

Scanned by Highroller.

Proofed by the best ELF proofer.

Made prettier by use of EBook Design Group Stylesheet.

Nectar of Heaven

E.C Tubb

Chapter One

All night the wind had droned over the workings dying at dawn when a pale yellow sun had illuminated a world transfigured by cold. Ice coated the mounds and gullies, frosted the humped buildings, gave a transient beauty to the harsh lines of functional machines. A thin, white blanket covered the torn and ravaged soil, snow filling hollows and softening peaks, a dry powder which held treachery.

"Dangerous." Hart Vardoon kicked at the accumulation, a white dust flying from his boot. "Be careless and you could slip, break a leg, maybe." He glanced at the humped machines. "Worse, even."

Dumarest glanced at the mechanisms; tall, their fronts set with curved teeth, the whole moving on wide treads. The operators sat back and to one side guiding the tearing action of the grabs which tore into the dirt and sent it in massed lumps to one side. If a worker should slip and fall the chances were high he would be unnoticed, his body joining the dirt in a red-stained mass.

"A freak." Wiess had joined them. He stood shivering, his face pinched beneath the surrounding fabric of his hood. "It's too early for snow. Once the sun gets high it'll thaw the stuff to water. Dry it out too," he added quickly. Sodden ground was

impossible to work. "A couple of hours should do it."

"You sure about that?"

"Take my word for it, Earl." Wiess shivered again and beat patched gloves against his chest. "This is my third season and I've seen freak storms before. We've got weeks yet, a month at least."

Vardoon shook his head as the man walked off toward his position. Behind him one of the machines woke to strident life, others following, metal grating as treads joined grabs in preparatory movement. Within minutes the workings would be in full operation.

"What do you think, Earl? Has Wiess got it right?"

"You saw his clothing."

"Too thin and too worn. A blast would go right through it and he hasn't the fat to fight cold. A gambler too."

"One who loses."

"As I've noticed." Vardoon scowled, scar tissue bunching on his face, turning it into a mask of savage ferocity. "Three seasons," he said. "Stuck on Polis for that long and he still lacks decent clothing. What do you think, Earl?"

Dumarest studied the sky, the pale orb of the sun fogged by high-drifting cloud. The wind had fallen but the air held a fresh, astringent odor together with the bite of chill. Far to the north rested a dullness; massed cloud laced with paler hues. Against them a flight of birds arrowed toward the south.

"Well?" Vardoon was impatient. "Have we a month or what?"

Dumarest said, "I'm a stranger here, Hart, like yourself, but if I had money owing I'd collect it now."

"I'm not fool enough to lend. So—" He broke off as an overseer yelled his anger. "We'd better get to work before he blows his

top. See you later."

He moved off and Dumarest set to work. The workings were open-cast mining, the machines ripping into the surface of an ancient seabed, the lumps of dirt cascading from the grabs containing nodules of manganese. With long-hafted hammers Dumarest and the other scudgers broke up the lumps and searched for the mineral. Pay was based on what they found.

It was hard, unremitting labor, today harder than usual. The chilled ground yielded too slowly to the impact of the hammers, the dirt taking too long to crumble. But, if nothing else, the activity generated body heat.

Dumarest straightened, throwing back the cowl of the thermal garment he wore over his own clothing, feeling the sweat dry on his face beneath the touch of a gentle wind. To the north the clouds were darker than before, the sun a little more hazed. Turning, he saw a raft lift from the administration area, the transparent canopy sealed, shimmering with reflected light as it caught the sun, the shapes within humped and indistinct.

Vardoon joined him as the craft vanished toward the south.

"The top brass," he said. "On the run. They must know something we don't."

"Maybe not."

"They've left, haven't they? The engineers, the assayers, the rest." Vardoon slammed his hammer against a lump of dirt and grunted as the head did nothing but indent the surface. "Three hits to do the work of one. Five times as long to check for nodules. How many have earned the price of a meal as yet? Now that raft—what's the answer, Earl?"

It came during the noon break. Hunched in his furs, the supervisor was curt.

"We're closing down. Hand in your tools before dark. Tomorrow you get paid. Transportation to town will be provided at noon."

A man chose to object. "Hell, why the hurry? It's early yet."

"That's right." The supervisor nodded. "If things were normal there'd be five or six weeks before winter closed us down. But things aren't normal. A storm's brewing and we want out while the going's good."

"Can we take a chance?" Wiess? Dumarest looked and saw another just like him, one just as desperate. "Work on for a couple of weeks at least? Hell, man, we've had storms before."

"Sure, but it's too close to winter. We're closing down."

Dumarest reached for his stew as the protests continued. It was thick, rich with synthetic meats, laced with spices, hot and warming to throat and stomach. Top-brass food but he could afford it. As he tore a morsel from a crust Vardoon slipped into the seat at his side.

"So now we know." He set down his own bowl and reached for his spoon. "It's time to move on." He frowned at the continued noise. "Listen to them howl. Crazy—did they think the job would last forever?"

Dumarest shrugged. The noise was born of desperation, of those who had hoped to accumulate a stake so as to move on from the trap that was Polis. A futile hope—the pay was too little to provide other than sustenance. Now they had lost even that. But, tonight, the sharks would be hungry for a final killing.

"Beldo's planning a game," said Vardoon. "Cash or paper against pay. Want in?"

"No. How's he going to make sure he collects?"

"A list from the office and a few goons to take care of trouble." Vardoon tore at his bread. "They can be handled. You've run a table before, Earl, right? Maybe we could make a killing."

As Beldo hoped to do, as Imman, as Tai'Hun and a couple of others. Predators who would skin the stupid and the desperate with marked cards, loaded dice, fixed games. A part of camp life

no matter what the world. Leeches tolerated by the authorities for the kickback they provided.

"Did you hear that?" Wiess came to join them. He was trembling. "Down and out—just like that! How am I going to get by? It takes money to gain the shelter of town, more to eat and if I fall sick—what the hell can I do?"

"Pray," said Vardoon. Dumarest was more helpful.

"Offer yourself on contract," he advised. "You'll get food and shelter in return for work."

"Sure." Wiess was bitter. "Twenty hours a day and sleep in a corner. Winding up with a debt I won't be able to pay. So next season I get sold to the owners as a drudge." His hand lifted to pull at his tunic, the imagined collar around his throat. "I'd end up a damned sight worse than I am now."

"You'd be alive," said Dumarest. His bowl was empty and he pushed it aside. Hours of daylight remained and should not be wasted.

That night the wind was gentle but the ice remained and the clouds to the north were higher, darker, closer than before. Masses of vapor in tormented balance, turbulence which created vortexes, temperatures balanced on a delicate edge. High-flying craft could have seeded the mass with chemicals and artificially created eletro-compounds to trigger the mass into release and quietude but the operation took money and materials the mine owners were unwilling to spend. The profits were too small as it was, the season closing, why waste effort for so little reward?

A sudden gust sent hail rattling against the windows and Dumarest turned, tense, relaxing as he isolated the cause of the sound. Vardoon grunted from where he stood next in line.

"You've fought, Earl. On Jaldrach?"

"No."

"Other places, then. I can spot a mercenary—a good one responds to the sound of gunfire like a well-trained dog." His eyes roved over the neutral gray plastic of Dumarest's tunic and pants, the high boots, the hilt of the knife riding above the right. A match for his own dull olive, the boots different, the material lacking the polished places on which protective armor had rested. Neater, more recently refurbished, but to his eye an unmistakable uniform.

That of a traveler, a rover, an adventurer among the stars.

Ahead of them a man swore in shocked disbelief.

"This all? Hell, I damned near broke my back for a week and for this?"

"You owed for shelter, clothing, a shot of antibiotics when you skinned your knee. Next!"

A big man, smiling, a sheaf of paper in his hand. Slips given by those he had skinned. The official checked them, paid, looked to the next in line.

A short line—too many had nothing to collect.

Outside, the rafts were loading the men bound for the town. Two lifted as Dumarest watched, rising slowly, veering as their drivers gained altitude, heavy, sluggish craft, designed more for the moving of freight than speed. Neither was canopied and the men crammed into the open bodies huddled together for warmth. Above, the sun had just passed zenith.

"Keep moving there!" the supervisor yelled to those handling the loading. "Get 'em full and get 'em on their way!" He turned, scowling, his face clearing as he saw Dumarest. "Earl! I've been watching out for you. Got a minute?"

Dumarest hesitated, glancing at the loading area. Two rafts remained, both rapidly filling.

"There'll be more," said the supervisor. "Everyone will get transport."

"When?"

"Later today. The first ones were hired to do a double trip. You'll lose nothing by waiting—at least you'll have cover."

The ones expected had canopies, then. A comfort worth the delay.

"Just a word," said the supervisor, "but let's get into the warm."

His office was snug, adorned with maps, prints, geological schematics. A pile of manganese nodules rested on a table with the assay report beside them. A hammer stood in a corner together with a pair of boots caked with dried mud. A parka hung on a nail behind the door. From a cupboard the supervisor took a bottle and two glasses. Pouring, he offered one to Dumarest then lifted his own.

"Health!"

A toast to which Dumarest responded. The spirit was raw and heavy with the odor of smoke, but his system was grateful for the warmth it gave.

"A bad one," mused his host. "The storm, I mean. We got a special report—but I guess you know that."

"I suspected it when I saw the administrators leave."

"Smart." The supervisor refilled both glasses. "I've been watching you, Earl. You and some others. How are you fixed for a stake?"

"I can manage."

"So I imagined—a pity in a way, but if you were like the rest we wouldn't be talking. I'll make it short. If you want I can offer you a winter job."

Dumarest shook his head.

"Now take your time," urged the supervisor. "Think about it."

Shelter and food and warmth until the next season. Subsistence, but a smart man could add to it. One who can handle a deck, for example?" His eyes were direct. "You know what I'm talking about?"

"You've money here," said Dumarest. "Machines, stores, housing, tools, equipment and all the rest of it. It's cheaper to hire guards than to move it."

"That's right. Take on the job and you'll be on the cadre next season. Regular pay, no sweat with the hammer, one of the established. An easy number," he urged. "Extra pay for handling a digger. Just run guard during the winter, do your duty, help entertain the others and you'll not regret it." He frowned as again Dumarest shook his head. "No?"

"No." Dumarest finished his drink. "But I thank you for the offer."

"It's a good one," the supervisor insisted. "And yours if you want it."

"For how much?"

"As I said, you're smart." The man smiled and moved thumb against finger in an unmistakable gesture. "Ten percent for me—fair?"

More than fair. The man was entitled to his reward for giving a snug berth and what it entailed. But Dumarest had other plans.

"Thanks for the drinks," he said. "But the answer's still no. Why not try someone who needs the job more than I do? Wiess, for instance."

"A loser." The supervisor shook his head. "You know better than that, Earl. He's broke and desperate. He'll cut corners on the job, try to steal, try to build a stake by cheating at cards. They'll catch him and we'll be a man short. I can't risk the trouble." He shrugged, corking the bottle. "Well, think it over. I like the way

you went to work yesterday when most of the others were flapping their gums. Change your mind, let me know, eh?"

It was late when the rafts finally returned. Dumarest moved forward with those waiting, while an overseer snapped his impatience.

"Come on! Come on! Get aboard or get left. You miss this trip and you walk!"

A man said, "Which raft do I take?"

"Any you like—no reservations. Just get on and let's finish the closedown."

The man ran to where a raft was almost full. It lifted as he swung himself into the body, his legs kicking as others hauled him to safety. Wiess, panting, ran past Dumarest and swore as Vardoon barred his passage.

"What the hell? Let me on!"

"Take another one." Vardoon called to Dumarest as the man scuttled away. "Here, Earl! Over here!"

The raft he had chosen was small, canopied, the body fitted with longitudinal benches. The driver sat at his controls in the front, turning as Dumarest climbed aboard. He said, to Vardoon, "That's enough, friend. We've a full load."

The raft could have held more but Dumarest didn't argue. A light load meant greater speed and safety. He sat on one of the benches as the canopy swung into place. Beyond it the other rafts lifted, fanning out as they headed toward the town. One remained, the last aside from themselves. The overseer was talking to the driver and, as Dumarest watched, he shrugged and turned away. A final straggler made his way to it, climbed aboard, sat waiting.

"Up," said Vardoon to the driver. "Let's move!"

He joined Dumarest as the vehicle lifted, the antigrav units in the hull emitting a thin whine—an unusual sound and Dumarest frowned as he heard it. Normally the lift was silent, only the forward propulsion creating a drone from the air. But the wind may have aggravated a structural defect, badly designed units or a faulty repair giving rise to an organ-like resonance.

"Polis," said Vardoon. "I'll be glad to see the back of it. Short seasons, extremes of heat and cold, people living like moles aside from a brief period a couple of times a year." He made a sound as if about to spit. "You can keep it. New to you, Earl?"

"No."

"I guess not. A traveler lands on many strange planets. Me, I like civilized worlds. Societies which can afford to pay for certain pleasures. People who like their comfort and are willing to do something to get it."

Like waging war with hired soldiers. Using profits to buy another's blood. Dumarest stirred, looking down at the ground now far below. An unbroken expanse of whiteness which rippled as if at the touch of a caressing hand. The kiss of wind which stirred it as if it had been a sea. To the north the sky was dark with menace.

"Damned storm." A man sitting opposite scowled at the terrain. "A few more weeks and I'd have saved enough to buy a Low passage. Now I'm stuck for the winter. Come the next season I'll be ready to work for essentials. Damn the luck!"

"Some make their own," said another. "I hear Beldo cleaned up."

"So did Tai'Hun." A man sitting at the rear of the driver added his share to the conversation. "Some make it the easy way." His eyes rested on Vardoon, moved toward Dumarest. "Some don't need to make it at all."

"Meaning?" Vardoon's face twisted in a snarl. "If you've

something on your mind spit it out."

"Nothing, but—"

"We worked, we saved, we didn't gamble. You figure that's wrong?"

Dumarest said, "Forget it, Hart."

"Why? Do we have to take his sneers? I guess he thinks we're company spies or gamblers' shills." Vardoon lifted a hand, closed it into a fist. "I know just what to do about that."

"Forget it," said Dumarest again. He had no wish to draw attention, and a fight in the confines of the raft would be both stupid and dangerous. He frowned as the vehicle lurched, the whine becoming louder. "Something wrong?"

"No." The driver looked back, face strained. "Just the wind. It caught us and we veered."

A lie; there had been no gust and they had not veered. The motion had been more of a dip, a checked fall. Dumarest rose and closed the gap between himself and the driver. Facing him, the row of basic controls was bathed in a yellowish glow.

"Higher." Dumarest looked at the wavering needle of the altimeter. "Put some distance between us and the ground."

"I—"

"What's wrong with this thing?" Dumarest gripped the man's shoulder as he made no answer. "Why the small load?"

"I told you."

"Not me. Hart?" Dumarest looked at the man as he came close. "What lies did this man feed you? The raft," he snapped as Vardoon hesitated, "what did he say about it?"

"A light load makes for a quicker journey. I agree with him."

Dumarest said, "Listen to the engine. The antigrav units. You

ever hear them sound like that before? And look at the ground; we're traveling too low and too slow." His hand closed on the driver's shoulder, the fingers meeting bone. "The truth," he said coldly. "I want the truth."

"Please!" The man winced at the pain. "The synch's out. That's all, I swear it!"

"Then lift!"

Dumarest eased his grip and waited as the man tried to obey. The instruments told of his failure. The raft rose, dipped, turned to tilt a little before settling even. Below, the whiteness seemed to stream like smoke as it was blasted by a gusting wind which battered at the raft as it reared like a dying creature.

"Down!" Dumarest glanced to the north, saw the sky filled with the onrushing fury of the storm, turned to look ahead, the ground below. "Down, you fool! Land while you've got the chance!"

A chance lost even as mentioned. The wind hit them before the driver could obey, caught them, ripped the vehicle from any semblance of control. Turned it, tilted it, sent it rolling to smash in the streaming white hell below.

Chapter Two

Somewhere a man was crying; small sounds like the whimpering of a child, a lost, hurt and terrified sound. Dumarest heard it as he struggled from darkness, aware of cold and pain, a sticky something on his face. Cautiously he moved, felt a resistance against his leg, pressed and felt the barrier yield. Turning, he saw light.

It came from one side; a pale luminous glow as of crushed and scattered pearls. A ghostly shine which revealed a battered shambles. Rising, he looked at a face with wide and staring eyes that rested on a head twisted at an impossible angle. The mouth was open in the parody of a smile, the lips curved in the rictus of

death. One, at least, no longer had cause for worry.

"Earl?" Vardoon calling from somewhere out of sight. "You alive, Earl? Answer me, damn you! Are you alive?"

He was buried beneath limp bodies, his head against another, mouth pressed hard against matted hair. He groaned as Dumarest pulled him free, blinking, wincing as he touched his head. "What happened?"

"We crashed." Dumarest looked at some of the others. Two were dead, one moaned from the pain of a broken arm, all were dazed. "Get up and help."

He moved off as the man climbed to his feet. The raft had settled on one side, the canopy, he guessed, facing the west and the sun. A wild guess and unimportant; it was enough they had light in which to work. The driver was dead, lolling in his seat, neck broken, eyes still holding his final terror—a greedy fool who had risked too much and had lost the gamble. Flying an unfit vehicle for the sake of hire-money. Dead, he was beyond revenge.

Dumarest pulled him from his seat and crouched before the controls. Lights winked as he touched switches but that was all. The engines remained dead as did the antigrav units. The heaters stayed cold. There was no operating radio and no emergency beacon. He knew there would be no emergency supplies.

"Well?" Vardoon frowned as he heard the news. "No radio so no hope of rescue. So it's up to us if we hope to make it."

"There'll be others." A man was reluctant to accept the obvious. "They'll find us."

Dumarest said, "We must be covered in snow so how could they see us?"

"We'll be missed. They'll come looking."

"Like hell they will!" Vardoon boomed his contempt. "Who gives a damn about a load of scudgers from the mines? We make

it on our own or we don't make it at all."

Listening, a man said bitterly, "So what do we do, walk?"

"We survive," said Dumarest. "That's all we can do until the storm is over. We strip the dead and get them outside and share their clothing between us. Is anyone carrying a bowl? Food of any kind? Liquor? You!" He pointed to a face streaked, like his own, with dried blood. "Find a bag of some kind, a container. Fill it with snow and bring it inside to thaw. The rest of you clean up this place. Move!"

Later, as the light beyond the canopy dimmed and the temperature fell, Vardoon said, "What do you figure our chances, Earl?"

"I've had less."

"And survived, naturally, but how many of these could have done the same?" He looked from one to the other, silent shapes wrapped in clothing, huddled for mutual warmth, conserving their energy as Dumarest had advised. Some, numbed by their injuries, dozed with fitful wakenings. More were awake, engrossed with their own thoughts, eager for the escape sleep would bring but as yet unable to gain it. A few had succumbed and lay breathing with ragged echoes.

"Well?" Vardoon asked.

Dumarest chose not to answer. He eased his bruised leg and tried to ignore the throbbing of his lacerated temple. Small discomforts lost in the greater problem.

There had been no food and only a small bottle of brandy recovered from the body of one of the dead. He had it now tucked beneath his robe where it would be safe. There was no other medication, no other source of aid for the cold and starving.

"Thirty miles to town," mused Vardoon. "How far have we covered? Ten? Fifteen? Five? That driver! I wish the bastard had lived!"

Dumarest said, "Call it five. That leaves one day's march. Call it two. Easy."

"In snow God knows how deep. In freezing conditions. Without food or heat of any kind. With no way to guide us—Earl, why try to take me for a fool?"

"Two days," said Dumarest. "Call it three. Once the storm is over we'll have the sun and stars to use as markers. Movement will keep us warm. There could be game—animals will be as hungry as we will be. Fur and bone will burn and we can make soup using the stomach as a pot. Have you never hunted, Hart? Used a sling? Killed and eaten a beast over a fire fueled from its body in a pot made of its guts?" He was speaking loudly, small echoes murmuring from the diaphragm of the canopy. "We'll make it easy. No trouble at all."

Lies to soothe the listeners, Vardoon guessed, and he added his own. Not until the canopy had grown dark and the raft filled with an almost solid darkness did his lips find Dumarest's ear.

"Have you been in a situation like this before?"

"Yes."

"I guessed as much. You knew just what to do. Now tell me the truth—can we make it?"

"If you want to—yes."

The will to survive was more important than food or fire—the determination to live which kept a man going long after he thought he would have died. Dumarest stared at the invisible canopy, remembering, knowing what was to come. Life now was measured in calories. Those carrying natural fat would have greater reserves than those who had starved—and too many had starved. The result of being stranded on a hostile world with no chance to build the price of even a Low passage. To ride doped and frozen and ninety percent dead in a casket designed for the transportation of beasts. Risking the fifteen percent death rate for the sake of cheap travel.

He stirred, remembering the waking, the euphoria of resurrection. Remembering, too, the warped handlers who took pleasure in withholding the numbing drugs so as to listen to the raw screams attending the agony of returning circulation. The corpses in caskets at the end of journeys. The thin faces of those who had made it. The faces of those who had taken one gamble too many.

In the darkness a man shifted and cried out, "Lorna! Lorna, my darling!"

One man sleeping and one lost in dreams. Soon they would be nightmares and would come without sleep. A world of ice and freezing chill and barren emptiness—of hunger and growing weakness—but a world which had to wait until the fury of the storm had died.

Vardoon whispered, "When, Earl? How long will the storm last?"

"Go to sleep."

"How long, damn you? How long?"

It lasted eleven days.

The wind had been kind. Toward the end it had blown snow from the wreck, allowing scudding clouds to be seen through the canopy. The snow had heaped high, providing a measure of insulation, but even so the cold had been too intense for some. As starvation had been for others. As injuries for even more.

Of the fifteen passengers only six had survived.

They made a small crowd on the mound at the rear of the raft. Vapor rose from their mouths to hang like thin plumes in the crystal-clear air. One called out as a fleck crossed the sky.

"A raft! By God, they've found us!"

It was a bird, as Dumarest had known. He stood a few yards from the others, examining the sky, the position of the sun. Iced

snow made small crunching noises as Vardoon came to join him. The man's face, soiled, twisted, looked like a thing of delirium.

"Crazy," he said, and jerked his head back toward the others. "Two are for heading back to the workings and the others want to stay here and wait for rescue. They figure on lighting a fire and making smoke. Can you talk to them, Earl?"

"Can't you?"

"I've tried but they won't listen. Those wanting to head back think they'll get a welcome if they make it. They won't believe they'll find nothing but barred doors and a bullet if they try to break in. The rest think rescue teams are out looking for them. They want to stay. The others want to go. Crazy, the lot of them."

The result of darkness and cold, hunger and the insidious attack of delusion. The dead had been too many and too close. The dying had been too noisy. The smells, despite the cold, had been too strong. Half-dead to begin with, those who had clung to life were more than a little insane.

One looked at Dumarest as he halted before them. "You with us to return?"

"No! We stay!" A skeleton dressed in a mountain of rags waved a stick-like limb. "Stay and make smoke—the dead will burn. That's what you said, didn't you? Burn the bones."

"Burn the bones and boil the flesh," said Vardoon, harshly. "That way you might just make it. Earl, I'm coming with you."

"Any others?" Dumarest waited. "If you want to come along you're welcome but I warn you now: fall behind and I leave you. Fall down and you get yourself up or stay where you fall. No?" He gave them time to think about it. "Right I'm off."

Vardoon fell into step beside him. He made no comment; the others, given their chance, had rejected it. He didn't even look back; there was no point. The dead would dispose of the dead and, come spring, someone might find the wreck and what was left of their bodies.

"Slow down," said Dumarest. "You're walking too fast," he explained. "You'll sweat and the sweat will freeze and cost you body heat."

Obediently, Vardoon slowed his pace. "Two days, Earl? Three?"

"Why ask? You know the facts as well as I do."

And could use them as well. Dumarest recalled some of their conversations, the hints the man had let fall, the small betrayals he had made. A mercenary, perhaps, but not for long and not where the action was most fierce. A guard at times, a bodyguard at others, an entrepreneur of a kind making a living how and when he could. The scarred face could have been repaired but surgery cost money and, perhaps, he liked to advertise. Or it could be that he just didn't care. The latter was most likely, decided Dumarest. A man too impatient to worry about trifles. One dazzled by some golden dream. If so, he wasn't alone.

"Polis." Vardoon kicked at the snow. "What brought you here, Earl?"

The spin of a coin, but Dumarest didn't say so. The random choice made when it became wise for him to leave a prosperous world. One too heavily populated for his liking. Once on Polis basic caution had dictated he conserve his money. The workings had provided easy anonymity.

"Luck," he said. "All of it bad. A lying handler told me the ship was bound for Terren." Casually he added, "You know it?"

"No. Something special?"

"Just a place." Dumarest halted and studied the sky. "Which way now?"

A test and Vardoon passed it. Without hesitation he lifted a hand, pointing to a low gap between hills, a little to the right of their present line of progress.

"Through there," he said. "Then to the east a little. If we find

high ground tomorrow we might be able to spot the town. Before that if a ship arrives."

Or left, the blue shimmer of its Erhaft Field would trace a signpost in the sky.

"And if there is no ship?"

"Heat refraction. The damn place is sealed but no insulation is total and they have to breathe. At the right time of day we should be able to spot the rising currents."

But first they had to get close enough. Darkness touched the sky as they neared the pass, blanked the skies as Dumarest found a declivity and burrowed into the snow. As Vardoon settled beside him, close for the sake of mutual warmth, Dumarest produced the last of the brandy.

"One drink each," he said. "You want it now or save it for later?"

"Now." Vardoon was emphatic. "If the skies clear we can move on. I had enough sleep back in the wreck to last me a month and if we get stiff it'll be hell easing our muscles." He took the bottle, hefted it, drank, passed it back. "I wondered if you'd have sense."

"Equal shares," said Dumarest. He emptied the bottle. The brandy warmed but he knew better than to be hasty. Tired muscles needed time to rest. "We'll take an hour."

Time for the sky to clear and the stars to blaze in swaths of silver glory. Brilliant points framing sheets and curtains of luminescence, the dark patches of dust clouds, the fuzz of distant nebulae. The galaxy as seen from close to the center was an awesome spectacle.

"Worlds," mused Vardoon. "Planets of all kinds. With money you could live like a king. Good food, women, an army of your own if you wanted it. A ship to ride in—you got ambition, Earl?" He didn't wait for an answer. "All my life I've been looking for the

jackpot. The one big deal which would set me up for life. As a kid I used to think it was easy but now I know better. The dream isn't enough. Knowledge isn't enough. You've got to have those you can trust. Men to stand beside you. Friends willing to take a chance. Friends !" His tone grew bitter. "Where the hell do you find them?"

Dawn, and the pass was far behind them, the marks of their passage lost beneath the touch of a streaming wind. Ahead, snow devils rose to swirl in wild abandon while above, fragments of cloud raced across the sky. Dumarest increased the pace, careless of the sweat dewing his body. If the storm should return and catch them in the open, loss of body heat wouldn't matter. Within hours they would be dead.

"There!" Vardoon lifted a hand, squinting against the wind which lashed at his eyes. "Over there, Earl! What is it, smoke?"

A rising column of something, distorted by the swirling snow. A brownness against the white, twisting, rising to fall again.

"Birds!" Vardoon swore. "Nothing but birds!"

They grew clearer as the distance closed between them. Predators, wheeling, diving to rip at something, to soar upward, to dive again. A small flock ignoring the wind and snow in search of food. A good sign—such creatures fled for shelter at the approach of a storm. Dumarest studied them with narrowed eyes, at the point which they circled.

"A raft!" Vardoon echoed his amazement. "A wreck. We weren't the only ones to be caught in the storm."

It lay shattered, broken, metal glinting from the exposed engine. Dark spots surrounded it together with scraps of rag and metal. As they approached, the birds rose, wings beating the air, beaks gaping. Things standing half as high as a man with huge, leathery wings and curved claws as sharp as sickles, dulled now as were their cruel beaks.

"Dead," said Vardoon. "They're all dead."

Dead and reduced to bone, to grinning skulls and frozen meat. A score of bodies lying scattered around the raft where they had fallen when it crashed. Killed by the impact or hurt too badly to move. Even the barely injured would have had no chance. The raft had lacked a canopy and without shelter they would have been victims of the storm.

As now they were food for the predators.

Vardoon moved among them, looking, frowning as he moved on, halting to pick something from a corpse. A thin chain bearing a small locket which he tucked into a pocket. The trinket was of little value but would be worth a meal or a session in the baths. He moved on, halting to stare at a body.

"Earl!"

Dumarest joined him to stare at the drawn face of Wiess. He hadn't died easily; one leg was bent at an impossible angle and a film of blood coated his chin and the clothing of his chest. As yet he had been untouched but as Dumarest stooped to look closer a shadow drifted overhead, then joined by others.

"Let's move on." Dumarest straightened and stepped from the body. Overhead the birds were circling, eyes like gems, beaks parted, the rustle of wings a thin keening in the frigid air.

"A moment." Vardoon bent over the body, fingers searching. "He could have something of value. Check the others, Earl."

The dead no longer had use for what they had owned. Trinkets, rings, coins, hidden wealth—all fruit for scavengers and life itself to the desperate. The birds circled lower as Dumarest moved away.

"Earl?" Vardoon lifted his head, scowling as he saw Dumarest leave the area. "They're dead, man," he said. "Why be so squeamish?"

Caution had dictated the move. Dumarest looked again at the birds, at the man now centered beneath them, the predator who had joined the others. To the birds he was a rival robbing them

of their prey and, starving because of the storm, they would not be inclined to yield.

"Hart!"

Dumarest yelled the warning as a bird dropped to attack. It fell with folded wings, a living missile, claws extended, beak closed and poised to strike. It hit as Vardoon straightened, missing his head but tearing at his shoulder, claws ripping the layers of fabric as if they had been knives. Opened, the wings hammered like flails and the beak struck to lift, to strike again.

The blows missed the eyes but tore at the cheeks and sent blood to stain the chin, the cloth protecting the throat.

Vardoon snarled, hands lifting, fists hammering, ducking as he avoided the beak and claws, slipping as the bird rose to wheel aside, to be replaced by another, more, a half dozen frenzied, battering shapes.

"Earl! I— Earl!"

Dumarest was already running, stooping as he ran, one hand dropping to the knife in his boot, rising loaded with pointed, razor-edged steel. Ducking his head he joined the other man, cutting, the blade stabbing up at a menacing shape, feeling the blow and rake of claws on his back, the rasp of a beak on his skull. Blood showered in a carmine rain as a bird rose to flap weakly aside, to fall dying on the snow. Bait for a cluster of its fellows but others remained. Dumarest heard the thrum of wings and dodged, slipping as he threw up his left arm, feeling the shock and jar as claws tore at the muffling fabric, the plastic of his clothing beneath, ripping it to reveal the metal mesh imbedded within. Protection which saved him from laceration if not from bruising.

Recovering, he met the attack, dodging, the knife rising to send its edge against the long, scabrous throat—a cut which severed the head and sent the body flapping in a wild burst of reflex action.

As it fell Dumarest shouted, "Hart! Away, man! Away!"

<>Run and leave the field to those who had claimed it first. The dictate of caution—a claw could rip out an eye, a beak tear open a throat and nothing could be gained to balance the risk.

Vardoon snarled as he beat at a winged shape, hands clamping, twisting, breaking the neck before using the jerking body as a club to beat at others. A man touched with berserker fury, blood masking his face, eyes burning, clothing stained and smoking with freshly spilled blood.

"Hart!"

Dumarest looked up as the man lowered his arm, the dead bird trailing from his hand. Above, a silent shape dropped from the skies, a bird plummeting, claws extended, curved to strike, and would hit unless Vardoon moved but, lost in his rage, he would recognize the danger too late. Dumarest drew back his arm, threw it forward, the knife a blur as it left his fingers, to hit and drive deep into the body of the predator. Blood jetted as the creature spun, its raucous cry rising harsh and strident in a grating squawk which snapped Vardoon fully aware.

"Earl! What—"

"Move!" Dumarest ran forward, snatched up the dead bird, tugged free his knife. "Away, man! Hurry!"

Snow lifted in little cakes from beneath his boots as he led the way from the area. Behind them the birds wheeled, circling the wreck, sounding their triumph as they settled to feed on the dead. Vardoon glanced back at them, touched his face, scowled at the blood dappling his fingers.

"Damned vermin! They nearly got my eyes. That last one would have blinded me for sure if it hadn't been for you."

"I was lucky."

"You were fast," corrected Vardoon. "I've never seen anyone move as fast. Skilled, too. If you hadn't hit I'd—" He shook his head, unwilling to voice what could have happened. Ripped, blinded, at the mercy of the elements and his sole companion. Something which hadn't happened and so could now be forgotten. Looking at the dead bird Dumarest carried, he said,

"For us?"

"Yes."

"Smart thinking. I should have held onto the one I had but when that thing almost got me I lost my appetite. Well, Earl, when do we eat?"

They were safely away from the other birds and to wait longer would be to lose the body heat their prey contained.

Dumarest set down the bird, sliced it open, cleaned and skinned it, divided the carcass into two equal portions. Chewing the raw, tough flesh they moved on. That night they saw the trail of a ship rising from the field. By dawn they had reached the town.

Chapter Three

It lay in the cup of hills; a jumble of blank-walled houses roofed with truncated pyramids, the roofs adorned with windmills which flashed and glittered as they spun as if they were decorations on a festive tree. A place of narrow, winding streets designed as a protection against the knife-edged winds of winter, just as the steep roofs guarded against too great a weight of snow, the blank walls the savage impact of driven hail.

A city now closed tight against the hostile elements with movement confined to underground passages. A refuge containing warmth, food, the luxury of baths.

"If you will turn now?"

The girl was young, nubile, detailed to attend him after the session in steam and heat. Near-scalding vapor which had driven out the misery of cold, as earlier food had banished hunger. Obediently Dumarest turned to lie supine on the couch. Above, the ceiling was adorned with stripes and swirls of color each swath set with minute flecks of glistening material.

"Does this please you?" Her hands were flowers laced with steel, the oil scented with musk, her skill obvious as she probed at muscle and sinew. "A little harder? Tell me if I cause pain."

Framed against the decorated ceiling, her face was round, pert, wreathed in a helmet of russet hair cut so as to form upcurved points on either cheek. Her lips were full, smiling. She wore a short garment of diaphanous material arranged so as to leave one shoulder bare, belted to display the swell of hips and buttocks. As she worked her breasts moved in unfettered abandon.

"You've been hurt in the past." Her fingers traced the pattern of cicatrices on his torso, thin lines of scar tissue which were the fruit of edged and pointed steel. The price he had paid to learn a savage trade. "A fighter?"

"No."

"But no stranger to the arena." She was wise beyond her years. "From the workings? If so you may find it hard to get along. If you're interested I know someone who could arrange a bout."

"I'm not."

"A pity. If you're as good as you look you could clean up during the winter."

Or die if luck was against him. Be maimed, crippled, slashed and left with severed tendons, blinded, ruined. He inhaled, filling his lungs with the scent of perfume and oil, adding the remembered smells of sweat and blood, the stink of fear. Seeing the glare of lights, the ring of avid faces, the feral eyes of those who had paid to watch. Vultures screaming for action. Men and women eager to taste vicarious pain, to enjoy vicarious wounds. Beasts yammering for the spectacle of death.

"Relax," said the girl. "You're getting tense." Her hands moved to knead his thighs. "You staying the winter?"

"Probably."

"You could do worse. Things quiet down after a while. Ships don't call during the bad season and there's not much doing until the spring. That's why a good fighter can make decent money. Anything which entertains is popular and a clever man could really enjoy himself. In fact I guarantee it." Her tone left no doubt as to her meaning. "I hope you stay."

"Why?"

"That's a stupid question." She lifted her hands from his body. "That's all for now. If you want to sleep go ahead. If you want anything else just press the button."

The bell which commanded a variety of joys—at a price.

Alone, Dumarest looked at the decorated ceiling and the images it contained. Figures born from the glint of light in color, the shape, the twists which caught the eyes and lulled with hypnotic associations. A dead man with a twisted leg, the gaping beak of a dying bird, a figure stained in blood, which took on the shape of a cowed man with a bleak, skull-like face. A smear of scarlet which spread as he watched to fill his vision.

As the Cyclan spread to engulf worlds.

The Cyclan which hunted him and would always hunt him as long as he held the secret they were determined to possess. The sequence of units which formed the affinity twin and which would give them complete domination of the galaxy.

As yet he was safe, there were no cybers on Polis; the planet was too insignificant. A commercial undertaking with a scatter of minor industries and scant farming. A place to be avoided by any traveler, for to be stranded was to starve. Yet word could have been sent and agents could be watching. The Cyclan knew he was in the area and would comb each world in turn to find him. Only by wildly random moves could he hope to elude them and, if what the girl said was true, he must leave soon or be trapped.

Dumarest turned, restless, conscious of a fatigue deeper than one born of muscular exertion. A single enemy could be faced

and beaten then to be forgotten, but how to defeat an organization which owned worlds and spun a web as far as men had reached? Each journey he took could be the one leading to destruction. Each man he met, each woman, could be an agent, a creature hungry for reward.

Vardoon?

The possibility existed but was remote. The man was almost what he seemed—almost because no man ever wholly dropped his facade. Someone with a past, someone who had been hurt in that past, someone who was doing his best to get along. But why had he come to Polis? Why work as a scudger at the mine?

Poor work with poor pay and yet the man had eaten well and his clothing, though worn, had been good. A man with some reserve of money then, who hadn't been dependent on the job. A man biding his time? One set to watch?

Dumarest didn't think so. The odds were against it; the man had been at the workings long before he'd landed and an agent would have stayed in town so as to check the landings. Vardoon was just a man who'd chosen badly and made the best of a bad world. Working, conserving his money— he'd done the same himself.

Relaxing, Dumarest looked again at the ceiling feeling calmer than before. The field had been deserted when they'd arrived but ships were due; the *Chendis* in three days' time, the *Sabia* and *Nordanus* shortly after. He would leave on one of them—which, he had yet to decide, but all offered escape. Until then he could do nothing but wait.

The underground streets followed the pattern of those above, the only addition being a wide, straight passage leading past the warehouse area to the field. A passage sealed now with heavy doors, as were the other exits from the town. Dumarest checked it as he did the rest of the meandering maze; the twelve-foot-high roof studded with globes which shone with a variety of hues. A small and limited world which offered the usual entertainments; a theater, taverns, places which sold

chemical analogues so the bored could experience the sensations of beasts, others which offered sensory tapes which gave one the illusion of being burned, drowned, flogged, loved—mental titivation which held its own insidious peril. Restaurants, music halls, casinos.

The Joy Palace was the best and Dumarest entered it, a watchful guard relaxing as he bought chips and paid his entrance fee. Inside, the roof swept high in a series of domed tiers all brilliant with a wash of shifting color. Artificial greenery softened the polished surface of stone and screened discreet couches. As he passed one, a woman sitting on the cushions lifted a hand.

"A moment, handsome. Like to play a game with me? A spin decides the outcome. You win and I entertain you for an hour. You lose and you pay the cost for two? Agreed?"

She shrugged as he moved on with a shake of the head. A philosopher, she would wait for another less cautious or more optimistic. Yet she felt a vague regret that Dumarest had shown so little interest.

Inside the gambling area he paused to look around.

The place was warm, scented with gusts of vagrant air rich with perfume, the floor firm yet soft beneath his feet. Bubbles drifted overhead, each shimmering with rainbows as if made of oil. Diversions to amuse, some emitting a thin, high keening, others a low, throaty laughter. The floor held tables for dice, cards, spinning wheels. The games were as familiar as the rest; spectrum, poker, starburn, brenzo, high-low-man-in-between. A transparent globe held a dust of variegated color which cleared by suction as Dumarest watched. The voice of the operator was a mechanical drone.

"Bet on the survival attribute of your choice. Pick your hue and watch as it struggles to eliminate competition. The photometer will tell which color is ascendant at the expiration of sixty seconds. Place your bets now. The combat begins."

Blue had won the last bout and the betting was heavy on red

and green. Dumarest placed chips on the blue, waited as the globe filled with a swirling mass of spores, picked up his winnings as a lamp flashed to signal his success.

Luck, but favoring the house and he moved on to stand at a dice game, to pass on to a wheel of fortune, to spend an hour at the poker table, which he left richer than he had started. Only then did he see Vardoon.

The man stood at the far side of a roulette wheel placed beneath a circling cluster of shimmering bubbles which weaved in apparent random in their imprisoning magnetic field. He was sweating, pearls of moisture thick on forehead and cheeks, lying in beads on the ridges of scar tissue. His hands were clenched, knuckles whitening as the croupier called the winner.

"Twelve. Red."

A simple game with simple rules. A wheel marked in thirty-six divisions, one white, the others divided between red and black. Even money on the colors, thirty-five times the stake on a winning number. If the ball settled in the white slot the house took it all.

"Place your bets." The croupier's voice held the familiar, emotionless drone. "Place your bets." A pause then, as the wheel spun. "No more bets."

Vardoon lost.

And again.

And again.

Dumarest studied him from the far side of the table, noting the betraying quiver of his hands, the tension of the muscles around the eyes and mouth. The lips were clamped with pressure, the eyes glazed with concentration. Once, when a girl bumped into him, he snarled with barely controlled rage. Sweat ran unnoticed from his chin.

These danger signs others had recognized and they moved

deftly into position. Neatly dressed men with bland faces and eyes of chipped and unfeeling glass. Servants of the casino who had seen others break when their luck had run too bad for too long; women who had gone into screaming hysteria, men who had run wild in a berserker frenzy. From their interest alone it was obvious Vardoorn was near the edge.

"Thirty-one," droned the croupier. "Black."

Vardoorn had backed thirty. He looked at the pile of chips before him, hesitated for a moment, then with an abrupt gesture thrust them all on the black.

Dumarest loaded chips on the red.

He said, "Tell me, Hart, how many survived the crash we were in? Nine? Ten?"

"What?" Vardoorn looked at him, blinking. "Earl?"

Dumarest was patient. "The crash, Hart. How many survived?"

"At first? I don't know. Eight, maybe? Nine? Call it eleven."

"Eleven it is." Dumarest backed the number with a low denomination chip. "Good to see you again, Hart. Have a drink after this spin?" Words to allay the fears of those standing by to act in case of need. Two drinks, maybe. "Well, there she goes!"

The wheel spun, the ball bouncing, coming to a final rest. Twenty-eight and red.

Picking up his winnings, Dumarest said, "Let's go get that drink."

Vardoorn needed it. He slumped in a chair as Dumarest ordered, the waitress returning with tall glasses filled with ice and flame. Half vanished at a single gulp and Vardoorn scowled as he looked at the remainder.

"Luck," he said. "I guess I used all mine up in one go out there

in the snow. I was crazy to think it would last." He emptied the glass, watched as Dumarest ordered more. "Well, at least you made out all right."

"Thanks to you."

"What?"

"You forgot the first rule of gambling," said Dumarest. "When you're desperate to win you never do. So I backed against you. The only real danger was losing to the house but, even then, the odds were in my favor." He added quietly, "How much, Hart?"

"Did I lose? Too much." The man reached for his second drink, swallowed, set it down a third empty. "My own fault but two days in this place was getting me down. And, at first, I won. A real lucky streak which turned sour but how was I to know that it would turn bad on me? So I changed games and won then started losing and, well, I guess you know how it is. Not that it matters, I can stand it."

Dumarest said, "You're lying."

"Now wait a minute, Earl!"

"You're broke," said Dumarest. "You didn't have much to start with and you tried to build your stake. Why else would you try to rob a dead man who you knew had nothing."

"Wiess?" Vardoon reached for his glass. "You don't miss much, do you? All right, that was a mistake, but most men hold a little something back. Cash for emergencies, a trinket, something. But you're wrong, Earl. I've money—enough for a Low passage. I hung onto that."

That, at least, demonstrated a degree of sense. Dumarest sipped at his own drink. Vardoon was an interlude, they had parted on reaching the town and would part after the drink and what the man chose to do was his own business.

He said, "Earl, I've been thinking. That world you mentioned, Terrel?"

"Terren."

"That's the one. Is it far?" He added hastily, "What I mean is it takes money to travel. You know?"

"I know."

"That's why I went to the tables." Vardoon pursed his lips as if about to spit. "Crazy, but I'd had enough. Win or bust and what the hell—we only live once. But before I go I'd like to make my pile. And that's crazy too, in a way. Am I talking sense?"

Dumarest shook his head.

"You think it's the drink?" Vardoon looked at his glass, again empty. "Back there, at the table, you saved me, right? Those goons would have jumped me if you hadn't stepped in. I saw them. I was gone but I saw them and I was about ready to blow." He looked at his hands, at the fists they made, and deliberately straightened his fingers. "I get that way at times," he said. "I just seem to go crazy—like out there on the snow when those damned birds attacked us. You saved me then, too, Earl. Not many would have done that. Not then and not at the table just now." He hesitated as he had at the table and then, as before, seemed to reach a sudden decision. "Listen, Earl, I'll give it to you straight. I've enough for a Low passage but that isn't enough for what I want. Stake me and I'll show you how to make a fortune. The biggest fortune you've ever dreamed of. Throw in with me and you'll be rich."

A bubble drifted, came within reach, lifted as Dumarest blew against it. A shimmering thing of swirling color, the sound it made was one of derisive laughter.

Vardoon heard it, guessed what Dumarest must be thinking, spoke with a desperate calmness as if aware he would be given no second chance.

"You've heard it all before, right? In a hundred taverns where men come up with secret coordinates of worlds loaded with easy pickings. Bonanza, Jackpot, Eldorado, Earth, Avalon—all

mythical planets but always you'll find someone who knows just how to get there. Someone who'll give you the location—if the price is right. And you think this is the same. Babble from a man who acted the fool and lost his stake at the table. One who is stranded, maybe, desperate to find the cost of a passage. Well, Earl, I'm desperate but not because of that. Desperate to find those who'll help me get hold of what's waiting. Desperate enough to try it alone if there's no other way. But before I can do that I've got to get there and travel costs money I haven't got."

Dumarest said, "You mentioned Earth—do you know where it is to be found?"

"What?" Vardoon frowned, impatient. "No, nor Jackpot or any of the others. But look around and you'll find someone to tell you. All you need is money."

It wasn't that simple. Vardoon was right in most of what he'd said, but not even the most desperate beggar would claim to know the whereabouts of Earth. Even to hint at such knowledge would be to betray his falsity. Not even the most credulous would believe him.

"Money." Vardoon closed a hand into a fist. "That and someone I could trust. Just one would be enough. A man to watch my back, to stand his turn, to stand at my side. A friend. Earl—"

"No."

"You don't believe me. Well, I can't blame you for that. But what if I can show you proof? Give it to you? Girl!" Vardoon's hand rose with his voice to summon the waitress. "Water," he ordered. "A jug and two clean glasses." As she moved off he dug at his throat, fingers slipping beneath his collar, reappearing locked beneath the links of a chain. It supported a small, flat box two inches long, and half as wide, half again as thick. The surface was smooth, polished to a dull sheen. Vardoon held it in his hand, waiting until the water had been delivered and they were again alone. "Look," he said. The lid of the box opened beneath the pressure of his thumb. "Look, Earl. Look!"

Dumarest saw a golden pearl.

It rested in a niche smoothed and polished to a mirror finish, a round globule of effulgent material which reflected the light in glints and sparkles. A thing far too small for its container, rolling as Vardoon moved it, reaching the end to roll back again as if made of steel. Yet the surface looked soft, yielding, a substance resembling a jelly.

"I had three," whispered Vardoon. "One I sold. One I gave to a companion. The other lies before you. Wealth, Earl. Worth a hundred times its weight in precious metal. Worth more than the wealth of a world to a dying man."

"Ardeel," said Dumarest.

"Ardeel," agreed Vardoon. "The nectar of heaven. You know of it?"

"By repute. Talk among mercenaries. Some claimed to have seen it, a few even to own it."

"Fools—they invited assassination."

"So a couple of them discovered," said Dumarest. "As did a trader who claimed to have it for sale. A high price, naturally, but worth it. Some believed him and one proved him a liar."

"And?"

"The rest gave him a chance. They made sure he had a supply then burned off his legs. They watched as he lay screaming, waiting, urging him to take his anodyne. They waited two days before losing patience and finishing him off."

"Hard men," said Vardoon. "Hard justice. Your kind, Earl?"

"I don't like being cheated."

"I'd be a fool to try it." Vardoon reached for the jug and slopped water into a glass. With a straw he fashioned a crude pair of tweezers and held the golden pearl within its jaws. "A

little," he said. "Only a little." With a steady hand he dunked the golden substance into the water, counted to three, lifted it and replaced it within the box. Snapping the lid shut he tucked it back beneath his tunic. "And now, Earl, for the proof."

Dumarest looked at the proffered glass, at the man who extended it. He had made his decision regarding Vardoon and had no reason to doubt him, yet old habits remained.

"You don't trust me," said Vardoon. "Well, you are not to be blamed for that. After me, then."

He drank and there was no doubt he was genuine. Taking the glass, Dumarest lifted it to his lips, sniffed, smelled nothing and drank.

Waiting, he stared at a clock set into a pillar of onyx; a gilt-figured thing with female shapes wreathing the edge in wild abandon. Its second hand was a luminous streak of scarlet, a color as bright and warm as the woman who had worn it in a cascade of silken tresses.

"Darling! Earl, my darling!"

She came toward him as he turned, smiling, arms outstretched, the rich, full curves of her body taut against the golden material of her garment, belted at the waist to hug the neatness of her figure. Green eyes sparkled as the full lips parted. Hair swirled as if formed of living flame.

Kalin!

A ghost which lingered and would always linger as long as he drew breath. The woman who had given him so much and left him with a burden he could have done without—which had made him a target for those claiming it as their own.

"My darling! My own wonderful darling!"

Her voice was as he remembered, her hands, the smile showing the teeth, the eyes. Eyes which once had become empty windows. Which had remained that way when the woman, the

real woman, had deserted the magnificent shell she had chosen to wear. The shell he would always remember.

As he could never forget the gift she had bequeathed him; the secret which made him a hunted man.

"I'm so lucky to have found you, Earl," she whispered, and now he could smell her perfume, the seductive scents which accentuated her femininity. "And in such an interesting place. Shall we win a fortune? Go hunting? Have fun in the snow? Hurry, darling! Hurry!"

And they were up and out, the snow crisp beneath his boots, the sky a cold vista of scintillant glory. To run and slide over endless, undulating dunes of glinting crystal with a fresh breeze caressing his cheeks. To plunge into a steaming pool and there to sport with darting fish amid which her nudity gleamed with alabaster temptation. To rise and feel the demanding heat of her body, to see the eyes of lambent emerald widening in satiation, to be aware of his achievement, his dominance, his bursting health and vitality.

To soar above the ice-bound terrain like a god with his face turned toward the stars.

To the flame of scarlet which slashed like a sword across the universe.

One which became the second hand of an ornate clock.

Dumarest looked at his hand, at the glass it held, then again at the clock. The red pointer had moved barely ten seconds around the dial. He frowned, recalling the things he had done, the space he had covered—all in so short a time?

"A trick." Vardoon sighed, breathing deeply, rubbing his hands over his face. His eyes held a haunting regret. "It's just a trick."

An illusion born of association—if the hand had been silver would Derai have come to him? If black, would Lallia have risen from the dead? Lavinia come to laugh and sport at his side?

"Dreams," said Vardoon softly. "Hallucinations so strong they seem more than real. The body metabolism slowed as if you'd taken quick time while the mind spins fantasies. In seconds you live hours of subjective experience. Can you guess what it means to a dying man?"

He rubbed his face again as if dispelling ghosts.

"The old," he said. "The diseased and incurable. A friend to every mercenary caught up in a war. The thing you need when you've been hit and are lying burned, broken, your stomach ripped open and your guts spilled in the mud. Take it and die—but you'll die smiling."

Tasting paradise before the final darkness.

Dumarest said, "You had three?"

"As I told you."

"And sold one?"

"To a mercenary captain in return for certain favors. The other went to a woman and I sleep easier because of it. The last I keep."

His tone brooked no argument and Dumarest gave him none. The thing could be sold but Vardoon needed it more than money. It was his weapon against his heritage; the fear of pain and death.

"Come in with me," he urged. "A full share in return for the stake—all the money you could ever use."

If they lived to collect it—Dumarest had no illusions of easy wealth.

He said, "Where?"

"Sacaweena—the rest I'll tell you when we're on our way. We could leave on the *Chendis* and transship at Telge. I'll get the necessary equipment after we land and then—" Vardoon broke

off, breathing deeply, sweat shining on his ravaged face. "Freedom," he said. "An end to slaving my guts out for keep. Of getting shot at for pay. Of living cheap and counting the cost and never knowing what the next world will bring. All life's a gamble but sometimes the odds are too great. Money will change that. With money a man can do what he wants."

"Sacaweena?"

"That's right, Earl, but without me you'd find nothing. Sacaweena—once they called it Erce."

Erce! An ancient name for Earth!

Chapter Four

Waking, Rham Kalova looked at the groined roof of the bedchamber, seeing the lights which ran across the stones, the central orb now brightly cerulean. The wind from the sea, the skies clear, the temperature rising, humidity low, the time three hours after dawn, details absorbed even as he turned to examine more signals, feeling the same warm satisfaction he had felt when he checked the weather. The twenty highest stockholders had altered their holdings little during the night, but Arment had plunged heavily in mining while Barracola had shed his offshore investments. Fools, the pair of them, and he felt the snug comfort of continued security. While they acted in such a wild manner his major holding was safe but, he knew, even as he warmed to the safety indicated by the signals, the wolves would be gathering. Sharper now, hungrier, eager for the kill—but again he would outwit them all. He and Cyber Zao.

Musing, he felt a sharp envy at the other's ability even while recognizing his own dependency. To be able to predict the course of events from a bare handful of data, to extrapolate the most probable path any act would incur and so both to anticipate and guard against the inevitable reaction was tantamount to having the ability to manipulate the future. But Zao was quick to deny this ability, insisting that he could do no more than advise, to use trained logic and skill to make his predictions, and yet that

same logic and skill had bested savage attacks on his holdings and maintained him as the Maximus, the acknowledged ruler of Sacaweena.

Yet he could be bested given the right opportunity, the right combination of circumstances despite the advice of the cyber. When greed grew too strong, and so did the hunger for power and the envy in which he was held, then they would strike and it would take all his skill and cunning to forestall the attack. Only their mutual hate and antagonism had saved him since that time, years ago now, when he had taken the greatest risk of his life and had, incredibly, won.

Won to rule the world and to lie in an uneasy bed.

The lights changed as he watched, showing the flow of holdings; Lobel had gained at Prador's expense, Chargel was edging upwards as was Traske. A combination? It was most probable and the threat, though small, could not be ignored. He would monitor the increase and take steps to negate it should it rise too high. An alliance with Veden? One with Macari? Both were lacking in ambition and neither had love for the others. Well, he would see—for now it was enough simply to watch.

A bell chimed and a soft voice whispered from the air. "Maximus, the hour has come for your waking. Do you wish to continue your repose?"

"No." He softened the snap of his voice. "I am awake. Instruct Cyber Zao to attend me."

An unnecessary precaution, but having paid the fee to the Cyclan there was no reason why he should not make use of the service provided. He halted the movement of his hand; to summon aid was to admit, if only to himself, the growing weakness of his body, yet to refuse it was to act without calculated logic. Would Zao refuse?

The answer caused him to throw back the covers and rise from the bed, to stand with one hand clutching the ornate headboard. A cyber did not admit to physical weakness; to Zao his body was a machine, an artifact of flesh and blood to be

fueled and maintained in a state of optimum condition but never to be pampered lest it develop ingrained weakness of its own. An odd concept—could a body have a will and desire not of the brain? Appetites and passions divorced from conscious decision?

A question to be mulled over later but now other work had to be done. He released his grip on the board, thankful the expected dizziness had not materialized—further proof of Zao's skill. The new medication he had suggested seemed to be working. His mind, too, held a new brilliance—the thought, as to the individual life of the body, for example, and things seemed to be sharper, clearer than before. Or it could be the result of contrast—a man with repaired vision often thought he saw better than before when the truth was that he had forgotten the power of his sight when young.

These musings had no place and he moved toward the bathroom, the mirrors fogging as they reacted to his presence, water streaming from above as he stepped into the shower. A gentle rain of soothing warmth, strengthening to a driving storm, a blast of stinging droplets. A torment he endured for moments only then the pressure eased and again he stood in a warm and soothing rain as lather graced his body to be washed away, replaced with more, followed by effulgent lotions and delicate perfume.

A trace, no more, he had no liking for the prevailing fashion, but even so he wrinkled his nose as he stepped toward the mirrors. Fernesh, he guessed, with some rose and a touch of musk. A blend suitable for his years and dignity and an armor against any unsuspected exudation. A ruler should be sweet to the nostrils of his people in more ways than one.

Sweet and strong, but as the mirrors cleared to his command he saw his failure.

Still tall, his shoulders wide, the face still with a stern, patrician grace, yet the flesh of chest and stomach betrayed their weakness, the wasting of muscle in arms and thighs, the shrinkage of calves, the ugly protrusions of the bones of feet and knees. Surgical art could only do so much and to hope for more was to yearn for the impossible. Patching and grafting, toning,

regrowths, transplanting of hair, replacements— all were but delaying tactics against the relentless pressure of age. And, each day it seemed, the battle was a little more lost, the victory of the grave a little closer.

Why did men have to die?

Why did he—when he had so much?

The chime broke his introspection, the soft voice a velvet caress. "Maximus, Cyber Zao awaits your pleasure."

"Let him wait—no!" The Cyclan was not to be flouted. "Let him be admitted."

An honor he wouldn't recognize or, if he did, would fail to appreciate. To him as to all cybers such things were of little value; demonstrations of the emotional sickness from which they did not suffer. Had he ordered, Zao would have waited his pleasure and felt no anger or irritation as now he would feel no pleasure or satisfaction. The only joy any cyber could experience was that of mental achievement.

He rose as Kalova entered the lounge from the bathroom, a robe covering his nakedness. An ornate thing of fine weave blazoned with intricate designs in a variety of colors with glitter at sleeves and throat. A robe which seemed cheap and gaudy in contrast to the cyber's own; one of scarlet, the Seal of the Cyclan proud on its breast.

"My Lord!" A salutation accompanied by a slight inclination of the shaven head. "I trust you are well?"

"Well enough."

"Your orders, my lord?"

Kalova gestured to the wall, the blaze of signals matching those in his bedroom. "What do you think?" He waited, one hand smoothing back the still-damp mane of his hair. Thick locks streaked with gray which hung low over the nape of his neck, trimmed and shaped to accentuate the clean lines of his profile.

"Well?"

"Normal movement, my lord." Zao was, always, calm, his tone a smooth modulation divorced of all irritating qualities. "There was a storm during the night, and a rise in the ion count usually results in heightened emotions. The trading, while at a time frantic, leveled out an hour before dawn. My prediction is that by noon the situation will be much the same as yesterday with the exception of the holdings of Arment and Barracola. The former will rise and the latter fall."

"And later?"

"Each trend will reverse."

"The rest?" Kalova was asking too much and he knew it. "Never mind. Can you assess Chargel and Traske?"

A stupid question and he had betrayed his concern by asking it. Given the data, Zao could provide the probable outcome. To have phrased the request in the way he had smacked of doubt as to the cyber's ability. Better to have given a straight order. Better still to have remained silent. The day he was unable to check the situation for himself would be the day he would be bested. That day was not yet.

"They are planning something, right? Uniting to achieve a common goal. But what? They don't have the power to threaten me and aren't popular enough to gain the support of many others. A kill, you think? Against whom?"

Zao didn't hesitate. "Their target is Prador, my lord."

"Prador?" The lights shifted, blinked, settled to tell the man's holdings. "Prador!" Kalova studied the signals. "Holdings in mining, offshore installations, refining, property, land to the north—what can they hope to gain from him?"

"A new vein of copper has been discovered in the Tamplin mine," said Zao. "Major control will determine the extent of production and the acquiring of Prador's shares will give Arment that control. Chargel and Traske have united to prevent that

from happening. They will bring pressure to bear with other interested parties and force Prador to yield the stock to them."

And, once the pressure was on, the man would have his back to the wall.

"If I back Arment to gain control what will be the outcome?"

"That depends on your decision as to the production. Limited, it will force the price up and lead to inflation. Expanded, it will cheapen the product but at the same time increase the value of the shares because of gained turnover. Continued, the trend will negate all its beneficial qualities by creating a glut. Workers will be discharged, consumption be lowered, recession induced. The trend will reverse itself, naturally, but not for a number of years." Zao added, "The prediction is in the order of 99.5 probability."

"Not certainty?"

"There can be no such thing as absolute certainty, my lord." Zao was patient. "Always there remains the unknown factor which must be taken into account. Events of astronomical improbability which yet could occur."

Such as a man living forever? A possibility the Cyclan must accept. Did cybers fear death? Would Zao, for example, fight to the last to retain his individual identity?

A question the cyber could have answered but never would. When old he would be taken, his brain freed of its hampering prison of flesh, placed in a vat of nutrient fluid and added to the other brains forming the tremendous complex of Central Intelligence. To live for endless millennia, conscious and aware, safely buried beneath miles of rock on a bleak and lonely world. His destiny and reward—if he did not fail.

Carmodyne had built the church, hiring the best architects and designers, using the best of materials to construct a soaring edifice of arches and gables, of peaks and a soaring tower in which he had set a sonorous bell.

Brother Tobol had objected.

"Why the bell, my lord?"

"Why?" Carmodyne, big, bluff, impetuous, had snorted his impatience. "Why to summon the worshipers, of course."

"To summon?" Brave in his annoyance, Tobol had shaken his head. "We do not issue orders, my lord. We do not demand suppliants to come to us. The Church of Universal Brotherhood wields no compulsion."

"But how else can they tell when to come to worship?"

"To worship what? Stones? Glass? Metal? Faith is not housed in buildings, my lord. It lives in the heart."

Carmodyne had been hurt. "Are you saying you don't like the building? That you object to my having given it to you?"

The last, at least Tobol could answer with inoffensive truth.

"My lord we are grateful for all you do. For all you give. For your generosity and kindness and concern. If I have offended I crave forgiveness." A trained psychologist, Tobol knew how to play on emotion. Knew also when to be humble, when to sooth and, despite his misapplied generosity, Carmodyne had meant well.

A man now dead but the building he had left remained a burden to the church as it did to his heiress. Looking up at the soaring tower, Fiona Velen pursed her lips with barely disguised anger.

"The fool! To have spent so much for so little! Typical of my uncle but now I have to meet the cost. How much do you think it would bring at auction?"

"Very little, my lady." Brother Tobol, now older by a year, shrugged thin shoulders beneath the brown homespun of his robe. "The adornments are built into the fabric and removing them would cost more than they are worth. The design is hardly

suiting to commercial purposes nor does it lend itself to regular habitation. Your uncle, I fear, was poorly advised."

By romantic notions culled from old books and legends.

Tales of an age which had never been illustrated by cities and towers of the imagination. Castles, strongholds, places of ancient worship—what had made the fool spend so much?

Watching the play of emotion over her strongly boned face the monk said quietly, "There will be no protest at any decision you choose to make. In the meantime, may it be used as your uncle intended?"

A memorial if nothing else, and a living one; despite her anger she had to admit that. If only the charges had been settled she would have been able to look at it with greater pleasure for, in its way, it was a masterpiece. But who could use beauty as collateral? Buy shares with artistic appreciation?

The land it stood on could be sold, of course, and the new owner would be responsible for upkeep and charges due. Arment? A moment and she rejected the idea; the man was too busy building his holdings. Judd? Attracted to her as he was he could be less than cautious but she knew him too well not to guess at the price. One she was reluctant to pay. Prador? Hurt by the recent attack he was in no condition to do other than lick his wounds. Helm? If he bought it at all it would be to convert it to rubble.

The problem annoyed her. Deals were made in the comfort of detachment; lands and properties bought, sold, offered at auction in an endless flow of manipulation. To see the place, to talk to the monk, to imagine her uncle standing where she was standing now, remembering his voice, his manner, his infectious laughter—what had made him do it?

"Some wine, my lady?" Tobol glanced at the ruby sun now low in the green-hazed sky. "Some food, perhaps? We have cakes and bread spiced with various flavors. A hobby," he confessed. "To mix and knead and bake. Had I not joined the church I think I would have been happy as a baker."

And he would have made a good one, she decided after tasting the proffered delicacies. As Samuel would have made a good vintner if the wine was of his making. As Jeld, the youngest, a good attendant. He had been both deft and silent, not even the sandals covering the bareness of his feet audible on the tessellated floor. Only the burning intensity of his eyes had spoiled the image of the perfect servitor.

The eyes of a fanatic—but all monks had to be that. Why else did they choose to live as they did?

"Some more cake, my lady?" Tobol gestured to a plate heaped with elaborate confections of sugar and nuts crusting convoluted pastry. "A little more wine?" He signaled for the table to be cleared as, again, she shook her head. "Would you care to see more of the church? There is an interesting carving in the northeast corner which may amuse you and the pattern of light thrown on the paving from the clerestory is at its best this time of day."

The food and wine had soothed her and she had spent too much time not to waste a little more. The carving lived up to its promise and she was entranced by the cunning pattern of light which threw the interior into a cavern dusted with rainbows. Carmodyne's work? Had he ordered the placing of the tinted glass as he must have commissioned the carving?

She remembered the face, the unmistakable parody of his own, the lips curved in laughter, the eyes crinkled with smiles. A gross, almost grotesque image, and yet it held a certain magic. As did the flowing pattern of light, the combination of hues, shadows, striations. Again she wondered why he had done it. Why build such an edifice? A question she put bluntly to Tobol.

For a moment he hesitated then said, "I believe it was because he loved beauty, my lady. Not, perhaps, the frail and delicate beauty of a flower but something on a grander scale. It had to be big and bright and splendid so he built something high and wide and filled it with light."

Light and space and hope for the afflicted. She wondered why

the monk had neglected to mention that, and had failed, also, to stress the comfort given to those who came to receive it. These questions were an irritation—why was she so concerned? Carmodyne was dead and his dream should die with him.

Watching the raft as it carried her back to the city and her home, Brother Jeld said bitterly, "Well, there she goes. How long now before the church is in ruins?"

"A building is not the Church," said Tobol firmly. "We can do without it if we must."

"To use the one you started with? The tent set up at the edge of the field? Small accomplishment for two decades of labor, Brother."

A score of years during which Jeld had grown from boy into man. Time to be accepted as a novice, to be tested, trained, to become a fully fledged monk and to be sent to Sacaweena on his first mission.

Tobol wished he had been sent elsewhere.

This was an uncharitable thought and he did his best to crush it but, as at the present, it returned to disturb his equilibrium. Was it pride which made him chafe at the younger man? If so it was a sin and must be eradicated, but it was a sin which Jeld more than shared. Pride in position and attainment led to the pain of others; servants, those less high, those needing support. Pride in possessions warped the basic fabric of human nature, for to love things more than living creatures was to invite evil.

Did Jeld hold the building in higher regard than his sworn purpose in life?

Watching him, Tobol was reluctant to believe it. The face, limned by the dying light of the sun now resting on the watery horizon, held the firm resolution of youthful dedication, but that was to be expected. As was the fire in the eyes, the impatience, the fretting at what must have seemed illogical barriers. As, too, was the yearning for power, the ability to sweep aside all the

obstructions which hindered the final glory of Man.

The moment when each could look at the other and realize the basic truth. *There, but for the grace of God, go I.*

The millennium which he would never see. As Jeld would never see or any monk now living. Men bred too fast and traveled too far for that but even while accepting that he would never see the culmination of his work, Tobol was content to do what he could—to alleviate suffering, to feed the starving, to comfort those in need. To set the example he wished others to follow.

A point he emphasized as he walked with Jeld across the sward surrounding the church.

"Of all dangers men face when dealing with their fellows pride is the most insidious. It seems so natural to display success, to show the world we have gained an advantage or achieved a measure of gratification. A man will boast of a new raft, a boat, his promotion. A woman of her new gown, her new home, a better situation. Small things, harmless it would appear, but that appearance is deceptive. For such things feed envy and envy can destroy."

"The church," said Jeld. "You are talking about the church."

This time Tobol made no play on the word. "Yes, Brother, this church. I was against it from the first and I thought you knew why. How many faiths have foundered because the original intention became lost in a desire for pomp and possessions? That danger we must avoid above all others, for to display wealth would set us apart from those we are dedicated to serve. Pride can have no place in our existence."

Which was why all monks, even the highest, wore the same brown robe, the same sandals on bare feet, had the same look of deprivation.

Food was for the starving and to wear a gem was to insult those to whom the bauble would mean food and warmth and medicine. To preach was to offend with its assumption of superiority and was itself a display of pride. To serve. To help the

afflicted. To tend the sick and ill and to ease the hearts and souls of the troubled—the life of a monk.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Jeld halted to look beyond the church at the ocean below the high ground on which it stood. The light from the sun painted the spire with ruby, turning it into a glowing pillar of flame. "If she decides against us—what can we do?"

"We can hope," said Tobol quietly. "And pray."

There was nothing else and the younger man knew it. Even so, Tobol saw the sudden clenching of his hand, the tension made manifest in the jaw, the throat, signs obvious to the trained eye, even though the face had remained impassive in the frame of the thrown-back cowl. Impatience controlled but present, and the old monk could feel sympathy. How often, when young, had he felt the same frustration?

Too often and too long ago but the time which had seamed his face and taken his hair had also curbed his impatience. As it would curb Jeld's. As it would teach him that, while a monk needed to feel, yet that feeling must not be too narrow, too intense. It was right to care for the sick—but *all* the sick. To be concerned over the poor—but *all* the poor. That to burn yourself out over one individual was to rob the rest. To care too much about one building to diminish the importance of all other churches.

Yet the one Carmodyne had built would be missed.

He let his eyes run over the structure as they made their way back. A computer had determined stress levels and tolerances, the optimum spans and arches, but an artist had placed his own imprint on the whole and the man finally responsible had sealed that with his own peccadilloes.

The carving, for instance, had he ordered the mason to be so outrageous? The mosaic in the south transept—had he planned the transfiguration when light struck it at certain times of the day? Curtains had shielded the area and nullified the original intention—if intention it had been—but could the subtle

depiction of interwound figures have been anything else? The explicit activity in which they were engaged?

A scene not likely to appeal to the new owner with her reputation for fastidious modesty. One probably exaggerated but built on a foundation of truth. He had been right not to have mentioned it, the carving had been enough, but Tobol didn't think he had made a mistake. The woman was grown, adult, a person of experience and one who must know something of the basic facts of life. Sex, of course, but more than that; the humor which lurked in unsuspected places as did farce and tragedy, pleasure and pain.

Would she sell?

Tobol recalled the way she had looked when examining the exterior of the church. Her eyes had held contempt if not for the building then for the man who had ordered it. The reason he had shown her the carving; if bad blood had existed between them the depiction may have shown a side of her uncle she hadn't known.

By contrast the interior of the church was dark; the light which had illuminated the tessellated floor now touching the upper reaches, casting smoke-like shadows on the groins, the vaulted spaces. In the dusk the suppliants waited with their usual patience. As he took his place one came to kneel in the cubicle before him; a man with a pale, tormented face, thin, knotted hands which clenched and clenched again as if they were animals beyond his control.

A man in need and Tobol listened to his litany of petty sins, studying the pale face now illuminated by the swirling colors of the benediction light.

"... neighbor's wife and we did wrong when he was kept late at the factory. A good man and I can't look into his eyes now and I'm sure he must suspect something because he used to wait for me to walk home with him and now he doesn't and..."

Suspicion and terror of punishment coupled with an inner guilt and sense of shame to create a situation verging on the

borders of insanity. A less sensitive man would have suffered less, a more brutal one not at all, but they too had their fears and guilts and terrors which haunted their lives.

"Look into the light," said Tobol as the litany came to an end. "Look into the light of forgiveness. Bathe in the flame of righteousness and be cleansed of all sin. Be freed of pain. Of suffering. Yield to the benediction of the Universal Brotherhood."

The light was hypnotic, the suppliant responsive, the monk skilled in his application. The pale face relaxed, the hands, the body, as he slipped into a trance, in which he would suffer subjective penance later to receive the bread of forgiveness.

And if some came only for the wafer of concentrate it didn't matter. Each, while under the light, was conditioned never to kill. Potential murder prevented for the cost of a little food—it was a fair exchange.

Chapter Five

Sacaweena was not Earth. Dumarest had known it from the moment of landing, even before, for Earth was a world with empty skies at night and the journey had been too short to have carried them far toward the Rim. The sky, too, was the wrong color, the sun, the lack of a moon. And, at night, there was fire.

He watched it from the window of the room they had taken in an inexpensive hotel set high against the edge of encircling hills. An oddly built place with a rounded roof and thick copper bars flanking the windows—lightning conductors which graced every building and reared high in every street. A defense against the flickering glows in the north, the electrical fury which sent low rumbles through the air as if gods were waging dreadful war with outmoded cannon.

"It's normal," said Vardoona as he came to join Dumarest at the window. "The sun charges the atmosphere during the day and we get the discharge at night. There are peaks to the north which act as conductors. Like the ones in the street," he added.

"But storms don't often hit the town."

"How often?"

"It varies. If the solar wind is strong then the charge builds high and all hell lets loose. Three, four times a year, maybe."

"And every night?"

"Usually every night," admitted Vardoon. "But the full impact is far to the north where the rocks have a high mineral content."

He had neglected to mention these details and Dumarest wondered what else he had left out. Wondered too if he had made a mistake, but if he had it was too late to regret it.

He turned back to the window as Vardoon busied himself with the equipment he had bought. The shore was rimmed with lights and, as he watched, a couple of small boats pulled in to dock at a jetty. Fishermen coming in to unload their catch. More lights illuminated the field set far to one side but the area was deserted. Facing it across the town rose the mass of the church.

An odd place to put such a building in such an environment and Dumarest wondered what had motivated the builder. The tower was an invitation to the fury of the elements and must be made of electro-repulsive material strengthened with a conductor inches thick.

"Earl?" Vardoon looked up from the gear he was examining. "You want to check this?"

The suit was of thick, ribbed material holding the feel of insulating plastic. Metal strips covered it ending at plates on the boots and a spike topping the helmet. The helmet itself was of spacesuit design as were the air tanks fitted to the shoulders.

"An adaptation." Vardoon was proud of his work. "The suit is basically scuba gear with additions and the helmet is one used on airless worlds for mining. The whole thing a dielectric, naturally, and the conductors will give added protection."

Dumarest said, "Did you use one like this the last time you were here?"

"I—no."

"Have you ever used one?"

"On Symile," said Vardoon. "A suit, I mean. One sealed and armored against fragments and poisonous vapor. A hell of an engagement. And I did some underwater work on Aquis."

Experience enough if the man told the truth and Dumarest, checking, saw the man had made no mistakes. The tanks were placed where they could be reached, the belt held the right equipment, the filters could be changed and cleaned. He removed one, tapped it, looked at Vardoon.

"To conserve air," the man explained. "We won't need to use the tanks until actually working, but we'll need the suits for protection most of the time we're in the area. The filters will make sure we don't suck in anything we don't want."

"Supplies? Survival tent? Weapons?"

Familiar items to them both and again Dumarest had to admit Vardoon had done well. He checked one of the guns, a primitive slug-thrower, the magazine holding a score of stubby cartridges. Cheap, tough, inaccurate at any range but devastating at close quarters.

Hefting it, he said, "Just what is waiting for us up there?"

"Nothing, I hope." Vardoon rubbed at his face and scowled. "But I like to be sure. We may never need to use them but I don't want to regret their not being at hand. At times a gun can be a man's best friend."

Against the things which could lurk in dark places. The beasts waiting to attack, the predators eager for easy prey. Predators which could walk on two legs and carry guns of their own.

"I was careful," said Vardoon, guessing Dumarest's thoughts.

"We're prospectors looking for juscar and heavy oils; rare metals and rich shale. I even got us licenses from the Quale Consortium to cross their land."

"The right land?"

"No."

"Then they aren't worth the paper they're printed on."
Dumarest threw down the gun. "What happens if we get caught? A fine for trespass? Imprisonment?"

Vardoon said flatly, "I never promised you it would be easy. If it were, there would be nothing for us to take. It would be all gone by now or locked up or placed beyond reach like all the rest of the good things in life. Grabbed by the bastards who want it all. But the stuffs there, waiting, all we need do is take it."

If they could reach it. If they could find it. If they could get it. If they could keep it.

Dumarest said, "Tell me again how you got those three pearls. All of it. Every detail."

"Again?" Vardoon snorted his irritation. "I told you all that on the way here."

Many times, with enough variation to give it the ring of truth but Dumarest wanted to be certain. If he was to risk his life he didn't want to lose it because of a small, forgotten detail, a point carelessly overlooked.

"Tell me again," he said. "I want to hear it."

A bottle stood among the supplies, raw brandy to give strength and comfort in case of need. Vardoon reached for it, unscrewed the cork, poured three fingers into a glass.

Lifting it he said, "To Emil Velen!"

Dumarest waited as he lowered the glass.

"A fool," said Vardoon. "Young, greedy, impatient to make a

killing. One of the Orres—the original residents. They carved this world up between them and handed down the loot and the name. Only Orres can own land or natural resources but they own it all. All—you understand? The land and what's under it and what's on top. Oil and ores and precious stones. Crops and buildings and factories and everything else. You want to build then you do it on the sufferance of the owner. They sell the land and your house goes with it—only it isn't your house. You can build it, sure, live in it if you want but at any time the owner can take it and do as he likes. Burn it. Convert it. Knock it down. And if you don't like it that's just too damned bad."

"And the owner?"

"I keep telling you, Earl, the one who holds the land is the owner." Vardoon swallowed more brandy. "It's a game. They buy and sell and offer for auction and the one who has the largest holding stands highest on the hill." He looked at his empty glass. "Why am I drinking alone?"

A fault rectified as Dumarest poured more brandy. As he lifted his own glass he said, "And Emil?"

"Greedy, as I told you. Young as well. A dangerous combination and I fell for it. He wanted a man to stand at his back and I got the job. So we went hunting." Vardoon stared into his glass, seeing in the rich, warm fluid it contained scenes from another place, another time. "He had the courage of ignorance and that's all he did have. I trusted him to know what he was going up against but he was working on rumor and second-hand reports. Even at that we were lucky. We found what we were looking for. Emil found it, that is. Found it and lost his life."

Dying with a smile even as blood pulsed from the broken skin, the pulped internal organs. His life ended by a fall, the rock which had followed him, the mass which had yielded to the thrust of his passage.

"We had no suits," said Vardoon. "Masks and other protection but no suits. The night came and with it the lightning and all I could do was to find a hole and crawl inside. The rest was a matter of waiting, riding my luck, getting out and away."

To reach the town, get passage on a ship, run from those who would hold him responsible for Emil Velen's death. He had been lucky to escape. Luckier still to leave with the golden pearls.

The level of the brandy left in the bottle was low by the time Dumarest was satisfied he had learned all he could. Emptying it into the glasses, he returned to the window and stared again into the night. It was late, the lights along the shore had gone and those illuminating the field cut to a third. The town itself was asleep, small noises drowned in the distant rumble of thunder. To the north the flashes had gained in fury, jagged tongues casting halos on crumbling peaks, forked and darting spears churning the spaces between them, the area on all sides. Elemental forces turning rock into molten sludge, dirt into smoldering ash, the air itself into a searing vapor.

Emil's grave and the place he had to reach. Facing the violence of hell to gain the nectar of heaven.

Stunned, Fiona looked at the dancing array of signals, the grim story they told of the vicious attack—all the more savage because of its utter unexpectedness. Yet she should have known; the hail which had destroyed the fernesh crop, the ocean surge which had wiped out three undersea farms, the collapse of two galleries in the Omault workings.

Warnings she had ignored, believing herself safe behind cunningly constructed barriers. Defenses which had turned against her and were now even threatening her basic security.

But why? Why her?

A stupid question and she knew it even as she assessed the dancing lights and the message they carried. Arment eager for yet more holdings, Prador, terrified of further hurt, yielding to the other's gain. Helm with his unsuspected interest and Rham Kalova quick to beat them all down to size and, if she was hurt in the maneuver, what was that to him?

No Maximus could afford the luxury of a conscience.

A test which she either met or went under. But what best to do? Judd was involved as was Traske and neither was in a position to risk an alliance. Lobel?

His face smiled as he responded to her signal. Framed in the screen it resembled that of a gnome, old, wise, cunning.

"Fiona, my dear, you have my commiseration."

"I'd prefer your help."

"An arrangement?" He frowned as if considering it. In his eyes she could see the flicker of colors reflected from his own signals. "You are not in a healthy position, my dear."

"I'm being squeezed. If I go down you will be next."

"So?"

"We work in harmony until this crisis is over. Mutual aid to back each other's holdings. As recompense I yield to you sector D 18."

"The land with the church?"

"Yes."

He said dryly, "You are too generous, my dear. A piece of nonproductive land heaped with a building of small return and high maintenance. Sector J 21, now, if you offered that I might be interested."

The bastard had her over a barrel and knew it. Well, her day would come.

"Agreed—if you will apply pressure to Helm."

"Not the Maximus?"

"Helm." Unless she had read the signals correctly she was not worthy of her holdings. "Waste no time, Lobel."

"Nor you, my dear."

Advice she took as his face vanished from the screen to be replaced by more detailed information than shown by the dancing signals. Helm must have allies but what was his main objective? A flanking attack on Arment? On Kalova himself? Each neared his holdings but would either yield? She decided not and quested for other avenues. To halt the progress of a glacier was impossible but maybe she could move a stone to start an avalanche to do the job for her.

Ashem? Reed? Vanderburg?

The names flickered as she checked their holdings. None had what she sensed she needed and others took their place. Lower in the scale now, almost too low to be effective but, if they could be persuaded to act, their very innocuousness would work in her favor. Gnats biting a giant but a gnat could distract and create an opportunity for others to use.

"My lady?"

Her maid at the door, wide-eyed, a mass of shimmering fabrics draped over her arm.

"Get out!"

"But your gown, my lady? For the assembly?"

"Leave me, you stupid bitch!"

The girl fled in tears, forgotten as soon as out of earshot. A distraction Fiona could have done without but the delay, small as it had been, had changed the situation a trifle. An exchange of holdings, an unexpected sale and a sudden withdrawal—the key she had been waiting for.

Ten hours later she was relaxing in her bath.

It had been close and she had been hurt but not as badly as Prador had been nor as deeply as Judd who must be regretting his unwise ambition. Helm had come out the best as she had expected once she had realized his intention. But his victory would give him small pleasure; his new holdings would sap his

assets and prove more of a burden than a gain.

And, as usual, the position of the Maximus was firm.

A bubble drifted toward her and she blew at it, watching as it spun to break and blend with the suds coating the water. The act of a god, she thought. Careless, unthinking destruction for no apparent purpose. Would it have mattered had the bubble been allowed to exist? To have completed its natural term?

Did it matter?

Water cascaded as she lifted her arms, to splash as she rose from its embrace. Suds vanished as a shower stung her flesh, the dew it left vanishing in turn beneath the scented air of drying winds.

"My lady?" The maid, fearful but more afraid of losing her position, spoke from the entrance to the bathroom. "Your dress—"

"Later!"

"As you wish, my lady, but the time! I have yet to do your hair and you were most specific as to the style. It will take—"

"As long as is needed." Why was the girl so tiresome? "Hand me my robe."

The precious moment had been lost and could not now be recaptured. The time when she could relax and look at her body and gain pleasure from what she saw. A narcissism echoed in her cosmetics, the style of her coiffure, her gown. Tonight, she decided, it would be gold to match the color of her hair.

Dumarest had set the time for the raft's rising an hour after dawn when the sun had risen to burn away mist and cloud and the lightning had died in the north. He rose high, heading toward the lands they were licensed to search; Vardoon crouched among the equipment in the body.

As they dropped to land he said, "We're wasting time, Earl. If

this place held anything of value they would have found it by now. They only issue licenses because they have nothing to lose."

"How many want to prospect out here?"

"At their own expense? None."

"Which might have made some people curious." Deftly Dumarest settled the raft. It was small, cheap, the lift bad and the engine weak. All he could afford. "They might decide to check. If they do I want them to find us. Out, now, and look busy."

A precaution but one which paid when an hour after noon, a speck appeared high in the sky, slowly growing into the shape of a raft manned by a half-dozen uniformed men. Their leader relaxed after he'd checked the licenses.

"Just making sure you've a right to be here," he explained. "There've been changes and the new holder doesn't like trespassers. The licenses hold good, though. Any luck so far?" He pursed his lips at the answer. "No? Well, keep trying. You could stumble on a rich vein or kick up a nugget—it's happened."

Dumarest said, "Have you worked this area yourself, officer? If you have maybe you could give us some advice."

"Not much I can say except to keep looking. One thing, though, watch out for purple streaks in the rock. Set markers if you find any; purple is the sure sign of rich shale."

"Shale?" Vardoon frowned and shook his head. "Alamite, maybe, but never shale."

"Did I say shale?" The officer shrugged. "Well, keep at it and watch out for storms."

"A test," said Vardoon as the raft rose to hover in the sky. "We were being checked out, Earl, just as you suspected. Changes, eh? I wonder who the new holder is."

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not to us, but—" Vardoon shrugged. "Let's move if we're going to. It's getting late."

"They're watching us," said Dumarest. "So we'll stay for a while. Eat and look around. We won't move until they clear the sky."

For an hour they checked the load, lashing it firm before Dumarest sent the vehicle into the air and headed north to where a thin, pale smoke wreathed the distant hills.

He rode low, the ground streaming beneath them: arid soil tufted with sparse vegetation and littered with massive boulders. Once they passed over a cleared area on which grew a straggle of crops. Those working the land didn't raise their heads as the raft swept over them. The houses they lived in were beehives spiked with copper antennae.

Dumarest could guess who and what they were: criminals, debtors, the stranded and those who'd lost out. The unfortunate. The bottom of the heap. Each world solved its own problems but the solution was usually the same.

The terrain changed, became more rugged, a wilderness of bleak expanses split by narrow crevasses, the whole having the appearance of a battleground illuminated by transient gleams of reflected light.

"Idiot gems," said Vardoon as he stared over the side. He sat beside Dumarest, hands on the rail, body laced with the restraints which held them both. "Silica and other minerals fused into a composite mass. Pretty but not worth digging out."

"Is anything?"

"Sometimes you can find a chain of nuggets where lightning has burned away the dross. Alloys, too, and crudely refined metals. During the winter when it's calmer people come out to root around in search of artistic items: stuff fused and shaped into abstract designs. Some of it fetches high prices at market." He looked at the sun, the peaks ahead. "Best to hurry, Earl. We've got to settle well before dark."

This intention was threatened by the delay, for the winds slowed them. Turbulence caught the raft as it neared the edge of the soaring range, lifting it, sending it spinning up and toward seared and pitted stone. Dumarest regained control, riding high and clear before heading back toward the south.

Vardoon said, "Going back to try later?"

It had to be a day, at least—delay he couldn't afford. Not only for the expense but for those who might be too curious as to who and what he was. Sacaweena was a small world with a small population and not an easy place to remain inconspicuous.

The raft lowered as Dumarest swung in a circle. The sun was low, the ground darkening with growing shadows, the peaks bathed in a flood of carmine light. The slopes bore the black mouths of caverns edged and fretted with glistening silicates. Against the darkness they glowed with a dancing luminescence.

"Charged," muttered Vardoon. "Loaded and ready to go." His hands were tight on the rail. "Back off, Earl. Let's go while there's still time."

But time ran out as lightning blazed around them. A discharge left raft and men bathed and haloed with blue-green fire. A glare blinded Dumarest with a dazzle of afterimages. When he could see again he looked at death.

It stared from the hills, filled the air with invisible energies, waited in the distance they had been flung, the height. Heated air rose in a thermal which caught and spun the raft like a leaf in a storm. Fighting the controls, Dumarest rode the wind, managed to veer the raft from a ridge of jagged stone, felt the wrench as a swirling updraft lifted it, the sickening drop as it hit a pocket of less dense air.

Around him a giant stirred, breathing fire, smoke and flame.

"Earl! For—"

Thunder drowned the rest of Vardoon's cry, stabbed at unmuffled ears, seared their eyes again with savage fury. Far to

one side a peak glowed and dripped steaming magma as again lightning flashed and again the giant roared, releasing energy which at any moment could turn the raft into falling debris, into smoking vapor.

Where to hide?

The instinct of an animal and Dumarest obeyed it. To find a hole in which to crouch while the storm raged outside. Protection to be gained only in the hills themselves.

As the glare died he saw the dark holes before him; the gaping mouths of caverns now ringed with darting flickers of miniature lightning. To judge which was large enough to take them was not enough—how to tell their depth?

The decision was made for him by a sudden gust of air which rose to tilt the raft and send it hurtling toward the pitted stone.

Dumarest felt the impact and used it even as he fought to maintain control. The raft tilted farther, seemed about to overturn, then straightened a little as, judging time and distance, he adjusted lift and drive. Close to the wall he found the reverse suction he had anticipated, used it, riding it to send the raft into the cavern which gaped before them. It came to rest with a juddering rasp of metal on stone.

"Close." Vardoon sucked in his breath as he looked at the hands he lifted from the rail, the bruises, the blood rimming the nails. "By God, that was close!"

Seventy feet away, beyond the mouth of the cave, thunder roared and reflected lightning illuminated the corpselike pallor of his face.

Chapter Six

Fatigue rode with Fiona despite the pills she had taken and it was hard to keep her shoulders straight, to smile and nod at banal greetings, to wear a cloak of assurance and pretend a

satisfaction she could not feel, and that was all the more false now that the euphoria of combat had died to reveal the harsh reality.

"A near thing, my dear." Lobel, smiling, garish in bright hues too young for his seamed and cunning face, lifted a hand in greeting. "Too near for comfort but you handled it well."

"I won, Lobel."

"You survived," he corrected. "For that you are to be congratulated. The next time—" His shrug was expressive.

"The next time I shall regain all I have lost and more."

"Of course."

"And then you will need to come begging for my aid."

"Which I am sure you will not refuse." His smile was devoid of warmth; a grimace which bared teeth and gums in the semblance of a snarl. "Friends must stick together, my dear. Ah! I see Helm has arrived."

Fiona glared at his retreating back then smoothed her face before others could witness her anger. Lobel was no worse than most and she would do better to make friends than provide meat for enemies, Reed? No, he was bearing the marks of his bartering and what could you gain from a loser? Vanderburg? He stood talking to Myra Lancing, a tall, slim woman neat in red and black, who had raised her status more by accident than design and Fiona wondered what plots they might be hatching. From the far side of the table Prador caught her eye, smiled, lifted his glass as if in a toast.

A gesture she returned with her own.

"Bad times," he said as he joined her. "If it hadn't been for you taking the pressure, Fiona, I'd be ruined by now. Another drink?" He replaced her glass with one filled with a golden fluid. "Correo's out, did you know? Grard won't be able to withstand the slightest pressure and is looking for allies. Sylvia and

Jeanne—you know them?"

"Dulet and Wendling? Not intimately."

"They recently inherited and formed an alliance. The basic plan was for mutual aid in the event of any attack but Sylvia relies on intuition and Jeanne is basically a gambler. If they ever had to face real pressure they would crack apart." He paused, waiting for her comment, adding, as she remained silent, "A thought, my dear, one to bear in mind. When the giants get hungry we small people must take what steps we can."

Such as exchanging information—but how could she be sure it was genuine? Her own assessment of the two women did not match Prador's; Sylvia operated on a basis of related pressures and Jeanne on minimized risk. If she gambled at all it was with a healthy appreciation of the odds.

She said, "Did you know that Ashen was trying to extend his holdings to the north?" A lie and one she elaborated as he leaned a little closer. "Lobel let it slip," she improvised. "He overheard him talking to Chargel in the baths. A whisper-but you know how tricky the acoustics can be. If true it could mean they are plotting to attack Arment or Barracola."

Or even Rham Kalova himself, a fact obvious but which she didn't mention. The art of a lie lay in its misdirection.

"Ashen," mused Prador. "And Chargel? An unlikely combination but one with all the more potential for danger because of that. Thank you, my dear. Bear in mind what I said about Sylvia and Jeanne."

A smile and he was gone, pressing among the others gathered at the assembly to garner what scraps of information he could. Lies for the most part, diversions, deceptions but a cunning and clever man could make use of them all. Building fabric from what was left unsaid, from what was emphasized and what was contradicted. Was Prador that clever?

If so why wasn't he at the upper table with the Maximus?

Fiona glanced to where Kalova stood with a small circle of intimates and sycophants. A man proud of his victories and confident of his strength; too obviously scornful of those he bested and too indifferent to their anxiety and pain. Correo—how must the man feel at this moment? Grand for whom every moment must be a waking nightmare. Bulem whom Prador hadn't mentioned but who now stood poised on a razor's edge. Herself.

The golden fluid stung her throat as she emptied the glass but still the taste of fear remained.

"My lords and ladies!" Arment's voice cut across the babble in the assembly chamber. "Take your places if you please!"

She was seated lower than before, a fact anticipated but still far from pleasant, and, too, she was conscious of the attitude of her new companions. To see another brought low was always a pleasure to those with small holdings; a consolation to their own limitations. As she waited to be served Fiona kept her eyes on the high table.

Arment was seated next to Kalova; one of the twenty entitled to be at the board presided over by the Maximus himself. The rest were placed in positions of relative importance; Prador was higher than herself as was Myra Lancing, Reed, Lobel even higher than before. Status gained by the holdings he had wrested from her as the price of his aid; the first had been only the beginning. How many others?

She looked around, a stupid gesture, for her own display would give her the facts, but it was copied by others at the low tables. There would have to be twelve dozen at least; the Gross had to be maintained, but how many more? The usual six? Five? Less?

Toying with her meal she wondered what the situation would be if someone should make an error. Should holders be diminished below the Gross a vacancy would exist to be filled by any who chose to challenge a holder. Who would such a one pick? Arment? She studied him where he sat, smiling, a scrap of meat speared on a lifted fork. Nils was young, strong, ruthless in

his determination. Helm? Older but with the same basic savagery as the rest. None would be easy and none would be so foolish as to create a vacancy.

"My lady?" An attendant shattered her musing. He stood at her side, a salver of sweet pastry balanced on one hand, serving tongs in the other. Her soiled plate had been deftly removed to be replaced by another. "An éclair, my lady? Honey cake? Chocolate sponge?"

She followed the movement of the tongs, indifferent as to the selection, nodding as the instrument came to rest over a heap of crusted pastry dusted with colored glitters.

"A wise choice, my dear." The man seated on her left nodded his approval. He was twice her age with a mouth like a trap and eyes to match. "Enriched flours, a high-protein filling, a decoration containing essential vitamins. A good foundation for the rest of the assembly."

"But fattening." The woman to Fiona's right added her comment. "Like most nice things. But you can afford it, my dear." Her eyes held envy as they studied the trim figure graced with well-formed curves. "Lynne Oldrant," she said, introducing herself. "And you are Fiona Velen. You've met Cran with his good advice but, for once, it's worth listening to. The only way to bear the Maximus's platitudes is to get half-drunk and then you risk spoiling the rest of the evening." She stabbed at her own confection, lifted a portion, ate, swallowed, shook her head. "Pleasure tonight and sweat tomorrow—but what else is life?"

Wine followed the cakes, new vintages together with potent spirits and, the tables cleared, the assembly waited for the address. As always Kalova chose to stretch the moment, maintaining tension while he raked them with his eyes, enjoying his power to the full even as he assessed what he saw, the resentment he knew existed.

Fiona yawned when he finally rose.

The address, like the meal, the assembly itself was an empty ritual born in the days when real blood had attended real battles

and feuds needed to be avoided by the sharing of meat and wine. Hard days in which hard men had fought and won a place on a hard world. Things on which the Maximus touched as he sent his voice to echo from the groined roof, adding comments of his own, the need for peace, the desire for stability and tranquility, his conviction that no personal enmities existed or could exist in the social order.

Lynne Oldrant sighed her relief when he sat.

"Thank God that's over! You there! Some more brandy!" As the attendant obeyed she added, to Fiona, "We must get to know each other better. The baths, tomorrow? I'll need a massage in any case. We can talk and, maybe, make a few plans."

The usual intrigues or something more? Fiona had felt the searching impact of the other's eyes and a shared bath was often the prelude to closer intimacies. Yet to be curt in her refusal would be to arouse enmity and lose a potential advantage.

"I'll have to check," she said. "Could I call you?"

"Of course." Lynne glanced at the high table, at Kalova where he sat. "When's the old fool going to summon the entertainers?"

The noise was the worst part. The light was bad with its blinding, searing intensity but the sound was beyond mere physical irritation. Crouched against the raft Dumarest could feel its battering despite the protective suit, the muffles shielding his ears. A force transmitted through the rock itself to pound at cell and tissue, to threaten the delicate capillaries and membranes. Energy which could rupture the cortex and induce insanity and death.

He had seen it happen on scattered battlefields when mercenaries had fought with savage viciousness but no battle he had ever known could approach the present situation. Now the hills fought the skies with dancing lightning the prelude to the massed volley of multiple cannon, echoes blasting from hill to hill, caught, magnified, sent in pulsing shock waves which ripped stone to acrid powder and fuming vapors. Fury which vented

itself and moved on to tear at other hills, crumble other peaks.

Beside him Vardoon lifted a fumbling hand to the helmet, the line linking them with direct communication.

"Earl?"

"What is it?"

"Just checking. Should we work on the raft now?"

The landing had torn the fabric, damaging some of the antigrav units and leaving a path of torn metal. The damage was less serious than it seemed but to effect repairs meant unloading the vehicle, tilting it, partially dismantling the structure. Work hard enough at any time, made even more difficult while wearing the suits.

Dumarest said, "Well leave it until after dawn."

"And waste the night?"

"We need to rest," said Dumarest patiently. "To eat and arrange the gear. To work now would mean using lights and making mistakes."

Explanations should have been unnecessary but he sensed Vardoon needed reassurance. The fury of the storm had unnerved him, reminded him of other, uglier incidents, perhaps, sent him to crouch morose and silent in the protection of his suit. Protection which proved itself as again lightning illuminated the cave and thunder crashed to send shock waves to fret the rim and shower grit from the roof.

Dumarest felt the jar and heard Vardoon's sudden intake of breath before noise drowned all else. Until the area fell into a relative quiescence there was nothing to do but sit and wait and, while waiting, think of what to do and how to do it. Plans already made and decisions already taken but both liable to be affected by altered circumstances. The storm could last too long. Rock could yield to send massed tons of stone to engulf them and bury them alive.

Bad thoughts and best not dwelt on. If it happened there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Dumarest forced himself to relax, watching the flicker of lightning beyond the mouth of the cave, the dancing chiaroscuros touching raft and rock and splintered walls. All over the sprawling range of hills the charged air would be venting stored energy in coruscating flashes. The hills and the crevasses between them, the small plateau, the terraces and winding ledges. The residue of once-tremendous mountains which had challenged the sky and the sun it contained. A challenge accepted when the world had moved closer to its primary, lost as the solar furnace had powered ceaseless attrition.

Sacaweena, a world of ocean and ranging hills and a narrow expanse of habitable land. One which held a fortune in golden pearls.

The pearls swelled before him to glint and glow with subtle attraction. A golden promise of wealth and the power it gave. Orbs which spun and took on the likeness of planets each with the same face, the same alluring hue. Blue the color of hope, of cloudless skies, of the world on which he had been born and for which he searched. Earth. Lost and forgotten Earth. Waiting for him somewhere in space... somewhere in darkness... waiting... waiting...

Dumarest jerked awake, conscious he had been dozing, drifting into sleep, sitting motionless while he tried to discover the reason for his abrupt awareness. Beyond the mouth of the cave the distant flashes of lightning cast an intermittent fire, the dancing patterns of light and shadow duller than before. A lull or movement of the storm had brought a relative peace to the local area.

Why had he awakened?

Before him the bulk of the raft was as before. At his side Vardoon stirred, a muttered snoring coming over the telephone wire connecting them. Shape, sound and movement assessed and dismissed even as recognized. They had not woken him, had not created the prickle of trepidation now touching his spine; the primitive warning of danger he had learned never to ignore.

Cautiously he lifted his knees, drawing back his feet and resting his weight on the soles. A move designed to yield quick mobility. One which woke Vardoorn.

"Earl?" His voice was leveled by control. "Earl?"

"Something. It could be trouble."

"Closer."

"I don't know. I—"

Dumarest broke off as the glare from outside returned, died, flashed again. Blazes of illumination created a stroboscopic effect, freezing all motion in a series of isolated frames. The raft. The mouth of the cave. The thing now moving from the rear.

It was flat and thin, ringed with spindle legs, fronted with lifted claws, mandibles, faceted eyes. The rear tapered into a vicious, whip-like tail tipped with cruel barbs. A bug adapted to its environment, able to slip through narrow cracks in its search for prey, attracted to the men by the scent of exuded perspiration: the animal odor carried on their protective clothing, vented through the filters as they breathed.

Water in an arid waste.

Food to fuel its eight-foot body.

"God!" Vardoorn heaved, froze as Dumarest clamped a hand on his arm. "It's a civas, Earl. Those claws could cut us apart. That tail's like a spear and club combined. And it can move fast when it has to."

If it wanted to. If it intended to attack. A doubt resolved in the next flash when Dumarest saw it had come closer, was fronting them, was poised for action.

"Guns." Dumarest snapped the command. "Get the guns!"

The wire connecting them tore free as Vardoorn lunged toward the raft, the bales it contained. As he tore at the fastenings

Dumarest rose, moved away from him, the stone he had scooped from the floor lifting, hurtling at the creature as it stood undecided which man to attack first.

The blow did little more than scratch the chitin of the carapace but accomplished what Dumarest intended. He darted toward the rear of the cave as the thing spun and lunged toward him, one claw snapping inches behind a thigh, the whip of the tail thrumming through the air to slash the air where he had stood seconds before.

Muted thunder rolled, drowned the sound of scuttling limbs, the following glow of lightning revealing the creature too close for comfort. It stood at the mouth of a narrowing passage leading from the rear of the cave, one it had followed from some distant lair. A space shrinking to less than two feet in width. Even if he could squeeze into it Dumarest would find no safety. To climb the walls would offer even less; the effort to maintain his hold offering him as easy meat to the mandibles and claws. To attack was the only real defense, to occupy its attention while Vardoon found the guns. But locked in the suit Dumarest was weaponless, his knife beyond reach. All that was left to him was his speed and brains.

The former he used to dodge a sudden attack, the second to find a weapon and method of attack.

The cave held nothing but natural stone: rocks on the floor, fragments jutting from the walls, shards hanging like spears from the roof. Dumarest stooped, found a pair of rocks, rose with one in each hand. The first hit one of the faceted eyes, driving deep to release a flood of oozing jelly. The second slammed against the joint of the claw uplifted to protect the remaining eye. Even as it left his hand he was running, springing high to land on the back of the creature, jumping again to reach the pendulous shard of pointed stone hanging from the roof above. The stone took his weight, swayed as he kicked, snapped above his hands to let him fall, armed with the yard-long fragment.

Blue-white fire blazed as he hit the ground, rolling as echoes blasted around him, rising with dazzled eyes to see the nightmare shape rear to tower high, mandibles reaching, the tail

swinging to slam against his leg, to rip at the tough fabric and bruise the flesh beneath. A blow which almost broke the bone.

Where was Vardoon?

The question was answered as Dumarest hopped to one side, the shard lifted, swinging as he used it like a club to strike again at the joint of the claw. Chitin yielded as it struck, the creature retreating, retreating farther as spots appeared on the carapace; neat holes releasing green ichor.

Man-made thunder echoed that from beyond the cave.

"Earl!" Vardoon had opened his helmet, his shout echoing as he eased his finger off the trigger. "Earl! Here!"

A gun like the one he carried, thrown for Dumarest to catch as again the scarred man opened fire. A hail of slugs which scored the carapace, whined off rock, sent dust and chips spraying from the edges of the narrow fissure as the creature scuttled for cover and safety.

"That's enough!" Dumarest caught Vardoon by the arm, lifted the muzzle of the gun. "It's gone. Quit wasting ammunition."

"Gone?" Vardoon was sweating, eyes wild, narrowed against the salt-sting of running droplets. Beads of perspiration rested thickly on ridges of tissue. "You sure, Earl?"

"I'm sure." Dumarest opened his own helmet and smelled the stench of burned explosives, the acrid, insect reek the predator had left behind. "What did you call it? A civas?"

"Filthy creatures. They'll eat a man alive given the chance. Suck his blood until he's dry and chew on the rest." Vardoon's hand shook as he wiped his face, sweat staining the back of his glove. "The damned thing would have fed well if it hadn't been for you."

Dumarest said, "We'd better take turns standing guard, in take the first watch."

To stand as the other slept, to walk about the cave to ease his bruised leg, to watch and check what he saw, to look at the mouth of the cavern and see the flashes lessen and the night surrender to the first touch of dawn.

Against the wall the panel of the relay was almost static; the changes registered small and of little effect as to present holdings. A time of quiescence when those who had been hurt took time to reassess their positions and those who had gained relished their victory. Even so the display held an artistic beauty; rare and precious metals combined to give a pleasing grace, although the art was wasted on Zao who appreciated only functional efficiency.

Now, seated at his desk, he studied the message relayed by the lights.

Unsuspected currents had damaged the undersea crop of edible weed in the lower northwestern decant. The holder of the sector would need to be wary. Tidal flows had enriched the shore of the far eastern region; a gain as the other was a loss. Lightning had struck a commune in the Mondera Farmlands with a high loss of life. Impressed workers who had no real value; Zao knew the Cyclan would have dealt with the problem they presented in a far more efficient manner. Conditioning, adaptation and elimination would have ended it and been more merciful in the long term. A side effect of no interest to those who would have induced it; mercy, like other emotions, had no place in a calculated scheme of existence.

How best to utilize the presented data?

The changes were too small, he decided. The events could be manipulated but needed greater impact to be fully utilized. Small gains would not interest the present elite and others would lack the necessary reserves for a confrontation. The prediction of a period of stasis at this time was high; in the order of eighty-nine percent. High enough to reassure Kalova if he was concerned as to his safety.

At the touch of a button the face of his acolyte appeared on

the screen of the communicator.

"Master?"

"Bring me all relevant data accumulated since my last assessment."

A test and one he was sure Risan would pass. All data was relevant but much of it could be condensed and evaluated prior to presentation. A necessity on worlds of high technology and vast habitations but here more of an exercise. Sacaweena was small, limited, the flow of data minimal in comparison to other planets. The reason why he had but a single acolyte.

"Master!" Risan bowed after placing the sheaf of papers on the desk before Zao. A tall, thin young man eager to pass his final tests and become a cyber with acolytes of his own.

Zao studied the papers as he left.

The data was set in chronological order, neatly subdivided, bare facts for the most part with attendant detail if a point needed further illumination. Sheets which rippled in his hands, pausing as he checked, moving on as he scanned with trained observation. Much was as he'd anticipated; scraps of gossip gathered from the baths, the gymnasium, the small parties at which hosts entertained selected guests. Information gathered and passed on by informants and spies. Other data; Bulem's threats, Reed's boasting, and application from Myra Lancing for his services. This request he refused though he would keep it in mind. Should Kalova become too independent it might serve the Cyclan's interest for another to become Maximus, but the woman would not be a good alternative. Even so, her eagerness would make her amicable and so a useful tool which could be used to manipulate another.

A list of reports from the undersea installations.

More from the Quale Consortium.

An oddity.

Zao halted the movement of the papers and studied the report. Licenses issued to two prospectors to inspect the Quale holdings in search of valuable ores. A common enough practice; a fee gathered and an investigation made at no cost to the holder. But how often were such licenses issued?

A check gave the answer and he sensed an inconsistency. People wishing to waste their time and money on such a search were rare to the point of nonexistence. Strangers, then, new arrivals—the date confirmed the probability. Had they been checked?

The routine patrol report confirmed they had. Two men together with a raft and other equipment had been spotted on land belonging to the Consortium. Their licenses had been in order. They had shown knowledge of ores and geology.

Why should such men be interested in worthless land?

Zao reached for the communicator. To Risan he said, "Bring me detailed maps of the area mentioned in report K57. Ask the officer commanding the patrol to report to me here personally as soon as possible."

Chan Kline came within the hour; eager to extend every courtesy to someone so close to the Maximus. A lieutenant, smart in his uniform of brown and olive, the crimson insignia of rank bright on breast and shoulders. A man young enough to be ambitious, old enough to be wise.

He nodded as he read the report. "Yes, sir, these are the facts. I thought it odd that men should want to prospect that area and paid them a visit. They seemed genuine enough. I tested them and the response was positive."

"Explain." Zao listened, said, "When you made the remark about shale did both correct you or only one?"

"One. The man with the scarred face. The other made no comment."

From reasons of ignorance or contempt? Or had there been no

need? The latter, Zao decided, the officer had been too superficial in his examination but could hardly be blamed for that. The fact he had checked at all was proof of his efficiency.

"Their names?" The report had lacked that detail. Zao tensed as he heard the answer. "Vardoon and Dumarest? Are you sure? Describe them."

Kline obeyed, adding, "They probably arrived on the last ship to land here. Do you want me to check on them in town?"

Zao made no immediate answer. Dumarest on Sacaweena? It seemed incredible and yet nothing was beyond the bounds of probability. Nothing—including a name which could be copied and an appearance which could be deceptive. On a matter of such importance there must be no doubt.

"Sir?" Kline broke the silence. "The check?"

"That will not be necessary." The past was dead and could do no more than add confirmation to established fact. And time, now, must not be wasted. Zao said, "Those men must be found and held without delay. You will be in charge of the operation. Gather every available raft and man and search until they are found. If it is necessary for you to progress beyond the Consortium lands do not hesitate; I will arrange for all needed permission. As I will arrange for your rank to be changed to that of captain. Find them and you will become a major."

High and rapid promotion for success and Kline could guess the penalty of failure. Ignominy—but he would not fail.

"One other point," said Zao. "A matter of prime importance which you must impress on all under your command. Those men are to be taken but not harmed. You understand? Use only the minimum amount of force required. Should they be killed or badly hurt you will answer for it."

A complication and there was another. Kline said, "You spoke of extending the search if necessary. To the north?"

"You object?"

"No, but others might and the Maximus will protest."

"The men are your concern but I assure you all permissions will be obtained. I shall be with Rham Kalova before you reach the hills." The cyber touched the map, his finger tracing ragged outlines. "Start the search here and extend rafts in line from here to here. Use a grid pattern and overlap individual areas. Use infrared detectors if you have them to locate the men by their radiated body heat. Keep me informed of your progress."

Kline said, "And you will give me a signed order authorizing the operation?"

"Of course. Now please waste no more time."

Zao returned to the map, as, saluting, the officer left. Seated, he studied the depicted terrain; the harsh ground of the Quale Consortium, the wilderness reaching north to the hills, the hills themselves. An area filled with wild guesses, assumptions, speculations. Even photographs taken from space could not be relied on—each storm changed detail, triggered violent changes.

An inferno in which the most glittering prize the Cyclan could hope to win could be hopelessly lost.

Chapter Seven

Lightning had struck a vein of silicate ore; vaporizing the metallic content and fusing the rest to be exploded out to firm into elaborate configurations of multicolored crystal. An expanse of blues and greens, reds and umbers, streaked lavender and rich purple all trapped and blended in sprays and leaves and twining pillars of adamantine substance. A bizarre yet beautiful wood made of lace and spines, trunks and saw-edged fronds, of glinting daggers and jagged barbs.

Vardoon swore as one dug into his shoulder, swore again as the tough material ripped as he tried to back away.

His voice snarled from the diaphragm of his helmet. "This is

crazy, Earl. We're wasting time."

A man too impatient for his own good. Vardoon had led the way into the area, the path into the artificial forest, losing his temper when meeting anticipated obstacles. The rage which sometimes possessed him now threatening to break free.

"Relax." Dumarest, at the rear, studied the trap in which Vardoon was caught. The barb digging into his suit prevented forward movement as it blocked an easy retreat. "Roll," he ordered. "Turn over to your left. That's it." Translucent lace shattered with the sound of chimes as Vardoon obeyed. "Now edge back toward me. To your right a little. That's it."

Dumarest backed, rising as he reached open space, waiting until his companion, grunting, stood beside him.

"A bust," said Vardoon. "I was sure—but I was wrong."

Another failure to add to the rest but Dumarest made no comment. Vardoon was the guide, the one with the local knowledge and, if as yet he hadn't delivered the promised wealth, he had never promised it would be easy. Now as he jerked open his helmet to reveal a sweating face Dumarest said, "Is this the place where you found the stuff before?"

"No." Vardoon sniffed, scowled, coughed before he hastily sealed the helmet again against the noxious fumes rising from the sun-heated ground. "It was just a place, Earl, I've told you that. In the hills they all look the same. We have to find the right spots and I figured they could be in there." He gestured at the twists and spires of the crystalline maze. "I still think so."

An error Dumarest didn't share. The congealed mass provided almost perfect cover but the very forces which had created it could convert it into molten slag with equal ease.

"We could try the far side," suggested Vardoon. "Break a path and make a quick search."

"No."

"Why not, Earl? Now that we're here let's check it out."

"It's getting late." Dumarest glanced at the sun, the long shadows at their feet. "We need to find cover."

Another cave in which to crouch while fury raged about them. To sit locked in the stifling confines of the suits, standing guard, watching and waiting for what might come. To eat and restrain a growing thirst. To maintain hope that tomorrow they would find the golden pearls.

Hope which was measured by the amount of food they carried, the water, the tanked air.

"Give it another hour," urged Vardoan. "I've a feeling about this place. We could hit lucky at any moment but if we leave now and the storm rips up the area it'll be hopeless. Let's just give it a last try."

Gambler's talk and Dumarest knew how it would end. The last try would lead to another, a chance taken once too often and there would be no others to follow.

He said, "I'm leaving. If you want to stay that's your business."

"Earl!"

Dumarest walked on, ignoring the shout, the muted thud of feet running behind. The raft lay in the shadow on a level place under an overhanging ledge. Repairing it had taken half a day and now it was sluggish, unreliable, which was the reason they had to camp in the hills instead of well away from the area of storms. Even as it was, the working period was far too short a part of the sunlit day.

A gamble; the odds set by physical limitations and natural forces. They had to win quickly or not at all and it seemed luck was against them. Dumarest halted, rearing back to stare at the higher slope of the hill rising above the raft, eyes searching the fissures and crannies, the splotched darkness of caves, the fretted traceries of lightning impact areas. Bolts which had seared and fused and blasted—but in a seemingly random distribution. Yet

was it wholly random? Did the naked fury of released energies follow some elaborate pattern?

"What's on your mind, Earl?" Vardoon was at his side, breathing deeply, voice edged with frustrated anger. "Looking for a place to camp?" He added, after a moment, "All those caves look too small."

Blotches revealing the mouths of vents, craters gouged in harder stone, narrow pipes now void of the ores and silicates, the veins and seams of material which had attracted the fury of electronic energy. Again Dumarest studied the area, seeing the shift of somber colors, the tints and hues born of chemical combinations. A patch which seemed to be something else.

"Earl!" Vardoon had seen it also. His fingers clamped hard on Dumarest's arm. "By, God, Earl! A vrek!"

It moved again, a subtle shift which revealed lambent flashes, hues, sparkles, lifting to take form, to rise and hang for a moment suspended in the air. A thing which looked like an angel.

An angel of death.

There was beauty in it, in line and function, in the wings which made a blur, the slender body tipped with huge, glinting eyes; bulbous mosaics which reflected the sun in shimmering glory. The antennae were wands of gilded and tapered flexibility, the mouth parts bearing the sheen of polished steel, the limbs delicate, jointed appendages ended in spatulate pads. The posterior, rounded, carried a slender, sting-like appendage.

"A female!" Vardoon's fingers dug harder. "A female, Earl—pray God it's voided!"

Eggs vented to be held by natural adhesion to the rock. The golden pearls of ardeel contained within the outer membrane.

Dumarest eased Vardoon's hand from his arm as he studied the creature now fanning the stone with shimmering wings. The vrek was as long as a man was tall; the product of a harsh

environment and so that it must have its own means of defense and attack—natural weaponry revealed in tiny scintillations; lambent flashes betraying the electronic energy stored within its body. Miniature lightning which could burn and destroy.

"It's voided!" Vardoon's voice held a gloating satisfaction. "Earl, there's a fortune waiting for us up there! A fortune."

One stuck high on a fretted wall of stone, buried in narrow cracks and fissures, firmly held now the adhesive had dried. Eggs needing to be pried from their seating, each taking time. More time needed to climb and settle so as to work. Dumarest glanced again at the sun.

"We've got to try it, Earl." Vardoon had seen the gesture and guessed its implication. "At least let's take up the raft and see what's there."

Perhaps nothing; many life-forms pretended to lay eggs in several places in order to deceive suspected predators. The spot could be an empty decoy.

"No!" Vardoon was emphatic when Dumarest mentioned the possibility. "Vreks don't act that way."

"Then how do they act? What about the males? Do they mate in midair on a nuptial flight? Once at the beginning of a season? Several times? Tell me."

"I don't know." Vardoon's voice was rigid in its determination, his face hard as he glowered through the faceplate of his helmet., "What difference does it make? Up there's what we came for and I'm getting it."

"Tomorrow," said Dumarest. "We'll find a place to camp and use the tent. We'll eat well and have a decent rest. When it's safe we'll work all-out to gather what we can."

"I'm not leaving here, Earl."

"We have to. There's no cave large enough to take the raft."

"I'm not leaving here!" Vardoon made an effort to control himself. "Once we go we need never find it again. Things change at night; landmarks vanish, places alter—you know how it is. A small risk, maybe, but one I'm not taking. One I daren't take. I've worked too hard for this, waited too long. If—" He broke off, panting, shaking his head. "No, Earl! No!"

Dumarest looked at the man's face, saw the sweat, the wild eyes and recognized the near-hysterical condition he was in. Saw too the tension of the hands clamped on the gun slung from one shoulder, the direction of the muzzle. If he walked away nothing might happen but if he tried to take the raft the result would be certain; to kill Vardoon would be the only way to save his life.

He said quietly, "Relax, Hart. You win."

That night again was spent in thunder but this time it seemed less savage than before. Usage, perhaps, or the jagged flashes did not strike so often or so near. Looking at the mouth of the narrow opening Dumarest saw a facing hill crawling with electronic fire, heard the roar, the echoes.

As they faded Vardoon called from the tent, "Come and get it, Earl!"

He squatted, stripped to shorts in the inflated sac; tubes supporting curtains of plastic to create an enclosed space large enough for them both. One fitted with an air-lock, lights, a pneumatic floor serving as a mattress. A place in which to remove the burden of the suits, to breathe clean, tanked air, to eat and wash and sleep in relative comfort.

"Here!" He handed Dumarest a steaming cup as he took his place. Fans whined to cool the heat induced by the suit, to clear the stink of sweat. "Yurva." Vardoon sipped and reached for a bottle. "A good tisane but better with brandy. Earl?"

Dumarest extended his cup and sat trying to relax. An impossibility in their present condition and he lacked the euphoria which fueled Vardoon's cheerfulness. Faced with an impossible situation, he had compromised and now wondered if

he had chosen the worse of both alternatives. If so he was stuck with it as was Vardoon.

The man poured himself more tisane, added more brandy.

"Neat," he said. "Your idea, Earl. To unload the raft and make camp up here close to the ardeel. A chance to relax and rest, as you said. What made you change your mind?"

<>The threat of death and the need of killing. Dumarest said, "Two things. One was your fear of losing the place and the other an idea I had about the vrek. That female wouldn't have voided her eggs unless she felt they had a chance." He added, as Vardoon frowned, "They are native to the hills and to survive at all they must have an instinctive knowledge of storm patterns. Maybe it's the stress fields in the air or something radiated from the rock but I guessed this area would be relatively safe for a while."

A guess, but one based on observation and certainly no lightning had struck close to the opening of the cave, for they had checked for lurking predators or fissures through which they could travel. Dumarest had kept the raft hovering while Vardoon had unloaded, taking it back under the ledge and grounding it with thick strands of protective copper before climbing up to the cave on a suspended rope. The only precaution he could take and he hoped it would be enough.

"Tomorrow," said Vardoon. "Well start as soon as it's safe and work all-out. A fresh void means lots of eggs and we can go back to town for more supplies and a new raft. Then back again for more!"

Greed reflected itself in Vardoon's voice, his eyes, but left Dumarest unaffected. Once back in town and the ardeel converted to money he would be on the next ship to leave Sacaweena,

"What are you going to do with it, Earl? Your share, I mean. How are you going to use the money?"

"Keeping snug," said Dumarest. "Keeping fed. Keeping cool!"

"A planet of solid ice. Right?"

Dumarest nodded and drained his cup. "Any of that brandy left?" As Vardoon poured he said, "And you, Hart? How are you going to spend a fortune?"

"On a game." Vardoon smiled as he met Dumarest's eyes. "The best and biggest game I know."

"One that takes money?"

"All the damn money I can get. And we'll get it, Earl, you and me. You're lucky and it rubs off. I knew that back on Polis when we both survived. You've proved it here on Sacaweena. You know how many have seen a female vrek void? You could count them on one hand. Can you guess how many eggs are out there? What they will bring? Luck, Earl, you can't beat it. Here, drink to luck."

Dumarest watched as brandy slopped into his cup, more into Vardoon's. He said, "Luck? I'll drink to that."

The spirit burned as he sipped, worked fast on Vardoon as he gulped. Euphoria accentuated by intoxication; emotion which yielded a growing relaxation and overwhelming sense of achievement. He was safe, the ardeel as good as won, fortune his together with all it meant. He drank to celebrate, nerves relaxing even more, voice thick with a mounting lassitude, the inevitable reaction from tension maintained too long, fears harbored too deep.

"Luck," he said, "Luck and money, Earl, you ever think how the two run together? Have one and you have both. Luck and money and all it can buy and there's damned little it can't. We'll cash in and come back for another load and another until we have it all. All the ardeel and all the money anyone could ever want." Lifting the bottle he blinked at what was left. "That all? What the hell—let's finish it!"

As the last drained into his cup Dumarest said, "What do you want all that money for, Hart? You want a planet too? One of solid ice?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"I told you." Vardoon swayed where he squatted, eyes filmed, suddenly dull. "I need it to play a game. A game— and the more I have the better my chances. I need it, Earl! Damn you, I need it!"

"Easy, Hart. You'll get it."

"We'll get it, Earl. You and me. Together."

"That's right."

"Let's drink to it." Vardoon tilted his cup over his mouth. "Tired," he muttered as, empty, he lowered it. "Too tired to argue. Sleep, Earl. I must have sleep."

Dumarest watched as he slid to one side, legs straightening, eyes closing, one arm lifting to pillow his head as if he had been a child. Within seconds his breathing became even, shallow, eyelids twitching to signal his dreams.

The bottle lay at hand and Dumarest lifted it, poured the contents of his cup back into the container. A draught for Vardoon in the morning when he would need it. Rising, he left the tent and prowled the narrow confines of the cave, nostrils twitching to acid, acrid odors but missing any trace of insect stench. Back within the tent it was a joy to fill his lungs, a pleasure to sit and pour himself a cup of cold tisane. Vardoon moved as he finished it, muttering, turning, restless in his sleep. A man dangerous in his greed.

Luck still rode with them; the raft was undamaged. Vardoon gusted his relief as he saw the ring of shattered stone blotched with shining copper; debris torn from the hill above the ledge which had remained intact at the cost of the metal.

"It's our day, Earl. Nothing can go wrong now. Let's get at it!"

Together they rode up the slope of the hill, Dumarest handling the controls, frowning at the poor response. The spot where the

vrek had voided her eggs was high, seamed with cracks too narrow to provide safe holds. A row of pitons hammered into the wall above provided anchors for suspended ropes, more holding the raft close to the rock. An uneasy union with the craft lifting and dropping as the compensators overreacted.

"No point in eating," said Vardoon. "If we vomit it'll be a waste of good food." He studied the wall from his seat in the raft. "How do we handle it? From the inside out or from the edges in?"

"Inside out," said Dumarest. "We don't know just where the edges are."

"And, inside, we're certain of a good crop." Vardoon, reached for one of the ropes. "I'll take the upper region while you take the lower. Keep at it, Earl—and don't miss any."

They were thick in the cracks and on the rock itself. Suspended from a rope, Dumarest inched his way over the sheer wall of stone, sweating, cramped in the hampering confines of his suit. Each egg had to be carefully pried free with the tip of his knife and placed in the pouch at his waist. Small, little larger than a pea, the yoke forming the actual pearl. When stripped of its outer membrane the inner skin would harden and contract to form a golden sphere.

Potential life, clinging to the sun-warmed stone, stimulated by electronic discharges to grow and take shape and hatch from the egg. Larvae of some kind which would follow the metamorphoses leading to the creation of fully grown adult vreks. How many would survive?

Few, he knew, but that was the way of nature; to be wastefully liberal with life-seed. As a human male gushed millions of spermatozoa at ejaculation to fertilize a single egg.

Had these been fertilized?

Dumarest paused, looking up to where Vardoon had moved a little to one side. His helmet was open and his hands worked with mechanical precision as he freed eggs to thrust into his

pouch.

"Hart!"

"What is it?" Vardoon didn't look down. "If you're worried about my helmet being open, forget it. The air's clean."

Sweet, free of chemical odors and metallic taints, the wind blew gently from the south. Dumarest opened his own helmet and felt the sweat dry on his face.

"Hart, what happens if these aren't stripped?"

"The eggs? They'd hatch, I guess. Why?" He ceased work to answer his own question. "There's no point in thinking of breeding them, Earl. It's been tried. You need special conditions—hell, we're wasting time!"

"One more thing; how do you tell if they're fertile?"

"You can't." Vardoon scabbled a boot on the stone as he swung to a new position. "But why worry about it? Come on, Earl, quit wasting time!"

When the sun was halfway to zenith Dumarest called a halt, insisting the other man join him in the raft for rest and water. Vardoon drank greedily, face mottled, streaked with sweat.

"A dream," he said as he lowered the canteen. "A fortune lying right before our very eyes. How the hell can you just sit here, Earl?"

"How many eggs did you ruin in the past fifteen minutes?"

"What?" Vardoon scowled, then shrugged. "Too many, but does it matter? There're plenty more."

"And if you get careless, slip and fall, what then?" Dumarest leaned back against the side of the raft. Its motion was like that of a ship at sea. "It's a long way to the bottom but maybe the eggs will cushion the impact."

"I get it." Vardoon rubbed his chin, squinted up at the sky.

"Move slower, take things easier—that it?"

"Pace yourself," said Dumarest. "We've a lot of rock to cover before noon."

"Noon?"

"That's right."

"You thinking of leaving at noon? No way, Earl. Hell, man, we stay until the rock is stripped clean."

Vardoon's decision but if he stayed he would be alone. Dumarest said, "Let's not argue about it. Want to sponge down in the tent?"

"No, but I'm getting out of this damned suit!" Vardoon looked at the hand Dumarest clamped on his arm. "Earl?"

"Keep the suit on."

"But—"

"Keep it on!" snapped Dumarest. "If you want to act the fool then do it when I'm not around. What if the wind should change? A freak storm blow up?" His anger was genuine, relayed by his eyes, the tone of his voice. "If you want to end our partnership just say the word. If not do as I say."

A small battle and a victory won as Vardoon swung himself back to work. But there would be another and Dumarest took care he would win it. Before leaving the raft he checked one of the guns, slinging it over a shoulder. The other, Vardoon's, remained in the raft.

An hour before noon the wind changed, shifting to blow strongly from the north, carrying with it a harsh acidity which seared nostrils and doubled Vardoon in a fit of coughing. Twisting on his rope, he sealed his helmet, fed clean air from the tanks to flush out the poison. With streaming eyes he looked at Dumarest working to the right and below. At the peaks to the north. At something which moved in a blur of shimmering

wings.

"Earl!"

Dumarest spun, bending his knees and ramming the soles of his boots against the rock. A stance which gave him enough stability to move his arms, to lift the gun in an instinctive reaction. The muzzle followed the darting shape.

A vrek—but a male.

A thing as beautiful as its mate but thicker, smaller, spined like a mythical dragon and keening like a nail drawn over slate. The sound of the wind thrumming past its wings, the protrusions. The sound of energy being generated for an obvious purpose.

"Down!" Dumarest tore at his own fastenings, freed them, dropped toward the raft. "Hart, damn you! Down!"

He came like a rag doll, spinning, bumping, landing heavily, to snatch up the gun and lift it toward the vrek.

"No!" Dumarest swung his hand at the weapon. "No, you fool!"

Fog engulfed them, a mist of swirling, darting particles suddenly illuminated by the snarling roar of the gun as Vardoon fired blindly into the milky cloud, composed of countless fragments of life; spawn vented by the male vrek to fertilize the deposited eggs. Gunfire returned by lightning.

The cloud split in a blue-green flash which threw Dumarest to one side, nerves jarred, muscles knotted. Another and he saw Vardoon standing wreathed in fire, coruscations which traced the metallic protection of his suit and limned the helmet spike with a scintillant halo. The gun glowed red, smoking as it fell to the deck. Dumarest snatched it up, threw it over the side, turned to slash at the holding ropes and, as they parted, sprang to the controls.

A moment and the raft was rising up through the settling

cloud and into the clear sky, which was cut by the shimmer of the wreck now far distant, by the dark flecks of nearing rafts.

Chapter Eight

Vardoon groaned, coughed, groaned again. His eyes, bleared, looked at Dumarest through the opened helmet. As he moved to sit upright he winced.

"You were hit," said Dumarest, anticipating the question. "A bolt from the wreck. I warned you not to fire."

"I tried to get it first," Vardoon grunted as he leaned back against the side of the raft. "I remember the flash but that's about all. I guess the suit saved me."

"It did."

"More proof that you're worth listening to." Vardoon coughed again; smoke from burned insulation had irritated his lungs. "Has it gone?"

"The wreck? Yes."

"So let's get back to work." Vardoon reared, swayed and clutched at Dumarest's shoulder to steady himself. His voice rose as he failed to see the hill. "What's happening? Where the hell are we?"

"Heading north." Dumarest returned to the controls. He said, "Strip off the suit and dump it. Rafts are after us and we want all the speed and lift this thing can give us."

His own suit had gone over the side together with everything else aside from the eggs and gun, clothes and his knife. Now, as Vardoon threw the seared weight of plastic and metal over the side, he said, "How are they coming?"

"Close," said Vardoon. "Too damned close. One on our tail and two not far behind. Others to either side and the rear." He

counted. "Two one side, three the other but one is lagging way back."

"Why are they after us?"

"I explained all that. All this," his hand gestured at the hills, "is a part of someone's holding. Trespassers aren't wanted."

"So they send an armada to catch us?"

"That's unusual," admitted Vardoorn. "A patrol, maybe, but only one raft like we saw before. Even then they don't come out often. No one likes traversing the hills."

Unless they had good reason to find someone among them. Dumarest sensed the closing jaws of a trap. Did the Cyclan have agents on this world? Did they know he was here?

"If they catch us," he said, "they'll take the eggs. You know that."

"I know it." Vardoorn tightened his hands. "I'll see them dead first. Earl, we've got to get away."

Cooperation won, for what it was worth, but a faster raft would have been a greater asset. Dumarest nursed the controls, balancing what he had to gain the greatest advantage, knowing even as he worked it wasn't enough. The raft behind would soon draw level—even now they were an easy target should the men inside decide to open fire. And he had seen sunlight reflected from the barrels of guns.

And they were heading in the wrong direction.

Ahead lay nothing but the marching hills, the crevasses, the ragged expanses of shattered stone. Safety lay to the south and if he hoped to reach it they had to head for it soon.

"You there!" The voice boomed from a loud-hailer. "Halt and hover or I'll burn you down!"

Chan Kline smiled as they did not obey. The search had been

long, tiresome, and worrying toward the end when Zao had mentioned his disappointment that it was taking so long. Now he could enjoy the sweet taste of success, heightened by playing cat and mouse for a while. Let the fools run for a few more miles. They were helpless to escape.

"Shall I fire, sir?"

"No!" The man was a good marksman and could bring down the raft without touching its occupants but mistakes could always happen and Zao had made it clear that he would tolerate no mistakes. "Let them run for a bit longer," said Kline. "I'll tell you when to shoot."

Until then he could sit and dream of his promotion now firmly secure. A new house, extra servants, an extra wife, even. Irene was getting tiresome and needed to be put in her place. It was time she learned that the one who paid the bills dictated the service.

"Captain!" The observer didn't lower his binoculars as he spoke. "Rafts ahead, sir."

"Ours?"

"No, Captain. They bear the markings of the Maximus."

"How many? Never mind!" Kline could count. He frowned as he searched the sky. Three and more rising from a point ahead where copper made flashing glints against the brown of stone. Others coming from either side. Numbers to more than equal his own. Rafts which bore men bearing guns. He swore as the ruby guide beam of a laser settled on his prow. "The fools! What the hell are they doing?"

"Halt!" The command answered his question. "Back away or I fire!"

"Captain?"

"Do as he says." Kline snatched up his own loud-hailer as the driver obeyed. "This is Captain Chan Kline. I have a commission

to search this area. Full permission has been obtained from the Maximus."

"By whom?"

"Cyber Zao."

"When I see it I'll let you pass."

"I haven't got it with me, you fool! Haven't you been notified?"

The voice said coldly, "I am Major Bran Mellia in full command of security appertaining to Rham Kalova's holdings. If you hope for cooperation, Captain, you had better change your attitude. As things stand you are trespassing. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly." To his marksman Kline said, "Can you see who's behind that laser trained on us? Could you get him?"

"Not before he burns us, Captain. It takes time to draw a bead."

<>He would be seen doing it and some trigger-happy fool would fire. A single shot could start a battle he would lose; he was outgunned and outmanned and if it came to an inquiry the major was in the right. Why hadn't he been notified of the gained permission? How the hell did Zao expect him to find and capture those men unless he had free access to all areas?

The man!

What had happened to the raft?

Dumarest had sent it diving fast and low, adding the pull of gravity to the pulse of the engine so that air whined thinly past the vehicle. A chance created by the confrontation of the opposing forces and one he had taken advantage of. Too busy arguing, Kline had forgotten them; precious seconds gained in which to reach a pass winding between ragged hills, to follow it as it looped south, to gain another and to move on beneath a narrow band of clear sky.

A rat scuttling frantically through a tortuous maze.

"Neat," said Vardoon. "Think we'll make it?"

"We'd better."

"If we don't we lose it all." Vardoon glanced at the pouches of eggs. His face was hard with ridged scar tissue; a determination evident in the hands clamped on the gun he held before him, muzzle pointed upward. "If that happens we won't go alone. I'll take some of those so-called soldiers with us. Did you hear them talk? They wouldn't last five minutes in any real conflict. I could have taken them all with a couple of rafts and a dozen men who know their business."

Talk, but if it gave him consolation there was no harm in it. There could even be gain, a man needing to talk often said more than he intended. As Dumarest chose another pass down which to send the raft he said casually, "Did you catch the names? The Maxim... Maxom..."

"The Maximus." Vardoon took the bait. "Rham Kulova— well, he was ripe for the job and it was only a matter of time before he won it. A hard bastard, greedy, too. I guess that's why he's after us. If we get away he could have reason to regret it."

"You know him?"

"Sure, I—" Vardoon broke off, added, "When I was here before I heard of him. Emil had no cause to love him."

"And the other? The cyber?"

"Zao? Never heard of him. He must be a recent arrival."

But established long enough to have gained influence and power. The implication of what Kline had said was plain and had removed any doubt as to why they were being chased. Why he was being chased—Vardoon had been unlucky enough to choose the wrong partner.

Now he said, "Can't you go faster, Earl?"

"No."

"If we're caught in the hills at night we're dead. If we lift they'll spot us and catch us before we clear the area. Willing to take a chance?" He explained as Dumarest nodded. "There's a trick I learned with models of this type. A way to short the engine so as to boost the output. It wrecks the plant but I guess we don't have to worry about that. You want me to try it?"

Dumarest said, "How long will the extra power last?"

"It depends on the engine and how greedy you are. Maybe a few hours, maybe less. It's a gamble but what can we lose?"

All they had if the engine burned out too soon. The same if Vardoon overestimated his skill. Dumarest looked at the sky and tried to guess the position of the sun. Already shadows dusted the bottoms of the passes and peaked silhouettes softened the walls of the hills. It was past noon, then, but how long until night?

How far did they have to go?

"Earl?" Vardoon was impatient to get busy. "What'll it be?"

"Go ahead. Just get everything ready to trigger the boost."

"Why not finish the job?"

Dumarest said patiently, "We'll save it until we need it. It's a long walk back even after we leave the hills and I'd rather ride slow than do it the hard way. Need any help?"

"No." Vardoon swung from the seat and produced a short-bladed knife. "Just keep this thing steady and yell if you see our friends."

A warning for him to get the gun into action, something Dumarest wanted to avoid. He steadied the raft as it bucked beneath him, felt it drop to touch stone, bouncing as it lifted to ride evenly down the pass. Mounded rock lay ahead, a thermal catching the vehicle as it swung past the heap and lifting it high.

Too high, another updraft of heated air caught it, lifted it like a scrap of thistle down to reveal a glimpse of the sun, a dark fleck uncomfortably close.

It vanished as he sent the raft diving into the shelter of a pass, solid rock blocking it from sight as it shielded them from any observer. But if they had been spotted the raft would follow and it had the advantage of height.

Behind him Dumarest heard scrapings, a grunt of satisfaction as Vardoon ripped away panels to expose leads and conduits. Within minutes he was ready.

"When you give the word, Earl."

They had time to spare and the longer they could stay hidden the better their chances. Dumarest swung to the left, glided along a defile, turned to the right and into a narrow gap masked from above by jutting outcrops of stone. One path wended, dipped, rose to reveal open sky at the far end, deceptive in its apparent innocence.

"Earl!"

Dumarest saw the thing as Vardoon yelled a warning. It dropped from where it had clung to the underside of the rock, a flattened disc two feet in diameter, fringed with tendrils, more rising in a spined frond from its center. Sparks flashed from it, numbing Dumarest's arm as he knocked it to one side. Another burst as he kicked at it, a third hit the side of the raft as it scraped against stone. From it, from the rock itself, the very air, came a sudden, acrid vapor.

"Hart! Hold your breath!"

Dumarest felt the sting of acrid gases catch at eyes and throat as he voided his lungs. Behind him, slower, Vardoon retched from the invisible fumes. Exudations from the creatures or a part of their environment—unless they could win free they would die.

The raft scraped against more stone, veered as Dumarest

adjusted their flight, hit again as tears fogged his vision. Ahead the clear expanse of sky seemed to shimmer, to become ringed with a contracting ring of darkness. Within his chest his empty lungs demanded air.

A pain he ignored as, blinking, he sent the raft arrowing along the narrow passage to the clear air ahead. Reaching it, he aimed for height, blasting the craft with manufactured winds before gulping air into his starved lungs. The inhalations cleared his head. Behind him Vardoon retched again, coughed, drew in air with a moist rattling.

"Hart?"

"I'm all right." Vardoon coughed again. "That damned stink got at me. Burned my throat a little, I guess, but I'll manage. How are we?"

Up and riding away from the hills. Ahead lay the rugged wilderness leading toward the south, the sea and the town. The sun was halfway toward the horizon; a ruby ball ahead and to the west. The sky was touched with puffs of white and flecks of darkness. Cloud—and the rafts hanging like vultures ready to strike.

As they closed in Dumarest said, "Now, Hart! Now!"

He felt the raft surge beneath him, the rush of air a whip lashing at his eyes, his face. Below, the ground blurred, fell away as they climbed, the hills diminishing behind them, the dark flecks of the rafts lost in the distance. Power—robbed from the whining engine—fed to the propulsion units as Vardoon boosted the transmission.

He swore as the raft faltered.

"My knife—the damned thing's burned out! Earl, pass me yours!"

The raft slowed as Dumarest reached for his boot, dropped, sluggishly rose again as he manipulated the controls. Turning he saw Vardoon's back, the hand he lifted, the haft of his knife with

the blade reduced to a nub of fused metal.

Saw too the raft which lanced at them from the eye of the ruby sun.

It had been a textbook maneuver and Kline had cause to congratulate himself. To calculate they would head for the south required little intelligence; without protective clothing the men had been left with no other choice. To guess, too, they would seek the protection of narrow passes was equally simple. The hard part in being able to determine where they would emerge and what path they would take. Possibilities countered by having his rafts sweep the hills and form station at the edge of the wilderness. Faster, able to move directly through unhampered air, they had been certain to beat the fugitives. But, as an insurance, he had gone on ahead to wait.

Now he headed in for the kill.

"Halt!" His voice echoed from the loud-hailer. "Halt and hover! Obey or I'll blast you from the sky!"

An empty threat but they wouldn't know that and this time there were no stubborn fools to interfere. No chance of another abortive escape.

His observer said, "They are continuing as before, sir."

Slow, juddering, the raft lifted to drop to lift again as if it had been a crippled moth riding on torn and tattered wings.

Burned out, thought Kline. Power gone, a crash inevitable unless the vehicle grounded soon. Why didn't the fools yield?

"Land! I order you to land immediately! Land or I fire." To the marksman Kline said, "Show yourself. Let them see you taking aim. If I order you to fire make certain you miss." The threat should be enough. As the man took up his position he lifted the loud-hailer. "You in the raft! Land or I'll shoot you down! You have five seconds in which to head downward!"

From the body of the raft Vardoon said, "Give me your knife,

Earl. I might be able to get us away."

A surge of power could fail, to leave them wrecked in the wilderness. A gamble with the cards stacked against them— but what else to do?

Dumarest looked back at the flecks of the other rafts, closer now, streaming wide in order to encircle and enclose. Kline was riding high and to one side; a position from which he commanded the immediate area.

Vardoon said impatiently, "Earl, your knife!" He lunged forward to snatch up the gun. "Never mind—this will do it!"

The movement sent the raft veering, which caused the marksman to close his finger in automatic reaction.

Flame jettied from the muzzle of his weapon, bullets whining to hit the raft, the rail, to cut the air with a lethal hail. Dumarest felt the shock as one glanced from his shoulder, the vivid flash as another gouged a bloody path over his left ear. The blow sent him doubled, almost unconscious over the controls as, snarling, Vardoon returned the fire.

A short burst sent the marksman back from the rail. Kline took his place, shouting, face contorted with rage and anxiety as he saw the figure slumped over the controls, but the emotions vanished as bullets churned his face to a pulp of blood and bone.

"Earl!" Vardoon lifted his voice over the snarl of gunfire. "Earl!"

Dumarest stirred as again the gun yammered, lacing shots into the raft, hitting the driver and sending the vehicle spinning toward the ground far below.

"For God's sake! Earl! Get with it, man!"

They were falling, air droning past with feral anticipation. A drone which faded as, sluggishly, the vehicle came under control and headed again toward the south.

Dumarest rose from the seat, swaying, fighting a sudden vertigo. The left side of his face was sticky with blood oozing from the throbbing ache of his wounded temple; one to match the minor hurt of his shoulder. Near misses, but Vardoon hadn't been so lucky.

He groaned as Dumarest knelt beside him to move his bulk, easing limbs, propping his head on a pouch of eggs. Blood ringed his mouth and made dark stains on his tunic; some old, others with a scarlet wetness. The first from lungs seared with corrosive vapors, the other from the damage done by the bullets which had pierced his stomach and chest.

"They down, Earl?" His lips twisted at Dumarest's nod. "I thought we were going to follow the swine. Crazy them opening fire like that. What harm could we do? I didn't intend—" He coughed, lifting a hand to wipe his lips clear of bloody froth. "Bad, Earl?"

"Bad enough."

"Then give me an egg." His mouth tried to smile as Dumarest shook his head. "Greedy?"

"You're lying on a pouch of them—help yourself if you want. I'm getting back to the controls."

"Wait! I—" Vardoon broke off, sweating. "The pain! God, the pain!"

Raw agony from broken ribs, their jagged ends tearing at delicate tissue like saw-edged knives. From punctured intestines and mangled bowels. Pain which distorted the universe and made extinction a welcome blessing.

Dumarest leaned forward, fingers hard as he rested them on Vardoon's throat, finding the pulsing carotid arteries and pressing so as to cut off the blood supply to the brain. The reaction was immediate. Vardoon sighed, relaxing as his eyes closed and he embraced the mercy of unconsciousness. Dumarest waited, counting seconds, releasing the pressure before the induced oblivion edged into the final tranquility of

death.

Back at the controls he fought a mounting vertigo. Ahead the sky shimmered with lambent emerald laced with streaks and swaths of carmine; colors reflected from the mirror of the ocean to form an all-encompassing swirl of engulfing deception, which he fought with a barrage of pertinent questions. How high was he? How far did he have to go? Where was his target?

Where were the other rafts?

Behind him the sky was clear and, dully, he wondered why. The sudden engagement which had sent their commander down? An order from some higher authority? A trap lying ahead from which they wanted to keep clear? Or were they playing cat and mouse, riding high, waiting and watching in detached comfort? Studying the veering progress of his raft, the path it took, the meandering passage. Gambling that he wouldn't make it. That he would crash before reaching the coast, the spired building resting on the fringe of hills encircling the town.

A gamble lost as he hit dirt, sending the raft to plow to a halt before the church, the startled monks, the woman with golden hair.

Chapter Nine

It had been something from the ancient tales of high romance, of fantasy and adventure, of the sagas once sung around leaping fires after the labor of the day was done. A thing Carmodyne would have appreciated and, cosseted in the womb of her bed, Fiona Velen savored every remembered moment.

Chance had taken her to the church at just that time; the sudden decision to see if there was any way to increase revenues from the sector. Tobol had met her, courteous as always, echoing a genuine concern at the problem which was as much his as hers. Even if rents were tripled they would show no increase; Carmodyne had given the monks free use of the church and surrounding land. A contract binding while he had lived and she

was reluctant to spit on his grave.

But there had been more cakes, more wine and, as she was about to make her departure, Dumarest had arrived.

Landing like a hero of old, crashing the raft into the dirt, lifting free the limp form of his companion and carrying it to where they stood.

"Brother, I ask your aid."

"It shall be given, brother." Tobol hadn't hesitated. "What do you need?"

"Nothing for myself but my friend is dying." He had added flatly, "I do not ask for charity."

Pride, she thought, a man with pride.

Stretching she felt the soft caress of silken sheets against her naked flesh. A caress accentuated by the touch of her hands as they moved over the contours of her body. Would his hands be as gentle? Would he be patient and understanding or would he take with a selfish disregard of her own needs?

Against the closed lids of her eyes she saw him again, tall, strong, his face savage with its mask of blood. Had he seen her? A glance, perhaps, but his attention had been on the monks, the help they could give. Yet some things she had learned; his name for one, his needs—information conveyed by Tobol as he had made his excuses. Replies to her direct questions.

Earl Dumarest—a man she found it hard to forget.

Her hands moved, settled, explored another region of her body in narcissistic appreciation. Would he look at her as Lynne had looked when they had shared a common bath? The woman had insisted on giving her a massage, leaning over her supine body, her own, untrammelled breasts hanging like pendulous fruit, nipples prominent, blue veins making a delicate tracery beneath the skin. Her hands had been hungry as they applied oil, had quested too urgently. Her eyes, when Fiona had turned and

then risen, had held an expression not pleasant to see.

But she had been subtle, hinting at another time, another occasion. Hinting too of the help she could give and the kind of enemy she could make. A frustrated and selfish bitch who would do better with a man.

Dumarest?

Fiona stirred, seeing again the bloodstained face with the hard, searching eyes. The mouth which matched the chin in determination, the body beneath the soiled gray of his clothing. A hard, firm, well-muscled body, well-suited to the giving of strong sons.

The hum of her phone interrupted an intriguing vein of speculation. Rham Kalova stared at her from the screen.

"Fiona, my dear! Not yet up?"

"It's early, Maximus."

"True, but you know the proverb—first to the feast gets the finest choice. Well, never mind that. You are well, I hope?" He beamed as she nodded. "That is good to hear. We haven't been as close as I would have wished of late. A woman of your attainments should be seated at the top table during assembly. Perhaps something could be done about it. I may not be as young as I was but I can still appreciate the presence of a beautiful woman."

A fool, she thought, and worse, a senile one. Or a man acting the part and Kalova was a poor actor. He wanted something—but what?

She said, smiling, "You are most kind, Maximus. And I am most fortunate that you think of me at times. To sit beside you at table would be to gain my highest ambition. Of course, before that could happen my holdings would have to increase, and—"

"Yes, yes," he said shortly, then resumed his smile. "Even that could be arranged. You are a shrewd woman and could gain as

long as pressures were not directed against you. If the opportunity should arise I am certain you would recognize it and take full advantage of the situation. High gain, my dear, and it could begin now. Which is why I am calling. A small matter of a transfer of holdings; your sector D 18 for sector K 29. I take it you agree?"

D 18—what could Kalova want with the church?

She said, a little blurredly, "I don't quite understand what you want, Maximus. Something about being seated at your side during the next assembly, wasn't it?" Inwardly she smiled as his face changed, became old and ugly and, somehow, womanish in its spite. A moment only, then again he was smiling, gently shaking his head, little crinkles at the corners of eyes and mouth.

"You're still half-asleep, my dear. I'm merely offering you an exchange of holdings. Of course, should you agree, there, could be other benefits."

Things he had spelled out had she the wit to understand. Pressures not applied so as to give her a measure of safety over and above her own skill and ability. Opportunities made should she become his willing tool in whatever plan he had in mind. But why the church?

"K 29 for D 18," she mused. "Carmodyne's monument. That's what I call it, Maximus, and I am a very sentimental person. I think I owe it to his memory to maintain his bequest. My personal charity, you understand."

"Charity begins at home."

"Of course—and K 29 is what?" Her relay lights confirmed the promptings of her memory. "A section of undersea development situated at the edge of the continental shelf. Hardly a prize, Maximus."

"But one with a high potential, my dear. Also the revenue is good."

"Perhaps." She yawned, slender fingers rising to cover her

mouth. "Your pardon, Maximus, but I had a rather late night. Was there anything else?"

"No. I am glad you agree, my dear. The record can be made immediately if you will take care of your end."

"But we haven't agreed," she said firmly. "One sector for another—where's the profit? And I like to look at the church and think of Carmodyne. Somehow it brings him closer to me. Did you know there's a carving of him inside the building? At times I sit before it and it's almost as if he were speaking to me. I'd hate to lose that small pleasure."

He said tightly, "Sectors K 29 and M 15—I'll double the bid!"

Again she checked the dancing lights. M 15—a stretch of barren land adjoining the Quale Consortium. Yet its very position gave it a certain value. Arment was eager to break the Consortium and could be interested. Helm too—the possibilities were intriguing. But why did Kalova want the church? If it was important to him it could be equally so to others.

"You are generous, Maximus, but I hate to be rushed into anything. Could I call you back on the matter? I'm sure there can't be any hurry. In any case I must arrange for a new gown to wear at the next assembly." Her smile held a cloying sweetness, "You know—when I sit next to you at table."

As Rham Kalova turned from the phone Zao said, "She refused."

"You heard."

"The probability was in the order of sixty-four percent. Less when you doubled your offer. Obviously there is a factor yet to be taken into account."

"The man," said Kalova. "Dumarest and his friend. Had I made the offer a week ago she would have jumped at it." His sneer was obvious. "Even I can determine what lies under my feet, Cyber. I don't need the Cyclan for that."

A man wounded in his pride and striking out without thought for the consequences. One looking for a convenient excuse.

Zao said, "The men are a factor, that is apparent, but what are they to her?"

"They are men—that's good enough. The woman is a nymphomaniac!"

A false judgment; narcissism was not nymphomania as Kalova should know. Yet further proof that his faculties were not what they should be. Left to his own devices he would have been beaten long ago, toppled from his high position to make way for another, more capable Maximus. As he would be toppled if the need arose.

"If you had issued the directives as I asked, my lord, this situation would not exist." Zao followed the restless pacing of the other with his deep-set eyes. "I would suggest that it is futile to employ experts if you have no intention of following their advice."

"Advice?" Kalova halted, spun so as to face the figure in scarlet. "Orders, you mean. Permission for the guard to search my holdings! To fly over them! To abrogate my rights! And for what? So a couple of poachers could be apprehended. Some trespassers taught a lesson. Dumarest—what is he to me?"

The man who held the answer to Kalova's dearest wish; the secret he held would provide the Maximus with a young, virile body. The affinity twin which could make Kalova the dominant part, using the host's body as if it were his own, sensing, feeling, a seeming part of the subject. Active life extended via a line of host-subjects. New bodies for old—a bribe no man could refuse, no aging woman resist.

If the Cyclan regained it a cyber's mind would now be in Kalova's body, dominating his own subdued intelligence, making the Maximus nothing but a puppet of flesh and blood and bone. A fact he dared not reveal; if Kalova even suspected it he would stop at nothing to capture Dumarest for his own ends.

Zao said in his even monotone, "The man is nothing to you, my lord, that is true, but the crime he committed against the Cyclan must not remain unpunished. He must be taken and your help would be more than appreciated."

And the converse would apply. Kalova resumed his pacing, brow creased in thought. To aid the Cyclan would bring rich rewards as had already been promised; a hint of surgical techniques to recapture a new vitality, drugs to combat the advance of age. A bonus to be added to the power which kept him Maximus. To defy them was to invite ruin and death.

What had Dumarest done to arouse such determination?

"I cannot be blamed, Cyber." Kalova paused to touch a hanging chime, small sounds rising to echo his words. "You had rafts and men commanded by an officer of your choice. The permission to search my northern holdings was unnecessary and events proved it. My own guards would have taken the fugitives had yours not argued the matter. A stupidity compounded by your commander."

A fool, who had paid the price of his folly. Kline was better dead but still questions remained.

Kalova shrugged when they were asked. "The officer, driver, marksman and signaler were killed but the observer was found alive. The fugitives did not open fire—they returned it. Hardly a crime. Those in the other rafts obeyed their original instructions and took no potentially harmful action. In any case they had no choice once the chase had left the north and Dumarest was crossing other holdings. Not even I can violate another's rights."

The code would destroy him should he break it, which made it impossible to send a task force to snatch Dumarest from the church; should it be tried, every holder would rise in protest. A hundred and forty-seven of them each with rafts and men and guns. Each determined to protect his rights.

"She'll make the exchange," said Kalova. He touched the chime again, waited for the tinklings to fade. "She's greedy and worried and aware of just how vulnerable she is if I choose to

move against her. The last conflict hurt her and she'll be wary of taking risks. Just give her time to think about it. She'll do as we want."

"And if she defies you, my lord?"

A stab at his pride and the result Zao had intended. Those cursed with the burden of emotion could be manipulated like dolls.

"I'll break her!" Kalova slashed his hand at the hanging chimes and left shattered crystal to litter the carpet. The blow lacerated the skin of his hand, minor wounds he did not feel as he remembered her smile, the lilt of her voice, her barely masked contempt. He was the Maximus and should be obeyed! Would be obeyed! "I'll ruin her!"

Bowing, Tobol said, "My lady, it is a pleasant surprise to see you again so soon after your last visit."

His voice held a question she made no attempt to answer. Let him wonder at her interest—knowledge was wealth to those who commanded it. Then, looking into his face, his old, wise eyes, she recognized her childishness.

"Those men? How are they?"

"Well, my lady. As well as can be expected." His arm made an inviting gesture. "Dumarest is on the upper balcony. I will send wine and cakes if you care to join him."

The wind was from the sea and ruffled her hair as Fiona emerged on the long, narrow path flanked by the rising swell of the roof to one side, a crenelated parapet on the other. Dumarest turned as she approached. His clothing had been refurbished and gleamed with a muted sheen. A softness hardened by the knife in his boot, the face above the collar of the tunic.

"My lady." His tone was formal. "May I take this opportunity to extend my gratitude for your forbearance?"

"Accepted, but why be grateful? The monks took care of you,

Earl, not I." She smiled and took a step closer. "Yes, I know your name. Do you know mine? Good, then use it. My first name," she added. "I want us to be friends."

"You are kind."

"Curious," she corrected. "Strangers are rare on this world and each holds novelty. What brought you to Sacaweena?"

"A promise, my lady, and a name."

"I asked you not to be formal, Earl. It places a barrier between us. Do you want that or is it that you have reason not to like my name? Carmodyne used to say it sounded like music. Do you agree?"

"Fiona," he said. "Fiona—yes, it holds melody. A charm which matches the one who bears it. Carmodyne?"

"My uncle. He built all this." Her gesture embraced the church. "He's dead now but his memory lives on in stone and decorations. If you are interested I'll show you what he looked like. He left a carving, somewhat distorted, but it holds the essence of the man. I think he would have liked you, Earl. You could have liked him. You could even have taught him a little sense."

He noted the hardening of her tone, the underlying tension. A woman of strong passions, subjected to equally strong impulses. He remembered the way she had looked at him, the expression in her eyes. One he had seen before.

He said, "Carmodyne. A Velen?"

"Of course. The Holder when he died. I inherited. To me came the paper, the profit and the penalties." She drew in her breath at the thought of what they could be, annoyed at herself for having mentioned them, more annoyed at the fear they created. Ghosts which need never materialize. Terrors which could remain unborn. Had Correo consoled himself with such platitudes? Did Bulem?

"So you inherited," said Dumarest. "Were there others of your house? Your father, for instance?"

"He died a year after I was born. That's why my uncle was so close." She shrugged, impatient at the questioning. "Does it matter?"

"Not really."

"Then why mention it?" She turned to look at the sea. The wind had created long, rolling swells which caught the light and reflected it in shimmers of crimson so as to form a lake of fire, broken by something which rose, to hang for a moment in a sparkle of droplets, to dive again to leave widening ripples. "Do you fish, Earl? Not with a line or nets but with a mask and air tanks and a gun. Meeting things ten times your size and challenging them in their own environment. Killing them and bringing back the trophies to awe your friends. Does that appeal to you?" She turned to face him. "Earl?"

He said quietly, "I do not kill for amusement."

"No." Her hand rose to touch his cheek, the fingers to linger on his lips before falling back to her side. "No, I didn't think you did. You aren't like other men. You have no need to prove your masculinity by hounding and destroying creatures from a safe distance. How many hunters, I wonder, would dare to meet an animal on equal terms? Naked, armed only with natural weapons, a knife at the most. Is your friend a hunter?"

"You could call him that."

"And you? What should I call you, Earl?"

"A fool, perhaps? An optimist?" He smiled down at her from his superior height. "Or just a very lucky man."

That, certainly, but there had to be more. She was aware of his eyes searching her face, lingering on the golden mane of her hair. Flattery without the need of words, which alone proved he was a clever man with a strong sense of survival—yet why had he risked so much? And why did Kalova want him so badly?

Dumarest had to be the answer—for hours she had checked and assessed each possibility. His companion, hurt, could be of little value, the sector was a liability—so what else was left?

Yet how to be sure?

The scuff of sandals broke her introspection as monks came with the promised refreshment. Impatiently she watched as a small, portable table was loaded with cakes and wine, the monks bowing as they withdrew. Again alone she looked at Dumarest as he poured them both wine, wondering at his ease, his confidence. Surely he must know how deeply he was in her power?

Abruptly she said, "Who are you, Earl?"

"Your guest," he said. "Your debtor."

"And you pay your debts?"

"When I can." Picking up the glasses he came toward her, halting to extend one, lifting his own as she took it. "But some debts can never be repaid. Your health, my lady!"

He drank with neat fastidiousness—if he had drunk at all. Another item of information to add to the rest but the increase made her all the more irritated. Why couldn't he fit into the normal pattern of masculine behavior? To desire her, yes, that in itself was a compliment, but also to display all the small crudities, the weaknesses and faults which made it so easy for her to be dominant. How should she handle him? How to manipulate his actions, to test and demand—yet how much more pleasant it would be to receive without the necessity of asking?

Dumarest looked at the glass she lowered. "More wine?"

"No." The container was empty. "I mean yes," she amended. "But not here. We'll drink at home."

Chapter Ten

It was a place filled with mirrors, the bedroom itself covered one floor, walls and ceiling with reflective panes, the wide bed reproduced endlessly in every direction. A chamber for exhibitionists and voyeurs. For lovers who needed to see and be seen; adding a new dimension of visual stimulus to an ancient art.

Lying on the bed, Dumarest looked at himself in the ceiling, the woman lying naked at his side. Her hair covered the pillow with a golden sheen, matched by the small glints from the soft down on her limbs and body. Her skin held the rich glow of studied care, the muscles beneath the fat firm with massage and exercise. A creature feline in her grace who now stretched and turned to look at him with warm, satiated eyes.

"Earl?"

"You are beautiful," he said. "Beautiful."

She almost purred. "You really think so?"

"Can there be any doubt?" He turned to meet her eyes, to smile into them, to touch gently the firm contours of her body. "You do me more than honor, my lady."

"You're strange," she said as again he looked at the mirrored ceiling. "Such odd terms of address. Have you known many highborn women? Loved them, even? Held them as you held me? Used them—Earl!"

Passion flowered, to turn into demanding flame, to fill the mirrors with writhing images. A time which was beyond measurement, terminating in a period of relative calm.

"A man," she whispered. "My darling, you are such a man." Her fingers traced the scars on his torso, lingered on the wound above his ear, almost healed now with the aid of chemical magic, dropped again to the pattern on his chest. A woman entranced by the proximity of passion and pain, of death and desire. "My man," she said softly. "All mine and such a wonderful asset. One I have been waiting for. A man I can love."

For the moment, the hour, the day. For as long as the whim would last—but the mirrors had told their story; Dumarest knew she could love none other than herself. Even in the heights of their passion she had sought the mirrors of his eyes.

Now, reaching, she touched a button and as soft melody stirred the air with the throbbing susurrations of muted drums she said, "You have nothing to worry about, Earl. I want you to know that. As long as you are mine I will protect you."

He knew she wasn't talking about a shared passion.

"Yours, my lady?"

"Still the caution, Earl?" She smiled then became serious. "Didn't Tobol explain? To safeguard you from certain others you had to be registered as a resident of the sector. That binds you to the holding. I own the sector—you see?"

Facts he knew but it was as well to expose the threat if one existed.

"So you own me."

"Not as a slave, Earl," she said quickly. "Never that. But I am responsible for you as you are to me. A matter of resident fee and other charges and in return you gain my protection and certain amenities—just details, Earl. Don't let them concern you."

"But you can sell me?"

"Sell the holding," she corrected. "I can do that, yes, and you will, naturally, go with it. All residents do. A formality," she added. "A change of holder means almost nothing."

To others, maybe, but they lacked his value. In the overhead mirror Dumarest saw the woman's face, the sudden alertness revealed in the tautness of skin, the tension of the eyes.

He said with deliberate casualness, "Has anyone made you an offer for the holding?"

"The Maximus. A good offer but I refused it." Her face had sharpened even more. "Should I have?"

"Not if it made you a profit." Dumarest reared to sit upright on the bed. "Why did you refuse?"

"A whim." She rose to sit beside him, legs crossed, the mane of her hair hanging like a curtain over her shoulders and breasts. "I have no love for Kalova so why yield to his demands? In any case delay will make him the more eager to close a deal. Who knows? He may offer double again." And then, with transparent motive, she added, "Would it matter to you, Earl?"

"If you sold? No."

A lie she chose not to question. The music died as she again touched the button, warm air wafting, heavy with pungent scents to fill the chamber with exotic perfumes. Leaning back she stared at the mirror, the twin reflections so close above.

"Life," she mused. "Why must it always be struggle? To spend it with someone special, to eat and drink and have a soft bed—how can there be more? Tell me, Earl, have you never wanted to settle down? To marry, rear sons, watch them grow? To belong to a family of note and walk with pride? To know real security. Real happiness?"

"A dream," he said. "Always there is the need to struggle. Always someone hungry for what you have. Willing to kill for it. Or are you saying that Sacaweena is a world different from the rest?"

"You should know, Earl. What brought you here anyway? A promise, you said. A name. The promise of what? Great wealth? The eggs you stole from Kalova?"

"Stole?"

"Of course. You raided his holding." She shook her head in mock reproof at his ignorance. "Did your friend mislead you? Didn't you know you were stealing from the Maximus? Perhaps that's why he's so eager to gain this special sector. You and what

you stole and, without doubt, a bloody revenge. You and your friend both, but he looked to be dying, so it all falls on you." Her hand reached up to caress his shoulder, golden hair clothing his arm with a mantle of silk. "You see how much you need me, my darling?"

The threat exposed—if she sold it would cost him his life. Not from the Maximus, though she believed him to be the enemy, but from the cyber at his side, Zao who would stop at nothing to achieve the capture of himself and his secret.

His real worth—if the woman guessed it how safe would he be?

The answer lay in the mirrors all around; for her there could be only one person of any importance. As yet she had tried to manipulate him to learn what she could—the truth would condemn him.

How to escape the trap?

"Earl?" Her hand ceased its movement, hair whispering as she pulled away from his body. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Of course not."

"You sat so still—did my stupid words worry you?"

"I was thinking of what you said. About a wife and family and the security it could bring. Yet you are alone, uncle dead, father dead, mother?"

"Dead too." She sounded bitter. "Suicide. When I was five. Emil—" Irritation edged her voice. "He—well, never mind. That was twenty-five years ago."

"Emil?"

"My elder brother. He was drowned on an inspection tour of undersea installations. So I'm all alone, Earl. But it isn't so bad—at least I haven't hungry dependents and stupid advisors to contend with and there are no Family Councils." She forced

brightness into her voice. "And the rest? The name?"

He smiled to match her own expression. "Name? Oh, what brought me to this world. Erce." He watched her in the mirrors. "I was told that used to be its name. Erce. You've heard of it?"

"Sacaweena was called that a long time ago. Before the Orres took over from the settlers they found here. A problem, Earl, one they solved in their own way. To be known as the Original Residents was a contradiction if they bought the world from others so they changed the name. A new world and so new settlers. No contradiction."

"And the others?"

"Those here before?" She shook her head. "Who knows? They couldn't make a go of it and were happy to sell."

With guns to help them make up their minds, threats added to bribery or it could have been a plain, simple massacre. Such things had been common in the past—had the name been changed to dilute the guilt?

Even if they had been allowed to leave peacefully it didn't help. How to follow them? Where to go? And if they had left anything of value behind them it must have long since been sold or broken for basic worth. And nothing would have been able to exist in the hills.

"So they had an entire world," mused Fiona. "A whole damned planet to call their own. One to hold and share out and play with just as they liked. One to keep all to themselves just as we keep it now. Just as we share it now. Hoarding it, you might say. But what makes you so interested in a name?" She frowned when he told her. "Earth? You're looking for Earth!"

She could have heard something, learned something—the chance had to be taken. A hope which died as she laughed.

"Earl, you're joking or crazy! The place doesn't exist. If it did it would be listed in the almanacs and navigation tables. With enough money you could hire a ship or buy a passage. It's a

myth, I tell you. A legend!"

It was real and Dumarest knew it. He had been born on Earth, had left it as a boy, had spent years now searching for the way back. A way lost as he had traveled deeper into the galaxy, the very name a subject for amusement. Yet the planet was there, waiting for him and, one day, he would find it.

The soft voice said, "Maximus, Cyber Zao asks for audience."

The man could wait! Leaning back in his chair Rham Kalova scowled at the dancing lights on the relay and felt anger at the interruption. The plan needed careful preparation; every diversity and potential fluctuation had to be assessed before the first attack was undertaken. A diversion, he'd decided, one to forestall potential defenses, allow him to move in subtle ways and then, at the last, to win him the prize.

He'd have Fiona Velen groveling at his feet before it was over!

"Maximus?" The soft voice held a note of interrogation and he realized he hadn't answered the original announcement. For a moment he was tempted to vocalize his immediate reaction then thought better of it. Not that he needed Zao—for once he would act on his own, yet to insult the cyber would be to act with stupidity.

He said, temporizing, "I am engaged. Ask him to have patience and wait."

"For how long, Maximus?"

An hour? Two? How to tell how long it would take?

"I will summon him later." He looked again at the screen, frowned as again the voice broke his concentration, "What is it now?"

"Cyber Zao asks that you be notified that he will be unavailable for three hours, Maximus."

A snub and later he would decide what to do about it but for

now let the man think he had asserted his authority.

"In three hours, then."

"Yes, Maximus."

Again he concentrated on the pattern of lights. All was relatively calm; only slight activity from a few minor holders maneuvering for advantage, as was to be expected. The large holders were quiescent, probably studying the situation and waiting for an opportunity. Arment would need to consolidate his recent gains and Helm must realize how dangerous it was to expand too fast. Bulem was easy meat and could be vanquished at a touch but would that be to his benefit? Reed held a flexible position and Lynne Oldrant's aspirations were obvious.

A pact? The woman was ambitious and noted for her greed. As was Myra Lancing. A moment and he had passed on to study other facts, other possibilities. The screen of lights changed as he moved to a closer study of any other variables. The weed in the installation held by Chargel— would that affect the value of Lobel's holding? Would the man again come to another's rescue? A possibility to be negated and for long minutes Kalova searched for a way to combat the event should it threaten. Time which joined that already wasted.

Again the soft voice broke his concentration. "Maximus. Cyber Zao has arrived."

So soon? Kalova blinked as he turned his head from the dancing, hypnotic glow of the lights. Should he send the man away or yield and allow him to enter? To work alone or to ask for aid?

Alone, he decided. His would be the labor and his the reward all the more sweet for having been gained by his own skill. A sweetness strengthened by another's respect and regard.

"Maximus?"

"Have him enter."

He chose to ignore the man, concentrating again on the signals, assessing streaming facts and feeling himself expand with recaptured ability.

"My lord?" Zao stepped to where Kalova was sitting. "You know that the woman Fiona Velen has taken Dumarest to her house? The prediction that they are now lovers is of the order of ninety-nine percent."

"An advantage, Cyber." Kalova looked at the tall, robed figure. "One I recognized as soon as the information was received. Let her use him; once she tires of her new toy she will be eager to sell."

The assessment of an amateur but Zao made no comment.

"Not that I will wait," snapped Kalova. "My plans are being formulated at this very moment. Pressure on Reed and Traske so as to apply a pincer movement on the holdings adjacent to those held by Barracola. The result will be a flurry between Judd, Vanderburg and Prador. While attention is diverted I will snap up Bulem and force the woman to sell in order to protect her eastern holdings. A good plan, you agree?"

A complicated one and it would not work as intended— Zao could tell it at a glance. Kalova was too blinded by his anger toward the woman to be able to assess clearly the situation. He ignored factors which had to be taken into account in his determination to ruin Fiona Velen who had dared to defy him. A weakness and one he failed to recognize. The fact alone proclaimed his failing abilities as did his insistence on working alone.

Megalomania, now clearly obvious, a disease which threatened the stability of Sacaweenaa.

"Well?" Kalova was impatient. "Your comments?"

"I would advise a delay, my lord. Nothing is to be gained by undue haste."

"You talk of delay? What of the punishment you wish to inflict

on Dumarest?"

"You confuse determination with revenge, my lord. Haste can lead to error and confusion. The delay I speak of is a matter of a few days. Time to wait until the situation is more favorable."

"You doubt my plan, is that it?"

"My lord—what if it should fail?"

"It will not fail!" Kalova's hands were quivering with rage, an anger reflected in his eyes, the savage compression of his lips. Abruptly he rose to pace the floor with quick, impatient strides. "I am the Maximus," he snapped. "I am that because I won the majority holding years ago. The skill which served me then is still with me. You have helped, Cyber, that I agree, but this is one thing I will do alone. That bitch will have cause to regret her contempt!"

"Even so, my lord, I—"

"No!" Kalova was curt in his interruption. "I will hear no more. Why did you want to see me?"

"A matter of your authorization on this order." Zao produced it. "For the guards at the field," he explained. "Under no circumstances must Dumarest be permitted to leave this world without your approval."

An irksome formality and already he had given the instructions but the fierce pride of the Orres demanded such rituals. Each held complete autonomy over his holdings; to violate their rights would be to risk losing all.

"Here!" Kalova threw back the signed order. "Your man is trapped—I trust the Cyclan will be grateful for my cooperation."

Risan was busy when Zao returned to his quarters, a sheaf of papers strewn on the desk before him, the compact keyboard of a computer at his side. On a relay the dancing lights flashed and glowed with shifting color, each change bringing action, fingers tapping the keys, checking, moving again.

As he went to rise Zao said, "Continue."

He took a place behind the acolyte, watching, making his own assessments. For some it was necessary to isolate each facet, to evaluate it, to fit it into an overall pattern. One which changed under the impact of newly received data to form new probabilities. The computer Risan was using was an aid he must learn to do without; no man wishing to run should practice on crutches.

"Well?"

Risan leaned back as the lights steadied. "The situation shows the effect of the northern storms on three communes. They will all need importations of food and water and, if to regain viability, new deposits of soil. The mines in the Tanaya sector are hitting narrowing seams. The weed from three undersea farms has been spoiled and must be used as fertilizer instead of basic food."

"Three major influences," said Zao. "How many minor?" He nodded at the answer. "Fifteen—that is correct. Seven of them are relevant to the main situation and the others can be assessed at a low order of importance. Your summation?"

Risan said, "Master, events are moving toward a nexus in which it is possible the present Maximus could be seriously weakened. A cabal has formed against him and he underestimates the potential danger."

"Your recommendations?"

"It is not for me to recommend, master."

The correct answer; a cyber did not take sides, back causes, uphold falling rulers. To advise was the full extent of their duties—all else was for the Cyclan not for those employing their services. Risan was ready for the final step and he would propose it as soon as the present situation had been resolved. In the meantime he had reason to make his report.

"Private seal," he ordered. "Total seclusion."

As the acolyte bowed Zao made his way to his private room. It was stark, bleak in its Spartan simplicity, the cot the only item of relative luxury, but even so the soft mattress was for functional use not for personal comfort.

As the door closed behind him Zao activated the thick band he wore around his left wrist. Electronic emissions created a zone of privacy against any spying device and the locked door and acolyte protected him from physical intrusion. Twin safeguards used when communicating with Central Intelligence. The rest was a matter of training and adaptation.

Lying supine on the cot, Zao relaxed, closing his eyes and concentrating on the Samatachazi formulae. Gradually he lost the use of his senses; had he opened his eyes he would have been blind. Locked in the prison of his skull his brain ceased to be irritated by external stimuli. It became a thing of pure intellect, its reasoning awareness the only thread of continued existence. Only then did the engrafted Homochon elements become active. Rapport followed.

Zao expanded with the sense of it.

Each cyber had a different experience; for him it was as if he had gained insight into every corner of the universe. He saw it and knew it and was of it as it was of him. Nodes of light bright with the shine of naked truth, marching in ordered array to the edges of infinity and, at the center, the massed intelligences of those who had served and continued to serve the Cyclan.

There was no verbal communication, only a mental communion, quick, near-instantaneous, organic transmission against which the speed of light was a crawl. Faster than ultra-radio. Faster even than thought.

Doubt

His verification.

Urgency

His understanding.

Insistence

His assurance.

Emphasis

The rest was euphoria.

It was always the same after rapport. A period in which the Homochon elements sank back into quiescence and the machinery of the body began to realign itself with mental processes. Zao hovered in an illuminated void filled with strange memories and alien concepts, dreamlike experiences and flashes of hallucination touched with disorienting vistas—scraps of overflow from other intelligences, the throw-away waste of other minds.

Opening his eyes he looked at the bare whiteness of the ceiling, assessing the information given even as his own had been sucked from his mind as if it had been water placed against a sponge. To capture Dumarest was a matter of prime urgency—Central Intelligence had left him in no doubt. The man must be taken and held at any cost. Against that directive the needs of Rham Kalova held little weight and he and his entire planet could be sacrificed should the need arise.

How best to obey?

The field was sealed and no ships were expected for at least a week, nor were any waiting to depart. Men in rafts watched the holding and reported on Dumarest's every movement. Soon Kalova would commence his plan to wrest sector D 18 from the woman's possession and with it Dumarest, who was resident. He would hand the man over to Zao as promised.

Or would he?

The ceiling was marred with small, almost invisible cracks, a tracery which spread in interwound convolutions like the distorted web of a spider. A mesh which resembled the problem and which Zao assessed even as he considered the variables open to those on whom he must rely. Dumarest was clever and shrewd

as he had proven more than once. A man with a seemingly uncanny ability to escape from traps and snares as if sensing their presence; able to manipulate circumstances to his own advantage.

Against him the Maximus had nothing but the power bestowed by the peculiarities of this world's culture.

Already he had shown himself less than able to assess a given situation; the woman was not the dominant factor in her relationship with Dumarest no matter how it might appear. Kalova was basing his assumption on her reaction to men of his own culture but Dumarest was a stranger. She would be slow to tire of him if she tired at all and, long before that, Dumarest would have made his own arrangements to survive.

The pattern of cracks led nowhere, lines merging to meet and branch in an elaborate maze which held no meaning. Zao turned his attention from them, unwilling to spare even the little it had demanded. This time, as never before in his entire life, he must not fail.

What if Dumarest should confide his secret to Kalova? The man would be unable to resist the promise of what was offered, yet even to hint a warning against it would be to arouse his curiosity and turn him against further help to the Cyclan. To kill him would be easy but what would it gain? To replace him? To threaten him with ruin?

How to use what was to gain what needed to be?

A problem which Zao pondered as he lay staring at the ceiling, at the pattern of thin cracks which spread like the skeined threads of a person's life. Factors considered, assessed, evaluated. Others formulated and all woven into bars of metaphorical steel, forging a trap from which Dumarest could never escape.

Chapter Eleven

Between low ridges of agate the water was a pool of emerald held in tiled walls decorated with grotesque fish and writhing creatures, the floor itself a pattern of shells and weed laced in suggestive designs. Dumarest followed it, swimming low, traversing the length of the enclosure before rising, droplets flying as he jerked the hair from his eyes, more cascading as he gripped the wall and reared from the water to sit on the edge.

"You swim well, Earl." Lynne Oldrant stared at him with unabashed admiration. "Fiona is to be envied."

"Her holdings?"

"You."

A flat answer to a deliberate misunderstanding and one Dumarest had expected. The woman had made no secret of her desire, the bait she had offered in her body and eyes, her lips and her smile. A mature woman with generous proportions and a mouth too soft and eyes too wanton. Jaded, as they all were, bored, eager for the stimulation a stranger could bring.

Or one bribed to pretend just that.

Now she turned and gestured a serving girl to her side, taking her time as she studied the dainties offered on the tray, selecting with care two comfits formed of twisted sugar dusted with a powder of spices.

"Here!" She offered one to Dumarest. "You take it, bite it, swallow it down. The results could be—interesting."

An aphrodisiac or some form of hallucinogenic. From her tone the thing could be either or it could be just a harmless sweetmeat. Or something not so harmless—a drug to induce impotence; who knew what she carried beneath her nails?

Dumarest said, "Thank you, my lady, but I must refuse."

"What I offer?"

"Just the comfit." His smile brought warmth to her eyes. "Will

you join me in the water?"

A chance to touch, to caress, to leave no doubt as to her extended invitation. An opportunity she used to the full. To win him from Fiona would be a sweet revenge for earlier rejection.

"Earl!" A tall, red-headed girl waved to him from where she stood at the edge of the pool. "Come and join us! We need your advice!"

Men had clustered in a group behind her, youngsters with faces usually masked with boredom now creased in a febrile interest.

"Chargel's man told me of the trick," said one. "He saw it done at a private fight on Emoolt. You feint—so! Then recovering you cut—so! If it hits, you gain a point. If you miss you backslash and thrust—so!" His hand made appropriate gestures, the knife he held glittering as it reflected the light from the ruby sun. "The man who used it had never been beaten."

"Or so he said." Shelia Fairfax, the tall girl with flaming hair, laughed her scorn. "Tell them, Earl. Put the fool wise."

Her tone held familiarity as did the hand she placed on his arm. Instant friendship gained in a matter of a few hours—or what passed for it in this too closely knit culture. Fiona had introduced him to the party—had left him at the pool while attending to a private matter. Lynne had been only one of the women to show more than a casual interest.

The man with the knife said, "Fool, Shelia? Care to back your judgment?"

"A week's allowance," she said. "No, make it a month's."

"That I can't score on Earl?"

"That's right." Her laughter was brittle. "You and your theories, Ivor! What chance would you have if faced with a real man?"

Dumarest saw the flush which rose to stain the sallow cheeks, the tension revealed in the hand gripping the knife. A young man, a minor son of some Orres family, trying to show off a little. A youth eager to command attention and to gain a little respect. The girl had been too spiteful, too cruel.

"May I see the knife?" Dumarest held out his hand, saw the other's hesitation, smiled as, finally, Ivor placed it in his fingers. It was what he had expected; a practice blade, the point and edges protruding a fraction of an inch from masking steel. Heavy, able to deliver bruising blows and shallow scratches, but relatively harmless. "A gift?"

"Not exactly. I'm interested in such things. At home I've a collection of knives each of which has killed a man," A boast quickly amended. "At least that's what I have been given to understand. They were part of an inheritance."

From whom was unimportant if the story was true. Dumarest hefted the blade, examined the edges and point, handed it back to the young man.

"Have you another?" He added, "Or do you want me to face you empty-handed?"

"You'll fight?"

"No, but we can try out that trick of yours." Dumarest looked at the girl. "A month's allowance, you said. And no blame on me if I should lose?"

"A month's allowance, Earl—and you won't lose!"

A confidence echoed by others as they made bets on the outcome. Dumarest took the second practice knife, hefted it, poised on the balls of his naked feet and adopted a fighter's stance, though he quickly rectified it as he saw the young man's awkward posture.

"Now," he said. "Come at me!"

The youth was too clumsy, too slow. He left himself wide open

to a killing thrust or a crippling slash had the knives been true blades. Dumarest backed, matching the other's clumsiness, steel ringing as the blades touched, parted to touch again. Music to mask the farce the combat had become as his own movements gave the youth's a grace they lacked. The attack, when it came, was pathetic.

"A hit!" Dumarest stepped back, hand to his side, smears of red on the palm when he displayed it to those watching. "He scored!"

A tiny scratch and a drop of blood—a small price to pay to save another's pride. Watching, Fiona guessed what had happened, came close as Shelia, stunned, tried to get the victor to cancel the bet.

"You were a fool, Earl. He could have hurt you."

"No."

"Maybe not, but why go to that trouble anyway?"

"Why bring me to this party?"

"To show off," she said. "To boast. Does that satisfy you?" The truth, covered as she added, "They wanted to see you. To refuse them that pleasure would have been to make enemies."

And, on Sacaweena, that was far from wise. Dumarest looked at the inquisitive faces, the calculating eyes. At a small distance a youth slapped Ivor on the back as he tried to gain a promise they would practice together. Another pleaded to be taught the trick. A girl pushed Shelia aside as she thrust herself at the victor.

"A friend," mused Fiona. "If nothing else he owes you a favor. You learn fast, Earl. He, his father, his entire family will be grateful you didn't make him look small. Not that they can do you much good—Bulem is on his way out. If the present trend continues he'll be finished within a few days. Crazy! What harm could he be to others? What could anyone gain by grabbing what he's got?"

"Which is?"

"Some undersea holdings which have lost their crop of weed because of undercurrents from seismic activity. A sector to the west and a few holdings scattered to the north and east. Nothing of any real value." She shrugged, bored with the subject. "Shall we swim?"

She wore a robe of shimmering scarlet, one hand lifted to the clasp on its shoulder, ready to let it fall from her naked body at his nod. Instead he said, "I'd rather go to the church."

"The church?"

"To see Vardoon. Will you take me?"

"Forget him, Earl. I can't see why you bothered about him in the first place. He was shot, as good as dead; let him go and what you'd find would all be yours. Why did you bring him back?"

"We were partners."

"So?"

She couldn't understand. To her partnerships were transient and used for personal gain. Allies were those on whom one was forced to make an agreement. Loyalty was a word without meaning. Dumarest said, "I want to see Vardoon."

He sat upright in a bed set with its head against a wall, a wide, low table set to either side, a pouch of eggs resting in his lap. The table to his right bore a tray dotted with glowing, golden pearls. The one to his left bore a litter of discarded membranes. As Dumarest watched he took an egg from the pouch, delicately slit it open with a sliver of razor-edged steel, skinned it from the yoke which he set carefully beside the others.

"Ardeel," he said. "A fortune, Earl. A fortune!"

He was thin, emaciated, body fat lost while under the influence of slow-time. The drug had accelerated his metabolism, turning hours into subjective days, days crawling past as if they

had been months. A time spent under induced unconsciousness and intravenous feeding as the body healed. For Dumarest it had been a subjective week for Vardoon it had been much longer.

"How do you feel?"

"Weak." Vardoon lifted another egg, slit it, placed the precious yoke on the tray with the others. Even as he set it down it began to harden into a sphere. "Weak and hungry but I guess I'm lucky to be either. From what they tell me my guts were shot full of holes. I owe the monks a lot."

"You'll pay it."

"And you, Earl? I owe you my life. How do I pay for that?"

"When I know I'll tell you." Dumarest looked around the room. It was small but neat and comfortable despite the lack of windows, the polished stone of the floor. A rack of instruments stood against the wall flanking the door, another of drugs on the matching side. Soft light from an overhead globe threw a diffused luminescence in which the pearls gleamed as if alive. "Is that all?"

"About half. Tobol has the rest. I asked him to keep them safe for me. He could handle their sale if you want. Whom else could you trust?"

"A Hausi?"

"None on this planet. Nothing for them to do with trade so limited and what there is all tied up by interested parties. The agent at the field works for the holder who takes his cut from everything coming in and going out. No place for a free agent, free enterprise or damn all else."

"So the field's valuable to the one who owns it?"

"Yes."

"Who does?"

"Usually the Maximus. Sometimes it can belong to another holder but it's damned hard to hang onto." Vardoon looked up from the egg he was slitting. "Why the interest? You thinking of staying? If so, forget it. This is one game you can't join." The egg burst in his fingers to leave a smear of yellow. "Damn! Look at that! A Low passage down the drain!"

"You're trying too hard," said Dumarest. "Give it a rest for now. What did you mean when you said this was one game I couldn't win?"

"Join, Earl, not win. No one can ever do that. Not for keeps."

"So?"

"You aren't of the Orres. Even if you were born here you have to be of the Orres. They are the only ones who can own anything on this world. Every inch of land and sea, what's in it, on it or under it—the whole damned works. Didn't I explain all that?"

"What about the utilities? Water? Power?"

"All owned by a holder. Good returns and so highly valued. Sometimes they change hands but not often." Vardoon stooped, lifted a jug from the floor and poured himself a cup of thick liquid. Basic—the essential food of a spaceman, sickly with glucose, tart with citrus, laced with vitamins. A high-protein substance, each cup holding enough energy to last a normal man for a day. "A lousy system," he said after drinking. "Holders are limited so only the heads of Families can operate. That creates jealousies. Boredom too for those left out despite their allowances. Sometimes a holder resigns when too old, sometimes assassinated, sometimes quits if losing too much too often, but usually they hang on until they die of natural causes."

"Can they buy in?"

"The numbers are limited. If they fall too low and a vacancy arises then an outsider can challenge a holder for entry. Usually those wanting in are set one against the other until only one is left. Even then whoever wins has to be admissable. That means of the Orres."

A nice, neat, closed system which made sure that those who had continued to hold and those outside remained that way. A society with ingrained weaknesses and one sure to shatter given time; the pressure of heirs denied a part in the economy would ensure that. But, for now, he had to work with the culture as he found it.

Dumarest said, "So whoever owns the field can deny anyone passage if he wants."

"That's right." Vardoon drank more basic. "But why should they?"

"We stole those eggs, remember? The owner doesn't like it. He might intend to get them back and freezing us could be one way to do it."

"Trouble," said Vardoon. "Well, nothing comes easy, but who would have expected this? I just figured to go in, grab what was going and then out again. No one hurt. Nobody really robbed, just a little poaching, a little collecting and that was all. I still can't understand why those goons came after us the way they did. That shooting—" He broke off, shaking his head. "I'd better get up. I'm no use lying flat on my back. Any friends, Earl?"

"One," said Dumarest. "You might know her. You said you were with her brother when he died."

He had left her with the monks and found her seated with Tobol, a chessboard between them, men scattered in bright touches of gold and jet on squares of scarlet and silver. She played the game well, he noted, moving the pieces with a sure deftness, covering each attack and retreating when threatened. Skill refined over the years and sharpened when Carmodyne had died.

As the old monk acknowledged defeat and set the board for another game she said, "How is your friend?"

"Alive and impatient to be on his feet."

"And to be gone?"

"That too."

"As you are?"

He had no place here and she must know it but to admit to a desire to leave was to betray his indifference. An attitude any woman would take as an insult and she more than most.

"This is a pleasant world," he said. "One I have hardly had time to see. Now, with money, perhaps I shall enjoy it."

"Perhaps?"

"A doubt you could resolve, my lady. Turn from me and what has this planet to offer?"

An answer which pleased her even though she knew it for the flattery it was. One which salved her pride and reassured her that it would be she and not Dumarest who would end their relationship. But not yet; not when she enjoyed his company so much, not when others envied her so openly.

Tobol sighed as, again, she demonstrated her prowess on the board.

"You are too skilled for me, my lady. I must beg you to allow an old man to retain his pride. Perhaps a younger opponent?" He looked up to where Dumarest stood beside the board. "Will you take my place?"

"Can you play?" Fiona was direct.

"I know the moves."

"But can you play?" She gave him no time to answer. "You understand the object of the game? To move and force selected responses from your opponent. To trap the enemy king and so to win. A miniature game of war," she mused. "Combat reduced to the dimensions of a board and yet holding all the cunning and strategy of actual battle. Sit, Earl, fight with me, and for a

wager?" She looked at him, the smile on her lips not matched by her eyes. "Double what you owe me if I win, the usual fees canceled if I am beaten."

"Fees?"

"As I explained; resident's, utilities, protection. All quite normal." She added softly, "And one-tenth of your treasure—mine by right as the holder of this sector. Shall we begin?"

Dumarest glanced at the monk and saw the almost imperceptible lift of the shoulders, the nod signifying she had the right. Above the vaulted roof reflected small sounds from the partitioned area outside the room in which they played; a scuff of shoes, a cough, the rustle of garments. Tiny murmurs drowned by the sharp rap of pieces on the board as she set them out for the new game. "Earl?"

"A game of war," he said. "Do I have it correctly? A game we play to win."

"With what you owe me as the fee—double or nothing." She extended both hands toward him, the fingers clenched, the pawns she held hidden by her flesh. "Your choice, Earl. Gold has first move." She smiled at his selection and opened her hand to reveal jet. "You lose, I win. An omen, perhaps?"

"If you are superstitious."

"Are you?"

"I hold certain beliefs."

"Such as?" She shrugged, again giving him no chance to answer. "We'll talk about such things later but for now let us concentrate on the game. My first move, Earl." She shifted her king's pawn two squares forward. "There!"

Dumarest followed her move.

Without hesitation she moved a cowled piece to a position

four squares above its fellow. She smiled as, again, he followed her move, confident that, after the next, she would have him. Her smile vanished as, deliberately, he swept pieces from the board to leave it bare but for her checkmated king.

"My game, I think."

"You cheated!" She rose, quivering with anger. "A child's trick! Earl, I never expected it of you! Can't you bear to lose?"

"I won."

"No! You—" She appealed to the monk. "You saw what happened. He couldn't win and so ruined the game."

"A game of war," said Dumarest. "I asked and you agreed. A game we play to win. Well, my lady, that's what I have done."

"No! The rules!—"

"In war there are no rules!" His tone was harshly bitter. "There is only one aim—to win. To win no matter how. That is what I have done. Perhaps that is what you should remember to do."

A lesson she ignored as, eyes bright with anger, she pushed past him and from the room. As he picked up the scattered pieces Tobol shook his head.

"You play a dangerous game, Earl. She is not a woman to forgive a slight." He added quietly, "Does the money mean so much to you?"

"As much to me as to her."

"You could have won."

"No."

"Yet you have so much it seems unwise to risk losing all for the sake of a part." So unwise Tobol wondered if Dumarest had hidden motives. Setting the last recovered piece on the board he said, "You are under stress, something Fiona may have forgotten."

And she tends to a certain willfulness."

A selfish disregard—but when had the rich been otherwise?

Dumarest said, "Doesn't it irk you having to live under sufferance?"

"Can you name a single world where men do not?" A rhetorical question and Tobol illuminated it. "Those who established this culture tried to make the best of an unhappy system. They used commercial strife in place of real war with its blood and pain and destruction. To avoid stasis and what it would bring they instituted rules enabling holdings to be gained and changed and set in new combinations. To avoid too great a measure of confusion they limited the number of holders yet insisted that the number not get too small."

"A game," said Dumarest. "But how limit the players? Can't anyone buy in?" He knew the answer. "Only the Orres, of course, the privileged. But they tend to concentrate."

"To gain maximum power. It is all so beautifully simple. The entire world split into holdings; counters to be used on a planetary board. Advantage gained by revenues and exploitation. Safeguards established against cabals and monopolies by the incentive offered to a single winner."

The Maximus. A form of stabilizing influence to prevent outright anarchy. A governor to slow down wildness yet always to stimulate ambition. The target for others to attack, themselves to be attacked in turn if they grew too strong or posed too great a threat. Selfish interest married to the overall welfare, for to neglect a holding was to diminish its value.

"It cannot survive," said Tobol. "No such system can. But what culture can guarantee anything more? How to wed bloodless violence with the stimulus of personal gain? The common good with a growing economy? To avoid stasis while maintaining stability? Yet the Orres did as well as most." He looked at the pieces neatly set on the board. "Don't blame her—Fiona Velen is a product of her society."

He found her standing before a carving depicting a distorted figure.

She did not turn as Dumarest approached, the sound of his steps a susurrating whisper which rose to be amplified by the groined roof, to fade in echoing murmurs. The day was ending, ruby beams streaming through the clerestory to make wide swaths and blotches on the opposing wall. On the floor shadows gathered, broken into fragments by reflected light, darkness which held the glow of colors, the golden cascade of her hair.

"Carmodyne," she said as Dumarest halted at her side. "I cried when he died."

"Fiona—"

"I know. I was being stupid and greedy and acted the fool. A family trait," she added bitterly. "Always we seem to act the fool. My father who took one chance too many, my brother who drowned, my mother who took her own life— did any of them think of me?"

Dumarest touched her shoulder, felt the small tremors running through her body, the emotion which roiled on the edge of eruption.

"Carmodyne took care of me," she said. "Did I tell you that? He was a father to me, a brother, a friend. He made me his heir. I think he gave me his love. Look at him, Earl. Do you think he was capable of love?"

The artist had been a genius, beneath the comic exterior Dumarest could see pathos. Had he yearned for the mother of the woman at his side? The brother he had lost? How often did laughter hide sorrow?

"Love," she said, turning to face him. "A word—what does it mean?"

"Caring, Fiona. Sharing. Doubling pleasure as it decreases pain."

"And who will share my pain? Who gives a damn about me? Earl! I—Earl!"

His arms closed around her as she pressed against him, the touch of her hair silken on his cheek. Beneath his hands he could feel the jerking movement of unleashed tears, of the venting of stemmed emotion. A time in which he did nothing but hold her within the protection of his arms. Then, as the dying sunlight crept with carmine glows over the wall, rising to the roof as the primary set, she sucked in her breath and straightened a little.

He said, "What is wrong, Fiona?"

"Nothing. I—"

"What is wrong!"

"A message," she said dully. "Delivered by someone while you were at the pool. A warning from someone who owed me a favor. Kalova wants to ruin me. He intends to push me down and then out. Out of any holding, out of position, out of any pretense at pride. To crush me—and he can do it. Earl! I'm so afraid!"

Chapter Twelve

Vardoona said, "No, Earl! It isn't reasonable! You're asking too much!"

Scowling, he began to pace the room, his figure caught and reflected in the mirrors which adorned the salon as they lined the bedchamber. Still thin, stooped a little, but active and alive when days ago he had been dying. He swore as he bumped into a mirrored wall. "This damned place is like a maze!"

"Sit down," said Dumarest. "Relax and listen."

"I've done that and the answer's still the same. I've waited too long and risked too much to give it all away now. All right, if it hadn't been for you I'd be dead, but that's what partners are for."

"That's what I'm talking about—our partner."

"The woman?" Vardoon shook his head. "Where does she come in?"

"She could have sold her holding and us with it."

"So?" Vardoon shrugged and resumed his chair. Wine stood on a table to his side and he sipped a little before biting into a wafer of concentrate. "It means nothing, Earl. The new holder would have taken his fees and that's all. We owe her for hospitality, maybe, but she invited us to stay with her, right?" He grunted as Dumarest nodded. "Well, that's all there is to it. If you want to split your share with her then go ahead but I'm keeping mine."

"For how long? And what's it worth?"

"For as long as I want and—" Vardoon frowned. "What the hell are you talking about? You know damned well what it's worth."

"I know," said Dumarest. "On this world that's zero. Who is going to buy it? Come on, man, tell me." He smiled as the other remained silent. "Good—you're beginning to catch on."

"I'll handle it myself. Leave Sacaweena and deal through a Hausi. He'll certify the ardeel as genuine and handle the sales. He'll take a commission, sure, but it'll be worth it."

"Now tell me how you're going to get it to him?"

"By ship, of course, how else? I'll—" Vardoon broke off and said slowly, "No. No, he wouldn't do it. He can't."

"Kalova?"

"The Maximus. He holds the field but he can't stop free trade. He daren't." He sounded as if he wanted reassurance. "Earl, he can't do that."

"Then maybe you should tell him." Dumarest took a sip of his

own wine. "And while he's giving you the answer he might tell you the real reason he was so eager to find and stop us. Or maybe you've worked it out for yourself by now. Remember those rafts which appeared in front of us? The argument as to permissions? They came from ahead, right? From the north. And did you see the glint of copper? Domes among the rock? Places camouflaged so as to look natural?"

Hints, truth mixed with suggestion but suggestion used to illuminate one facet of the truth.

"A monopoly!" Vardoon slammed his hand hard against his knee. "Somehow he's found how to breed vreks and so ensure a high and steady revenue. No wonder the bastard has managed to stay Maximus for so long!"

"Was he that when you were here?"

"No, he took over about fifteen years ago."

"A long time to stay on top?"

"Too damned long, but the revenue could account for it. And he holds the field." Vardoon drank and looked into his empty goblet. "A search," he said. "He'll make a search and confiscate any ardeel he finds. He'll say it was poached and so justify the act. If we complain who will listen? What holder would care?"

"Our hostess," said Dumarest. "Our partner."

"Yours, Earl. Not mine. So you've shown me I'm in a bind but I'll work it out somehow. Come to a deal of some kind."

If he guessed of the cyber's interest the temptation could be too strong, the deal too enticing. The ardeel, passage, every obstacle moved aside—for Dumarest safely delivered.

"I've made a deal," said Dumarest. "And you're a part of it. You can come in willingly or not but either way you come in. A part of what we found isn't enough. We need it all. She needs it. Fiona."

"Revenue to back her play," said Vardoon. "Earl, you're crazy! You don't know what it's all about!"

"And you do?" Dumarest pressed on. "But you would, you've been here before. You know all about the system. Too much about it, maybe. The shale, for example, and your interest in the holders. The equipment you bought—a good guess if it was a guess. Do you remember what I told you back on Polis? How I hate to be cheated?"

"How cheated? I promised you ardeel and you have it."

"Which is why you're still alive." Dumarest leaned toward the other man, the fingers of his right hand resting on the hilt of the knife riding above his boot. "While you were healing I got to thinking about a few things. Emil Velen, for example, his sister, his uncle, the way he is said to have died. Not in the hills but in the sea. Now how could you have made such a mistake?"

"I didn't." Vardoon met the cold, hard eyes. "People lie when it suits them. Carmodyne would have wanted to save the girl. Emil—"

"A young hothead," interrupted Dumarest. "Chafing at his dependence on his mother. Not liking the way she handled things and impatient to get in on the game. That's what you call it, isn't it? The game? But to buy in he needed a lot of money and could think of only one way to get it. So he hired a companion and headed into the hills. Or maybe he went alone. In which case—"

"He wasn't alone!"

"So something happened." Dumarest reached for the decanter and poured a ruby stream into Vardoon's goblet. "They may have got caught in a storm or found by guards or hit by other poachers. In any case one was killed and the other hurt. Did he hurt someone in return? Kill the wrong man?"

"Earl! I told you what happened!"

"Hurt," said Dumarest softly. "His face burned, caught alone

in the hills. Who took care of him until he'd healed? Got him safe passage away from Sacaweena? Told an invented tale of Emil being drowned at sea? Carmodyne?"

Vardoon looked at his wine, drank, stared at the little remaining in the goblet. It shimmered with the amplified vibrations received from the quiver of his hand.

"It makes sense," continued Dumarest. "A man on the run, scared, trying to build a stake to get back. It's something you can't live without once it gets into the blood. The excitement, the fever, the lure of the game. Gambling for life and fortune. Something bred into the bone if you were born here and of the Orres. How long has it been now? Twenty-five years? Moving from world to world, working, trying to build a fortune, losing it as you tried to make it larger. Hitting the bottom and trying again."

Trying and failing until, on Polis, he had met the one man who could provide the answer. A desperate gamble won at the cost of another's safety. Something he couldn't have known.

"You think I'm Emil Velen?"

Dumarest shrugged and sipped again at his wine. "I don't know. I don't care. But if Kalova thinks you are it could be the reason he wants to ruin Fiona. An old blood feud. A relative dead, a friend—what does it matter? You're here that's all that matters."

"But—" Vardoon broke off, shaking his head. "I could never prove it," he muttered. "God, what a mess! If Fiona loses—"

"Kalova moves in. He gets the holding and you with it. Still want to hold onto your share?"

Marc Bulem was old, stooped, his eyes suspicious beneath tufted brows. He received Dumarest in a chamber filled with the scent of age; books, tapestries, scrolls—decaying parchments and papers yielding their insidious effluvium. An atmosphere which suited his thin, scholastic face, his gnarled and blotched hands.

A man lost in a world of the past, of speculation and legend, of great deeds done in remote times, of sagas and chants and litanies. Of forgotten crusades.

"Dumarest," he said. "Earl Dumarest. I don't know you but all visitors are welcome. Do you have books to sell? Some retrieved information? Facts as yet unknown to me?"

The wrong man but a natural mistake. Dumarest had asked for the head of the house; a title Marc must hold by courtesy. He blinked when Dumarest explained.

"You must want Melvin. My younger brother but far more clever than I. Our fortunes depend on him. A moment while I correct the error."

He moved away to leave Dumarest standing before the long windows at the far end of the chamber. Overhead the sky was dull with cloud and a mist of rain had wetted the panes with a scatter of droplets. To the north clouds were darker, roiling beneath the impact of high winds.

"He will be with us in a while," said Marc as he returned. "A matter of business, you understand. At times it never seems to end. Well, I've been done with that for years now. It was never my strength, you understand. I lack the quickness of mind, the skill, the killer instinct needed to survive. Which is why Melvin was voted Head at a Family Council. No disrespect, you understand, but even I could recognize the need."

One admitted too late, perhaps; Bulem was tottering on the edge of ruin. A fact Dumarest did not mention as he listened to the old man.

"My interest has always been in the past. Books, records, old artifacts, old legends. Did you know that Eden actually exists? The fabled world of comfort and luxury often mentioned in old stories?"

A common name; Dumarest had visited three worlds bearing it. "Is that a fact?"

"I could give you the coordinates. Bonanza, too, a world of incredible mineral wealth. One day, if things get too bad, I will arrange an expedition to go there and restore our fortunes."

A madman, or a man made mad by the pressure of life on Sacaweena. One living in a dream, finding comfort in false resources, strength in his supposed knowledge. Now he bustled about the room, lifting books, setting them down to handle a scroll, a file from which he blew dust.

"It's all in here; facts and coordinates and all the old legends sifted and turned into concrete fact. Did you know that, at one time, all men lived in a single world? They left it to reach out to form new settlements. Thousands of them! Millions! Small groups wanting to live as they decided, free from all restraint and compulsion. A long time ago now but such great events. See! Let me show you! I have the proof!"

Dust faded print on moldering pages. Stained lists and scrawled annotations. Insertions from other sources, references legible only to the old man, notes of complex ambiguity. The gossamer fabric of hope and fantasy.

"You see? They're all here. Worlds of wealth and promise. We have no need to worry. No need at all." He held out the book. "Jackpot, Avalon, Erce—they're all here!"

"Erce?" Dumarest reached for the book. "The old name of this world?"

"Yes, but it was borrowed from another. The mother planet, perhaps. The source of all life as we know it. The pure, original world." Pages fluttered in the thin hands. "Look! See this reference! This deposition! All life stemmed from the primordial egg. The fruit of cosmic forces which sparked off sentient awareness. One original race which later split into the factions we know. One original world which held that new and pristine life. A state of grace which lasted for millennia and then something happened. The race split and fragmented to leave the home they had known. They scattered and spread as if from a point of utter corruption. To fly in terror to find new places on which to expiate their sins. Only when cleansed will the race of

Man be again united."

The creed of the Original People. Could this man be one of them? The Orres itself be a part of the sect? The name itself held significance; the Original Residents—the Original People. Given their known love of secrecy such a change would be logical.

Did the coordinates of Earth lie in those moldering pages?

"No!" The old man snatched the book away from the reaching hand. "You are after my secrets!"

"You offered to show me the book."

"You tricked me." The suspicious eyes became cunning. "You are trying to steal my knowledge. Who sent you here? The Maximus? Helm? Ashen? Chargel? Enemies all of them. I am surrounded by enemies. They would ruin my House. Steal my fortune. Help! Help!"

He backed, the book clutched tight in mottled hands, pressed hard against the hollowed chest. A man terrified by the ghosts of his own distorted imagination. He spun as servants ran into the room, a tall, well-built man at their head. "Melvin! Be warned! The man is an enemy!"

The wine was sweet, touched with honey and roses, holding a golden warmth which added brightness to the musty chamber and helped to dispel a little of the external gloom.

Lifting his glass, Melvin Bulem said, "I am in your debt, Earl. I drink to your health." A sip. "To your fortune." Another sip. "To your success."

Dumarest followed the ritual as he studied the other man. He was younger than his brother, hard instead of soft, direct instead of devious, the eyes shrewd but free of the suspicious cunning. Even so he betrayed the signs of anxiety which had marked Fiona's face with premature lines, his own now a mask of studied courtesy.

He said, "I must apologize, Earl. Need I explain that my

brother is not wholly as other men? His illusions, at times, threaten to overwhelm him. The talk of all men having lived on a single planet, for example. An apparent absurdity; how could such divergent types rise on a single world? A common environment must lead to a common race. And the talk of a cosmic egg and the babble he repeats about the need for men to expiate sin. Did you examine the book? No? A pity, if you had you would have seen it composed of rubbish. Even his talk varies at times; today it will be an expedition to Bonanza to restore our fortunes, tomorrow Avalon, the day after he will have wrested a secret from an old parchment and boast of immortality."

"When young did he travel?"

"Marc? No. Why do you ask?"

"His ideas. He could have learned them on other planets."

"He has never left Sacaweena. His notions are due to lies told by visiting captains and traders who beguiled him when young. A poison which produced wild blooms when, later, he had to manage our affairs." Bulem took a sip of his wine. "But enough of my unfortunate brother. In your travels you must have seen many like him."

"He could be helped."

"Helped," mused Bulem. "An odd word for you to have used. Most would have said 'cured.' Well, we shall see, perhaps the monks could aid him with their skill." He took another sip of wine, a gesture which terminated the subject. "I am pleased to see you, Earl, but may I ask the reason you came?"

"You mentioned it. A matter of debt."

"I see."

"You acknowledge it?"

"I, my Family, and most certainly Ivor are grateful to you for having saved our honor. The boy is young in heart if not in body and, it could be, he takes after Marc in certain ways. That is not

important. If you wish me to reassure you of what we owe then consider it done."

"I do," said Dumarest. "But I was thinking of repayment."

"Of course." A veil dropped over Bulem's eyes, adding to his earlier detachment. "I had thought that—well, we are often mistaken. It's a matter of payment, then. The cost of a High passage? Travelers, I understand, are used to such calculations. Would you be satisfied with that?"

"No."

"Double then? Double—I refuse to bargain."

"I want your aid not your money."

"What?"

"I have money," said Dumarest. "With your help I can get more. An arrangement which will benefit us both. Have you a map of the northern sectors?" He waited as the other fetched it. "There!" His finger marked a point, moved on to others. "And here and here!"

Bulem said, "You spoke of an arrangement?"

"These are Kalova's holdings? And these?"

"Those also."

"And here?" Dumarest nodded at the answer. "Do they come with the title or does the Maximus have to earn them?" Facts he knew but wanted Bulem to elaborate. "He has to earn them. Good. That means he can lose them. Can he be forced to sell?"

"The rules apply to all; if two or more holders offer at least twice the recorded value it has to be offered to all. A forced auction. But there are penalties against those forcing the sale of any holding if the price they offered is not reached." Balance and counterbalance; details designed to prevent stagnation. Bulem added, "A forced attack can lead to vicious repercussions."

The weight of the Maximus used to frighten off potential nuisances. Insidious threats to maintain hard-won power.

Dumarest said, "I'm offering you a chance to get rich. With my help you can increase your assets, but I want my fair share. If you aren't interested just say so and I'll leave. If you are I'll show you proof of what I mean."

Bulem poured them both more wine. "Show me."

He sucked in his breath as Dumarest opened the lid of a box he took from his tunic to reveal the massed glow of golden pearls. Their sheen dulled the glow of the wine, seeming brighter because of the clouded sky, the misted air.

"Ardeel," said Dumarest. "I don't have to tell you what these are worth but this is only a sample. Imagine you had a hundred times this amount. A thousand. Such assets would restore your House to its former position." He tilted the box, letting the glow shift as sunlight shifted on the naked steel of a blade. Eye-brightness to catch and hold the attention. "I know just where they are to be found."

"The north?"

"On Kalova's holdings." The lid snapped shut, hiding the lure. "I've traced the breeding path of the vreaks and know where and when they deposit their eggs. Kalova thinks he has a monopoly but it can be broken if you—or someone—obtains certain holdings. I'll tell you which if you agree to yield me my share."

Bulem said slowly, "If you have money why ask for more?"

"I'm human." Dumarest thrust the box back into his pocket and rose to his feet. "Such a stupid question means you aren't interested. There's no point in either of us wasting any more time."

"You are too hasty," said Bulem. "Sit, have some more wine, remember we are friends. And let us talk about the size of your share."

It was late when Dumarest returned to Fiona's house to find Vardoon long asleep, the woman herself dressed for bed. She watched with eyes narrowed with jealousy as he bathed and rubbed himself dry.

"You look tired, Earl. Busy?"

"Yes."

"With whom? Lynne? Myra? Some other woman you met at the pool?" Her anger increased as he made no answer. "Are you going to tell me you haven't been seeing them? Talking to them? Drinking with them? Making love to them—you bastard!"

He said flatly, "I did what had to be done. Now do I stay or do I leave?"

To arms more than willing to embrace him; Fiona could guess where they could be found. Guess too at the sniggers which would follow her once he had left her alone. A woman unable to hold even a dependent lover—how the bitches would gloat!

She said, demanding reassurance, "It was just business, Earl? For me?"

"For you."

"Then come to bed!"

To play an old and familiar game and later to lie and review the events of the day. Had he left anything out of his calculations? Made too great a mistake? Bulem had been only one and others had been tempted even as Vardoon had spread the same, glittering lure to his own prospects. Hints dropped, arrangements, pacts and promises made. Bargains struck over wine and in some cases sealed with a kiss. A kiss and more—pride had no place in the need to survive.

He sank deeper into the fog between sleep and waking, drifting into a doze, into a dream, a universe filled with a single golden egg.

One with a surface marred with teeming life; swarms of black motes dulling the shimmering glory, moving, bunching, spreading as if it had been a vicious mold. A parasitic growth which killed the thing which gave it life; demanding more than was available, taking more than could be spared.

And, as he watched, the egg died.

The surface cracked in a multitude of tiny lines, fragmentation which grew, expanding to reveal the sullen glow of inner fires. A red anger which faded to a dark and useless slag, the darkness edging out to dull the gold, to turn it dark in widening striations of mounting ugliness.

Life died with it; the teeming masses shriveling, burning, turning to crisp and char, to drifting ash, to writhing, tormented shapes. Some rising to stream away as if driven by gusting winds. Some dispersed like a cloud of thinning smoke. Some to hang, crying, lost in the dark and empty void.

Crying... crying... crying...

Dumarest jerked fully awake, rearing to sit upright as the thin, demanding tone filled the mirrored chamber. At his side Fiona stirred, came awake with a sudden gasp to fear, golden hair an embracing curtain, her face dimmed in its shadow, pale and trained in the soft light which had bloomed with the alarm. The warning of Kalova's attack.

Chapter Thirteen

Kalova had bathed and perfumed himself and dressed as for a festival in a bright ensemble of lavender and gold touched with emerald and amber. Drugs had banished the last of his fatigue but he didn't need their accompanying euphoria. Sitting, he felt the blood rush through his veins, sparkling in his brain as if the cranium were filled with effervescent bubbles. A warrior geared and readied for battle—and the combat had begun!

He had picked the time well; an hour before dawn when

lightning still shredded the northern sky and the ion count was high. A time when most would be asleep and all would be off their guard. The woman especially with her new lover. He could imagine them locked in each other's arms, replete with passion, dulled with satiation, lost in a febrile world of their own. A weakness which was to his advantage and he pressed it home with ruthless determination.

Pressure on Helm, awake but slow to respond. More on Chargel to strengthen the distraction and then to make a direct attack on poor, bruised Prador who would yield and so make way for the flank attack.

A neat, well-contrived, well-considered plan no matter what Zao might think. A demonstration of the skill which had gained him the position he held. Further proof that he deserved the title and retained the power to hold on to it. The Maximus now and the Maximus for always—or for as long as he should live.

A sobering thought and he banished it—there was no time for anything other than total concentration once an attack had been launched. Yet it crept back with its insidious promptings, with wakened fears and aching regrets. How to retain his awareness? His individuality? How to stave off the inevitable?

How to remain alive?

No—how to extend the life he had?

Lights danced on the display before him, a flickering kaleidoscope which reported every aspect of the changing situation. One which, as yet, followed the pattern he had predicted and, again, he felt a resurgence of confidence. Could the cyber have done better? Could the entire Cyclan? A man could do no more than win and, doing that, he showed he was as good as anything they could provide. Demonstrated, too, that he needed nothing he did not already possess.

Thoughts broken as new lights flashed; Lobel joining the fray and eager for gain. Attacking Ashen who, in turn, allowed Reed to gain an advantage. Skirmishing which did not affect the main issue and there was cause for amusement in their snapping like

hungry dogs at the edges of a feast. Scavengers eager to gain by another's efforts but, should they transgress, their punishment would be swift.

The hum of the phone and Arment's face on the screen.

"An exchange, Maximus? Sector E 17 for L 98?"

An interruption, which he could have done without but such were part of the struggle. Swiftly he calculated the display; the exchange would do him no harm and, while giving Arment a slight advantage it would be against Traske.

"A hundredth?"

"Agreed."

One percent of the holding's registered worth now added to Kalova's assets. An easy gain and proof that the sector must be more valuable to Arment than was readily apparent. A move in some elaborate plan of his own? A diversion? A shift of attack or, odd though it seemed, a retreat? Facts he should consider but the lights were dancing too fast, the various moves too complicated for him to waste time on wild speculation.

The phone again and Zao's image.

"My lord, if you require my services I am available."

Waiting in his room, watching the lights, resenting Kalova's skill. But, not; resentment was an emotion the cyber could not feel—yet surely the man must have a remnant of pride?

"My lord?"

"I don't need you. But remain available—that is what you are paid for."

An insult but one Kalova felt he could afford. The cyber, despite his talent, the strength of the association he represented, was basically a servant. On Sacaweena the Maximus was almost a king.

Did the king have to die?

A lull in the action and time for his drug-stimulated brain to turn back to the nagging problem. Life could be extended; on various worlds techniques had been developed to replace worn tissue with fresh. New parts, grafts, organs, implants; weapons in the battle against encroaching years. And, on Pane so he had heard, a brain could be transplanted into a new body—for a price.

One he would pay even if it was the value of a world.

The phone and Helm's face, strained, dewed with sweat.

"Maximus! Sectors T 35 and F 82—your offer?"

"Not interested." Kalova paused, mind racing. "I'll pay twenty percent over the price for sector D 32."

"Twenty-five?"

"Done!"

A pause then Vanderburg, followed by Myra Lancing, Barracola, Judd, Cran—the faces began to blur as did their offers. Fish drawn into his net as he had anticipated, holders frightened at the threat they saw brewing, wanting to erect barriers, make safeguards against a probable turn of events. But his main opponent remained silent—was Fiona Velen still asleep?

Dumarest said, "Wait!"

"But—"

"Wait!" He looked at the dancing lights, the shifts and blurs of changing fortunes; details of exchanges, sales, auctions, the flow of assets, gains and losses due to revised valuations, the status of holders, their holdings and revenues. "Just wait!"

The signals were too complex for him to follow; data received and relayed by the computer, the bank which alone made such fast trading possible. The flickers alone were enough to tire the

eyes, to induce a near-hypnotic state in which judgment could be distorted and action delayed. Factors which had to be taken into account as did so many others. Seated before the panel, stilled by his command, Fiona chafed and was the victim of surging fears.

Wait—but what if she waited too long? How to sit and do nothing while under attack? To watch as situations changed to develop into others, to ignore opportunities and incipient threats. To obey the harsh voice of a man who could know nothing of the complexities involved. "Earl! I—"

"Wait!" He softened his tone. "I'll admit you are more expert than I, but even so things follow a regular pattern. In the arena it pays to take time to assess the opposition. To study the opponent in order to plan your own defense, your own attack. To hurry without decisive action is to ask for disaster." Pausing he added, "And you gain simply because others expect you to act. Your lack of response can upset their own plans."

Good advice—but this was not an arena with men facing each other with naked blades. Fighters held in a ring and surrounded by watching faces. And yet was it so different? The pain and death would be metaphorical but the tension was the same. The hurt. The disgrace. The sweet taste of success, the sour bile of failure. But to go against the conditioning of a lifetime was hard; every instinct urged her to take an active part in what was happening.

"Here!" Vardoon had made tisane and she took the steaming cup as he offered it. As it left his hand their eyes met and she saw a common understanding, a mutual sympathy. "Drink this," he urged. "And relax. Earl knows what he's doing."

She wished she could share his conviction. Already she had yielded too much; to bathe and dress and come fully awake before answering the alarm. To resist the initial impulse to buy and sell and share in the trading. To wait in a room lined with mirrors which caught the glow of flashing lights and splintered them into dancing rainbows.

Watching, Dumarest admired her calm even as he noted her mounting tension, which he could understand. To fight was one

thing and that held basic similarity but the game she played was not that simple. Simulated war fought on a planetary board with three thousand counters of constantly shifting values against a hundred and forty-six opponents.

No wonder she could win at chess!

Vardoon joined him, handed him tisane. The steam held a pungent perfume, the flavor was that of honey and spice. A fluid which yielded a comfort and a mild stimulation.

"She's like a ship on the field with engines running and the drive ready to go." Vardoon looked at the woman's reflected likeness. "She won't wait much longer, Earl."

Dumarest said, "Read me the board."

"Kalova's buying holdings and pressuring others into forced auctions. That means a shift in assets and he's using others' weaknesses to his advantage. Against him are strong blocks; Arment, Chargel and Helm have the largest holdings. But if he's after Fiona why the hell doesn't he make a direct attack?"

"Change the situation—would you?"

"A fort on a hill," mused Vardoon. "I want it but if I concentrate all my forces I leave myself open to attack from flanks and rear. It's strong so it will take time to wear down and, if it costs me too much, I'll be liable to injury from those waiting to pounce. I see what you're getting at."

And there was another facet he hadn't mentioned—the love of a cat for tormenting a mouse. Kalova hated Fiona as Dumarest had learned. A hate born of her casual rejection of his offer. An affront which he had chosen to regard as an insult and which he found impossible to swallow. Now, determined on revenge, he was prone to error.

But if Zao was advising him, there could be only one outcome.

Dumarest finished the tisane and rose to pace the floor. Swaths of color painted his neutral gray with transient glory,

shifting, changing as the signals changed, glowing from the mirrors all around. Catching the face of the woman as she sat, hands clenched, sensing her world edging toward ruin.

If she lost it would she search for it as he did Earth?

Pacing, he remembered the dream, the golden egg teeming with life which had died and the life with it. A dream born of his conversation with Marc Bulem and his supposed ravings. A man tormented with delusions, hopelessly insane and lost in a world of fantasy—according to his brother. But some of what he'd said was familiar to Dumarest—and what if the rest had a grounding in truth?

Had all men originated on one world?

An apparent fallacy as Melvin had said—men came in all shades and styles of hair and nostrils and build. Effects caused by wild radiations or local environments as any intelligent man would swear. How else to account for skins as pale as alabaster and those as dark as jet? Blond hair and brown and black and tresses the color of flame? Blue eyes? Eyes of amber? Eyes which looked like liquid pools of Stygian darkness?

All the children of one, single planet?

He heard again a voice which held the muted thunder of drums: "*From terror they fled to find new places on which to expiate their sins.*"

A voice from a world far distant in time and space. Words he had heard from others as they repeated the guarded creed of the Original People. The same words he had heard from Marc Bulem only a short while ago.

From terror they fled to expiate their sins.

From terror?

Terra?

Another name for Earth and he wondered if the dream had

held a deeper significance than he guessed. Something not merely born of a chance encounter but that very encounter serving to trigger latent data into a symbolic whole. Had the egg represented Earth? The parasitic life Mankind?

He remembered the crying, the endless wailing of those lost in a dark eternity. The alarm or a dirge for a destroyed world?

But Earth had not been destroyed.

"Earl!" He turned to see Vardoorn staring at him, a peculiar expression in his eyes. The light he had seen before when facing a contender in the arena. The inner glow of a man facing, and loving, combat. "Earl—it's started!"

Nothing but the flashing lights had changed and yet it seemed that something had entered the mirrored chamber with its soft lights and thick carpets, its ornaments and touches of feminine grace. A dark and somber thing with the hue of death.

"A forced auction," explained Fiona as Dumarest came to stand behind her. "A minor holding; Kalova must be mad to have put himself in debt because of it."

A favor owed to the one who backed him with an offer of twice its registered value. And he would want repayment when it suited him.

"Let it go," said Dumarest.

"Relinquish it? Earl—it's a part of my holding!"

Vardoorn said, "Let it go, Fiona. Boost the bidding to a third of extra value then duck out."

For a moment she hesitated, the conditioning of a lifetime at war with what, subconsciously, she knew to be good advice. Sweat dewed her face when, after dragging minutes, she slumped back in her chair.

"It's gone," she said dully. "Kalova's won."

A minor conflict but not the war. Dumarest studied the display, wishing he had the skill to read it, feeling ill at ease and knowing why. His life was at stake but the saving of it was beyond his control. Here was no arena with a single opponent but those with faces he could not see careless of the hurt and death they could unwittingly give.

"A fort on a hill," muttered Vardoan. "Remember, Earl? Kalova would have made a good mercenary—he's clearing away potential sources of danger."

Small villages, woods, coppices which could hold armed men. Beating the grounds and warning others to stay clear by his actions. Soon now he would aim his attack at its true target, forcing the use of material, the wasting of resources—the assets which alone could guarantee Fiona her holding.

A crude analogy, for the present situation contained refinements impossible to generalize. Dumarest leaned forward as the woman sucked in her breath.

"Something?"

"A move against Lobel—but why? He presents no threat and rarely takes the initiative." Fiona studied the display, brow creased in a frown, the fingers of her right hand tapping the broad arm of her chair. "And now Cran!"

Another minor holder and easy prey to a ruthless predator. An attack which triggered a pattern in Dumarest's mind, not of a military engagement but a more familiar scene. A melee in which a score of men stood in the arena each against the other. A situation in which the weak could be as dangerous as the strong.

But the arena was a place in which only one law was paramount—to survive. Here the action was hedged with rules and custom, accepted forms of behavior as if the participants were following the dictates of ancient chivalry.

Dumarest said, "Have you those who owe you favors? Contact them and make a deal. They to eliminate one of the weakest in

return for you meeting all costs and later support."

"Drive a holder out? By conspiracy? Earl—that's assassination!"

"Do it!"

"But—"

She was thinking of her reputation, the scorn and contempt she would have to face. Dumarest said urgently, "You remember when we played chess? What I did? What I told you? To win is all that counts." He added dryly, "And remember—the winner never has to pay."

A spur which sent her hand to the phone. As she activated it Vardoona drew Dumarest out of range of its scanner.

"A dangerous game, Earl. Kalova could do just what you've advised. Arrange a series of forced auctions and keep milking her until she's too weak to resist."

"How long would that take?"

"It won't be quick but it'll be inevitable. In order to keep that sector she'll have to bid far higher than it's worth."

The balance taken by the bank; a detail Dumarest had learned as he had others. But to know the moves was not to be a master of the game.

Again he began to pace the room, seeing his reflected image grow and diminish, waver and distort as reflection was caught by reflection, the whole painted with shifting hues. What would Zao be doing? If he was advising Kalova then why the delay? The cyber would have no time for elaborate and inefficient maneuverings and any plan he had devised would be apparent by now. Kalova must be operating alone—an unexpected bonus.

"It's done," Fiona called from her chair, face drawn beneath the curtain of hair. Tresses which she lifted to tuck beneath a gemmed band. "Kelman is down and out."

A name without meaning but, somewhere in the city, a man stared at his display and felt the sickness of utter defeat. Dumarest said, "Bid for sector N 89."

"Earl, that holding's useless!"

"Bid!"

A moment then he heard her sharp inhalation. "This is crazy! Maiden's bidding too!"

One of Vardoon's prospects; a minor holder jumping the gun. He was joined by another; Myra Lancing who had demanded more than a kiss.

"Keep the bidding high," said Dumarest. "Force up the price but duck out before you get stuck with it."

To bleed Kalova in a forced auction. To weaken those already weak if he should prove too shrewd. To fight in the terms of the arena where to lose was to die.

The pills were small, blue, potent Kalova swallowed three and swore as his reaching hand knocked over the goblet of wine. Too much wine and too many pills, but his strength had to be maintained, his clarity of mind. Tiredness now would cloud his ability and cost him more than he could afford.

Why was the bitch so stubborn?

Attack after attack had been bested and still she continued to fight. And now she was attacking his own holdings in the north. She and other fools who should know better.

The phone and Chargel. "Maximus—N 76 for S 21?"

More interest in the north! "No!"

"For S21 and S15?"

Holdings on the edge of the continental shelf but his own was little better. Yet the fact it was wanted woke suspicion. Chargel

was too shrewd to chase barren rock in the storm-torn hills unless he had a good reason.

"No!"

The screen died and Kalova sank back in his chair, watching the dancing signals with eyes grown sore with strain. How long had it been? A glance at the clock could have told him but he had his own measure of time. It had been too long, an age, an eternity, and still there was no sign of an end. Would he have to fight on for the rest of the day? The following night? The day after that? Such tremendous engagements had been known in the past but now were the stuff of legend.

Why the interest in the north?

He scowled as yet another forced auction came into being: Bulem, Dulet, Lancing and Sand. Fools who asked for the punishment they deserved for daring to bait the Maximus. Even as he matched and beat their bids he was assessing their resources. All were minor holders but Sand the most vulnerable. It would be easy to make him an example.

A thing done with the ease of a hammer crushing an ant, his holdings taken at a cost he could meet, arid lands of small revenue. A liability but he would not hold them for long.

"My lord!" Zao's face on the screen. "I have been following the situation and—"

"Not now, Cyber!"

"I would suggest that—"

The voice died as the image faded, both victims of a broken connection. Kalova sat, fuming, hand shaking as he reached for more pills. Did Zao expect him to come whining to heel? To beg the cyber for his aid and so admit his incapability? Did the man think he was too old to have skill? Too old to fight?

He snarled as, again, he was attacked in the north. Three sectors this time and all high in the hills. Too high for comfort

and too close to his private installations to be lost. He triggered responses, outbid the opposition, swore as others took their place. Were they all mad? The price they offered was far in excess of the registered value yet they could not all be fools.

The phone and Lynne Oldrant. "Sector F 37, Maximus. How much?"

The field, now of negative revenue. A liability now; he needed liquid assets and he could always get it back later. The woman blinked at his demand and, reluctantly, shook her head.

"Too high, Maximus. Cut it by a third and it's a deal."

"A quarter."

"Done!"

In his office Zao saw the transaction registered on his repeater display, saw too the sudden flurry of renewed activity in the north. More attacks on the Maximus and, like a reactive animal, he could only respond in one way. An emotional cripple now wrapped in a web of self-deception and incapable of objective detachment.

The woman?

Her rejection had been no more than a trigger and it could have come from any other. A denial of Kalova's self-image of supreme authority. A blow at his ego which, in his mental condition, he had interpreted as an attack on his life. To destroy the woman had become of paramount necessity. Old, failing, such a destruction would give him assurance that he was still capable, still strong.

It was time he should be replaced.

Arment? The logical choice but he was too strong. Helm the same. Chargel, Barracola, even Traske. They would accept his aid and promise all and even keep that promise for a while but, later, their own strength would urge them to rebel.

Fiona Velen?

A choice he had considered before and the new factors recently introduced did not alter the basic premise. She was devoid of a potentially troublesome family, young enough to be malleable, intelligent enough to have held her own since inheriting from Carmodyne. Her association with Dumarest presented no real problem; her own narcissism would diminish his importance.

More activity on the display and Zao rose to his feet. Kalova had to be stopped before it was too late.

The woman guarding his outer office was stubborn. "I am sorry but the Maximus is not to be disturbed. He gave explicit orders to that effect."

"This is an emergency."

"For whom?" She didn't like the cyber and took pleasure in showing it. "If he wants to see you he will send word to that effect."

Time wasting which he could not afford. Zao stepped closer to where she sat, the index finger of his left hand extended to touch her wrist, the sliver of metal carried beneath the nail pressing, breaking the skin, driving the drug it carried into her blood. She was dead before he removed his hand.

"You!" Kalova spun in his chair as Zao approached. "I left orders I was not to be disturbed."

"Which I chose to ignore." Zao glanced at the display, noted the changes made while he had journeyed from his office. The space field had changed hands, sold to Fiona Velen for a handsome profit. Something Kalova had missed in his concentration on the northern attacks.

"Look at them, Cyber!" He gestured at the display with a trembling hand. "Like dogs snapping at a bone. All wanting holdings in the north. The north!"

"Why?"

"It's a plot, that's why. A device to attack me, to bring me down. But they'll pay for it. Every last damned one. I'll see them all down and out!"

As Cran and Sand and Bulem would be next. Sacrificed as a warning to others. Once he had gone they would see sense. Cease their attacks and give him time to rest and consider the situation. Give him a chance to take care of the woman.

"No, my lord! Wait!" Zao had seen what the other had overlooked. "Wait!"

Kalova resented the command and ignored it as he pressed home the attack, smiling as he used all his strength to crush the weakling, laughing aloud as he fell—a laugh cut short as the flashing lights ceased their dancing.

"What's wrong? The display—why has it stopped?"

The answer shone back at him from the steady signals; one too many had been eliminated. Cran, Sand, Bulem—and Kalman whom he'd forgotten. Trading had stopped—and Fiona Velen held the field.

Chapter Fourteen

There was wine but Fiona hadn't needed it; the euphoria of victory filled her with its own intoxication. Now, laughing, she lifted her glass to toast her success.

"To you, Earl, and you, Hart. Victory to us all!"

Wine added ruby to her lips, a moistness to their soft invitation, which was reflected in her eyes. Dumarest recognized the biological heat born of the end of tension, the reaction from strain.

He said, "What happens now?"

"Nothing." Fiona set down her wine. "Kalova made a mistake and so froze the situation. We must have the Gross. We started with one hundred and forty-seven. I took out one and the Maximus the other three. That leaves one hundred and forty-three. One short. There can be no trading, no exchanges, no auctions until the Gross has been restored."

"The way's open for challenges," explained Vardoon. "Usually one is picked but any can go forward. And any holder can be challenged. Of course they can use a champion, but the facts remain." He frowned, looking thoughtful. "You, Earl. Why not you?"

"I'm not of the Orres."

"No. I'd forgotten. A shame—you could have been the next Maximus."

"He still could be." Fiona came close. "Or her consort."

"You?"

"Why not? With your help, Earl. You've shown me how it can be done. Once things get back to normal we can really build up my holding. Kalova's shaken now and if Annent and Helm work with us he won't stand a chance." Her arms lifted to close about his neck. Below his eyes her face was vibrant with imagined power. "The Maximus," she murmured. "The Queen!"

Ambition displayed but he had no interest. His part was over; she retained the church and now held the field. Unless she prevented it there was nothing to stop him from leaving once a ship was available.

"Earl?" Her lips closed the space between themselves and his own. "You will work with me, darling? Advise me? Teach me more of your cunning? Earl, you know how I feel about you. Together we could go so far. Have so much. Stay with me, darling. Be at my side."

The chime of the doorbell saved him from the necessity of an answer. Melvin Bulem, face hard, eyes cold, followed Vardoon

into the chamber.

Without preamble he said, "I am ruined—you know that?"

"Melvin, I'm so sorry!" Fiona gushed a false sympathy. "Kalova had no need to destroy you."

"It was your fault." His eyes rested on Dumarest. "You and your lies. Your hints and persuasions. I thought you a friend and treated you as such. Why did you do this to me?"

"You did it to yourself," said Vardoon. He stood a little behind and to one side of the visitor, his hands poised for action. "You let greed blind you. A mistake but you made it. Now stop crying like a baby and blaming others."

Without looking from Dumarest, Bulem said again, "Why did you do this to me?"

To him and to a dozen others, tempting them with the golden lure of ardeel, guiding them down the path he wanted them to take. Warriors persuaded to fight in his cause. Bulem was nothing but an unlucky casualty.

Dumarest said, "Reparation will be made. Fiona, will you see to it? My share of the eggs." To Bulem he added, "With money you can buy your way back. Obtain new holdings."

"I trusted you."

"That is why I'm making reparation."

The most he could do but Bulem's hurt was too deep to be assuaged with recompense. He said stiffly, "You are generous and it is appreciated, but you will understand why you are no longer a welcome guest. My house is closed to you."

His house, his brother, the book which could hold the secret he had searched for so many years. The wine Vardoon handed to him held a sour bitterness.

"A fool," said Vardoon as Dumarest lowered the goblet. "But

at least he had the guts to meet you face to face. For a moment there I thought he was going to try to kill you."

"Would you have blamed him?"

"No. I'd have felt the same in his place." Vardoon scowled as, again, the door demanded attention. "Who the hell is it this time?"

Bulem had been tense, cold, determined; Kalova was seething with rage. It showed in every gesture, every move. In the darting flicker of his eyes, the continual flexing of the fingers. Small points of froth hung at the corners of his mouth and his eyes held tracers of red.

"You bitch!" He glared at Fiona as he thrust forward into the room. "You cunning, underhanded bitch!"

"Wipe your mouth, Maximus."

"What?"

"You heard what I said. Either talk like a man or get out of my house." She was smiling, confident in her power, the strength her companions gave. What could an old man do against Dumarest and his friend? "This house is my holding," she said. "You have no right here, no authority. If you can't act like a guest, Kalova, then leave."

He had not come alone. Behind him, standing like a tall and silent flame, Zao watched with burning, deep-set eyes. Like a shadow, his acolyte stood to one side. Three men but the cyber held the power.

Fiona sensed it as she had in Dumarest; a radiated aura which set him apart from others, but the two were not the same. Dumarest held the strength of an individual who had long learned to rely on none other than himself. Zao had the confidence of a tremendous organization at his back, the trust in his own abilities, the conviction that what he did was right.

He said, "My lady, I must congratulate you on your ability.

The manner of attack was unusual and most effective."

"Lies," snarled Kalova. "The bitch cheated. The fools who attacked me were deluded as to the real worth of the northern holdings. I should have crushed them all!"

As he had crushed Bulem and so halted all operations—the mistake which would kill him.

"The signal, of course, was your own bidding for the selected holdings," continued Zao as if Kalova did not exist. "Those who had been primed followed your lead and the rest was inevitable." Emotive children driven by greed and imagination. The mere fact that someone wanted something was evidence to them that it had to be of value. Supply and demand. Crazy bidding and a form of hysteria too common to any society founded on financial manipulation. And Dumarest had instigated the debacle. "I have a suggestion, my lady, which you may find of interest."

Dumarest said, "Talk to him later, Fiona. After I have gone."

Zao turned, met his eyes, looked again at the woman. "It would not be wise to delay. Opportunities should be seized when available or else another may gain the prize."

A threat she recognized and what harm would it do to talk?

"Later, Fiona. Talk—"

"Hush, Earl!" She smiled at him as if he were an impatient child then looked again at the tall figure in scarlet. "He is eager to celebrate my success," she explained, "but a pleasure deferred is a pleasure doubled—or so I have been told. Why don't you make some tisane, Earl? Take your friend with you—I'm sure that what the cyber has to say can be of little interest to either of you."

She frowned as neither moved—a reaction noted and assessed by Zao. As he had predicted, the woman relished the taste of power and was already forgetting who had given her the present victory. But for Dumarest she would have been in Bulem's position.

Kalova said, "I came to warn you, bitch! As Maximus I'm calling a full, extraordinary meeting of all holders to discuss the events of the past few hours. You are guilty of cheating, misrepresentation, collusion, conspiracy, the use of bribes and the employing of outside agents. I don't think there will be much opposition to my suggestion that the situation be restored to what it was before the last adjustments took place. A day," he added. "Perhaps two. We could even go back to the time before your lover took an interest."

"You can't do that."

"No? That's what you think."

"That's what I know!" Her tone was sharp. "You're talking of custom, not law. Just because it hasn't been polite to do what you accuse me of doesn't mean it isn't allowed. To win, Maximus, that's the only real law. To win!"

"And to continue to win, my lady." Zao's tone was a contrast to the raised voices. "That is what I'd hoped to talk about with you. A new Maximus will be subjected to tremendous pressures from other aspirants to the title and will need all the help available. You may, naturally, feel you do not need such help, in which case I will be free to offer my services elsewhere."

Another threat, this time more open; either she employed Zao or he would work for another and, if he did, what then of her power?

She said slowly, "Let there be no mistake about this, Cyber. You are offering to help me become the Maximus?"

"Exactly so, my lady."

"And Kalova?"

A fool who would have been dead by now if it hadn't been for the woman who'd guarded his office. Two deaths within minutes, both of apparent cardiac arrest, both with a common factor, was to invite unwanted suspicion. And, always, had been the chance of his making an adjustment with Fiona. One irretrievably lost as

he grasped just what Zao was proposing.

"Her? That bitch in my place?"

Zao said, "I give you notice, my lord, that the Cyclan has terminated the services provided on your behalf as agreed. If you accept, my lady, I am now in your employ."

To stand at her side, to take what she had and use his talent to build it into a commanding whole. To make her the largest holder—the Maximus. But what would be his price?

He said, in answer to her blunt question, "The man at your side, my lady. Earl Dumarest."

The display had stilled but color shifted in the mirrors adorning the walls; the shift of scarlet as Zao turned, a gleam from the acolyte, the sheen of lavender and gold, of emerald and amber from Kalova, the dull hues of Vardoon, the gray of his own clothing. Tints which grew by repeated reflection. A frame for the golden mane of the woman's hair, the warm velvet of her skin, the ebon of her gown.

Death in a rounded form.

She wouldn't know it or care if she did. Dumarest had no illusion; the bribe offered was too tempting for her to resist. To become the Maximus! The ultimate achievement of her world.

Vardoon said, frowning, "You want Earl? What the hell for?"

"That is none of your concern. My lady?"

An illusion of dependence was skillfully maintained but Dumarest knew its real worth. One way or another Zao was determined to hold him fast. If he could continue in his position on this world then he would do so but, if he had to kill them all besides Dumarest he would do it without hesitation.

"My lady?"

"A moment," she said. "I need to think. You want Earl— but

why?"

"A matter of justice, my lady. He needs to answer for crimes committed against the Cyclan."

That was the explanation given to Kalova, which he hadn't bothered to give Vardoon. But still Fiona hesitated.

"A prisoner? You want to lock him in a cage? I'm not sure I can let you do that. But—" Gold filled the mirrors as she shook her head, her hair falling from the restraining band. "Give me time."

Seconds which could stretch to minutes at the most. Time which must not be wasted. As she began to pace the floor Dumarest checked the room, the people in it.

The chamber was large and made to appear larger by the mirrored walls. Fiona took ten long strides to cover it from one end to another, the long, smooth contours of her thigh flashing through the slit in her skirt. Small tables stood by the walls bearing various ornaments. The furnishings were sparse, some chairs, a couch, a tall vase filled with crystalline blooms. Doors to the other rooms were hidden in reflective deception. A warm, snug, tight and windowless room. One turning into a cell.

Vardoon shifted a little where he stood behind Dumarest and a little to one side. The man would be neutral if not an active ally. The acolyte, watchful, had his hands hidden in the wide sleeves of his robe. He was armed, one hand on a gun, ready to defend his master in case of need but he would hesitate before opening fire. Kalova stood with his back to a wall, mouth parted, eyes glazed. The sound of his breathing rose above the soft scuff of the woman's sandals; a ragged gasping with held liquid susurations. A man tottering on the edge of control, stunned by recent events, a victim of rage and fear about to collapse or explode. One of his hands was buried in a pocket, the other hung limp at his side. Fiona?

She turned and walked to the center of the room to pause and look at Dumarest.

"Earl—I'm sorry."

He said urgently, "Fiona, give me a chance. Wait for a few days. A ship's due and I can leave on it."

A plea to gain time and fire the Maximus's rage, so he could utilize to the full his one, single advantage. Zao did not want him dead and would have impressed that on his acolyte. Even so he could be maimed, burned, blinded and rendered helpless. But to determine that would take an extra split second of aim; force an added assessment.

Vardoon rumbled, "After what he's done, girl, it doesn't seem too much to ask."

"You'll be the new Maximus," said Dumarest. "With Zao to help you how can you fail? Kalova will be no problem. He'll be dead before we leave this room. Why leave him to make trouble? A few days, darling. Just give me a few days."

"Dead?" Kalova seemed to be choking. "Dead?"

"Shut up, you old fool!" In imagination she was already the Maximus and he just an irritating nuisance. "Earl, believe me, I'd like to help you, but—" Her shrug was expressive. "A chance like this comes only once."

"So you're willing to sacrifice me," said Dumarest. "Just as you're willing to see Kalova die. He's got to be killed, of course, I can see that. But I can't do you any harm. You don't have to send me to death as you do him. And he is going to die—you know that?"

"Like you said, Earl—there's only one law. To win no matter what the cost." She added, smiling, "And the winner never has to pay."

"You bitch!" Kalova exploded at last. "You'd kill me? Me!"

He lunged from the wall, his hand appearing from his pocket, the laser it held leveling, the guide beam a ruby sword which cut a flaming swath over the black fabric of her gown. To rise and

slash at her face. To fall and cut at her breasts, the stomach below. To turn the golden mane of her hair into leaping scarlet and to puddle her thighs with blood as she lay screaming on the soft pile of the carpet.

"Fiona!"

Vardoon dived toward Kalova, his face a bestial mask of animal fury, hands reaching to grab and tear, to twist and break. Even as he called, Dumarest was moving, one hand snatching up a heavy ornament to send it like a bullet into the acolyte's face, to crush his temple and send him staggering backwards, his hand falling with the gun it had held, dead before he touched the floor.

"Hold!" Zao also was armed. The beam from his laser touched the floor and created rising smoke. "Move and I burn your legs!"

Dumarest froze, hand reaching to the knife in his boot. The cyber had moved faster than he'd guessed, anticipating Kalova's explosion, Vardoon's reaction. Now he glanced at the slumped body of the woman, the man crouched beside her, Kalova's body lying with a broken neck to one side. The laser, knocked from his hand, rested at the base of the tall vase of crystalline flowers.

"Lift your hand, Dumarest. Up. Higher." The muzzle of his gun emphasized the command. "I warn you against trying anything foolish. Your speed is well known to the Cyclan and I took accelerating drugs as a precaution. Reach for that knife and I will burn off your hand before you can touch it. Burn out your eyes too, if it becomes necessary. Now lift your other hand. Raise them both well above your head. Now move back against the wall and turn to face it."

He stood with arms raised to wait for the blast of the drug from the hypogun which would render him totally helpless. In the mirror he could see Zao as he produced it to hold in his other hand. A tall, scarlet shape reflected in the mirror, multiplied by added reflections from the mirrors to either side.

Mirrors!

Dumarest moved, throwing himself to one side, feeling the

heat as the laser seared his thigh. Plastic burned to reveal the protective mesh beneath. A fraction of time and then the beam, reflected from the mirror, hit another, a third and bounced back toward its source. As the scarlet robe burst into flame Dumarest threw his knife.

It lanced through the air, a glittering extension of his arm, to reach the skull-like face, an eye, to bury its point deep into the brain. As Zao fell, Dumarest joined Vardoon at the woman's side.

"Earl!" The laser had slashed her face, blinding an eye, ruining the nose, the cheek, the edge of her jaw, but the untouched mouth managed to smile. "Forgive me, darling? Please forgive me."

"She's dying," said Vardoon. "Dying!"

The face could be healed, the breasts, but the beam had seared too deeply into her stomach. The spleen was damaged, the liver, the kidneys and spine. The intestines had been cut—only the cauterizing effect of the laser which sealed as it cut had enabled her to live so long.

"Earl!" The hand which gripped his tightened. "I had to do it. You understand? To win—nothing else mattered. To win at any cost. You taught me that, my darling. Earl! I love you!"

Blood reddened her lips as Dumarest lifted his free hand to touch her throat and search for the carotids. Vardoon knocked it away before he could apply merciful pressure.

"No, Earl, not that!" The box in his hand opened to reveal clustered golden pearls. "This!"

The nectar of heaven.

Vardoon gave it and Dumarest watched as, smiling, she died.

A wind had carried rain from the sea, a thin downpour which left sparkling droplets on the shrubs and trees, to hang like transient gems on the perimeter fence of the field. Underfoot the ground was dark with a rich, brown dampness which would soon

dry beneath the heat of the sun. As the clouds to the north would thin and fray apart to reveal the distant loom of the storm-wracked hills.

Kicking a stone, Vardoon said, "You don't have to go, Earl. There's a home for you here for as long as you want it."

"I know."

"A safe place. If anyone comes looking for you they'll be wasting their time." He paused then said abruptly, "She loved you. I guess you know that. In her way she really loved you."

Dumarest looked at the sky, not wanting to answer.

"Not that it matters." Vardoon sucked in his breath and shook his head. "It's all over now. That lunatic! If it hadn't been for him she'd be alive this moment."

And he would be a helpless prisoner. A point Dumarest didn't mention as he remained silent about others. Instead he said, "So you're staying."

"Until things get sorted out." Vardoon looked at the ship waiting on the field; a small, battered trader on which Dumarest had booked passage. "About money, Earl. You gave your share to Bulem and the rest is tied up as registered assets. It can't be touched while things remain as they are. All we have is the eggs used to dazzle the marks. It's yours together with this." A bag accompanied the box. "Some of Fiona's jewelry. All the cash I could find. The cost of maybe a dozen High passages. Wait for the next ship and it could be a lot more."

"This will do." To wait was to meet the cybers who would be already on their way. Dumarest looked to where a monk stood by the fence. "I'll be back."

Tobol greeted him with a smile. "An old custom," he said. "One I like to observe; to wish a friend a pleasant journey and to see him on his way."

"You think of me as a friend?"

"You consider yourself an enemy?"

"Of the Church? No." Dumarest looked at where Vardoon waited. "Will there be trouble?"

"Over the inheritance? No. There are records and they will prove his claim. He is extremely reluctant to make it but I think he has been persuaded to see the necessity. Odd how she never suspected who he really was."

"He is scarred," said Dumarest. "And she was young at the time. Also there was the matter of shame—he had run from his responsibilities."

"A man old enough to be ambitious and yet too young to have any real power. He must have hated seeing his mother make such obvious mistakes. Hated his uncle too, perhaps, but all that is in the past."

"If you continue to advise him suggest that he propose to the holders that no cyber should be allowed to give his services to any one individual. A total ban would be better. Suggest, too, that it would be wise to extend the field of those qualified."

"Smaller holdings and more to share them." Tobol nodded his agreement. "Destroy the resident-concept and allow free enterprise and this society might well be able to survive." He looked at the box Dumarest held toward him. "For the Church?"

"All of it."

"You are more than generous." Tobol looked up from the open receptacle, startled. "All of it?"

"To ease the dying." He remembered Fiona, the pain she would have suffered when shocked nerves had resumed their function. "To sell if you want. To use as you decide. I want none of it."

A man dedicated to life; uninterested in the means of death. Tobol tucked the box under his arm, lifting a hand in farewell as Dumarest walked away.

Vardoon came to meet him as the warning siren echoed across the field.

"Time's running out, Earl."

"I know."

"Need any help getting aboard?" Vardoon shrugged as Dumarest smiled. "No, I guess not, but I wish I were coming with you."

"You've work to do here."

"I know. Well, take care of yourself and don't forget there's a home here whenever you want it." Vardoon held out his hands, palms upward in the mercenary salute of peace. "Good-bye, Earl."

"Good-bye—Emil."

Dumarest turned and walked across the field to the waiting ship, the sky, the empty spaces between the stars.