He shrugged, unabashed. "Sure, but you know how it is. A man likes to get the best that's going."

Dirt, she thought as she pushed past him. Scum. The dregs of Technos and a disgrace to the planet. Why didn't they get themselves some education and find decent jobs?

The irritation was misplaced; she had more important things to do than worry about beggars and slums. With quick strides she walked down the street into a place selling educational tapes and out of a rear door. A narrow alley opened on a wide boulevard. Two hundred yards along a soaring sheet of glass and metal protected a display of gold and jewels. A uniformed attendant glanced at her, at the bulky bag she carried, then stepped forward to open the door. Inside, a wave of scented air warmed away her chill.

"Madam?" A man, sleek and well groomed, rose at her side.

"I wish to sell some items."

"Certainly, madam." He led the way toward an inner door. "If you will be so good as to wait inside?"

The buyer was a plump man with a pink scalp and veiled eyes. He looked at the contents of the bag, resting his fingers on scaled miniatures, an elaborate clock, a set of chessmen carved from solid crystal, two statuettes, a handful of cameos, some filigree work of silver and gold, a fragment of tapestry, a meditation light of skilled workmanship and historical interest.

Quietly he said, "You will pardon the question, madam, but can you give me proof that these things are yours to dispose of?"

For answer she held out her left wrist. Gravely he studied the engraving on the bracelet.

"My apologies, madam, but you can appreciate our concern. There has been a great deal of theft in the city recently."

"I understand. Can you accommodate me?"

"Certainly, madam. If you will permit me to make a closer study of these items?"

She nodded, relaxing as he produced a jeweler's glass and fitted it to his eye. Her precautions, though simple, should have been good enough. She had used three different vehicles and had walked the last few yards. Had anyone been following her, he must have lost the trail.

Removing his glass the buyer said, "You have excellent taste, madam. These items are truly works of art."

"You will take them?"

"Naturally." He mentioned a price. "It is not as high as you may have expected but the market is slow and the cost of storage high. If you would prefer us to sell them on commission you would probably get more but it would take time."

"I accept your valuation. Can you give it to me now?"

"Of course, madam. I will arrange for a check immediately."

"Not a check, jewels. Small stones easily negotiable. I will shortly be traveling to various primitive worlds," she explained. "I want something I can use to purchase local products."

He was too polite to display surprise. "In that case I suggest unmounted gems. The tax is lower and they should meet your requirements."

For travel, for bribes, for escape. She still retained enough influence in the palace to be able to get information. Dumarest had been captured and was being questioned. Vargas would not be gentle and would learn everything he knew.

And she had asked him to assassinate the Technarch!

If nothing else, his testimony would damn her. Without support she wouldn't stand a chance. Even with it the crime was enough to send her to trial as an enemy of the state.

Her only hope lay in flight.

Chapter Eleven

DUMAREST WOKE to the sting of minor irritation, hearing the click of metal on glass, the regular breathing of a person very close. Opening his eyes he stared at a white ceiling barred with stripes of shadow. His mouth was dry and he had a throbbing ache behind his temples. Trying to rise, he felt the pressure of a hand on his bare shoulder.

"Be still," warned a voice. It was female and vaguely familiar. "I haven't finished yet."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking a series of samples. Your sweat, blood, lymph, spinal and seminal fluids—there are exactly fifty-eight of them. Do you want me to list them all?"

"No."

"You had a set taken when you were carried from the questioning. Now I'm taking another." Dumarest felt a slight prick at the lobe of his ear. "You've had slow-time therapy giving you the equivalent of thirty hours of sleep. How do you feel?"

"I'm thirsty and I've a headache."

"It's probably a hangover from visual strain. I'll give you something for it in a minute."

Instruments made small noises and Dumarest heard the sharp hiss of a hypogun as it blasted drugs through his skin and into his bloodstream. The pounding ache eased a little though the thirst remained.

"Can I get up now?"

"You'd do better to rest." He heard the rattle of movement as if vials were being shaken in a holder. "You recovered sooner than I expected. You must have strong powers of recuperation."

Quietly he said, "Yes, Elaine. I have."

He heard the soft intake of breath and sat upright, turning to look at the woman where she sat beside a medical trolley beyond the head of the bed. Elaine Delmayer was dressed all in white, the rich olive of her skin accentuated by the sterile fabric, the warm tones deepened by lack of contrast.

"Coincidence," she said calmly. "Well, it happens."

Dumarest rose. He was in a cube seven feet square, one wall completely barred. The cell contained the bed, a toilet and washbasin. He crossed over to it, turned on the tap, drank from the running faucet and then laved his face and neck. He was completely naked, droplets of water gleaming like pearls on the hard whiteness of his skin.

Turning, he looked at the woman. "Why?"

"Why did I drug you?"

"We can start with that, yes."

"I didn't know who and what you were," she said flatly. "All I was certain of was that I knew who you weren't the man you claimed to be. I know Major Keren. Jack and I are old friends and I was expecting to see him when you arrived. I couldn't understand why you used his name and so I gave you something in the tisane. I wanted to render you helpless while I called Jack and made inquiries." She lifted one hand and touched the side of her jaw. "You gave me no chance for that. Do you often strike women?"

"Only when I suspect their motives. And the men waiting outside?"

She frowned. "I know nothing of that."

"Never mind." Mada, of course. She must have had him followed from the train. "But why should you have been afraid of me?"

"I'm from Loame," she said evenly. "That makes me an enemy alien. A planet at war is inclined to become hysterical and to see spies under every bed. You could have been sent to test my loyalty, to trap me in some way. It was a risk I dared not take." She saw the movement of his eyes. "Don't worry. This place isn't fitted with microphones. We have other ways to learn the truth."

Dumarest was grim. "So I discovered."

"You had a bad session," she admitted. "Far more intense than anyone has ever had before. You were exhausted when they carried you from the chair. I had to give you intravenous feeding with saline and glucose together with restoratives to avoid total physical and mental shock."

He could believe it. The questions had become hammers beating at the naked surface of his brain, each answer becoming a greater effort as he struggled against fatigue. Twice, he remembered, they had paused to give him water. Well, it was over now. They had searched his mind and learned what they wanted to know.

"What are the charges and when is the trial?"

Elaine said, "I don't know what you mean."

"Do I have to explain?" Dumarest was curt. "I have been questioned. All right. Now they know all they wanted to find out. The next step is surely to try me for breaking the law. What are the penalties for landing without permission, escaping from custody, theft and assault?"

"I don't know," she said. "But it doesn't matter. I don't think they intend to try you."

"Why not? This is a civilized world, isn't it? A highly sophisticated culture which operates on the basis of law. Or are they going to release me now they know I had no criminal

intent."

"Not that either. Vargas—"

"Is a man," he interrupted. "The head of the council. Or are you saying that he has set himself above the law? Is that it?" He stepped toward her, gripping her shoulders as she made no answer. "And you are willing to work for a system like that? A society in which the individual has no rights at all? Are you so in love with slavery that you run to meet it?"

"I work here." She responded to his anger with a rising fury of her own. "I am a doctor and a skilled pathologist. I have degrees in ecology, botany, economics, social science, psychology, chemistry—" She broke off, eyes hard as they met his own. "What's the difference? You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"On Technos I am respected. I have a high position and live well. On Loame what would I be? The wife of a grower and a virtual serf. A—"

"A person who could entertain a guest without fear of a trap." Dumarest released her and stepped back. "You drugged me because you feared that very thing. And still you try to justify your blindness. Are you trying to climb higher still? To get a seat on the Supreme Council?"

"That's impossible! Only the native born are allowed to stand for the examinations."

"Not impossible. What about Mada Grist? She comes from Loame. She denied it but she lied. The color and texture of her skin is unmistakable."

"Mada Grist?" Elaine frowned, puzzled, her anger evaporating. "You know her?"

"Yes."

"And she looks like me?"

"Very much like you. You reminded me of her when we met. You have the same coloring and height, and even your figures are much the same. She is a little younger, perhaps, but that—" He broke off at the sound of her laughter. "Elaine!"

"You poor devil," she said. "Someone has been having a game with you. Mada Grist is eighty-seven years old."

Beyond the bars of the cell footsteps echoed from a point down the external corridor. As they grew closer Dumarest said, "Delay matters. We must talk."

"But—"

"Do it!"

He returned to the bed and lay supine, eyes closed and hands lax at his sides. He felt the woman lean over him and touch him with some instrument. The footsteps halted.

"Madam?"

"I am not finished. Leave me. I will call when ready." As the footsteps retreated she said, "What have we to talk about?"

"Mada Grist. Has she a granddaughter?"

"No. She has no children."

"The woman I am talking about wears a bracelet of gold on her left wrist. It is her identification. Does that mean anything to you?" He rose as she remained silent, turning to look into her face. "Well?"

"Members of the Supreme Council wear such a bracelet," she admitted. "But it could have been a forgery. How would you know?"

"I wouldn't, but the guards would, and could an impostor live in an apartment in the palace? And your friend saw her. Major Keron came looking for me. He seemed convinced she was genuine."

"No. It isn't possible. There must be some mistake."

"Such as?"

"Women are vain and old women more so. The wearing of masks has become fashionable. In a dim light you could have easily been mistaken."

It was possible, he had seen her only twice and both times the light had been poor. He remembered how she had prevented him from touching her face and his own suspicions that she wore a mask. But there had been no doubt as to the youth of her body.

"I told you that I knew her," he said. "I saw her naked. Her body is younger than your own." He saw the look in her eyes, the dawning comprehension. "You didn't know?"

"No. How could I have? I still can't believe it."

He was harsh. "You don't want to believe it because, if you do, it will shake your nice, tidy little world. But you work here. You must, have guessed. What do you do?"

"Tissue typing mostly. Taking cells to grow new organs in culture vats as replacement grafts for the war-injured."

"From the tributaries sent from Loame?"

"Mostly, yes. We have an extremely low rejection mechanism which makes culture growths ideal for surgical use. The donors aren't harmed, of course; they just lose a few cells which are quickly replaced by normal means. But the other—what you suggest—it's horrible!"

"But true. Mada Grist can't be the only one. There must be others, members of the Supreme Council wouldn't take the risk unless there was a reasonable chance of success." Or perhaps she had been desperate, he thought, her body so diseased that it was easier to give her a new one rather than a series of implants. The details didn't matter. The important thing was to convince Elaine of the inevitable consequences. "You are intelligent and must know what will happen. More and more old people will

want new bodies and, for every one that does, one of your own people has to die. Technos will become a parasite on Loame. Your planet will be a farm for the production of young and healthy beasts. Their brains won't matter, only their bodies, fed and cosseted until they are needed. Cattle!"

Her hands tightened into fists. "No! It's too vile! It mustn't happen. It can't!"

"It will unless you stop it. The Technarch has everything in his favor. He can offer young bodies and extended life to those who are loyal. Already he has made himself the master of Technos, and soon he will be almost a god. And he has someone to help him do it. A creature of the Cyclan. My guess is that the cyber came here just before the wars started. Am I right?"

"I don't know. I've only been in the capital a short time. I was studying and—" She drew a deep breath. "That doesn't matter. What can I do?"

"Fight, what else?" Dumarest paused, listening. From somewhere down the corridor he heard the muffled slam of a door. "You have access to some of the tributaries from Loame. Set them free, fill them with chemical courage and turn them against the palace guards. How well do you know Keron?"

"Very well. We are to be married."

"Contact him. Use hypnotics if you have to but get him to act. He is in control of armed and trained men. Once Vargas is dead he could become leader of the planet. Damn it, girl, think! A culture like this is brittle, the people conditioned to obey the man with the big voice, the officials terrified to act of their own volition. Act now and Loame is safe. Mada Grist will cooperate because she has no choice now that Vargas knows she asked me to kill him. With her on your side others of the council will fall into line. Keron can retain control in the name of security and from then on it's up to you."

"You make it all sound so very simple."

"It is simple. All you need to do is to think and act for

yourself." Dumarest tensed as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. "The guard. Can you get me out of here?"

Elaine shook her head.

"Why not? He has to let you out and you can take me with you. Tell him that you have to conduct some special tests or something."

"It wouldn't work," she said regretfully. "You don't understand. They are afraid of you and there are guards posted beyond each end of the corridor. If we leave together they will incapacitate us both."

"Incapacitate? Why not kill?"

She glanced toward the medical trolley. "You seem to be very important and now I've a suspicion why. The samples I took are to confirm tests already made. Your tissues are sympathetic to those of the Technarch." She paused then added, "And Vargas is a very old man."

Dumarest said tightly, "Get me out of here."

"I can't. I told you, it's impossible."

"You've a stack of degrees and a headful of knowledge," he said sharply. "Use that intelligence you're so proud of. Help me or I'll ruin your life."

She studied his face, the hard set of his mouth, the savage determination of his eyes. "You mean it. You really mean it?"

"Yes," he said. "You'd better believe that."

* * *

The guard came running at her call. He halted beyond the bars, looking to where she stooped over Dumarest as he lay on the bed.

"Madam? Is anything wrong?"

"This man is ill," she snapped. "Dying. Summon help immediately. He must be taken to the hospital at once."

He hesitated. "My orders—"

"To hell with your orders! This is an emergency! Move!"

"I'll call a doctor."

"You stupid fool!" Her eyes blazed with impatient anger. "I am a doctor! I tell you this man is dying. He needs immediate surgery. Now do as I say. Quickly. If you delay and he dies, you will answer for it. Now hurry!"

Her tone, sharp with fear, spurred him to action. From the end of the corridor came a blur of voices and the sounds of movement. Elaine dropped her hands to Dumarest's chest, thrusting with the heels of her palms in the basic actions of heart massage. Her breath was warm against his cheek as she whispered quick instructions.

"Remain lax as if you were unconscious. Roll up your eyes in case anyone makes a simple test. Restrain your breathing if anyone comes close or, if you cannot hold your breath, make it ragged and irregular. It would be better if I drugged you. There will be other physicians."

"No. Have you slow-time?"

"Not with me. In the hospital, yes. Is that what you want?"

"Use it if you can. I—" He broke off, falling silent as men streamed down the corridor. They brought a wheeled stretcher, waiting as the door of the cell slid aside, entering to lift Dumarest on the vehicle. Continuing her massage Elaine walked beside him, shielding him with her body, maintaining the pretense, as they passed the guards. One of them busied himself with a phone as they headed toward an elevator, Dumarest catching his tone of frantic urgency.

Unable to hold his breath any longer he inhaled with a tearing rasp, forcing saliva into his throat to produce a liquid gurgling.

A man said, "He sounds bad, madam. What's the matter with him?"

"Syncope coupled with internal seepage of lymphatic fluids into the lungs. Probably internal hemorrhage and a malfunction of involuntary muscular responses aggravated by extreme exhaustion and psychic shock."

The elevator came to a halt, doors opening, the wheels of the stretcher humming over a smooth floor. More doors, the sound of muted voices and the taint of antiseptics. The hands lifted from his chest and touched his mouth. Something hard and cold was thrust against his tongue.

Elaine whispered, "Yendhal is coming. I heard them notify him what happened."

Dumarest groaned and heaved on the stretcher. Through slitted eyes he saw the uniforms of watchful guards. Elaine stooped over him, the spatula hard against his tongue. Her eyes were anxious, afraid.

"What now?"

He relaxed, unable to answer, forcing the woman to think for herself. If she had sense she would think of an answer but it would have to be soon. At the moment she was operating on fear, caught in events over which she had little control, her intelligence numbed by the shock of recent disclosures.

The spatula left his mouth and he felt the touch of something cold on his chest. An electronic stethoscope? It rose and pressed against his throat. He spoke, sub-vocally, only a sighing murmur passing his lips.

"Get the guards out of here or get me somewhere out of sight."

The instrument left his throat, and he heard the sharpness of the woman's command.

"This man needs immediate operative surgery. You will leave

the room while I have him prepared."

One of the guards said firmly, "We have our orders. He is not to leave our sight."

"I cannot work with you watching. For one thing you are medically unclean. If he should become infected because of bacteria carried on your persons I shall not be responsible." Her tone softened a little. "I appreciate your dilemma but he cannot walk let alone escape. You can wait outside. There is no other exit from this room. Now please hurry. Every second lost lessens his chances of recovery."

The door closed and she said faintly. "All right, Earl. You've had your way so far. Now what?"

He opened his eyes and rose from the stretcher looking around. The room was small and lined with cabinets containing medical equipment. The bright glitter of operating instruments shone from a tray: forceps, shears, scalpels of various sizes. He picked up the largest.

"You're a barbarian," she said contemptuously. "A savage. All you know is how to lie and kill."

"You think I lied?"

"I don't know. You threw me into a panic and I acted without due consideration. That was unscientific. I should have gathered more data, tested the truth of what you said, made my own judgments. I was a fool."

"You still are," he said harshly. "A fool and worse. You are a traitor to your own land."

"Loame—"

"Means nothing to you," he interrupted. "And it means even less to me. I came here to ask you for help and that is all. The rest simply happened. Now all I want is to get away from here. To take passage to another world. If I have to kill a dozen men to do it, I shall. The alternative isn't pleasant."

She was in shock, he decided; the even tenor of her life suddenly disrupted, her previous conviction now being replaced by doubt. He remembered the luxury of her apartment and the loneliness she had suffered when young. Here she was respected and her knowledge was valuable. The ability she owned gave a tremendous advantage in the peculiar competition of this culture.

"You told me that you had slow-time," he said. "Is it here?"

"A little. Enough for about thirty hours subjective time. You want it?"

He hesitated, tempted to take advantage of the offer. It would enable him to leave the building and perhaps reach the landing field. Certainly it would remove him from immediate danger. But he owed a duty to the girl.

"No, you take it. You've used it before?" He continued as she shook her head. "It will speed your metabolism to forty times normal. That means you must be very careful how you move and walk. Don't hit anything and remember that, because of inertia, things will weigh forty times as much. Keep eating glucose because you'll be burning up a lot of energy. Use the stairs, not elevators, it will save you time."

She frowned. "Time for what?"

"To find Keron. To get him to prove what I say about Mada Grist. To bring him back here and to put an end to this corruption. And," he added, "to save my life if I'm still around."

Chapter Twelve

IT HAD BEEN a prediction of a high order of probability, and Ruen was not surprised when the acolyte announced Dek Brekla. He came into the room, tense, wary, his eyes glancing from the scarlet figure of the cyber to the package lying on a low table.

Ruen remained silent as the acolyte brought the guest a glass of wine. Brekla sipped and nodded.

"Nice," he said. "A good vintage."

Ruen wouldn't have known. To him food and drink were fuel for the mechanism of his body, tasteless substances which kept it operating at an optimum level of efficiency. The wine was kept merely for use by the Technarch and as an offering to guests.

Brekla finished his wine. "I want to talk to you, cyber. Can I be sure as to your discretion?"

His voice was strained, hurried, in direct contrast to Ruen's even modulation.

"You can, my lord."

"You can predict the course of events. I want you to make such a prediction for me. If Vargas were to die what are the chances of my becoming Technarch?" He frowned as Ruen remained silent. "Well? Why don't you answer?"

"Such a prediction is not easy to make, my lord. There are factors which must be taken into consideration and of which I have no present knowledge. The council, while sundered, still remains a viable entity and could unite against you. There could be a question as to the loyalty of your men." Ruen paused then added, "And Vargas is not yet dead. Much can happen in the immediate future to alter the present pattern of potential probabilities."

"Assume the Technarch was to die within the next few hours. What then?"

Ruen said, "Would you care for more wine, my lord?"

"More wine?" Brekla looked at his glass and then at the tall figure of the cyber. "You digress. Why won't you reply to my question?"

"The services of the Cyclan are not given freely to all, my lord.

The fees are paid by the Technarch."

"And if I were he?"

Ruen bowed. "In such a case I would cooperate to the full, my lord."

The prediction had materialized just as he'd anticipated and its success brought the only pleasure the cyber could ever know. And yet it had been an elementary problem based on the emotional weakness of greed. Brekla was ambitious and so transparently obvious. He had been given a position of power and wanted more. It could be wise to let him have it. The mounting irrationality of Vargas's behavior was reaching a climax. Already his paranoia had spread to include distrust of the cyber.

"Of course, my lord," said Ruen, "we could, perhaps, reach a compromise. My aid in return for yours."

"You have it," said Brekla quickly. "What is it you want?"

"The man Dumarest."

"The stranger?" Brekla frowned. "Is that all?"

"Yes, my lord. Place him into my hands and I will advise you as to the steps you must take to achieve your ambition." It was a request the cyber had already made to the Technarch and Vargas had abruptly refused. Brekla would not.

"Dumarest," he mused. "He was questioned. You know that?"

"I know it."

Then he was placed in a cell. "You know that also?"

"Yes, my lord. It should not be hard for you to arrange his release. The probability of his attempting to escape is ninety-three percent and so it would be wise to render him unconscious before the cell is opened."

"Your information is out of date." Brekla enjoyed his

momentary triumph. "He did escape."

"And was recaptured," said Ruen evenly. "That was inevitable if the Technarch had taken elementary precautions."

"You underestimate the man." Brekla was curious. What possible interest could the cyber have in Dumarest? That he was valuable to the Cyclan was obvious, but why? His restless mind probed the question. Perhaps it would be better for him not to rely on Ruen; if he could act alone he would be free of any obligations.

"The probability of you becoming the new Technarch is thirty-eight percent," said Ruen, as if he had read the other's mind. "That is if you operate alone. If you take advantage of my services the probability will rise to the order of ninety-one point seven. Now tell me about Dumarest. He was recaptured?"

"Finally, yes." Brekla recognized the threat and the promise. "He managed to get from the cell into the hospital. An adjoining chamber in which equipment was kept. Yendhal had it filled with anesthetic gas, and when Dumarest was unconscious, he was taken. The woman who must have aided him had vanished."

"A woman cannot escape from a closed room. It was closed?"

"Yes."

"And guarded?"

"It was watched all the time. Only the man was found." Brekla added, "The door opened once and closed immediately. No one came out. The guards swear to it."

"They were wrong, my lord. It was then the woman must have escaped. There can be no other explanation for her absence." Ruen did not elaborate. The woman was unimportant and could be ignored. Dumarest was another matter. But with Brekla's help he would no longer be a problem. "Can you bring Dumarest to me now?"

"No. Vargas has him safe." Brekla anticipated the cyber's

question. "He is going to put him through the labyrinth."

* * *

Vargas stared fretfully at the screen and demanded impatiently, "Why doesn't he get on with it? What's he waiting for? Did you give him full instructions?"

Yendhal was soothing. "Of course, sire. But as yet we have not given him the signal to commence."

"Why not?"

"I am checking his external responses with electronic scanners, sire. The intensity of sweat, heat and emitted odor. The last is most interesting. As you know, an odor is actually minute particles which are translated into smell by a receptive organ. Emotions have recognizable odors. A dog will attack a man in fear and run from one in anger. Dumarest is experiencing neither."

Vargas was thoughtful. "He is not afraid?"

"Not as far as I can determine, sire. His temperature has risen a little but that is to be expected. The human metabolism being a heat mechanism will ready itself for action by consuming more fuel and thus gaining greater energy. He is not sweating which means that he is conserving that energy for later use. He is not afraid which means that he will be that much more efficient. There is a trace of resentment which is natural in any thinking organism forced to operate according to unwelcome dictates." Yendhal pressed a button and watched a flicker of lights. "The labyrinth is fully prepared. I have kept the programming exactly as before but it can, if necessary, be changed according to need."

He was too eager, thought Vargas, too quick to propose changing the system. Was he afraid that a deception might be discovered? Had Yendhal set the dangers too high in order to maintain his position, failing all subjects so as to keep him in suspense?

"There will be no change. I want everything exactly as it has

been before."

"As you wish, sire."

"I do wish." Vargas leaned toward the screen and operated a control. "Dumarest, listen to what I say. It is the Technarch who speaks." He saw the small figure lift its head to scan the ceiling, turn to stare at the doors facing the small chamber. "At the signal you will pass through the door as you have been told. Within lie various hazards. Pass them all and you will be given a free pardon, money and passage from Technos. Speak if you understand."

"Go to hell," said Dumarest.

Vargas was a liar and was a fool to imagine that his lies would be believed. And Dumarest had no reason to pander to the inflated ego of the Technarch. He had been treated like a wild animal. Now, completely naked, he faced unknown dangers with his life the penalty for failure. He was in no mood to be polite.

Waiting, he scanned the room. Why were there so many doors? For the purpose of the experiment one should be enough. Were they to delude? To confuse? Or was it simply that this compartment had been built at the junction of many passages and that communication between them was still important?

He dropped, resting his ear against the floor, listening to soft vibrations. A muted thud, a scrape, the dull, repetitious beat of a mechanical heart. The room must be far underground, for the sounds he heard were the pumps of the ventilation system and the movements of attendant guards.

As he rose the light flashed red.

"He isn't going through the door," said Vargas. Anger thickened his voice and made it ugly. "If he refuses to obey I will have him flayed alive."

"He obeys, sire. He is merely being cautious." Yendhal lifted his hand, ready to reset the clock timing the experiment. "Already he is displaying a strong sense of survival. For all he

knows danger could threaten from behind."

All the doors other than the designated panel were locked. Dumarest opened it, flung it wide and sprang aside. After a moment he dropped and thrust his head through the opening. The room was empty, a small compartment tapering in the shape of a wedge, the roof curved as if part of a tunnel. Again he listened to the sound of distant pumps and, faintly, caught the whir of fans.

The labyrinth, then, must be within the ventilation system, built in the colossal pipes and hidden from all without specialized knowledge. The special laboratories and operating theaters, too; no wonder Elaine hadn't known about them.

Rising, he turned and headed toward the remaining door.

It opened on a passage three feet wide, curving away to the right, the left blocked by a wall covered with long, pointed spikes. They were set close together, the entire surface a vicious bristle. Dumarest examined them, touching the points and feeling the burr of tiny barbs, the slight discoloration of the metal. A nerve poison, he guessed, an added inducement to stay away from the wall. Turning, he looked the other way. The passage was eight feet high, floor and walls covered with a tessellated design of red and yellow. The roof was luminous and cast a soft, shadowless glow. The curve swung sharply to the left, as if he stood in the hollow rim of a wheel.

He sprang forward as something touched his shoulders, stinging with sharp agony. The spiked wall was moving forward, silent, already beyond the edge of the door. It moved faster as he watched so that he had to back, finally turning again to face the empty passage.

It would contain mechanical traps, snares, devices which would maim or kill. The purpose of the wall was obviously to keep him moving, the spikes to prevent him clinging somehow to the surface. Yet the passage could not be totally impassable, if so there would be no point to the test.

The wall touched him again.

Dumarest ran down the passage. He ran at top speed, feet making a soft slapping noise against the floor, his eyes darting from side to side, every sense taut as he sought for danger. A less determined man would have moved as slowly as the wall allowed, trying to discern hidden traps, becoming confused with doubt and mounting fears. Dumarest was gambling the speed of his body against mechanical delay.

He felt the floor sink a trifle, saw a panel gape and something lash through the air. Behind him came a vicious crack. A whip perhaps? It was possible but he wasted no time on speculation. The sharpness of the curve and the speed of his progress threw him against the right hand wall. It sprouted tendrils, thick strands covered with a gooey slime, catching and hampering his body. He twisted, not touching the snares, moving so as to throw one against the other, creating a tangle from which he jerked free as the wall approached.

It reached the place, moved on, the tendrils sheared from the side of the passage falling to mound in a ball at the foot of the wall. Dumarest ran on.

The curve had grown sharper and he guessed that he was in a spiral, running through a passage curved in on itself. A section of the floor dropped ahead, moving to one side and revealing the gleam of serrated metal teeth far below. From the roof fell a rope. He jumped, caught it, swung himself back and forth over the pit, let go when he had gained momentum enough to reach the far side. The rope fell into the opening, the floor returned, the wall moved relentlessly on.

Dumarest raced ahead of it, gaining time, his brain working with lightning thought. As yet the traps had been simple tests of intelligence, dangerous to a dull intellect but basically easy to avoid. There would have to be others of a different nature. From around the curve came a clang of metal and a deep-throated snarl.

Bars had dropped across the passage. Before them paced a slaving beast. Doglike but with the fangs of a wolf, it glared at Dumarest with savage eyes. Drugged, probably, its natural ferocity enhanced by chemical stimulants, starved and

desperate. It crouched, tail lashing, preparing itself to spring. Dumarest was on it before it could leave the ground, his left hand catching the loose skin beneath the snarling jaws, the stiffened blade of his right smashing down through fur, skin, fat and the vertebrae beneath.

Releasing the dead animal, he sprang to the bars blocking the passage. They were an inch thick, close-set and apparently immobile. Turning, he studied the approach of the spiked wall. It seemed to be traveling faster. Swarming up the bars he tested the roof and found it solid. To either side the walls were the same. Dropping he sent his hands over the floor and found a thin crack running to either side. As the spikes of the wall neared his chest the crack widened, the floor swinging down and sending him plummeting into shadows.

He fell ten feet and rose at once, eyes strained against the dimness. He stood in a tiny compartment from which ran two passages. As in the curved one above, they were lit by a dim glow from the roof. He chose the right, running down it until halted by a blank wall. Returning he headed down the other, pausing as it branched, head tilted to catch the slightest sound. From the left came the soft tinkle of water, from the right the gusting sigh of wind. Without hesitation he chose the right-hand passage, running down it past branching openings, turning right again as he reached a junction.

He was in a maze, he realized, a compact labyrinth of blocked passages and blind turns, probably adjustable by remote control and the entire system filled with various dangers.

A labyrinth he had to penetrate in order to save his life.

Chapter Thirteen

VARGAS SAID, "He's following the air currents. See how he wets his finger in order to determine the direction of flow?" He

stooped over the screen, his hooked nose and lined features giving him the appearance of an aging bird of prey.

"He's clever," admitted Yendhal. His fingers caressed the controls governing the programming of the labyrinth. "I should like to test him yet further. If we blocked the east passages and released the krell it would drive him into the barbed mesh. To escape he would have to plunge into the water containing the gleese. He is bleeding and they would be attracted by the scent. Unless he manages to either kill them all or to escape in time they will tear him to pieces."

"No."

"But, sire, we could rescue him in time. He need not die. I feel that it is important we test him to the utmost. His survival factor is incredible and much could be learned."

"No," said Vargas again. He glowered as the physician reluctantly lowered his hand from the controls. Already the programming had been altered twice, each time increasing the hazards, the move justified by Yendhal's insistence.

But the limit had been reached. Further dangers would prove nothing other than that Dumarest was a man with all a man's frailty. Flesh and bone could not withstand the metal and plastic, the protoplasmic brain and electronic engineering which had gone into the manufacture of the krell. The gleese, too; what man could withstand the concentrated attack of a score of the voracious flesh-eaters?

Was Yendhal trying to rob him of his prize?

Vargas turned as the door sighed open, face mottling with anger even as his heart pounded with a sudden fear. The fear subsided a little as he recognized the tall figure in the scarlet robe, but the anger remained.

"What are you doing here, cyber? How dare you come uninvited into my presence?"

Ruen crossed the room and looked at the screen.

"My lord, this man must be released from your labyrinth. Immediately."

"You forget yourself, cyber. The Technarch does not take orders!"

"Even so, my lord, he must be released."

"By my order, not yours!" Vargas was adamant. "I rule here, cyber, not you. The man is mine to do with as I please. If it is my whim I shall test him to destruction." He raised his voice and shouted. "Guards! To me! At once!"

"They will not respond, my lord," said Ruen evenly. "There is trouble in the palace and they have been relieved of their duties in order to withstand it."

"Trouble?"

"Yes, my lord."

An insurrection? Vargas felt the tightening of his stomach as he considered the possibility. It was remote. With Brekla taking care of things any opposition would be short-lived. Ruen must be playing on his fears, using his knowledge to gain his own ends. And yet, where were the guards?

"You!" Vargas glared at the cyber. "You have done this. You have worked against me from the beginning. There was no trouble until you came with your lying advice and subtle ways. You and your damned Cyclan! Well, we shall see who is the master of Technos. Yendhal! Test Dumarest to destruction. Release the krell. Now!"

"Hold!" Ruen did not raise his voice and it remained an even monotone devoid of emotion but now it held on iron note of command. "Release him."

The physician hesitated, the point of his tongue wetting his lower lip as he stared from the cyber to the Technarch. Against Vargas the figure in scarlet looked the epitome of calm, his shaven head hooded by his cowl, his eyes direct in the shadowed

sockets of his skull. His controlled determination was heightened by his immobility, the hands which he had thrust into the wide sleeves of his robe.

"I advise you to think before you answer, my lord," said Ruen before Vargas could reply. "The man Dumarest means nothing to you, but the aid of the Cyclan does. Deny one and you will lose the other. How long do you think you will continue to rule without a cyber to guide you?"

More threats? Vargas felt suffocated with the accumulating pile of enemies. Did Ruen want Dumarest to act the assassin as that bitch Mada Grist had done? Was that why he wanted him freed? And if he yielded how, where would it end?

"You heard my orders," he snapped at Yendhal. "Obey!"

Ruen took a hand from the sleeve of his robe. From it something spat, singing, the high-pitched whine deepening a little as it struck against the side of Vargas's throat. A quivering mote rested in the center of a spreading circle of disintegration, cell and tissue yielding beneath the sonic destruction.

As the Technarch fell, already dead, Ruen lifted his hand toward the physician.

"The man Dumarest," he said evenly. "Release him."

Yendhal hastened to obey.

* * *

The arrows had come from nowhere, running before him, below lifted partitions and pointing the way at junctions. Dumarest followed them, loping past areas acrid with insect smells, black pits in which things stirred, the surge of turgid waters. He was covered with sweat and blood, staggering a little from numbing fatigue. A spined patch of growth had torn at his bare flesh with vicious thorns.

The arrow halted at a door. He opened it and found himself in a familiar chamber. A small room flanked by many doors, one of

which led to the passage he had followed into the labyrinth. Somehow he had made a complete circle and returned to the point from which he had started. Lips thinned with anger, he padded from one door to another, baring his teeth as a panel opened to reveal a chamber bright with gleaming instruments.

Framed in the opening Yendhal stared at him, eyes wide in the sudden pallor of his face.

"No!" he said as Dumarest moved forward, hands lifted, face a relentless mask. "Please, no!"

"I survived," said Dumarest. "I won your filthy game. I want what was promised, a pardon, money, passage away from this world. I'll get it or I'll tear out your throat."

"I can't! I—"

"Where is Vargas?" Dumarest followed the direction of the physician's gaze, saw the slumped body, the warm flame of a cyber's robe. "Dead?"

"Ruen killed him." Yendhal clutched at Dumarest's arm. Once he had seemed to be a fussy schoolmaster; now he was a terrified schoolboy. "Master him and I'll give you anything you want. Kill him! Quickly! Before he kills us all!"

Dumarest shook off the restraining hand.

"Why?" he said to Ruen. "A cyber doesn't kill his employer without good reason. Did he die so that he could be replaced by another more amenable to the designs of your clan?"

Ruen said evenly, "I killed him in order to save your life."

Dumarest looked at his hands, at the ring glowing like freshly spilled blood on his finger. "I suppose I should thank you but I've the feeling that such thanks would be premature. What possible interest could you have in me?"

"Personally, none. But you are of value to the Cyclan. My orders are specific. You are to be safeguarded and sent to a

world I prefer not to name. There you will be questioned. Not by means of the childish devices used on this backward planet but with all the skills developed over centuries of research. In a secret laboratory of the Cyclan you will divulge all you know."

"About this?" Dumarest held up his hand, catching the light on the red stone of his ring. "Do you know why I am so important to your people?"

"You possess a secret of tremendous importance. One stolen from the Cyclan by a man named Brasque." Ruen made a slight gesture, dismissing the man as unimportant. "He is dead, but before he died he incorporated the stolen secret in a ring which he gave to his wife. That ring she gave to you."

"And you have been after it ever since," said Dumarest bleakly, remembering. "Your predictions told you that it was the only place it could be. But now you cannot be certain that it is still there. I could have changed the stone or altered the sequence. You must keep me alive in order to discover the truth."

"That is so."

Dumarest laughed without humor. "Odd that I should be indebted to those whom I have such reason to hate. But the secret is valuable to you, isn't it, cyber? To you and to your clan."

Ruen made no comment.

"The composition of the affinity-twin," continued Dumarest. He was talking in order to gain time, to restore the strength of his body. "Fifteen molecular units which create a living symbiote with the power to unite host to subject in almost total empathy. The host becomes the subject. He is the subject. He—or she."

A mane of lustrous red hair, eyes like sparkling emeralds, skin as soft and as white as translucent snow. How could he ever forget Kalin?

"Fifteen units," Dumarest repeated. "You must know how long it would take to test them all. If you could try one combination each second it would take more than four thousand years. Can

the Cyclan afford to wait that long?"

"No," said Ruen.

And took his hand from the sleeve of his robe.

Dumarest moved, dropping, lunging forward, rising to grip the thin wrist before the cyber could aim his weapon. A thing to stun and paralyze, to render him helpless, packaged meat prepared for transport. He felt the thin wrist beneath his fingers, the sudden explosion of strength as Ruen fought back. He was deceptively strong but hampered by his very nature. He fought with a coldly calculating logic, using fingers and elbows, feet and knees, moving in a scientific dance which would have sent any normal man writhing helplessly to the floor.

Dumarest wasn't normal. His reflexes gave him an advantage, but his hatred was his prime weapon. He snarled with anger, not feeling the crippling blows, his fury lifting him above pain. He struck with the blade of his hand and felt ribs yield. He struck again at the base of the neck, a third time, then stepped back as Ruen slumped to the floor to lie in a pool of scarlet fabric.

Yendhal stared at him, then at Dumarest. "He's dead?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad." The physician stooped, examining the body. "He was dangerous. A man like that has too much power and I am sure that he tried to set Vargas against me." He straightened and looked at Dumarest, "You won't regret this."

"I know that." Dumarest reached out and caught Yendhal by the shoulder, his fingers digging hard against sensitive nerves. "And now for you."

"What do you intend?" The physician squirmed as Dumarest dragged him from the room into the external chamber. His struggles increased as he recognized where he was, the door to which he was being dragged. "No! For God's sake! I'll give you anything you want. Anything!"

"You'll give me satisfaction." Dumarest stared at the terrified man. "You remember the questioning? The things you said? You designed this toy and who knows how many poor devils you've sent to be tormented in it? Well, now it's your turn."

He kicked open the door and threw Yendhal inside, slamming shut the panel and leaning on it, listening, hearing the soft hum of hidden machinery as the spiked wall stirred into life.

* * *

It was snowing again, the landing field a swirl of dancing flakes which caught the lights and shimmered with transient beauty before settling to mound the area with fluffy whiteness. Elaine shivered. "It's getting cold. It will be freezing before midnight."

"The ship will be gone long before then." At her side, bulky in his uniform weatherproof. Major Keron moved a little, boots stamping the snow. "You've picked a good time to leave, Earl. Technos can be hell in winter."

"I can imagine." Dumarest turned to where the ship reared high against the snow, its peak capped like a distant mountain. He wanted to get inside where it would be warm, to find his cabin and settle down on the bunk, to sleep a little and wash the taste of this world from his memory. He looked at the woman. "Before I forget—my thanks for saving my life."

"And our thanks for having saved our world." Her eyes were direct as they met his own. "We owe you a lot, Earl. All of us. You showed me things I didn't want to see. It's strange how a world can grow rotten and no one really suspects what is happening. We trusted the council too much. We trusted in the authority vested in the Technarch. Well, we won't make the same mistake again."

"We can't afford to." Keron was brusque. "Vargas dead, Brekla, the cyber and Yendhal. A dozen officials and close to three hundred men. It was nasty while it lasted."

"It was cheap," said Dumarest. "A little blood and you've won

a world. Now you have to hang on to it. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance." He looked again at the waiting vessel. "What are you going to do about Loame?"

"Kill the thorge," said Elaine quickly. "Educate and then return the tributaries. Within five years everything will be back as it was."

"No," said Dumarest. "Not that. Clear the land and build factories. Find and operate mines. Use the educated labor to man industries. Make Loame a free world. If you maintain the authority of the growers you'll be begging for trouble." He moved, impatient at his own lecturing. "But you know all this. You know that you have to end the war and the rest of it. I don't have to tell you what needs to be done."

"You did once," she reminded and paused, musing. "We were like a supersaturated solution, poised and inert. Then you came, a seed crystal, and immediately the pattern was broken. There should be more men like you, Earl. More travelers with fresh ideas."

"Open your landing fields and there will be."

"They'll be open." Keron snapped his fingers. "A moment. I've forgotten something." He turned, moved to where a car stood waiting, returned with a package, "This was found in Ruen's apartments. I think it must belong to you."

Dumarest opened it, fingered the gray plastic material with the protective mesh buried deep. So Cleon was dead, caught by the Cyclan, interrogated, disposed of and his borrowed clothing sent to Ruen as evidence that the man they wanted had to be on Technos.

"There's one other thing," said Elaine quietly. "Someone wants to see you before you leave." She stood in the snow, a vague blur in the shadows, her furs piled high against her cheeks. From reasons of vanity or shyness she had retained her mask. Dumarest was glad of it.

"My lady."

"You call me that, even though you know that I am not what I seem?"

"I remember that you saved my life," said Dumarest. "That you gave me something—" He broke off, knowing better than to arouse painful memories. Mada Grist had acted as she did because of the promptings of her young and virile body. The desire of her flesh overriding the wisdom of her mind.

"Earl," she said. "Earl!" Her hand rose as if to touch his cheek. "Keron found me while I was trying to book passage. He arrested me then released me when the girl persuaded him to act. I was instrumental in proving that you had not lied."

"And now?"

"I will work," she said. "What else? But— you know, Earl. Perhaps you can understand. Do you forgive me?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And shall I ever see you again?"

It was kinder not to lie. "No, my lady. Never again."

He turned and headed to where the ship was waiting. It would carry him to Jalanth where there would be other ships heading for other worlds.

And, soon now, he would find Earth.