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THE RETURN Dumarest of Terra #32 by E.C. Tubb

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Dedication:

To Phil Harbottle, who has accompanied Dumarest all the way.

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Introduction to *The Return* by E.C. Tubb

In a way it all started back in 1957 when I wrote a short story, *The Bells of Acheron*, which dealt with a party of tourists visiting a selection of worlds with unusual features. That of Acheron was a deep, spacious valley filled with a mass of growths each of varying size and all bearing a host of seed pods ranging in size from small to enormous. The soil was loaded with silicon, the pods were of glass and, at dawn and dusk when gentle winds stirred the valley each pod responded to the impact of the seeds it contained. The result was music which covered the entire aural spectrum, 'white noise' which held every sound ever heard and which could be shaped by the mind to form words, prayers, songs, pleas — a threnody born in the subconscious and holding a subtle attraction and a deadly threat.

A story, published, later anthologized, but relegated to the stature of 'ghost' — a thing done and set aside in the face of other work.

Ten years later that ghost rose again — and it was not alone.

When Earl Dumarest rose from the casket in which he'd lain doped, frozen and ninety percent dead, he couldn't have known what he had started, and neither did I. I was writing an adventure novel and had created a character who would play a prominent part. I had no suspicion, then, that we would travel together in 32 books over the next eighteen years.

Like any strong character, Dumarest quickly developed a life of his own. To be believable he had to be consistent in the way he thought, behaved and evaluated data. The things which made him, the attributes he had been given, the motives which drove him, dictated the actions he took and his response to events in which he became embroiled.

Much was made clear at the very beginning. Dumarest had ridden as he had, a Low passage, risking the fifteen percent death rate, for the sake of cheap travel. A traveler at the bottom of the heap to whom poverty, while a perpetual danger, was no stranger. An unexpected diversion had dumped him on the last kind of world he had wanted to visit. Gath, a tourist attraction, with a soaring range of mountains fretted, worn, shaped, channeled, pierced and funneled into the resemblance of a monstrous organ which, like the plants of Acheron, when impacted by the wind, filled, the air with a mind-churning medley of 'white noise'. But on Gath the storms were violent, the sounds they produced strong enough to induce insanity and death. A harsh world as savage as the society in which he found himself. A bleak, dead-end world. One devoid of charity, offering no employment, no hope. Without money it was impossible to book passage and escape to another world. Without money he would starve,

Dumarest had learned in the hard school of experience and he came equipped with certain attributes. He had very fast reflexes, he carried a knife and knew how to use it, he wore traveler's garb which, because of the metal mesh buried within the thermal plastic, gave him protection against the lash of a claw, the rip of thorns, the cut and thrust of edged weapons. Most important of all, he had an overriding determination to survive no matter what the cost.

On Gath that wasn't easy, but he managed and the book sold and was liked and...and...

Dumarest refused to be forgotten. A year later he was back in another story, *Derai*, 1968, which tested him to the limit, costing him love and security and leaving him alone to follow his own path. To continue his search for the world on which he had been

born and from which he had run when little more than a child. Earth, now a world of legend, its existence denied, derided, no almanac carrying the all-important coordinates of its spacial position.

Toyman, 1969, followed a year later followed by *Kalin* in which Dumarest gained both love and a secret which was to dominate his future years. One so powerful and important that it made him the prey of the Cyclan who hunted him across the galaxy with ruthless efficiency. *The Jester At Scar*, (1970), *Lallia* (1971), *Technos*, (1972), and *Veruchia*, (1973), followed. Then things changed.

Don Wollheim who had published the Dumarest books while at Ace moved to set up his own company, DAW Books, and wanted Dumarest to go with him. I was agreeable, I'd already written the next adventure, *Mayenne*, but there was a minor snag. DAW wanted to use a longer length than Ace had used, an extra 10, 000 words a volume. This was a big advantage as it permitted more freedom to expand and develop the plot. So *Mayenne* had to be lengthened. I doubt if anyone could find just where and how.

With DAW Dumarest gained new life and vigor and a new element entered the scene. As the series grew longer many readers began to show concern that Dumarest, despite finding many clues, had yet to find Earth. I received many letters on the subject and it was seriously suggested that I should write the final book and put it safely by so that, should I die of accident or whatever, the saga could be completed.

All were positive that, sooner or later, Dumarest would find his home world. Well, almost all, as Don Wollheim later told me he'd had a visitor in the early years of the series; an excitable Russian who firmly announced that "Dumarest will never find Earth!" An affirmation probably based on the popularity of Dumarest and his adventures or his own hope that they would never end. Unfortunately events decided otherwise.

In order to sustain interest and to maintain suspense Don decided that Dumarest would find Earth — but not yet and only in pretense. This was done in volume 27, *Earth is Heaven*,

(1982), in which the truth is only revealed at the very end of the book. So Dumarest moved on for another 4 volumes *until*, in 1985, he finds the precious coordinates of Earth inscribed on the walls in *The Temple of Truth*.

This was not intended to be the end of the series.

Dumarest was to find Earth and then continue his adventures on a planet which, while his home world, would be strange and terrible, monstrous and bizarre. Many questions needed to be resolved — why had Earth been proscribed? By whom? Why had its existence been denied? What dreadful threat did it harbor? What mysteries lurked in its caverns, on its mountains, deep in its valleys? Spurred by the lust for easy wealth others would follow the coordinates Dumarest had found, eager to help themselves to a mountain of legendary wealth. Their presence would be resented by those who would combat the intrusion. There would be battle, murder and sudden death. A host of possibilities — now in limbo. The series did not continue. As far as DAW Books were concerned *The Temple of Truth* ended the adventures of Dumarest.

In all fairness I have to agree that, if the series had to end, then that was as good a place as any. But I had already written *The Return* and planned the beginning of the next volume. That remains just a beginning, and *The Return* remained a 'lost book' until 1992 when it, together with all other 31 volumes were published in France. It seemed that it would stay 'lost' as far as an English publication was concerned. Now, happily, three decades since Dumarest rose from his casket, you can travel with him to find his home.

I hope you will enjoy the journey.

— E.C. Tubb, London, July 1996

POSTSCRIPT TO THE DUMAREST SAGA by Philip Harbottle

Edwin Charles Tubb ("E.C. Tubb") was one of a select group of young British writers who emerged after the second world war and helped establish science fiction in Great Britain. A prolific

novelist and contributor to the burgeoning sf magazines, he soon became equally well established in America, appearing in such magazines as *Astounding/Analog*, and *Galaxy*. In 1956 he began a long association with American book editor Donald A. Wollheim, who was to publish numerous novels by Tubb, most notably those featuring "Earl Dumarest," and his quest to find his home planet, Earth.

The Dumarest saga was Tubb's greatest commercial success. The early novels in particular, were reprinted several times in both the USA and the UK, and the series has been translated around the world, from France to Japan.

Initially warmly received by even the most acerbic critics, as the series continued the praise became qualified by a note of exasperation as Dumarest failed to find Earth. The more sensible end of the critical spectrum was typified by Thomas Easton, *Analog's* regular book reviewer:

"...the Dumarest series is too blamed long. When it was new, I looked forward to six or eight more books before a final answer. Now that it is stretching toward two dozen, I am getting impatient. Come on, Tubb! Give the man a break!"

That was written in 1981. Two years and five books later, Easton wrote:

"All his search to date has been fruitless. All his apparent progress futile. He has to do it all over again. The tale will go on, and on. How does the reader react? There's a certain wry appreciation for being had well. But that doesn't last nearly as long as my irritated, impatient, 'Oh, no! There's more!' Yet the series sells — so many people seem to love reliable repetition. Perhaps we should call the Dumarest saga the soap opera of science fiction and be done with it."

Easton clearly shared the general critical opinion that Dumarest *had* to reach Earth. But was this necessarily true?

Tubb, like many another freelance writer, had battled for years with the problem of finding a steady market. There is nothing more soul-destroying (and economically

life-threatening) than for a writer to labor on a novel which does not sell. The science fiction market has always been a precarious one, in that a relative handful of individuals control the destinies of magazines and publishing houses — and, by extension, authors. Writers who personally fall foul of an editor can find their market withdrawn; others who curry mutual favors and scratch a few backs can see their careers secured or helped along. Most literary production has to be tailored to individual editorial tastes, or else aimed at a guaranteed waiting market, as perceived by the publisher. All of which vagaries are cheerfully accepted by most journeymen writers who regard it as 'writing for the market.'

John Russell Fearn spent years trying to find a reliable publisher, writing for literally dozens of editors, in dozens of styles, under dozens of names. All proved to be shifting sand, until Fearn achieved a vast personal following with readers of the *Toronto Star Weekly* (with a regular readership in excess of 900,000) for his Golden Amazon series. *The Star Weekly* published 52 weekly novels a year, of all types: mysteries, detectives, adventure, and romance; it had a large female readership. Until Fearn began contributing they rarely used sf. At first, Fearn managed to sell to them mysteries and westerns, and a number of straight sf novels, but sold three times as many Amazon stories. An examination of Fearn's correspondence with the editor of the *Star Weekly* highlights a dilemma facing all writers. In 1959, along with his latest Amazon story, Fearn had submitted a superb straight sf novel, *Land's End-Labrador*. Despite the quality of the latter story, it was rejected, but the editor's letter continued, regarding the Amazon novel:

"I feel sure that this will be all right as it is an Amazon story and there is a big readership for those."

All of Fearn's subsequent published novels with the *Star Weekly* were Amazon stories, in which the Amazon traveled through interstellar space, from planet to planet — just like Dumarest!

A prolific writer, Tubb had published dozens of novels in his early career, but with almost as many publishers. He had to

battle with a fickle and fraught market place. As his Dumarest series progressed, its background became more and more solid, and real. Tubb realized that it could be used as a template for all kinds of science fiction situations. The underlying concept of Dumarest traveling from world to world offered tremendous scope. It offered a means to explore and invent different ecologies and cultures. As a traveler, he could meet a vast range of varied and interesting characters —scientists, idealists, peasants, princes, criminals, fanatics, beggars, philosophers, cripples, children, soldiers, saints and sinners, villains and heroes, and an endless variety of fascinating women. The character of Dumarest himself grew and deepened from book to book, until he became a character of considerable depth: he could be a ruthless killer (but only if his life or that of a loved one depended on it), but he could also be compassionate to others, and a champion of children and those less fortunate than himself. Dumarest, in fact, grew into the composite of all Tubb's earlier heroes — a galactic Every man, but with a convincing logical consistency. He never did anything out of character, but new facets were added with each novel. There was hardly a plot, character, or situation Tubb could conceive that could not be incorporated into a Dumarest novel.

Tubb had a choice. He could end the Dumarest series in favor of a succession of one-off novels, and *try* to sell them, or he could write them as a Dumarest and be reasonably sure of a sale and worldwide subsidiary sales.

Tubb, in fact, did both continue to write Dumarest *and* to create non-Dumarest novels (he even created other character series). Dumarest continued for eighteen years, settling at two novels per year. In an interview about DAW Books in the early 1980's, Donald A. Wollheim was asked how long the Dumarest series was to continue. Wollheim's reply was revealing:

"Obviously, as long as I'll buy them and as long as people will keep buying them. I'm sure that E.C. Tubb is not planning to end it, because it's too profitable. They have a nice following. As far as I'm concerned, they can go on indefinitely... You know, Tubb, if he's in his right mind, will never have this man [Dumarest] find Earth..."

—(*Sense of Wonder*, Oryx Press 1985)

Wollheim, always the shrewdest of operators in the sf market place, was happy for Tubb to continue writing Dumarest adventures, and indeed actively encouraged him to do so.

Critics brought to the later Dumarest novels a built-in prejudice based on their own belief that Dumarest *had* to find Earth. But anyone who reads them objectively will find that the novels have a range of themes and ideas that can be enjoyed as a one-off novel, and whether Dumarest goes forwards, backwards, or sideways in his quest to find Earth does not particularly matter.

Not sufficiently acknowledged is the fact that even within the Dumarest mythos itself, there was considerable development and advancement of the underlying plot, as in, for example, the mysterious degeneration of the cyber brains. The discovery of the Original People credo, and the ingenious explorations of myths and legends, exemplified in the angels and demons in *Earth Is Heaven*. And there was also a gradual tightening of the underlying strands of mystery as to the relationship of the Cyclan to the Earth, and the conspiracy to remove all clues to Earth's location from official data banks. Earth is proscribed — a pariah planet. Why? Herein lies the answer to those bone-headed smartass critics who wondered why the Cyclan didn't just lay a trail to Earth in order to find and trap Dumarest. There obviously had to be a reason, and the critics put their feet in their mouths by their temerity in suggesting that Tubb had simply slipped up, or was too stupid to realize his obvious mistake. As usual, he was way ahead of them.

But it would appear that an enlightened outlook was beyond most critics, and it may have been their whinings and snipings that abruptly prompted Wollheim to ask Tubb to bring the series to a conclusion. And therein lies the rub, and considerable irony. Originally, Tubb had never intended the search for Earth to continue indefinitely. That came about because of commercial considerations and editorial directives. As I conjectured in 1979, writing in *The Science Fiction Collector* (No. 8), once Dumarest reached Earth, "then arising out of the revelations that follow will come a new quest for Dumarest, and a new cycle of

adventures (on Earth) will begin all over again." Tubb has recently confirmed this. So that, when Wollheim asked for the series to come to a final conclusion in a single climactic novel, he was asking the impossible. The logical unraveling of the strands of mystery Tubb had carefully laid out required several novels at least. And why should he kill off his most successful character when there was logically no need for him to do so?

Sadly, the impasse with DAW Books was never resolved, and the subsequent illness of Wollheim in 1985, put paid to any possibility that it might be. With the transfer of control and power that year, Wollheim's heirs then took DAW Books into radical new feminist directions, eschewing macho male heroes completely. In the UK, Arrow/Legend, who had always been a few years behind with the reprinting of the Dumarest canon, had the perfect opportunity to continue the series when they eventually published numbers 30 and 31 as a double volume in 1989. They could, and should, have published no. 32, and commissioned the concluding part of the cycle, *Dumarest on Earth*. That they failed to do so is as regrettable as it is inexplicable. The suspicion has to be of editorial and/or corporate changes, with a personal editorial agenda switch that has so bedeviled science fiction authorship. The 32nd novel did eventually appear in print in 1992 —but in the French language. French critics have always been independently minded, and they recognized the true quality of the Dumarest series. This prompted Gerard de Villiers (Plon/ GECP Publishing) to begin printing the entire series from number one, in 1986. Their beautiful uniform editions were issued under the banner *L'Aventurier des Etoiles*, with high quality translations by Richard F. Nolane and others. They were a great success.

In the sizzling summer of 1995, I went on holiday to New York, where the daily temperature hovered above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Whilst drinking cool root beer in a Brooklyn diner with publisher Gary Lovisi and dealer Chris Eckhoff, I narrated the above events, with more than a few colorful expletives. Deploring the non-publication of *The Return* in English, I urged them to spread the word of its existence to New York publishers. Whether it was the heat, the effect of root beer, my impassioned oratory, or Gary's own shrewd publishing instinct, or a mixture

of these, can never be known, but shortly after my return to England, I received a letter from Gary. Could he see the mss of *The Return* for consideration under his own Gryphon Books imprint? Once Gary had seen the quality of the mss for himself there was no doubt in his mind that *The Return* simply *had* to be published. Thanks to the kind cooperation of Tubb himself, this project is now a reality. And incidentally, it was Ted who provided the design for Ron Turner's beautifully evocative cover painting!

Tubb has let it be known that he would welcome the opportunity to revise the Dumarest novels into ten large volumes, eliminating any repetition, and with new bridging material where necessary. This is a marvelous idea, and would serve to restore the Dumarest saga to print, for the benefit of a new generation of readers denied the chance to read it since it was allowed to go out of print. And as a ten volume series, it would surely win over even the most exasperated of critics. And whereas a modern publisher might hesitate to publish 32 novels, 10 volumes could well be a more feasible and attractive proposition. Any enterprising publisher reading this is hereby invited to contact the author! And, of course, a golden opportunity awaits any publisher sagacious enough to commission new adventures of Dumarest on Earth!

In the meantime, Tubb's army of fans can revel in the present volume, which they might never have expected to see. Even the most jaded sf buffs will rediscover their sense of wonder as they unravel the dark secret of the planet of Fionnula, yet another amazing planet in Tubb's galactic Cook's Tour. And all readers will surely fall under the spell of Zehava, another of the fascinating women in the eventful life of Earl Dumarest.

You are about to embark on Dumarest's final journey to find Earth. Better fasten your seat belts — it's one hell of a ride!

—Philip Harbottle Wallsend, July 1996.

Chapter One

At first the place seemed of limitless dimensions; a vast

cavern housing crouching monsters attended by murmuring shadows the whole slashed with vivid beams of light which held trapped and glowing stars. Then, as eyes adjusted to the relative dimness, things took on a hard reality. The light was from the sun shining through transparencies set in the curved roof, the stars were drifting motes of dust, the monsters heaps of crates, bundles, bales, the murmuring shadows buyers, sellers, agents, porters, watchful guards. Things to be expected in any high-security warehouse and, while larger than most, that on Arpagus followed a common pattern.

"There!" Lozano Polletin lifted a hand, a finger pointing. "The cargo. Just as I told you."

He moved towards it, aggressive, assertive, a man past middle-age, of medium build, his lined, cynical face dewed with sweat. His clothing was not ostentatious but the rings he wore hinted at his wealth. An entrepreneur who operated with a shrewd appreciation of relative values. A gambler who had lost more than he could afford.

"Two hundred units." He halted beside the pile and rested his hand against it. "Individually packed and direct from the *Matsuki-Taru*. Sealed, branded, tested, guaranteed. A fortune."

Dumarest studied the heap aware of others sharing his interest; a checker, a guard, some porters slowing their progress towards a dealer who snapped his fingers with impatience. Behind him an inspector hovered in anticipation of a fee-bearing summons. To his right a flash of brightness became a woman wearing metallic fabrics, her hair a helmet of russet flecked with gold. One who vanished into the shadows as Dumarest returned his attention to the cargo.

A potential fortune as Polletin had claimed and he had the chance to share it. An opportunity it would be foolish to miss; the man had clear title and had been blunt over his need for a partner. The cargo was as he claimed. "What about transportation?"

"That's all arranged. I've worked with Minton before and he's willing to extend credit. Twenty percent over the normal rates

payable before leaving the point of destination. Worth it considering the circumstances. Any other captain would insist on cash in advance or a share of the cargo."

"When do you expect him?"

"Tomorrow. He's due to arrive before noon. We can be cleared, loaded and away before dark." Polletin stared at his rings. Small shimmers of reflected light blazed from the gems set in the heavy metal bands, dying as he moved his hands. "It's just as I told you. A golden opportunity. Do we have a deal?"

His tone hadn't changed but there was an added tension in his stance and the shimmer of his rings had betrayed the nervous quiver of his hands. In the casino they had done the same and now he played with an exposed hand.

Dumarest looked at the stacked cartons, waiting, letting the tension build. "I'm interested, Lozano, but I'm not happy with the cut."

"It's a fair one. I've paid two-thirds of the cost. Give me the other third and you get forty percent of the profit." Impatiently he added, "Damn it, Earl, I've done all the work and made all the arrangements. You'd be a fool to turn me down. Why throw away a fortune?"

"Make it fifty and we have a deal."

For a long moment the entrepreneur made no reply, his eyes as hard and as bright as the stones in his rings as he calculated alternatives. Then, shrugging, he said, "You strike a hard bargain, but I can't blame you for that. I'd do the same.

I've no choice and you know it. Fifty percent it is. The money?"

"After I've checked what I'm buying."

The inspector came forward at Polletin's signal, and waited for Dumarest to make his choice. A crate picked at random from within the pile, handed down by porters, opened by Dumarest as

they withdrew. Inside lay a compact mechanism, one which opened like a flower beneath Polletin's hands to stand higher than he was tall, the glistening petals forming a round, concave mirror six feet in diameter.

"A solar power unit," he said. "One of the finest. Completely automatic in operation. Just set it up, aim it at the sun and the inbuilt computer does the rest. The power output is high and the demand will be higher. Baldar is a harsh world and the farmers need all the help they can get. This will be their weapon against famine, drought and storm. Provide energy to use for pumps, drills and transport. It's a weapon they can't refuse."

"Is it one they can pay for?"

"Telwigcan. He's the local factor and our buyer. He'll issue them out on a low monthly rental. The farmers will snap them up and think themselves lucky to get them. They'll increase production and borrow to buy extra seed and stuff. They won't be able to meet the payments, of course, farmers have no cash, and the debt will be set against the harvest. When it comes in he'll collect twice over. First he'll cut the value of the harvest because of the increased yield. Then he'll raise the unit rental."

"Nice. "

"That's why he'll be eager to buy. He simply can't lose. In a few years he'll own the land and farmers both. " Polletin sounded envious. "Well, that's his good luck, but it helps us. All we need do is to screw him for as much as we can get — and make sure we get it. "

"Two men, " said Dumarest. "I guess we can't count on Minton and his crew. You and me against Telwig and how many others? Suppose he tries to take without paying? "

"He'll get nothing he can use. " Polletin dug into a pocket and produced a small cylinder. "This is the heart of the unit. A crystalline alloy key which controls the computer. Without it the thing is useless." He tossed it into the air, caught it as it fell. "Our insurance. We don't hand over the keys until both we and the money are safe. "

Nights were kind on Arpagus. Soft breezes from the hills dispelled the lingering heat of the day and spread the scent of scattered herbs. At dusk lanterns blazed into life on roofs and walls; things of beauty which threw vivid patches of vibrant color over the paths and buildings. Warm hues which made a pleasant contrast to the shimmering glow of starlight which silvered the terrain with a nacreous sheen. A combination which created the illusion of space, brightness and warm, safe comfort.

One Dumarest could appreciate as he walked down the narrow street which led towards the landing field. He felt exhilarated, too wakeful for sleep, too impatient to sit idle as the hours dragged by. The exhilaration was that of a gambler who, staking all, knew he was certain to win. The deal with Polletin was safe enough; the cargo would not be released without the authorization in his pocket and in a few hours they would be on their way to turn it into cash. The money, once gained, could be safeguarded and even if Telwig didn't buy others would. There was no way he could lose. The only thing in doubt was the extent of his profit.

The street widened as it rose to open into a small, oval clearing holding a bench, the statue of a woman, a fountain which threw a tinted spray. Flowers scented the air with a sickly perfume. Halting, he looked at the town.

It lay before him, a mass of warm patches and silver glow; mansions of the wealthy flanked by smaller dwellings, dwarfed by the soaring bulk of the hotel and the cathedral-like grandeur of the casino, the whole slashed with streets, roads, and narrow lanes. The casino was to be expected; on Arpagus gambling was a way of life. The hotel catered to transients; merchants, traders and speculators who dealt in cargos and stocks, futures and commodities. Gamblers little different from those who courted fortune in the casino.

"My lord?" A woman stepped from behind the statue, tall, robed, a cowl masking her hair, shadowing her face. Ruby light turned her into a figure of flame. "My lord!"

She cringed, one hand rising in futile defense, the cowl falling back to reveal hair looped and curled in an elaborate coiffure,

the warm oval of her face. One ageless beneath a mask of paint but her eyes held naked terror at what she saw; a man, grey clothing tinged with red, the knife in his hand a crimson icicle aimed at her throat. His face was the killing mask of a beast.

"No! Please, no! I —"

His hand clamped over her mouth to silence her scream as the knife fell away from her throat to be sheathed in his boot. A mistake, one he had realized almost too late; the woman was a harlot plying her trade. A harmless creature turned into a figure of menace by the ruby light, the robe she wore, the loose cowl which protected her elaborate coiffure.

Dumarest said, quickly, "I mean you no harm. You startled me. Please do not scream." As he freed her mouth he added, "I apologize for my rudeness."

She said nothing, breasts heaving as she drew air into her lungs, eyes searching his face with fading anxiety. Then, shrugging, she smiled.

"No need for that, my lord. How could I object to such an impulsive lover?"

A woman knowledgeable of men and the devil which rode within them. One resuming her trade, already dismissing the fury he had displayed, the knife, the threat of the blade at her throat as a symptom of his need. Passion often wore a bizarre and terrifying face.

"Here." Dumarest produced a coin and pressed it into her hand. "Accept this as recompense."

"For your lack of interest?"

"For the urgent business which demands my attention elsewhere." Smiling he closed her fingers over the metal. "Good fortune attend you."

"You are gracious. I regret your departure. May the goddess favor your life and enterprises."

Empty words born of his charity but it was better to receive a blessing than a curse. Dumarest moved on, the wash of ruby light falling behind him, the soaring facade of the hotel becoming a brighter hue among others. Polletin was lost in drunken slumber, dreaming of profits to come and the ruin he had so barely avoided. Someone who had chosen a bad partner and had been left with a contract to be met or a ruinous penalty to be paid. But was the man what he seemed? Could he be the agent of a relentless enemy?

The odds were against it. The game had been honest and while it was possible for a skilled gambler to manipulate the other players he doubted if Polletin had the skill. The man had been desperate to win enough to meet his obligation. Losing, it had been natural for him to approach the winner with his proposition. One Dumarest had accepted. A bargain now struck and sealed.

Irritably he shook his head, exhilaration gone, concern taking its place. The harlot had startled him more than she could have guessed. The scarlet of her robe and the cowl which had shadowed her face had created the illusion of a cyber and he had reacted without conscious thought imagining an enemy where none existed. A danger which was unlikely to exist. The Cyclan could have no interest in Arpagus and must now be convinced that he was dead. Yet nothing was certain and the wildest coincidences could happen. If a cyber was on the planet he needed to take precautions to save his life and money. On this world if he lost one the other would be short.

The field lay on the edge of town, lights tracing the high perimeter fence, hazed as it winked from mesh and barbs. The warehouse loomed close to one side, the turret at the end of the building ready to hurl destruction at any attempting to violate its contents. Two other towers were set at intervals at the far side of the field both equally armed. Dumarest headed towards the nearest, frowning as he neared the structure. The tower was too silent, too lifeless. Men should have been on watch quick to challenge his approach but he closed the distance between himself and the tower without question.

Three steps from the door his foot hit something soft and he stumbled and almost fell. Stooping he touched the obstruction, feeling hair, ears, bared fangs. In the silver starlight he saw the body of a large dog stretched on the ground.

A guard dog now dead. From the throat rose the tufted feathers of a dart.

"Guards!" Dumarest sent his boot thudding against the door. "Guards! Guards — answer me, damn you!"

The building remained silent and he turned, tense, aware of danger. Dirt plumed beneath his boots as he ran towards the other tower. The field was empty. Those on watch, dulled by the lack of action, could have grown careless in the conduct of their duties. Even now they could be dozing, drinking, indifferent to his approach.

Someone was before him.

He saw the glint as he neared the tower; brightness which vanished to glow again as he veered from his path in a transient glimmer of reflected light. A sheen which he had seen before and he slowed, moving silently towards it. The glint moved in turn and he heard the rasp of shoes against soil. One repeated as he ran silently towards the noise, the metallic sheen of remembered garments, the woman who wore them.

One who wore a pad resting over her nose and mouth.

She turned as he reached her, rearing back as he tore the pad from her face and threw it to one side. An acrid scent caught at his nostrils and smarted his eyes then it had gone and he was fighting for his life.

She attacked without hesitation, metal blades lancing at his eyes from the stabbing tips of her fingers. Speed alone saved him. The blades passed over his lowered head stabbing again at his neck and slashing at his face. He heard the rasp as they tore at the fabric of his blouse, the grate as they met the protective mesh buried beneath. Before she could strike again he slammed the heel of his hand against her chest between and above her

breasts. She staggered back, chest heaving, fighting for breath. Before she could regain her balance, he straightened, arms sweeping aside the threat of the sharp steel wedged to her nails.

"Use those again and I'll break your arms!"

"Bastard!" Panting, she glared her hate. "Why did you interfere?"

She gave him no time to answer, one hand dropping to her waist, lifting with the bulk of a laser. Dumarest smashed it aside before it could level, gripped it, twisted it from her hand. For a moment they stood dangerously close and he could smell the aroma of her perfume, feel the warm, feminine heat of her body. Then he threw the gun after the pad and stepped back, hands lifted in wary defense.

"Fast." She stared at him, eyes wide beneath arching brows, the helmet of her hair silvered by starlight and the glow from the field. She lifted one hand and pressed it where he had struck. A blow which should have rendered her helpless. The woman was far stronger than she seemed. "Too damned fast." Wincing she added, "You hurt me."

"You asked for it."

"Maybe. What happens now?"

"I take you to the guards."

"Why? What's the complaint? That I wouldn't let you rape me?" Her voice thickened a little as she edged closer. "Is that what this is all about? You saw me and desired me and came after me to get what you wanted? Well, you know what they say. To the victor the spoils. You certainly won. So?"

The offer of her body; a weapon as deadly as the laser, the blades fitted to her nails. A man lost in passion was vulnerable. To accept would be to commit suicide.

Dumarest said, "You killed the dog. You did something to silence the guards in the towers. A lethal gas of some kind. It has

to be gas. Why?"

"You're talking nonsense. I was just out for a walk. I couldn't sleep and it's quiet out here." Her hand lifted to gesture at the towers, the space between them. "I saw no dog. If one is dead I didn't kill it. Someone else could have been here before us. I've no gas. Search me if you want."

She lifted both arms and turned so as to display her body. The metallic fabric she wore fitted her tightly, accentuating the swell of hips and breasts, the curve of buttocks and thighs. Her waist was that of a girl as were the broad contours of her face, but there was nothing young about her eyes. Looking at them Dumarest was reminded of the harlot.

"The guards can do the searching."

"You don't believe me? Why? Because of what happened? I thought you intended rape so I defended myself. Can I be blamed for that? Do you want me to beg? To grovel?" She shrugged as he made no answer. "To hell with it. Take me to the guards if you want. I'll tell them I found you up here close to a tower. That you attacked me without cause. I've bruises to prove it. Your word against mine." Her breasts rose as she inflated her lungs. "Want to bet on whom they'll believe?"

A gamble he would win despite the lure of her body. The guards would listen to both sides and the pad would speak for him; traces of skin, sweat and saliva would tie it to the woman. Her clothing would hold betraying residues of the gas she had used. Evidence which would settle guilt without question.

A thing she must know so she was either trying to lull him into a false sense of security or playing for time. Time to accomplish what?

Her eyes gave the answer. Dumarest saw the shift of silver reflections as they moved to search the sky, lowered to study the warehouse, rose again to the sky. She was expecting something and, suddenly, he knew what it had to be.

"Raiders! You bitch! You're working with raiders!"

"That's crazy!" She backed from him, the anger distorting his face. "I was just taking a walk. I got lost and—"

She turned and ran to where he had thrown the laser, snatching it up, turning to aim. He struck before she could fire, the mark of his fist a red patch on her jaw, blood staining the sand from her skull, the stone against which she had fallen.

Chapter Two

Dumarest heard the whining scream of tormented air as he neared the warehouse. Felt the blast, the jarring shock as the raider's vessel slammed to a landing on the field, the blue shimmer of its Erhaft field vanishing to reveal the bulk of a ship designed for loot and destruction.

An incredible landing which told of the skill of its captain, one matched by the ability of his gunners. Missiles ruined the turret on the warehouse, blasted open the wall, turned the other towers into rubble. Fire traced a path towards the town, ending at the hotel with a blossom of flame.

As the echoes died an amplified voice roared from the ship.

"WARNING! KEEP YOUR DISTANCE! ATTACK US AND WE DESTROY THE TOWN!"

A threat emphasized by the smoke rising from the hotel. Minor damage as yet but a demonstration of what would happen if the raiders were not obeyed. Whoever was in command knew his business and was wasting no time. The fence by the warehouse was down, cut and flattened on the dirt. The loading ports of the ship were open, ramps already in place, men hurrying to collect their loot. Workers lightly dressed guarded by others resembling machines.

Light gleamed from their armour; polished surfaces designed to reflect the fury of lasers, strong enough to withstand the impact of missiles. The helmets were blank, tanked air a protection against gas, the weapons they carried able to scythe flesh, metal and stone.

Dumarest edged closer to the warehouse, crouched low, trusting the glare of the perimeter lights and drifting smoke to shield him, from watchful eyes. One man, hardly a threat, but a guard on the alert would fire at a shadow. He froze behind the shielding bulk of a hut. Too late to give warning there was nothing he could do but ensure his own survival. To wait and watch as the warehouse was gutted of its treasures; bales containing rare and costly spices, boxes of electronic components, valuable oils, gems, herbs. Cartons he recognized.

The cargo which had cost him all he owned.

As sweating men piled it on the ramps he rose and slipped closer to the warehouse. Rubble from the ruined turret provided shelter and he crouched among it, feeling broken furnishings, equipment, the body of a guard. He moved again, freezing as an armored shape turned to scan the area. As it turned away he ran again, reaching the wall of the warehouse, the carvings which decorated it and provided plentiful holds. He swarmed upwards, reached the eaves and drew himself onto the roof. It was curved, thick, the transparencies now glowing with light. Illumination which revealed wide cracks caused by the attack. He reached one, stared through it, saw a mound of bales lying beneath. Bulk cargo of small value which cushioned his fall and he lay still, examining the scene below. The workers were busy further down the warehouse and he could see no guards.

Dropping to the floor he waited for the moment he knew had to come.

The success of a raid depended on surprise and speed. To hit, steal and run with the minimum of warning and without delay. The man commanding the raid would know that. Know, too, that despite his warning and the threat of damage local forces would move against him. Any ship was vulnerable to missile attack. It would have to leave before one could be organized. When it left there would be no time to count heads.

Dumarest inched forward among the piled goods, seeking shadows, freezing as men passed close. One grunted as a siren cut the air.

"That's it! First warning! Let's move!"

He flung his weight against a loaded platform, others joining him; a disciplined group but inevitably there were stragglers. A couple of men quested for anything small and valuable. Another tugged at a torn bale. As his hand dived into the opening the man guiding the platform yelled his anger.

"There's no time for that! Get busy on this load! Hurry!"

Dumarest watched as the loaded platform moved on its way towards the ship. As the siren again blasted its warning he stepped from hiding, hand dropping to his boot, rising armed with steel. As the raider tore his hand free from the bale and ran down the warehouse Dumarest threw the knife.

It hit as he intended, the pommel slamming against the back of the skull, the man falling as again the siren tore the air in final warning. There had been no shot, no scream, no witnesses. A prisoner had been safely taken.

One who would never talk.

Kez Mbopola was a Hausi, his dark face striated with the ritual caste-scars of his guild. An agent who could be trusted. One who never lied even if he didn't reveal all the truth. Early as it was he sat at his desk in an office redolent of a hundred spices, a thousand deals.

"A bad time." He gestured at the bottle standing before him together with glasses. "Help yourself if you want. You've earned it."

"You know?"

"I've been told. At least you got one of them. A pity he had such a thin skull." Mbopola watched as Dumarest sipped at the brandy. "It's a shame they got away so light. Three teams of guards dead as well as civilians. Raiders should be hunted down. Exterminated like the vermin they are!"

Strong language from a man who prided himself on his

detached neutrality and it would be echoed by others eager for punitive action. Empty demands for nothing would be done. Ships, men and armaments cost money and the one man who could have told them where to strike was dead. They would repair the damage, heal the injured, bury the dead and things would be as before.

Aside from the orphans, the widows, those left crippled, those left ruined.

As Dumarest lowered his glass the Hausi said, "I can guess why you are here. Unfortunately the answer is no."

"To what?"

"The return of your money. The transaction was completed. There can be no reversal of the contract."

As Dumarest had expected. "What about insurance?"

"Your partner would know about that."

"The warehouse guarantee?"

"Will be honored. In matters of business it is essential to maintain a good reputation and Arpagus will not shirk responsibility. However, it will take time to settle the details and, in your case, the recompense will be minimal."

"Why? The cargo —"

"Was declared by your partner to have little value." Mbopola shrugged, lifting his hands to forestall any protest. "A fiction, of course, but it is common practice and saves on the premium. Most traders cut corners where they can and your partner is no different to the rest. Didn't he tell you? Perhaps he didn't think it important. But I should ask him about the insurance." The Hausi reached for the bottle to pour fresh drinks, then halted the action, his face registering concern. "I should have asked. The hotel was hit. I hope he wasn't hurt."

Lozano Polletin was dying.

Dumarest looked at him where he lay in the terminal ward of the infirmary. They had washed his face and sealed his wounds with a film of clear plastic dressing, but the blood edging his lips told of lacerated lungs and internal injuries. Weakly he raised a hand in greeting.

"Earl! I'm glad you came." His voice was thin, blurred by the drugs which had killed his pain. "They told me what happened. A raid — damn the luck."

"Was the cargo insured?"

"No. Those cartons were too big to pilfer and money was tight." Polletin coughed, swallowed, fresh carmine staining his lips "Dreaming," he said. "I was dreaming of what I'd do with the profit. A big house, my own company, some comforts..." His voice trailed into silence. Returned with a caustic bitterness. "I had it all wrong. Lease, don't sell. Just hire out and collect for life. Telwig —"

"Where can I find him?"

"I told you."

"A lie. Now I want the truth. Where?"

"Chendha." The sick man moved fretfully on the bed.

"You'll find him on Chendha. Sorry about that, Earl, but I had to keep an edge. You understand? You'd do the same yourself." He grimaced as Dumarest nodded, the parody of a smile. "You got the keys?"

Collected from the ruins of the room they had shared.

"They're safe."

"Good." Polletin lifted his hands and pulled free the rings he wore. "Take these. I won't need them now. Go on, take them!" His fingers closed on Dumarest's own as he obeyed. "The pain, Earl! It's coming back! Help me! Help me!"

Dumarest stepped away from the bed as the summoned attendant stooped over the writhing figure. He heard the sharp hiss as a hypogun blasted oblivion into Polletin's arteries. A lethal dose; there was nothing merciful in extending torment.

"He's at peace now." The attendant pursed his lips. "Known him long?"

"No."

"I see you've got his rings. There could be charges due and —"

Dumarest said flatly, "They'll be met by the town. All of them. If the guards had done their job he wouldn't be lying here. Where are the rest of his things?"

His clothing was ruined, the money belt empty, the shoes devoid of secret compartments. In exchange for his money Dumarest had nothing but useless components and a few tawdry rings.

He hefted them in his palm knowing that, even if genuine, they would buy little more than a single High passage. One trip in relative comfort to another world there to be stranded, crippled by poverty, easy prey for any who might be hunting him down.

"Your pardon, sir."

Men had come to remove the body. He left them to it, leaving the ward, aware of the death-smell pervading the chamber. A corridor led him into an open space from which ran several passages. He chose one at random. It led to a room flanked with cots occupied by women. A nurse stared at him from where she stood beside a patient. Dumarest halted, recognizing his mistake. Turning he retraced his steps, then halted, looking towards his right, the bed in the corner, the gleam of russet hair.

To the nurse who came towards him he said, "That woman in the corner bed. Who is she?"

"A victim of the raid. She was found near the guard towers

badly concussed. Do you know her?"

"I'm not sure. Her name?"

"We haven't got it. She carried no identification and appears to be suffering from amnesia. It's common after her type of injury. If you recognize her please let me know. There are questions needing to be answered."

Dumarest waited until she had bustled away then moved towards the bed. She was as he remembered. The metal blades still glued to her nails showed bright against the cover. Sitting beside her he searched her face. It was expressionless. Her eyes appeared unfocused. In them he could see his own reflection.

"Do you know me? Remember me?"

She made no response. Leaning forward he touched her scalp where the hair had been shaved. Plastic dressing covered an ugly wound.

He said quietly, "If you really are suffering from amnesia then I'm wasting my time. I could even feel sorry for you because you're going to pay for something you can't even remember. People were killed and hurt during the raid and feeling is running high. They want revenge and they won't be gentle. Already they're curious as to why you were found so close to the towers. I could tell them."

She remained silent but he saw faint glimmers from the bright metal on her nails.

"You're faking amnesia in order to avoid answering questions. Hoping to leave here before they lose patience. But you won't be allowed to leave. Not after I've had a word with the guards." Dumarest paused then said, flatly, "I'm the only chance you have of staying alive. I can provide an alibi and swear to your innocence. They'll believe me. But I don't come cheap."

He leaned over the bed to whisper in her ear. The picture of a man kissing a tender farewell to the object of his affection.

"Make your decision. Help me or I'll turn you in. There'll be a reward and I can use the money." His tone deepened, echoed his anger, his determination. "Get this straight! You and yours robbed me. Killed my partner. Made a wreck of my plans. You'll pay for that or I'll see you dead. Touch my hand if we have a deal."

He waited, watching her face, her eyes. He smelt the faint ghost of perfume but nothing of fear. A woman with too much courage or one genuinely ill. In either case he would carry out his threat. Then, as he rose, he felt the stinging impact of her nails.

At night the window glowed with cerulean brightness, but now the lantern was dark, the opening framing a sunlit vista of the town, the men busy repairing the warehouse, the empty field. Minton had come and gone, scowling when he heard of Polletin's death, accepting the Hausi's offer of an alternative cargo. But there would be plenty of other ships. Arpagus was a busy world.

"Earl!" Water splashed in the bathroom. "Come and scrub my back."

Ignoring the invitation he roamed the apartment. The furnishings were sparse, cheap, as drab as the carpet and curtains. The print of a clown made a splash of color and betrayed an ironic humor. There were no cushions, no ornaments, nothing personal to the occupant herself.

He turned at the pad of feet as, naked but for the towel wrapped around her waist, she came towards him.

Zehava Postel was a beautiful woman.

One almost as tall as himself with wide, sloping shoulders, breasts set high and proud. Beneath the strong brows the eyes were vividly blue. The lips were full, revealing in their sensuality. Her skin was a pale copper dewed with pearls.

He touched one, saw the droplet break beneath his finger, felt the warm velvet of her skin.

"Do you like what you see?" Her voice was rich with an

inviting softness, the slight huskiness bearing musical overtones. One different to that she had used before. "Do I please you?"

"You're an actress."

"All women are that."

"But few as expert." He added, dryly, "Few have as great a need."

She made no comment, stepping past him to stand before the window, the air of her passage scented with enticing odors. Sunlight created an aureole about her hair. She had removed the metal blades and scarlet shone at the tips of her fingers. Nails polished and painted as the rest of her had been washed and perfumed and adorned with a cunning art. A woman unashamed of her body. One who thought all men vulnerable to her charms.

"That's better!" She turned to face him, drawing in her breath, holding it before exhaling with a contented sigh. "I love the sun and it's good to be clean. To wash off the stink of the infirmary. I was beginning to think you'd never come to get me out. Well, you did, so let's celebrate."

She opened the wine standing on a low table and filled two tables.

Dumarest said, "First there's a matter of money."

"Later. After we celebrate."

"Now." Harshness edged his voice. "We made a deal. If you want to argue I can always change my mind."

"After you've sworn I was with you?" Smiling she shook her head. "I think not. What would you tell them?"

"I didn't swear. I gave you an alibi and they took my word. They'll take it again if I say I wanted you to trust me so I could get at the truth."

"Which is?"

"You worked with the raiders. You were sent ahead to scout the target. You rented this apartment and checked out the warehouse, noting cargo-numbers and assessing bulk and value. I saw you there. You must have relayed the information to the others and, after you'd taken care of the towers, you gave the signal to strike. But why pick on my goods? All that bulk?"

"Weapons, Earl. There's a ready market for them on a lot of worlds."

Weapons? He frowned then remembered how Polletin had described the value of the units to the farmers, the words he had used. Weapons against drought and famine. Weapons they couldn't do without. She had caught a word and had assumed the rest and made a mistake which had ruined him.

"Anything else?"

"The reason you rented this apartment. No cleaning service. No maids. No one to check your comings or goings or to see something suspicious. I guess you intended to leave with the others but you couldn't make it. When found you acted as you did. That was clever," he admitted "If I hadn't taken the wrong passage you'd have got away with it."

"You did and I didn't. But it wasn't all an act. At first I didn't know where I was. You weren't gentle."

"Your head hit a stone when you fell."

"That makes me feel better." She closed the space between them, her hand rising to touch his cheek, the fingers a lingering caress. "So luck threw us together again. We can't argue with fate, darling. We —"

"Have business to finish. Get the money."

For a long moment she stared at him, her hand falling from his cheek then, abruptly, she turned and padded from the room. He heard small sounds, rustles, clicks, the thud of a closing door. When she returned she was dressed as he remembered, the metallic fabric shimmering with reflected gleams. A matching

belt hung like a dead snake over her arm.

"Here!" She threw it at him. "What I promised you. All I have."

He found no seal, sliced it open, spilled a handful of gems into his palm.

"I didn't promise you a fortune," she said quickly. "I haven't one to give. I was to have left with the others as you said. That's my emergency fund in case something went wrong."

One she would have carried with her together with everything else of value if she'd intended to run. The contents of the apartment proved the intention, no food, no clothing or personal jewelry, just liquid soap, perfume, a bottle of forgotten wine.

"It isn't enough." She sensed his disappointment. "I guess you could make more if you turned me in for a reward."

"You kept the deal. You gave me all you have."

"I haven't done that yet. I've more than money, Earl. Not my body though it's yours if you want it, but an opportunity to make your fortune. You have the temperament for it. You could get back all you've lost and more."

He said, dryly, "As a raider?"

"Why not? There are worse things to do with your life. Better than wasting it in a factory or office or breaking your back on a farm making others rich. You were right about me working with them, but it's more than that. I'm one of them. I belong and so could you. Please, Earl! Think about it!"

Dumarest caught the note of desperation. Without money the woman was stranded. Running the risk of falling into debt and being collared to be sold as a virtual slave. She could make out in her own way but it would take time and the authorities were already suspicious. She needed to leave Arpagus quickly and she couldn't do it without his help. The reason for the offer, the bait, the appeal to his greed.

"Earl?"

He pretended to consider, to weigh advantage against risk. Then, shrugging, he lifted his glass.

"Hell, why not? What have I to lose?" The answer she had wanted to hear. "A toast, Zehava! To love and life and endless loot!"

To the blast of guns, the screams of the dying, the stink of fear and blood and pain. He'd known them all as a mercenary and could well know them again. But it was more than that. She was giving him the chance to recover his stolen cargo. To be rich, to be safe, to find the means of revenge. Above all, the opportunity to complete his voyage. Raiders had ships and he needed a vessel to carry him home.

Chapter Three

In a chamber sunken deep beneath the torn and ravaged surface of a lonely world Master Ryon, Cyber Prime, sat and fished in the waters of madness.

Around him surged an endless susurrations of voices, music, prepositions, scales, mnemonic jingles, abstruse speculations all interwoven with vivid flashes of vibrant color forming bizarre geometric forms and mathematical concepts. Universes flowered based on distorted forms of logic. Symbols took on animate life and the stuff of creation itself swirled to settle in alien configurations, to blaze with enticing perfection, to swirl again in restless chaos.

Then, suddenly, it was over.

Ryon sat bemused, staring at his desk, the machine on its surface, the time-switch which had terminated the playback of the recording. A moment and he was himself again, assessing, evaluating, making calculations, reaching decisions. The recording must be destroyed together with the brain from which it had been taken. No others must be made; the insidious attraction of undisciplined thought held a subtle danger. Any

further aberration must be confined to the brains affected and they too must be destroyed. Even if those intelligences measured their life in centuries.

Ryon visualized them, the massed racks holding the remnants of cybers who had served well and who had earned the reward of extended existence. Their bodies had been discarded, their brains sealed into ovoid containers, fed with nutrients, connected to others of their own kind. Freed of all physical distraction their only duty to think, to compute, to serve the organization to which they had dedicated their existence. Forming Central Intelligence which was heart and brain of the Cyclan.

As he was its head and master.

Ryon rose, standing tall before the desk, a living flame in the scarlet of his robe, the seal of the Cyclan shimmering on his breast. A man lean from the lack of unnecessary fat, his face gaunt, his scalp hairless. One taken when barely a child, training and surgery ridding him of the capacity of emotion. He knew nothing of hate, love, fear, joy. Food was nothing but fuel for his body. Tenderness and concern were abstracts without meaning. His only determination was the pursuit of efficiency. His only pleasure that of mental achievement.

"Master?" The voice of his aide whispered from the air. "The Council will be assembling in an hour."

A communication needing no response. Ryon moved from the desk towards the center of the chamber, halting as light blossomed before him. As he watched the air became alive with a multitude of glowing points as a depiction of the galaxy came into being. A masterpiece of electronic magic, each mote of light held in a complex web of electromagnetic forces. With such diminution detail had to be lost but the stars were present and among them scarlet flecks glowed in scattered profusion.

The power of the Cyclan.

Each fleck represented a world which had lost its self-determination to become a part of the master-plan which

would result in the total domination of the galaxy. Flecks which would spread and increase until all worlds worked together in a common unity. Then there would be an end to waste, ignorance, misdirected effort, squandered resources. An end to war, poverty, disease, the idiocy of emotional distraction. Culled of undesirable traits, ruled by reason, bred for genetic advantage, the race would achieve its true destiny.

The plan would work as it had been designed to work, the only variable was time. The only threat was that residing within the massed minds of Central Intelligence.

Too many of those minds had gone insane.

A creeping, insidious, progressive degeneration which had claimed thousands despite the most rigorous efforts to halt its progress. As yet neither a cure nor the cause was known. All affected brains had been destroyed.

To his invisible aide Ryon said, "Report on the progress of Unit R."

"Three hours ahead of schedule, Master."

A satisfying response. Those busy recording the contents of brains as yet unaffected by the strange malady knew the urgency of their task. To lift skeins of knowledge from their organic prisons and impress them on sensitive, sponge-like nodes of fabricated metallic substance. An experiment with tremendous potential. One which could solve the problem.

As it could have been solved long ago if Dumarest had been captured. He alone knew the correct order in which the fifteen biomolecular units comprising the affinity twin had to be assembled. The artificial symbiote which could give the Cyclan irresistible domination.

Injected into the bloodstream it nestled at the brain of the cortex and became intermeshed with the entire sensory and nervous system. The brain holding the dominant half would engulf that holding the submissive. Each move, all tactile sensation, every visual stimulus and muscular determination

would be instantly absorbed and assimilated. The effect was to give the host containing the dominant half a new body. A promise and bribe impossible to resist.

An old man could become young and virile. A crone beautiful. The hopelessly crippled and diseased could be whole and healthy again. A cyber could control the body and mind of the ruler of a world and guide it to a chosen future. The deranged brains could be given a life separate from the complex of Central Intelligence, probed, tested, treated, the mental deterioration isolated and cured.

A secret lost on the bleak world of Raniang where Dumarest had died, incinerated in the incandescent fury of an atomic explosion. He had to have died — the probability was ninety-nine point nine percent. As near to certainty as could be achieved.

The sparkling lens of the galaxy died as Ryon turned from the spectacle. He paused at this desk, unwilling to waste even a moment and he had time to spare before joining the Council. A touch and paper spilled from a slot bearing a resume of items considered by Central Intelligence to have special significance. Quickly he scanned them, assimilating details of ship movements, market trends, economic pressures, oddities of personal behavior in important people, the report of a raid.

An item followed by the account of a man having been killed by a thrown knife.

The *Sabata* was small, old, scarred. Within the hull were leaking tanks, worn filters, aging components, the dirt and grime of careless maintenance. The crew matched the vessel; vulpines who scavenged space for what trade they could find, sharing the profits and bearing the stamp of those who lived on the edge of danger.

Men familiar to Dumarest as was the condition of the ship. He shrugged as Zehava scowled her displeasure.

"Free Traders don't worry about unessentials. A good generator, a sealed hull and fuel to get where they're going is enough. That and a profit at the end of every journey. Just make

the best of it."

"It's disgusting!"

"It isn't an hotel though I've lived in some that were as bad."

"There's no room. The walls are filthy. The bed's too narrow." She looked at the bowl and faucet standing between the cot and bulkhead. "Am I supposed to shower in that?"

"There is no shower. You use a sponge and don't use too much water. The other facility is at the end of the passage. You eat in the salon." He added, "I'm going there now. Don't join me. I want to learn what I can."

News, gossip, speculation, all diverted if a beautiful woman provided distraction and claimed attention. Journeys were tiresome even when relieved of tedium by quicktime and shipboard romance was not unknown.

Anjuli lifted a hand in greeting as Dumarest entered the compartment. He was small, round, a barely healed wound on the side of his face. A victim of the raid, the wound received as he ran from the warehouse. His loss had been a half share of a rich consignment of oil.

"We're away at last," he said. "I thought we'd never get settlement of our claim."

"You could have left it to the Hausi."

"For a commission," agreed Anjuli. "Had there been space available we'd have done that but all ships were booked solid." By owners eager to shift their stock, traders to escape the possibility of another raid. "We were lucky to get passage at all. We'd have preferred better but this will do. Schill is a busy world and we'll get passage easy enough. Right, Yusef?"

His partner nodded. "Did you hear the rumor? They figure a transient had something to do with the raid. I can't see it myself — who would work with that scum? My guess is that the authorities are trying to shift attention from their own

carelessness. That ship should have been blasted as it landed. It certainly should never have been allowed to leave."

"Collusion." A man spoke from where he sat in a corner of the salon. "The raiders might even be splitting the take."

"Why should they?" Romar, the other occupant of the salon voiced his opinion. "They're heading back home now. We should be following them."

"Where and with what?" Anjuli was bitter. "Even if we had a ship and men with guts we still don't know where to look for them."

"Wrong," said the man in the corner. "I was on Biju when it was raided last year. They ran a computer analysis and decided the raiders came from somewhere in the Lonagar Drift. Not that it did any good. No one did anything."

"As expected," said Yusef. "How about a game?"

"Not poker," said Roar. "Not on this journey." He looked at Dumarest. "No disrespect, but I was in the casino when you had your big win. Polletin was supposed to be good but you took him for all he had. Let's play something less savage."

"High, low, man in between?" Dumarest produced a pack of cards as Romar nodded. "Any objections to my running the bank?"

It was an easy, monotonous, simple game. Three cards dealt face up in any order but the middle card determined the result. Pairs canceled. If a pair included the middle card the bank won all bets. Three of a kind made a void hand.

Dumarest dealt a five to his left, a lord to his right, a ten in the middle. "Man in between." He matched the stake of the winners and dealt again. A seven to his left, a nine to his right, a three in the middle. "Low wins." A four to his left, a lady to his right, a four in the middle. "Bank wins." A trey to his left, another to his right, a deuce between. "Low wins." Three eights and avoid hand. Nines to left and right with a ten between.

"High wins."

The steward came to distribute quicktime, the drug easing the tedium of the journey. Beneath its influence the metabolism was slowed so that days became subjective hours.

"Where do you want it? Wrist? Throat? Where?"

"Wrist." Romar extended his hand, watched as the steward aimed and fired his hypogun. At the blast he froze, turning into a statue, all movement slowed to a fraction of normal.

"Throat." Bone and sinew in the wrist could slow the quick absorption of the drug. Dumarest felt the touch of the hypogun, heard the sharp hiss as the drug was blasted through skin, fat and muscle into his bloodstream. The lights flickered, then all seemed as before, but, on the next deal, the cards vanished from his hand to reappear immediately on the table.

After an hour Romar had lost enough. He rose from the table, stretched, crossed the salon to where a faucet yielded a thick, opaque fluid. Basic, the standard food of spacers. Rich in protein, sickly with glucose, laced with vitamins, tart with citrus. A cup provided nourishment for a day. A heating element in the base of the cup kept the fluid warm.

"If I can do anything for any of you don't hesitate to ask," Romar said. "I've a good selection of analogues and symbiotes which will give you really interesting experiences. I've also pills, sensitapes and some other things you'd find of interest."

Anjuli said, "Sensitapes? What kinds?"

"You name it, I've got it."

The other man said, "I'm interested in those analogues. All subjects?"

He followed Romar to buy the experience of being something other than human. Yusef and his partner trailed after him for sensitapes by which they would enjoy erotic dreams. Alone Dumarest pocketed his cards and left the salon.

Like the cabins the corridor was cramped, soiled, dimly lit. A brighter glow spilled from the partly open door of a cabin at the far end of the passage where the steward took his rest. Closer the hum of voices came from where the others bargained with Romar over his wares. The door of Zehava's cabin was closed. Dumarest opened it, looked inside, saw the empty compartment, the vacant cot.

Silently he moved to his own cabin and quietly opened the door.

Zehava was kneeling beside his bunk, a heavy satchel resting before her. She was busy working at the lock.

"Earl!" She looked up, startled, as he entered the cabin. "I was —"

"Go ahead. Open it." He closed the door behind him as he gave her the combination. "Take a look at what's inside."

Two hundred cylinders packed snugly in a stout container, the whole making a compact but heavy load.

"They belong to my stolen cargo," he explained. "Think of them as firing pins."

"For the weapons?"

"They were packed separately for obvious reasons. Without them the cargo is nothing but rubbish. Without the cargo these are nothing but scrap. That's why I'm carrying them. They'll be useful when I finally get to where we're going — if I ever do."

"You doubt me?"

He looked at the open satchel.

"I was feeling lonely," she said. "I came to see if you'd retired then I saw the satchel and wanted to find out what you were carrying. You can't blame me for that. You've got all the money and without you I'm helpless. I was curious and afraid. Earl! You must believe me!"

He said, dryly, "You should have locked the door."

"I tried. The lock doesn't work." She stared her defiance. "All right. So you caught me. I lied. I knew you wouldn't be in the cabin. You came back too soon. But I needed to know."

"Because you don't like operating in the dark?"

"Yes."

"That makes two of us. Exactly where are we headed?"

"I told you."

"You gave me a name. This time I want the truth." As she hesitated, he said, "We've left Arpagus so you're safe. I can't stop you running, but remember I've all the money. I also have what makes the cargo you stole worth more than junk. You could leave me and get by, but without these components the weapons are useless. How will they welcome you when you get back home?"

"Not with open arms," she admitted. "Damn you, Earl! Do you always win?"

"Where are we heading?"

"Kaldar."

"In the Lonagar Drift?"

"The Drift, yes. How did you know?" She relaxed as he told her. "Rumor — there are a dozen of them. Think nothing of it. Anyway it takes a special kind of skill to navigate through the Drift. Those who have it work for us."

And those who didn't stood little chance of hiring out their skills. No one would risk a vessel without good reason. No group would operate unless there was profit to be won. Zehava had been overly cautious. The raiders could have shouted out the name and location of their home world for all to hear and it wouldn't have changed a thing. The man he had hoped to question had died for nothing.

Dumarest turned on the cot, restless, unable to sleep. Zehava had acted as he had expected and was now in her cabin, curiosity satisfied, confident he trusted her. He had changed the combination on the lock so she would have no chance to steal the contents of the satchel. The money was in his belt. She could run but what would she gain? What else could she do but take him to her home world?

To Kaldar, the cargo, the chance she had offered. The ship which would carry him home.

To the world he had left long ago when a boy, stowing away on a strange vessel, hiding until inevitably discovered. The captain had been kind, instead of evicting him into the void he had allowed Dumarest to work his passage. Carrying him deep towards the center of the Galaxy where stars were thick and Earth had become nothing but a legend, a world of myth and dazzling promise.

One he had searched to find. Gathering hints, clues, scraps of information from a host of sources until he had found the essential coordinates engraved on stone in gleaming symbols of precious metals in a temple now nothing but dust.

The golden figures of Earth!

He turned again on the cot, drifting into a world filled with fire and searing brilliance and sleeting death. One on which the figures glowed with livid configurations as if incised on his brain. The secret he had searched so hard to find.

A companion to one he had been given by a woman he would never forget.

Kalin with hair of flame who had more than saved his life. Gone now as so many others were gone, victims to the relentless pursuit of those who wore the scarlet robe. The Cyclan which had hunted him from world to world. Which would still hunt him unless remaining convinced he was dead.

"Earl?" Zehava was at the door, wearing a thin robe, eyes widening as he rose to face her, knife in hand, his body naked

but for shorts. "Earl, something's wrong, the noise —"

It came from down the passage, a low, snarling growl as if a predator was worrying a kill. Romar stepped from his cabin as they moved towards it.

"It's nothing to worry about," he said. "Just someone enjoying an analogue.

Dumarest remembered the man in the salon. "Anything dangerous?"

"No. I don't carry anything big or vicious and I wouldn't sell them on a ship if I did. Don't let the noise bother you. He'll be all right. After it's over he'll just fall asleep."

Zehava shook her head as she followed Dumarest back into his cabin.

"The things people do. Taking dope to pretend they are beasts. Smelling the things they do, tasting, feeling, acting as if they are no longer human. Have you ever taken an analogue, Earl?"

"Have you?"

"We don't need them on Kaldar. Life's exciting enough as it is." She stepped closer to him, eyes bright with invitation. "You'll find that out, darling. You won't need chemical diversions. Not while you have me."

"Is that a part of our deal?"

She smiled, not answering, moving even closer and he could smell her perfume and feel the radiated warmth of her body. A woman fighting with her own weapons as he had with his. Lifting a hand she touched his chest, ran her fingers over the scars marring the hard, muscular surface.

"Knives, Earl. On Kaldar we know about scars. Knives made these. In the arena. These are the signs of your apprenticeship. You're a fighter and you have to be a good one. How many have

you killed?" She smiled as he made no answer. "You're not a braggart. Good, I like that, but on Kaldar it'll do no harm to let them know of your prowess.

Her hand rose to circle his neck, was joined by the other to seal him in a tender prison. Rising to her full height she kissed him on the lips her own softly firm, warmly moist, parted with mounting desire.

"Darling!" Her voice held an urgent huskiness. "Earl, my darling. Earl!"

She was naked beneath the robe, her flesh curved in a pattern of feminine perfection, glowing with passionate heat. He responded to it, closing his hands on her yielding flesh, lifting her toward the cot, joining her in naked abandon.

"Earl, my darling! My wonderful darling!"

A cry which masked a demand which he met to be engulfed and drained as he drained in turn.

Satiated they rested, locked in a close embrace while, down the passage, a man thinking himself to be a beast, writhed at collected scents of lust and slaked desire and howled mournfully at an imaginary moon.

Chapter Four

From his office Magnate Chen Mernaya had a clear view of the warehouse and the towers on the far side of the field. A sight which brought little comfort — repairs were taking too long and the towers still lacked armament. The warehouse was in better shape, but traces of the raid remained despite the constant labor of a host of workers.

"They're too slow." Julian joined him at the window. "I've tried to speed them up but nothing seems to work." He added, "Cyber Hugas has agreed to an audience."

A relief; those who wore the scarlet robe did not volunteer

their services, but his unexpected presence gave an opportunity to gain the help of the Cyclan and Mernaya was eager to take it.

To the secretary he said, "Have you discovered what he's doing here?"

"I understand a minor fault in his vessel needs repair. No help has been asked of our facilities and his aides have been out and about asking questions."

"About what?"

"The raid. The damage. Ship movements. Other things." Julian moved from the window. "Maybe he'll tell you why he's so curious."

Mernaya doubted it and he had a more important problem needing an answer. One he voiced when, after being ushered into the room at the hotel used by the cyber as an office, he took his seat before the desk.

Hugas said, "You realize that until a formal contract has been established between those who govern this world and the Cyclan I can give you no assistance."

"I am the Magnate. A contract will be agreed. It is just that, as you are here and the problem is urgent, I had hoped to minimize delay."

A laudable desire for efficiency or a betrayal of desperation? To the cyber there was no doubt as to the answer. No doubt either as to the underlying cause of the problem afflicting Arpagus. The system of justice practiced on the planet was bleeding the economy dry. A fact the magnate found hard to accept.

"Nonsense!" Mernaya reared to his feet, fighting to control his anger, the desire to strike the skull-like face before him. An act tantamount to suicide. "What would you have me do with malefactors? I asked for help, cyber, not a moral judgement!"

"Compose yourself, my lord." Huga's voice remained an even

modulation devoid of all irritant factors. "I advise, nothing more. My duties lie in offering you the logical outcome of any proposed course of action. To help you arrive at a decision by presenting you with the probable result of any sequence of events."

A living machine with a computer for a brain. One able to take a handful of facts and from them to extrapolate a hundred more. To use what was to predict what would be. To give advice which would lead to power and riches. The lure and power of the Cyclan. Who would willingly relinquish the source of such advantage?

The thin end of the wedge which would gain the organization yet another world.

Mernaya slumped back into his chair, sweat gleaming on his lined face, his domed and balding skull. "I apologize." His hands made vague gestures. "I am overwrought. What do you advise should be done?"

"Get rid of the malefactors."

"Sell them? We do. Only the debtors are retained to provide needed workers. They are essential to our economy."

"On the contrary, my lord. The workers you gain are an expense to maintain. They have no incentive to work, no reason to cooperate and they have no buying power. Because they provide a source of apparently cheap labor others are prevented from gaining employment and are forced into debt in order to survive. Debt they cannot pay so, in turn, they wear the collar. It is a problem which can only get worse. The prediction is in the order of eighty-nine percent that, unless changes are made, Arpagus will be bankrupt within two generations."

Odds too high for comfort. "What can be done, cyber?"

Advise me."

"If and when the contract is agreed by the Cyclan your problems will receive immediate attention," assured Hugas. "Until then, my lord, consider what I have said."

An acolyte ushered Mernaya from the office, another entering to set a list of data on the polished surface. Facts and figures from a host of sources, correlated, integrated as to time and place. Details which firmed the final pattern and presented a stunning conclusion.

Dumarest was alive!

Hugas had traveled in a ship which gave no outward hint of the incredible velocity it could obtain. Yet, fast as it was, the prediction had been ninety-three percent that he would arrive too late. One which gave no glow of mental pleasure when confirmed. A small thing could have made such a difference. An accident, a sickness, an argument, normal greed — anything which could have caused delay.

To have enabled Ryon and Central Intelligence to have eliminated an incredibly remote possibility.

That a man, caught in the searing heat and fury of an atomic explosion could, somehow, have managed to survive.

The probability that Dumarest had died in the Temple of Cerevox on Raniang was ninety-nine point nine percent. Practical certainty, but the unknown factor had always to be taken into account. Nothing could be taken as inevitable.

Central Intelligence had been directed to give prominence to any item which could have the remotest bearing on Dumarest. He was known to carry a knife and he knew how to use it. A man had died because of a thrown knife. A probable coincidence but one which had to be investigated. A question to be answered — had Dumarest thrown the knife or was he dead as had been assumed?

Hugas had no doubt as to the answer. Dumarest, alive, had been on Arpagus. He had done certain things and had left on a certain vessel accompanied by a certain person. Sufficient facts to enable any cyber to predict the logical sequence of events.

To the acolyte who answered his summons he said, "Total seal."

A small room leading from the office held a bed, some soft furnishings, a few ornaments all of which Hugas ignored. Lying supine on the bed he touched the thick bracelet locked around his left wrist. Invisible forces flowed from the mechanism to create a barrier no prying instrument could penetrate.

Closing his eyes he concentrated on the Samatchazi formulae. His heartbeat slowed, his breathing became shallow, his temperature fell as if he had been asleep. Gradually he lost all sense of feeling, all contact with the physical world. Silence engulfed him; had he opened his eyes he would have been blind. He rested, detached from external reality, only his individual awareness remaining alive. Only then did the grafted Homochon elements within his brain stir from quiescence to become truly active.

Hugas entered another dimension.

A place of shifting banners of rippling luminescence laced with crystalline shapes which shifted in continual motion to form new and enticing configurations. He sensed rifts of unimaginable depths, each pulsing with the nexus of galaxies yet to be formed. Colors were alive with brooding intelligences developing themes illustrated by haloes of drifting, writhing, brilliance. A dimension of which he was a part, sharing and giving in a universal gestalt.

Deep in the heart of that shifting luminescence was Central Intelligence, the nexus of the tremendous power which spanned the galaxy. It touched his mental presence and melded, absorbing and transmitting knowledge with equal ease. Mental communication so fast as to be instantaneous.

The rest was a matter of mental intoxication.

Always, after rapport, when the grafted Homochon elements sank back into quiescence and the machinery of the body reassociated itself with the mind, came this period of supreme revelation. Hugas drifted in a limbo alive with alien memories and unexperienced situations, eerie thought and peculiar physical sensations. Thoughts like scratching whispers on the surface of his mind tantalizing with concepts of engrossing

magnitude and unsuspected complexity. Scraps of overflow from other minds, the residue of powerful intelligences caught and transmitted by the massed brains of Central Intelligence.

The entity which, once having the secret carried by Dumarest, would have gained potential immortality.

Pangritz was a harsh world. Mines to the north fumed acrid dust into the sky and smelters added plumes of roiling smoke. Smuts drifted in the air and clouds of swirling dust hung low beneath a leaden sky. A world sacrificed to the gaining of wealth, disposable, a planet to be gutted, ravaged, left as a desert. One close to the Lonagar Drift.

"Kaldar?" The handler shook his head. "No. We don't go there. It's too deep in the Drift. We wouldn't risk it even on full charter. The best I can offer is passage to Weinzt. You could get a ship to Kaldar from there. We leave in three hours. The woman can have a high passage but you'll have to ride Low."

Locked in a casket meant for the transportation of beasts, doped, frozen, ninety-percent dead. Risking the fifteen percent death rate for the sake of cheap travel.

Dumarest said, "I've a better idea. I'll ride High and work the table while the woman goes into the box. A deal?"

The handler stared thoughtfully at Zehava. She had changed the metallic dress for garments similar to those worn by Dumarest. A high-collared, long-sleeved tunic reaching to mid-thigh with matching pants thrust into knee-high boots. Clothing easy to clean and refurbish, popular among travelers for the protection of its mesh, the thermal defense against extremes of temperature. Hers was maroon against his grey, a gilded belt emphasizing her waist, her femininity.

"All right," said the handler. "Be there an hour before leaving. You can pay me now if you like."

"No," said Zehava quickly. "But we'll be back. Is Weinzt an easy world?"

"You'll get on fine," assured the handler. "Trust me."

Another ship. Another handler, this one more honest.

"You're on the right world if you want to get to Kaldar but we can't take you. Try the office," he jerked his head to where a low building stood beside the fence.

Inside a Hausi reached for a pad covered with jottings. "Kaldar? A ship leaves tomorrow, another next week. The one tomorrow is a private charter but I might get you passage —traders are always eager to cut costs. It'll be extra, but any passage will cost you double normal rates. The Drift," he explained. "Good navigators don't come cheap."

An official barred their path as they headed towards the gate, gesturing to where a ship was unloading. A file of men stumbled down the ramp urged by guards bearing short rods which they handled like swords. The men had cropped hair, wore rough coveralls and each had a collar embracing his neck. Criminals sold to work in the mines. None of them would last more than a year.

"Why do they stand it, Earl?" Zehava shook her head as she watched the shambling line. "They have no hope and nothing to lose. They are as good as dead so why don't they do something about it? At least they could kill a guard."

He said, dryly, "Have you ever worn a collar?"

"No, of course not, but what difference does it make? A collar doesn't make you a slave."

Not unless the love of life was too strong. The fear of pain. The rods could activate a mechanism in the locked band and turn every nerve into liquid fire. If unlawfully opened the collar would explode and decapitate the wearer.

Things they both knew. An experience he wanted to forget.

"The hell with it," she said. "Let's get a drink."

A tavern stood beyond the gate, the facade ornamented with bizarre depictions of an ancient ritual. The door gave on a wide chamber flanked with a bar and secluded alcoves all warmed by yellow light from glowing tubes. On a dais a girl writhed to the accompaniment of cymbals and a wailing pipe.

As Dumarest led the way to an empty alcove the music increased in tempo, the writhing become more abandoned until, with shocking abruptness, the girl froze as the music ended.

A moment of silence then coins showered at her feet as the audience yelled appreciation.

"A fool," said Zehava.

"Could you do better?"

"I was thinking of the first handler. Does he really think we'll be back?" She sipped at the wine a serving girl had brought and pursed her lips at its tartness. "He lied about getting to Kaldar from Weintz. He lied about the planet, too. It's as bad as they come. Scum like that should be taken care of."

And would be, but not now and not by him. Dumarest looked around, noting some new arrivals, a trio sharing a bowl of stew, a man frowning over a handful of coins. On the dais a juggler had replaced the dancer, filling the air with glittering balls which formed a fountain of brilliance.

Zehava said, "Why did you try to book passage on that ship? There was no need. We're as good as home."

"So you told me."

"But you had to check, is that it?" She smiled, not waiting for an answer. "You're too suspicious, Earl. At times I feel you still don't trust me." Her hand fell to the satchel at his side, moved to rest on his thigh. "You will once we get to Kaldar."

Dumarest said, dryly, "We have a problem. You heard what the Hausi said. As things stand we haven't money for passage."

"You can get the money," she said. "We both know how."

By entering the arena, facing naked steel, risking his life for a fee. Pretending to be clumsy and slow and easy prey while she moved among the crowd using what money they had to make bets at favorable odds. Relying on his skill, his luck, her honesty.

Or to steal, to kill, to take from those who had. The way of the Kaldari. The way he must go if he hoped to be accepted.

"Don't worry about it, Earl." Her hand closed with warm intimacy on his thigh. "I don't want to take the chance of you getting killed and there's no need for either of us to risk wearing a collar. The traders here know me and will extend credit. It will pay them to help and they know it. I only have to get in touch."

She moved to where a row of communicators stood beneath a faded sign. A woman with a odd sense of humor or one who had submitted him to a test. Or, perhaps, she was taking a small and belated revenge — she had known all along that the traders would be willing to help her. But if she had waited? Forced him to a decision?

Dumarest looked at the juggler, the balls rising to fall to rise again. Symbols of a life in which every hour could bring a change of fortune.

Hollman Brasch raised his glass and said, "A toast to unexpected but more than welcome friends. Zehava. Earl. I salute you!"

He was smooth, bland, a man of middle years to whom the gaining of profit was a personal religion. Others at the table shared his creed; men who priced everything they saw, women who searched for every advantage. Traders with a vested interest in Kaldar and what the world could offer.

Rhia Styne, tall, dark, cosmetics masking her age, the hard set of her features, said, "I must say I envy you, Zehava. To have traveled so far with such a charming companion. I'd love to hear of your adventures."

"Is that what you call them, Rhia?" Marcia Tomlin, blonde, as old and as hard, cracked a brittle smile. "From the look of Zehava, I'd call them beauty treatments. She positively glows."

"Thank you, Marcia. You too, Rhia. You are both most kind." Zehava forced a smile. "But extra thanks to you, Hollman, the dinner was superb. On Kaldar I will more than repay your hospitality."

"I anticipate the pleasure, my dear, but it will have to be deferred. Personal matters detain me."

"I regret to hear it. The ship?"

"Will leave as planned. Sung will be on it, Molo, Zinny Montiel." His hand made gestures at those seated at the table. "Rhia, too, I understand."

"Not this trip," she corrected. "I yielded my place. Had I known who else was traveling I would have resisted temptation." She looked meaningfully at Dumarest. "I too could use a few adventures."

"I'd advise against it," warned Marcia. "It isn't wise to steal from the Kaldari."

"Steal?" Rhia smiled and shook her head. "I would only intend to borrow."

Fuming, Zehava rose and said, acidly, "It is just as well that you aren't coming to Kaldar." To her host she added, "My apologies, Hollman, but your excellent food and wine have induced a sudden fatigue. I wish to retire. Earl?"

"I'm not as tired as you, Zehava." He selected a nut from a dish, cracked it, ate the kernel. "I'm sure someone will show me to my room."

"A wise man," chuckled Molo Blain as she swept from the chamber. "One who knows that to be too soft with a woman is to lose her respect. Especially a woman like Zehava Postel. The Kaldari have no time for weakness."

"What is your interest in her?" Marcia leaned closer over the table to give him a glimpse of her body, the scent of her perfume. "Your real interest."

"Business."

"Of course." Brasch sipped at his wine. "What better motive? You met by simple accident? Traveled together for mutual convenience?"

Things Zehava had explained and which Dumarest repeated with elaborations. The story they had concocted which made no mention of Arpagus and hinted at mutual attraction as well as mutual convenience.

"How romantic." Rhia sighed her envy. "You are fortunate, Earl. She could give you the chance to become a very rich man. Of course, to make the most of the opportunity, you will need the right kind of friends."

"Which I hope I have found." Dumarest reached for another nut. "I am glad we have things in common and can be of mutual assistance. We must discuss details during our passage."

He sensed the release of tension at the hoped-for response. The implied response of further discussion and the arranging of details. One close to an important member of the Kaldari would have powerful influence and could increase already bloated profits.

Montiel said, "I would say that you are a much traveled man, Earl. Certainly I would take you to be an authority on the diversity of Man. It happens to be a hobby of mine and I wonder if—"

"Zinny! Please!" The blonde lifted her hands in protest. "Not again. Not now. You'll bore Earl to death." To Dumarest she explained, "He's got this crazy idea that all men could have originated on one planet. It's obviously impossible. The very divergence of types is evidence against it; black, brown, yellow, white — all from one world? Impossible!"

"The ability to interbreed proves all belong to a common species," snapped Montiel. "But you object too quickly, Marcia. I was going to ask Earl if he has heard of the Lugange theory dealing with the composition of cultural structures. It is based on the assumption that there are five basic types of human; rulers, creators, warriors, builders, followers. Rulers must lead," he explained. "Always they must be at the top; the ones who make the decisions, give the orders, command obedience. Creators are innovators, artists, thinkers, those who plan. Warriors fight against the forces which always threaten us; death, disease, famine, drought, the environment itself. Builders construct. They are the craftsmen, the artisans, the engineers who turn dreams and plans into concrete reality. Followers serve. They lack imagination and are reluctant to change. They cling to old ways, old traditions, and resist those who threaten their established way of life."

"The majority," said Brasch. "But essential, surely?"

"Yes," agreed Montiel. "They ensure a degree of stability but the ratio has to be within certain limits. Too high and you get a static society. Too low and there is no buffer against chaos. Too many changes made too quickly can destroy the social fabric."

"Warriors would take care of that," said Marcia. "Soldiers."

"Soldiers are followers. They take orders and obey without question. A warrior will think for himself and choose his enemy. A doctor is a warrior. A nurse. A farmer. A destroyer of predators. Naturally there is overlap — a composer is a creator but not all musicians can compose. Those who simply play to order take on the attributes of a follower. The difference in the various categories is the inherent ability and drive which dictates the use of individual thought and action."

"What are we, Zinny?" Rhia smiled at Dumarest. "I know what Earl is, a warrior if there ever was one, but the rest of us? We like to give orders. We like to build fortunes and create new markets. We fight to keep what we have. What does that make us?"

"On the edge of becoming boring." Hollman Brasch smiled at

the company. "Let us leave this mess and enjoy wine in another room. Earl, when you wish, a servant will guide you to your chamber."

Like the rest of the house it was a place of luxury with scented water in the shower and hot air serving as towels. As he moved towards the bed, a robe covering his nakedness, Zehava entered the room.

She too wore a robe, a thin, clinging swathe of fabric which held subdued glitters and subtle tones. The satchel she carried pulled at her shoulder and made a heavy sound as she put it down.

"Here. I thought you'd be worried about it."

An excuse to visit his room — the food and wine had induced more than fatigue.

"It was safe where it was." He added, "I though you'd be asleep by now."

"I was restless. Thinking. What did you all talk about after I left?"

"Montiel did most of the talking. He wanted to expound a theory he has —"

"I've heard it. He thinks all men originated on one world. Some mythical planet. He gets boring. He should find something new."

"He has. The Lugange theory." He told her about it as she moved restlessly about the room. "If there's anything in it Kaldar must have a high ratio of warriors."

"So?"

"Who does all the work?"

A question she ignored. "What else was said?"

"Nothing of importance. That's the reason I stayed behind,"

he explained. "I wanted to let them know I was a free agent and could be trusted. You must have known that." A sop to her pride, her offended dignity. "But they were wary. Just putting out hints and feelers. They're saving the real business until we're on our way."

"I can guess what it will be." Her lips thinned in anger. "I've no illusions as to what these people are. Don't think of conspiring with them against me, Earl. It wouldn't be wise."

The warning of a jealous woman and a reminder of unfinished business. He glanced at the satchel. Once on Kaldar she would be among her own kind and it was better for her to learn the truth before appearing a fool. But not yet. Not until they were safely on their way.

Chapter Five

Some fool had torched Gannitown and thick plumes of black smoke rose to mar the lavender clarity of the morning sky. Watching them Brak scowled; the town had no real value and its inhabitants little more, but without the ganni the irrigation canals would choke, the crops fall, dirt mount in the streets of the city. The old problems of labor-shortage now aggravated by some hothead out on a spree.

"Mel Jumay," said a voice behind him. "Yesterday he reached his majority and decided to celebrate."

Nadine who seemed at times to have the ability to read minds, but Brak knew there was nothing mysterious about her comment. Only a fool would have failed to recognize his irritation and the Jumays were notorious for undisciplined behavior.

"Three sections destroyed," she continued. "A dozen ganni burned and twice as many with superficial injuries. Cuts," she explained. "Singes. Most were asleep when it happened. The cost —"

"Will be met."

"By Mel Jumay?"

A boy, barely a man, with nothing behind him but his family's reputation. Brak smarted at the cynicism in her voice, the tone which hinted at his own weakness. One he rejected with brusque anger.

"The damage will be repaired and the expense borne by the boy and his family. Have no doubt as to that."

She made no comment and he was grateful. If nothing else the girl had a sharp wit and an acid tongue. Turning he looked at her, seeing the ghost which rested beneath the contours of her face. A harder, older visage, but one with the same dark enigma of the eyes, the generous curve of the lips, the strong jaw. The ebon mane of her hair was longer, the skin paler, but never could there be any doubt that she was his brother's child.

"Uncle?"

"Nothing." He turned from her stare, the question in her eyes. The memories were too strong and he brushed them aside as he limped to the far edge of the tower. "Why don't you go down?"

"Later."

He could have insisted and she would have obeyed, but what would have been gained by the exercise of his authority? Instead he leaned against the parapet, looking over the city, seeing other towers, the buildings which set them apart, the narrow streets which wound like serpents between high and featureless walls.

A complex of defensive structures enclosing stores, bunkers, arsenals buried deep. In the center lay the great square ringed with shops and sheds. Warehouse sprawled to the north now mostly empty. To the south lay the factories, too small and too idle. Instead of the flood of raw materials to be processed there was only a trickle of scrap, broken and obsolete parts, discarded rubbish. It had been too easy to acquire the new to replace the old. Too simple to take instead of making. Now the artisans capable of operating the machines were too few and far too expensive.

"A mistake," said Nadine. "One of timing."

Reading his mind again but his stance if not his face must have mirrored his thoughts. The factories had been established before she had been born. Greg had insisted on funds being set aside for the project. Strong in the Council his words carried weight, but interest had waned when he died.

Died. Greg dead. Why hadn't it been him?

A question asked countless times and still he had to find the answer. Instead he had only the scene repeated over and over in his mind as if it were a loop of film. The raid, the fires and smoke and stench of burning. The shouts and blasts of guns and the adrenalin running high. A neat, well-planned raid designed to achieve the maximum of loot and the minimum of damage.

It happened when the raid was over and the recall had sounded. A man, gun in hand, rising from a mound of rubble. Opening fire without hesitation. Bullets holding explosives in shaped charges which tore through armour as if it had been paper. The first had slammed into his hip. Greg had taken the rest, flinging himself as a barrier before him. A time of noise and confusion, the gun jerking in his hand, the stranger falling back a bloody pulp above his shoulders, then pain as he fought the crippling effect of his wound. Anger as his body refused to lift the deadweight of his brother. Near-dementia as others had torn him from the body and carried him into the waiting ship.

He had lived — that had been the hard part. Medical science had replaced his hip and healed his flesh but it could do nothing to assuage his grief. Nothing for the wife of his brother who had bequeathed him her daughter before following her husband into death. An act of bravery, but those of Kaldar had never wanted for courage. Yet had she guessed her ghost would haunt him each time he looked into the girl's face?

He doubted it; Marta had never been intentionally unkind. Not even when rejecting his love when, too late, he had begged her to become his wife. Greg had won her heart. Why had the wrong man died?

"Uncle, there are things to be done." Nadine appeared at his side. If she knew of the agony which tore at his heart it remained her secret. "Shall we go down?"

Below waited tedium. A host of tiresome details, decisions, judgments, unpleasant facts. Here, on the summit of the tower, he was free to dream and remember and, if some of the memories gave rise to pain, yet they still held the life he had once known.

"I won't go down without you."

He flared with sudden anger. "You talk as if I was stupid! Senile! A dotard! If I want to stay up here I will!"

"Of course."

"It gives me time to think. To plan." He saw her face, the set of her mouth, her chin. Hardness which matched and eliminated the thirty-year old ghost. She was reading him again and his anger vanished as quickly as it had come. What use to deny the truth? "Child, you should be roving or wed."

"Have I no choice?" Amusement lightened her features. "Does your assistant have no standing?"

Too much and they both knew it. As the Council knew it and others who fretted at her summations and proposals. Married she would have the protection of a husband and his family. Now she had only herself and the fading glory of his name.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Things will work out." Pausing, she added, "Mel Jumay was more than careless during his celebration. He fired the church."

When an adolescent Brother Weyer had seen a man flogged almost to death for having stolen food. A common crime and a common punishment on Delt where starvation was a constant threat. The monk who had gone to his aid had been old, stooped, gaunt with privation. Unable to lift the moaning wretch he had appealed for help. Shamed, Weyer had supplied it, carrying the torn body to the flimsy shelter of the church.

Fifty years ago now and each had been spent following the path he had chosen to take. First at the great seminary on Hope where he had been taught, trained and tested. Then to be one of the great band of monks carrying help and hope to all who were in need. To teach the basic creed of the Church to all so that even the strong, the rich and powerful, when looked at those less fortunate than themselves would say, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'

When all lived by that creed the millennium would have arrived.

"Brother!" Nealon came towards him, his face hard against the thrown-back cowl. Ash coated his robe and his feet, naked in their sandals, were thick with grime. "Two more ganni have just died. That makes five to date. Nothing seems to help. If only the city would send us doctors—"

"They would be just as helpless." Nealon had much to learn. "They are dying because they have lost the will to live. I have seen it often before. You are wrong to blame yourself."

"Who else?"

"Did you cause the fire? Spread it? Burn the victims?" Weyer masked his impatience. "You are not a judge to determine guilt or to apportion blame. You are a monk of the Church of Universal Brotherhood. Your task is to care for the afflicted. We can best do that in the infirmary."

It was a crude shelter built of scraps which shielded the interior from the sun and the infrequent rains. The air held the taint of sickness. On cots the ganni lay like creatures already dead. Weyer halted besides one, looking down at the round, blank face, the staring, empty eyes. A creature with the size and shape of a man, the features of an idiotic child, the hands of a laborer. The product of a world circling a violent sun, brought to Kaldar to tend and serve, to work at tasks too demeaning for those who ruled.

"Why do they die?" Nealon touched the fine down which covered the ganni like fur. "I know what you said but I don't

understand. They are not that badly injured. A man would easily survive. Why don't they?"

Weyer shrugged. The universe was full of questions and, as fast as answers were found, more questions rose to make fresh demands. It was enough to know that, if hurt too badly or shocked too deeply, the ganni died. The ultimate defiance of a slave.

When he finally left the infirmary a thin wind from the distant hills was dispersing the last of the smoke and Weyer breathed gratefully at the air. The city had sent help. Overseers directed ganni to clear the charred wreckage. They were slow to obey. From a group gathered to one side rose a keening dirge spreading as others joined in. A death chant the monk had heard before and now, as then, it caused a sudden depression. A mood he fought as he made his way to where Mukerjee and the other two monks were hard at work.

Already they had cleared the site and were assembling struts which would be covered with plastic to form a small, enclosed chamber. A tent barely large enough to hold a monk and a suppliant, but it would serve.

"Brother?" Mukerjee straightened, easing his back with broad, scarred hands. Fire had seared one cheek leaving an ugly patch on his ebon skin. His robe was singed and half his hair had vanished. "How are the sick?"

"As well as can be expected. Brother Nealon is taking care of them. Now I want you to report to him so that he can take care of you." Weyer's tone precluded all argument. "He will give you an intravenous injection of saline and glucose together with antibiotics, a sedative and nutrients. You will need them under slowtime."

Mukerjee frowned, the drug was expensive. Weyer spoke before he could object.

"One hour." His smile softened the rebuke. "Pride is a sin, brother. Manga, see that he doesn't fall into it."

The old monk led Mukerjee to the infirmary, his step firmer than the younger man's. An hour of slowtime would cure that, the drug accelerating his metabolism to give him the equivalent of two days rest and normal recuperation. Time for the danger of shock and infection to be eliminated and to ease the pain of his burns.

Prinsloo joined him as Weyer turned to the carefully wrapped bundle lying to one side. It contained the benediction light which Mukerjee had saved at the cost of his injuries.

As he examined it the young monk said, "It isn't damaged. I've checked."

Good news; the instrument provided communication with the great seminaries of Hope and Pace as well as a more obvious function. Beneath the swirling light it projected in hypnotic splendor suppliants would kneel, confess their sins and suffer subjective penance. They would gain comfort and absolution — and be conditioned never to kill. The wafer of concentrate which was the bread of forgiveness was a fair exchange.

"Brother?" Prinsloo looked at his superior. "Have you decided who should be the first to serve once the church is open?"

Himself, he hoped, and Weyer could understand his yearning. To build held its own satisfaction. To ease the torment of crippled minds was something else. To watch as faces became smooth as guilt was erased and inner harmony established was reward enough for the ceaseless dedication demanded of all who wore the brown, homespun robe.

Gently he said, "First, all must be made ready. Then, brother, who would you select to be the first to serve?"

Prinsloo was worthy of his calling. Without hesitation he said, "Mukerjee has earned the right."

The right, the duty and the chance to sit and rest while his body healed.

Vargas was annoyed. Nadine heard the deep rumble of his

voice as she entered the workshop, a blast of anger which sent echoes from the roof.

"Fool! You've exceeded the tolerances by three hundred percent! Do it again and I'll have you flogged!"

He came into sight as she passed the bulk of a machine, big, his apron soiled, arms and torso bared. The worker standing before him was young, banded with the collar of his servitude. He sidled away as Nadine approached, cradling a piece of equipment in his arms.

As he vanished from sight she said, "I assume you've checked the instruments he's using. It's possible they could be at fault."

"What?" Vargas snarled, still dominated by his anger. "Damn it, woman, I know my business. If the fault is his he goes, but first he'll be flogged and branded."

"That will lower his value."

"As an engineer he won't have any." His tone warned her not to argue further. "Now, aside from telling me how to run my workshops, what do you want?" He pursed his lips as she told him. "Materials for construction? Sure, I'll have them delivered. Council charge?"

"Jumay's." She added, quickly, "Mel Jumay is responsible for the damage. It includes that done to the church. He and his family should pay for it."

"Do they agree?" Vargas frowned as she made no answer. "They won't like it. Suke is touchy about such things and he has no time for the monks. I can't blame him. Always whining, begging, trying to change things. They should be kicked off the planet. They should never have been allowed to come here. They don't belong."

An opinion she had heard before. Patiently she said, "You could be right, but see the materials are delivered as soon as you can. If we don't need the monks we need the ganni."

Some worked among the machines, sweeping, dusting, stepping aside as she left the workshop busy with her thoughts. Had the young engineer been genuinely careless or had he attempted sabotage? Producing a component holding a subtle flaw which would cause it to fail at a critical time. It was possible; none forced to wear the collar could be expected to love those who had put it there, but how to prove it? A man daring enough to commit sabotage would have the intelligence to alter the calibration of his instruments so as to appear innocent.

"Nadine!" A young man came running towards her. Nigel Myer, face flushed from recent exertion, sweat running over his naked torso. Behind him, on the exercise ground, other young men struck and weaved in simulated combat. "A moment. Please!"

She waited, knowing what he wanted, pretending ignorance as he fought to regain his breath.

"I heard what happened in the town. I'm sorry."

"Did you have a part in it?"

"I was with the crowd," he admitted, "but I had nothing to do with the fire. If there is anything I can do to help?" He paused, waiting for the expected rejection of the empty offer. One not meant and made as the part of a calculated design. "Nadine?"

She said, knowing his answer. "You could help with the construction."

"I'd like to but I can't. I'm hoping to get a place with Toibin," he explained. "I'll have to be in top condition when he makes his decision. It's important that I make his crew. I need action!"

And wanted her to speak for him. She could sympathize with his need. A man without reputation had little chance of selection and needed all the help he could get. Without it he would be lucky to be picked at all even if willing to take a minimum share or no share at all in order to gain experience.

"I'll do what I can," she promised. "But don't build up your

hopes. Your best chance is to catch Toibin's eye. Draw his attention in some way. Do something spectacular." She anticipated his question. "I can't tell you what, Leese Toibin has his own standards, but I can tell you this — he won't look kindly on a man who needs a woman to speak for him."

Something he should have known and the fact that he had appealed to her for help showed him to have more ambition than capability. Kaldar had too many of his type.

Her office was cool, shadowed, a haven to which she clung. Later, when darkness came, the air would lose its heat and winds blow from the hills carrying the scent of chard, kren, emulish, the subtle magic of peedham. Stars would blaze in the fading lavender of the sky and all would be at peace.

Odd thoughts and disturbing. She was far from senile and only the old dreamed of endless tranquillity. Irritably she shook her head, reaching for papers, halting the motion as the communicator glowed to life.

"Nadine?" It was Jessie from communication. She continued as Nadine acknowledged. "Messages from Chapman and Lochner. Chapman wants to know if a final assessment has been made of the peedham he sent in. Lochner said to call him. He's having trouble of some kind."

"Serious?"

"Isn't it always?"

"Always," admitted Nadine. To the man even a broken sprocket was tantamount to the end of creation. She forced herself to be patient. Jessie loved to play her little games. "Can you give me a clue?"

"I heard a rumor from someone who knows his engineer. My guess is that he wants Council backing in order to buy a new generator.

Nadine reached for the computer as the screen died. Lochner's ship had a record of unreliability. Too many minor

breakdowns leading to aborted raids and dissatisfied crews. He had coasted on past success, but now his credit was exhausted which meant he would have to make do with what he had and rely on the young and inexperienced to crew his vessel. Any loot he might gain was already spoken for and generators didn't come cheap.

A bad risk. He would appeal to the Council against her summation, but they were men of business. In the end Lochner would lose his ship, his standing and, if he chose to quarrel with the wrong man, his life.

New data replaced the old. Chapman was in a different category. He had taken up farming after taking a bad wound and grew peedham in hydroponic vats. His crops were uniformly good and his credit was high. The latest assessment would provide a rich bonus. One he might be interested in investing. It would do no harm to let him know of the opportunity presented by Lochner's situation. If interested they could make a deal. Lochner would have his new generator, Chapman a share in his vessel and the Council would not be involved.

She might even avoid making a new enemy.

Leaning back she looked at the charts decorating the walls, the portrait facing her. That of a man, hair shaped to form a dark helmet over the contours of his skull, the eyes deep-set, meshed with lines, the mouth, smiling now, holding a hard resolution. Her father. A man she had never known.

What would he have made of her?

Something she would never know. How to tell how she would have developed under his parental influence? How she would have grown had her mother not chosen to follow him into oblivion? Why had she done that? For love, they had told her, but how could she have been so selfish? Tradition, honor, custom, loyalty — what value did such things have when set against the needs of a helpless child?

She felt pain and looked to where her nails dug into her palms. They drove deeper as she watched, blood welling from the

small punctures, the sight feeding her impulse to destructive violence. To hurt! To destroy! To kill!

To smash the bars of her prison and to be free!

Chapter Six

There should have been castles, strongholds, towers flaunting banners filled with armed and armored men jealous of their pride. Products of a world devoted to the pursuit of adventure, battle, violence and sudden death. One governed by the worship of personal bravery, courage and respect. The stuff of romance Zehava had learned as a child. A dream which Kaldar had never fulfilled.

Pausing on the ramp Dumarest recognized a dead-end world. One of a type on which travelers feared to be stranded. A planet with few opportunities to earn money for food, shelter, a passage to freedom. One which held odd inconsistencies. The field was uneven, the buildings edging it dilapidated, the ships standing to one side rested in a litter of debris. Yet the guard pylons were thick and widely scattered. The lack of a fence was unusual but no surprise; raiders would have no patience with irksome restrictions.

A scatter of men stood on the road leading to town, mostly young, all wearing leather bright with protective metal, the plates shaped and gemmed to individual taste. Martial garb accentuated by the weapons belted to their waists. Loungers killing time, curious as to what the ship had carried. One stepped forward to bar his path.

"You a trader?"

"Of a kind." Dumarest was patient. The man was young, bored, certainly a fool, but the gun he wore made him dangerous. "Could you direct me to the hotel?"

"What are you carrying?"

"Personal baggage." Dumarest eased the strap of the satchel

and slipped it from his shoulder. "It's heavy and I'd appreciate a hand. Is it far to the hotel?"

"The Kaldari aren't servants," snapped the youngster. "What are you hiding?" He glanced at his companions as if to make certain he had an audience then, as Dumarest ignored the question, said, "There's something wrong here. That satchel looks too heavy. A genuine trader would have got a ganni to carry it. Or it could have been delivered to the warehouse. Open it up. I want to check what's inside."

Dumarest said, "You want to check it? Go ahead."

He stepped forward, the satchel swinging in his hand, flying free to thud on the dirt where the other had been standing. As he sprang aside, cursing, snatching at his gun, Dumarest closed the distance between them, the fingers of his left hand clamping on flesh, the weapon it held, pressing it deep into its ornate holster. His right hand rose between them to lock fingers on the other's throat, the tips of fingers and thumb digging into the tender places beneath the ears to rest on the carotid arteries. An action masked by their bodies from those watching.

One of them called, "Hey, Nigel, you getting set to dance?"

Another, more shrewd, said, "I think he's bitten off more than he can chew."

And was stuck with it. To struggle was to be rendered senseless, disarmed, left sprawled on the dirt. To back down would brand him a coward. The only real choice was to fight and, if he lost, at least it would be with honor.

Dumarest said, "We can end this. Just back away and leave me your gun."

"I can't. The shame —"

"You'd rather be dead?" His fingers tightened, applying pressure which, if increased, would cause unconsciousness and, if maintained, death. "Just give me your word. We break, then laugh and talk a little. You pickup the satchel and carry it to the

hotel."

A way out for the young man but he hesitated too long. Those watching, sensing something more serious than they had thought, moved closer, eager to settle the dispute. They would form a ring, insist on physical combat, watch the bloody outcome. Dumarest would have no choice but to kill.

"Earl!" Zehava broke the impasse. "What are you doing?" Her tone changed. "Nigel? What's going on?"

"Zehava!" Relief gusted from his throat as Dumarest lowered his hand. "We heard you were dead. How —"

"Never mind that now. I see you've met my friend. Earl, meet Nigel Myer. I knew his sister. Nigel, this is Earl Dumarest." Dryly, she added, "I'm sure you'll get along. Why don't you guide him to the hotel?"

It was large, clean, luxurious. The bath, made of striated marble, was ringed with ornate decoration and held him like a cupped hand. Relaxing in steaming water Dumarest closed his eyes and let the warm comfort ease him into a state of drifting introspection as he assessed what he had learned. Nigel had been eager to volunteer information in order to make amends. A young man who had tried to gain a cheap reputation and had almost lost his life. The hand at his throat, the face close to his own, had left him in no doubt as to that.

He would talk and to save his own reputation would enhance Dumarest's prowess. A beginning — on Kaldar a man made his mark or was held in small regard. A world of too many rulers and headed to a predictable end. Kings, princes, politicians, those who demanded taxes or tributes of any kind and by any name were parasites living on the effort of others. When their greed and numbers grew too large they would ruin the host which supported them.

"Earl!" Dumarest woke to a pounding at the door, Zehava fuming at her failure to open it. "Earl, let me in!"

"A moment!"

He rose from the water, taking his time drying and dressing himself. The bedroom was large as was the bed with its ornate decoration and richly embroidered cover. Tall windows gave a view of the plaza below and filled the chamber with mellow light. Zehava came to a halt before them.

"There was no need for you to have bolted the door. You're safe here."

"As I was when leaving the field?"

"Nigel's a fool." Irritably she shook her head. "Forget him. Pour me a drink."

She had brought a bottle with her and he opened it and poured lambent fluid into small glasses engraved with intricate decoration. Handing her one he lifted the other in the gesture of a toast.

"To luck, Zehava! All of it good!"

The pungent spirit filled his mouth with smoke and fire, turning into a sweet tartness as it slid down his throat to blossom into a flower of comfort as it reached his stomach.

"Peedham," she said, watching his reaction. "It's made from peedham. A herb which grows in the hills. You like it?"

"It's unusual." Dumarest took another sip, wondering why she had brought it, guessing at its probable effect. An aphrodisiac, perhaps, certainly a strong neural depressant. One which would erode caution, bring euphoria, and make the drinker less than wise. "Did you enjoy your reunion?"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you head for the ship. The one which raided Arpagus. I recognized it. Toibin's vessel. Nigel told me his name." He added, "He also told me about his sister."

"She died." Zehava helped herself to more from the bottle. "Eight years ago now. On a raid she shouldn't have touched. She

was my idol. I worshipped her. Loved her. Well, never mind, she's gone now." She emptied the glass at a swallow as if in salute to a tender ghost. Coughing, she dragged air into her lungs. "To hell with it. The past is dead. What made you tangle with Nigel, anyway?"

"He wanted to demonstrate how tough he is. To get himself known so as to gain a place with your friend. I promised to speak to you about it. Get you to use your influence."

"What influence?" She was bitter. "Lesse Toibin goes his own way and takes only the best. With his reputation he can pick and choose."

"So your visit was just a matter of business." Her glass was empty and Dumarest refilled it, watching as, more cautiously, she drank. "To talk over what happened and to get his explanation as to why he abandoned you. Was it a good one?"

"I didn't see him," she admitted. "He's visiting a friend in the hills. He'll be back after the auction. We came in with the last of the dealers," she explained. "After the viewing we'll get down to business and sell the loot."

"What about Toibin?"

"Damn Toibin. Why keep talking about him?"

"Everyone thinks he's a hero. He made a successful raid and only lost two people. One now that you're returned to take the blame."

"Blame?"

"You selected the cargo," reminded Dumarest. "You assessed its value. If it brings a small return you won't be popular. You, not Toibin, he's the kind of hero you people love. He's done nothing wrong. He only abandoned you. Snatched what was to hand and ran like a scared rat. He didn't even check on his own men. All he wanted was to save his own skin."

"You can't say that!"

"Why not?" Dumarest shrugged. "I was there. I saw it. He had time and enough to spare. He could have waited for you. He could have sent out a search party. He must have known you'd be close to the towers. He could have guessed that you might be hurt. Comrades are supposed to look after each other. Did he you? My guess he wanted to dump you. Even if we hadn't met I doubt if you would have reached the ship. Maybe he wanted to save your share. Or maybe he's just grown tired of you." A shrewd guess and he saw the sudden tightening of her jaw. "You see what I'm getting at?"

"I see what you're trying to do." Zehava lifted her glass then paused with it barely touching her lips. Over the rim she said, "You're smart, Earl. Maybe too damned smart. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm a fool."

"Like Toibin?" Dumarest met her eyes. "Or does he think you a coward? A woman who hasn't the guts to want revenge?"

Sunken in his chair Sung Pember looked half-asleep; an old man taking his rest, barely aware of what was going on around him. Casually he touched his nose.

"Five." Catching the signal the auctioneer voiced the bid. "I have five. Who offers six? I must ask you not to waste time. Who offers six?"

Reluctantly a man touched his ear.

The ring at work, bidding slow, bidding low and keeping down prices. Cameron had seen it too often before and fumed with inward rage at the prospect of seeing it again.

"Six. I have six. Who offers seven? The lot is five vats of rare perfume in high demand on a host of worlds. Who offers seven?"

Zinny Monteil lifted a finger.

"I have seven. I'm looking for eight. Who will offer eight?" An empty plea and the auctioneer knew it. Another victory for the ring. The lot would be almost given away but those who had won it were eager for their reward, meager though it would be. "The

bid is seven. I have seven. Seven once. Seven twice." He lifted his gavel. "Sev —"

"Eight!" called Dumarest.

He sat to the rear, back to the wall, his voice deliberately loud, sending echoes through the warehouse in which the auction was being held. At his side Zehava drew in her breath.

"Careful, Earl. You could get stuck." She sighed her relief as someone raised the bid, frowned as Dumarest topped it. "Ten thousand! Do you know what happens to those who can't pay?"

"I know what I'm doing." Dumarest nodded, smiling, as Molo Bain twisted in his seats to stare at him. "The ring will buy or I'll split the lot among the independents. It's a safe gamble."

One he pursued as the bids mounted, raising his voice, making himself known to the auctioneer, the assistants, others in the warehouse. At twenty thousand he withdrew from the bidding but others, stimulated by the contest, ran the final price up another three.

Zehava said, "I'm in going, Earl. This kind of excitement I can do without. Just remember the penalty if you buy what you can't pay for."

Stripped, flayed, impaled on a stake; Kaldar was not kind to outsiders who broke the rules. Dumarest took no further part in the bidding, once had been enough for his purpose. Only when a familiar carton was lifted on the display platform did he lean forward.

"Lot thirty-two. Two hundred units including the one on display." Cameron waited as assistants opened the carton and erected what it contained. Light glowed from the petals forming a mirror, creating a shimmering haze of rainbow brilliance. "A product of the Matsuki-Taru. Solar power units worth a fortune on any harsh world. The bidding will be in steps of five thousand. We start at thirty."

Low but a flurry of early bids would stimulate the sale and

small units were more tempting than large. As the bidding commenced Dumarest rose, seated himself behind Sung Pember, leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"Everything arranged?"

Pember nodded. "We'll get them dirt cheap."

"Don't be too greedy. Remember where you are."

"They need us."

"They need money," corrected Dumarest. "There are a dozen other dealers eager to take your place. Just remember how they got this stuff."

"Seventy," said Cameron. "And five. And five. Eighty thousand. Eighty. Eighty-five. Ninety. I have ninety." He frowned as the bidding slowed. It was too soon, the lot too valuable and he sensed the influence of the ring. "I have ninety thousand. And five." He caught the signal from a woman seated to one side. One topped by Molo Bain. "One hundred thousand." He glanced at the woman who could have been fronting for a rival group but she made no sign. "And five." Cameron invented a bid. "I have one hundred and five thousand."

Time slowed as he waited for a response. His action had been calculated but he was facing experts in their field who knew all the tricks. Again he felt the stir of anger. Those facing him were parasites feeding on the efforts of their betters. Those who had risked death and injury to obtain what they held in so low regard. If they wouldn't bid then he would take.

"I have one hundred and five. I am waiting for your bids." He lifted his gavel then, deliberately put it down. "I'll give you time to remember what is on offer. Goods worth far in excess of what has been bid. A lot holding the potential of vast profit. I open the bidding for the last time."

Dumarest said, "Is he talking of a reserve?"

"No." Pember's voice held a dry amusement. "He made a false

bid to up the amount. Now he's stuck with it. Let him sweat for a while."

"Let him sweat too long and you could wind up on a stake." Dumarest recognized the obvious anger. "He's of the Kaldari. Think he'll be gentle? Bid, damn you! Now!"

Before rage overtook the auctioneer and he threw aside civilized restraint. Bids were mostly by signal and he could swear such signals had been made, running up an enormous sum, forcing a hapless victim to pay or face the penalty.

Quickly Pember touched his nose.

"One ten." Cameron relaxed. "I have one hundred and ten thousand. It isn't enough. Unless there is realistic appreciation of what is on offer I shall cancel the auction."

Montiel said, "I protest! You can't do that!"

"Are you telling me what I can't do?" Raw anger edged the auctioneer's voice. "Do you think you have the right to rob the Kaldari?"

"Of course not! But traditions should be kept. We have an understanding and—"

"No one is robbing you." Dumarest rose to his feet and moved towards the platform. A man who had demonstrated he was not of the ring. "The bidding is fair for the product offered. Look." He touched the unit on display, opening a panel to show the empty interior. "It's incomplete," he explained. "It lacks a vital component. They all do. Without them the units are valueless."

At times it seemed the walls were closing in to crush her as if she had been an insect caught between a finger and a thumb. Then she would leave the office to walk in the open air but even then there were restraints. The hills, the buildings, even the bowl of the sky were components of the prison which held her. Symbols of earlier times when, always, there had been those to tell her what to do, how to act, how to think, how to live the life which should have been hers.

Only work provided an anodyne and even that was not always efficacious.

Nadine sighed, leaning back in her chair, palming her eyes. In the darkness she could see Pember's face, old, ugly in its anger as he complained of unfair treatment.

"I was cheated." Rage made him offensive. "The goods in lot thirty-two were rubbish."

"They were offered as seen. The standard procedure. You know that."

"I had no way of telling. The —"

"Didn't you call on the services of an engineer?"

"There was no need. We —I was given to understand the units were perfect." His face darkened. "Damn him!"

"Who?"

"Dumarest!"

"Then blame him, not us. You bought as seen. The lot is yours. The money is ours."

Verified credit and he had left in a storm. As had Zehava Postel.

"Is this all?" She had stared incredulously at the figure on the slip handed her. A woman Nadine envied if she did not like. "Are you sure?"

"You have the figures; cost of missiles fired, fuel, equipment used, other expenses." Nadine tried to be patient. "You have the sum gained from the sale of the loot. Set one against the other and you have the profit or loss. In your case a profit. You know the size of your share."

"And yours."

"Administration has to be paid for. If you want to handle

everything yourself, nothing is stopping you. But you'll find it doesn't pay."

As the raid hadn't been as profitable as hoped and, in the darkness of her palms, Nadine could see the cold anger in the woman's face. The determination in her eyes.

"Nadine." Jessie on the communicator. "Earl Dumarest to see you."

He came with the calm assurance of a man who needed no one but himself. An attribute which warmed her to him as, with quick intuition, she sensed the loneliness she knew too well.

"Dumarest." She rose and smiled a welcome as she gestured him to a chair. "Or may I call you Earl?" Her smile widened as he nodded. "I've been hearing things about you. Someone said you cheated him."

"Pember."

"Yes. Did you?"

"I sold him an idea. Buy lot thirty-two. Take the units to a harsh world, lease them to those who needed them most. I know where they would be welcome. I told him the units were far better than anyone here could guess. Having them examined by an engineer would reveal their true value. I didn't lie and I didn't cheat. I simply didn't tell the entire truth."

"I still don't understand. If you had revealed the truth the units would have attracted no bids. You could have bought them for practically nothing."

Dumarest said, "Do you gamble? There is a point in any game when a player has invested too much to throw in his hand. His loss would be too great for him not to risk more. Pember offered me a partnership. He thought I had a vested influence on the world I mentioned. I let him think that. I persuaded him to buy the units. Until he owned them I had nothing to bargain with."

"If he'd bought them too cheaply he would be willing to cut

his losses." She nodded, appreciating the irony of one man thinking to cheat another and being cheated in turn. For Pember it was a case of poetic justice. "But what do you get out of it?" She answered her own question. "Of course! You have the missing components!"

Dumarest said nothing, watching her face, the movement of her eyes. She lacked the vibrant femininity of Zehava which flaunted itself like a challenge, instead she had a poised calmness which told of iron control. That and something else, a mannerism, a thing he had seen before. As if she had to make a conscious effort not to speak but wait until a question was asked before answering it.

He said, bluntly, "Are you a reader?"

"I'm not a telepath if that's what you mean. I just guessed you had the components. I must warn you that I'm in no position to make a deal."

Something he hadn't asked, but she had known it was on his mind. As she read now of his suspicions. Damn the man! Why did he have to be so shrewd?

"I knew a man once," said Dumarest quietly. "In a way he was a friend. He had a peculiar talent. He could read people. Not their minds but their actions. Small things which betrayed what they were thinking. He found it embarrassing at times. People tended to avoid him. They were afraid of what they might reveal."

Something she knew too well. "What happened to him?"

"Balman? He died."

As her father had died. Her mother. As, she sensed, had all those close to Dumarest. Did he too feel the restraints which tormented her?

Dumarest said, "If you were in my position, what would you do?"

"With the components? Offer them to Pember. He will have to give you a good price. Those units are worth far more than he paid for them." She added, shrewdly, "You don't trust him."

"There is a lot of money involved."

"Safeguards can be utilized. You must have thought of them. No!"

Dumarest said, "You're doing it again. Rejecting an offer before it's made. At least listen to what I have to say."

"You're wasting your time."

"That is hardly the response of someone who should be interested in survival. Who is trusted by the Council to do the best for Kaldar. Should I go over your head? Make my offer to someone less intransigent?"

"You would do that?"

"It is your decision." Dumarest moved his chair closer to the desk, placed an arm on the surface, leaned forward to put his face inches from her own. "I'll deal with Pember if I have to but I'd rather not. He would complicate things. He might even try to kill me. He could succeed."

Nadine doubted it. "Why would he want to do that?"

Because of what he was; scum battenning on filth. A parasite living on property stolen from others. Trading in goods stained with blood, pain, death and tears. A thing worse than any raider for without his kind to provide a market none could prosper. Things Dumarest didn't mention. Facts she read as if he had.

"Earl! We are what we are!"

"Then be what you are!" He leaned even closer, his face hard with the ferocity of a predator. "What do you owe to Pember and his kind? Why show them concern? Act for me. For yourself. Sell him the components."

"No."

"Two hundred units." Dumarest ignored the protest. "Charge what you like and keep a tenth of what you get. An eighth. A fair commission."

"You don't understand. We don't operate that way. Toibin—"

"Has nothing to do with this. He's made his sale but the components are mine. Money," he urged. "Think of what you could do with it!"

How had he known? Had he read her as she had read him? Sensing her need and playing on it? Offering the one lure she couldn't resist. The chance of freedom. Of independence. Of escape.

Looking up she saw the smiling face of her father. A smile of love or derision?

Dumarest said, quietly, "The components are legally mine. Bought in normal trade."

"That makes a difference?"

"To you, perhaps." He smiled as her eyes dropped to meet his own. "We are what we are. But what we are isn't always what we seem to be. Please, Nadine. I need your help."

"To make a fortune?"

"No," he said. "To get transport to Earth."

Chapter Seven

In the shadows a woman was chanting a saga composed to laud the prowess of the raiders, their bravery, their courage, their fierce independence. Verses which dealt with blood and conquest, each followed by a roar from the crowd. Sound augmented by fists drumming on tables and the clash of beakers. Barbaric melody laced with wild ululations and animal bellowing.

The Kaldari at play.

The auction was over, the dealers gone, the warehouse now empty. It was a time to relax, to celebrate and make plans for future enterprises. Time, also, for tempers to flare and imagined grievances to be revenged. For romance to flower and assignations to be made. For the true nature of the Kaldari to show itself in strutting, unthinking, barbaric arrogance.

Dumarest sat with Zehava at a corner table. An overhead lantern cast a soft, yellow light and others of varying hues filled the tavern with blotches of ruby and emerald, of sapphire, agate, amethyst. Doors and windows were illuminated with the nacreous sheen of pearl. Colors which accentuated the gleam of polished leather and metal, of bracelets, armbands, chains and heavy rings. Portable wealth advertising the prowess of the wearer.

"Drink!"

A man lurched to a halt before the table. He swayed a little, spilled wine shining wetly on his clothing. His belt was of wide golden links, the sheathed knife bright with jewels and ornate engraving.

"Drink," he said again. "Drink with Odumi."

Dumarest rose without hesitation, his goblet lifted high. "I drink," he said loudly. "To Odumi and to all his friends."

"The toast?"

"To travel far. To live well. To die bravely."

A sentiment which appealed and a roar of approbation echoed from the rafters. Odumi, satisfied, moved away to join a knot of cronies. The woman, her chant ended, stepped forward into brighter light to reveal herself as a crone painted and adorned to resemble a warrior queen. As she scrabbled for the coins flung as a reward other women, far younger, moved purposefully among the men.

Zehava snorted her contempt as someone began another chant.

"Look at the fools. Strutting, drinking, dreaming of past glories when they taste nothing but failure. Do you know how much Toibin made from that raid? Can you guess?"

"Not enough."

"Nowhere near enough." She scowled into her empty goblet, watched as a girl, responding to Dumarest's signal, refilled it. "Tonight will see the back of most of the gain. I had a double share but even that barely paid expenses. Glowering, she added, "I heard he blamed me. Said my selection was poor."

"As you expected."

"As you warned me he would but I still don't like it." The wine lowered as she drank. "What do you think of our administrator?"

"Nadine?"

"That's the one. Nadine Cavallo. Sorenson's niece. Her mother married his brother." Patiently she explained, "Women retain their own names on Kaldar. If I had a daughter she would be named after me. Sons take their father's name."

"Tell me about her."

He leaned back, remembering the face which was a mask for the unhappiness within. A lonely child who had grown into a lonely woman. One alien to her place and time, unable to accept the mores of the society into which she had been born and yearning to escape to a more gentle culture.

"She's weak." Zehava dismissed the woman with a shrug. "Her mother should have taken her into the dark. Brak should have made her go roving to harden her spirit. Instead he let her skulk in an office. I tried to befriend her once. Fetched her a necklace from a raid but she wouldn't touch it. The fool. There wasn't even blood on it." She laughed at the memory. "That raid was something! We hit a vacation resort and stripped it clean. Neat

work and good profit. Urstyn was clever."

"Why don't you still ride with him?"

"He's dead. Took a nasty wound in the gut on Asque. The pain was too much so he ended it." She lifted her goblet. "A good man. I drink to his memory."

As others were now drinking to old comrades and departed friends. In a far corner a drum throbbed and a pipe wailed a mournful tune. Money rattled on the tables as serving girls scurried with fresh jugs of wine for the toasting. A custom it would be unwise to ignore. Dumarest bought wine, refilled their goblets, pretended to drink to every shouted name.

To Zehava he said, "Who was the man who died on Arpagus?"

"Did anyone die?"

"A loader. Toibin left him behind. Find out who it was. Quickly!" He watched as she slipped away to mingle with others. Shouting rose as she returned and men milled about the door. The beat of the drum quickened as if the celebrations were reaching a climax. "Well?"

"Dren Ford. He wasn't missed until after they'd left." Slowly she added, "If you know he's dead you must have killed him."

"So?"

"For God's sake don't admit it. He has kin. There are at least five here who would avenge him."

"They'd fight?"

"They'd butcher. You wouldn't stand a chance. They'd cut you down like a beast and none would object. You're an outsider. They don't owe you anything. You aren't of the Kaldari."

But she was. Dumarest said, quietly, "He should be remembered."

"Yes." She looked at the crowd, a sudden anger thinning her

lips. "The bastard! Toibin might have some excuse for having abandoned me but not the loader. His people should know what happened." Abruptly she rose to her feet, her voice clear against the wail of the pipe, the pulse of the drum. "A toast! To one who was forgotten. I drink to Dren Ford!"

As the music died a man called, "We drink to the dead,
Zehava."

"I know that."

"Are you saying my nephew is dead?" A woman thrust herself through the crowd, a hand resting on the dagger at her waist. Ruby light shone from polished steel as she twitched at the blade. "Abandoned?"

"Is he here? Have you his body? Did any see him die?"

"But—"

"I was there. On Arpagus after the raid. Abandoned by a man I thought I could trust. I know how they felt about us and what they wanted to do. If Dren died quickly he was lucky." Zehava lifted her goblet. "I drink to a comrade. He was forgotten by his captain — let us not forget him now. To Dren Ford!"

Glass shattered as she flung the empty goblet to the floor. Destruction compounded as others followed her example. As the crystalline tinkling died a man walked from the crowd gathered at the door.

As he halted before the table Zehava said, "So you've shown yourself at last. Earl — meet Captain Leese Toibin."

He was tall, lithe, a man at the end of his fourth decade. The black leather which clothed his body bore plates and jewels of price. His belt was wide, set with gems, hung with a knife in a gleaming scabbard. More jewels glowed from his rings, bracelets, the thick chain about his neck. His face was a contradiction to the barbaric garb, long, smooth, the eyes enigmatic pools of darkness beneath arching brows. The visage of an artist who

delighted in creating images of pain. An actor who had timed his entry for maximum impact.

"Earl Dumarest," he said. "I have heard much about you."

The voice, like the face, held an unexpected gentility. The tones of an aristocrat who could afford to be bland, but Dumarest sensed the force within him, the arrogance of a man accustomed to being obeyed.

"Zehava." He turned to the woman. "How nice to see you again. You were talking, my dear. What were you saying?"

"You heard me."

"Some of it, yes, but had another told me of your tirade I would have doubted his sanity. Do you honestly believe that I deliberately abandoned you?"

"I was left." Anger flared in her voice and eyes. "Damn you! Can you guess what would have happened to me had I been taken?"

"A risk you willingly accepted for double a captain's share. You failed to make the rendezvous. Blame yourself, not me."

"You were the captain. I risked my life on that raid and deserved better consideration. And what about Ford?"

The woman who had claimed to be his aunt called out from where she stood. "Tell us about Dren, captain. What happened to him?"

"It was time to leave. I sounded the recall. Later we found he had missed the ship."

"How? Why?"

"I questioned the others of his team. They said he was more interested in delving into bales than getting on with the job. He could have lingered after private loot."

"Dren wouldn't have done that!"

"He missed the ship." The softness held the touch of an impatient snarl. "He knew what he had to do and failed to do it. Was I to sit and wait for him? Risk everything because he was tardy?"

Zehava said, "You could have waited. There was no risk."

"No?" Toibin gave her his attention. "How can you be sure of that?"

"I was there. You know that."

"In the warehouse? At the ship? Near to it?" The softness of his tone was the warning of a serpent about to strike. "Tell us," he urged, a hand lifting to the crowd pressing close. "Tell us what really happened to you. To you and Dren Ford."

A trap and she had fallen into it. Now it was his word against hers and the crowd was on his side. Ford's aunt edged forward, steel glimmering as she lifted the dagger from its sheath. Others, seeing the gesture, rumbled their approval.

"Were you caught?" mused Toibin. "Questioned? Did you buy your life? Have you returned with accusations so as to minimize your guilt? Is there none to challenge your assertions?"

"I challenge them!" The woman with the dagger lifted it high. "If she's lying I'll cut her guts out! Well, bitch? Shall we put it to the test?"

The rough justice of the barbarian in which might equaled right. It was a part of Zehava's culture and she was prepared to face it. Dumarest saw the determined set of her jaw, the tension of arms and shoulders, the hand which fell to her belt, the knife it carried. Guns were too impersonal, too dangerous to use in a crowd even if tradition wasn't against them. She would fight and she would die. She had drunk too deeply and lacked the savage hate of the other woman.

Dumarest said loudly, "Zehava didn't lie. I was there. I know."

"You were with her?!" Toibin reared back a little as afraid of

contamination. A theatrical gesture which caused the yellow light to shimmer on his clothing, the dark mass of his hair. "On the field? In the warehouse?"

"I was there but she wasn't with me then. A stone damned near smashed her skull. I ran to tell you she was hurt but couldn't get close. By the time I'd made it into the warehouse you were getting ready to leave. God knows why you had nothing to be afraid of."

Dumarest paused for effect, looking at Toibin, the assembled crowd.

Deliberately he said, "You had destroyed the towers, killed the guards, blown open the warehouse and hit the town. You had the inhabitants at your mercy and they knew it. Even if they had wanted to resist, it would have taken too long to assemble men and find missiles, get them into place, aim and fire them and do it all without being spotted. You had time to do anything you wanted. Instead you ran like a scared rat. You didn't even check what you'd taken. And you left Dren Ford to die."

The woman said, quickly, "Did you see it?"

"No." A necessary lie. Dumarest compounded it with another. "I heard he put up a good fight. Two men died before they shot him down."

"I knew it had to be like that." The blade she'd drawn vanished into its sheath. "Dren had guts and was no petty thief. His captain should have known that."

Toibin snapped, harshly, "Watch your mouth, woman!"

"My nephew —"

"Is dead. Had he done as he should he would be with us now. But he died bravely — if you choose to believe a stranger." Toibin lifted his hand to point at Dumarest as he raised his voice. "Who is he? What is he doing here? A man who claims to have penetrated my guards, to have remained undetected in the warehouse, to be close enough to the authorities to know what

happened to Dren Ford? Can you believe him? Can you trust him? Take his word against mine?"

A clever man acting a part and doing it well. No man could have achieved Toibin's status by the use of brawn alone. Within the rounded skull rested a shrewd and calculating intelligence. One cunning enough to have picked the time and place for his confrontation with Zehava and her discontent. Now he was appealing to the loyalty of the crowd. A tried and trusted member of the community setting himself against a stranger. There could be no doubt as to the outcome.

Dumarest said, "Are you calling me a liar?"

"You?" Toibin shrugged. "I call you nothing for that is what you are. A toy hired to satisfy a harlot's lust."

"You bastard!" Zehava rose, quivering with anger. Snatching Dumarest's goblet she lifted it to hurl its contents into Toibin's face. "No one calls me that!"

Dumarest lunged towards her, hands extended, fingers striking her wrist to send a shower of wine spraying to one side. Rage had blinded her to danger. On Kaldar no distinction was made between the sexes.

"Sit." He felt her tremble beneath his hands as he forced her back into her chair. "Don't play into his hands. He's baiting you. Give him an excuse and he'll kill you."

"How touching." Toibin rocked back on his heels. "See how he comforts her. He does it well. A pity he is a liar. A betrayer. A coward. Something less than a man."

Dumarest looked at the tall figure limned in the yellow light, knowing that what was to come, seeing no way to avoid it.

"Meaning?"

"A man would fight."

"On equal terms? As one of the Kaldari?"

Zehava settled the matter. "He is my man. He fights for me. Who denies my right?"

Starlight illuminated the plaza, sheening the flags with silver luminescence, frosting the buildings, the trees, the ornamental shrubs. Light augmented by lanterns carried from the tavern and swung aloft to cast their shifting patches of jeweled hues over the scene. One reminiscent of Arpagus, the casino which was its pride, but here the stakes would be the highest a man could wager.

"Be careful, Earl." Zehava whispered tensely in his ear. "Toibin is a skilled and dirty fighter. Don't underestimate him. If he wins we lose all we own."

To the victor the spoils and the penalty she would pay for having equaled his status. Dumarest had expected nothing less but if he was defeated Zehava would only lose her wealth. He would lose his life.

He inhaled slowly, deeply, forcing himself to relax as he had done so often before. Then there had been a roped ring, brilliant overhead lights, a sea of faces set in rising tiers. The familiar setting of any arena which men fought with naked steel, cutting, stabbing, slicing, maiming. Killing for the sake of money and a transient glory. The memory of it fogged the starlight, turned the glowing lamplight into the semblance of blood, of gold, the febrile gleam of eyes as women bared their breasts and screamed invitations to their bed and body.

That madness would be absent here as would be those who hung around the preparation rooms; the touts, perverts, gamblers, assessors of odds. The fixers with their drugged wine. The liars with their useless pills and potions. The ghouls who gloated over slashed and maimed bodies. Vampires who thrilled at the sight of blood and necrophiliacs who bribed the attendants to let them have their way with the helpless dead. But the faces would be the same. A ring of them, avid, bestial, hungry for the spectacle to come.

"Dumarest!" Toibin called from where he stood at the far end of the circle. "Your customs need not be ours. If you feel the want

of religious consolation I permit you to send for a monk."

Mockery which brought a laugh from the crowd, but not all of them. The aunt of Ford remained silent and so did others with her. Not many but enough to form a small knot in the assembly. Dumarest marked its position as he marked the glow of the lanterns, the shadows of the trees. Among them, like ghosts, he saw the dim shape of ganni as they watched events beyond their comprehension.

"Well?" Toibin flaunted his humor. "Do you wish to take advantage of my offer?"

"Yes," said Dumarest. "I would like to see a monk." Pausing he added, "A week from today."

Again came the laughter. True barbarians they could appreciate the jest. They fell silent as the two men closed for combat.

Both were stripped to the waist and both carried naked steel. The knives were not a match as each favored his own. Dumarest's was nine inches of honed and polished metal, the guard scarred, the hilt worn, the rounded pommel a balance for the edged and pointed blade. A tool designed for survival. The weapon carried by Toibin was one fashioned to kill. A slender triangle, ten inches long, double-edged, viciously pointed. The guard was too big, the pommel too large as if intended for use as a club.

"Even money on the captain." The voice came from the back of the crowd. "Fives on the stranger. Why hesitate? A gamble adds spice to blood."

Dumarest slowed as Toibin came nearer. As their knives were different so was the stance they adopted. Habit guided Dumarest into that used in the arena. He stood with legs slightly parted, toes outward, feet firm on the ground, his body inclined a little towards his opponent. The knife was held like a sword, thumb to the blade, the edge inward and the point raised. A stance which enabled him to move quickly, to cut fore and background, to parry and to stab if desirable.

Toibin was accustomed to less formal combat. His left arm was folded across his chest to protect his heart, hand guarding the throat, elbow pressed above his spleen. His knife was held like a sword but the point was in line with his forearm and aimed low. The stance of a man willing to take a wound as long as he could deliver a blow.

One would be enough. The vicious point driving into the intestines, twisting, ripping, the sharp edges severing tendon, muscle, artery and nerve. Releasing a shower of blood and guts as it was drawn upwards and free.

An obvious danger — were there others?

Toibin had intended the challenge from the first but why had he been so willing to accept the woman's conditions? Was he confident because he was certain he would win?

Dumarest stepped aside as the captain attacked, the slender triangle shimmering like ice as it cut the air. A stab which went wide, steel clashing as he parried, testing for strength and agility. The triangle was like a rock, Toibin like a cat as he spun to thrust again, to snarl his anger as Dumarest moved beyond reach.

"I knew you were a coward. But none can run from death."

Words intended to irritate but Dumarest ignored the taunt. Ford's aunt and her supporters were to his left and he moved so as to place them at his back. A small defense but if men had been set to help Toibin it would make things harder for them. As for the rest he could only trust their concept of honor.

"A dancer." Toibin sneered as, after a flurry in which blades had made metallic ringings, Dumarest regained his chosen position. "If you are afraid of combat then yield and I will treat you gently. Admit you lied. Pay for your mistake and live to enjoy the light of another dawn."

An offer which Dumarest pretended to consider. In any fight the object was to win as fast as possible before luck or accident could bring defeat. Toibin was playing to his audience. His

reputation was at stake and he wanted to demean his opponent before butchering his path to victory. A weakness which could be used against him.

"Money," said Dumarest. "You'll accept money?" He slowed, allowed the other to come closer, the vicious blade within reach. "You'll let me live if I pay?"

Toibin smiled, nodding then, with sudden ferocity, attacked. He gave no warning, the slender triangle of his blade darting forward to rip into the stomach. A blow Dumarest had anticipated and he twisted from it, feeling the burn as the point ripped at his side. A minor wound risked for the chance to grip the hand holding the knife, halting movement while his own blade slashed upwards to cut the interior of the forearm, severing tendons, veins, grating on bone to release a shower of blood.

"Bastard!" Toibin bared his teeth in a snarl. "You bastard!"

His left hand darted forward, fingers stabbing in a vicious attack. Dumarest struck before they could reach his eyes, slashing the edge of his knife hard against the right side of the captain's throat. Sending the blade to shear through skin, fat, muscle, the pulsing arteries beneath. Releasing a fountain of blood to stain them both before the captain slumped lifeless to the ground.

Chapter Eight

Ivernal wasted no time in coming to the point.

"Earth!" His hand slammed on the table, emphasizing both anger and disgust. "Is the man serious? Does he expect us to give him a ship and crew to go hunting a legend?"

"He isn't asking for charity," said Nadine. "He—"

"If any want to go with him that is their choice." Ozenne was curt in his interruption as he attacked what he considered to be the heart of the matter. "None has the right to deny them."

"That is admitted." Musson shifted restlessly on his chair. "What is the problem? Why is the Council in session? It is simply a matter of business. Does Dumarest have money?"

"His own plus what he gained from Toibin." Nadine added, "Aside from personal jewelry that wasn't much."

"Is that why he challenged Dumarest?" Jumay was shrewd. "To harvest what he'd gained from the traders? Not that it matters. Toibin was a fool. He could have handled things better. Dumarest is an outsider."

But could no longer be treated as one.

Nadine leaned back in her chair pretending an indifference she did not feel. The council chamber, a bare room fitted with a table and chairs, held no dignity as the Council itself held no real power. A body created as a matter of convenience to provide arbitration when needed, to deal with visiting traders, to act as an agent and to provide a degree of administration. Yet they could act as one and had influence by reason of friends and families.

Musson said, "I still fail to see why we are here. Dumarest wants to charter a ship. If he can pay for it then where is the problem?"

Dieter was more discerning. "He wants to go hunting a myth. To search for Earth. Never mind what we think — he obviously believes he can find it. But when? Where? How long would he expect the charter to last?"

"Until he reaches his destination." Nadine looked at those around the table. "He is willing to pay all he has towards the venture. He also has the coordinates."

"Of Earth?" Calbray spoke for the first time. An old, thin, wizened man who bore facial scars with a stubborn pride. "Woman, do you know what you are saying?"

To them all Earth was a legend. Any supposed coordinates had to be the product of a mad or cunning mind. The stuff of

lying adventure sold in taverns to gullible fools. Such a one, with money, could buy passage to wherever it would take him, but the ships of Kaldar were not ordinary vessels. The caution of those owning and operating them induced a wary suspicion.

One Nadine shared but Dumarest had won her over.

Now she dangled a glittering bait.

Earth was the mythical treasure world of the galaxy. A planet of indescribable wealth. One holding mountains of rare and precious metals, dunes of gems, lakes of perfumes, oceans of wine, forests of trees bearing pods which held the cure for all ills. The inflated promise of legend yet the allure remained. Find Earth and gain the prize of all time. Out there for the talking.

"Dumarest is convinced he can find it," she said. "He is willing to back himself with a fortune. All he wants is a ship to carry him."

"Then let him find one elsewhere."

"And lose all the potential profit?" Dieter scowled at the suggestion. "Don't be a fool, Ivernal. We daren't turn him down. Think how it will look to others. The chance to find the richest prize ever dreamed of thrown away by scared old men? You know what would be said and done. We'll be targets for every frustrated youngster on the planet. We wouldn't last a week."

Ozenne said, "You say he has the coordinates, Nadine. Have you seen them? Did he give you any proof?"

"He isn't lying."

"But the figures?"

"He didn't give them to me," she admitted. "Would you?"

"No, I suppose not. But he'll have to give them to the captain. Who will it be?"

She took her time before answering, knowing she trod on

delicate ground. Few ships were owned by an individual. Costs were too high and most were owned by combines with shares sold to those willing to gamble. Crews and captains the same. Dieter's warning applied to more than frustrated youngsters. Who best to select?

"Wine?" Brak Sorenson had held himself in reserve. Now he acted to take the pressure off his niece. As he limped around the table filling glasses he said, casually, "While we're on the subject, who will take over the Geniat now that Toibin is dead?"

"Uncle, that can wait."

"Of course. It's just that he was readying for action and —" He broke off, shrugging. "I guess it doesn't matter."

A clever man, one who knew better than to say too much or press too hard, but the seed had been sown and Nadine shared his silence as discussion swept the table. All had preferences, Jumay arguing with Ozenne, Dieter with Musson. Calbray with Iveral. As the noise mounted Nadine rapped on the board.

"If the proposition is going to create strife among us it had best be abandoned. A pity. The potential is vast but Dumarest will have to try elsewhere."

As if on cue Musson said, "You've given this some thought, Nadine. What do you advise?"

"That we forget our differences and waste no time in reaching agreement. Dumarest has much to offer but isn't the most patient of men. Many hold him in high regard since his fight with Toibin and will not take kindly to his rejection. There are those who want to rid themselves of the restrictions we have imposed. There has been talk of changes." She looked at Suke Jumay. "Some of it close to home."

"Mel is a hothead," he admitted. He rasped his chin, remembering how the youngster had defied him over the damage caused by the fire. Pride had made him meet the cost from his own pocket, but where would the defiance end? "He needs action."

"He isn't alone," said Nadine. "There aren't enough opportunities to keep he and his kind busy. To raid we need ships. To meet costs we must have profitable targets. Dumarest is offering us a golden opportunity. The accumulated wealth of an entire world!"

A theme she harped on as she went into detail. With Toibin dead his ship needed a captain and she had just the man in mind. Lief Chapman who belonged to no combine and old enough to be cautious, stubborn enough not to be easily swayed, rich enough to contribute. One with experience now fretting at inactivity and yearning to get back into space. A man they could trust.

Points they could appreciate.

She gave them others. An idle vessel made no profits. The Geniat was almost ready to leave. The crew could contain most of the disaffected. A large compliment would offer the chance of many gaining experience and also provide a garrison to establish a claim on Earth. Dumarest would command the expedition.

"Command?" Jumay shook his head. "No. He'll be a passenger."

"And a guide."

"All we need are the coordinates."

"We have to be sure of him." Nadine was patient. "The reward is too great for us to take unnecessary chances. Give him nothing but passage and he has no real commitment. Put him in command and offer him a share and we'll bind him to us." She appealed to their logic. "What have we to lose?"

Her own idea and a good one. Dumarest would accept the offer as he would agree to the condition she intended to impose. One Brak guessed as, after the others had gone, he voiced his displeasure.

"You can't do it, Nadine!"

"You can't stop me."

"But—"

"Don't try to talk me out of it!" She regretted her tone, but he was transparently easy to read and she was in no mood for an argument. "I'm going with Dumarest. With the expedition. It's what I want and what's going to happen."

"Nadine! For God's sake! You're all I have!"

The prisoner of his need and she turned from him, fighting her anger. Why couldn't he understand? Why must he cling so hard? Why couldn't he let her go?

Standing at the edge of the field Dumarest studied the Kaldari as they practiced their form of military exercise. They worked in groups, following coded signals, keeping to patterns of movement which provided mutual cover and protection. Drills common to the mercenary bands he had known, but where hired soldiers were intent on survival the Kaldari concentrated on speed. They had no interest in taking and holding territory or of limiting damage. Their aim was to raid and run. To attack, to kill to loot. They would attack like wolves, fight like cornered rats, die rather than yield. Individuals trained in the art of murder.

At his side Zehava said, "Look at them, Earl. Ready for anything. They'll go wherever you want. Do anything you order. Why not help me make the final decision?"

"The Council gave you that job. You know these people better than I do. Just avoid selecting hotheads. We want no trouble."

"You or Nadine? Why take her? She's paranoid."

"She comes with us," he said flatly. "Nigel too." The young man could be a potential ally. He pointed at a man on the field. One going through the movements of unarmed combat. "What about him?"

"Atsuo? He's good but getting slow." Stubbornly she added, "I

still can't see why you want to take Nadine."

Dumarest ignored her objection, concentrating on those busy at exercise. Zehava had assumed too much. She believed they would follow him without question, but he knew better. Killing Toibin had won him a certain respect, but it wasn't enough. To gain rank and loyalty he needed to prove himself in a manner they would accept, yet do it in a way which would not injure their pride.

He had made his choice. A sharp rattle of shots made it easy for him to close in on his selected target. "Automatic fire?"

"That's Nowka. He's fast and accurate. Come and watch."

Targets had been set up at the edge of the field. A dozen, man-sized silhouettes balanced to fall at the impact of a bullet. A man stood facing them, a stubby weapon cradled in his arms. Others clustered behind him, among them a girl with braided hair with a chronometer in her hand. As she called the signal Nowka fired, crouching, twisting as he emptied the magazine. Half the targets toppled to the dirt.

As the applause died Zehava said, "See? I told you he was good."

By her definition and those watching but Dumarest had other standards. Joining the group he said to the man with the gun, "That's a fine weapon. May I see it?"

It was simple, but effective, designed for hard wear. A short-range weapon favored by mercenaries for street and house fighting. The magazine held thirty cartridges. A stud determined the style of fire.

"I've smoothed and polished the action," explained the owner. He was hard, brash, in his early twenties. He wore the ubiquitous martial garb and the weapon had been personalized with engraving and brilliant stones. "I can clear the load in less than four seconds."

"So I noticed."

"You don't approve?"

Dumarest said, dryly, "It seems to me that if you hit the target with the first shot the rest aren't necessary. Use them all and you could be in trouble."

"Meaning?"

"Think about it." Dumarest looked at the targets, noting their distance, the way they had been grouped. The space between them was too great for effective sweep-fire. "Anyone can shoot at things which can't hit back, but suppose those targets were a real enemy? Armed men ready and able to kill. What then?"

"I'll show you." Nowka snatched back the gun and rammed home a fresh magazine. "Give the word, Kathi." He bettered his previous performance sending nine targets to the ground.

As he lowered the gun and turned, smiling, Dumarest said, "Well? What do you do now?"

"What are you getting at?"

"They are the enemy." Dumarest pointed at the targets still standing. "You've just shot down their comrades. Your gun is empty. You're at their mercy. If you're lucky they'll give you a quick death."

"Could you do better?"

"I think so."

"Let's see you do it." Nowka added, "If you've the guts to bet I'll lay a thousand you can't beat my score."

"Load the gun." Dumarest took it, checked the action, set the stud for single fire. To those watching he said, "Just shooting at targets doesn't teach you much more than how to aim your weapon. To improve the skill which could save your life you need to use intelligence and imagination. Think of those targets as enemy soldiers on patrol, alert to catch any hint of movement, primed to open fire in triggered reflex. If you attacked and gave

them the slightest chance then, no matter how good you are at hitting targets, you're dead. Dead," he repeated. "Useless. To me. The expedition. Your comrades."

"The talk of a coward," sneered Nowka. "You can only die once. What matter how as long as it's done with honor? Toibin knew that. He never hesitated to take a risk. Not even when it came to fighting a man trained in the arena."

"It was his choice," said Dumarest. "As making that wager was yours." He turned to face the targets. "Kathi!"

He opened fire as the girl gave the signal, moving and firing in a blur of coordinated movement, the sound of the shots blending into one.

As the last target fell Kathi said, her voice high,

"That's perfect! They never knew what hit them! They were dead before they hit the ground! They —" She broke off, recognizing the false reality induced by the demonstration.

Then, defiantly, she added, "I've never seen anyone move so fast or shoot as straight. Right, Nowka?"

He glared his rage. "I'll take the gun!"

It still held a third of its load. Dumarest emptied it, working the action to spill the cartridges on the ground before throwing it into the extended palm.

The last of the suppliants had gone, the benediction light now dark, the interior of the church a place of shadowed gloom. Brother Weyer rose, stretching, feeling old muscles register their protest, old sinews making their complaint. It had been a long session, but now it was over and he could relax. He stepped from the chair and out of the enclosed space where tormented souls had found comfort and forgiveness. A bolt rolled beneath his sandal and he staggered and almost fell, conscious of the sudden pain around his heart. An accident and a warning, but the fault was equally his. Knowing of the danger he should have carried a light. Certainly he needed to avoid stress.

Outside he leaned against a stanchion and looked at the sky. The Lonagar Drift burned in an awesome splendor, its light silvering the bulk of the newly constructed church, shadowing the materials lying bulked within. Soon now the task would be completed, the debris cleared away and the church once again would dominate the area.

Until some fool would amuse himself and all would have to be done again.

A bad thought and Weyer dismissed it. To anticipate disaster was to invite it and to stand in judgement on others was to ape divinity. It was not for him to determine how others should lead their lives. Instead he listened to the noises of the night. Distant laughter, metallic clangings from the field, the working chant of teams of ganni blending with the soft keening of those mourning their dead. Loud sounds swamped the others; a formless yammering stemming from a dozen throats, the noise quelled by a sudden blast of searing anger.

"Shut up, damn you! The Council made the selection! You'll abide by it! And remember — stowaways will be evicted!"

Dumarest and, from the sound of him, at the end of his patience. Weyer lifted a hand in greeting as he came forward in the starlight.

"Welcome. You look as if you could use a drink. I have some wine inside. Would you care to share it?"

Dumarest followed the monk into the church. A lantern glowed into life at his touch, yellow light illuminating a closed area holding a cot, a table, chairs, a cabinet of charred wood. From it Weyer produced a bottle and goblets.

"Some food?"

"Just the wine."

It was better than he'd expected and the monk smiled as he refilled the goblet. "A gift from the one of the Kaldari," he explained. "A lady we were able to comfort. In return we gained

her gratitude."

"A rare achievement," said Dumarest. He sipped at his wine. "You sent a message. It sounded urgent. You want to see me. Why?"

"It was good of you to come. You must be very busy."

"Completing final checks," agreed Dumarest. "We leave at dawn. What is it you want? A berth? I can arrange it if you wish."

"The offer is tempting," said Weyer. "To search for a planet most believe to be a legend. An adventure with many attractions; the lure of the unknown, rich rewards, fabulous achievements. On Kaldar who could resist them? But there are other legends and they promise far less. Earth need not be a paradise. Find it and you could discover abomination."

"From which men ran in the old days?"

"I don't understand."

"No?" Dumarest shrugged. "Maybe not, but I think you do." His voice deepened, took the pulse of drums as he quoted. "From terror they fled 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, but if the monk knew of them he made no comment.

"Terror," said Dumarest. "Or Terra — another name for Earth. It fits with what you are saying. A world abandoned because of some terrible catastrophe. Forgotten, ignored, all references to it eliminated from the almanac. An entire planet relegated to the status of a legend. But Earth is not a legend. It exists. I shall find it."

A statement of fact as Weyer recognized. He looked at his hands, locked as if in prayer, then at his guest. A hard man and not one to be easily dissuaded.

He said, quietly, "There are many legends. One is about a box. The comfort and safety of a world rested on the fact that it should never be opened. But someone was curious. The box was opened and terror was released. You recognize the analogy?"

"Earth is not a box."

"And the galaxy is not a world, but the similarity is the same." Weyer's voice held a desperate intensity. "All legends hold a grain of truth. Why else should a planet be abandoned? The thing which destroyed a world could still exist. The hope of the Church is that the vileness which contaminates the human race can be contained and, in time, neutralized. But if the galaxy is again exposed to the essence of horror which could still reside on Earth then what hope for Mankind?"

A man of intelligence and understanding repeating dogma learned when young. A doctrine designed to shape minds to serve a particular end.

"You talk of legends," said Dumarest impatiently. "Use logic and reason instead. I am living proof that the planet is harmless. I was born on Earth. If there is contamination then I must carry it. Am I such a dangerous threat to the safety of the galaxy?"

"You could be unique," said Weyer. "Immune. The possibility exists. As does the threat you could present. You are not as other men. Your reflexes are amazingly fast and you seem to constantly benefit from a succession of fortuitous circumstances. Luck," he explained. "Good luck. Also there is something within you which seems to radiate a determined strength. A violence and intensity of purpose." He moved his hands in a helpless gesture. "I can't explain it, but it is present and it sets you apart. The Kaldari will be freshly exposed. They are savage barbarians of the worst kind. Selfish, uncaring, devoid of any sense of responsibility. Once contaminated they would be irresistible. Such a scourge must not be permitted to exist!" His right fist drove into his left palm. "No matter how remote the possibility it cannot be allowed!"

Dumarest said, "The Kaldari are no problem. Have the ganni refuse their labor. Move into the hills."

"The Kaldari would follow them."

"And return to ashes. I've looked around. Their strongholds, factories, warehouses, workshops — all are vulnerable. Fire could cleanse this world. There are enough men wearing the collar to take care of it."

"They won't," said Weyer. "You could and would, but they can't and neither can I. It's advice I cannot accept. It is not what I want from you."

"What is?"

"For you to give up your search for a legend. I beg you — do not find Earth!"

A useless plea. As it ended Dumarest heard sounds from outside the room. A scrape, the clink of metal, a sharp inhalation as of a stifled curse.

"Down!" His hand lashed out to kill the lantern. Pushed Weyer to lie beside it. "Stay on the floor!"

In darkness Dumarest lunged towards the wall, plastic yielding to the slash of his knife. Easing himself through the gap he crouched, immobile, eyes and ears strained for movement and sound. The interior of the church was dark aside from the nacreous glow of starlight filtering through the translucent material of its construction. The stacked materials on the floor provided both traps and cover.

Metal clinked to one side.

An accident or noise deliberately created to attract attention? As it came again Dumarest moved to a pile of crates, hugging their shelter as he searched the area. Was that a bale or a crouching man? Sacks or a lurking menace? Was the intruder still within the church?

Dumarest knew he was lurking in the shadows. Sooner or later he would move to the attack or decide to retreat. When he did would be the time to act. Time would provide the answer. All

he need do was wait.

Weyer lacked his patience. Within the room the monk stirred, fumbled for the lantern, triggered it into glowing life as he headed towards the door. Illumination flooded into the body of the church as he opened it, revealing the scattered materials, the figure rising from where it had crouched. Nowka, light gleaming from a familiar object in his hand. One he pointed at the monk.

"No!" Weyer lifted a hand as if against the threat of a gun. "Don't shoot!"

Dumarest rose, lifting his knife as Weyer fell. The blast of a gun froze his hand and he lowered the blade as Zehava moved from the entrance to the building.

"The fool!" She kicked at Nowka's lifeless body. "Just as well I followed him. I knew he was nursing a grievance, but I didn't think he'd turn into an assassin. He couldn't stand the shame," she explained. "You bested him at the range and he resented it. He was close to Toibin and wanted to avenge him. That's why he used the weapon he did. A symbol in a way. A pity about the monk, but better him than you. I guess the light must have dazzled Nowka, or he was just primed to react to any target he saw."

Dumarest stooped and picked up the knife the dead man had carried. The one Toibin had used. Weyer lay where he had fallen, as he would have fallen had Nowka made sure of his target. But how could a knife, unless thrown, kill at a distance?

"Earl!" Zehava was impatient. "Let's get away from here. Forget him," she snapped as Dumarest knelt beside the monk. "Let his own kind take care of him."

He made no comment as he examined the limp shape. There was no apparent wound, just a fleck of blood on the right cheek. A tiny puncture which could have been made by a stinging insect — or a tiny missile. One which had induced the simulation of death, but Dumarest could feel the slow, turgid beat of the heart. Crossing to the lantern he examined the knife, seeing the tiny hole in the guard, the stud on the hilt. Pressed it would fire a

dart loaded with chemicals. A device common in cheating arenas.

"Earl!"

"There's no need for you to stay, Zehava. Just tell someone to get rid of this filth." He gestured at the dead man. "I'll take care of the monk."

Chapter Nine

Lief Chapman was as hard as a rock, his body angular, his mouth like a trap. A laser had burned out his left eye and half his face during an old raid. Though surgery had replaced the eye and repaired the ravaged cheek and temple a certain oddness remained which gave the impression he stared at things others could not see.

To Dumarest he said, "Have you any idea where these coordinates will take us?"

"To Earth."

"Almost to the edge of the galaxy." Gampu Niall scowled at the almanacs which littered the surface of his desk. The navigator was younger than the captain, but matched him in physical hardness. "It's a long way."

"So?" Dumarest looked from one to the other. "Are you saying you can't handle it?"

"I can guide a ship to anywhere in the universe," snapped Niall. "I'm saying it won't be easy. Stars are thin so far out and so are planets. If anything should go wrong we'll have nothing to rely on but ourselves. I'll have to plot a safe course and it'll have to be done in stages. One mistake could be our last."

The ship burned, seared, twisted by invisible forces created by the death and disintegration of suns. Falling into the maw of a vortex, a warp, a black hole. Caught in local regions of intense strain which could crush a hull or turn a vessel into a ball of

incandescent vapour. To freeze it in an eternal stasis or to rotate it into an alien dimension.

Dangers of which Dumarest was aware and he watched as the others frowned over a cluster of charts.

"Once we leave the Drift we'll head to the Solloso," said the captain. "Then to Quegan and the Myrm Cluster."

Niall disagreed. "Not the Myrm. We can avoid it by first going to Sabela then on to Stark. That area is pretty safe. A longer flight, but in the right direction."

Dumarest left them to it, moving through the ship on a routine inspection. The vessel was different to others he had known. One built for a specific purpose now adapted for another. The holds had been partitioned into sections holding tiered bunks to accommodate the enlarged compliment. All personal weapons had been locked away. Life would be cramped, restrained, far from comfortable. Only the officers had the privacy of their own cabins.

Zehava was in the communications shack. She turned as Dumarest entered.

"Earl?"

"We'll be off soon. Check the compliment is settled."

"Nadine —"

"Has her duties. Get on with yours."

As she left Dumarest looked at the operator busy with his equipment. Sending final messages back to Kaldar and among them would be the coordinates he had given the captain. Figures which would take them into the area he wanted to reach, but not those giving the true position of Earth. An elementary precaution against probable betrayal. Later it wouldn't matter. For all he cared the entire galaxy could know where Earth was to be found. But only after he had reached it. Only when he was home.

The firing control was unique to vessels designed for combat.

"Hi!" The officer in charge lifted a hand in greeting. Isin Badwasi had retained the exuberance of youth though his cropped hair held traces of silver. His face was mobile, eyes dark and holding a gleam of amusement. Gold shone in rich profusion against the rich blackness of his skin. "Come to look at my toys, commander?"

"They're safe?"

"As a virgin locked behind fifty feet of stone." He sobered at Dumarest's expression. "Sorry, I just like to joke. All locks are in place. Firing mechanisms inactive. Heads unarmed. The way things are we couldn't hurt a fly."

"How long before we could?"

"Too long," admitted Badwasi. "If we were attacked now we'd be dead before we knew what hit us. A precaution," he explained. "Against a ship failing to clear the gravity well or a generator failing at a critical time. It happened to Domhar three years ago. His vessel didn't make it. Luckily it hit well away from town but it still made a nasty mess."

"Does that happen often?"

"Once was enough. So we don't arm the missiles until we're in the clear. But the electronics are functioning."

"Show me." Dumarest watched as the man sent his hands dancing over his instruments. Screens lit to show the vista of space, the great ball of Kaldar looming close as they circled it in orbit. Lines crossed circles to form impact points, computers maintaining alignment. "Have you automatic locking?"

"You name it, we have it. Toibin never spared expense when it came to equipment. We can lock on a target, hold, fire by time or remote. This ship can hold its own against anything in space."

Creatures of the imagination born from the dreams of a violent childhood when the unknown held terrors and to be

armed was to be safe. A sense of insecurity carried into adult life. Ships could not fight in space as Badwasi well knew; the Erhaft field made such conflict impossible. The instruments and armament housed in the vessel were for use against helpless towns and the people in them.

Dumarest studied a panel, the board marked as to various rooms and levels. "Slave gas?"

"The system doesn't work."

"You've carried slaves?"

"Often. But not for some time now. Toibin didn't like it. He claimed the profit was too small and the trouble too great. I guess he had a point."

"I guess he had," said Dumarest. "Were you a friend of his?"

"We got along."

"Do you know where he got that knife he used?"

"Against you in the fight?" Badwasi shook his head. "No. I can't remember seeing it before. He must have picked it up somewhere."

"Or received it as a gift?"

"It's possible. Toibin had a lot of friends. He was popular. People liked to do things for him. Give him gifts. Do what he wanted. He said people liked him. I guess he was right."

"Yes," said Dumarest. "Dead right."

"Meaning?"

"Toibin's gone. What he wanted or didn't want no longer matters. It's what I want that matters now. Get this system working. I want everything on this ship to be fully operational. Is that understood?"

"Sure, but the captain—"

"Gives the orders. I know. Do you want to make an issue of it?" Dumarest met the other's eyes, waited until they lowered. Quietly he said, "Were you on Arpagus?"

"I was."

"In charge of the armament?"

"That's right." Badwasi straightened, his eyes wary. "I aimed and fired the missiles — but I didn't call the shots."

"Remember that," said Dumarest. "From now on no one calls the shots but me."

"Understood, commander." Badwasi turned to his panels as the lights flickered their warning. "Good. At last we're on our way."

In the caverns the temperature was constant and it was only imagination which caused Ryon to feel the semblance of a chill. Yet was it wholly imagination? He could feel the tension beneath the scarlet robe as his body adopted a protective stance against the loss of heat. An association, he decided, one born of the learning of failure and almost psychosomatic in its end result. One alien to all previous experience — never had he known fear. Yet now, scanning the report, he could sense what such an emotion could be.

But if fear was alien to his experience so was regret. The past was over and unchangeable. To blame the phenomenal luck which attended Dumarest was to follow an illogical path. A proof of inefficiency which he would never tolerate. The challenge remained and must be met. The means were to hand.

Machines had smoothed the floors so that the stone held a soft sheen over which he glided with an assured tread. An aide hovered discretely to one side. Another led the way through passages, rooms, compartments to an area in which the air pulsed with the murmur of assembled apparatus. Against a wall a screen showed a nacreous surface. Those present wore sterile white touched with the insignia of their crafts. Among them Ryon and his aides resembled living flames.

"Master." Sing Candhar, seamed with years of study and service, bowed to the Cyber Prime. A gesture of respect for achievement and not an admission of servitude. "The experiment is prepared and waiting."

"Continue."

The screen glowed to vibrant color. It showed a sterile chamber in which apparatus was assembled on a bench and, to one side, a construction of rods, cranks, and levers.

"A mechanical analogue of the human body," explained Candhar. "The major problem we have as yet encountered is the difficulty of the recorded mind-imprint to adjust itself to the unfamiliar host in which it finds itself. The brains have been divested of their bodies for many years and old habits have died or been forgotten. It is basically a matter of re-education."

The next step to total domination. The recorded impression of a brain impressed on the sensitive metal node to be given life in a new form. The stumbling block had been unexpected but was totally understandable. If a brain, transplanted from one skull to another, hoped to control its new body, it had to establish synaptic links in order to unite mind and flesh. The expectation had been that such a union would be automatic. The facts were otherwise.

"Now," said Candhar.

A lever jerked on the construction.

"The mind-imprint has been impressed on the analogue and is now learning what impulse results in what effect. The command is to lift and wave both arms."

"Would moving one arm not be easier for it to master?"

"The arms, to be effective, must learn to work in unison. It is best to impress that from the outset."

Again the analogue jerked in apparently random movements. A child, blind, deaf, without sensation, fumbling with gloved

hands at buttons to find which did what, remembering the gained results, correlating them, uniting them with others to achieve control.

Learning to move, to crawl, to stand, to walk. To touch and see and discover the world around. A baby did it and so could a man.

"Are there signs of deterioration?"

"None as yet, master. There is some disorientation as we expected and, of necessity, a realignment of mental attitude. In effect we are witnessing a rebirth."

A man wedding himself to metal. Ryon watched as the jerking movements of the analogue grew more frantic, rods shifting, clashing against levers, cranks jerking in a wild abandon. A metal spider threshing in an extreme of agony. A machine which had run berserk.

The threshing died as Candhar touched a control.

"What happened?"

"A failure, master."

Another to add to the rest — this was not the first experiment. Another brain lost — the mind-imprint was not a copy but a transfer of the entire energy-pattern which made an individual. How must it have felt locked in an alien housing, afflicted by alien sensations?

An academic question, the intelligence had found refuge first in madness and then in the extinction attending the volatilization of the node.

Ryon said, "Investigate the possibility that the analogue was too alien for the intelligence to accept. A more familiar host must be found. One with which the imprint can sense an affinity."

"A clone?"

"Perhaps. One from the actual brain tissue itself would have the highest chance of success."

"Marie, the late Cyber Prime, instigated an experiment which could be of value," suggested Candhar. "It was placed in abeyance when circumstances dictated a change of effort. It might be possible to utilize the progress which had been made."

"That decision has already been taken. Proceed as instructed."

Ryon swept from the room attended by his silent aides. Down more passages, into other rooms, ending in one which held medical scents and a real, not imagined chill. Like Candhar the medical technician was no longer young. His bow was as perfunctorily.

"Master. I have done as you asked."

"The situation?"

"The experiment can be completed without too much expenditure of effort or loss of time."

The required answer. Ryon stepped to a transparent wall and studied what lay beyond. Marie had planned well and the logic of the Cyclan had done the rest. While to maintain a lapsed experiment was wasteful yet to discard accomplished achievement was inefficient. The change of effort Candhar had mentioned, induced when Marie had demonstrated his inefficiency and had paid the price of failure, had given him the key to ultimate success.

The dream had died, killed by endless days, vanishing to trail behind her like torn and dusty cobwebs mocking in their memories of what might have happened. She'd hoped for so much. To be free, unrestrained, untrammelled, yet all she had accomplished was to have moved from one prison to another and that of the ship was more confining than she had thought possible. A closed world in which she felt she was being moulded into a figure of madness.

"Nadine, here are the figures for the lower decks." Nigel Myer

handed her a slip of paper, not meeting her eyes, too eager to rejoin his comrades to be more than barely polite. "Is there anything else?"

He moved away as she shook her head, released from duties invented to make him feel important and give him a sense of purpose. She knew too well the compliment of the ship. Knew the cliques and cabals which were building and changing, the associations and groups. But, while the compliment found pleasure in the company of others and could talk and make plans she could only walk from one compartment to another, to the salon, the hold, her cabin where, thank God, she could be alone.

"Just a minute!" A woman came towards her, bright touches of paint accentuating her lips and eyes, the bones of her face. Tazima Osborn, arrogant, fuming with anger. "I'm changing one of my cabin-partners. Ellen Beram. I can't stand the bitch. Lisa is willing to take her place. See to it."

"No," snapped Nadine. "You see to it. Why tell me?"

"You put us together. I've never liked the woman since the Escum raid. Move her or there'll be blood — and it won't be mine!"

Another threat and more trouble to add to the rest. The threat meant little; a part of the general atmosphere of violence she had known all her life, but trouble was something she was supposed to avoid, to negate before it grew unto ugly dimensions. A job she'd been good at but that had been on a different world. In the regimented constriction of the ship small things took on a new importance and could lead to quarrels and bloody violence.

Zehava didn't help.

"Let them sort it out between themselves. If they want action put them in a ring with clubs. Naked," she added. "And spike the clubs with nails. They'll cool down when it comes to risking their beauty."

She sat with others at a table in the salon playing dice, the cubes landing hard against the baffle.

"Seventeen!" Zehava picked up one of the four cubes. "Now sixteen. Watch me hit twenty-one!" She threw and cursed as the die came to rest showing a six. "Over! I'm busted and out!" She glared at Nadine. "You brought me bad luck! Take your stupid problems somewhere else!"

An insult, one she could take up, but Zehava wouldn't shrink from combat and she lacked the other's skill. A gust of laughter followed her from the salon and she halted to lean against the bulkhead feeling the endless vibration of the drive against her forehead and cheek. She had known those at the table all her life, but now they were strangers. As were too many others. In the entire ship she had only one friend.

Dumarest was in his cabin. He opened the door to her knock and stepped aside to allow her entrance. He had been resting, the imprint of his body clear on the bunk. The cubicle was dimly lit but bright enough for her to see the scars which marred his naked torso and read his welcome and, thankfully, his concern.

It gave her courage. She said, "I have to talk to you. The others don't take me seriously. The officers look on me as a nuisance. I've no experience of raiding. I don't belong. Even the work I do is a joke."

"You're wrong." He gestured, inviting her to sit on the bunk. "Would you like a drink? Some wine? Here, try some of this."

It was peedham and he served it in a small glass engraved with erotic figures. Zehava's gift, she guessed, and felt a sharp jealousy.

"You must think me a fool."

"No."

"A coward then."

Something of both but she was not to blame for either. Only a fool attempted the impossible and a coward was merely a human who feared the unknown. He sat beside her, smiling comfort over his glass, letting the magic of its contents warm his stomach as

he hoped it was dissolving her terror. A paranoid, suspicious of everyone and everything, convinced she was surrounded by enemies. Able to read their secret thoughts, their amusement, scorn, contempt. On Kaldar the boaster, the braggart and swaggerer were held in esteem and then only as long as they lived up to their image. A harsh society in which to be gentle was to be weak and to be weak was to be despised.

Nadine had been born on the wrong world.

He said, gently, "You're not a fool and you certainly aren't a coward. You're just someone who is learning a hard lesson. You are discovering there is no escape. No matter how far or how fast we run the bars we carry with us will always cage us in. You, me, everyone. We are all prisoners of our mind."

"Not you, Earl!"

"Everyone." He sipped at his glass. She saw the light reflected from his eyes, the strong lines of his mouth and jaw. "Don't try to find happiness, Nadine. Be satisfied with contentment."

Good advice but he would never take it. For him there could be alternative to the path he had chosen and she wondered how a world could hold such allure. What had he lost that he should miss it so much?

"Drink," he urged. "You need to relax. What have you to report?"

Nothing but a host of small details, but she sensed his interest was deeper than it seemed. What, to her, were trivial scraps of information was, to him, items which could threaten the success of his enterprise.

Watching him, reading him, she felt a disturbing flood of emotion. One stemming from the safety of the cabin, his strength, the protection he could give. A partner who could offer happiness. One who could give her love.

"Earl!" The peedham had dissolved her reticence. The light held a new softness and his closeness created an urgent demand.

"Tell me," she whispered, her hand rising to caress his cheek. "Tell me —" but even as she framed the question she knew it would be futile. What he had lost would be a secret he would keep. Instead she said, fighting for control, "How much longer will the journey last?"

"Does it matter?"

"It could. There are too many disputes, threats, actual fights. The compliment is restless. They resent discipline and are bored. Some even talk of breaking the journey to make a raid."

"No!" He was emphatic. "They mustn't be allowed to do that. We have to keep going. Talk to them. Remind them of what they stand to gain. The treasure, gems, precious metals, all the other things. The entire wealth of a world. The planet itself. Play on their greed. If they insist on arguing threaten to evict them."

"And when they object? Am I supposed to fight?"

"If you have to, yes." He strove to be patient. "I'm not talking about physical combat. Fight with your brains and talent. Read them. Use lies, gossip, rumor, anything which works. You've done it before."

"On Kaldar. This is a new world."

"It's still a world. The same rules apply. Another drink?" He set aside the bottle when she shook her head. "Then get some rest. Stay here if you want. I'll make sure no one bothers you."

She wanted more than the security of his cabin.

"Earl!"

She reached for him, yielding to the thrust of emotion, her demanding need. Within the circle of her arms she felt the firm strength of his body, responding to its warm impact, feeling the burning heat of desire, knowing it was shared. Then, abruptly, he pushed her away.

"Earl'." She felt the pain of rejection. "What's wrong?"

His hand was pressed against the bulkhead and she read the answer. Her own hand confirmed it. The metal was free of vibration. The Erhaft field had collapsed.

Dumarest ran through a ship filled with apparent corpses. An illusion created by the drug which had neutralized the quicktime in his blood and restored his normal metabolism. In the engine room others, also on normal time, wrestled with the bulk of the generator.

Zoll Mauger snarled his impatience at a stubborn panel.

"Give me a hand, here! Move!"

Simi Kent, the second engineer, ran forward with an oddly shaped lever. One he slipped into an orifice, heaved, grunted as the casing remained intact.

"What's the problem?" Dumarest rested a hand on the metal. "Warped?"

"Maybe fused. I hope to hell it isn't. Cutting it free could do damage." Simi heaved again on the lever, Dumarest adding his strength. Together they forced it free. "Zoll!"

The engineer pushed them aside as he crouched to examine the exposed interior of the generator. When he straightened black smears streaked the contours of his face.

Simi was impatient. "Bad?"

"Bad enough. The governor blew. The safety fuses took the brunt, but they went in turn and the coils are grimed." Irritably he shook his head. "I don't understand it. There was no reason for the damn thing to blow. We were running even, no surges, no drain, nothing to cause damage. It just happened."

Dumarest said, "How long to repair it?"

"As long as it takes." Mauger was curt. "The governor will have to be replaced. We carry a spare so that's no problem. But the generator need to be cleaned, the safeties renewed and the

coils needs to be polished and realigned."

"For the text-book repair," agreed Dumarest. "I'm talking about something good enough to establish the field and get us to a planet."

"You an engineer?"

"I've handled machines and seen damaged generators." Dumarest stared at the other man. "From what you say most of what needs doing is basic. Maybe I can help. It's my neck too," he reminded. "Don't blame me for taking care of it."

"I don't." Mauger looked at Nadine. She had entered the engine room as they had talked. "What is it?"

"The captain wants a full report." She looked at the dismantled generator and added, "I heard what you said about replacing the governor. I suggest you check the spare before you do."

"Why?" Mauger scowled when she told him. "Some worker on Kaldar committing sabotage? Are you serious?"

"Vargas was complaining about sloppy work. There could be a connection. How often do governors blow?"

"Rarely," admitted the engineer. "What's your point?"

Dumarest said, before Nadine could answer, "It could be simple chance or it could be sabotage. If it happens again we could lose the generator. Are you willing to take that kind of chance?"

"Not if I can help it," said Mauger. "I'll check it out. You can report to the captain when I've finished."

Cradled by his chair in the control room Lief Chapman was a part of his domain. A meld of machine and mind, of science and art; apparent magic which had given Mankind the universe to rove in. All useless now. The vessel had turned into a coffin.

With the Erhaft field down it was traveling below the speed of light and long before it could reach a habitable world everyone aboard would be dead. Starvation would see to it, and thirst, and inevitable madness. Not even the magic of drugs would stave off the inevitable. But that would not happen to his command. The vagaries of chance had seen to that.

"Captain?" Niall was at his side, eyes on the main screen.
"You've checked it out?"

Chapman nodded, eyes drifting over the panels, the ranked instruments. Space was far from empty and nothing in it was safe.

"As yet we're lucky," said the navigator. "This area is relatively clear. It all depends on how long it takes to affect repairs."

Dumarest provided the answer. Chapman scowled as he finished his report.

"How long?"

"A day, maybe less." Dumarest noticed the captain's expression. "I'm quoting the engineer. The original governor is useless. If it hadn't been for Mauger I'd be saying the same about the generator, but we had luck and he was quick to act. He needs to calibrate the spare governor, replace the safeties and do what he can to clean the coils."

"Why waste time messing with the spare?"

"It can't be relied on."

"We can't use it?"

"I didn't say that. The tolerances are way out. It has to be stripped and recalibrated to accepted standard. If that isn't done it will blow. When it does it could take the generator with it. We don't carry a spare generator. We won't have a spare governor either." Dumarest added, grimly, "It's a gamble I'd rather not take."

Chapman was equally grim. "We have no choice."

He pointed at the screen before him, the stars it portrayed. Cross-hairs quartered a glowing point. As they watched the star moved to one side. An illusion; it was the ship which had moved.

"We're caught in a Blakstaad vortex," explained the navigator. "Spiraling into the center. There's a black hole there. When we get too close we'll be sucked in."

Dumarest said, "How long do we have?"

"An hour. Seventy five minutes at the most. The speed of approach increases the closer we get." Chapman reached for his panel, punched a button. "Mauger?"

"With you, captain."

"Make an immediate start on the repairs. Use all the help you need."

The engineer snapped, "Haven't you been told what happened? The situation we're in?"

"It makes no difference. Just do as I order. You've an hour to get this ship out of trouble. Understood?"

"It can't be done."

"Do it!"

Mauger snarled his anger. "To hell with that. We haven't the time and no stupid order is going to change things. Get that into your skull. We haven't the time!"

"Damn you! We're heading into a black hole!"

"You want me to put things back together again?" snapped the engineer. "Just put them back? Right, I'll do it, but it'll make no difference. Unless it's done right it'll be a waste of time. The generator won't work or, if it does, it'll blow in seconds and leave only scrap. You know that."

Dumarest said, quickly, "There's a way out. We can use slowtime."

Speeding their metabolism so that minutes turned into hours. But using it was dangerous. The mere act of living burning energy, created hunger, searing thirst and numbing fatigue. Water became a thick, cloying syrup. Food was inedible. Objects gained apparent weight because of massive inertia. Muscles were strained, sinews torn, any normal impact resulting in pulped flesh and shattered bone.

"You've used it?" Chapman sighed his relief as Dumarest nodded. "Teach the others how to adapt. I'll have Chagal deliver it to the engine room. He'll stay to help."

"With booster shots, ice, cold water and glucose," said Dumarest. To the navigator he added, "Find us a world to run to. Pick one which is close."

Chapter Ten

Fionnulawas a world redolent of decay. A dull ball of brown and grey circling a scarlet sun blotched and marred by scabrous patches of sooty blackness. The sky was umber traced with drifting clouds of dusty brown. The soil was harsh, gritty, bearing vegetation the color of dust. Walls and houses were of rock, fretted and pocked as if made by the fumbling hands of children. On the field itself a truncated cone stood like a monument in an ancient graveyard.

"A dump!" Zehava voiced her contempt. "It's spooked. Even the air stinks."

"We didn't come for the air." Dumarest had noticed the acrid taint as he had noticed the oddity of the field. No loungers, touts, the usual entrepreneurs. None eager to talk to the crew, to obtain passage, to offer cargo. Not even the expected guards. A world seeming to be devoid of curiosity. One apparently free of greed. "They have what we need."

"Taverns, I hope. Recreation of a kind — the compliment is

getting stale."

"Keep them busy. I want the ship cleaned and aired. Have them settle any personal disputes then put them to drill. Badwasi will help. Turn them into a disciplined force." Pausing he added, "Make the show impressive."

"To awe the natives?" She smiled her understanding. "A show of muscle to instill respect and to ease the negotiations. And we don't have to hurry them." Her fingers closed on his arm. "It's time we got close, Earl. Really close. Let's find a hotel. We need comfort and privacy." Her tone sharpened as he shook his head. "Why not?"

"We haven't the time. You're needed here. I'm due to meet Nadine to arrange the repairs."

The town was reminiscent of Kaldar with its narrow streets and winding ways, but the people were different. Small, subdued, faces bland and bearing a common likeness. The obvious result of intensive inbreeding. Their clothing followed natural colors brightened with stylized designs which, he guessed, denoted status and skills. He saw no sign of weapons.

Nadine was waiting before the repair sheds. As they met she said, "This is an odd place, Earl. Almost like something from a dream. But it seems peaceful and the people are polite."

"A cultural trait."

"You've met similar before?"

"All worlds have their own ways. Some are stranger than others. Did you discover who can best help us?"

"Aslam Cazele. He's waiting for us in his tower."

He sat in a chamber ornamented with relics of former days; banners, weapons, scrolls illuminated with elaborate designs. An old man, puffed beneath his clothing, his face strongly boned, eyes hard, bright with a watchful sheen.

"You are welcome." His gesture invited them to sit. "You will join me in cakes and wine, I insist. Strangers are rare on Fionnula."

Traditional hospitality displaying peaceful intent. A custom familiar to Dumarest. The cakes were small, the wine perfumed. Cazele drained his glass and wiped his lips on a scrap of fabric. Leaning back in his chair he smiled as he noticed Nadine's interest in the furnishings of the room.

"My adornments interest you? That banner was carried by an ancestor in a bloody war. That scroll lists those who first settled here. That is a graph of population trends. With that gun I brought down a gravid ulharge in the Moreau Pass. An ugly thing. I was in my late teens at the time. But enough of an old man's memories. More wine?"

Dumarest said, "What is that?"

He pointed to a glass case set against a wall. The yellow light shone in ruby reflections from a creature mounted beneath the transparent pane. A scaled and spined thing half the length of his forearm, winged, the mandibles lined with cruel serrations. The proboscis was like a needle. Compound eyes shone like jewels. The tail held a cluster of vents which could have housed stings.

"That?" Cazele was casual. "A pylas. They breed in the hills. Now tell me about yourselves. Have you come to trade? We have a fine stock of dried loosh in the warehouse and I can talk Sinclair into letting it go for a reasonable price. If you want to settle there is land to the north. Good soil and plenty of water."

"We have landed to effect minor repairs. We need parts and facilities. It seems your authority is needed before they can be provided."

"That is correct. The field and the repair sheds are in my domain. Just what do you need?"

"My engineer could tell you that better than I. If you give me the necessary authority he and your technicians can get

together."

"Agreed. I also assume you would be interested in recreational facilities." Cazele poured more wine. "Fionnula may look bleak but things are not always what they seem. There is good hunting if you care to indulge in the sport. We have underground lakes and gardens. Soon it will be the time of the Carriere. The time of rain," he explained. "The sky will be thick with cloud and the air alive with waterfalls. Three days and the sun shines again and the crops grow before your eyes. The fields will be rich with glorious color yielding a heady perfume. It is a time of festival. You will enjoy it."

"If we are here."

"It would be a pity if you were not." Cazele smiled and sipped at his wine. Shaking his head he set down the glass and rose to his feet. "I am being inhospitable. The wine is not of the best. Please excuse me while I fetch a fresh bottle."

An obvious excuse to leave them alone. Electronic eyes and ears could hear every word, see every movement and give Cazele an advantage if they were careless. Such a man would not miss the opportunity of learning what he could. Dumarest rose as Nadine leaned towards him and moved to where the pylas rested in its case. As she joined him he rested a finger on the pane.

Quietly, as if discussing the creature, he said, "What do you read?"

"He wants the business but he wants us to settle even more. From what I've seen this planet needs new blood. He could hope we will provide it."

By revitalizing the population with new children, the vitality of new minds, new energies. An influx gained by the promise of land, titles, the hint of given authority. An offer which held appeal and those so tempted would be reluctant to leave.

"Look around," said Dumarest. "See what you can learn. In a way you are looking at the history of a world."

One barely investigated before Cazele returned. The wine he had selected was darkly red, flecked with tiny motes of gold, the taste giving rise to thoughts of firelight and clustered shadows.

"A wine for romance," he said, lifting his glass. "In it one can see pleasant memories and the hint of joys to come. A rare vintage. If the weather is kind we shall be able to repeat it. Your health!"

Dutifully Dumarest drank the toast. As he lowered his glass he said, "Now to business. We have yet to come to an arrangement."

"We will, but after a journey it is good to rest for a while. To enjoy what a new world has to offer. Good food and wine. Pleasant company." Cazele lifted the bottle. "Enjoy your stay. Why be in so much of a hurry?"

"A matter of finance," said Dumarest. "We are mercenaries and have a contract. It would be poor business for us to break it or to arrive late. Which is why we can tolerate no unnecessary delay." Smiling he reached for the bottle. "Now let us enjoy the rest of this wine."

Dumarest stood on the field before the enigmatic cone, one hand resting on the surface, head tilted as he looked up at its height.

As Zehava joined him he said, "What do you make of this?"

"Nothing. It's a freak of some kind. Maybe a monument of sorts. It could even be old garbage. Who the hell cares? Just relax, Earl. Why make problems? We've enough as it is."

"The compliment," he agreed. "They're turning into a rabble."

"That's your opinion. They aren't toy soldiers. The Kaldari don't take orders. They won't obey unless they want to and there's no reason they should. Anyway, where's the harm? What's wrong with a little recreation?"

Days and nights spent on their concept of fun, the natives eager for the money they squandered in taverns, casinos, and

houses of pleasure. The normal pastimes of those to whom the future was always in doubt. For whom old age was an abstraction. Too many days and now parties were rafting into the hills to find what sport they could.

Zehava said, "How can you blame them, Earl? They're bored. The repairs are taking too long. So they' re having some fun. Why don't we?"

An invitation he ignored. Mauger grunted as he entered the engine room. The basic work had been done, a new governor replacing the original spare, but the coils had needed more work than he had guessed and now there was a fresh problem.

"The air recyclers will have to be checked. We found one with damaged components which could have poisoned the air. Once the ionic exchanger breaks down there's a danger it can produce too much ozone or —"

"Sabotage?"

Mauger shrugged. "How to tell? Filters break down like everything else."

But not in a vessel correctly maintained. Not in a ship which dared not take the chance of malfunction. What else could he suspect? How much longer the delay?

Again the engineer shrugged. "I can't tell you that. The generator took longer than I thought and now we have to take care of this. I won't be happy until I've checked every essential component. It'll take time but it's better to be sure. Anyway, this seems a comfortable world."

Too comfortable, at least for the visitors, Dumarest wasn't so sure about the natives. Yet they seemed amiable enough if a little odd. Too detached, too prone to lose attention, sometimes seeming to shrink in abject terror and, at others, to be riding an euphoric high. All giving the impression of holding a common secret, one they were determined not to share.

Nadine was no help.

"I can't read them, Earl," she confessed. "I don't know their language. What would normally signal fear and terror comes out as joy and anticipation. There are places I can't enter. Closed houses. There are trips out to the hills in sealed rafts."

"Hunters?"

"I'm not sure. They could be but where are the trophies? The skins and tails and heads. Cazele has things like that in his office. You'd expect to find them on sale." Pausing she added, "Land has been offered to some of the compliment. Land, servants, and titles if they will stay. Women, too, a lot of women. To revitalize the population, I suppose. Only the men have so far been approached."

"Do any show interest?"

"Some of them. They talk of setting up here. Of turning this world into an extension of Kaldar. They will rule and the natives will do the work." She shook her head, smiling. "It's just talk, Earl. A dream. When the ship's ready to leave they'll forget it."

Something he doubted. Cazele was offering a golden bribe and the promise was too enticing, the temptation too great. All they had ever hoped to attain delivered on a plate. The expedition would be abandoned. The ship retained to take the news back to Kaldar. He would be forgotten or conveniently disposed of.

Thoughts which sent him to pace the empty salon.

"Earl?"

"Go to Cazele," he said. "Apply pressure. I want everything we need delivered without delay. Hint that we could come to an agreement if he wants some of us to settle."

"You'd give them permission to stay?"

"Can I prevent them?" His smile was that of a man accepting the inevitable. "Just do your best to persuade him. Take your time and find out what you can. From him and any others of the Cabal." He added, "Make the most of what will happen at dusk."

Zehava was in town, seated at a table with others, throwing dice for wine. She rose as she saw Dumarest.

"Earl, what a pleasant surprise. Say you missed me and decided to have some fun." Abruptly she changed the subject. "Zoll tells me the repairs aren't coming as well as they should. Something about delays. Wasn't Nadine supposed to be taking care of that?"

"She is."

"Good." Her hand rose to touch his cheek, the fingers trailing in a caress. "You're worried, darling. Worried and tired. You're trying to carry everything on your back. Let others do some of the work." Her hand moved, slipped within his arm, her body moving to press against his own. "Let's see what this place has to offer."

They found a tavern which offered food and drink and women who danced in erotic postures to the beat of drums. A passage led to an underground lake where they swam among fish with crimson scales and eyes of pearl. Strands of silver weed embraced them and strange blooms of living petals emulated the seasons as they watched.

As dusk neared Dumarest led the way outside to where rafts drifted from the hills to settle on roofs and clear spaces. Wealthy landowners, he guessed, returning from their holdings to the comfort and security of their towers. An evening ritual.

Zehava ignored them. "Where next, Earl?"

"Wait." He looked at the sky, the peak of a distant promontory. "We're about to see a show."

One which blazed into life without warning. Fire streamed from a scintillating point in savage brightness. A glare which created thunder. A blast which shook the air and rattled windows and caused dust to rise from houses and streets. Twice more missiles hurtled from the ship to repeat the display of the first, the last leaving an ugly patch of widening darkness. Soot which rose to form a new cloud in the sky. Badwasi had done

well.

His work created chaos.

Zehava winced as a shrieking woman ran past her down the narrow street, eyes wild, hands tearing at her hair. A man, hysterical with fear, followed her, others joining in to form a sudden flood of demented humanity. One which vanished as quickly as it had appeared, bodies diving through every opening, doors closing, shutters slamming across windows. Almost at once the town was deserted.

"God!" Zehava clutched at Dumarest's arm. "What's the matter with them? Some noise. A few bangs in the sky and they go crazy."

"Let's get back to the ship."

"Why? I want to see what happens. How long is everyone going to stay locked away?"

Long enough for the day to die and the stars to appear. Nadine was waiting when they returned to the ship. She had a message from Cazele.

"You are not to fire missiles again. If you do all cooperation will cease."

Dumarest looked at Mauger. "Do we need it?"

"Technical help, no, but we could still use some parts and facilities. Nadine was going to arrange it."

"I have. Cazele gave me his promise of assistance in return for my assurance that there will not be another accident. That's what I told him," she explained. "The missiles were fired in error. He didn't believe me."

"He wasn't supposed to," said Dumarest. "Just as long as he gives us what we need. That isn't a complete overhaul," he said to the engineer. "I want the ship ready to leave. Don't rip apart things for the sake of it."

"I want us to be safe."

"Just make sure we can leave." To Nadine he said, "What else did you pick up?"

"At the time of the blast? Cazele was terrified. So were the others with him."

"Terrified," mused Zehava. "Like the people in town, Earl. I wonder why?"

Chapter Eleven

From the body of the raft the hills were a series of irregular peaks scored with shallow ravines and dotted with level patches bearing stunted trees and bushes. Rough ground providing thick cover for predators and other creatures. But Dumarest had seen no sign of life.

"There!" Zehava pointed to where a regular shape stood to one side. "See it?" To the driver she snapped, "Turn left and down. Between those mounds. Land close to the cabin."

It was small, a mere box with sealed windows, a roof, a door. Ventilation was provided by spinning fans set in meshed tubes. Like the building in town it had been constructed of worn and fretted stone.

Inside rested a wide bed, a table and chairs, a compact cooking unit, some odd items of clothing and sporting gear, a dead man.

Nigel Myer who had chased adventure and had found something which had killed him.

He lay on the bed, legs sprawled, hands empty, the slash across his throat the grisly parody of a smile. He was naked, scratches on arms and torso, more on one cheek. Blood had dried to provide a brownish smear on flesh and the cover on which he lay. More smears made a patch from the bed to the door. Others spattered the walls.

Dumarest touched his arm, moved his fingers to the region of the heart as he felt the temperature of the flesh.

"His companion?"

"Ulman Tighe. He's outside."

He sat on the ground, well away from the cabin, the radio with which he had summoned help hanging from a strap around his neck. A man of Nigel's age, dressed in rough clothing, a holstered weapon at his belt.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. That is I'm not sure. It —" He broke off, swallowing rising vomit. More lay to one side where he had vented the contents of his stomach. "We came out here to hunt. Nigel, me and Wanda. She was our guide. More than that, really, she seemed to like us and we all got along. Nigel wanted to be alone with her so I took a walk. When I returned I found them lying together in a puddle of blood. God — what a mess!"

Dumarest said, sharply, "What about the girl?"

"I dragged her from him. She didn't belong. He was of the Kaldari and —"

"Where is she now?"

Lying in a shallow gully to one side of the cabin. A small, forlorn, naked creature who had once been beautiful but now was a thing of horror. Something had ripped open her stomach from crotch to navel, leaving her intestines to hang like tangled ribbons.

Zehava said, "Nigel couldn't have done this. Tighe must be responsible. He killed them both then realized he was stranded unless he sent for help."

"Why did he kill them?"

"Jealously, perhaps? She must have played one against the

other and he lost his temper."

Slashing a throat and ripping open a stomach in a frenzy of rage. A possibility but Dumarest doubted if it was the answer. Tighe had been armed, his gun to hand, an easy method of dealing death. Back in the cabin he studied the man, his clothing, the smears it bore, the smudges. Some were on his face, more on his hands. But the thick spatters which marred the walls were absent. How could he have stood in the sudden spraying of blood and avoided the betraying shower?

How had he caused the wounds?

The dead man moved beneath his hands as Dumarest examined the slashed throat. A knife would have left a clean gash. A claw a rip as neat if not as deep. The wound on Nigel's throat had been made with something jagged like a saw.

Thoughtfully he examined the interior of the cabin. A sealed box once the door was closed and it was so arranged that it could not be left open by accident. It had been closed when Tighe had returned from his walk. If he wasn't the murderer, then someone else had to be.

"No." Tighe was positive. "I saw no one leave. I wasn't gone all that long," he explained. "Just wandered in a circle. Wanda warned us about straying too far from the cabin. She thought of it as protection."

"From what?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. When I questioned her she changed the subject. They all do that."

Becoming vague if asked to give specific information. Switching to something else when asked to talk about their personal lives. Reluctant to go into detail and pretending ignorance when asked about facts they had to know but didn't want to admit.

"Did you really come out here to hunt or were you interested in something else? Cazele's offer," Dumarest suggested. "The

land he promised if you would stay."

Zehava slapped her hand against the gun she carried as the young man nodded.

"There's your motive, Earl! He wanted to stay but Nigel wasn't interested so he killed him to shut his mouth."

"The girl, too? Why would he do that?"

"To stop her talking. He wouldn't want it to get around. Chapman would call it mutiny."

Dumarest said, dryly, "Aren't the Kaldari supposed to be independent? Why should Tighe care what the captain thought? If he wants to stay he will. I can't see him committing a double murder to keep a secret which doesn't need keeping."

"If he didn't kill them who did?"

Dumarest said to the young man, "You took a short walk and they were alive and well when you left. How long were they alone? Ten minutes? Thirty?"

"About that. Yes."

"Thirty minutes. You returned, saw them and then what did you do? Use the radio to summon help?"

"Yes."

"Right away?"

"I was sick first," admitted Tighe. "All that blood. I staggered outside and threw up. Then I called for help."

A call relayed to Dumarest as he traversed the hills with Zehava and the native driver. They had reached the cabin within minutes. Barely time for Tighe to have shifted the body of the girl. They had seen no raft and Dumarest had seen no sign of movement. The cabin had been empty when Tighe had found the bodies and Nigel's flesh was still warm. If Tighe was innocent how had the couple died?

"Let's finish this." Zehava was impatient. "Wrap up the body and take it back with us. Nigel can be evicted in space — he deserves better than this lousy world. Tighe, give me a hand."

The cover rustled as they moved it to cover the body. A rustle echoed by another as Dumarest propped open the door. It slammed as he ducked, throwing himself forward, steel flashing as he jerked the knife from his boot. Something hit the panel, scrabbled, rose with a flash of scarlet wings to fall, spraying blood, the head severed from the body. A pylon which had lurked unseen beneath the bed.

One with mandibles strong enough and jagged enough to have slashed a throat and ripped open a stomach.

"Filth!" Zehava pulped it beneath her foot. "It must have sneaked in when you went for your walk, Tighe. You were lucky. Nigel wasn't. Let's get back to town."

There had been music, dancers, acrobats who defied gravity. A woman who sang with the trilling cadences of birds. A juggler, a contortionist, a girl who ate fire. There had been meats served in a dozen ways, vegetables graced with a variety of sauces, cakes, pastries, nuts, confections in stunning profusion. Wine had been served from crystal flagons accompanied by a choice of spirits and liqueurs with surprising flavors.

The ingredients of a feast provided by Cazele as a gesture of hospitality and farewell.

Now, the meal and entertainment over, most of the company helped from their places to the privacy of rooms, talk hung like drifting smoke over the table.

"We shall be sorry to see you leave," said Cazele from his place at the head of the board. "I regret that you could not all respond to my invitation."

"A matter of necessity," said Dumarest.

"One I understand. But I would have liked to thank them all for having enlivened the town."

"Good profit for the taverns." Lebor Aethy smiled at remembered gain.

"There will be broken hearts when you go." A woman, old beneath her paint, reached for a comfit. "Your men have an enviable virility." She chewed, swallowed, added, "If you wish to sell your seed before you depart —"

"Enough, Indira!" Cazele was sharp. To Dumarest he said, "I must apologize. She has imbibed too deeply."

"No." She refuted the suggestion. "I'm no drunker than you, Aslam. There's nothing objectionable in offering to buy viable sperm. If Earl agrees —"

"He doesn't," snapped Zehava.

"You speak for him?" The woman's voice held acid. "Give the orders? But I forget — you have the gun."

"Is that what you think?" Cazele laughed with genuine amusement. "You really must be drunk, my dear, to be so blind. A gun doesn't give authority, it only provides a threat. Those who rely on such a weapon are helpless should it be lost or cease to function. A wise man knows that. Knows too the mental attitude of those accustomed to rely on guns. They tend to underestimate those who do not. They forget there are other weapons."

He paused and picked a knife from the table. Light shone from its polished blade and turned it into a thing of functional beauty.

"A knife can be more than it seems," he mused. "Correctly designed it can cut and stab and slice with equal efficiency. It can be thrown. It can be used as a hammer, a lever, a probe, a surgical instrument. It can kill a beast, skin it, scrape the hide, butcher the carcass. With a flint it can make fire. It can be sharpened on a stone. Polished it acts as a mirror. It needs no charges, no cartridges. It is silent in operation. It is cheap. It will last for years. It will provide the means to survive." Metal clashed as the knife fell from his hand to hit another. "All a gun can do is wound and kill."

Zehava said, "You are wrong. A gun gives power. It makes you equal."

"Why this talk of killing?" Indira rose from her seat. "I'm interested only in life. It is late, Aslam. You will excuse me? Lebor. Peoro. Be so kind as to escort me home."

They rose, Peoro staggering a little as he climbed to his feet. A dour man who had nodded a greeting but said nothing. Cazele sighed as he departed.

"When a boy he tried to kill himself by swallowing acid. He was saved but for a long time it was agony for him to speak. The habit of silence remains. An asset at times and he controls the processing plants so he could not be ignored. More wine?" He froze the motion of his hands as Dumarest shook his head.

Zehava said, "I'd like some more wine. I've a toast to make. One to the dead."

"Your companion. A tragic loss." Cazele filled her glass. "You have my sympathy. A pylas, I understand. They can be vicious."

Dumarest said, "Why do you tolerate them?"

"We have little choice. They breed deep in the hills. Finding their nests is not easy. Destroying them is almost impossible."

"Use radioactive dusts." Zehava swallowed the remainder of her wine. "They wouldn't stand a chance."

"Perhaps not, but we lack the skills and experience. If you were to consider accepting the commission?" Cazele paused, waiting for an answer. When none came he added, "A fee could be arranged. Some of your party could remain to be picked up later. An ideal arrangement."

Dumarest said, "First we'd have to know more about the pylas. No one seems to want to talk about them. Do they often kill without reason?"

"No."

"Swarm?"

"No." Cazele reached for the flagon. "More wine? Some tisane, then. I have a special compound. But not here. Let us go into my private room."

He led the way, ignoring those left at the board. Zehava trailed after him, Nadine moving quickly to Dumarest's side. The fingers she rested on his arm, tightened, eased, closed again.

"What is it?"

She returned his whisper. "He's lying. There's something on his mind. I've read it for days. There could be danger."

The tisane fumed in an ornamented pot; a sweetish concoction which held a tart freshness and an enticing aroma. They sat in soft chairs, Dumarest between the two women, Cazele facing all three.

Without preamble he said, "I've heard talk as to your destination. Is it true that you are heading for Earth?"

"If we are?"

"Earth! "Cazele shook his head. "That vile place. I beg you to reconsider. You are welcome to stay here. We need you. Our gene pool is too small. After we settled this world too many left and only the weak remained. Our numbers have grown but we need new blood. Provide it and I'll double our previous offer as to land and position."

Nadine said, "You could buy sperm. Traders —"

"Are rare. There is little to attract them. Fionnula is not what it was. Theloosh is not in high demand and we have little else to offer. I am being honest with you." Pausing he added, "I offer a bargain. Remain here another week. Permit Indira to collect what she is willing to buy — sperm can be frozen against future need. In return load your vessel with all the loosh you can carry."

"I'll think about it," said Dumarest. "I guess Earth can wait."

"It should be destroyed!" Cazele leaned back in his chair, calmer now, confident he had made a deal. "Earth! The vilest world in the galaxy!"

"You know it?"

"I know of it," corrected Cazele. He poured himself more tisane and sat, cup in hand, vapour rising to veil his face. "A world from which men ran to find other places on which to expiate their sins. A world proscribed. Has none ever warned you not to find it?"

"Yes," said Dumarest. "A monk."

"The Church knows more than it tells. And so do others. You would be wise to heed the warning."

Zehava said, with explosive impatience, "This talk is crazy! Earth is just another planet. Most don't even believe it exists. Earl knows where to find it. We go there, get the treasure, leave. That's all there is to it."

"Treasure? You hope to find treasure?"

"What else?"

"Death," said Cazele. "Plague, disease, madness. Horror beyond imagination. Vileness beyond belief."

Nadine said, "The legends say otherwise."

"They are legends. Tales for fools. Who really believes Earth has rivers of gold, roads of precious metals, mountains of grain, lakes of wine? The concept is ridiculous. No sane man would risk his life and fortune searching for such a world. But the converse?" Cazele sipped his tisane. "There is a morbid streak in us which finds a fascination in things of horror. Ghouls, ghosts, goblins, things which lurk in darkness. Every circus has its freaks. Every carnival its share of grotesque monstrosities. The truth about Earth would be a magnet attracting every diseased mind in the galaxy."

"The truth?" said Dumarest. "How can it be determined? How —" He broke off as a dull report echoed in the chamber. "What is that?"

"Nothing." Cazele was on his feet, smiling, hands extended in a soothing gesture. "Some fireworks. A small celebration. You were about to ask a question?"

One forgotten as Dumarest looked at Nadine. "We're leaving," he snapped. "Now!"

Outside it was dark, starlight illuminating the low towers, the shuttered windows. A bright point rose to expand in a glare of light and the rolling thunder of an explosion. Dumarest remembered the missiles from the ship and the panic they had caused. Beneath his hand he felt the structure of the tower, the fretted stone a match for the enigmatic cone on the field.

"Earl! Look!" Zehava pointed at the sky. "There! On the horizon!"

A patch of cloud or something which could have been smoke. It expanded as he watched, dark against the stars, grim, menacing.

Nadine flinched as more explosions tore the air. Alarms, not fireworks. Cazele had lied and Dumarest guessed why.

"Give me your gun. Run to the ship and have the captain sound the recall. We leave when I give the word." He turned to Zehava as Nadine obeyed. "Have our people spread the word then get to the ship. Hurry!"

He ran down a narrow alley and halted at a door beneath a swinging sign. One depicting hands clasped in friendship. The door was locked.

"Open!" His boot crashed against the panel. "Open this door or I'll smash it in! Open!"

The gun in his hand blasted lead and flame, bullets tearing into the panel, ceasing as it swung open to reveal a scared face,

the dim shape of a body. Both vanished as Dumarest lunged through the opening. Beyond lay tables and chairs, the hunched bodies of natives, the arrogant figures of Kaldari.

"Emergency!" The rasp of his voice demanded attention. "Return to the ship. Pass the word to those who need to know. Move!"

A second tavern then a place filled with soft scents and seductive music, the roar of his gun destroying the sensual atmosphere, his snapped command rising above feminine screams. Then he was running towards the field as the strident blast of the recall rang through the air. Zehava was at the port.

"Stand by to seal," said Dumarest. "When I give the word don't hesitate. We'll be taking off immediately."

In the bridge Chapman turned, scowling, from his controls. "What's this all about?"

"Trouble." Dumarest looked at the screen, the dark smear depicted on it, now closer than before. "They tried to trap us. The reason for the delays. If they hadn't fired the alarms we wouldn't have stood a chance."

"I don't understand."

"The pylas aren't what they seem. Neither are the people. We offered them something new." Dumarest frowned at the screen, the figures between the town and field. Too few and moving too slowly. "Get ready for take-off."

"Now? Those people will never get here in time."

"I'll give them all there is." Dumarest added, savagely, "Damn it, captain! Do as I say! Do you want to lose the ship?"

Nadine was with Badwasi at the firing controls. His screens also showed the spreading cloud of darkness. One now almost covering the sky.

"It gives me the creeps," he said, as Dumarest joined them.

"It's like a hand reaching for us. Something from the unknown."

"Can you hit it?"

"I can blast the air where it is. You want that?" His hands danced over the controls, converting the screens to register infra-red, sucking in his breath at what they showed. "Hell! Look at that!"

A cloud of scarlet flecks, moving, dancing, creatures whose body heat registered in burning hues. A host of winged bodies spreading and glowing as if with inner fire. Even as they watched it came closer, becoming a collection of individual points, a blizzard of scarlet snow.

"We can fire," said Badwasi, "but it wouldn't do any good. It would be like trying to stop rain by shooting the drops from the air. What the hell is it?"

A swarm. The pylas moving from their nests in the hills. Obeying the instinctive directive which governed their survival.

"They're social insects," explained Dumarest. "Like ants or bees, one queen able to lay a multitude of fertile eggs. The natives have become hosts of a kind. The things take blood and give something in return. A symbiote, perhaps, an exchange which gives a doped tranquillity. That's why the people are so vague. But it's more than that. Sometimes they inject an egg. Maybe to breed a new queen. It grows in the stomach. When ready it breaks free. That's why the natives are so scared and hide when they hear the alarm."

Nadine said, "Is that what happened to Nigel and the dead girl?"

"The cabin was sealed," said Dumarest. "Zehava thought the creature must have slipped inside when Tighe took his walk. That wasn't possible. The cabin was designed to prevent it. The pylas had to have come from inside. The rip in the girl's stomach gave the answer."

That and the creature he had seen in the case, the serrated

mandibles, the wings, the needle-like proboscis, the tail-assembly. Many social insects built nests of seeming stone. Others sealed potential dangers beneath layers of extruded material. The towers, the walls, a ship if it should be too tardy in escaping. They would coat the hull, enter the ports, clog the machinery, block vents, ruin the delicate balance essential for flight.

Dumarest wondered what type of vessel lay within the enigmatic cone on the field. How long it had rested there. What had happened to the crew.

"Captain!" His hand slapped the communicator as the cloud came dangerously close. Scarlet flecks which tore savagely at those still in the open and smeared the hull with liquid stone. "Let's go! Zehava! Close the port!"

"Earl! You can't. There are people out there. Give them a chance!"

They'd had their chance and wasted it.

"Now!" His voice rose above the staccato blast of the siren, the warning to those outside to stay clear. "Do it or be sucked out! Captain! Save the ship! Hit space! Now, damn you! Now!"

To send it into the relative safety of the void, leaving helpless victims behind. Sacrifices to his overwhelming need to complete his journey to Earth.

Chapter Twelve

The metal of the ship held more than the quiver of the Erhaft field. There was a continual susurrations from the bulkheads, the hull, the decks and stanchions. Vibration trapped from a multitude of sources, traveling the confined world of the vessel, using its structure as diaphragms.

Lying on his bunk, eyes closed in sleep, Dumarest was laved with whispers which held the sound of a woman crying, the deeper tones of a curse, tapping, clicks, rustles, laughter, the

echoes of what could have been desperate prayer. Ghost-voices. Phantoms which created dreams to haunt the sleeping confines of his mind.

He stood on an endless plain wreathed in swirling mist facing a soaring range of mountains from which came all the sounds there ever could be. Voices which promised paradise, threatened hell, offered delights beyond imagination, warned of dangers yet to come. Tones voiced by men long dead, women now dust, all long dispersed in space and time. Other sounds; the whimper of a starving baby, the pleading wail of a terrified child, the snarl of hate from a man, the frenzied screaming of a beaten woman.

Echoes of what he had once known as home.

Figures surrounded him, hands extended, voices demanding that he give what he held. The body of a small rodent killed by a stone from his sling. His prey and hope of life, the nourishment which would sustain him through another day.

Running he escaped them to be faced by other shapes. Sombre figures, gaunt, faceless, menacing in scarlet robes. Their hands were concealed within wide sleeves, but their demands were the same. For him to give them the secret he held. One passed to him by a woman who had demonstrated to him the true meaning of love.

Other faces, other hands, the demand always the same. For him to give...give...give...

Still others — those wanting to take his life.

Dumarest jerked, rolling from the bunk, body tensed for combat. But he was alone, the cabin secure, no visible threat evident. A dream. A nightmare. He had known them before but rarely with such intensity. Seated he fought to slow the rapid gusting of his lungs, the tattoo-like drumming of his heart. His thoughts swirled as if driven by a fountain of bubbles.

Why had the monk warned him against finding Earth?

Why had Cazele?

In imagination Dumarest saw his face limned on the bulkhead, old, hard, the vapour from the tisane giving him the appearance of a brooding idol. A shrewd and cunning man who worked for his own ends. One who could have intended to provide subtle clues.

He knew the creed of the Original People — were they to be found on Fionnula? How had he known that Earth had been proscribed? What had he meant by saying the Church knew more than it told. As did others. Which others?

What other organization matched the Church in its world-spanning influence?

There was only one. Was it possible the Cyclan could be working in unison with the Church? Did they know where Earth was to be found? If so why had they wasted so much time and effort hunting him from world to world?

Logic demanded they would have allowed him easy passage to the planet of his birth — and the trap they would have set to close around him once he had arrived. So they could not know of Earth or, if they did, they wanted to keep him from it.

Why?

A question as yet beyond solution, but another was not. Cazele had been emphatic in his savage condemnation of Earth. Had he been acting or had he been sincere? Nadine would know.

"Earl!" Her eyes widened as she saw him. "This is a surprise. Is anything wrong?"

"No. May I come in?"

She was dressed for bed, wearing a black chiton which left one shoulder bare, the thin fabric held at her waist by a silver cord, the lower edge falling to just above her knees. Her feet were bare. Her hair unbound, the thick tresses falling over her shoulders to blend with the color of her raiment accentuating the pallor of her skin. Her face looked younger than her years. The cabin held the scent of her perfume.

"I was trying to sleep." She gestured at the bunk, the rumped cover. "I couldn't. You?"

"I had a nightmare."

"I can guess what about." Her voice hardened. "That Cazele! We should have destroyed his town!"

"What good would that have done?"

"None," she admitted. "But the Kaldari believe in revenge."

A bloodbath of the innocent of which he wanted no part nor, he guessed, did she.

Dumarest stepped past her into the cabin, looking around, seeing the small, feminine touches which made the place uniquely hers. A print of a kitten stuck to a bulkhead, a scrap of rich fabric which softened the contours of a stanchion, a tiny doll sitting on the table at the head of the bunk. Next to it a thing of crystal turned and bathed the compartment with swathes of delicate color.

"Brak gave it to me when I was a child," she said, noting his interest. "There are chimes, too." She touched a stud and soft tintinnabulations filled the cabin with the music of elfin bells. "Pleasant, isn't it? I loved it as a child but now I prefer silence." The bells died as, again, she touched the stud. "Why don't you sit?"

She watched as he settled himself close to the pillow then sat on the bunk beside him, tucking her legs beneath her, her shoulder leaning against his arm.

He said, dryly, "You remember the last time we sat like this? What happened?"

"It won't happen again. Zoll's made sure of that." She lightened her weight against his arm so as to meet his eyes. "You want to talk," she said. "To ask me something but I'm not sure what. You mask your feelings. Is it something to do with the ship? The journey? Why is it taking so long?"

"We have a long way to go."

"I know. Niall told me. So what's the problem?"

"Cazele. You heard him talk and you must have read him. You knew he was lying about the alarm. Was he lying when he claimed to know of Earth?"

She frowned, trying to remember, then said, slowly, "I can't be certain. I wasn't really watching him that closely. Raw lies are obvious but other things aren't. He could have been telling the truth as he knew it."

"When he spoke of Earth?"

"The legend, yes. He wasn't lying then. Not deliberately. But how could he have been so wrong? Earth is a paradise."

Not the world Dumarest had known but it hadn't been what Cazele claimed either. He had repeated a distorted variation of the popular legend. One which could have been designed and propagated for a desired purpose. But why should Earth be so reviled?

"Damn!" Nadine voiced her annoyance as the crystal lamp ceased to revolve. "It's stuck again. I'll have to get it fixed. If you'll just lean back a little."

He felt the impact of her body as she leaned across him to correct the instrument. The chiton made a soft rustle as it mounted the columns of her thighs, one matched by the sliding contact of her flesh. The mounds of her breasts flattened against his torso.

"There! That's done it!"

She smiled as the lamp began to turn, bands of color touching her face, her hair, the long column of her throat. Turning her eyes into kaleidoscopic gems, her mouth into a demanding rose of passion. One which moved closer to his, to touch, to lock with iron determination.

Fear had ridden with them to Fionnula. Hate had joined it to lurk like an unseen passenger in chambers and compartments, in the salons, the holds, the places where people gathered. Lief Chapman could sense it. Something as real to him as the glowing instruments on his panels. Emotional stress had no meter but it was as detectable as the flow of current through a wire.

"Captain." Niall from the communicator. "Course change in fifteen. Mark!"

"Noted."

The sequence had already been incorporated. An instrument flashed as he pressed a button, electronic relays poised to move the ship from one path to another. Routine. Another bite taken from the journey.

Relaxing Chapman stared at the numbing majesty of the universe. It had, for him, a special attraction. One he had missed when tending his farm but that episode was over and now he was where he belonged. In tune with his command, in harmony with the flow of energies within the hull, at one with the invisible.

Sensing the pulse of electrons, the surge of impatient ions, the thrust and flurry and atomic particles. Forces which created a sub-aural music which could be stronger than any drug.

Entering the bridge Dumarest looked at the lax figure in the big chair and wondered if the captain had fallen victim to the siren lure. Many captains had, using drugs and symbiotes to ease the crushing burden of infinity.

Chapman opened his eyes. "I wasn't asleep, commander."

It wouldn't have mattered if he had been. Stinging electrical impulses would have woken him in case of need. Something they both knew as Dumarest recognized the reason for the use of his title. Formality had virtue when coupled to discipline.

"Where are we now, captain?"

"On the last leg of the journey." Chapman stretched. "I'll be

glad when it's over. Some things last too long. I hear that you've tested the slave panel again."

"With perfume. There's some leakage but we can live with it."

"If they guess what's on your mind they won't like it," warned the captain. "I'm not sure I like it myself. You don't gas your crew."

"It isn't for the crew. It's for the others. You'd rather they mutinied?" Dumarest didn't force an answer. The word alone was repugnant to any captain. "I'm simply taking precautions. Zehava tells me that hotheads are stirring up trouble. Nadine reports there have been changes in cabin-partners and group-assemblies. You know what that means."

"Polarization of attitudes. Some want to wait others to act. Most of them lost friends on Fionnula. If they'd had quick action things would be different. They've had too much time to sit and brood."

Niall looked up, nodding a greeting as Dumarest entered his domain. A litter of charts lay on the desk before him together with a scatter of books, and navigational data. A computer screen was blank.

"Another student after knowledge? If you want to know just where we are ask Zehava. For some reason she's become interested in navigation. That and communications or maybe she and Schell have a special affinity for electronics. My guess is that like everyone else their patience is running out."

"And yours?"

"I've a different problem. Earth could be where you say it is but I can't find proof. I've checked the oldest almanacs I can find. It isn't listed. There's no entry for Earth on world listings either." He slapped one of the books. "So I tried a different tack. Stars follow a closely related pattern of distribution. The trouble is that when you get close to the Rim the distribution shows widening variables so we can't be sure a sun is where one could be expected. Or the reverse. There's also the problem of

identification. Would you know your sun if you found it?"

"Yes," said Dumarest. "I'd know it."

Niall said, shrewdly, "There's only one way you could be certain. No two stars are the same though some come close. To be absolutely certain you must have a spectrograph. It's like a fingerprint. Once we match the Fraunhofer lines we'll be sure. You know that. Would you also know why Earth isn't listed?"

"That's easy. Someone wanted it lost."

Dumarest watched the navigator's face, saw the stunned look of incredulity, the beginning of a smile then, as Niall met his eyes, the smile vanished.

"You're serious," he said. "By God, you mean it! But why? Why would someone want to lose a world?"

"Someone or something. I don't know why."

"How then? How the hell could it be done?" Niall shook his head. "No! It's crazy! You just can't lose a world! It's impossible!"

"No," said Dumarest. "It would be easy." He picked an almanac from the desk and held it in his hand. "A book which lists all known worlds. If a planet isn't listed then it doesn't exist. Right?"

"It isn't known," corrected the engineer. "But, basically, it's what you say."

"So we take a world." Dumarest flipped through the pages. "Kaldar. We erase the entry. Now the planet no longer exists. Right?"

"Wrong!" Niall was emphatic. "Kaldar exists! I know it!"

"Could you prove it? If it isn't listed in this book or any other almanac? Would you be able to find anyone who would agree with you?"

"Erasing an entry doesn't eliminate a world."

"True, but how could anyone find it? There would be no listed coordinates. How could you convince anyone it was real? Especially if they believed it was only a legend. A myth which no sane man would credit. What then?"

The navigator said, slowly, "You're talking about Earth."

"Yes." Dumarest lifted the almanac in his hand. "To you and to every navigator this is the most important book in the universe. Without it you're lost. Where do you get it from?"

"Shops, repair yards, depots, traders — they're all over the place. Anyone can buy a copy."

"Good business for those who print and distribute them," said Dumarest. "But anyone can do that. The importance lies with those who compile the information. The point I'm making is that it all comes from a single source. Now tell me what would happen if someone at that source failed to include an entry."

"The error would be spotted. The data revised."

"If it was a genuine error. What if the omission was deliberate?" Dumarest threw down the book before Niall could answer. "I'm talking about a long time in the past. When, maybe, the system of navigation changed so as to use the actual center of the galaxy as the main reference point. New almanacs would have been essential. They would have been more expensive than they are now. If new almanacs had been offered in exchange for the old what would have happened?"

"No old books," said the navigator. "Are you saying that the new issue contained no reference to Earth?"

"Can you think of a better way to lose a world?!"

"It would work," admitted Niall. "Knowledge doesn't last without records. But think of what it would take. The cost. The organization. The planning. Who could have handled it?"

The Church or the Cyclan — but why?

Ulman Tighe was too brash, too aggressive. A defense against inward unease. One echoed in his voice.

"Commander, a word of warning. You were straight with me on Fionnula. You believed me. Many didn't. Even now some think I murdered Nigel and the girl. That doesn't bother them. What does is the way some of their friends were abandoned. They blame you for that. There's talk of revenge."

To the Kaldari that meant death delivered with brutal efficiency. Weapons weren't available in the ship which meant that a group were preparing themselves to beat him to death. Tighe also if they ever discovered he had carried the warning. Something he knew and by speaking he had demonstrated a personal loyalty.

Dumarest said, "Thank you for telling me. Don't be among them."

"He won't," said Nadine when Tighe had gone. "He's got more sense. But he's right about the danger. I've sensed it accumulating for some time now. I'd hoped it would dissipate but it's grown worse. They want to kill you. Earl!" Her hand closed on his arm. "Stay away from them. Keep to the bridge and your cabin. Don't give them the chance to get at you. Damn it," she snapped, reading his rejection of her advice. "At least carry a gun!"

"Where are they?"

"The gun —"

"Forget the gun. Where do I find those who want to kill me?"

In the salon, the natural place, but the compartment was too quiet. It lacked the rattle of dice and slap of cards, the sounds of those playing or gambling on the luck of those who did. A place of recreation which, in some subtle manner, had become something else. A lair. A haven for plotters. A den for predators in human shape.

"Commander?" A man looked up from where he lounged at a

table, his use of the title a sneer. "This is an honor."

"Is it?" Dumarest glanced at the others in the salon. Many were women, a division which meant nothing for the women of the Kaldari were as vicious as the men. "This salon is for common use. If you want privacy go somewhere else. If you have a problem let me hear it. In the meantime get on with your duties. You!" His finger stabbed at a man. "Husad. You should be cleaning the filters. You! Fontayne. You've work in the lower hold."

"Who says so?"

"I do. You object?"

"Our work is here, damn you!"

Russo Byrne thrust himself forward from where he had been standing against a bulkhead. He was tall, strong, face proudly scarred. A man confident of his strength and prowess. The heavy rings he wore could pulp flesh and shatter bone.

The man at the table said, "Take it easy, Russo."

"Why?"

Dumarest said, evenly, "Stefan is right. Use your head instead of your mouth. I give the same advice to all of you. The captain will never tolerate mutiny."

"Is that what you call it?" A man beside Stefan spat his disgust. Lefro Grake who had lost a brother. "I call it exterminating vermin. Getting rid of filth who threatens to destroy us all. You don't give a damn for the Kaldari. All you want is the ship and enough men to take it where you want it to go."

The truth but Dumarest didn't admit it. "It's still mutiny. The captain will have you fed into space."

"For an accident?" Byrne stepped even closer. "A fair fight? How can a man be blamed for hitting just a little too hard?"

Light shone from his rings as he lifted hands closed into fists.
"All of us here will swear it was your choice."

A man revealing a weakness. Talking instead of acting and so giving his victim a chance. Dumarest backed as he reached for his knife, remembering the ban on weapons as he found only an empty sheath. The door of the salon thudded shut as someone from behind pushed him off balance. He staggered, was pushed again, pretended to almost fall. As yet they were playing with him, enjoying their moment, one he helped by an apparent helplessness.

One which vanished as Byrne attacked, metal-loaded fists reaching to pulp his nose, shatter his jaw, ruin his eyes, send him to the deck in helpless agony. To end the search which had taken so long. To rob him of his chance of reaching Earth. And he was so close. So very close.

Nothing and no one must stop him now!

Byrne shrieked with agony, doubling, falling as a boot smashed with pulping, killing force into his groin. As he fell Dumarest moved, striking out with a flattened hand, the fingers locked to form a blunted spear. One which crushed a larynx and filled the throat with blood. His hand jerked back, the elbow a ram which slammed against the torso of someone behind him, splintering ribs and driving jagged ends into the lungs.

Dumarest continued the attack, moving fast, fast, faster...

The boot again, rising to drive outward, to ruin a knee, the left hand chopping at the neck as the man went down. A woman, screaming her rage, dropped as he slammed his fist against her jaw. Another spat blood and broken teeth from the impact of his elbow as she clawed at his eyes. As she fell away Dumarest twisted towards a snarling face, his open hand rising, the heel catching the nose, crushing it, driving splinters of bone up into the brain.

Something hit his cheek. Something else struck his shoulder, his back, his head. Blows without effect and without pain. Wetness ran from his temple as a man went down before him.

Another folded, breath rasping in his throat, blood where an eye had been. He kicked, the boot having a life of its own, as his hands had life, his skull used as a hammer, his elbows, his knees.

A time of madness. Of a blood-red world dominated by violence. One born of the stress, tension and strain of the journey. The hatred for those who would stop him, those who would ruin his dream, exploding into a berserk fury.

One which ended with the stunning scent of flowers.

"Earl!" Nadine was beside him, cradling his head on her breasts, her tears dewing his face. "Earl, for God's sake, come back to me!"

He stirred, fighting nausea, feeling aches and minor pain. He was on his bunk, in his cabin, the woman holding him in her arms.

"Earl?"

"I'm all right." He struggled to sit upright and sat with lowered head until the cabin steadied. On cheek, skull and temple he felt the slickness of transparent dressings. The side of his torso was dark with a patch of bruise. One eye was tender. His hands and fingers were sore as was a knee. "Slave gas?"

"Badwasi released it. They had closed the salon so the effects were confined. We had to wait until it was neutralized. At first I thought you were dead. As for the rest — Earl, it was horrible!"

A carmine shambles of dead and injured. Something she must have seen before, then he remembered that she had never been on a raid. Never known the berserk madness which could turn a human into a killing machine.

Voices murmured from the passage outside the cabin. Men going about their duties, tones muffled by the partitions.

"Did you see the mess? I've been in brawls but this beat them all."

"Crazy. Like a predator at work. One dominated by bloodlust. If he comes from Earth — what the hell are we getting into?"

Nadine rested her hands on his ears. "Don't listen to them, darling. Don't worry about it. It's over."

"The mutiny?"

"We don't call it that. It's logged as a fight. The dead have been evicted. Those who were hurt have been treated. The rest know how lucky they've been." Pausing she added, "Chagal blames you for causing him work."

"Because he had to care of the injured?"

"Because you didn't kill them all. The dead are easier to dispose of."

The physician had been honest if blunt and she swallowed as if to rid herself of an unpleasant taste. A woman reluctant to accept the grim reality of a universe in which, in order to survive, it was essential to kill.

Dumarest felt her warmth, that of the kitchen, the cradle, the kind which turned a house into a home. One which held care, concern and a genuine tenderness. She smiled as he touched her, turning towards him, softening to his caress. The door slammed open without warning.

"Earl! How are you, lover?" Zehava paused to inflate her lungs, breasts rising above the narrow cincture of her belt. Her hands rose to glide in a narcissic gesture over her hips and thighs. A beautiful woman, dominating the cabin as she displayed her charms. "You look well. I guess you've had excellent nursing."

Nadine said, "I was only trying to help."

"Of course. What else? But I can take care of him now. Why don't you go where you're needed?" As the door closed behind her Zehava said, coldly, "I can understand the appetite for something new, Earl. But I warn you — what is mine I keep."

"So?"

"I won't be mocked. It's obvious how she feels about you and others are talking. Soon they'll be laughing and that I'll not tolerate. You've had your fun. End it." She added, "If you don't I'll end her."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"No. The captain wants you. He said it was urgent. There's something odd in space."

Chapter Thirteen

There was nothing unusual on the screen. Stars, thinner now, made brilliant points of light against the dark space beyond the galaxy. Hanging like skeins of jewels other galaxies, incredibly distant, showed as luminous smears.

Patches of dust made enigmatic pools of darkness edged with stars scattered like a profusion of jewels. The normal visual spectrum as relayed by the scanners.

Together with something as yet unseen.

"Someone in trouble." Chapman touched a control. "Listen."

Sound murmured from the speakers. The whispering echo of tremendous forces blended into a susurrations which held eerie connotations. The normal background radiation registering as sound, forming the siren-lure which could bring insanity. Over it, loud, harsh, demanding, rode a wailing ululation as if a hurt and wounded creature was crying in the void.

An emergency alarm from a vessel in distress.

"It's lying ahead and getting closer." Chapman studied his panels. "We'll be in contact before long."

Dumarest leaned closer to the screen. A wasted effort; no naked eye could pick a vessel from the immensity around them. Yet one lay out there, damaged, its field down, drifting and

helpless, its radio-beacon calling for help. A forlorn hope. Rescue in space was rare. Here, so close to the Rim, those in distress were hoping for a miracle.

"Twenty!" Niall called the warning from his station. "We're almost on target. Nine! Mark!"

As the Erhaft field vanished and the Geniat ceased its hurtling progress a ship sprang into visibility on the screen. One small, battered, scarred, the markings blurred, the name barely discernible.

"The *Evoy*," mused Niall. "Too small for a regular commercial. It could be a free trader or a private vessel belonging to a wealthy House or ruler. In that case I'd expect it to be in better condition."

"Any communication?"

"No." The captain adjusted the image. "Schell's been trying ever since we heard the beacon. All we get is the alarm."

Which could mean that the ship was nothing but a drifting coffin. Dumarest studied it as it came closer. The hull was apparently intact so the damage had to be internal. A faulty ventilation system could have poisoned the atmosphere but would not have collapsed the field. Had the generator failed? Had there been some other reason? Mutiny? Murder? Madness? The impact of interstellar forces could give birth to bizarre consequences.

"We'll have to investigate," said Chapman. "Send over a team. Badwasi —"

"Have him scan the area," said Dumarest. "Check for another vessel."

"There could be people in there," protested the captain. "Sick, starving, dying."

"A little longer won't make that much difference. We should be prepared in case others have heard the beacon."

And be coming in to claim what was to be found. Salvage was rare in space and ships were valuable. Fights between rescuers were not unknown and only a fool would neglect to take elementary precautions.

"Nothing," said Chapman after Badwasi had reported. "But I'm having him maintain a watch. Now let's see what we've found."

"I'll attend to it," said Dumarest. "Have Zehava pick a few men. I'll meet them at the loading port. Try and get us closer."

Zehava was ready for space when arrived, suited, line and reaction pistol at her belt, helmet open. "I'm coming with you, Earl. Treibig and Lowish will make up the team." She gestured to where two men, suited, stood at her side. "Any objections?"

"Have they had experience? Have you?"

"Yes, to both questions."

"Then let's get going."

Suited, sealed, Dumarest led the way into the vestibule of the air lock. Lights flashed as, the cycle completed, the outer door opened to expose them to the void. Framed in the portal the *Evoy*, closer than it had been, still seemed very small and distant. A hard target to hit and one easy to miss.

Treibig's voice came over the radio, thin against the wail of the alarm. "What the hell is a ship like that doing out here?"

"That's what we're going to find out. You go first. We'll follow your line. Try not to miss."

"I won't miss."

Confidence matched by action. Snapping the end of his line to a ringbolt on the hull Treibig stepped from the lock. Magnetic boots held him fast as, tensing, he judged angle and distance. Flexing his knees he jumped into space, the line trailing behind him. For a moment it looked as if he would miss the target then,

firing his reaction pistol, he made good his boast.

"You next." Dumarest slapped Lowish on the arm. "Wait where you land. Do nothing until I join you. Go!"

Zehava followed. She stepped back as Dumarest landed close. "What now, Earl?"

"We'll check the hull. Everyone spread out and search for damage. It needn't be major. Report anything you find."

He moved to the rear of the vessel as they obeyed, checking entry ports, the loading area, the door through which the ramp would be lowered after landing. All were intact and secure. Kneeling he ran gloved fingers over the plating. The signs of erosion were clear and he could feel a series of irregularities. Flakes of paint rose beneath his touch to dot his faceplate with a scatter of reflective brilliance. Wiping it clean he rejoined the others.

"Anything to report?"

"Nothing," said Treibig. "All seems as it should be aside from the attrition of the hull." His voice struggled against the noise of the alarm. "We'll have to force an entry and turn off the damned beacon!"

"No!" snapped Dumarest. "I don't want it touched!"

"But—"

"That's an order. If you want to argue report back to the ship!" More softly Dumarest added, "Something happened to this ship and we don't yet know what. Treat it as you would a bomb. The emergency hatch should be operational. Find it and get inside. Touch nothing."

As the two men moved away Zehava touched Dumarest's arm and, as he turned to face her, sliced the edge of her hand across her faceplate in an unmistakable signal.

Switching off his mike he touched helmets.

"Something wrong?"

"You tell me, Earl. Why all this fuss over a wreck?"

One traveling in the same direction as themselves. In a region of space where no ship could be expected. A coincidence he found hard to accept.

"We don't know how long it's been drifting. Those inside could have died of disease. They could even have rigged the ship to blow. Some people don't like to leave anything behind them."

The rich, the selfish, the arrogant. Those who would cling to life until the last then take a belated revenge on rescuers who arrived too late. Something she could understand.

"If this belonged to a wealthy ruler there could be treasure, Earl. The hold stuffed with riches. Valuable cargo. If—"

"Commander!" Treibig's voice cut her short. "Commander? Commander — respond!"

Dumarest activated the mike. "What is it?"

"We've gained entry. The pressure is low but the air is sweet and breathable. From what I can make out the generator failed."

"Don't touch anything!" said Dumarest sharply. "Check for life but do nothing else!"

He followed Zehava through the emergency hatch, Lowish coming towards them as they entered the ship. His helmet was open, his eyes open with excitement. If the air carried lethal bacteria he was already contaminated but the probability was slight and the risk small.

One Dumarest accepted. Treibig had been right about the air. The pressure was about half normal but it held an unexpected freshness.

"I smell something." Zehava sniffed the air as she removed her helmet. "Incense? Perfume? Are there women aboard?" She

misunderstood Lowish's hesitation. "Don't be squeamish. I realize they could be dead by now, but did the ship carry women?"

"At least one," he said. "She isn't dead. She's lying in a casket."

Through the transparent lid her hair was a blaze of scarlet glory. Strands of flame wreathing the clear alabaster contours of her face, the long column of her throat. She was nude, the skin of her body almost translucent, unblemished as if she had been a statue carved by a master sculptor from a block of rare and precious marble. A figure he remembered. A face he would never forget.

"Earl!" Zehava was at his side. "What's the matter? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

He had.

Kalin.

Kalin of Solis lying before him as if space and time had no meaning.

"She's beautiful." Zehava drew in her breath as she looked into the casket. "God, but she's lovely!"

With a beauty which had been more than skin and hair and the moulding of flesh and bone. The inner spirit he had known, the person, the wonderful thing which had accentuated the outward form and made her unique among women. But the inner person had died and the shell, though still beautiful, had not been the same. Yet it was hard to remember that. Harder still not to respond in the way his nature demanded. To take her and hold and never, ever let her go.

"She is the Lady Lucia del Vigoda." Zehava read the name from a label on the casket. "Why would she be traveling without maids? A duenna, at least. The person in the next casket is a man. Calton Yemm."

His face was sharply aquiline, the hair a dark cap over a rounded skull, the closed eyes deeply sunken beneath strong brows. His body was slender, ribs prominent, skin taut over the pelvic area. The joints were delineated as if he were an anatomical specimen. His hands, folded on his chest, gave him the appearance of a corpse laid to rest.

Dumarest said, "Treibig, return to the ship and have Mauger come over to check the generator. We'll need the physician, too. Lowish, check the hold but watch out for booby traps. Zehava, see what's in the cabins."

"We'll do it together, Earl."

"No. I'm going to find the log."

He found it lying on the seat of the big chair in which the captain would have sat. Dumarest scanned it, frowning, then searched the bridge before checking both the radio-shack and the navigator's office. The steward's cabin was empty and unusually neat. The salon was too small, too bare. The spigots yielded neither water or basic.

"This is crazy," said Zehava, joining him. "No captain, navigator, steward, handler or engineer. No radio officer. Not even a maid, duenna or bodyguard. A woman like Lucia would never have traveled unaccompanied. What the hell happened?"

"It's in the log." Dumarest gestured towards it. "I'll explain what happened when we're all together."

It was a story stranger than most but not unfamiliar to those who spent their lives in the void. A private vessel making a routine journey from one star to another, falling victim to an unexpected disturbance, one which had brought disaster.

"They ran into a warp," explained Dumarest. "It sucked them in and, later, spat them back into normal space. Here." He gestured towards the hull, the void beyond. "They must have traversed almost half the galaxy. The navigator suspected they must have been held in stasis for a time. He wasn't sure. He was sure that the experience drove them insane. The steward and

handler tried to rape Lucia, were beaten off by her duenna who was also her bodyguard and turned on her maids. They were —"

"The navigator?" Mauger frowned. "He wrote up the log? Why not the captain?"

"He died with the engineer when the generator blew. The maids were butchered and their killers died in turn."

"Which leaves just the duenna, Lucia, the navigator and the man in the other casket," said the engineer. "How is he, Chagal?"

"Fair enough," said the physician. He was a big man, older than most of the others, but sharing, despite his profession, their indifference to the value of life. "He'll make it. The woman too, but he's running out of time."

Lacking the essential body-fat which alone could maintain life while in the casket. Metabolism, slowed, still demanded energy and many traveling Low starved before or during resurrection.

Lowish said, "What happened to the others?"

"There are only two caskets," said Dumarest. "Did you find any food?"

"No food and no water. The cargo is made up synthetics and manufactured goods. Valuable but inedible."

"They starved," said Treibig. "But what happened to the bodies? Maybe they —" He broke off, shrugging. "Why guess? The man can give us the answer."

He sat beside the casket, shivering, the cup of basic trembling in his hands. Food brought from the Geniat together with other items. Patiently Dumarest waited until the container was empty.

"What happened? Tell me."

"Later," said Chagal. "He's in no condition yet."

"Have you ever ridden Low?" Dumarest stared at the physician. "I have. I know what he's capable of. What happened,

Yemm? Tell me."

The story was much the same as he had read from the log. The warp, the strange forces which had seized the vessel. The death and despair. The grim, final decision.

"With the generator gone we had no hope. Madness had taken too many lives. The food and water were exhausted. There was only one thing to be done. We had to utilize the caskets."

"Why you?" Dumarest leaned towards the man. His recovery had been fast. Already Yemm had stopped shivering and was in command of himself. "The woman had a duenna. The navigator was still alive. Yet they allowed you to take the one remaining casket. Why?"

"It was necessary."

"Why?"

"The decision was made. It was the only one which could have been made. I had no choice but to abide by it. To have refused would have been illogical."

"Why you?" Dumarest added, coldly, "I shall not ask again."

A statement of intention more chilling than any threat. Watching, Zehava saw Yemm look at his hands as if to find comfort and strength in their familiar configurations. A man who must know the position he was in. The ship and all it contained was now the property of those who had found it. His own life had no value. If he was evicted into the void who would complain? Yet he had courage. Not until Dumarest turned, hand lifted to signal, did he speak.

"The Lady Lucia was bound for Kruge there to marry the younger son of Tyrant Manukian. You will have noticed the color of her hair, the translucent quality of her skin. Her eyes, if open, would be emerald. She is the product of centuries of selective breeding. The son of the Tyrant has similar characteristics. On both their worlds it is the mark of aristocracy. The cargo in the holds constitutes her dowry. The duenna had sworn to defend

her charge with her life. She did what needed to be done."

"She killed the navigator?"

"It was painless. She evicted his body into space. Then she sealed me into the casket. Afterwards, I assume, she followed the navigator."

A quick death instead of starvation and the torture of thirst. But why had Yemm received special treatment?

"The Lady Lucia has a malfunction of her nervous system," he explained. "It became manifest when she reached puberty. A derangement of the synaptic responses caused, it is thought, by a wild mutation which releases hampering elements from the endocrine glands. The condition can be held in balance by the introduction of living cells which act as beneficial antibodies."

He glanced at the casket holding the woman then back at Dumarest, his eyes darkly enigmatic.

"My tissue culture matches that of the Lady Lucia. My glands have been adapted to produce the essential antibodies. My life maintains her own. Without me she dies."

The cabin held traces of her presence; silks and rich brocades, a cabinet which held gowns, a box which held a profusion of jewels. Things which held the ghostly scent of expensive perfume as did the air, the books and covers, the papers scattered on the bunk.

Dumarest watched as Chagal probed among them. "Is it true?"

"According to what's here, yes." The physician straightened a computer print-out in his hand. This is a report from the Sung-Hagen laboratories on Kruge. It deals with tissue matching and is a copy of one I found in his cabin. He appears to have spoken the truth."

"Appears?"

"Anything can be fed into a computer. What he claims is possible, but hard to prove without tests. I can't run them. I haven't the equipment or the skill. But why should he lie? What would be the point? What could he hope to gain?"

Questions to add to others. Dumarest moved about the cabin, touching, imagining the woman who had occupied it. One warm with vibrant life instead of lying wrapped in the chill of simulated death.

"What would happen to her if Yemm died?"

"She would follow him. The synapses govern the electrical impulses which pass along nerves. Block or distort them and you get paralysis, disorganized muscular responses, failure of the brain to receive and relay vital information. Death would be inevitable and not pretty to watch."

"Why Yemm? Why not drugs?"

"Her condition may not respond to synthetics. It is safe to assume they have been tried and failed. Fresh cells given at regular intervals from someone like Yemm could be her only hope." Chagal added, "Think of it as a blood transfusion. A living donor would ensure a continuous supply."

Neat, logical, all of a piece as was everything else about the *Evoy*. Too neat. Too logical. Like a puzzle which had been constructed to carry a specific message, to bear an unmistakable pattern. Somehow it didn't ring true. The vessel had known madness, death, violence, murder, sacrifice and suicide. There had been starvation and the horror of thirst. Yet everything was clean, neat, the air sweet with the hint of perfume. Even so there was nothing tangible he could regard as proof as his suspicions. Everything could be explained by madness, habit or blind, unthinking obedience. A discipline which had tried to find security in the continuing of unessential tasks.

Dumarest returned to the hold where the caskets were housed. Yemm, dressed now in dark fabrics, stood at the head of one holding the woman as if at his station or on guard. His face was impassive.

Zehava turned as Dumarest closed the distance between them. She too had been looking at the woman in the casket.

"Well?"

"There are valuables in the cabins. Collect them and have them ready for transfer."

"What about the woman?"

"She can wait."

"With respect, commander, I must disagree." Yemm laid a hand on the transparent lid. "Even though the metabolism of the Lady Lucia has been slowed the deterioration of her nervous system is progressing. Unless she receives treatment she will wake an imbecile. She might not even wake at all."

"Chagal?"

"He could be right." The physician scowled as he studied the figure in the casket. "It would be a damned shame to ruin a body like that. Resurrect her and I'll supervise the transfer of tissue. Yemm will advise me on the correct procedure. He has all the equipment needed in his cabin. Do it," he urged. "What have you to lose?"

Nothing or perhaps too much. Dumarest looked down at the woman in her frozen sleep, feeling the turmoil of conflicting emotions. Of caution against the urge of old associations. To arouse her could be to wake a demon better left asleep, but to allow her to die could bring eternal regret.

"Do it," whispered Zehava. "Earl, you must!"

To press the right controls and to wait, watching, counting as the seconds slipped by. Living again in memory the experience of resurrection. To rise through layers of ebon chill as the eddy currents warmed flesh and bone and interior organs. Sensing the injected drugs which guarded against the agony of returning circulation. Knowing when the electric stimulator ceased and allowed the heart to beat under its own power. The resuscitator

yielding to allow the natural function of the lungs. To wake as if reborn, hearing the pneumatic hiss as the casket opened, rearing upright, glowing with the euphoria of resurrection.

Within minutes he could hold Kalin in his arms and know again the wonderful ecstasy of her love.

But later — for now it was best she stayed as she was.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapman said, impatiently, "Earl, if there's a chance of salvaging that ship we've got to take it. Do you realize how much it's worth?" He looked at the *Evoy* where it showed on the screen; an astronomical chance of easy wealth made concrete. "There's more. Yemm has made me a proposition. It makes a lot of sense. Zehava backs him."

"On what?"

"Yemm claims that if we return the Lady Lucia to the Tyrant he'll reward us with an amount equal to half the salvage value. He'll also buy the vessel if we want to sell. Either way we make a fortune. But he insists she's to be released from the casket. I can't understand why you haven't done it already. Neither can anyone else. If she dies we lose the reward."

A disturbing possibility to a greedy man and one no raider would tolerate. Dumarest turned from the screen which dominated the bridge. They were alone in the compartment, the panels facing the big chair winking with intermittent dots of light as instruments monitored their position.

"It's only been a few hours," said Dumarest. "We had other things to do. Does Mauger think he can repair the generator?"

"He's confident he can do it in about two days. Basically it's a matter of cleaning and re-adjusting. No vital component was destroyed. It's mostly flare-damage probably caused when a conduit cracked and flashed to another. It could have been metal-fatigue caused by distortion induced by the warp. The

surge must have blown the fuses."

"And killed the captain and engineer."

"That's right."

"It's what Yemm said happened. What was written in the log." Dumarest looked again at the drifting vessel, imagining what was said to have happened, trying to picture the events, uneasily aware of the caution which rasped at his nerves. "Don't you think it odd that they were together at that spot at that time? And why wasn't an attempt made to repair the damage?"

"You just gave the reason. The captain and engineer were dead. The navigator was killed by the duenna. It makes sense, Earl. What would a rich bitch and a walking laboratory know about repairing a generator?"

"The navigator wasn't killed right away," reminded Dumarest. "The food and water would have lasted for some time. Why didn't he try to repair the generator while he had the chance? Did Mauger report that any work had been done on it at all?"

"No," admitted Chapman. "But that doesn't mean anything. Not all navigators have engineering skills. Maybe he was killed early in order to conserve the food and water. When it ran out the duenna put the others into the caskets. It's not important. Once we repair the ship we'll have it made. The salvage and an extra bonus for returning the girl."

"Big money promised but that's all you have as yet. A promise. From someone you know nothing about. We only have his word for who and what he claims to be. How can you trust him?"

"I can't reject the offer. Yemm swears the money will be handed over. In any case the Tyrant won't get the girl until we get the reward."

"You're forgetting the warp," said Dumarest. "And the suspected stasis which could have lasted for decades. The Tyrant could be dead by now. His son, too. Whoever now rules may not want the girl. You've a long way to go before you could make

radio contact. The journey could be wasted."

"Someone will want her."

"You want the reward."

"As you want to get to Earth," snapped Chapman. "That's why you don't want us to collect the reward and salvage. You don't want to use the time. Admit it."

"Why can't you see the obvious?" Dumarest paced the bridge, fighting to control his anger at the captain's stubbornness. "Look at what we have. A ship conveniently disabled. A story written in a log and how to tell if it's true? Sweet air in a vessel which has been drifting for years. A casket holding a man thinned almost to a skeleton. Another holding a girl who looks in the prime of health. Why hasn't she lost her fat? How to avoid it if she has been in the box as long as claimed? What really happened to the duenna? Was there ever one at all? Yemm could have waited until the last moment then set the controls and closed the lid on himself. He'd be taking a risk but only a small one."

"What are you getting at?"

"It could be a trap."

"Out here? Using a ship as a decoy? That's ridiculous! Who would want to trap us? How would they know we were close?"

The Cyclan, predicting their course or learning of it from an agent. A suspicion Dumarest kept to himself.

"Forget the reward," he urged. "There's a world of treasure waiting for us. Why risk losing it for the chance some ruler will be generous? Carry out the task you were commissioned to do. Damn it, captain, if you abandon it now you'll be committing a form of mutiny!" Then, before Chapman could answer, he added, "Let's play it safe. Put a spare crew on board the *Evoy*. They can follow us to Earth."

"To hell with Earth," snapped Chapman. "It can wait. I want to make sure of what I have. There will be time later to chase a

legend."

Chapman was adamant, blinded by greed. Badwasi lacked imagination. He said, "There's nothing out there, commander. I've maintained a scan and the instruments register nothing out of the ordinary."

Dumarest said, "What you're really saying is that you can't discern any movement."

"Well, yes, I guess I am." Badwasi gestured at the void. "If a ship was out there I'd have spotted it. The field leaves a trail. Even if drifting the mass would register if it was close. In that case we could even get a visual sighting. There's nothing. Space is clear."

"What if a vessel was out there? Field down. Drifting. Stationary in relation to us?"

"It would be invisible," admitted Badwasi. "Especially if it stayed on a line between us and a star. But why would it do that?" He narrowed his eyes with belated suspicion, examining the screens, the instruments. "Is there something out there?"

"I don't know," admitted Dumarest. "But there could be. Keep watch and if anything should appear make sure you target and track it. Have missiles armed and ready."

"You expect action?"

"I just don't want to be taken by surprise."

Zehava's cabin was empty. As was Yemm's. Niall said, "She went over to the *Evoy* with the supplies. She must have stayed to make a check. As far as I know she's the only one aboard."

"What about Yemra?"

"Talking with the captain. Something to do with that woman in the casket, I guess. Maybe he's increasing the reward."

The air lock was empty, the drifting shape of the *Evoy*

unchanged, the only addition to the original scene the thin line which traversed the gulf between the two vessels. Suited, sealed, a heavy satchel hanging from his shoulder, Dumarest clicked a sliding ring on the line and kicked himself into space. He landed softly, legs flexing to cushion the impact. Freeing himself from the line he moved to the emergency hatch and cycled through the lock.

Opening his faceplate he paused, listening, then hearing nothing moved softly through the vessel. Bales and canisters stood in neat array ready for the repair team and crew who would arrive later. The cabins were vacant, the salon deserted, the engine room empty. A tool locker swallowed the satchel. The hold was open, the bales of cargo stacked and held by broad restraints.

Zehava stood before the casket, hands resting on the controls, body leaning forward. She had removed her suit and was dressed in a blouse and pants of finely decorated fabric. Clothing which enhanced her femininity as did the cosmetics she wore. Her eyes, as she studied the figure the casket contained, were wide, luminous with reflected light.

A woman entranced. Her expression one he remembered.

Dumarest said, quietly, "Does she remind you of Nigel's sister?"

"Earl!" She spun to face him, then mastered her surprise. "No," she said. "Suarra was blonde and human enough to have had her faults. The Lady Lucia is perfect. Like something from an old legend. Beauty epitomized in a form which belongs to the world of dreams. Beautiful," she repeated. Dangerous but fragile. A blow could shatter her and maybe it should. I've seen how you look at her. What she must mean to you. I don't want to lose you, Earl! If I thought she could take you from me I'd kill her now! I'd ruin her beauty! I'd watch her die!"

She slumped, quivering, as he gripped her arms.

"Easy, Zehava. Easy."

"I'm sorry." She straightened, breathing deeply, filling his nostrils with the scent of her perfume. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it. I just want you to prove to me that I have nothing to fear. Wake the woman, see her, hold her —then tell me which of us you love. Do it, Earl! For me!"

"Where's Yemm?"

"What?" She blinked at the change of subject. "I don't know. I left him in the ship. He wanted to ask Chapman's permission to wake the Lady Lucia. He's been monitoring her progress and is worried about her. What are you doing here?"

"I came to collect you."

"Were you worried about me, darling?" She smiled her pleasure. "I must have forgotten the time. After the others left I made another examination of the cabins. We should move over here, Earl. This ship is designed for comfort. We could leave the girl with Chapman and go off to find Earth."

"You'd like that?"

"To be alone with you? You know I would." She stepped towards him, arms rising to embrace him, standing close. "Let's do it, Earl. Once the ship is repaired we'll take it and find a new world."

Dumarest said, dryly, "Don't you think Chapman might object to us stealing his salvage?"

"Let him. There'll be nothing he can do about it."

She moved even closer, rising on her toes, lips pursed as she moved her face towards the open faceplate, warm as they touched his own, her arms tensing around him.

Holding him fast as hands ripped the line and reaction pistol from his belt.

From where he had retreated Yemm said, "Do nothing foolish, commander. I will not hesitate to cripple you if it becomes

necessary."

He had removed his suit and wore a short, dark robe with wide sleeves bearing scarlet bands. The laser he held lifted as Dumarest broke free of Zehava's grip. His face and eyes were expressionless, his tones devoid of emotion, but there was no doubt he would use the weapon. He had thrown the line and reaction pistol to the deck and, without warning, fired at them both. The line fused into a shapeless lump of plastic. The reaction pistol flared then slumped into ruin.

"Now remove your suit, commander."

"Do it, Earl!" urged Zehava as Dumarest made no move to obey. "Just do as he says."

"And then what? Run away to find that wonderful world you spoke of? Chapman would never let us go."

"The captain will have no choice." Yemm made a small gesture with the gun. "This vessel isn't what it seems. It has a hidden method of propulsion and will be out of sight and range before anyone can realize what has happened."

"A trap," said Dumarest. "This ship, the cargo, the promise of a reward. All designed to appeal to Chapman's greed. You knew how I would react to the woman in the casket. What is she? A clone?"

"A specimen grown to rigorous definitions. One designed to attract and hold your attention. The prediction that you would have wasted no time in opening the casket was in the order of eighty-three percent. Your failure to do so puzzles me. Why did you hesitate?"

"I have a high regard for the ability of the Cyclan and had reason to be suspicious."

Zehava said, "That's nonsense."

"How would you know? And how could the Cyclan have known just where to place the *Evoy* unless someone told them which

course we were taking? Sent them our coordinates as supplied by our navigator when you stood in for Schell at the radio. When did you become their agent?"

He shrugged at her silence.

"My guess is it was on Pangritz. They would have predicted our destination and arrived before us. The traders would have been eager to help. Once in the house it would have been easy to instruct you and pass over the knife you gave Toibin to use during the arranged fight. He was to fire the dart, deliver a minor wound and pretend to have killed me. You would have taken care of the supposed body. Shipped me out with the traders. Gained your reward when you handed me over. But Toibin spoiled it with his anger and Nowka when he hit the wrong target. You'd given him the knife and had to kill him in order to shut his mouth."

Dumarest moved a little as if easing his weight, edging closer to where the woman stood beside the casket.

"After that you played for delay. You sabotaged the governor. Naturally you didn't think we'd run into a vortex. You thought we'd just drift long enough for your friends to find us. After we landed on Fionnula you arranged for further delay. The damaged filters. The slowed repairs. The technicians thought the orders came from Cazele and he didn't complain because it suited him." Again he edged towards her. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I am of the Kaldari!" She blazed with sudden fury. "You shamed me. Beat me into the dirt. Prevented me from leaving with the others. Later, when you found me in the infirmary, you made me beg. Beg! I wanted to kill you then. I wanted to flay you alive when, later, you stripped me of all that I owned. Turned me into a pauper. Made me dependent on your whim. Used me!" Her voice thickened, became ugly. "Can you imagine how I felt? How it hurt to pretend? To lie? To smile? To follow you like a dog when you demanded I take you where you wanted to go? When the Cyclan approached me I welcomed their offer. They promised I should have my revenge."

Dumarest said, mildly, "My congratulations, Zehava. You're a

superb actress. Unfortunately you're also a fool. Do you honestly think the Cyclan will permit you to live?"

"The Cyclan does not lie. The woman will receive her reward." The laser moved in Yemm's hand. "Remove your suit, commander. I shall tolerate no further delay. Obey or I will ruin your knees, your elbows, your feet, hands and eyes. Hurry. It is time for us to go."

"Together with this bitch you're in love with!" Zehava spun to face the casket, reaching for the controls. "Take her with you!"

Yemm fired as Dumarest lunged towards her, aiming for his elbow, hitting the woman instead. A wound masked by a gust of sparkling vapour which fumed from the opening lid to expand in a scintillating cloud. Dumarest slammed shut his helmet, seeing Zehava stagger, a burned hole marring her forehead, twisting as she fell towards him. A numbness touched his face, stung his eyes, caused him to stumble and Yemm, immune to the vapour, to miss as he fired again. Dumarest straightened, lifting the dead woman, using her as a shield. Throwing the body as Yemm burned dead flesh and, too late, tried to jump clear. Dumarest closed the gap between them, hands reaching, striking, feeling the snap of bone as he broke the neck.

Within the casket, wreathed in sparkling vapour, the woman stirred, rose, smiling as she opened emerald eyes.

Kalin!

His love, resurrected and reaching for him with inviting arms.

An illusion induced by the touch of vapour he had inhaled. One compounded by a dizzy nausea as he ran from the hold, the sparkling vapour, the dream of love which had haunted him for so long. The bait of the trap now about to close around him.

The opening of the casket would have commenced the cycle activating the drive. The only hope of escape lay in speed.

Dumarest raced to the emergency hatch, pass through it and stared at the other ship. The line which had connected the two

vessels had vanished. Yemm's work, the reason why he had destroyed the suit-line and reaction pistol. As he had destroyed the radio with his second shot leaving Dumarest with no way to summon help and only one way to reach safety. He crouched, flexing his knees, aiming at the distant bulk of the *Geniat*, the dark patch of its open port. With all his strength he kicked himself into the void.

Watching the growing bulk of the vessel he knew he would miss.

His suit carried nothing he could remove. To flail his limbs would generate axial motion and nothing else. To change direction he needed reaction mass; something to throw so as to move in the opposite direction. Staring at the port he judged space and time, watching as the dark blotch moved relentlessly up and to one side. He would barely miss the hull, but it was enough to send him to drift for eternity.

He ignored the sick tension of his stomach, the dryness of his mouth, concentrating on the thin hiss of air as it passed from the tanks into his suit. Adjusting the valves he increased the flow and felt the pressure hard against his ears. Twisting he rotated his body and watched a moving vista as he waited for the critical moment.

The bulk of the ship passed before him, the open port, the emptiness of space. The ship again, the port, again the void.

Dumarest counted the time of rotation, noting his position in relation to the port, his apparent velocity. Waiting until he dared wait no longer then, with a twisting wrench, unlocked his helmet and tore it free.

Air gusted past his head to dissipate in the void. Mass which acted as a weak blast to send him towards the ship, the open port. A haven which he approached far too slowly. The helmet was added mass. Dumarest threw it from him, twisting to face the port as it came close, grabbing desperately at the rim. Blood roared in his ears as he pulled himself into the vestibule and twice he missed the handle. At the third attempt he found it, pulled it down, fell to roll in agony as the outer door closed, air

blasting from vents to fill the compartment, his starved lungs.

Chapter Fifteen

The cabin held soft memories, as silken as the flesh he had touched, as sweet as the taste of yielding lips. Lying on the bunk, Nadine at his side, Dumarest looked at the drifting swathes of color from her crystal lamp. Shifting hues designed to induce calmness leading to sleep, but for him they did the reverse, painting images which illuminated the bulkhead as they burned in his memory.

Chapman's anger at having lost his salvage. The *Evoy* had vanished before Dumarest had returned to safety and he had said nothing of the bomb he had planted and would have detonated had the captain insisted on pandering to his greed. Zehava's betrayal and he wondered if all her passion had been pretense. It was possible, hate and love were, at times, very close and her final action had revealed a latent jealousy. To destroy someone she could never have and made sure he would never get.

The cycle moved on, turning the cabin into a place of magic, of untrammelled fantasy. He followed a band of emerald and was reminded of eyes. Of scarlet which was the hue both of hair and blood. Pearl was translucent skin. Blue the color of skies in which fleecy clouds drifted in regal detachment. Green became precious patches of grass. White became silver shining from a swollen moon.

Images of home, but soon they would be more than that.

"Earl?" Beside him Nadine whispered his name as she moved to press tighter against him. A woman still almost asleep. One hovering on the edge of nightmare. She reared, gasping, crying his name.

"Earl! My God! Your face!"

One carmined with the blood oozing from ears and nose, lips and eyes. Minor wounds from burst capillaries which had quickly healed, but which had given him the mask of a demon.

One from which Badwasi had recoiled when warned of potential danger. Which had forced Chapman to accept his version of the truth. Which had enhanced even further his reputation among the Kaldari.

"Easy." He stroked her hair, soothing her with touch and words as he would calm a frightened animal. "It's all right now. It's all right."

"I love you, darling. I shall always love you. I know I'm not like that woman in the casket but —"

"Later." His fingers rested on her lips. "We'll talk later. Go back to sleep now. Sleep...sleep..."

She sighed, yielding to his voice, the hypnotic compulsion of the swirling colors. A woman in love. One in whom restraints had been shattered by the impact of raw emotion and violent action. Spurs which had driven her from her paranoid fears to gain a new understanding. To reveal an unexpected beauty.

Why had she mentioned Kalin?

No, not Kalin, the facsimile in the casket. Only he had melded the two into one, demonstrating his weakness, his need. Things the Cyclan had used with calculated intent.

Yet was scarlet hair so important? Translucent skin? Emerald eyes? Long ago the woman who had worn that shape had taught him that outer appearance held little value. That the inner self transcended the superficial gloss of outer beauty. Would the facsimile have stood beside him? Worked for him? Saved him as Kalin had done?

Dumarest knew the answer as he knew it was long past time to bury the ghost which had haunted him for so long. The woman who had been a companion he would never forget had worn a lovely shell. The product of her use of the affinity twin, the secret of which she had passed to him at the end. But no shell could ever restore the woman who had worn it. Nothing ever replace the dust she had become. The dead should be left to rest. Ghosts should not be mourned when the living had so much to

give.

Dumarest looked at Nadine where she lay at his side. Death had come too close and he had turned to her driven by a basic need. She had responded, asking no questions, making no demands. Guessing his trauma. Sensing his pain at rejection. Knowing his need of reassurance, of relief. Calming him when, again in nightmare, he had drifted in the void, stomach knotted with helpless fear, living only because he had reacted without fear or hesitation.

Subconsciously taking a gamble in which a quick end was balanced against potential survival. A gamble he had won as he had won so many others. Yet the biggest was still to come.

He watched a swirl of scarlet seeing, not the flame of lustrous hair, but the color of a hated robe. Red, the hue of blood as brown was the color of soil. The Cyclan and the Church. Two great organizations which spanned the galaxy. Both wanting to change human nature, one by appealing to reason the other by appealing to belief. The head against the heart. Logic against emotion. Reason against faith. Two sides of a single coin, each offering their promise of paradise.

Both determined to deny the existence of Earth.

Why?

"Earl?" Nadine sat upright on the bunk, shimmering hues gracing the smooth contours of her naked flesh. "Relax, darling. You need to be calm and rest."

Good advice he couldn't take. He rose, too restless to linger at her side and she watched as he dressed, uneasily conscious of a subtle alteration in his stance and manner. The blotches on his face would fade, but it was as if their creation had given birth to something she found almost frightening.

"Earl, is something wrong?"

"No." He added, "We'll be arriving soon. There are things I need to do."

"Soon?" She thought he was confused. "We won't arrive for days yet. Niall told me when I asked."

"That was before he had the true coordinates. We'll arrive in a few hours. I didn't trust Chapman," Dumarest explained. "Events proved me right. He would have sold me out for the sake of salvage."

"So you kept the true coordinates to yourself. How did Chapman take it?"

"He didn't like it."

"He wouldn't. He is of the Kaldari," she warned. "He might want to take revenge. You hurt his pride."

"To hell with his pride. He'll take us to Earth!"

Always on a raid there was doubt as to the outcome, but this time, if legend held truth, the rewards would be enormous. A heady thought and one Chapman relished as he sat in his chair and watched the glowing lights on his panels. For him the siren lure of space held small danger. Yet some journeys could last too long.

For Dumarest it had lasted most of his life. A long, frustrating search for a world most believed didn't exist. A journey which had taken him too often to the edge of death. One almost ended and he sat in the cabin, facing the screens, conscious of the tension riding within him.

Nadine sensed it as she sat beside him, near, but not touching. This was a time he needed to be alone.

"Getting close." The navigator's voice betrayed his tension. "Field ready to collapse. Ready? Now!"

The blue cocoon surrounding the vessel died. There was a brief flicker as the scanners replaced the computer analogues and relayed the direct image of what lay outside.

"No!" Nadine drew in her breath. "It can't be!"

The screens showed nothing, but the vista of space.

"I knew it!" Chapman snarled his disgust. "It was all a damned lie! Earth doesn't exist and this proves it. We've crossed half the galaxy to find it's only a myth. The salvage lost. The reward. Those abandoned on Fionnula. All for nothing. There's no Earth. No planet of treasure. We've been used. Taken for fools!"

Dumarest said, sharply, "You can't lose what you never had so stop whining about the salvage. There's nothing out there because you didn't do your job."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were supposed to take us to the new coordinates I gave you. Obviously you haven't. Why? Taking your revenge because I didn't trust you?" His voice thickened with anger. "If you want revenge you can have it — and so can I!"

"Earl! Don't!" Nadine added, quickly, "There has to be a mistake of some kind."

"The mistake was in believing a legend." Chapman had calmed, recognizing the strength of Dumarest's anger. He gestured at the screens. "There's the truth. Take a good look at it." He added, bitterly, "It's cost enough."

In blood and pain and the threat of extinction. The loss of a fortune. In mockery, hatred, betrayal, and death which had come too close. Dumarest knew too well what the price had been.

Niall said, quietly, "I know how you must be feeling, Earl. You're disappointed and think yourself cheated and it's never pleasant to be wrong. But don't blame the captain. He went where I told him and you supplied the coordinates. This is where they guided us."

The golden figures of Earth — a lie?

It was something Dumarest didn't want to believe. He had searched too long to be able to calmly accept that it had all been

for nothing. He knew Earth existed. He was positive the coordinates had been genuine. Why had they found nothing but empty space?

Nadine said, urgently, "Believe them, Earl. It's exactly as they say."

The truth as she read it. But there had to be something more. Dumarest recalled a clue won from the past.

"Look for patterns," he ordered. "Try to find constellations which fit designs." He quoted the mnemonic. "The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins, and next the Crab the Lion shines the Virgin and the Scales. The Scorpion, Archer, and Sea Goat, the man who holds the Watering Pot, the Fish with shining scales."

Nadine didn't understand. "Earl?"

"The signs of the Zodiac," he explained. "As seen from Earth the night sky held constellations set in a ring of designs. In order they are Ram, Bull, Twins, Crab, Lion, Virgin, Scales, Scorpion, Archer, Goat, Pot, Fish. Twelve of them. They should be unmistakable."

Signposts in the sky standing like a ring of sentinels about Earth. Guardians now absent.

"Maybe they didn't look like what you say," suggested Badwasi. Impatient to find the promised world he had joined the others. "Can you remember them, Earl? You would have seen them when young. Animals, people, things. Stars shaped into images would be hard to forget?"

There had been no images. Dumarest thought back, remembering, seeing the sky as he had when a boy. An expanse of gleaming stars streaked by the ribbon of the galactic lens, dominated at times by the swollen orb of the moon. There had been no pictures of men and women, of artifacts and creatures suspended in the heavens.

"Try to remember," urged Badwasi. "If we can see them then this is where Earth used to be. If not then we are in the wrong

place."

"Used to be," mused Niall. "That's a possibility. Maybe it has moved. The galaxy is rotating," explained the navigator. "The drift isn't fast but it's there and has to be taken into account. How old were the coordinates you gave me? A thousand years? Five?"

"I don't know," admitted Dumarest. "But they had to be very old."

"Which means we are at a point in space where Earth used to be a long time ago. A few thousand years isn't much in galactic terms but it could be the answer. All we have to do is plot a course which will compensate for the galactic drift. Don't worry, Earl. If Earth exists we'll find it."

Dumarest waited, staring bleakly at the screen. There was nothing he could do if the search should end in failure. Nothing but admit defeat and try again, but, if Earth was not found, there would be problems he would have to face. The Kaldari, disappointed, believing themselves to have been cheated, would demand vengeance for their dead. Even if they left him alive he would be stranded on some hostile world. Perhaps crippled, maimed, blinded, helpless to fend for himself. Capable only of waiting for death.

Irritably he dismissed the concept. To worry about an uncertain future was worse than stupid. The very fact such thoughts had intruded on his mind was proof that the search was costing him more than money and fatigue. He was losing the sharp edge of assessment which was essential if he hoped to survive.

"Soon," said Chapman. His tone betrayed what he expected to find. Another failure and the inevitable disappointment which could lead Dumarest to make demands backed by the threat of violence. The captain's hand rose to feel the flat hardness of the laser beneath his tunic. If such demands came he was ready to face them.

From his station Niall said, "Stand by, captain. Now!"

The field collapsed, the ship slowing, the screen blazing with a sudden rush of light. A glowing sun and, before them, a ball of blue and swirling white hanging like a jewel against the darkness of space. One attended by a sister globe, smaller, brightly silver with reflected light, marred and pocked to give the likeness of a skull.

"That's it!" Niall shouted his triumph. "By God, we've found it!"

Earth — and something else.

It came from behind the moon, a gleaming spindle which was suddenly before them, to hang, a bright fleck against the bulk of the planet. A vessel of unfamiliar pattern but Dumarest knew to whom it must belong.

To Chapman he said, "Order full battle alert. Move, damn you! Badwasi, get to your station and ready missiles!" Over the blare of the alarm he yelled, "Schell! Any contact?"

"No."

"Keep trying," snapped the captain. "Niall, what have you on that vessel?"

"Nothing. The design is one I've never seen before. But it's fast and looks armed. Let's hope it's friendly."

A hope Dumarest didn't share. The Cyclan had advanced technology and the ship had to be theirs. The fact that it was here, waiting, was proof they knew of the existence and location of Earth. Like a spider in a web they had waited for his arrival. Logic dictated they would communicate. He knew what they would demand.

"Dumarest." The face portrayed on the comscreen was a model of sculptured perfection. "Earl Dumarest. Are you receiving me? Please respond."

"I am receiving you."

"We must talk in private. Use your communications shack." The communication was broken as Dumarest followed the instructions. Was resumed as he sat in Schell's chair. "You are wise to cooperate. We have matters to discuss."

Dumarest said, dryly, "I assumed that."

"You are astute. Incidentally I must congratulate you. The prediction that you would fall victim to the trap presented by the Evoy was of a high order of probability. By escaping you demonstrated your unusual abilities. I am confident we can arrive at a satisfactory arrangement."

"Who are you?"

"The representative of the Master Ryon, the Cyber Prime. Think of me as an extension. I suggest you consider the implications of what that means."

Not just an agent. Not an ordinary cyber as his appearance made obvious; the thin, skeletal features born of a stringent diet had yielded to a fuller, more rounded appearance graced with wide-set eyes, a sculptured nose, finely moulded lips. The beauty was incidental. The product of functional design.

A surrogate, he guessed. A creature manufactured as an experiment or to serve a specific purpose.

"Do you have a name?"

"I am Tryne. I am a product of the Cyclan laboratories. My body is stronger than that of any human. My brain is constructed of a sponge-metal alloy which emulates the cerebral cortex. On it can be impressed the memories, knowledge and directives of a human brain. Cellular laminates provide synaptic unions. The outward appearance can be altered as required. Need I explain to you what this means?"

The end of his special status. While the Cyclan had needed his secret they had taken care to guard his life. Now they had found an alternative way of extending their domain he had lost his unique importance. Or was that what he was meant to believe?

The face on the screen could be the mask it seemed. The entire story designed to soften his resolution.

Dumarest said, "If I had nothing you wanted we would not be having this conversation. It is both illogical and inefficient to waste time and energy. Therefore I assume you want to obtain the correct sequence of the fifteen units forming the affinity twin."

"That is correct."

"If I refuse to give it to you?"

"Your ship and all it contains will be totally destroyed. I assure you the probability of that prediction is close to certainty. You are a gambler, Dumarest. Do not make the mistake of thinking this is a bluff."

"It would be illogical to kill me."

"We now have a viable alternative as you must have realized. It will serve until the sequence can be rediscovered. It is only a matter of time."

A long time, or it could be a day.

"A secret is useless to a dead man," said Dumarest. "I'm willing to trade. It's yours for the ship and the lives of the crew. For myself, safety, power and wealth."

"Agreed."

"One more thing. Tell me about Earth."

"That would serve no purpose."

"What harm would it do? I was born on the planet." Dumarest leaned closer to the screen. "Logically you have no reason to refuse me."

"What has logic to do with you and Earth? To it you are a stranger. You stowed away when little more than a child on a ship which broke the proscription. Instead of evicting you the

captain allowed you to work your passage. You stayed with him until he died. We know about you, Dumarest. Your wanderings, your search, your killings. You are a true product of your world. Yet what do you know about it? Your journeys were limited."

The truth and he had found nothing of paradise.

He said, "A monk told me Earth was anathema. He begged me not to find it."

"You should have taken his advice."

"Why should he have given it?"

"Because he thought it best." Tryne paused, then continued. "You have traveled, touched on a host of worlds, seen the brutality and depravity of petty rulers, their lust for power, their greed. Imagine that vileness multiplied, condensed, introduced into an overcrowded world. Logic, sanity, reason, restraint, all were denied. The entire planet was afflicted with a madness which defied belief and it led to a terrible end. The monk warned you against Earth because, to him, the planet is abomination."

"Diseased with an affliction which could still survive," said Dumarest. "He told me that, too. Does the Cyclan subscribe to that belief?" As the surrogate made no answer he quoted, "From terror they fled to find new worlds on which to expiate their sins."

The creed of the Original People. Did it hold the answer? Had they run from an insane world, the populace clashing in a frenzy of mutual destruction, the very air poisoned by lethal contamination? Had the Cyclan? Scientists escaping global catastrophe to establish the organization now spread across the galaxy. Promulgating the pursuit of logic and reason as the Church preached tolerance? Each, in their own way, working to ensure the survival of the human species.

Dumarest said, "What happened? Did something go wrong? An experiment get out of hand? A technology which devastated the world. Did all men originate on one planet? Was that planet Earth? Did the environment itself induce the lunacy you speak

of? Is that why it was proscribed?"

Questions which gained no answers.

"You have one chance to save your life." The surrogate maintained the even modulation of tone which was the mark of every cyber, but the smoothness held an iron determination. "You must place yourself in our hands. Don a suit, leave your vessel and head to where we are waiting. You have seven minutes."

The ultimatum was no bluff. Yet the surrogate had made a mistake. Instead of addressing him alone it should have spoken to the crew, offering riches in return for handing him over, bound and helpless. Or had it been a mistake? The Kaldari, curious, could have learned the value of his secret. An unwanted and unnecessary complication.

Chapman turned from his instruments as Dumarest returned to the bridge. "Well?"

"We're in trouble. They —"

"Why did they ask for you? How did they know your name?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. They want everything we have in return for our lives. We'll spend them wearing a collar. They want me to go over and talk."

"No!" Chapman was emphatic. "I don't like this. They know you and that makes for problems. They can talk to me direct."

"They want me." Dumarest snarled his impatience. "You don't trust me, but I've no time to argue. We can't afford to waste time."

"If you go you'll be giving them a hostage."

"That worries you?" Dumarest gave the captain no time to answer. "Let me get at the board." A button sank beneath his thumb. "Badwasi? Stand by. Have everything loaded and ready to fire. Mauger?"

"Here."

"Get ready." Dumarest checked the time. "You've got exactly four and a half minutes."

"Everything's set." The engineer added, "You want to see it go?"

"I'll be with Badwasi."

"What the hell's going on?" Chapman glared as Dumarest straightened from the screen. "You going out there?"

"No, but a suit is. One fitted with a bomb and a proximity fuse. The faceplate's been darkened and we've incorporated a device to emulate heartbeat and respiration. A recording," he explained. "If they listen they'll think it a man."

"You didn't just make it."

"No, but I thought we might need it." Dumarest headed towards the door. "I had it done hours ago."

"You knew they'd be waiting?"

"I guessed they might be."

More than guessed. He had sensed it, feeling a premonition so strong it was almost clairvoyant, one which had driven him to act as he had.

In the gunnery room Dumarest studied the other vessel, the planet against which it was framed.

"Earl!" Badwasi was sweating. "It's going to be damned close!"

Dumarest ignored the comment, concentrating on the screen. Earth — to the monk it represented abomination, but that had to be a judgment based on emotive reaction. The Cyclan would have a different frame of reference. Logic and reason would only accept conclusions based on solid evidence. They would have made a thorough investigation.

What were they protecting?

To Badwasi he said, "Check the missiles. We'll only have one chance."

If they tried to run, the shimmer of the Erhaft field would betray their intention and they would be fired on before it could be fully established. The other vessel could move faster in normal space. It would be able to dodge or destroy any missile aimed against it. But, if those in control could be distracted they could have a chance.

Thirty seconds left. Dumarest thumbed the intercom.

"Ready to go, Zoll. Pass out the suit."

It emerged looking like a man, one hunched over the jetting flames of twin, side-set reaction pistols. The flames died as, slightly off-course, the figure moved towards the Cyclan vessel.

"Listen." Badwasi increased the gain on a speaker. From it came the rasp of breathing, the pounding of a heart. "That should fool them."

"How did you pick that up?"

"Laser contact. The suit acts as a diaphragm and the beam reflects the deflections. It works both ways."

"Then talk to it," snapped Dumarest. "Pretend it's me in there. Use my name and act natural. Hurry!"

A time of tension in which the orb of the planet seemed to pulse as if a great, watching eye.

"That's it." Badwasi turned from his microphone. "They're coming out. If they spot the beam they'll be warned."

More waiting, calculating, a gamble with life itself as the stake. The Cyclan would have predicted the possibility of a trap and could have set one of their own. Dumarest frowned, remembering. Why had the surrogate been willing to talk at such

length? Why the specific time allowed for him to leave the ship? Seven minutes, barely enough time to don a suit and pass through the lock. No time to spare for thought or action. Why, at the end, nothing had been said as to the safety of the ship and the others.

Abruptly Dumarest knew the answer.

"Badwasi! Open fire!"

Dumarest heard a metallic crack, saw the gunnery officer spin on his feet, a hole in the back of his head, a ghastly pulp where his face had been. Another crack and he felt the impact of something which ripped at the side of his scalp, sending blood to gush down his face, blinding his eyes, smearing his tunic. More cracks echoed with spiteful violence as he lunged towards the panels.

The Cyclan had sent a cloud of non-metallic missiles from a point far to one side of the Geniat. A lethal rain which riddled the hull like a blast from a gigantic shotgun.

Air whined from the vessel, slowing as the inner coating of sealing compound blocked the apertures. An alarm blared as Dumarest clear his eyes. Buttons sank beneath his fingers and he felt the shudder as missiles flared from their housing.

One expanded into a glowing ball of brilliance as it met a blocking missile. Another did no better as the men from the Cyclan vessel thrust the suit they had collected into the port. As a third missile wasted itself the Cyclan struck back.

The Geniat slewed as if kicked by a mighty boot, hull yielding, air gusting into the void together with a cloud of debris; the shattered bones and mangled flesh of those who had taken the brunt of the impact. Doors slammed, sealing compartments, saving the living at the expense of those hurt or already dead. A second hit would create total destruction. It never came.

The screens flared as, within the Cyclan vessel, the suit-bomb vented its energy. Like a stricken beast the ship jerked, darted to one side, turned into incandescent vapour as it ran into the

missiles Dumarest blasted towards it.

"It worked!" Chapman had been too close to death and it showed. "Your plan worked, Earl. We got them, but they damned near got us. The hull damaged, equipment ruined, half the crew dead or injured. We've got to land and soon!"

Dumarest didn't hear him. Nor the voice of Nadine as she came to make her report. His whole attention was on the planet swelling before him in the screens. A white-mottled blueness wreathed by a diadem of stars.

Earth!

His search was over. He was home.