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# The Avengers of Carrig

John Brunner

**THE GIANT BIRD SOARED ALOFT—**

**WHILE BELOW THE PEOPLE WORSHIPED**

The birds were ruling the planet when the first humanoids arrived—not birds as the Earth knew them, but marvelous creatures with the highest intelligence in the universe.

The birds allowed man to settle and build his civilization below, while they held ultimate sovereignty in the realm above.

But now this division of power was shattered. New masters were spreading their tyranny over earth and air.

And there was just one thin, desperate chance for survival—that was for the humanoids and the birds to unite...

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## CHAPTER ONE



This year the first new moon of spring fell early. In the hill passes the way was still slippery with ice. By day the travelers' breath, and that of their beasts of burden, wreathed before their faces in transient curlicues, while the feet of the less fortunate grew numb inside crude straw-stuffed clogs from the soles of which a few nails protruded, hopefully to give extra purchase on the steepest stretches; by night, when the caravan made bivouac, water had to be got in the form of pailfuls of snow, which they melted down, shivering around tiny fires. The highland streams were still frozen, and there was no fuel except what they had themselves brought.

But even with frost forming on their eyebrows they plodded along willingly enough, and offered no complaint. They counted themselves fortunate to be under the direction of Trader Heron, master of this caravan. Often and often on a bitter night, with wind whisking dry, powdery snow from the shoulder of some rocky overhang, with the chill light of the moon lying on the stark black and white bones of the range, a voice had spoken of the risk of bandits, starved and desperate at the end of winter; and another had scoffed, demanding what hunger-weak bandit

would dare attack such a convoy as this: hundreds of pack-animals, a thousand people, and Trader Heron's own armed guard posted on overnight watch!

But the time for such anxiety was over, at last, and the faintest-hearted were glad they had plucked up sufficient courage to venture on the journey. To reach the city Carrig before the season of the king-hunt meant much extra profit; here, the coming of spring seemed to thaw people's purses as it thawed the snow of the hills.

And now they had crossed the border of the Carrig domains; already they had encountered winter watchmen descending from the high forts, and done some small impromptu trading with peasants emerging from their snowbound farms, who were also intending to visit the city for the king-hunt. After the rutted hill-tracks, the level metaled roads of the lowlands felt like a path strewn with pillows, and—secure in the knowledge that bandits had not penetrated Carrig's frontiers in living memory—merchants, drovers, hangers-on, and soldiers alike relaxed into laughter and song as they rode or marched on the last leg of their arduous journey.

Trader Heron himself was not the least pleased among the company. He was a large, jolly-faced man, far more affable than most who enjoyed such power and influence. His name was a byword over half a continent, thanks to the caravans he organized—always on the most profitable routes, always planned and equipped so well that he showed returns on his investment of 50 or 100 percent, when other caravan masters had to be content with 10. Yet even his fiercest rivals disliked him only for his business acumen, not for himself. He had a house and a wife in each of the four cities between which his caravans plied most often, but in no place could he settle; he must always be up and doing. He had spent the past winter in an enterprise toward the Western Ocean, the sea to which Carrig's own river ran, and had returned less than a month ago—barely in time, his rivals hoped, to recruit his caravan for Carrig. Yet he had seemed to need do no more than snap his fingers, and there they came running.

He sat his huge riding-graat like a cheerful statue, the brim of his flat hat tilted back from his face, the twenty capes of his greatcoat falling around him like the roofs of a pagoda. Daytimes, the travelers ate on the line of march, taking from their packs the cold remains of the dough-cakes they had cooked the evening before on flat brass griddles or, if they were poor folk, on red-hot stones. Although it was not yet noon, and they were well in sight of the city of Carrig itself, force of habit made them adhere to their regular routine on this final day of the journey, and Heron did the same as the rest, accepting from his personal attendants big bannocks sweetened with syrup and chewing them in rhythm with the motion of his steed.

Thoughtfully he looked toward the rising towers of the city and wondered what was in store for them this year. On his last visit the atmosphere had been tense; all too easily the frustrations and inconveniences of a long, hard winter might cause hatred to fester, like gangrene in a frostbitten limb. And, come to think of it...

He brushed crumbs of bannock from his beard and called to one of his men-at-arms, ordering him to bring to the head of the column a boy who had indeed had his toes frozen; he should be got into the city quickly, so that a surgeon

might see to him.

The notion of suffering from the cold reminded him to glance back and see how the two men from the southland were getting on, the ones he had struck up an acquaintance with during the trip. There they were, as usual, just a few paces behind. "It was fairly common for southlanders to turn up on caravans to Carrig. Most often they were merchants hawking some southern novelty, or artisans who had heard that their skills were in demand in the northern towns; some were mercenaries; some few were men fleeing blood-guilt, condemned to five or ten years' exile; again, there were entertainers seeking new audiences; and in the height of summer there were usually a few pilgrims bound for the northern sanctuary, though these seemed to grow less numerous year by year.

The two men who rode at his back, however, had attracted Heron's attention first because they seemed to fit into none of these classes. Obviously high-born, from their sophisticated—even arrogant—bearing and their educated interest in the country through which they were passing, they yet did not appear to be wealthy, for their possessions were limited to two riding-graats each, on one of which, turn and turn about, they loaded their clothing, provisions, and utensils; and neither of them had any attendants. By name they were Belfeor and Pargetty, but since these were two of the commonest southern patronymics, Heron was little wiser for knowing that. He had privately decided that they must be renegade younger sons from noble families, turned adventurer for want of better prospects at home.

They interested him greatly, for when talking at night around the fire they had revealed—when they spared time from the inevitable southlanders' complaints about the cold—a skepticism and rationality rare among the superstitious local people, even to questioning the divine right of the gods to order human lives by whim. Heron hoped that he would not lose track of them when the caravan dispersed in Carrig; he wanted to hear more of their opinions about the world.

The city Carrig had grown organically from its situation, like a forest spreading. Near the Smoking Hills, which curved about it in the north like the arc of a bent bow, the land was wonderfully fertile, because lava breaks down rapidly into productive soil. Hence there was soon a surplus of food.

Only a few miles distant a great river turned from a rushing, rocky torrent to a broad, calm waterway flowing west into the ocean. Accordingly, a settlement grew up at the highest navigable point; in a generation or two its overlords, grandsons of raftsmen and boatwrights, waxed fat on taxes and commission by trading dried sea-fish for vegetables and meat in casks of brine. Out of enlightened self-interest they spent some of their profits in building a good river-port with wooden jetties and, later, stone quays, and in hiring mercenaries to protect their warehouses from bandit raids.

Meantime, cities in the southland began to prosper, and the occasional straggling bands of peddlers and pilgrims who followed the north-south road through a pass in the Smoking Hills and continued to the northern sanctuary—then greatly revered for its oracles—developed into caravans, hundreds strong, with armed escorts against those same bandits. It was logical that they should make a

stopover at Carrig; to encourage them, the lords of the city built a bridge and saved them having to ford the river. Eventually it was only natural for Carrig to become a destination instead of a way station. Nowadays barely one caravan in four continued north from the city, and those exclusively for religious purposes, having shed traders and workers and indeed everyone bar pilgrims and perhaps guards convoying a valuable offering made by some wealthy southerner clinging doggedly to the ancient beliefs. But the northern sanctuary had lost its magnetism now, and other cults had supplanted the original faith.

Dominating Carrig was a last outcrop of the hard rock over which the river tumbled in its upper reaches. On this acropolis a fortress and a temple loomed like thunderclouds. The fortress was of gray local stone, the temple of a pinkish rock that had been floated upstream on flat-bottomed barges, but the greater part of the city which wandered haphazardly from the foot of the citadel toward the river was of wood.

So also was the bridge, before which the caravan had to halt for customs inspection and to ensure that the drovers did not in their eagerness burden the planking with more than two graats at a time. Despite careful repair work at the end of last summer, the bridge showed signs of the hard frosts just past; water had soaked into some of the great piles, as thick as a man's chest, and on freezing there had split the wood lengthways.

At the head of the procession, Trader Heron reined his graat to a halt. Patiently the big-headed beast snuffled and grunted, carrying on an endless conversation with itself. From the guardhouse on the far side of the river, officers whom he recognized came striding out; one of them called to dismiss the runner who had brought news of the caravan's arrival in Carrig territory, and the man saluted and headed for home with a cheerful expression.

Heron was not quite so happy. By two's, it was going to take the rest of the day to pass the graats over the bridge, and he had no special desire to watch the whole process—indeed, he had excellent reasons for not doing so. Surely, since he had been passing this way four times a year for twelve years, the customs officers would not mind dealing with his overseers instead of himself?

Leaning forward on his saddle, he addressed the senior of them.

"You'll appreciate that if we do not gain audience with Sir Bavis Knole before sundown, we'll be constrained to wait out the week of the king-hunt without licenses! You'll allow me to go forward at once, and those under my aegis with me?"

"Surely!" the officer replied at once. "Leave but enough men to move your beasts when the inspection's done, and we'll not require your further presence, trader!"

"I thank you heartily," Heron said, sweeping off his hat and sketching the bow which his girth and his posture alike rendered impossible. With a nod to an overseer nearby he indicated that some suitable gift should be given to the cooperative officer, and then he turned to Belfeor and Pargetty. Most of the other southerners had already crowded as close to the bridge as possible, anxiously eyeing the sun.

"For religious reasons no official business is done for a week following sundown on the evening of the spring new moon," Heron explained. "Without casting

ourselves on the protection of the city, and gaining citizens' rights thereby, we're not allowed to trade, to buy and sell in public places, or to seek work. Nor have we the protection of the police. We must hasten to the fortress and secure an audience with the regent, Sir Bavis Knole." He hesitated, scrutinizing the southlanders' faces for a response and detecting none. Baldly winding up, he said, "Well, take it from me that to be caught in Carrig without citizenship can be awkward, whether or not you wish to engage in trade—as, for instance, if your purse is stolen and the police will not assist you to recover it."

Belfeor, dark-browed, heavy-set, exchanged a glance with his fair companion Pargetty. He said, "May we then ride with you and obtain this audience?"

"I was about to suggest it," Heron nodded. "Rejoin me on the other side of the bridge; they will only permit laden graats to cross by two's."

When they had done so—followed by a volley of abuse from others of the caravan who did not see why southerners should enjoy special privileges—Belfeor spoke up again.

"You mentioned religion a moment ago," he said. Heron fancied that Pargetty shot his companion a warning glance, but could not decide why. "As I understand it, is not this king-hunt rather a matter of politics, to decide who shall rule the city?"

"Here in Carrig the two go thus." Heron held up his right hand with the first and index fingers crossed. "Their customs are strange indeed."

"For myself," Belfeor shrugged, "I hold that nothing human can be called strange."

Heron's turn to shoot a glance at him. That was a remarkable statement for a southerner to make! In Carrig it would probably be unthinkable. No doubt about it: Belfeor and his companion were going to be worth cultivating.

Neutrally, he said, "Well, I'm a roving man, and I have to act as I'm required wherever I go. Certainly to me it seems that yours is the proper attitude."

They were coming now into the city itself. It had no wall about it, for in the days when bandits used to ravage this area the whole populace could find refuge in the citadel, and now, when twenty such citadels would not hold everyone, the bandits were stood off at frontiers a day's march distant. It was clear that people were preparing for festivities; over the doors of houses and shops, symbols of the clans had been erected, and on many street corners as well as in the vast marketplace near the waterfront, sharp-faced men had set up betting-tables. Chalked on boards behind them were contenders' names and current odds. This year one name headed every list: Saikmar son of Corrie, of the Clan Twywit. Heron, who had come here for the king-hunt twelve years running, had never seen such low odds or such unanimity. Indeed, a few of the boards offered one thousand to one in favor of Saikmar to discourage further bets.

"They wager on the success of the contenders?" Belfeor said in a wondering tone. "This does surprise me."

"Many say it's disrespectful," Heron agreed. "But, see you, there has been an interregnum of eighteen years, and accordingly the city has been ruled by the Clan

Parradile, who for their totem-kinship with the king cannot take part in the hunt. Some argue that betting has been encouraged to degrade the status of the contending clans in the eyes of the common folk.”

“Well, certainly I’d not lay my money on the outcome of this contest,” Belfeor said, and gave a wolfish laugh. Alert, Heron thought he caught an answering grin on Pargetty’s face, but it might have been no more than a supercilious reaction to an improbable custom in a foreign country.

At the foot of the citadel’s rocky wall they had to abandon their steeds. Followed by the first of the southland foot-passengers from the caravan, who must presumably have bribed the customs officers to be let through so quickly, they ascended the winding path to the fortress where the regent of Carrig was giving his last audience before the season of the king-hunt began.

## CHAPTER TWO



Sir Bavis Knole would gladly have consigned those who plagued him with business on this of all days to the pit of the biggest volcano in the Smoking Hills, but for one thing: it was unlucky to begin a new year with business unfinished, and he could do nothing to alter the pattern that was laid down for him to follow. For, though he had been lord of Carrig for eighteen years, he was not a king. He was only a regent. The king slept yonder in the warm caves, where tomorrow men would go to startle him awake.

Therefore, his belly churning beneath his cassock like a pot of soup stirred with a spoon, Sir Bavis dealt with the matters before him with such grace as he could muster.

There was the problem of sixteen peasants who had fled their farms when an unseasonable eruption scattered a landslide of pumice and ash across the fields. They brought the sulfurous stench of the Smoking Hills into the very audience hall; it hung about their unwashed bodies and their tattered clothes. These were shiftless, dull-witted folk whose only conceivable virtue might be termed persistence by someone too charitable to employ the correct name: obstinacy. Two or three such cases arose every year; some families in the district had been driven from their holdings by lava ten times in as many generations, and still drifted back to the foothills as though fatally addicted to the vapors the breeze blew down on them.

Sir Bavis sighed, and resisted the impulse to tell them to go jump in a volcano. This was a season when omens counted, and to help the unfortunate was a source of spiritual benefit. Brusquely he ordered lodgings to be found, medicaments for the sick, work for the able-bodied. At the mention of the last he saw their faces fall, and was so disgusted that he barely noticed their departure.

It was a relief, after that, to find Trader Heron facing him—a man who, for all that he engaged in vulgar commerce, was intelligent and cleanly and an altogether welcome visitor. To the dismay of the court officials who were trying to hurry the proceedings, Sir Bavis accorded Heron twenty minutes of his time, some in conversation, some in an exchange of gifts. Heron had valuable spices, and much fine cloth, and some iron swords that he wanted to barter as stud-fee for the service of some of his graats, which he then planned to leave in Carrig until they foaled in midwinter next. Graats being southerly beasts, it was a risky plan, but as Heron explained, he wanted to breed from the tough northern strain so that his early-spring caravans would come through the hills more easily.

Sir Bavis chuckled and gave permission. It was good to have some joke to lighten his depressed mood, and the idea of Heron trying to get caravans through even earlier than the spring new moon was amusing; it led to visions of the portly man sunk up to his waist in a snowbank and wondering how he could turn the experience to profitable use.

Finally, as custom required, all the travelers from the south who had arrived under Heron's aegis came to cast themselves on the city, thereby acquiring temporary rights of citizenship. The notators listed the names of those concerned as well as they could, and issued porcelain certificates to each, whitish plaques as big as a man's palm.

Among the applicants, Sir Bavis noted two who were apart from the ordinary run of artisans, entertainers, traders, and footloose adventurers. Instead of standing respectfully by while Heron discussed his business, they had taken seats beside him, and from the fact that he made no objection it was clear that he regarded them as persons of some status. He did not offer to introduce them, but that was proper; until they received their certificates of citizenship they did not officially exist. Sir Bavis listened as they gave their names to the notators, and made a mental note—for what reason, he did not know—that the dark one was Belfeor and the fair, lean one was Pargetty.

As they withdrew, he had a curious feeling that Belfeor was looking not merely at, but into him, searching out secrets Sir Bavis would far rather have kept. Of course, the idea was nonsensical. But it was disquieting.

The great doors of the audience hall closed; there were no more cases to deal with today. At once servants began to drag in benches for the assembly this evening, ranging them in groups for the various clans, and to change the stubs of last night's torches in the brass wall-sconces. Although the screaming of the Bench legs on the flagstones made him wince, Sir Bavis did not move from his high throne.

*Tomorrow ...*

There was a sudden sharp pain in his chest—a pain that he could not localize, neither on the surface like a blow, nor from the surface inward like a sword-cut. He seemed to be embedded in it; he felt his heart slow and falter, and the hall grew dark. Like a drowning man fighting back to the air, he mastered it and took a desperate new grip on the world, panting.

He looked around covertly. No one appeared to have noticed. To outward view



Sir Bavis was as he had always been—older, of course, and more care-lined about the forehead, but still a strong and burly man. And yet a god's hand had reached into his body and closed around his heart, warningly.

Sir Bavis Knole, chief of the Clan Parradile, had ruled now in Carrig for eighteen years, for in all that time no one had slain the king. With every passing year the king had grown huger and stronger and more cunning. It seemed at last to Sir Bavis that he had vaingloriously expected to do the same.

What plainer warning than the shadow of death in the hall of audience could he seek to prove himself wrong?

Yes indeed: he had been wrong, and he had *done* wrong. These eighteen years of supremacy that he imagined he had secured by his own scheming, his own efforts—they were after all a loan from the gods. And now his stewardship was over. Useless to rail at it.

With the admission, the pain eased and his heart resumed its regular rhythm. Oh, the omen was unmistakable! This year, then, let the king-hunt go forward without interference, even though men said that Saikmar of the Clan Twywit was sure to kill the king. Let him! Let the gods' will be manifest, and put an end to this sorry masquerade.

Sir Bavis, his head cleared and cooled by making up his mind, rose to his feet and stalked majestically from the hall.

Heron rode slowly through the crowded streets in the vicinity of the marketplace with the two southern strangers beside him. They wore patronizing expressions, which did not correspond with Belfeor's professed tolerance for all things human. He wished he could make these two out; they puzzled him. Of course, they hailed from parts he did not ordinarily travel to himself, but there was something about them which rang false—some contradiction, some paradox in their natures...

He reached a decision, and waited for the right moment to put it into effect.

Coming now to the marketplace, they found it crowded with the graats from the caravan and their respective owners. Men and beasts milled around randomly as harassed overseers tried to keep track of mercenaries whose contracts called for them to stand guard tonight over valuable merchandise but who kept tending to vanish in the direction of nearby taverns, and innkeepers shouted offers of accommodation, which were eagerly taken up. Naturally, people who had goods to vend tomorrow wanted to lodge as near as they could to the market and ensure an early chance at the best sites for stalls; but those who were merely weary also wanted beds close at hand, rather than having to trudge to the outskirts of the city for the night, and several squabbles were developing.

Heron lowered himself from his saddle and waddled into the midst of the confusion. With sharp jests and ripe insults he brought some kind of order out of it, and returned at last to Belfeor and Pargetty with a satisfied expression.

"Well, sirs!" he exclaimed. "What have you in mind to do now?"

Belfeor shrugged. "To find where we can lodge, I suppose," he answered.

“You’ll have no luck close to the market now; we’ll fill every bed in the middle of town. Besides, most everyone from the district comes to the king-hunt, the greatest festival of Carrig’s year; and though you may find what you think is a decent room, a greedy landlord might very well insist on your sharing with some smelly peasant family toting bags of spring produce they won’t let out of their sight. Look you, though: I have a house here, small but comfortable, and were you willing to sleep in one room you’d be my honored guests.”

He thought for a moment that Pargetty was going to refuse, but Belfeor smiled quickly and cut in before his friend could speak.

“We’d be more than glad,” he said. “I may say we’ve enjoyed your company too much to relinquish it before we must, and hope you think the same.”

Pargetty said, “But—”

“Our business will not suffer any delay by this,” Belfeor interrupted. “Is that what worries you?”

Pargetty nodded, and Heron noted with interest: *So they do have business here! They never spoke of it before.*

He wondered what business it could be. Certainly it was of no ordinary kind.

“What happens this evening in connection with the king-hunt?” Belfeor asked, falling in beside Heron as they left the market.

“Oh, if I recall aright, when the evening star comes out Sir Bavis must declare the season of the king-hunt open; then there will be an assembly of all the clans, who’ll put forward their chosen contenders, one from each. These then will be dedicated, and must watch the night through until dawn while the other nobles hold a great feast in the fortress. Or so I’ve been told—you’ll appreciate that this is a sacred matter to them, and not one whose details they readily divulge to foreigners like myself. Tomorrow they’ll send to wake the king from his lair in the Smoking Hills. Sometimes it takes a day or two to find out which cave he’s chosen for his winter sleep, though usually it’s marked the year before. And then in the rising currents of hot air above the volcanoes the contenders do battle with the king until he is slain—which has not befallen in eighteen years!—or until all the gliders are brought down. Some skillful challengers, they say, have remained aloft in constant battle for three days and nights, until the king was wearied and slow and a dart found him. But that must have been a generation ago, or more.”

“And what honor to him who kills the king?” Belfeor asked.

“His clan rules from that day until the next spring new moon.”

“This then is how the old man we had audience of came to be the regent?”

“Ah, that no.” Heron raised his hand. “At present Carrig is under the law of the interregnum, and Clan Parradile holds the power, being barred, you understand, from killing the king. And all the other clans attack together. Were it otherwise, were another clan ruling, then he who killed the king the previous year would go forth first alone for a chance to renew his power. So usually he does, for the old king will have driven away all serious rivals of his own kind, and a new king is often young and inexperienced. But this one, after surviving eighteen years, is mightier

than ever was seen before.”

“*You’ve* seen him?” Belfeor suggested.

“From a distance. For myself, I’d willingly go no closer to him than a day’s fast march.”

Heron’s wife here was a Carrig woman and the household was run in Carrig style, which meant that when he arrived in the city he was treated like a visiting monarch. To have made his wife behave otherwise would have upset her view of what was right and proper. She had four children now; he was certain they were none of them his, but he had never complained—after all, a barren woman was regarded with contempt by most local people and he was seldom in Carrig more than two months of the year. And it was very pleasant after a long and arduous trek across ice-bound hill passes to subside into the lap of such luxury as this one alone of his four wives knew how to provide.

He had allotted attendants to wait on Belfeor and Pargetty, presuming that they too would welcome hot baths, massages, the services of a barber, and clean comfortable clothes. He was surprised, therefore, to find those same attendants returning to him in less than half an hour. He demanded the reason, leaning out of the cloud of steam which enveloped him and muttering an apology to his wife, who was combing his hair.

“Your guests, sir,” one of the attendants explained, “declared their intention of giving thanks for a safe journey before a portable shrine they carry with them, and ordered us to leave them undisturbed while they did so.”

Unbidden, there came a prickling at the back of Heron’s neck. In memory he reheard those conversations by the fire during which, only a few days ago, Belfeor and Pargetty had expressed such remarkable skepticism concerning the gods.

“It doesn’t fit!” he muttered, and clambered out of the bath so energetically he slopped half a gallon of water over the side. To his wife’s solicitous inquiries he replied only, “Give me a towel!”

And, kilting it roughly around him, he set off barefoot down the passage from his own suite to the room he had given the visitors. He walked quietly for all his bulk, automatically remembering every loose board and avoiding it.

Not caring that some of his servants had followed him and were having trouble hiding their amusement, he put his eye to a fine crack in the slatted wall. The window of this room was to the west, and although it was near sunset and the shutters had moreover been closed, there was enough light to reveal his mysterious guests. He also had a perfect view of their “portable shrine.” He recognized it immediately. He had one himself.

It was a subspace communicator.

He took a pace back and to the side, poising himself opposite the door. Curtly he commanded his servants to follow him. No time for precautions now—he had to act, and act quickly. He flung himself forward.

The door's wooden lock had not been designed to withstand almost three hundred pounds of determination. It snapped; the door shot back and let Heron through to confront the astonished "southerners." Southerners hell! No wonder he hadn't been able to place, them. They were from off the planet!

He had hardly spoken Galactic except to make his quarterly reports since he was posted here. But it was his birth-tongue, and his alarm and amazement made it automatic that he should revert to it now.

"All right, switch that thing off! Both of you are under arrest!"

Pargetty, at the controls of the communicator, was absolutely thunderstruck. But Belfeor, moving as though he had been expecting this moment and had been rehearsing his response for weeks, took up something else that lay on the table beside the communicator. An energy gun. An old one, but serviceable.

With a blazing bolt he cut Heron down where he stood, and the servants—to whom it • was as though he had wielded the lightning—screamed, turned tail, and fled for their lives.

## CHAPTER THREE



When Sir Bavis lost his temper for the third time with the valets who were robing him, in a little stone-walled room close to the summit of the fortress' great tower, he realized that his futile, self-directed irritation ran the risk of delaying him past the moment when the evening star should appear. Mastering himself with a violent effort, he called for a harper to quiet his jangled nerves.

Shortly one appeared, who bowed with a flourish and inquired his master's preference of songs.

"Sing *The Ballad of Red Sloin*," Sir Bavis ordered.

The harper bowed again, seated himself on a "red velvet stool, brushed back his long dark hair, and struck a chord. In his ringing tenor voice he began:

"I sing the honor and renown,  
The glory brought on Carrig town,  
When first Clan Parradile was—"

"Stop!" exclaimed Sir Bavis, so sharply that his valets, already victims of three outbursts of unaccountable fury, cringed reflexively away from him. "Not that version! The old version!" He heard his voice ragged with tension.

The harper was not the least astonished of the company. He said doubtfully, "But, sir, the old version is—"

"Have you forgotten it?" Sir Bavis cut in.

"I, sir?" The harper looked affronted. "I, who can recall the snatches my mother taught me ere I learned to walk? I intended only to say—"

"If you remember the old one, then in the name of all the gods do as you're told and sing it!" Sir Bavis roared. Paling, the harper shrugged and began again.

"I sing a hero of renown,  
Red Sloin who came to Carrig town,  
A stranger and a man of might..."

Listening, Sir Bavis felt a grim stir of satisfaction. It was as though he were symbolically regulating accounts with the gods. *The Ballad of Red Sloin* was so old no man could be sure when it was made; it told how the first interregnum had come about. There had been nine clans then, instead of the present eight, and the chief of the ninth, Clan Graat, was a treacherous schemer, hated by all. But his son was the skillfullest glider pilot of his day, and as spring and the king-hunt approached, men were certain that he would be the one to kill the king, and his clan would achieve power, and would then sell the city to a tribe of bandits who had besieged it for three summers running.

From the south, though, came Red Sloin, a mighty stranger, and he spoke up in the assembly called at the beginning of the king-hunt. Though he was not a clansman, not even a native of the city, everyone was so desperate to escape the threatened triumph of Clan Graat that they would snatch at any straw for deliverance and agreed that he must be allowed to go forth with the other contenders... not that anyone imagined he had a chance to win.

But he dashed his glider against the king's neck, and fell together with the king into the crater of a volcano, and thus laid clear the way for the chief of Clan Parradile to assume power, which he did, his first act being to extirpate the treacherous Clan Graat by slaughtering its adults and scattering the children among the other clans. Afterward the bandits were driven off and peace returned.

During the eighteen years that Sir Bavis had now ruled, the harpers of the city—perhaps out of a deliberate wish to flatter him—had taken to making Red Sloin's part in the story smaller and Clan Parradile's far larger. But to Sir Bavis it now seemed imperative that the original version should be restored.

His mind rambled as his valets finished putting on his regalia, started to comb his beard and to dress it with the paste of oil and lampblack, which he used to disguise the fact that it was turning gray. Reaching back into time with his imagination, he tried to picture the way things must once have been—before men learned to count the number of days in a year, perhaps, when the first new moon of spring came as a surprise. Doubtless, back then, they must have called the people

together and chosen the fittest to attack the king by popular acclamation. It would all have been spontaneous. Not as nowadays, when all the clans had spent the entire winter preparing for this season, putting their most hopeful contenders through grueling tests, improving their gliders, redesigning their darts to make them fly farther and straighter and penetrate more deeply, until long before the assembly they knew almost beyond doubt whether anyone this year was good enough to kill the king.

Ritualized. It had become ritualized, stilted, formal, routine! And yet it still enshrined the essential truth, as a little dry seed may hold the form of a great tree...

The harper's song was dying to a close when the door of the room slammed back and Sir Bavis' only son, Ambrus, came hurrying in.

"Respect, father," he said, making a perfunctory bow, and did not wait for the polite answer before charging ahead. "I would know whether what is to be done should be done now or in the morning."

"What?" said Sir Bavis stonily, looking the youth up and down. He had sometimes wondered about his wife's constancy, seeing this black-browed fellow with his sullen mouth and his fierce face devoid of subtlety. Himself, though men might say he was strong as a pillar of the fortress and hard as its stones, he had ever been a man who would not strike down what he could undermine, a patient schemer who planned for years ahead if need be.

Nonetheless, he knew how rarely a strain bred true from generation to generation; maybe some ancestor of his or his wife's had endowed Ambrus with so many faults. It was a burden that had to be borne.

Not understanding his father's reaction, Ambrus gave a blank stare. He said, "You know what I'm talking about—what has to be done!"

Stifling a sigh, Sir Bavis leaned back in his high-armed chair and extended first one leg, then the other, so that his valets could slip on and lace his ceremonial boots. He said, "Tell me, Ambrus, who do men say stands the best chance tomorrow?"

The youth brightened. At last he was catching on. Sir Bavis prompted him further—though surely only a dummy would have failed to realize that a servant's mouth could be unlocked where a noble's could not, and that those who attended him were nonetheless servants, before whom one did not refer even obliquely to secrets of state.

"Do they not," he pursued, "speak especially highly of Saikmar son of Corrie, of Clan Twywit?"

"Indeed!" Ambrus confirmed, pretending enthusiasm. "It's said he's the cleverest seen in forty years!" Unspoken under the words was his private gloss on the remark: *Not that that will make any difference to his fate!*

"Before the week is out, then," Sir Bavis muttered, "we may see a new clan ruling in this fortress." He spoke levelly, watching Ambrus' face for a reaction. It came: a dark flush of jealousy.

And, a moment later, he himself felt a new stab of pain so acute he had to close his eyes. Another warning from the gods, that was what it must be—like the prick of a graat-goad, harrying an obstinate animal along a path it did not wish to follow.

The subject of this dialogue with his son was a certain porcelain jar that reposed, well-stoppered, in a locked chest in an adjoining room. It held a brew of herbs and fungi of which twenty drops would fuddle the strongest man. Seventeen times at the start of the king-hunt Sir Bavis had sent a luck-cup to the most fancied contenders... spiked with the drug.

And yet this year, whenever he thought of it, the hand of a god squeezed cruelly around his heart.

He opened his eyes and looked harshly around at his servants. “Are you done?” he demanded.

They nodded fearfully.

“Then get. gone!”

They went, scurrying like little thievish animals. Only Ambrus remained. Getting to his feet, Sir Bavis began to pace up and down, wishing with all his being that he had never made the boy party to this secret. He had told himself he had done so because it was time for Ambrus to learn the skills of statecraft, but that had been a lie. He knew the real reason now: it was because the only thing his son knew how to admire in an older man, father or not father, was a greater degree of duplicity and cunning than he had as yet had time to master.

Abruptly he said, “We will send no luck-cup to Saikmar.”

Ambrus took half a step forward, words boiling to his lips. “But, father, if he does—!”

“Silence!” Like a spear, the command halted Ambrus in mid-rush. Sir Bavis continued, fumbling for words.

“Son, I have perhaps led you to... to an over-light regard for the gods. I have been tempted to... to change matters, to arrange things as I would have them, not as the gods willed. At least, that’s what I thought I was doing. But now I realize it was all illusion, for what the gods will comes to pass, and men they use only as their instruments. We have prospered for a long time—but not owing to any cleverness of mine: on sufferance from *them*. And their patience has finally run dry.”

He could not express the sense that went deeper than words, the sense of impending death, and beyond death the pit of torment in the Smoking Hills. He had only words to utter.

“Eighteen years, Ambrus, have made the king mighty beyond belief. Perhaps I have helped him. Perhaps but for me, and the—the luck-cups I have sent annually to his challengers, he would have been laid low. But now it is time to make an end of interfering. We must cast our destiny to him, and rely on his strength and cunning.”

He could read the rebellion in Ambrus’ eyes, to which words were no counter. Ambrus was saying, “But that this womanish Saikmar should oust Clan Parradile from ruling—it’s unspeakable!”

“If it happens, it happens,” his father answered heavily.

“It must not!” Ambrus stamped his foot. “Oh, why was I born into Clan Parradile that’s permitted to rule only when others default?”

“You’re greedy!” snapped Sir Bavis. “Envious of power! I’m ashamed for you. Do not men pray as they lie dying to be reborn into this clan you prize so lightly? Do they not hold it an honor to have the noblest of beasts for a clan-sign?”

“Oh, for you to speak is well enough!” Ambrus retorted. “How do you think I feel, seeing hope of such estate as you’ve enjoyed for eighteen years snatched from me?”

“By your words and actions now, you seem ill-fitted for any post of dignity!”

For a moment Ambrus was at a loss for speech. His eyes narrowed. Finding himself before a low table, he planted a balled fist on it for a prop and leaned forward. He said, “How shall I prove you wrong? Shall I arm my glider and go forth tomorrow to contend with the king? Better that I should lay him low than that—that weakling Saikmar!”

All Sir Bavis old strength came back with a sudden torrent of rage and horror. He strode toward his son, snapped his fingers on the youth’s ear like the jaws of a parradile, and used the pain as a lever to bend him from the waist. As he had not done since Ambrus was twelve years old, he clouted him enormously on the seat of his breeches.

“Go!” he said thickly when he had delivered the blow. “Go purify your mouth before you dare speak to me again—or anyone! You must make atonement for your sacrilege!”

As though realizing at last the weight of what he had said, Ambrus’ anger gave way to fear, and he made no move against his father. His mouth working, but not uttering a word, he turned blindly to the door and went out. Shocked to the core, Sir Bavis remained alone. That his son should speak of going forth against the king—himself a member of the king’s clan! How far was it from there to talk of killing a cousin... or even his father?

Through his sick dismay an important point gradually worked its way into consciousness. If he was capable of blasphemy, mere disobedience would be nothing to Ambrus—and he knew of the existence of the porcelain jar in the next room.

Sir Bavis stole, guiltily like a thief, to the door and peered both ways along the corridor. No one was in sight. Hastily he located the proper keys among the many which depended from his belt, let himself into the other room and opened the chest. There was the jar, mercifully untouched since last year. He seized it and hastened to the nearest window. Outside it ran a rain-sluice. He spilled the contents of the jar into it, and as the poison trickled away felt a great calmness come over him. With an exultant gesture he hurled the empty jar far into the distance, and heard it smash on one of the lower roofs of the fortress.

He returned to the robing-room moments before the chief acolyte came tapping at its door with his staff of office to say that the sun would shortly be setting. Sir Bavis, smiling a little, accepted the staff and followed the acolyte to the winding



stair that led to the topmost parapet of the highest watchtower. In the distance could be heard the confused noise of the nobles as they arrived for the assembly that would succeed the sunset ritual.

Emerging on the flat stage that circled the top of the tower, he found all in order—robed acolytes, servers, sages, and his kinfolk, who wore the proud symbol of the senior clan, the stylized two-winged shape of the parradile their king. He greeted them stiffly as he went by.

At last he came to the western battlements and stared toward the twin furnaces of the sunset and the Smoking Hills. Already the reddish disc of the sun was misshapen by the hot air rising over the volcanic range. And the wind must be from that quarter, for he could smell—

No. The scent of burning was from close at hand. Glancing down over the city, he could make out a smear of smoke indicating the site of a house afire. Fortunately it was not far from the river, which meant plenty of water was available to protect nearby buildings. From the volume and density of the smoke it was clear there was small chance of saving the house itself.

Out of curiosity he called to one of the young servers standing near him, a boy noted for the keenness of his eyesight. “See you there!” he said, gesturing. “Can you discern whose house it is that’s burning?”

The boy hesitated. “It might be Trader Heron’s,” he said doubtfully. “But there’s too much smoke to be sure.”

Trader Heron’s! Why, what a disaster to befall him on the very day of his return to—

Sir Bavis glanced up, and realized that while he was distracted the evening star had come out like a water-white jewel on the dying-coal color of the sky. All else was instantly forgotten except the ritual words; he raised his staff and pointed toward the star.

“Tomorrow it is lawful that the king be killed!”

## CHAPTER FOUR



Saikmar son of Corrie moved as in a dream to take his place among the other members of Clan Twywit in the hall of audience. In his veins the blood seemed to rush like a mountain torrent; he felt he was watching his own actions from a distance, as a man does when drunkenness severs the body from the mind’s control without blurring the mind’s awareness. Yet this was in no other way like being drunk, as far as he could tell from his limited experience of that state. It was closer to ecstasy.

Those about him—his mother, his uncle who had stood guardian to him since his father's death, his sisters, his aunts, and cousins to the third degree—were proud of him, and as he passed by on the way to his seat in the front rank they clapped him on the shoulder or called encouragement to him. But he was not proud of himself. His ecstasy was beyond pride. He was not completely here in the hall. Part of him was out there above the Smoking Hills, riding the turbulent air in a flimsy glider—already lost in tomorrow.

The huge semicircular audience hall was filled with benches arranged in wedge-shaped groups, widening from short ones at the front, where three might without comfort cram side by side, to long ones against the wall adequate for twenty. The order in which the clans sat was determined by lot. As it had fallen out, Clan Twywit this year claimed the central wedge, and so when he took his place Saikmar found himself directly facing the throne on which Sir Bavis would preside.

He was dimly aware that most eyes were upon him, but took no notice. Those eyes were seeing a youth as tall as a man, but curiously slim, all his bones even to those of his skull being narrow and light—birdlike, people said. A few years ago none would have foreseen him as his clan's best contender, for he spent his time studying, dancing, singing, and climbing trees by himself away from the rough-and-tumble of his fellows. Now, though, at eighteen, he had learned to express his dancer's grace through the medium of a glider, to finger its controls with the same delicacy as a musical instrument, and his light build and nervously quick reactions had marked him out far above the rest.

Limping a little (he had been thrown by a spirited graat and broken a leg which healed short) his uncle, Sir Malan Corrie, chief of the clan, took his place on one side of Saikmar, and his mother on the other. His mother was queenly still, though growing old, and carried herself grandly.

And now there was a clash of gongs and silence followed the dying reverberations as doors behind the dais opened to admit Sir Bavis, surrounded by his acolytes and servers and all his splendid retinue. Saikmar's eyes fastened on the face above the glossy black beard. Could it be true, as gutter-gossip held, that this noble head of the noblest clan had drugged contenders year by year to ensure that the king would not be killed? Oh, it was past belief! That ringing voice as it uttered invocations to the gods sounded like a bell of sincerity, resonating to the very marrow of Saikmar's bones...

Then, when the invocations were done, there came the appeal for contenders against the king. Saikmar felt his heartbeat quicken; he turned to look at the first of his rivals as he rose to give his name to the notator for the record. Of course, the contenders had been selected weeks—in some cases months—ago. But for the sake of the ritual the notators had to hear them speak for themselves and write the names down in the honor roll. (For some contenders, lost among the volcanoes, an entry on the roll had to stand as their only memorial.)

In olden days, ancient traditions reported, the pattern was not so rigid as now; contenders were not confined to one from each clan, and even men from outside the Carrig territory had been permitted to attempt the king's life: Red Sloin, for instance, about whom a famous ballad had been made. Waiting his turn to speak,

Saikmar heard a few lines of that song in his memory.

Then his uncle was urging him to rise, and he was recalled to the present with a start. Making his voice as deep as he could—for it was high and clear, and sometimes he was taunted because it had never actually broken, merely slid from a boy's treble to a youth's tenor—he announced his name, his clan, and his intention to go forth against the king.

One moment later he had forgotten, and was lost anew in visions of the hunt.

It was not until after the contender from the last clan had been listed that reality broke in on him again, and then in a strange, unlooked-for fashion. The great doors at the rear of the hall had been heard to open, but no one had looked round, assuming that with the approach of darkness servants were coming to light the torches, or attend to some other necessary task. Now, though, from a pool of shadow a bass voice rang out.

“And I! I also would go to hunt your king!”

Startled—Sir Bavis perhaps the most startled of all—the assembled nobles craned to see who had spoken. Emerging from obscurity, he proved to be a man of at least thirty, possibly older, heavy-set, with dark brows. He wore a southland costume of loose belted shirt and flapping breeches, and he hooked his thumbs defiantly into the belt as he confronted the hostile glaring of the company.

After a moment's silence, indignation against the intruder broke out like floodwater breaching a dam, and Sir Bavis had to command the bearer of the loudest gong to hammer on it before he could cut through the tumult. When he had a semblance of order, he shouted, “Come forward and make yourself known!”

Expressionless, the stranger tramped up the aisle alongside the folk of Clan Twywit, and Saikmar, heart hammering, wondered if he had had some kind of premonition just now, when he found *The Ballad of Red Sloin* running through his brain.

Sir Bavis was half out of his seat now, staring at the dark-browed man. “Why, you came for audience this afternoon with Trader Heron—I recognize you now. You're the southerner, the one called Belfeor!”

“Correct,” the stranger said sarcastically. “But please don't tell me that that prevents me going to hunt the king. Red Sloin wasn't a Carrig man either, and I ask no more than you accorded him.”

Considering what he had been through since his arrival in the city, Belfeor reflected with grim satisfaction, he felt he had made a most impressive entry. Of all the incredibly bad luck, to fall in with a Galactic agent—to find themselves in his very house! When there could hardly be a dozen agents on the planet, and probably half as many.

Still, things had not turned out too badly. Though Pargetty was inclined to panic at first, he'd had to agree that if Heron—or whatever his real name was—had charged in wearing nothing but a towel, and moreover forgotten himself sufficiently to address them in Galactic, he could have had no previous inkling of his guests'

off-planet origin. Which in turn implied that they had disguised themselves well. And further meant that he had had no chance to report their presence to the authorities. All was not lost, therefore. But they had to move quickly.

The servants had panicked only because of the energy gun. Given a few minutes in which to grow angry at their master's death, the bravest of them would return. They snatched up the communicator and replaced it in the native wooden case which disguised it as a "shrine"—an obvious cover, because many of the indigenous cults venerated ancestral relics and protected their containers with elaborate curses aimed at thieves and despoilers—gathered what few of their belongings were absolutely indispensable, and hurried out of the room. As he left, Belfeor launched two more bolts at the body of Trader Heron and saw the wooden floor beneath his corpse crackle into a blaze.

"We'll burn the house!" he snapped at Pargetty. "We've a good chance they won't believe the servants' story—they may think them crazy at least until tomorrow, and by then we should be out of their reach if what you've told me is true."

Pargetty, pale-faced, gave a nod and fumbled his own energy gun out from beneath his shirt. Sighting to the other end of the long passage, he started a fire there also to block the door of Heron's private suite. When they had descended the external staircase to the stableyard behind the house, they completed their work with two more shots through windows, and coils of smoke began to pour from the rooftop.

"That'll occupy their minds," Belfeor said grimly. "It's good dry timber—it'll be a furnace in no time. And now we'd better get lost in the city." He spun on his heel and began to set a fast pace through a maze of back alleys; there was no risk of literally getting lost, however, so long as they could see the crest of the rocky citadel which dominated Carrig.

"How long until the assembly in the fortress?" Pargetty panted, struggling to keep abreast of his companion.

"It starts as soon as the evening star appears—two of this system, presumably. Blast Heron for interrupting! I wanted an accurate time-check from the ship."

"How long before they start worrying up there?"

"They're probably worrying already, damn it. Your first job is to find a place where you can set up the communicator again and explain what happened. Make sure they don't panic, above all. Emphasize that Heron can't possibly have passed the word to anyone and there's no reason not to go ahead as planned. Presumably Heron used his caravan journeys as cover for a regular beat, and that means you were right when you told us there wasn't a permanent agent based in Carrig. By the time news of what's happened to him filters through to another agent on this planet, we'll have had months to get dug in."

Pargetty nodded doubtfully. "But for all we know he was scheduled to make a report directly he got here. Won't the Patrol investigate at once if that's the case?"

"You're asking *me*?" Belfeor countered. "You're supposed to know the answer to questions like that, I thought!" And, before the reddening Pargetty could reply, he went on: "Anyhow, that's a risk we have to take. Here, I think we've gone far enough

together; we'd better split up now. I'll rendezvous with you tonight at—no, of course I won't. If they accept me like they're supposed to, I guess I'll have to go through the mumbo-jumbo, the all-night watch and the rest of it. You're on your own, then. I'll link up after the king-hunt. Don't do anything rash!"

And then there was no problem except getting into the fortress, which he managed with a cover story so flimsy he could hardly believe it, though he had been assured beforehand that it would succeed. All he did was to show the guards a little southland trinket and tell them it was a luck-charm he intended to give to Saikmar—and they let him by. Obviously they must all have bet heavily on Saikmar and wanted him to have any luck that was going.

If the hint about Red Sloin was equally effective—whoever Red Sloin might have been—he was certain of bringing off his gigantic gamble.

All the time that the argument was raging in the hall, Saikmar was staring in puzzlement toward the intruder. He looked *old*. Old for a contender, anyway. And heavily built, even stocky. It was hard to picture a man like that piloting a glider among the chimneys of the Smoking Hills. Moreover, unless he intended to do as Red Sloin had done in the legend—crash his glider deliberately against the king's neck—how could he hope to triumph? Saikmar knew very well how slender his own chances were, and he had the double advantage of youthful reflexes and years of daily practice, except in the bitterest month of winter.

And this Belfeor did not have the air of a man who wanted to die.

It was altogether absurd, Saikmar concluded. You *had* to be young and agile to kill the king, even when there was only a new and inexperienced one to cope with. All the authorities agreed on that; no champion on record had killed the king more than four years in succession. At twenty-five you were already stiffening up, too slow to match with a lithe male parradile.

Behind him there was a sudden clamor. Luchan, who had been last year's contender for Clan Twywit and whose glider had crashed after a blow from the king's left pinion, leaving him less of a man by one arm and one eye, was on his feet and shouting at Sir Bavis.

"Your doing!" he barked. "A scheme of yours to keep power in the hands of Clan Parradile!"

Instantly there was fresh uproar, and the waves of sound beat at Saikmar's head like fists. Other ready accusers were found from other clans, and slanders were soon being hurled like javelins. At last Saikmar could stand it no longer, and stood up bellowing for silence.

Because he was the most favored contender, they shamefacedly allowed him to be heard. He did not plan the words; they merely tumbled out of him. He cried, "Has none of you a grain of sense? Have you looked at this man Belfeor? Have you wondered what chance he has against the king? He claims to have come to the city for the first time today—no matter how skillful a pilot he may be, what chance do you think he stands among the treacherous up-and-down-draughts of the Smoking Hills?"

His point was beginning to sink in. He saw expressions growing thoughtful on every side.

“Luchan! Were you Sir Bavis, and had you some dirty scheme to twist the will of the gods, would you pick such a man? I’ve no idea what drives him to make his challenge, but I doubt if he knows what kind of ordeal he’s exposing himself to. I think he must just be gambling foolishly on a chance of power. Well, let him! If he compares himself to Red Sloin, let him! If he’s as good a man as Sloin was, he’ll prove it tomorrow; if not, he’ll meet inglorious death. I say he’s welcome to let the king break his silly neck if that’s what he wants!”

Breathing hard, Saikmar sat down, vaguely astonished at himself. His mother bent over and whispered some compliment in his ear; he returned only a distracted nod, waiting to see what would happen now.

“But it’s against all custom...” a worried voice said from the left of the hall.

“Against custom perhaps.” Sir Bavis seemed to have recovered his aplomb and spoke with his usual authority. “But against the law it is not. I feel Saikmar son of Corrie has spoken well. And I declare before you all, and especially before Luchan—whose tongue would appear to have loosened in his mouth since last we were gathered here!—that I have seen this upstart Belfeor but once before, when he came to throw himself upon the city today with the rest of Trader Heron’s caravan. Beyond that I know nothing about him.”

Throughout the long debate Belfeor had said nothing; he had stood in the same defiant pose with his thumbs hooked in his belt. Now he raised his voice.

“Am I accepted, then?”

“Against my will, against the will of us all, but because it is not forbidden, you are accepted,” said Sir Bavis bitterly.

“Good!” Belfeor said, and grinned around at the scowling nobles. “Moreover, friends, I’m not here, as that young fellow suggested, to have my neck broken by your king. Perhaps in a day or two we’ll see those sneers on the other side of your heads!”

Seeing the man’s utter self-confidence, Saikmar felt a chill of apprehension. It was ridiculous to think this upstart might succeed! And yet... such assurance must be rooted somewhere.

“The man’s clearly mad,” he heard his uncle whisper. Possibly, Saikmar thought. But he was terribly afraid that in fact he knew something which the folk of Carrig did not, and that his secret might gain him the victory.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Not merely an upstart, but an unbeliever too—surely the gods would never permit a man like that to triumph over the king! In a dark side-chapel of the great temple, hours later, Saikmar’s head still rang with what Belfeor had said. It was the custom that each contender should watch the night through in the chapel where stood his own clan’s symbol and the statues of the appropriate patron gods; belonging to no clan, the intruder naturally put the priests in a quandary over where he might properly keep his watch.

And Belfeor had said in loud cheerful tones such as men never used in the holy precincts, “Don’t mind me. Anywhere comfortable will do, so’s I can doze off when I feel inclined.”

Leaning back in his hard chair carved from a single block of stone, Saikmar stared wondering at the god-statues and the twywit symbol. If Belfeor was killed in the hunt, of course, that would be fit reward for his impiety. But if he lived, and worse yet if the king did not...

Doggedly he drove the idea from his mind. He could not, however, escape the knowledge that the intrusion of Belfeor had placed an intolerable responsibility on him. He had read that fact in everyone’s eyes as he was being dedicated prior to his watch: in his mother’s, his uncle’s, the priests’, the acolytes’... *He* was the person on whom Carrig depended for the frustration of the intruder.

To distract himself, and also in the hope that it would encourage him to emulate it, he began to meditate on the nature of his clan animal, the twywit. It was almost as good a beast to claim totem-kinship with as the parradile, for it was agile, cunning, and extremely tough. It was about the weight of a man, having two muscular hind legs with which it could leap when pouncing on prey, or bound across an obstacle such as a creek, when it would retract and hold up its clawed forelimbs. Its normal gait, however, was on all fours, a quick scurrying run. Its head was flat above and developed below into short, powerful, heavily fanged jaws. Its fur was thick and smooth, shading from light tan on the head to reddish-brown on the belly and blackish-brown on the back. It was tailless.

In another way, though, it was a poor clan-sign to boast about, for a few years ago a great pestilence had almost cleared the territory of twywits—to the relief of farmers who had lost valuable stock or even children through its ravages, and to the dismay of the clansmen who bore its symbol.

Was it a good thing at all to claim kinship with a beast of prey? Saikmar had never posed the question to himself before, but now, as he remembered the children that had been killed by twywits, it arose unbidden in his mind. And this was the worst of all times to doubt the wisdom of the gods, when tomorrow not only his life but the future of Carrig depended on their whims!

He stared at the statue of Maige, goddess of speed and the wind, trying to concentrate on her attributes, but his mind kept on wandering against his will. There had been a Clan Graat once—mentioned in *The Ballad of Red Sloin*—and this for the first time struck him as strange. Because the graat was a riding- and pack-animal, domesticated and useful, whereas the twywit, the parradile, the coshivor, the arbitz, and the rest of the clan totems were wild beasts and mostly very savage.

Could the graat possibly have been a wild beast too, in the days when the clans first chose their totems? It was a new and disturbing idea, but it made sense.

Saikmar shivered—not with cold, though in the high-roofed draughty temple at this dead hour of night it was far from warm, but with the impact of his unexpected insight. One did not usually think of revolutionary changes in the world. Certainly there were changes going on all the time, but they were petty: an improvement in the wing-design for gliders, novel imports from the south, shifting fashions in clothing and manners. But nothing to signify.

When you considered that a graat might once have been a wild beast, though... And that there must have been a time when on the site of Carrig there was nothing at all, not even a cluster of clay huts...

Suppose Belfeor did kill the king: having no clan, what would he do? Would he choose to be adopted into one of the existing clans, or would he create a new one for himself? If so, what would he choose as his clan animal?

Angrily, Saikmar checked the line of thought again. It was ridiculous to envisage Belfeor's success. Better to pursue the scarcely less comfortable notion that things had changed radically in the past than the terrifying likelihood of their changing in the future. He had always been studiously inclined, and he knew most of the old tales that accounted for man's presence in the world. They varied in detail, but on basics they agreed. Once, they recounted, man had been like the gods, and dwelt in a fairer world than this, and enjoyed marvelous powers over nature. But they became arrogant. Seeing this, the gods smote the sun so that it blazed a hundred times more fiercely than usual, as a fire roars up when a poker lets air into its base. Most of the arrogant people were destroyed; only a few, by divine grace, were able to escape the sun's fury. These had fled in a boat across some vast ocean—the sages held that the Western Ocean was referred to—and for a long while had been compelled to live in a frigid barren waste. When at last they were permitted to move to more hospitable lands, they were warned that it was only on sufferance. If they offended the gods again, they would be destroyed forever.

It was said further that the custom of the king-hunt had been instituted by the gods as an annual reminder that man was a frail creature—that such a beast as the parradile, not being more than a beast, was strong enough to kill men and cunning enough to escape their lures and traps. On the other hand, you could point to lands where no such custom existed and argue instead that the king-hunt was invented by men themselves to ensure that only the cleverest and most resourceful achieved power in Carrig, and to bestow on the reigning clan those qualities of strength and subtlety men respected in parradiles. But here the matter shaded over into magic, and magic was the exclusive province of Clan Parradile; Saikmar knew little of it.

Whichever way you looked at it, however, one constant fact remained: this was the custom of Carrig, and for it men died yearly. It was not fitting that an irreverent stranger should trample his clumsy feet across sacred ground as Belfeor was doing. Saikmar turned to the other statue flanking the twywit symbol—that of Oric, god of everything sharp, fangs, claws, darts, and spears—and besought him to blunt Belfeor's weapons so that they would not wound.



With dawn came the clangor of gongs in the streets, announcing the departure of the advance party who had in some ways a more dangerous task even than the contenders, for they had to scramble among the cavern-riddled foothills of the volcanic range and rout the king from his slumber. More paradises than the king wintered in those warm caves, and there was always the risk of disturbing a mother with young, who would attack on sight because she had not hibernated. The king, however, would be drowsy and placid, and the business of coming awake, gulping down the provisions he had stored last fall and emerging into the daylight would occupy him long enough for the advance guard to make their getaway.

When the gongs had died in the distance, the priests came to fetch the contenders and make sacrifice in their name on the hearthstone of the temple. After that, it was for them to decide what to do until the king was wakened. Those who were not too excited could sleep away the morning and refresh themselves after their wakeful night. Much to his own surprise this was what Saikmar did, lying on a bundle of cloaks while his riggers double-checked his glider, renewing the thongs of tough elastic kowtschook which propelled its darts, testing every inch of the control cords to make sure they would not snap.

He did not see what became of Belfeor. When he inquired on waking, he found that no one very much cared.

Each of the clans had its own launching-site for gliders. Clan Twywit's was closest of all to the city, and the party accompanying Saikmar could delay their departure a full hour beyond the others' without risking the loss of their chance at the king. It was almost noon when they took station on the grassy plateau among the volcanic peaks, and looked over the landscape for signs of activity. Saikmar knew this area better than his own clan's estate, for he had flown over it hundreds of times and each smoking crater was an old friend of his, ready to lend the help of an updraught or veil him temporarily with blinding smoke. Yet he found himself trembling as he waited for the riggers to set up his glider on its launching-ramp.

"Scared?" Luchan said. As a former contender he had the right to be present at the launching-site, though Saikmar would have been happier without him; Luchan's missing arm and closed eye were unpleasant reminders of what the king could do to an over-bold attacker.

"A little," Saikmar acknowledged.

"You've taken nothing of Sir Bavis', I hope?" Luchan murmured. "No luck-cup or anything like it?"

Saikmar shook his head. "None has been sent to me," he declared. He and Luchan had talked about this before—the slanderous charge that Sir Bavis drugged the contenders.

Luchan shrugged and gave a twisted smile. "Myself, I did. I think I was unwise. However, since you've been sent none and I lack all proof for my charge except that after the drink I felt less than completely myself, let's refrain from blighting the day with talk of such matters. What were you thinking of when I spoke?"

"Of the stranger Belfeor," Saikmar answered. "He gives me a disturbing sense of—of menace."

Luchan clapped him on the shoulder with his surviving hand. "What you have to worry about today is the king, my friend, not some foolish and arrogant stranger! I've been making inquiries, and no one seems to know what's become of him since he left the temple. No one has seen him with a glider on the way here, no one has any knowledge of where he might plan to set up a launching-ramp, or of any servants or riggers he can command... It's my guess he's changed his mind, and he'll never dare show his face in Carrig again."

Saikmar was on the point of saying that he disagreed, that he did not feel Belfeor was that kind of man, when a shrill cry came from the keen-eyed lookout on the edge of the plateau.

"They wave the yellow flag! The king's been found!"

At once there was a frenzy of activity. Up hobbled his uncle to embrace Saikmar and wish him well; the riggers stood to their weights and winches as he piled into the fragile shell of the glider and fastened safety-lines about him, setting his knife where he could reach it to cut himself loose if he had to. He took hold of the control-stick and set it for launching, pushing it well forward so that he could dive from the plateau's edge before rising into the hot up-current of the nearest crater; then there was a wait which seemed long as eternity.

"He comes!" the lookout called at last, and they let go the weights.

Next moment the eyes of everyone else were on the king, but Saikmar dared not turn his gaze in that direction yet. He was too busy gentling the glider through the treacherous volcanic draughts, seeking the up-current which would whip him a safe thousand feet higher than the king. When he at last located it, he could look. And caught his breath. No matter how often a man has flown over the Smoking Hills, he thought, there could never be another occasion like the first time you shared the air with the king-parradile.

He had just taken his lazy leap into the sky; it was clear from which cave he had emerged, for his stiff tail pointed at it like a signpost. He was black, and blue, and gold, and he shone in the sunlight. Under his smooth hide the pumping wing-muscles rippled like waves in deep oil. Never in living memory had the king survived so long; never in memory or legend had one grown to such a—size!

Seeing his true proportions, Saikmar was so startled he almost tilted his glider into a stall. Before today, he had never flown with the king—only watched and studied his habits from the ground. The parradile's body was five times a man's height from shoulders to root of tail, sharp-keeled below, broad and flat above. Tail and neck together added as much again to his length; atop the curving neck the wise old head, hammer-shaped, turned to survey the rising adversaries, for other gliders had taken the air now. And as though defiantly the king opened his vast jaws in a blood-red yawn, then leaned on his left pinion—sixty feet to the tip now it was full-spread!—and swooped into the updraught of a volcano.

Before Saikmar knew what had happened, the king was at his own level and still rising.

Some said that the parradile had copied this technique from men; Saikmar held this to be nonsense, arguing that no flying creature could lair among the Smoking

Hills and not discover the trick in the course of nature. Yet, watching the elegance with which the king rode the hot rising air, he understood how people could mistake it for a skill learned like human skills.

As yet, however, it seemed the king was drowsy, for he did no more than glance toward Saikmar's glider and then sheer off in a dive, pumping his wings to work the winter's stiffness out of them. Relieved, for he felt it best to circle awhile before planning his first attack, Saikmar decided to gain more height still, and while doing so to see where the other contenders were.

He recognized their various gliders easily enough; each clan had its distinctive livery colors, and painted their craft accordingly. His own was decked in the colors of the twywit, black-brown above and red-brown underneath. Others were green, slate-colored, blood-red, checkered or striped.

No glider should have been white.

He realized this the instant he saw it take the sky, even as his intelligence rebelled against the information of his eyes. No glider could climb like that—a mile from any updraught, at the lowest estimate! Yet here it came, leaping up the sky with an earsplitting howl, and...

His perception of time seemed to fail him. Minutes later he returned to awareness, to find himself guiding his glider through a series of dull mechanical spirals toward a landing-place, its darts unfired. There was no longer any target to loose them against.

He had witnessed the worst catastrophe ever to befall his people and their city, and the memory of it would be etched into his brain until he died. The glider that should not have been there, the white one, rose with insolence to confront the king, and something spat from it like lightning in a clear sky. One second later the king—he who had been aerial majesty, wisdom, and doom incarnate—was a blistered, tumbling hulk shorn of a wing, falling like a wounded god toward the pit of a volcano straight below.

And Belfeor, the upstart stranger, the intruder from the south without reverence for the gods, had made himself legal lord of Carrig.

## CHAPTER SIX



The pay was the highest in history, because you were paid in life. But because the rewards were so high, the conditions were stringent. In other branches of government service you could earn on a four-for-one basis, or six-for-one, or even seven-for-one. Only in the Corps Galactia was pay on a ten-for-one scale. Straightforwardly, for every year you spent in the Corps, you would be *guaranteed* ten healthy, youthful years of extra life.

If you survived to claim your due.

And if you had a use to put them to.

And, above all, if you and the Corps got along. The minimum service contract was ten years, and if you quit—or were thrown out—before those ten years were up, you had lost your chance for good. Nobody got a second try at any career that paid off in longevity treatment.

Maddalena Santos thought of this fact, sitting alone in the anteroom of the commandant's suite, and was suddenly afraid. She was twenty-five years old. She had just begun to realize what life could mean—what a *lifetime* could mean. And she feared that she had thoughtlessly found out how to throw her chance of it away.

It was never cold under the dome on this airless world—airless like all Corps bases, so that hyperphotonic ships could come out of subspace almost on its surface—but Maddalena felt herself shivering. There were so few things that a call to the commandant's office could mean, and they were practically all bad. Especially since a ship had just docked after a long tour on frontier patrol and was scheduled to head from here to Earth, presumably for a change of crew and a refit. That was the way failed corpsmen went out: back to Earth, or wherever they hailed from originally. Not many of them were from Earth nowadays.

And there was part of her trouble.

She closed her hands convulsively on the arms of the big chair she sat in and her lips moved silently. They formed words which might have been, “I didn't mean to behave like that!”

Maybe not... But people too often did things they didn't mean.

Looking back, she saw that coming fresh from Earth's most famous university, proud as all space of her diplomas and degrees, she must have appeared arrogant and cocky to those more experienced corpsmen she found herself working with. She just didn't react to them as genuine corpsmen; that was it. It was too far a cry from the glamorous ideal to the hardbitten, weary, unromantic reality. Subconsciously she found herself looking on her companions as ignorant colonials, while she was a sophisticated product of Earth itself.

Obviously, the Earthside way to do things was the best way. Maddalena knew the Earthside way. This made her superior. It said here!

It took almost a year for her to realize how much she was disliked. With some people it was nearer hate than dislike. And six months beyond that—up till now—to figure out why. She had just got there. She was just learning to feel ashamed of herself, learning to writhe at the memory of her own voice raised as it had been a hundred times in complaint, complaint, complaint!

“There's never any fun around here! You can't think about the work clear around the clock! I never needed to feel bored on Earth—there was always something to do, something new and exciting!”

Or if it wasn't over the monotony, it was about the food, or the standardized accommodation, or the smell of the ventilator current, or the incompetent way she thought someone else was handling what was none of her business.

A multipanel was set into each of the walls of the anteroom. She reached for the controls of the nearest and switched to the mirror adjustment. Her face felt hot. And sure enough, when she looked at her reflection, she was blushing with embarrassment at her own past stupidity. It wasn't long since blushing in itself would have horrified her. Currently it seemed like a pretty good sign. Like a fever indicating that her body's defenses were fighting for her.

Another point occurred to her as she studied herself. Maybe she'd cared too much about this face and body of hers. Out here on a Corps base, two parsecs from a civilized planet, a body was a vehicle for getting a mind from place to place. The mind was what counted. It was man's only weapon of last resort against the universe. What she wanted, what she needed to do was to start regarding the good looks that had come with her body as a bonus, not as the important part.

Of course... they were a substantial bonus. She tilted her head a trifle to one side. The blush had gone, leaving her skin as usual: flawless, lightly tanned, with a hint of olive beneath. Her eyes were large and dark and the long lashes were natural. Her glossy black hair was cropped short (she'd complained about that too!), because hair more than one inch long might get trapped in the sealing-ring of a space helmet when suiting up for an emergency; but that merely emphasized how beautifully shaped her oval head was. A student of preatomic art she had known in college had compared it to a form by Brancusi. Her shoulders sloped a little; her waist was small, and her legs were inches longer than they should have been in proportion to her trunk, giving her a look of tall fragility.

She was tired as hell of that fragile look, she realized abruptly. She was probably conditioned by it herself—the exquisite product of Earth, too fine to rub shoulders with these gross colonials!

And thanks to that idiotic subconscious assumption, the chances were good that she had thrown away a century of much-coveted extra life.

A voice spoke out of the wall close at hand. "Probationer Santos to the commandant's office now, please!"

Automatically she got to her feet. She was thinking: *Probationer!* That had rankled too. She had expected to be confirmed as most people were in lieutenant's rank after a year; when she was not, she had gone around complaining and saying it wasn't because she couldn't cope with her work, it was because people didn't like her. Not believing what she said. Speaking from malice.

But it was then, of course, that someone finally lost his temper and told her how right she was, and she realized with horror and dismay that being liked *was* part of her job and moreover the part she couldn't manage. That was the beginning of her real education.

More than likely, this was the end now.

She walked through the autodoor of the commandant's office as smartly as she could, but when she announced herself she heard her voice shaking a little. Commandant Brzeska took no notice, but neutrally told her to sit down. She obeyed, thinking: *He isn't alone—I wonder if that's a good sign or a bad one.*

She knew the man who was sitting beside the commandant, but only by sight. He

was a tired-faced man with prematurely gray hair which had presumably turned color while he was on patrol out of reach of longevity treatments. It was his ship which had docked here yesterday. Her first hopeful reaction turned sour as she remembered the likely corollary of this.

And yet—would Brzeska tell her she was through in the presence of a stranger?

There was a silence while the patrolman looked her up and down. His gaze was uncomfortably penetrating, as though he could judge her personality from outward appearances. At length he turned to the commandant and raised one eyebrow inquiringly; Brzeska nodded and spoke.

“Santos, this is Patrol Major Langenschmidt.”

Maddalena forced a smile of acknowledgment and waited for him to continue. He seemed to have difficulty choosing words; it was perhaps as much as half a minute before he plunged ahead.

“Well, Santos! I’m going to say what I have to say in front of Major Langenschmidt because it’s only fair that he should hear it. I don’t imagine I have to tell you now that you’re by far the most cordially detested person who has ever been stationed here, under my command or anybody else’s. *Do you realize that?*”

With all the spirit she could muster, Maddalena said, “I’ve known for some time. I’ve been doing my best to rectify it.”

“Glad to hear you say so,” Brzeska countered caustically. “So far I haven’t noticed much success. In fact—look at this.”

He picked up a report form from the desk before him and held it out to her. She took it numbly, and read:

“In view of her congenital inability to cooperate with more experienced corporals, and her indomitable conceit, Probationer Santos appears wholly unsuitable as career material.”

She went on staring at the words long after they had blurred unreadably.

“All right, give it back,” Brzeska said, took the form, and crumpled it in his hand. Tossing it into the disposer where it vanished with a puff of heat, he leaned back.

“That was the report I planned to send to Earth on the major’s ship, and you along with it. You realize the implications?”

*Do you have to torture me?* But Maddalena’s mouth was too dry to utter the words aloud; she could merely nod.

“Hrmp! But in fact you’ve had a reprieve. According to your documents, which I’ve studied pretty frequently—as often as I found myself wondering why you were selected for Corps service in the first place, and you can imagine how often *that* must be!—you have a good aptitude for languages, right? And in college your chief leisure activity was face-to-face dramatics: acting, as it used to be called?”

Maddalena nodded again.

“Half your trouble, it seems to me,” Brzeska sighed, “is due to dramatizing yourself above your real place in the scheme of things. Well, thanks to our current

shortage of spare operatives a chance has arisen for you to see whether these talents of yours really entitle you to the status you seem to think is yours by right.” He turned to Langenschmidt. “Tell her about it, Gus.”

The major hesitated. “You presumably know the Patrol’s main job in this sector,” he suggested.

*Do you think I’m completely ignorant?* The words rose angrily to Maddalena’s lips, but she bit them back with an effort. She said, “You’re mainly mapping the planets where the refugees from Zarathustra wound up, and planting and collecting agents on the worlds which are still isolated from contact with the rest of the Galactic community.”

“Correct. Well, we’ve heard nothing from one of our most valuable on-planet agents for very nearly two years now. According to rumors relayed by our other agents there, he’s dead, nobody knows quite how. In general this would be nothing worse than a damned nuisance—it’s a backward world in most respects, and things don’t change greatly from generation to generation. However, something very odd indeed is happening in one of the cities that used to be included in the dead agent’s beat. There may have been some crucial technological breakthrough, leading to a cultural upheaval, or maybe there’s been a revolution, or some conqueror has seized power. We can’t tell. All we hear is at third-hand or worse, muddled by word-of-mouth transmission and exaggerated into nonsense. It’ll take us a year or two to build up a good cover for a new permanent agent covering the same beat, and a year or two might be a dangerously long time. I put it to the commandant here and he agrees with me.”

“So, Santos,” Brzeska rumbled, “you being the only operative I can cheerfully spare, I’m offering you a choice. I appreciate it has offended your sensitive soul to be forced into the company of us rough backwoodsmen here, so it’ll be quite in character for you to refuse the assignment—after all, on the world we’re talking about, people are not just uncouth but unwashed, not just unsophisticated but uncivilized.”

Under the lash of the commandant’s sarcasm Maddalena felt herself trembling. It took all her willpower to bear in mind that she deserved to be talked to like this after the way she had behaved since her arrival.

“Naturally,” Brzeska continued, “if you do refuse, I’ll rewrite my report in the same terms as before and this time I won’t throw it away. I’ll send it, and you, to Earth. And you will be out one century’s pay.”

“Permanently,” Maddalena said. She hadn’t intended to speak.

“Permanently,” Brzeska confirmed.

While the commandant was speaking, Langenschmidt had been looking worried. Now he said in a doubtful tone, “Pavel, you’ve used some pretty strong terms about Probationer Santos. I know you well enough to realize you must have good reasons. But if this is the way things stand, maybe it wasn’t a good idea in the first place. An—uh—an inadequate agent would be worse than no agent at all in a spot like this.”

Maddalena took a deep breath. “Major,” she said, “when I came here a year and

a half ago I was a conceited little fool. I thought that because I was Earthborn I knew all about everything. I realize that now—fully. I'll take any chance at all to make up for my own stupidity. I can't do more than my best, but I don't think the people who passed me for Corps service can be completely wrong. If there's anything useful in me I'm determined to find it, and right now I'll take the hardest job I can get—in space, on a planet, anywhere.”

“You do realize,” Langenschmidt murmured, not looking at her but down at his own big-knuckled hands, “that you stand a good chance of being out not merely your century of extra life, but what remains of your natural span as well? Things are pretty rough on the Zarathustra Refugee Planets.”

“If I turn down the assignment, I'm going to have to go through the rest of my *natural span* feeling miserably ashamed of myself, aren't I? So that's not likely to deter me.”

Brzeska gave a stifled snort. “Santos, you're overdramatizing yourself again,” he sighed. “There was a legend they used to have, I believe, back in the days when people acted face-to-face as professional entertainers, which always concerned some young unknown player becoming famous when the most important player was taken ill and he or she had to step into the main role. You're not being chosen for some glamorous part, understood? You're a stopgap. Your job is to go to a certain place and find out what's happening, *nothing else*. The fewer people who've heard of your existence when you leave that planet, the better we'll be pleased. You're not going to be famous and there won't be any glamour. Is that clear?”

“I understand,” Maddalena said stiffly.

“Good. All that remains is for you to prove that you mean what you say. All right, Gus—it's up to you now.”

Langenschmidt hauled himself to his feet. “Come with me, Santos, ” he said. “We'll start at once.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN



In some ways, Gus Langenschmidt thought, he was better off than Commandant Brzeska or anyone else tied to an on-planet base of the Corps. For instance, you seldom found that more than half the personnel of such a base really cared about the work they were doing—the rest were serving out their time, stacking up their future life ten years for one. Aboard a Patrol cruiser, people *all* cared about the work. They had to. If they didn't, a single ten-year tour of operations would drive them crazy.

Also he was better off than the commandant because his job took him places; he might actually set foot on ten or a dozen different worlds in the course of a



trip—under conditions of fantastic secrecy, naturally—while Brzeska was stuck under this same old dome.

There was one fundamental way, though, in which the commandant had the better of the bargain. If things went seriously wrong, it would be Brzeska's responsibility as ranking officer in this Galactic sector. But it would be Gus Langenschmidt's *fault*.

He led Maddalena into the office that had been assigned to him for the period of his stay on the base-world, and flung himself into a chair. "Sit down," he said, waving his hand vaguely. She complied nervously, and he looked her over again.

He was a long way from being sure about Brzeska's reasoning. The commandant had said, in sum, "Granted she's not what I'd pick to do your job if there was an alternative. But provided she's handled right she isn't hopeless. She's just discovered how much she values other people's good opinion of her, which she never imagined she might have to work for. When she first came here, she expected us all to look up to her because she's beautiful and hails from Earth. We've blown that idea to smithereens, and now, in order to rebuild her ego and provide a substantial foundation for her self-esteem, she's looking for a challenge. Yours is maybe a degree or two tougher than what I had in mind for her, but at least she's in the right frame of mind to tackle it with determination."

*Well, when the devil drives . . .*

He said, hearing his voice harsh and grating, "What do you think of the work the Patrol does, and our on-planet agents, and everyone else in this benighted neck of the universe?"

Taken by surprise, she faltered, "Well—I guess..."

"Skip the stock answer you're trying to remember from your original indoctrination. What have you been in the habit of saying about our work?"

Maddalena bit her lip, but raised her head and looked him straight in the eye. "When I first came out here, I said I couldn't see why we should waste so much time worrying about the affairs of degenerates grubbing around in the mud. I don't have that view anymore. But I guess I haven't acquired another to put in its place."

"Sounds like an honest answer," Langenschmidt nodded. He didn't reveal it, but he was better pleased by her frankness than he'd expected. "So we start level. You can't figure out what makes people like me tick, and I can't make out why people like you think they're ticking at all. I saw you looking puzzled at my gray hair—no, don't try to deny it." He raised a hand to forestall her heated denial. "I could practically read off your face what you were asking yourself: 'If he's old enough to go gray he must have stacked up centuries of credit—why doesn't he quit?' Well, I *have* been around quite a while, and I haven't quit because I don't know a better use to put a spare century of life to than the work I'm doing right now. Okay! I get the impression that while you probably know quite a lot about my beat in the abstract, up there in your pretty hollow head, you don't have any gut-reaction to those cold dispassionate facts they fed you. So I'll start you from scratch, and if you feel inclined to lose interest because you've heard it all before, *don't*. I've been there; I've seen and touched and smelt, and what I can tell you might one day save your

life.”

He reached to thumb a switch and the office went dark. On one of the walls an offset stereo map of the local systems shone out. Picking up a lightwand, he used it to point at what he was talking about.

“That system has an inhabited planet. That one. That one. All six of that cluster there. Two more beyond that, and some more beyond that still, we’re pretty certain. That’s to say they were inhabited when we last checked, but struggling in conditions too bad for us to risk stationing agents among the survivors. By now an epidemic may have wiped one or more of the populations out. My beat doesn’t go quite so far.

“The reason why these populated worlds are grouped around here so far from the nearest nexus of civilized planets has presumably not escaped your attention—hm?”

She was going to have to stand a hell of a lot of needling, Maddalena reminded herself. As calmly as possible she said, “Zarathustra.”

“Exactly. It was in the direction of those systems that the bulk of the refugee ships from Zarathustra came seven and a half centuries ago—ships full of people who’d picked themselves off their home world when the sky was on fire and the seas were already practically boiling from the nova. In their understandable panic they were content to save their skins; consequently they arrived—those who did arrive somewhere—with practically nothing else. It was a fantastic achievement evacuating as many as they did manage to get away: something on the order of two and a quarter million in three thousand ships. For a long time we were convinced that only the handful that made it to Baucis Alpha on the solward side of Zarathustra had survived; it wasn’t until a hundred and twenty years ago that any of their descendants managed to signal us, and we learned how many more ships had reached habitable worlds.

“By then, of course, things had developed of their own accord. Maybe not to you, because I understand you’re still very young, but to most people who’ve been conditioned by the idea of longevity treatments, a century isn’t a very long time. To man in his natural state, though, it’s more realistic to think of it in terms of generations—four, or even six. And thirty generations is quite long enough for Galactic to have evolved on these isolated worlds by way of dialects into individual languages, so that a speaker from the north doesn’t understand another from the south. That’s something they don’t stress enough in their comfortable lecture-halls back on Earth: what a breakdown in communications can do to the very substance of language!

“Something else they don’t explain properly is this. When you’re sick with some local bug, hungry as hell because your spear broke off short in the last animal you went hunting for; and your fire went out in last Tuesday’s cloudburst so you couldn’t have cooked it even if you had caught it, you put down great-great-grandpa’s tales of flying between the stars and cities with millions of people in them as the senile ramblings of a crazy old man. You’re preoccupied with practical matters. You don’t even bother to read, because it makes more sense to spend the time practicing with your bow and arrows. As to learning to write—who are you going to write to? Everyone else is within shouting distance.

“Consequently, when we began investigating the worlds the refugees from Zarathustra had stumbled on, some of them were full of subhuman savages—dietary deficiencies in childhood mainly accounted for that. But others had sprouted some rather promising indigenous civilizations. They’d hardly had the opportunity to achieve much technology, of course; even if chance had included a mining engineer, for instance, among one party of survivors, it still is a long, long way from finding a vein of iron ore to refining high-grade steel. Further yet from a pitchblende strike to an atomic reactor!

“Well, among our other jobs the Patrol keeps an eye on these civilizations. One of the lessons it’s taken us longest to learn is that we don’t know everything. Moreover, Galactic society seems to some people to be settling into a kind of complacent apathy, with no incentive to strike out in new directions. For all we know, the society on one of these isolated worlds may come up with something we’ve missed—may go further into the human sciences than we’ve gone, for example, or develop biochemistry, as we’ve developed electronics, to a high level of accomplishment. So we haven’t interfered, or made our presence known, or done anything except watch.”

Maddalena felt the promised stir of resentment deep inside her. So far Langenschmidt had told her nothing that hadn’t been covered in her indoctrination before she was posted here. And yet... somehow it *was* different, coming not from a faraway lecturer but from a man who cared enough about his subject to devote his hard-earned extra lifetime to it. She compelled herself to go on listening attentively.

“Keeping watch, though, is imperative. Two reasons. First is the brand-new angle these cultures give us on human social evolution. We’ve learned more about the way new inventions and discoveries affect a civilization from a century of studying the refugee worlds than we’ve learned from a millennium of analyzing terrestrial history. Second is that the Patrol aren’t the only people who’ve come this way.”

“Slaveworld,” Maddalena said.

“Quite right. Slaveworld. Did somebody tell you that, or did you figure it out?”

“I guess somebody told me,” Maddalena muttered.

“Don’t look so sheepish. The point is you remembered it in context. Good! Of course, Slaveworld wasn’t one of the planets colonized from Zarathustra in a panic; its people were systematically kidnapped from their home worlds, forced to settle on a previously uninhabited planet, and all for the sake of a labor force to exploit its resources of light metals. But the plan worked for two hundred and twelve years and proved very profitable until the Patrol was set up and found out what was really going on.”

Langenschmidt settled himself more comfortably in his . chair.

“Even with the Patrol keeping guard, there still remains the risk that someone on a world nearer to Earth might see the possibilities of dominating a superstitious and backward populace on a rich and almost virgin planet. As it happens, in the present case the risk is a very acute one. Not that they would get away with it for long—after all, the planet concerned is on my beat and I have five agents scattered over its

surface. In a matter of decades at most we'd catch on. But mere knowledge of the existence of men from beyond the sky would foul things up dreadfully, since most of their local cults are founded on fables about starflight. In some of the societies where the relapse to barbarism was never total—this one I'm worried about in particular—they're working free of the grip of superstition, but intrusion from space would probably trigger a wave of religious hysteria and set them back a long way.

“That's the particular system I'm talking about, by the way.” He moved his lightwand and laid its bright beam on a system about twenty-five parsecs from the base. “ZRP—Zarathustra Refugee Planet—number fourteen. Total population, confined to one major continent and the islands immediately adjacent, a little more than two million. They started with fewer than eight hundred; just one shipload set down there. Climatically very comfortable. Also it's a Class A planet where human beings can eat indigenous plants and the flesh of at least some native animals. The largest city on the planet is a place called Carrig, which dominates the intersection between the chief north-to-south trade route and a navigable river up which the coastal folk trade their dried fish. Carrig has seventeen thousand people and controls an area equivalent to a small nation-state. That was where our agent died, or was killed, we've no idea which. Unfortunately he hadn't made a report for some time; he was posing as a caravan master and he couldn't very well use a communicator during a trip lasting three weeks over icy hill passes.

“Carrig, so our social geographers inform us, is sited where it's virtually bound to become the capital city of its continent when communications are sufficiently advanced to permit the extension of government to the coast in all directions. There will probably be several small wars first, but with luck they may be disposed of before any weapons more advanced than bows and catapults can be deployed. Unfortunately the inhabitants of Carrig already possess extremely serviceable gliders—they stretch animal-skins over a framework of light native wood, like bamboo only stiffer, and if it occurs to them to drop liquid fire or poisoned darts from them... Sorry, I'm wandering from the point. I'm trying to tell you about the here-and-now. Where was I?”

“You were describing the location of Carrig,” Maddalena ventured.

“So I was. I was just about to say: Fourteen is building some mountains late in its existence. There's a good deal of continental drift still in progress, and not far north of Carrig there's a complex geological stress system that's created a fault area with consequent volcanic activity.

“And the volcanic range is crawling with high-number elements. In short, simple geology is making sure that when the local people achieve nuclear technics, Carrig will have the planet's biggest supply of reactor-fuel right on its doorstep.”

“Slaveworld?” Maddalena said again.

“Well, it would be a temptation for some unscrupulous gang of adventurers, wouldn't it? And if they decided to pull the trick, they'd have their labor force right on the spot.”

Maddalena hesitated. “But is there any evidence to suspect that someone actually has...?”

“None at all—I’m just illustrating why this is such a sensitive area that we desperately need a substitute agent to hold the fort there. What we have managed to establish as solid fact goes like this. Carrig’s society is organized on a clan-and-totem basis—seven rival clans, plus one nominally neutral and above politics, a kind of priestly caste. In an annual contest they determine the succession by a fantastic airborne duel between men in these gliders I mentioned to you and a winged animal called a parradile, sacred because it symbolizes the qualities of kingship. The winner’s clan becomes the cabinet, so to speak, for the following year and takes over the administration down to and including the collection of taxes. In theory, anyone can have a go at the king-parradile provided he observes certain formalities, but for a long time the practice has been to restrict competition to one select champion from each eligible clan.

“According to reliable report, however, an outsider recently did go in for the contest and *won*. The story goes that he wielded a bolt of lightning! Slee, who’s our nearest surviving agent to Carrig, suspects that someone may have invented gunpowder, because there are plenty of deposits of sulfur in the volcanic region, and parradile guano is very rich in sodium and potassium nitrates—exactly what you need for a simple explosive. If he’s figured out how to make elementary bombs, or worse yet some sort of rocket missile, this outsider may be all set to launch Carrig on a war of conquest.”

“And you want me to go and find out if this is true?”

“Exactly,” said Langenschmidt—not without sympathy. “I wish you luck. But luck, believe me, isn’t going to be nearly enough.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT



The effect of being one kind of person for twenty-five years could not be wiped out overnight. Many times in the course of the intensive instruction she had to take to fit her for the job on ZRP 14, Maddalena gave way to the old discontent, the old rebellion. The last time, however, was the time Gus Langenschmidt lost his temper and barked at her, “What the hell are you in the Corps for anyway?”

“The pay!” she shot back.

“What use are you going to put an extra lifetime to if you can’t make proper use of the first one?”

The insult cooled her down; after a while she brought herself to apologize, and things went more smoothly. But total reform was going to take a very long time indeed.

What helped most of all was that underneath his gruff exterior and often sarcastic manner Langenschmidt proved to be closer to the glamorized Earthside

ideal of a corpsman than anyone else she had met in her year and a half of service. Subconsciously she seemed to have assumed that the administrative work she had been doing since she was posted here was all the Corps ever did. It made her ashamed to discover that Langenschmidt was virtually a polymath, able to hoist from his memory snatches of the languages spoken on Fourteen, rules regarding their relationship to each other and to the parent tongues, bits of the hypothetical ur-dialect developed from Galactic and the second language spoken on Zarathustra before its destruction, which was Irani... He had by his own admission been on Fourteen three times only: twice to get subspace communicators to agents who had had theirs accidentally destroyed; once in company with a student of social analysis who wanted more detail about religious ritual than the resident agent, a nonspecialist, could provide. And yet he probably knew more about Fourteen than the best-educated native of the planet.

Maddalena was proud of her linguistic ability, and had believed herself well grounded in etymology. But the difference between paper analysis of language, and learning to speak three distinct tongues each with four or five local dialects well enough to pass for a native in any of them, seemed completely terrifying.

Things became worse still when she had to go aboard Langenschmidt's cruiser for the trip to Fourteen itself. Half his crew was due to be rotated and take a long leave; this time, although none of them was Earthborn, they had elected to opt for a refit on Earth and spend their furlough there. Ten years on Patrol had wearied them to the limit of endurance, and now the conclusion of their tour had been postponed to allow for her delivery to Fourteen. None of them put their common thought into words, but she could feel it in the air of the ship—the unspoken comment: *You'd better make the trouble we've taken over you worthwhile.*

Outwardly, of course, they treated her exactly like any agent being delivered to a new assignment, with flawless politeness, and that, if anything, was even harder to bear.

She needed to spend most of the voyage revising her knowledge of the planet's societies and perfecting her ability to speak its languages. That kept her from having to make light conversation with the crew all the time, and she was duly grateful.

In particular she passed many hours playing over and over the disinhibiting tapes which psychologists at the base had prepared for her. Langenschmidt had been brutally straightforward about the problems implicit in having to assign a woman to this task. He had pointed out that, like most cultures at a similar level, Carrig was masculine-dominated and women were relegated to a secondary position. However, there was always one weapon a woman could use to acquire influence over men: her body. It was highly likely, therefore, that in order to establish herself in a really secure situation in Carrig she would need to make herself the mistress of some local notable, perhaps a clan-chief. So she would have to rid herself of her instinctive distaste for the population of Fourteen as dirty barbarians. They were dirty, true. They were barbarians, also true. Which meant that reconciling herself to the prospect required a deep restructuring job on her prejudices.

Just how ingrained those prejudices were, she had discovered when she was first told what her cover was to be. Evidence that it was the most convenient and most reliable one available simply bounced off her frigid armor of preconception, and even as the ship closed with its destination she was having difficulty adapting to the role.

It had been suggested by the nearest of the surviving on-planet agents, Slee, whose own cover was the trade usually translated as “hetaira manager” but which a blunter age would have named “pander.” In the territory south of Carrig something resembling a cross between the Japanese geisha system and the acknowledged-mistress system of ancient Greece had evolved; high-class courtesans favored not less for their skill at music, dancing, and conversation than for their amorous talents were a regular part of a rich man’s retinue; and those who could not afford to keep a hetaira on a full-time basis were catered for by managers with several girls under contract. This profession—a perfectly respectable one into which parents among the poorer classes were delighted to send their daughters for the sake of the upper-class manners they would acquire—was eminently suitable for present needs. Already Slee’s girls had established for him an extensive grapevine which brought him news and gossip from all parts of the continent; it was through them that he had been able to piece together an outline of events at Carrig far to the north.

Recently, so Slee reported, it had become fashionable in Carrig also to keep or rent hetairas. What more natural than that Maddalena should be sent to Carrig as a supposed employee of his testing the possibility of opening a branch of his business there? Moreover, there was not so much contact between Carrig and the southland that she would be unable to pass off her accent and lack of familiarity with local mores as due to her southern origin.

She had to concede the logic of the scheme eventually. But she also had to play over the psychologists’ tapes several times a day to condition her into acceptance of it.

*One thing*, Maddalena thought as she stood before the mirror in her cabin studying her disguise for flaws: *one good thing is my hair*. They had injected her scalp with trichogibberellins, and since leaving the base her hair had practically streamed back to its natural shoulder-length. Now it was tied and braided into an openwork cap of white lace. A skin-tight bodice of the same white lace and leotards of red lace—both garments oddly comfortable—clasped her body as closely as a lover; over them came a tunic and loose breeches of black embroidered with yellow and green, then a sort of cape of yellow into which a green design was woven; and for street-wear and traveling a voluminous cloak which could be caught up by a drawstring if she had to walk on muddy ground. There was a hood attached to it against rain. On her feet were red slippers, and to go with the cloak she had huge wood-and-leather overshoes lined with a sort of sponge.

It was the acquisition of this wardrobe she had suddenly acquired which had for the first time made her *feel*—all the way down—the resources that the Corps commanded. There had been the suggestion that she pose as a visiting hetaira,

made over the subspace communicator from Fourteen by Slee, whose “employee” she was going to be. The suggestion was approved. They sent to the library. In ten minutes Langenschmidt was playing over a tape labeled “ZRP 14—South Civilized Territory—Female Costume Group 3: Leisured and Non-Artisan Classes.”

Within an hour she was trying the outfit on, and it didn’t even need alterations to make it fit her.

She turned from the mirror to review the rest of her gear. One wooden trunk of authentic native pattern—the wood was synthetic, but the grain had been checked from another recording, this time an account of the timbers used for carpentry in Fourteen’s northern subtropical zone. It would pass the closest inspection short of advanced chemical analysis. In the trunk were five or six more costumes, cosmetics, a subspace communicator hidden under a false bottom, a comprehensive medical kit disguised as a sewing-box, and a case of herbal ointments.

Plus one musical instrument, a sort of panpipe turned on its side and blown by means of a bellows. Another recording had supplied not merely blueprints of the instruments and instructions for playing it, but thirty popular tunes to be rendered on it and the words of a dozen traditional songs, all very long indeed, which she had had diligently to commit to memory under light hypnosis.

Plus a brush-pen, a cake of ink, and a booklet of coarse native paper, because a hetaira was expected to be able to compose flattering quatrains about her employers.

Plus a jeweled box—tightly locked—with religious ideograms on the lid invoking a terrible fate on anyone who opened it without permission, ostensibly containing relics of her ancestors, but in fact holding a well-charged energy gun which, if the lock were forced, would melt into a sizzling amorphous puddle of metal and plastic.

She picked up the musical instrument—it was called a “piap’r” and the name simply meant “piper,” indeed was derived from that originally—and pumped the bellows. By stopping the tubes of the panpipes she played a short plaintive melody. Halfway through, her hand began to shake so badly that she missed several notes.

She was absolutely scared stiff.

Well, there were tranquilizers to take care of that. But the tension would still be there, masked but nonetheless acute, until she was actually on the planet and had convinced herself that her fake identity was proof against the natives’ scrutiny. Every precaution had been taken, even down to analyzing the history of the Carrig clans to determine which were the most progressive and hence the likeliest to adopt the southern fashion for engaging hetairas.

Yet no matter how often she reassured herself, she was still in the grip of a sense of imminent doom.

A call from Langenschmidt interrupted her depressed brooding, asking her to go forward to the bridge of the cruiser, and she headed straight there in her native costume. On her entry the major looked up from a tape that had just reeled out of the communicators and gave an approving but absentminded nod.



“Yop look the part perfectly, as far as I can tell,” he said. “You even walk correctly. Well, sorry to drag you up here just before planetfall, but we received this from Slee a short time ago, and I think I ought to play it for you.”

He dropped the cassette into its slot. At once Slee, exotic in a costume almost as gaudy as Maddalena’s, looked out of the screen adjacent. Having a permanent station on Fourteen, unlike Heron, he was able to maintain a vision circuit as well as voice. He sounded worried.

“Gus, I’ve had some disturbing news. As you know, I’ve been trying for some time to get accurate news of Heron’s death. His house was burnt down, which was fortunate in that his communicator was destroyed, but a damnable nuisance in that it meant all the physical evidence was shoveled up as garbage and we have nothing to go on but what the servants recounted, and they were in a wild panic. And Carrig is too far from here for me to get more than rumors, anyway.

“Something’s come up which ties in closely with what people are saying about this stranger Belfeor who’s made himself ruler of Carrig, though. You’ll recall that he was said to have killed the king-parradile with a lightning bolt, which I interpret as meaning some sort of primitive gunpowder rocket.

“Well, according to a former servant of Heron’s who’s just been released from a bedlam where they locked him for alleged insanity after his master’s death, it was Belfeor who killed him—and what’s more, by throwing a lightning bolt at him. One can presume that Heron got wind of Belfeor’s plans, and to forestall his interfering, Belfeor set a mine or something in Heron’s house, blowing it and him up. I don’t see any other reasonable explanation. It’s the devil’s own job sorting fact from fantasy in these tales, even when you know pretty well how the natives’ minds work. We *must* get an agent into Carrig again, soon, to see if this is true or not. I’ve even been trying to invent a reason why I should go there myself—perhaps I ought to trek north with a caravan of pilgrims, or something, even though it’ll puzzle the hell out of my friends who take me for an incurable skeptic. I wish to goodness the standard of living would rise to the level where they invent the notion of tourism!”

Langenschmidt shut the recording off. He looked at Maddalena. “Sounds as though you’re really needed down there,” he murmured. “Are you all ready to go? We’re due to break into real space soon—we’re just maneuvering out to the night-side of the planet.”

Maddalena nodded. Her throat felt terribly dry.

“Get your suit on, then, and have your gear put in the landing-craft. I’ll join you in a minute.”

“You’re taking me down yourself?”

“I’ve done it before,” Langenschmidt grunted. “Move it along!”

Seated behind him in the needle-shaped boat that would sneak them unobtrusively down to the surface of Fourteen, Maddalena struggled to get her awkward clothing organized inside her spacesuit, and listened to the exchange between Langenschmidt and the pilot of the cruiser as they ran down the preflight

checklist. You didn't go aboard a landing-craft without a spacesuit and helmet—it was far too risky.

The checks on the landing-craft completed, the pilot gave the standard all-hands warning about breaking through into real space, and they braced themselves for the peculiar shuddering-grinding sensation that always accompanied dropping out of hyperphotonic drive. One moment later the pilot was speaking again, his voice half-strangled with astonishment.

He said, "Of all the—! That's a *ship* out there, in orbit around Fourteen!"

Maddalena froze. Langenschmidt snapped, "A ship? What kind of—?"

He got no further. There was a huge cracking sound followed by a rending of metal, and Maddalena's last thought before she passed out was that she was probably going to die.

## CHAPTER NINE



Saikmar son of Corrie, penniless refugee, headed down the long draughty corridor of the sanctuary toward the twisted doorway across which the wind already whined and occasionally howled. He walked with determination, as though alert for the possibility of ambush.

Indeed, as he came close to the exit, he was waylaid by the old priestess Nyloo and her constant companion, a girl-child of about seven or eight—one of those that a woman pilgrim had borne during a pious visit and left as an offering. The child's eyes were round and prematurely wise. Saikmar was always disquieted by such children.

The old priestess said, "You're bound outward, Saikmar son of Corrie?" She spoke the queerly accented antique dialect that he had now come to understand well. "Outside it grows cold. Not long from now to build snow-walls at the door and close the chill away."

Saikmar had long passed the stage when he had addressed the staff of the sanctuary obsequiously. He answered in a harsh tone, "And what is it to you if I freeze out there? Will you not have one less useless mouth to stuff with food this winter?"

Nyloo looked at him steadily. She was very, very old; the skin on her skull, which was almost bald, seemed dry and crackly, like poor-grade parchment. She said, "You take complaining from your fellows too much to heart.' Not I nor any other priest or priestess blames you that we lack our due this summer. For more generations than it is remembered we have served by giving asylum to those who flee injustice and tyranny, as you yourself do, hoping only that we might receive,

each summer, gifts from fertile climes to fill our bellies during the long winter night. From Carrig nothing has come this year—yet how can it be the fault of a fugitive?” She gave a shrug. “The old and the weak who have used up their lives will resign themselves that the young and strong may see another summer.”

“Are you going to die this winter, granny?” said the child, looking up at the old woman with her big round eyes. Saikmar seized his chance, flung his threadbare cloak around him, ducked his head as one does when rushing an attacker, and hurried out into the bitter afternoon.

Gasping sometimes as gusts whipped powdery dry snow off ledges and outcrops and blasted them at his face, he set himself to climb the jagged rocks surrounding the sanctuary. It had become a daily habit with him to scramble among the cavern-riddled cliffs hereabouts till he could stand at last on a crest and stare over the silvery scarred dome of the sanctuary, over the landscape that at this point in the year still showed some rock after the summer thaw, but that soon would be blank snow as far as the eye could reach—stare achingly south, toward Carrig that he perhaps would never see again.

Staring, he remembered. How Belfeor and his evil kin—men claiming to be of the southland but some of whom did not even speak the southland tongue, and women with them as arrogant as men—had claimed their right to be established as a clan and rule Carrig; how they were at first resisted, but how they, in the end, repressed all opposition through their strange magical powers; how they then set the people to unheard-of tasks among the Smoking Hills, driving them cruelly and killing many. How Sir Bavis Knole—maddened, men said, because he had had to concede that Belfeor had come legally by his right to rule—had cast himself from the watchtower of the fortress to his death on the rocks of the citadel after his son Ambrus had taken service with Belfeor and forsworn his clan...

He shivered, standing on the cliff's edge, and wrapped his cloak still tighter about him. The sky, even in the afternoon, was darkling at this season. Soon the night would come—the night that would last half a year. He had lived through one such night already, and had not believed it until it was upon him. The darkness! The loneliness! Outside the howling of the wind, inside the chanting of the priests as they rehearsed their charms to assure the rebirth of the sun.

Could he endure another such winter? Not for the first time he thought about following Sir Bavis' example; a headlong plunge from this clifftop would surely break any man's skull and give release to the spirit within. But he drove the notion firmly from his mind. Had it been his duty to seek death, he could have found it long ago, at home in Carrig, when those who most vigorously opposed Belfeor were being put to the sword.

But then they had counseled him—his mother, his uncle, and his cousins with one voice—to travel to the northern sanctuary before Belfeor's men came for him, to preserve his life against the day when it would be possible to strike back. The sanctuary had offered asylum to fugitives since legendary times; their fee was paid by the cities entitled to such protection by pilgrims who brought barrels of dried fish, salted vegetables, and sun-dried smoked meat with them on their summer visits. Without this addition to what they could grow on their poor soil during the

short summer, those at the sanctuary would doubtless starve in the winter.

Last summer, though they had been fewer than ever before, there had indeed been a handful of pilgrim caravans, and he had eagerly demanded from them news of Carrig. All the news was bad; at least, though, it was a link with his home. This summer just ending... nothing. Not one caravan had come through Carrig to the far north.

Saikmar looked down past his feet. His mouth set in a hard line as the tempting idea of suicide returned. There was a clear fall of sixty feet to a slanting jagged scree of loose stone. One step might free him of his fate. Better that way, surely, than to become like those others he had found here at the sanctuary, the other refugees—miserable, cringing beggars skulking down the passageways, without pride, without hope. *That* was no fit end for Saikmar son of Corrie! A noble should confront death with defiance, before the burden of the world forced his back to bow.

Oh yes! Better silence and darkness and the age-long wait for rebirth than to suffer the winter under the resentful stare of the priests and priestesses and the terrible wise children who shared the secret of their mysteries. One step...

He squared his shoulders and threw his head back for a last look at the world, and in the darkening sky he saw an omen. For the first time in his life he was sure beyond doubt that the gods had sent him a personal sign.

There, circling and swooping in the gathering dusk, but unmistakable to a man who had spent years studying the habits of that species, was a creature that no one had ever seen so far north before. Splendid in dark blue, green, and gold against the sunset, it was a young male parradile.

Shivering with awe and not with cold, Saikmar saw it hesitate, hover, and plunge. On the sheer face of the cavern-riddled cliff it touched, clung, folded its wings, and disappeared.

Early next morning—he had hardly slept for his feverish excitement—Saikmar left the sanctuary again. He had known since he saw the parradile what he must do: go to it and throw himself on its mercy and the gods'. For was the parradile not also a fugitive in these barren wastes? That it should have wandered so far north suggested that Belfeor's sacrilege had reached unheard-of heights—he must have hunted the parradiles out of the Smoking Hills!

The creature might, of course, kill him—drive him from the mouth of its chosen cave so that he fell to his death among the rocks. What matter? It would be better for his chances of a good reincarnation than suicide. It might, on the other hand, be drowsy with the cold and ready to hibernate, in which case it would simply ignore him. At least he could greet it and make it an offering.

He felt lightheaded as he started to scramble across the cliff-face to the cave where he had seen it settle, and small wonder. Lack of sleep, and tormenting excitement, and lack of food together, accounted for that. He had eaten neither his supper last night nor the handful of parched grain and dried fruit he was given this morning. They were in a pouch at his belt as his offering to the parradile.

The task of reaching the cave was a dreadful one. The parradile had had no trouble; it could settle anywhere it had room to keep its wings spread until its feet found purchase. Saikmar had to clamber along icy ledges, sometimes chipping himself a handhold with his knife, with the wind whipping his cloak until it threatened to fill like a sail and drag him away. In many of the caves he passed he saw with dismay that last night's frost had spread a layer of ice. How would a parradile, accustomed to the warm caves of the Smoking Hills, endure a winter here? Spring would see it a rigid corpse!

Whatever he could do to help the creature live, he would—at the risk of his own life if necessary. He toyed with the idea of telling the priestess in charge of the food-store that he was going to kill himself and wanted to take the rations he would otherwise consume during the winter and give them to the parradile. He dismissed it. She would laugh in his face. The parradile had no place in the sanctuary's cult. To these people here it was merely a weird beast from the south. And worse yet... He shuddered as a fresh point struck him. They might come out and try to kill the parradile, for its meat would keep well in the chill of winter and would valuably supplement their stores. No: better mention it to nobody at all. Another idea he considered: bringing his meals here as long as he could. But it would only be a week, ten days at most, before they closed off the door to the sanctuary with a snow-wall; from then until spring no one would go outside. And after eating nothing for two or three days he, Saikmar, would be too weak to make the climb and deliver the food anyway.

What *was* he to do?

At last he set his foot where the parradile had landed, on a ledge of ice-free rock at the mouth of a cave which he had to enter stooping. Here he was in shadow, though much of the cliff-face he had traversed was bright with sunlight reflected off the snow, and he had to pause while his eyes adjusted. Sniffing, he knew he was at the right place. He had whiffed the scent of parradiles before, and its pungency was unique—though not at all unpleasant, somewhat resembling the resinous incense the priests burned in the great temple at home.

He opened his pouch of food and took a handful of fruit and grain on his palm. Holding it out before him he ventured into the cave.

And had gone five paces before he realized that it was empty.

Thunderstruck, he let the food fall. But the odour of parradile was unmistakable! Where in the name of the gods had the creature gone?

His first thought was that some shadow at the rear of the cave must indicate a tunnel farther into the rock, but he hammered on the wall in vain. All solid. The parradile had gone away for sure.

After his elation, the shock of disappointment made his eyes sting with tears. Half-blinded he stumbled back to the cave-mouth, putting his head in his hands. He was so lost in black misery that he did not hear the slap of the parradile's wings until they were close enough for their wind to fan his skin.

He snatched his hands from his eyes in alarm—and the creature was there, on the same ledge with him, wings half-folded but giving the occasional twitch to keep

a balance, head cocked suspiciously, sharp eyes studying him, red mouth closed around something which looked familiar.

A bolt of cloth! A bolt of heavy woollen cloth of the kind men wove out of graat-hair in the country east of Carrig!

But the problem of what a parradile might need with cloth could wait. There was the more urgent matter of whether it was going to attack him or not; after all, men had been killing its ancestors in their annual ritual for uncountable generations.

Perhaps, however—the point did not occur to Saikmar until much later—they had never made a connection between men and their gliders, possibly even regarding the latter as creatures like themselves. At any rate, it took this one only a few seconds to decide Saikmar was no kind of threat. Although a mere four or five years old, not due to mature for two or three more, it was already bigger and heavier than a man, and enormously strong.

It let the bolt of cloth fall to the ground and began to nose it into the cave. Only then did Saikmar notice that in both its taloned feet it gripped spreading bundles of unwoven graat-hair on which it moved shuffling, like a man in too-big slippers. When the bolt of cloth was well inside the cave, it kicked its feet free of the clumps of hair and pushed them in also.

*Making itself a nest for the winter... ?*

Saikmar could conceive of no other explanation. But no one had ever heard of a parradile making a nest!

Nosing the cloth along the floor of the cave, the parradile encountered the grain and fruit Saikmar had let fall. Its tongue slapped the rock wetly and scooped them up. Encouraged, and recalling that parradiles were notoriously hearty eaters because it cost them so much energy, to hoist their weight aloft, Saikmar fumbled more food from his pouch with clumsy hands and held it out. The parradile examined it warily; then, convinced this was the same as what it had just gobbled, it opened its mouth. Saikmar turned his palm over and spilt the morsel into the blood-colored maw.

The parradile gave a snort of approval and snuffed at the pouch. He took it off and inverted it; the entire contents did not make a mouthful for the beast. Seeming disappointed, it wiped the pouch with its tongue for the last few crumbs, leaving a long moist trail, then pushed past him and tipped off the ledge again. His last sight of it was as it swooped and dived toward the south.

He began to laugh. He laughed until his ribs ached and the cold air was torturing his throat, and then he laughed again.

The next day, when he returned, the parradile had half-filled the cave with soft, warm materials—stolen cloth woven by men, graat-hair, dry grasses, whole animal-hides tanned and softened for leather. Out of this mass the creature's head poked ridiculously, teeth displayed in a warning snarl. But that lasted only a moment; then it appeared to recognize him, and relaxed.

He offered it food again, but this was refused, and the creature seemed to be

trying to explain that it had fed well, for it opened its jaws wide and blew breath scented with a raw-meat tang.

He stayed with it for a while. It was his only link with home. Meantime, he ate what was in his pouch, since the parradile had declined it.

That set a pattern for the next day, and those following, until they had begun to build the snow-wall across the sanctuary door and he realized this visit must be his last. He was afraid he might not reach the cave on this final day, for there was a blizzard from shortly after dawn until the afternoon, and the days were very short now. The going was far too treacherous to think of trying to get back from the cave in the dark.

However, he seized his chance when the snow gave over for a while and made haste to bid his friend farewell for the winter.

The parradile, which by now had grown accustomed to his presence, gave a grunt of greeting the moment his head showed at the mouth of the cave. As he entered, going cautiously because it was so dim in here, it turned on its side in its big soft nest and raised one pinion to display what was hidden underneath.

A sleeping human being...

## CHAPTER TEN



Afterward, Maddalena realized that she had been conscious during more of the disaster than she had believed at the time. She could remember practically nothing when she found herself lying three-quarters buried in a gigantic snowdrift, astonished that she was even alive; but that was the effect of shock, and the speed with which events had succeeded one another. Later, disconnected pictures, like dreams, pieced together in her mind and she was able to figure out what must have happened.

There was the pilot's cry over the helmet phones announcing the presence of a ship in orbit around Fourteen, and Gus Langenschmidt's horrified response. And the crash directly after. Presumably the orbiting ship had heard static on their subspace communicators; suspecting that it might be due to an approaching Patrol cruiser, they were on the alert. Directly they realized that their fears were confirmed, they holed the new arrival with a well-aimed projectile. It might have been a purpose-built missile, but it needed only to be a chunk of metal with a ferry-rocket welded to it. Somewhere or other she had picked up the information that a ferry-rocket pushing a ton of solid metal could break through the meteor-bumpers fitted to any vessel smaller than Sirius class, and a Patrol cruiser was half that size. Hitting at two or three hundred miles a second such a projectile would have opened the cruiser up like a split peascod.

There were more flash-pictures remembered from a little later, in the landing-craft: Gus Langenschmidt struggling with the controls to free them from the parent ship. A second jolting crash. The shock of looking back along the cabin and seeing a gash in their hull, and the rear edge of the gash glowing red-hot and melting in brilliant droplets as the thin outer air of the planet tore at it. There was Langenschmidt giving her incisive orders, which she obeyed mechanically, although she barely heard them for the howl of air blasting across the opening in the hull, like wind in an organ pipe. The convincing feeling that she was jumping to her death, as she piled out of that same gap, when Langenschmidt had forced the speed down low enough, and plunged into a night black as space, where she felt as though the stars were below her and the white winter landscape above. Hitting the air-brake release on her suit, then the trigger of the tiny altimeter-computer controlling the jets. The reaction-mass ran out when she was twenty feet above the ground, but it was deep snow she tumbled into and she was unhurt.

She lay there quiescent for perhaps an hour, until her hands and feet were numb even through the insulated suit. It took her that long to readjust to the fact that she was still alive, and afterward to convince herself that there was some point in getting up, even though she was alone on a strange planet with no resources but what she had on, and her intelligence.

There was no telling what had become of Langenschmidt. She could not even recollect at first whether she had seen the landing-craft again as she hurtled ground-ward. The odds were strong that it had crashed. Perhaps Langenschmidt had baled out before it was too late; perhaps not. Certainly at the speed they had been traveling he would have landed hundreds of miles away even if he had left his control chair directly. She herself had jumped.

The cold and shock combined to make her mind sluggish. She had to struggle for a long time before she solved the simple problem of working herself out of the snowdrift in which she had sunk up to elbow-height. At last she realized that by moving with a kind of swimming motion she could prevent herself from sinking any deeper, and after a hundred yards of crawling she was able to stand up on solid rock. She looked about her. It was hard to accept that she was on a planet where human beings could live. The desolation was total.

She felt herself sliding toward hysteria as she strained her eyes into the dimness, and cast about desperately for a straw of hope. What light there was came from a moon about quarter-full and a fairly dense patch of stars showing through a rift in the otherwise general cloud-cover. There was also a distant furnace-like glow illuminating some of the clouds in the direction she was facing. Polar lights, presumably.

Her desperation lessened as she realized that if she could see enough of those stars she could determine at least a few facts about her predicament: where north lay, for example. They had provided pictures of the local star-patterns as part of her briefing. Was there a distinctive constellation up there in that small, clear patch?

For a long moment she was afraid there were too few stars to make sure. Then there came a hot surge of excitement and relief. She could see two of the three stars composing the Northern Triangle of this planet's sky—unmistakable because there



was the dim, fuzzy blur of a globular cluster exactly midway between them, a combination unique in either hemisphere.

So she could set her suit's gyrocompass, at least. Fumbling with gauntleted fingers she freed the catch that held its float fixed when not in use, and heard its very faint humming begin immediately. It was powered by the warmth of her body inside the suit, and required no further attention.

Obviously the thing to do was to head south, failing any visible landmarks in this icy desert. The ship that brought the refugees here from Zarathustra had crashed in the Arctic, that was known; it had become the focus of some kind of mystical cult. When the refugees' descendants migrated away, the only direction they could logically take was to the south, to more fertile lands. Provided only that she was on the same side of the pole, there was a chance she might stumble across habitation fairly soon.

There was no point in just standing here, anyway. She considered waiting for daylight before making a start, but then realized that since she had been coming to the planet at the end of its northern summer, for all she knew the polar night at this latitude might have set in already. She might have to wait six months for the dawn.

She remembered to change from the suit's canned air supply to filtered external air. She cursed the length of her hair, which had come loose from her lace cap and kept blowing across her mouth, and began to trudge.

At first she was buoyed up by recollection of her mission and the good resolutions she had made about reforming herself. There was no doubt that she had been hurled into the midst of a far worse crisis than Slee had ever dreamed of, a crisis involving strange orbiting ships where no ships ought to be, and a crew so terrified of the Patrol that they shot on sight. That spelled, to her, something at least on the scale of the Slaveworld case. She tried to lure herself onward with fantasies about how she would single-handedly foil the conspirators, be decorated and promoted and...

But the chill, and the sheer effort of plodding through the soft, dense snow, made those fantasies less and less credible. She dismissed them in favor of more mundane matters: what to do if she did find her way to human habitation. She would have to strip off and destroy her suit, for instance, with its too-advanced gadgetry; likewise she would have to invent a story to account for her presence here... What? Could she have been kidnapped by bandits? There were bandits on Fourteen, the reason why caravan masters like Trader Heron needed armed guards to convoy their merchandise. But were they to be found so far north? Probably not—there was no one here worth robbing. There was no one here, period. *Have to think of some other lie to tell...* Bit by bit, as she grew tired, her thoughts slowed down. A sharp headwind arose, and made her progress difficult with its blustering resistance. Every few moments a spray of snow would dust across her helmet and blind her until she wiped it away with the back of her gauntlet. There was a mechanical wiper, but it had been intended only to cope with fine spatial dust, not clogging snowflakes, and anyway its movement was hypnotic and combined with weariness to dull her brain.

She had been walking so long she wanted to fall down and go to sleep; the only

thing that prevented her was that a decision was needed to stop walking, and it was less demanding not to make any decisions. It began to occur to her that it was getting lighter over half the sky, and darker over the other half. This puzzled her for a while. At last she discovered that as the sun rose on one side of her, an ominous army of cloud was sweeping from the other. The wind grew fiercer still; she had the impression she was walking on one spot, as though on a treadmill, unable to go forward.

She put one foot on a patch of ice and sprawled headlong. Shock made her draw in a gasping breath, and with it came a tress of hair.

That was the straw which broke her patience. All self-control failed, and for the next few minutes she was weeping and railing and screaming curses—damning the Corps for bribing her with its promise of long life, damning Brzeska for not sending her back to Earth in disgrace, damning Langenschmidt for not crashing and killing them both instantly, damning the crew of the mysterious orbiting ship for firing on the cruiser, and most fervently of all, damning herself for being a weak-willed idiot.

While she was recovering from her hysterical despair, and finding that it had paradoxically done her good by clearing and calming her mind, the edge of the storm came upon her and she forced herself to her feet, aching from head to toe. If she stayed where she was, the blizzard would snow her under and she would die for sure.

The going here was tougher than ever, and it was not only because she was hindered by the wind, she suddenly discovered. She was breasting a steep rise in the ground, and the last few yards of the ascent seemed impossibly difficult.

She began muttering to herself. “From the top of the rise I’ll see a village. I’ll see people. At least I’ll see smoke rising from a fire. Maybe there’ll be someone to come and meet me and help me the rest of the way. Maybe—”

She looked up as a movement caught her attention. For one instant, before a blasting shower of snow blinded her, she had a clear sight of something monstrous and winged that circled patiently overhead. Waiting.

In historical romances she had read about the vultures that would close on a dying traveler lost in the deserts of Earth; and she had seen tapes of how you could track the progress of a wolfshark through the shallow seas of Cyclops by the line of Jackson’s buzzards that formed over its murderous trail, and dived one by one to feast on the killer’s leavings. The images fused in her muddled mind. That thing! Up there! Waiting until she dropped in her tracks, and then...

She hurled herself wildly to the crest of the ridge, sobbing.

When she had clawed most of the snow off her faceplate, she saw that a few rays of sunlight were slanting between the clouds. She could make out that she was at one end of a quadrant of cliffs, low here, much higher at the other end. The face of the cliff was riddled with dark patches that might be the mouths of caverns. But she scarcely noticed them. For one of the sunrays fell directly upon a glistening domelike shape around the sides of which snow had drifted. Its top, however, was still being broomed clean by the wind, and that top gleamed as only one substance she knew could gleam—the chromium alloy plated four inches thick on the hull of a

spacecraft.

At that, she lost her head utterly. She heard herself shout, “Gus! *Gus!*” And she strode forward.

There was nothing under her feet.

She half-slid, half-tumbled, fully twenty yards down the icy slope, her hair once again blocking her mouth so that she had to spit and splutter to cry out; and when she rolled over and the sky whirled into her field of vision, she saw the monstrous flying beast hurtling toward her, with its blood-red mouth gaping and its taloned feet poised for the strike.

It was upon her at the very moment when she sank helpless into a pile of soft snow, with her arms flailing and her ears full of her own vain calls for help. A snapping grip like pincers clamped each of her upper arms and she was instantly whipped off the ground. To struggle was useless, as she learned immediately—the monster was incredibly strong, and no matter how violently she twisted, it kept on its imperturbable course toward the face of the cliff.

On a ledge outside the mouth of one of the many caves there, it set her down with such astonishing gentleness that she was taken aback. Then it planted its feet firmly, keeping its wings spread wide to prevent her jumping over the edge, and began to prod her with its blunt muzzle.

Willy-nilly she stumbled into the cave.

There was a sort of nest there, she found—soft, smelling pungently of its owner with a tang that penetrated even the filters of her suit. When she reached it, she waited passively, expecting the beast to attack her any moment now.

Instead, it backed past her and burrowed its body among the nest-material. When it was comfortable, it half-opened one enormous pinion and hooked it over her head, knocking her off-balance and forcing her to fall into the nest as well.

For a little she struggled; then, as exhaustion claimed her, she lost track of the terrifying predicament she was in and was aware only of how warm and restful this place was after the cruel snowscape she had crossed all night long, of how loudly the wind outside was howling, how...

*Gus never mentioned this in his briefing about Fourteen ...*

And that was her last thought until she awoke hours later to find that a lean young man was staring at her from the entrance of the cave, his face pinched with cold and his mouth ajar with pure amazement.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Since his arrival at the sanctuary, Saikmar had tried to act always with dignity, to behave as befitted the status of one who would now belong to the ruling clan in Carrig had he not been cheated of his rights. He had done his best to adopt a grave, mature manner modeled on that of his uncle, Sir Malan, and the—late—Sir Bavis Knole.

The excitement of first sighting, then befriending, the parradile had slashed through the veneer and exposed his true underlying nature. He was, after all, barely more than a youth and stranded without friends in an inhospitable wilderness.

Consequently, he was literally gaping when the girl sheltering under the parradile's wing awoke with a start and sat up.

At first he had thought wildly that she must be dead—that the parradile was showing him the body as a warning, or even as an indication that it was supplied with food. There was such a corpse-like look about the clothing she wore, a heavy, dull metallic garment with a big belt and a casque or hood or helmet topping it. Indeed it was not until she spoke to him that he realized her sex, so completely did it disguise her figure.

Her voice was hoarse, but pleasant. She said something first in a language he did not know, then caught herself as though dazed but recovering rapidly, and addressed him in the ordinary Carrig tongue.

“Who are you? And what's this creature that brought me to the cave?”

Straining his eyes, Saikmar tried to discern her features through the curious transparent membrane that fronted her helmet—without success. He said, “I am Saikmar son of Corrie of the Clan Twywit in Carrig, dwelling in asylum at the sanctuary here. And this creature whose nest you share is a noble beast, a parradile.”

She gave a slow, thoughtful nod. Beside her, its wing still raised, the parradile turned its head on its flexible neck and snuffed at her. Then it glanced back at Saikmar, seeming expectant.

“And you?” Saikmar demanded.

The girl shook her head helplessly. “I—I?...”

“What happened to you? How did you come here?”

“I—do not remember clearly. I have been faint.”

Saikmar stood gazing at her in wonder. If only the parradile could talk, he thought. What was the meaning of all this? Clearly the parradile must have brought the girl here, for all day until now the blizzard had been too thick for anyone to risk clambering along the ledges he himself had found to be the only route for access; one had to see clearly every hand—and foothold. And it had done so with some gentleness, moreover—there was not a mark on her, though one stab of those great talons could have transfixed her instantly. But if it had rescued her from the snows, that implied other questions. What was she doing here, wandering alone? Why was she so strangely clad? Could the parradile have brought her from far to the south where it had roved on its expeditions to gather material for its nest? He had never

heard of such a thing. Parradiles had been accused of making off with children and young graats, but such tales always placed the event in “another country,” and it was a far cry from that, anyhow, to carrying away an adult...

With the wind howling at his back and the threat of imminent darkness, however, he dared not spare the time for questions. He said, “I must guide you to the sanctuary and find warmth and food for you. Are you well enough to move?”

She rose cautiously, first to her knees, then to her feet. She was nearly as tall as Saikmar himself. Having flexed all her joints and stretched a little, she said, “I’m weak, but the rest has done me good. I think I’ll be all right. Is there still a storm outside?”

“There was much snow earlier, but now the sky is clear. We must go quickly, though. Night will soon be upon us.”

Moving cautiously, she freed her feet from the tangled mass of the parradile’s nest and walked to the mouth of the cave. Looking down, she pointed at the shining dome of the sanctuary.

“Is that where we must go?”

“Yes,” Saikmar agreed. “The way is difficult, but you must come with me now or not at all. Today they are building the snow-wall across the sanctuary door, to seal it for the winter. There is no room on the face of this cliff for two to go together; I shall have to guide you and show you where to cling and where to step.”

The girl made no reply, but went on studying the cliff-face. Saikmar could not blame her for hesitating. The storm earlier had laid snow like whitewash across the rocks, and in the failing daylight it was scarcely possible to see any ledges or crevices at all.

He was still pondering what encouragement he could offer—or indeed, whether he should attempt to persuade her to the sanctuary after all: might she not be an emissary of the gods?—when there was a grunting and heaving from behind him and the parradile pushed its way out of the nest. It came to join them on the ledge; there was barely room for the three of them, and the creature’s huge shoulder crowded against Saikmar’s.

Almost he could have sworn that the darting gestures it was making with its head, jabbing through the air toward the sanctuary, were asking a question: *Is that where you want to go... ?*

Abruptly the parradile seemed to lose patience. Its wings slapped out to their full span and beat the air like thunder. Startled, nearly knocked off-balance, Saikmar pressed back against the rocky wall. Treading air as a swimmer treads water, the parradile turned ten feet from the ledge and swooped toward him, its pinions fetching it up short like air-brakes as its talons snatched at his arms.

And he was being carried like a doll over the rocky scree below.

The flight was so brief that he was too astonished to cry out; as he was gathering a deep breath to do so, he found himself deposited on level ground not far from the sanctuary, and the parradile was soaring back up the face of the cliff to fetch the girl also. Poised on one knee in the snow, Saikmar stared in amazement tinged with

admiration. For it took courage to act as the girl was acting—to step to the absolute brink of the ledge before the cave and cast herself backward into the talons' grip.

Another moment, and she had been gently set down beside him. Hovering with the slightest waver of wings, the parradile waited to see if they were both all right before it spun so swiftly that it raised a snow-flurry and headed to its warm nest in the cliffside.

There was a strange tightness in Saikmar's throat. As though bidding good-bye to a friend, he realized, he was waving at the parradile's dwindling form. He checked himself, mindful of the snow-wall that was being built at the door of the sanctuary, helped the girl to her feet, and began without a word to lead her toward shelter.

They had almost finished the snow-wall now. It was one of the tasks demanded of the refugees in return for their keep, to prepare the great tolls of hard snow forming the body of the wall, to fetch loads of soft snow afterward and hammer them into the chinks and crevices, making the whole at last completely windproof.

As Saikmar and the girl approached, the workers paused to stare at them. They were a motley, bedraggled crew, mostly thin and wily-eyed, their hands chapped raw with the cold of the snow they had been hauling and their ears and noses nipped to red by the wind. Few of them had adequate clothes; some of the lucky ones had filched blankets and draped them about their bodies poncho-wise.

Saikmar knew that he had been expected to take part in the building of the snow-wall, though no one had formally ordered him to do so, and his heart sank as he recognized, foremost among the toilers, a man named Graddo who was a self-appointed leader of the refugees and cordially detested Saikmar, as he said, for his effeminate courtly ways. There was nothing to be done but put a bold face on things, however. Taking his companion by the arm, he led her toward the last gap in the wall, where a keystone arch of snow-blocks breached its quarter-spherical shape.

For whatever reason, the gang of refugees was doing nothing worse than scowl, so—

And he almost walked straight into the reason. Waiting under the arch, calm-faced and as rigid as though herself frozen, was the old priestess Nyloo.

“Another mouth to feed this winter, useless one?” she said after looking Saikmar and the girl up and down.

“The woman here also claims sanctuary,” Saikmar snapped. He had no idea whether that had been her intention, but in this barren arctic waste there was no other course for her to adopt.

“I see.” Nyloo's eyes burned in her old face. “A woman, is it? A flesh-and-blood woman? Hah! More likely, feared that you'll shiver in the long winter night, you conjured yourself a succubus to warm your bed. Isn't that it?”

“I know nothing of conjuration,” Saikmar retorted, feeling his face grow hot despite the icy air. “Magic is your province and none of mine.”

“Indeed!” Nyloo answered sharply. “That is a pity—a great pity. For how, without conjuration, is food for another hungry mouth to be come by this winter? Tell me that!”

“There are seventy refugees in the sanctuary,” Saikmar said. “With one more, is the difference large?”

“It exists!” Nyloo countered.

By now, sensing that they would have official approval if “they expressed resentment at the new arrival, the other refugees had abandoned their work on the snow-wall and were crowding around Saikmar menacingly. In the front rank, as well as Graddo, he recognized two men with deep and rankling grudges against the world, fathers of children growing up in the sanctuary. Like children born to pilgrims during a stay here, the offspring of the refugees were taught the mysteries and assigned to replenish the ranks of the priesthood, but whereas the pilgrims forsook their babies willingly, the refugees were compelled to do so, a very different matter.

Saikmar’s belly drew drum-tight with apprehension.

“About this woman, then!” Graddo rumbled, and clouted the girl roughly on the shoulder so that she winced, though she said nothing. “Where does she come from? From a city that has bought the right of asylum for its citizens by sending caravans hither with food for the sanctuary, as our own cities did?”

“Well spoken!” shouted another man behind him, and there was an instant chorus of agreement. The circle closed half a pace tighter on Saikmar and his companion.

“Well spoken indeed,” Nyloo nodded. “This woman, Saikmar—if she be a woman and not a succubus, which would be better since you do not have to feed spirits with corporeal food!—why does she not speak for herself?”

“I am from Dayomar, a city of the southland,” said the girl loudly, and raised her head to look Nyloo straight in the face.

“Dayomar?” said the refugee who had put the question. He sounded disappointed. “How say you, priestess?”

“Yes, the folk of Dayomar have the right of asylum,” Nyloo admitted grudgingly. “They have maintained it over many years, though none from so far south has claimed it in living memory.”

Saikmar felt a stir of hope, and broke in at once. “Then allow us passage, old woman!”

“JSfot so fast now!” Graddo objected. It was clear that he was enjoying this chance to discomfit Saikmar, and hoped it might lead to something more—perhaps even to his exclusion from the sanctuary. “She only *says* she’s from Dayomar. I was in that city once myself, before my unjust accusers forced me to flee hither. And never anywhere in the southland did I see a garb like what she wears!”

“Would you expect someone trudging across snowfields to affect the same dress as southlanders strolling on a sunny beach?” Saikmar snapped back. His argument

went unheeded. Fear of hunger was always in the forefront of the refugees' minds; that, and the tacit encouragement of Nyloo, was stinging them now to a more aggressive manner.

They began to shout—"Turn her away! Turn 'em both away! He's too stuck-up and haughty to do a hand's turn for his keep here!"

Nyloo lifted a hand and sharply ordered silence. When it had fallen, she questioned the girl again.

"How did you come here from Dayomar?"

"I—I don't rightly know," the girl said after a pause.

"I found her yonder in a cave on the face of the cliff," Saikmar exclaimed. "Where the parradile has nested—it had taken her into its nest to keep her warm."

Half a dozen scoffing voices were raised again at that. He heard: "Rubbish! Parradiles here in the far north? They never come this way! Besides, whoever heard of them making nests? Parradiles don't make nests! From Carrig, and he doesn't even know the habits of parradiles—I knew he was stupid but I didn't think anyone could be that stupid!"

Saikmar clenched his fists and rounded on them, hot words boiling to his lips. But before he could utter them, Nyloo came unexpectedly to his support.

"You! You have eyes less sharp than those of your own children! Certainly a parradile has been seen here of late—many of the youngsters have reported it to me." There was an edge of uncertainty on her voice now.

"Saikmar!" she went on. "You say you found this woman in the parradile's cave, unharmed?"

"I did!"

"Will you take your oath on that? An oath by the gods of your clan in Carrig, and by the parradile and the twywit?"

"Gladly!"

Puzzled, but sensing that their anticipated triumph was slipping away, the refugees shifted from foot to foot. Nyloo beckoned the girl with a bony index finger; when she timidly approached, the priestess felt the strange clothing she wore, her face drawing into a frown. At length she spoke again.

"It is a sign," she said reluctantly. "An omen. Until we have determined its import, we must admit you to the sanctuary. But I warn you!" Her voice rose. "If we discover this claim to be untrue—if you, Saikmar, have taken a false oath—we shall breach the snow-wall and drive you through it, both of you, to wander in the winter night until you die."

She moved aside and gave a jerk of her near-bald head.

"Enter!"



## CHAPTER TWELVE



Maddalena had been weak not only with tiredness and hunger but with what was much worse than either—despair. From every angle her situation had appeared hopeless when she fell into her exhausted sleep in the parradile’s nest. Though she had been given refuge from the storm, for all she knew her safety might be only temporary. When it woke, the creature might perhaps be hungry, and attack her, or it might hold her captive for some alien purpose of its own, or...

But there comes a point in extreme depression when the slightest hint of hope acts like a single ray of light admitted to a dark room. One finger of light makes a room no longer utterly dark; one glimmer of hope had snapped Maddalena back to the point where she could think and plan to save herself.

As yet, of course, she had had no chance to act; she had had to accept passively what was done on her behalf and make the most of it. It was clear, though, that this tall young man who had found her in the parradile’s cave was prepared to befriend her. That was proved by his willingness to argue with the unpleasant old woman who had tried to bar their entry—and what a stroke of luck it had been to find that Dayomar, the southern city she had named only because it was where Slee was based, was entitled to asylum for its citizens! She hoped she would have no narrower squeak before she left the planet again.

Now: this place she had been admitted to. She had realized as soon as she saw it for the second time that when she spotted its shining metal dome from the nearby cliff-top and shouted for Langenschmidt, she had been both right and wrong: right, in recognizing the chromium alloy hull of a spacecraft; wrong, in thinking that it must be the landing-craft from which she had baled out. Regardless of the name the natives applied to it, a word meaning “sanctuary” or “place of safety,” it was the ship that had brought eight hundred refugees from Zarathustra, which, as she had been told in her briefing, was now the shrine for a mystical cult.

From the glimpses she had caught as she was being hurried inside by Saikmar, she could tell that the ship had buckled badly on landing. The door through which they entered was apparently an old lifeboat-lock, and either from the force of the original crash or because the great weight of the hull had settled in the subsequent centuries it was too far off-square ever to be closed again; hence the windproof wall of snow being piled up over and around it. Inside, the durable plastic, which coated all metal surfaces as a guard against corrosion, had been worn away by the passage of innumerable feet, and here and there the floor was marred by patches of rust. Frost was thick on the walls before they came to an internal door which still functioned; beyond, there was foetid warmth and a smell indicating long human occupation and inefficient sanitation. Maddalena shuddered.

Saikmar hurried her onward. At an intersection in the passageway they came upon half a dozen children all aged about five playing with chunks of something tough and rubbery, cut in cubes; the game was to catch them as they bounced at unpredictable angles. Their play forgotten at the sight of a stranger, all the children stared with open mouths while Saikmar led Maddalena past them and turned to the left.

Down here the crash, or subsidence, had buckled the hull-plates more severely still; there were gaps and cracks plugged with rags over which some pitchlike substance had been smeared. She guessed that this must have been crew's quarters, for there were doors at intervals of five yards on either side of the passage—doorways, rather. The sliding panels had been either cut away or hammered back in their distorted grooves, where they had rusted fast, and now the openings were screened with panels of basketwork or animal-hides draped like curtains.

Behind some of these curtains there were sounds of movement, and she fancied that inquisitive eyes were peering at her through almost invisible gaps.

Saikmar halted at last before a doorway at the very end of the passage, and she saw that this one was more effectively closed than the others. What looked like the seven-foot-long meshmetal base of an ancient bunk had been placed across the opening and there secured by a bronze bar drilled at each end to fit pegs sunk in the wall. A rudimentary padlock weighing two or three pounds held the bar fast in the middle. Saikmar found a key to unlock it on a ring chained to his belt, lifted the barrier aside, and stood back.

“Enter,” he invited her.

She obeyed. She found herself in a four-bunk cabin, one of the bunks having been sawed off its mountings to serve, as she had seen, in place of a door. Presumably the reason Saikmar had gone to such trouble was because he had more possessions than other refugees; the remaining three bunks were loaded with clothing, blankets, the huge handwritten books of which she had seen examples during her briefing, some metallic objects which were probably armor, and other things she did not recognize at all.

The sight reminded her painfully of how completely she was at the mercy of events without the gear she had abandoned in the landing-craft. She had no means of signaling her whereabouts, no medical supplies—which on a backward world like this might well be the deadliest lack of all—and no more clothes than what she stood up in. Also it had been made abundantly clear that her arrival was resented because of a food shortage. And with the polar winter setting in for six months, obviously there could be no provisions brought in from outside.

One stroke of luck she had had, though. Perhaps there would be others. Indeed, come to think of it, there already had been another. She glanced down at her spacesuit as she realized the fact. The orbiting ship that had fired on the Patrol cruiser proved that some power-group from another system *had* discovered Fourteen and was exploiting its resources, or its people, or both. The implication was that the death of Trader Heron and the slaughter of the king parradile at the hands of a man “wielding the lightning” referred to an off-worlder with an energy

gun—not to the discovery of gunpowder, as Slee had ingeniously hypothesized. She had been half-afraid, therefore, that her spacesuit might be recognized for what it was and that she might be regarded as an enemy.

The intruders, however, must have planned to cause as little disturbance as they could—must have kept their alien origin secret, learned the local languages and disguised themselves in native costume. Unless Trader Heron's death had been coincidence, they would have realized that the loss of a Galactic agent would attract investigators, and wished to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

They had been very clever, she thought bitterly. It had taken a long time for even a hint of their interference to get back to a Corps base, longer still for an agent to be sent to check up. By shooting down the cruiser directly it emerged in real space, they had certainly gained a further respite of a year or two, unless she or Langenschmidt reached a subspace communicator. It wasn't uncommon for a Patrol cruiser to disappear without trace. It happened perhaps three or four times a century, and there was seldom a vessel to spare to look into the disappearance immediately.

That, of course, was why the pay in the Corps was so high.

By the time another ship was sent to Fourteen, the intruders might well have gained a secure enough foothold to thumb their noses at the Corps. For there were two views current concerning the treatment of Zarathustra Refugee Planets. The long view was the one that the Corps accepted and that Langenschmidt had expounded to her: to allow these isolated worlds to develop along their own lines, free from interference by more advanced cultures. The short view was that they should be opened to trade and traffic so that the alleged benefits of Galactic civilization would be made available to them.

If the intruders dug themselves in deeply enough, the hands of the Corps would be tied; it would be impossible to root them out without force, and this in itself would be a breach of the policy of noninterference. They could secure more and still more time by appealing an order to vacate to ever higher authority in the Galactic legal hierarchy, and a final decision might be reached in—what? Ten years? Coping with two hundred and sixty planets in uneasy federation was a slow, slow process.

By that time, naturally, it wouldn't matter which way the decision went. Irreparable harm would have been done.

She felt partly terrified, partly elated. She had made herself unpopular back at the base because all the time she was telling herself that the routine jobs she was given were too petty for her abilities. She had a superb conceit. But here she was landed with a task that posed so tremendous a challenge it was as though the universe itself had taken her at her word. It was wholly up to her whether it was accomplished.

More to the point: it was wholly up to her whether she survived or not.

There was no furniture at all in the cabin except the bunks. There were sanitary facilities, but they had probably not functioned since the ship crashed. Saikmar cleared a space for her on one of the bunks, padding the metal frame with a blanket, and indicated that she should sit down. What could have become of the

mattresses that must once have been fitted here? Oh: doubtless that was how the children had obtained the chunks of rubbery stuff they were playing with.

She lowered herself to the bunk and took off her helmet gratefully, glad of the chance to sort out the tangle into which her hair had muddled itself. Saikmar watched her every move, but there was no hostility or suspicion in his face, only curiosity. She had not realized at the time when he introduced himself as coming from Carrig, that if he had recognized her as coming from space, and knew that the usurpers in his city were from space also, he would not have been so friendly.

She waited for him to speak.

Saikmar found himself at a loss now. Until Nyloo had accepted that the girl's arrival constituted an omen, he had only half-believed the idea himself. True, he had been willing enough to regard the parradile as a divine emissary on sight, but he had, after all, been depressed enough to be contemplating suicide, and later reflection had suggested that the likeliest explanation was eviction of the parradiles from the Smoking Hills by Belfeor's blasphemous "clan."

This was a matter, however, in which the views of a priestess obviously carried a lot of weight. And the more he thought about it, the more probable it seemed that he had indeed brushed the fringes of the supernatural. The mystery of her presence here; the way the parradile had brought them both off the cliff-face and to level ground, something unheard of—everything tied together and filled his mind with visions of divine intervention. And the strange clothes the girl wore, especially her hard helmet with its transparent faceplate...

Which she was now taking off, to reveal that her features were of more than human loveliness.

Saikmar took a deep breath and decided to go straight to the point. "Are you human?" he demanded. "Or do you come from the gods?"

The girl paused awhile before answering. She said finally, "I'm human. But very strange things have happened to me."

That was clear enough. He pursued, "You are from Dayomar, you say. How are you called?"

"Melisma, daughter of Yull and Mazia, but they are dead." She made a sign he had seen southlanders make at the mention of a death. So far, so good.

"How did you come here from the southland, then?"

Again this pause before her answer. He wondered if she was preparing a lie, or whether she simply disbelieved some marvelous experience she had undergone. Her next words persuaded him that the second was the true reason.

"I don't remember clearly. Perhaps the parradile brought me. It seems to me that it did."

Then whether she was human herself or not, it had definitely been a miracle that accounted for her presence. She certainly could not have wandered this far north on her own. No caravans had come to the sanctuary this summer. It had to be the

parradile that had carried her hither.

A tremendous thrill passed through his body, and he had to shut his eyes for a moment, steadying himself. He was not forsaken by the gods! Here was an inarguable omen, directed at himself, and if Nyloo tried to make out otherwise, he would take her fuddled old head from her shoulders, priestess or not.

“This place...” the girl was saying thoughtfully, looking about her. “It’s the northern sanctuary?”

“Yes.”

“And you said, I think, that you had claimed asylum here. Why? What drove you from home?”

“I am of a noble family in Carrig,” Saikmar said bitterly. “There, as you may know, the king-hunt annually decides who shall rule. I who should have slain the king for Clan Twywit was cheated of my rights by strangers from the south with evil powers. Had I not fled hither I’d be dead, for the strangers leagued with traitors in the city—among them Ambrus son of Knole, whom may the gods swiftly destroy!—and burned down those who stood against them with magical lightning.”

The girl’s face had lit with astonishment. She said, “But then you’re the Saikmar who—I”

At that instant, though, the metal frame he had propped back across the door was rudely flung aside and fell clattering. Into the cabin stepped Graddo, and behind him a score of the other refugees could be seen, menacing—women too, as well as the men who had been working on the snow-wall.

“I’ve come to tell you thieves and wastrels,” Graddo said curtly, “that though talk of omens may impress old women who’ve had their brains addled by years of dabbling in the mysteries, it cuts no ice with us. Food’s short, for your city Carrig must have stopped the summer caravans this year and kept the pickings for themselves. We’re all agreed that that’s the likely explanation. So we’re going to put you out of the sanctuary, to make your way to Carrig, if you can!”

He smiled sardonically, and behind him the others shouted their approval. Some of them, Saikmar saw with sinking heart, held clubs and knives, and all their faces were bright with malevolence.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



For a moment there was silence, stretching like rope under too great a weight, tautening until it was sure to snap. Saikmar’s eyes sought the sword he had not dared to cumber himself with when he went to the parradile’s lair. It was as far away across the floor of the cabin as it could possibly be, hanging on the most

distant wall, and before he could reach it Graddo could be upon him. Only two or three of them could enter the cabin at a time, but he doubted he could stand off even two. Sword or no sword, though, he was going to have to try.

“Move!” Graddo barked at last, when his patience ran dry.

“Graddo!” a cry came through the doorway. “Push ‘em out to us! If they don’t want to go, we’ll just drag ‘em!”

“I’ll do that!”

Suiting action to words he took half a pace toward Saikmar, making as though to seize him by the arm. What happened next Saikmar did not quite see; he was still poising himself to duck under Graddo’s arms and try a wrestling throw on him when Graddo abruptly was not there any longer. He was flat on his back with a startled expression and the girl Melisma was standing over him.

“They want to play it rough,” said one of the refugees crowding the doorway, a man with a club whom the lean months had not been able to pare down to thinness. He stepped inside as Graddo started to get to his feet, cursing. Saikmar decided that the extraordinary girl could take care of Graddo for the moment, and as the newcomer reached for him, he summoned all the lightness and precision he had come by through his childhood pastime of dancing.

When the new attacker struck at him, it was his turn not to be where he had been. He jumped back far enough for the man’s ankle to catch against Graddo’s as the latter went sprawling the second time. There was a tremendous clang as they fell against the metal wall; the whole cabin rang.

Before the club-wielder could rise, Saikmar—realizing this was no time for finesse—charged him and crashed his skull back to the wall again. Satisfied he had dizzied the fellow for a while, he spun to face another who had come through the door. Feinting, he pretended to launch himself directly at him. At the last moment he darted aside. The man stumbled, and Saikmar’s fist took him on the back of the neck. He continued forward willy-nilly, snatching at the girl to prevent himself falling.

The girl caught his flailing arm at the wrist with one hand. With the other she pushed at the back of his elbow. The man screamed like a beast! He fell moaning across a bunk; when he tried to move his injured arm, he could not for the pain.

One could imagine, Saikmar reflected approvingly, a woman like this being very much at home in a parradile’s lair.

Graddo had still not had enough, it seemed. Once more he tried to scramble to his feet. Losing patience, Melisma put a booted foot against his solar plexus. It was not a kick she gave him, but a jab; nonetheless he doubled up coughing, clutching his belly.

She possessed herself of the club abandoned by the man with the dislocated elbow, and Saikmar seized the chance to tug his sword free of the peg where it was hanging. Panting, they stood shoulder to shoulder to confront the other refugees in the doorway.

The enthusiasm of the latter seemed to have chilled. None appeared eager to

follow up Graddo's lead. Besides, with three attackers' legs sprawled across the floor, there was hardly any clear footing left for further intruders.

"My apologies, Melisma," Saikmar said out of the side of his mouth. "Though we beat them off now, it will surely be a miserable winter, with these walking carrion looking for any chance to revenge themselves."

"I should rather be the one to apologize," she answered equally softly. "Had I not come to the sanctuary, things would not have reached this pass."

"Oh, eventually they would," Saikmar sighed. "It was only a question of time."

He braced himself as he saw movement among the refugees, thinking they were nerving themselves for a fresh onslaught, then paused in puzzlement as he saw that their heads were turning to look along the passage. Suddenly a commanding voice rang out, and the crowd fell back. Some of them had the grace to look ashamed as they made way for Nyloo. Others grumbled, sour-faced.

The priestess came to the doorway and gave a comprehending nod as she glanced inside. Beside her, clinging to her arm, was the old-wise child who was her usual companion. It was to her that Nyloo spoke.

"You say it was Graddo who persuaded his companions to do this?"

The child nodded, her big eyes raised to Nyloo's face.

"Graddo!" the priestess said, and her voice was as terrible as the grinding of a glacier. Still doubled over his sore midriff, the man looked up uncertainly.

"You have blasphemed," Nyloo said. "The sanctuary rejects you. You are cast into winter darkness, and henceforth your name is accursed."

Graddo's face went bleach-pale, and he froze into immobility. From behind Nyloo came a sigh, as all the refugees together heard the terrible sentence of doom.

Saikmar relaxed and wiped his forehead. Well, that was a relief!

He was surprised and alarmed to hear Melisma say a moment later, "What will become of him?"

Nyloo glanced at her. "What do you think? He will be driven from the sanctuary to live or die as the gods see fit."

"Not for my sake," Melisma said. "Do not do it in my name."

"It will be done because he profaned the sanctuary, not because he attacked you," Nyloo answered shortly. "No one may set himself up as judge of who may and who may not seek asylum here. We, the priestly staff, alone have that right. Graddo! This is the last time your name will ever be spoken within these walls. You are accursed. Go!"

She spat on the floor and ground her foot in the smear of moisture.

Machinelike, Graddo rose to his feet. Stumbling, he crossed the cabin to the exit. The other refugees moved aside as though from the carrier of an infectious disease. With one last survey of the scene, Nyloo and her child companion followed, then the two other attackers, shaking with relief that only Graddo and not they also had been expelled.

Melisma made to start after them, but Saikmar caught her arm. He said, “He would have done that to us! Why do you say no?”

Her shoulders slumped, but she made no other reply. After a few seconds in which she seemed to recover her self-control, she turned away from the door. He picked up and securely fastened the barrier, and when he looked her way again he saw that she was peeling off the peculiar coverall she wore. He stared at her, feeling a stab of surprise, for she was revealed as dancer-slim and exquisitely clothed.

He had no chance to pay her the compliment that rose to his lips, however, for he was forestalled by the reverberating thrum of the meal-gong, and the squeals and the hammering feet of excited children resounded in the noisy metal corridors. She started, dropping the heavy suit on the nearest bunk.

“What was that?”

“The signal that—like stabled graats—they are now consenting to feed us. Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“Come then.”

Maddalena-Melisma tried to ignore the sour looks of those who waited on line before the door through which drifted the succulent smell of food. Mostly now it was the women who glowered, seeing her so finely dressed and so healthy and attractive. Though they must all have been quite young, the refugee women were prematurely aged by worry and privation. Two or three young men leered until Saikmar took half a pace toward them; then they quickly looked another way.

“Who exactly are these people?” Maddalena asked in a low voice. Equally quietly, so that she had to watch his lips to catch every word, Saikmar explained.

“Like myself, they have claimed the immemorial right of asylum here—to avoid unjust accusation, to escape punishment for debt, or because they have been exiled from their own cities and have no skills to support themselves in a strange country.”

“Why are they so—so resentful?”

“They are without hope, without a future. They cannot even look forward to honor from their descendants, for their children are taught by the priestesses to forget their parents, little by little, and then trained in the mysteries. It is the only source from which the priesthood can be recruited. The priestesses must be virgins, and the priests are—uh—no longer equipped to father children.”

Melisma’s incredulity must have shown on her face. At that moment the line began to move, and Saikmar gestured ahead of them. “In that room you will understand,” he said.

And she did. The room was thick with steam, and moreover poorly lighted, but she could see that it was serving its original purpose as a canteen. Behind a metal counter pitted with rust, fat persons in robes stood ladling stew into bowls that the refugees held out, adding to the stew a chunk of coarse bread and a strip of some kind of dried fish on which salt granules glittered. These persons sometimes



snapped angrily at children who were disorderly while waiting their turn, and their voices were high and querulous.

*Priests, no longer equipped...*

She turned it over in her mind and shortly came up with a reason for this barbaric custom. Of course, when the refugees fled from Zarathustra there was still a ban on spacecrew fathering or mothering children; proper hard-radiation screening had not been developed, and their only legal way to become parents was by making a deposit in a sperm-and-ovum bank beforehand. Some petty tyrant, ignorant of the grounds for the ban, must have institutionalized it by the crude means which came to hand. It was another example of the same process that had turned the stranded ship into an inviolate sanctuary. To people who had been saved by the ship from the fury of a star going nova, the mental step from ship-equals-escape to ship-equals-safety must have been a very small one.

Surveying the canteen as the line moved irregularly forward, she was struck by the fact that instead of the refugees going to tables or benches to eat their food, they left the room—presumably to return to their cabins. Why were there no tables? Ah: the counter was not in its original position; it had been cut loose and dragged several feet across the floor, no doubt making the room too crowded for everyone to eat together.

Behind the serving priests, big urns of stew bubbled. Through the steam which rose from them she could just discern that the walls and roof were buckled and gashed. Pipes ran through the gashes into darkness beyond.

The implications of that shook her so much that she stopped in her tracks, and only Saikmar's nudging made her aware that it was her turn to take a bowl and have it filled. Hastily complying, she said, "Behind the wall yonder—what is there?"

Saikmar shrugged. "Something magical, I presume, the business of the mysteries. I know nothing of them."

"Is it always hot in here?"

"Oh yes, even in midwinter, and there is always stew or broth, or at least chay to comfort the stomach."

Chay, she recalled from her briefing, was an infusion of dried leaves containing a stimulant similar in its effects to coca, but much milder. It had to be made with boiling water, she had learned—it was one of the necessary accomplishments for the role of hetaira she was supposed to adopt.

So down there in the dark there must still be a source of power! Obviously not the main generators of the ship—they would have been smashed in the landing, as she could deduce from the glimpses she had had already. Indeed, it was a minor miracle that they hadn't blown up and destroyed the ship completely. Probably the survivors had jury-rigged something to see them through their first winter. However that might be, what counted was that it was still operating.

When she got the chance, she must definitely investigate.

She accompanied Saikmar back to the cabin to eat their meal. The food was oddly flavored, but the stew was hot and the coarse bread was very filling. The dried fish, though, was stale despite generous salting; after a trial nibble she put the rest by.

“Tell me,” she said as she wiped the last drops from her bowl with the last crust of bread, “what did Graddo mean—?”

Saikmar threw up his hand in horror. “Never speak that name!” he whispered. “It has been accursed!”

“Oh, for... !” But she recovered herself; she could not afford to slight the customs of the local people. Obediently, she changed her phrasing. “What did the man who attacked us mean when he accused your city of stopping caravans and keeping the pickings for themselves?”

Saikmar explained, admitting that for all he knew the charge was justified, but insisting on what was certainly true: that it was unfair to accuse his own or any other of the genuine Carrig clans of being responsible. If the guilt lay anywhere, it must be at the door of the usurper Belfeor and his cronies, a banditlike horde conjured as if by magic—presumably from some hiding place in the hills—to enforce with strange, terrible weapons their leader’s right to rule.

From there he went on into a bitter tirade against Belfeor, to which Maddalena listened carefully, extracting the salient points. She was both disappointed and horrified:—horrified because it became clear that the people of Carrig were used to a leisurely, secure life where change came slowly if at all, and in such a society one ruthless man could already have wrought irremediable harm; disappointed because Saikmar could retail her no news that was less than a year old, and from it she could not determine whether she had to deal with a mere gang of adventurers who fancied the idea of playing the despot for a while, or with a well-organized plot to enslave Carrig and milk it of its rich resources.

Still, there was no point in railing against fate. She had been fortunate enough to fall in with Saikmar rather than Graddo on her arrival, and that was some consolation. But she gloomily wondered how she was going to sweat out the winter without breaking down completely, knowing that with every passing hour Belfeor was closing his grip more tightly on his miserable victims.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Time passed. Firmly instructing herself not to fret, Maddalena began to get the measure of the enclosed society she had landed among. Whether it was due to the coming of winter or whether things were the same the year around, she could not yet tell; but most of the refugees were half in hibernation—wakeful, but so lacking

in vitality they were apathetic. Twice a day a great gong boomed to announce an issue of food, and that was the only real event so far as most of them were concerned. Even the children, who were playful enough at the age of four or five, seemed to have the spirit systematically drained out of them, and by the time they were eight or ten they were miniature parodies of the priestly staff. Some, like the little girl who was Nyloo's constant companion, contrived it very young indeed.

Shortly after the day's second meal, the light in the sanctuary dimmed to a twilight level; two-thirds of the way toward the first meal of the next day, the brightness increased again. She was so used to sourceless illumination that she recognized this only as further proof of still-functioning power-sources when Saikmar commented on it as an example of the reasons why the mysteries must be taken seriously.

Well, if it was the only way of persuading people to undertake maintenance for seven centuries...

Despite her impatience, she kept reminding herself that she was here chiefly on sufferance. The other refugees scowled at her whenever she appeared in the canteen, and it was as yet not known whether Saikmar's oath concerning her had been enough to convince Nyloo that she must be allowed to stay. She dared not do anything risky, such as stealing into the canteen to look behind that gashed wall, until she was absolutely confident of not being caught.

Meanwhile she was thrown exclusively into Saikmar's company. At first the prospect had worried her, but after a day or two she was quite pleased. He was a far cry from the rough barbarians she had expected to encounter here—indeed, he was unfailingly courteous and considerate, never making the least imposition on her, his whole attitude utterly different from the patronizing arrogance she had been led to imagine. It did not take her long to see that this was due to him being in awe of her; his veneer of sophistication was thin, and hid an unfathomable depth of superstition concerning, above all, parradiles.

Whether the other refugees were also awed, or whether the expulsion of Graddo had made them frightened for more rational reasons, her few attempts to make conversation with them were a fiasco. She had thought the atmosphere of a Corps base was oppressive enough; this, though, was frightening. According to what Saikmar told her, no one in the sanctuary seemed to have enough imagination to invent ways to pass the time. Once the snow-wall had closed off the entrance until spring there was almost literally nothing to do except sleep, moon around, and quarrel. Often the sound of fights, begun purely to relieve the monotony, shattered the ears of all the refugees in their close-packed cabins.

Himself accustomed to a full life at home, Saikmar offered his guest what he could. Immediately he discovered she could read—a rare accomplishment, she gathered, among Carrig's women—he produced from a locked chest the few books he had managed to bring with him. But despite their enormous size the handwritten pages of all of them together held less than one recording-spool such as she was accustomed to, and she knew the contents by heart within hours. There were two books of lyric poems with indications for harp accompaniment; two books chronicling the history of Carrig: volume one was almost entirely fabulous,

although the second looked like a fairly factual, if bald, account of the city's last two centuries; and, finally, a sort of breviary of the Carrig religion, indicating by means of a laboriously worked-out calendar the proper times for various festivals such as the king-hunt.

Even the rapid briefing she had undergone had told her more about Fourteen than these books compiled on the spot.

Afraid of her own weaknesses, foreseeing how easily she might crack, being cooped up here for months on end, she wondered about the possibility of escape. But the more she considered it, the more absurd it became. Granted that all kinds of survival gear were built into her suit, they were meant primarily for survival in space or on airless asteroids; the compass was almost the only exception. The one thing the sanctuary wasn't short of was water, but even if she managed to electrolyze some and compress the hydrogen into tanks, the weight of the tanks would probably be too much for the suit-jets to lift—they were meant to stabilize and slow down the wearer during a fall, not to hoist him or her off the ground and over mountain ranges. The technology to make collapsed-hydrogen lozenges had been available before the Zarathustra nova, but she didn't know whether the principle had diffused that far; and even if by a miracle she found some hidden in a remote corner of the sanctuary, she would never be able to transfer them from their hypermagnetic storage cases to the magazine on the suit. Immediately they were removed from the enclosing energy field they would expand by a factor of about eight thousand, and it would take the output of a fair-sized fusion reactor to put them back again.

*Thinking of fusion reactors ...*

Time and again she came back to the same conclusion: she must sneak into the priestly zone beyond the canteen and find out what manner of machine was still working there. But she dared not share that intention even with Saikmar; to him all such matters were magical, and he had been brought up not to meddle with them. As for the idea that the priests and priestesses themselves might tell her, it was ridiculous. They guarded their secrets more jealously than life.

She planned her strategy with care. First of all, she persuaded Saikmar to take her on a guided tour of all those parts of the sanctuary that were open to the refugees, which she estimated at about a third of the original hull-volume. A further third, or slightly less, was reserved to the staff, and in it they taught the children they had recruited; studied ancient writings without comprehension, and assigned them symbolic meanings in line with their own experience of reality; and conducted such rituals as they had. This was not a god-centered cult, Maddalena found; the planet-wide term ordinarily translated as "the gods" referred here to abstract principles or ungraspable concepts: creation, speed, the generation of storms, heat, cold, and light. There was no idea that they must be propitiated, only that they must be served because that was the nature of the universe. It seemed as though the further they drifted from their original landing, the more the natives of Fourteen had garbled the traditions they had inherited, and by now the link between this cult and—say—the religion of Carrig was hardly recognizable.

As to the last third of the original ship, it had either been crushed on landing, or

had been ripped open and was now unusable thanks to hundreds of winters of drifting snow.

Somewhere on the borderline of the priestly zone, therefore, she must seek the resources she needed.

Though Saikmar slept soundly, he was sometimes disturbed by dreams which, as he told Maddalena, sprang from memories of what he had seen Belfeor do in Carrig. Most often he dreamed of how he had been cheated of his right to kill the king. In keeping with her role as a south-lander she had made appropriate religious gestures and awed exclamations when she heard about the usurper's power to hurl bolts of lightning, and it was not entirely pretense. She could clearly imagine the impact of energy guns on the ignorant and unprepared.

Following such a dream, Saikmar invariably fell into very deep sleep from which, as she took pains to establish, virtually nothing could rouse him. Accordingly, several days after her arrival, she waited patiently in the twilit cabin until she heard him writhing in the grip of nightmare, and then a while longer until his breathing grew regular again. Now was her chance. She groped under her bunk until she located the headlight of her space helmet, and silently unscrewed it from its mount. It would run for months without recharging, and its beam could be narrowed to a mere pencil of light, ideal for her surreptitious wanderings.

It was difficult to get out of the cabin and not make a noise owing to the metal frame across the entrance. Lowering it on a blanket, however, solved that problem, and she stole into the corridor. Somewhere a fractious baby was crying, but aside from that the place was quiet. Most of the refugees enjoyed their sleep; dreams offered escape from reality.

Seeing and hearing no one, she made her way along the familiar route to the canteen. A scent of food still clung in the air hereabouts, and her mouth watered without warning, reminding her that like all the refugees she was on a bare subsistence diet now and invariably hungry. The air was warmer here, too, than in the cabin she had left.

The door of the canteen was among the few which still functioned. It was shut, naturally, and moreover it seemed to be locked on the far side. No matter how hard she leaned on the sliding panel she could not make it budge. But she had half-expected this, and come prepared. The frame of the ship was so badly buckled that any door that still operated must have loosened in its grooves, just as those that did not work had been jammed in them. Playing her flashlight on the door, she saw she was right in her guess. There was a gap easily wide enough to admit the tip of her survival knife, which she had also removed from her spacesuit and brought with her.

Five minutes' fiddling work with the knife enabled her to press the catch of the lock back into its socket and free the panel.

Having listened a moment for sounds of snoring or even breathing, which might betray someone keeping overnight watch in this pleasantly warm room, she crossed the floor silently and went behind the service counter. She inspected the big urns

where they cooked the soups and stews that formed the mainstay of the refugees' diet. They were cold at the moment, but the means whereby they were heated was clear: they were connected to steam pipes—leaky, corroded, and plugged with the same pitchlike material used for gaps in the hull. All the pipes led through holes in the wall behind. Studying these holes, she saw that they must indeed date back to the days just after the ship had crashed; to protect the exposed edges of the metal from rust, plastic had been sprayed on. What little remained was black and brittle with age.

*So down there...*

She played her flashlight through the largest hole, one big enough for her to crawl through, and saw that there was a compartment beyond containing a confused array of machinery. Promptly she decided she *was* going to crawl through.

Once again she made sure there was no one sleeping here to guard against intrusion—it was unlikely in view of the refugees' superstitious regard for the priestly mysteries, but one never knew—and then she wriggled with maximum patience past the steam pipes and into the new room.

When she took a good look at what it contained, she suffered a twinge of alarm. The entire arrangement was incredibly makeshift. She calmed herself by reflecting that if it had worked for so many centuries it probably wouldn't explode now, and if it did there was nothing she could do about it anyway. Cautiously inspecting everything with her flashlight, but touching nothing, she walked around the room.

What must have happened was that the original occupants of the ship had brought together here such devices as they could salvage to make their existence supportable. A fusion reactor—an antique four times the bulk of current models elsewhere in the galaxy—stood in the center; a big pipe to the outside presumably indicated where snow was shoveled in, melted snow being close enough to pure water when filtered. A little of the water was electrolyzed for the sake of its hydrogen, to run the reactor; the rest was flashed into steam to heat the sanctuary and to power a small turbo-generator sited across the room, which clearly provided the lighting. A stopcock, screwed tightly shut at present, admitted steam to the stew urns when mealtimes approached.

So far, so good. What else was there here? She broadened the beam of her flashlight and shone it around at random. A moment later she thought she was going to faint—the devices in use were not the only ones in the room. Others were pushed back against the wall, covered in dust as though untouched for centuries. And one at least of them she recognized instantly.

She recovered quickly, but she was still trembling with excitement as she wiped away dust and fumbled open inspection covers, for as far as she could tell, the machine ought to be in perfect working order. Provided she could connect it up...

She hunted high and low for a length of cable, and eventually found a coil of twenty feet or so discarded behind another machine that clearly was not worth investigating—most of its parts had been cannibalized, and she didn't know what it was anyway. She found a vacant output terminal on the turbo-generator, frowned for a moment over the antique design of the clips on it, figured out the answer and

hooked up the cable.

Drawing a deep breath, she pressed a switch next to the plate which identified her prize as a diet synthesizer mark 4, built on Zarathustra nearly a thousand years ago. Its airtight trace-element hoppers were three-quarters full; calcium, phosphorus, and iron were lower than the rest, but dried fish and salted meat were after all still available... Her thoughts raced on, while out of the air, the machine, whining a little, sucked carbon dioxide, nitrogen and hydrogen, comprising the four basic elements of living matter; it hammered them together in a fashion she understood only vaguely, although she had been taught in Corps indoctrination how to service these devices that sometimes stood between death and a stranded spaceman.

Being old, the machine ran noisily, but she did not care. When a door on the far side of the fusion reactor was flung back, she paused to open the delivery hopper before turning to see who had come in. It was Nyloo, her face pale with fury as she held high a smoking torch. Obviously the secret of increasing the sourceless light had been lost; only the time-control governing its night-day cycle still ran by itself.

Angry words died on the priestess' lips as she came wonderingly forward to look at what Maddalena held in her hand: a damp, succulent cake of brownish color, the same consistency as doughy bread, containing—if the machine had worked properly—proteins, starches, sugars, and several vitamins.

After a long incredulous pause, Nyloo lowered her aged body to her knees and bowed her forehead to the floor.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Then, of course, there was the problem of fabricating a convincing lie to explain how she had set in operation a machine which had stood by idle for centuries. It seemed that each of the priests and priestesses had a certain specialty in the work of the sanctuary, and so narrow had these specialities become that in many cases knowledge had died with its holder, through illness or accident, before a child could be trained in that particular field of the “mysteries.”

Fortunately Nyloo did not press that point immediately. She was so overcome with excitement that she ran off to rouse the rest of the staff to witness the miracle, and before they—and some of the refugees too, awakened by the racket—had got over their amazement, Maddalena had had time to work out a plausible fiction. She recounted how she had found some ancient documents in her grandmother's home when she was a child, including a few which had pictures, and how her grandmother had passed on some old family traditions concerning the contents. Beyond that she did not have to elaborate—all her listeners were too busy sampling the synthesizer cake, and Nyloo was positively crowing with delight at her own

sagacity in admitting Maddalena to the sanctuary.

“The omens have been fulfilled!” she cried over and over again.

Only Maddalena realized that this solution to the food problem was temporary. With altogether a hundred or more mouths to feed, the trace-element hoppers would soon be drained, and where on this world could you find, for instance, a source of the pure cobalt needed for cobal-ocyanamin, vitamin B-12? She dared not show over-detailed knowledge of the machine’s workings, but certainly she must find an opportunity to warn Nyloo against relying completely on its output. Luckily one of the flavor controls had slipped a little, and the diet cakes—normally deliriously flavored to tempt the appetites of people who might be apathetic with despair—were dull to the palate, like unsalted potatoes.

To the refugees, nonetheless, they came as manna. Some of the children here had never known what it was to eat as much as they liked, and for the first time in their lives, slept the night through without crying out for hunger. The whole atmosphere lost its famine-induced tension, and people smiled more often and forgot their pinched, moody expressions. Above all, the priestly staff displayed great respect toward their savior, giving her a cabin of her own and many gifts of cloth and furniture from their own quarters. As for the refugees, their former hostility vanished utterly. When Maddalena came to the canteen for a meal they stood aside until she was served, and if they met her in the passageways they bowed low as they had done at home to folk of noble birth.

This, though, was far from the companionship she now desperately craved, and her one actual friend here—Saikmar—was the only person who seemed upset, rather than pleased, by the course of events. For several days he avoided her completely, even to arriving late at the canteen so he was sure of missing her in the line. Maddalena was dismayed at his behavior, and resolved that she must confront him about it.

She had come to like him more than she had expected to like anyone on this backward world. He was obviously intelligent; he had had a good education by Carrig standards, and if his thinking was shot through with superstition that was scarcely his fault; but most importantly he was a naturally civilized person, with a strong sense of responsibility and no trace of the arrogance she had imagined among barbarian nobles. She knew from their long talks together that he was far more concerned for the fate of Carrig’s people under the harsh rule of the usurper than over the loss of his chance to win power for his own clan. Had he been fairly defeated in the king-hunt, he would have been disappointed but content with the will of the gods. Belfeor’s actions, however, had lighted in him a smouldering anger which one day—given the time and place—would explode.

After four days of his cold-shouldering, she could stand it no longer. Impulsively she dropped the bolt of cloth, from which she was trying to contrive a new costume for herself with clumsy, enormous scissors and a tarnished brass needle, and hurried along the corridors to Saikmar’s cabin.

Fist poised to bang on the wall beside the entrance, she hesitated. What if—against all her good resolutions—she had somehow made Saikmar dislike her as her colleagues at the base had learned to, for her conceit or her continual



complaining? Though she could not think of any such way she might have offended Saikmar, she had to remember that the minds of people from so backward a planet didn't function in the manner she was accustomed to.

A year ago, a month ago, the idea of apologizing to a barbarian would have been inconceivable.. Now she made up her mind that if necessary she was going to grovel; she needed a friend above anything else, and there was no one except Saikmar to turn to.

She knocked, and heard him rise—by the sound of his movements, reluctantly—to lift aside the metal frame blocking his doorway. The moment he saw her, his face froze.

With dignity he said, “What service may I do Melisma?”

That was in the formal third person, the type of address used for aged grandparents, very noble persons and the gods themselves. But there was no politeness in his tone; his voice cut like a whip. Maddalena flushed. Keeping her own voice steady with an effort, she said, “May I come in?”

He stepped aside and gestured that she should enter, though he made it clear that he was acting against his will. Nothing in here had changed noticeably; indeed, Maddalena suspected that since she moved to her new quarters most things had not even been touched, suggesting that Saikmar had spent his time sitting and staring at nothing.

She stood uncertainly waiting for him to close the door again. Having done so, he turned to face her—and the mask of his self-control slipped for an instant. Out of his large dark eyes naked misery looked at her.

It was only for a second, but that was long enough for her to forget everything except pity and gratitude. Barbarian he might be, but he was human first of all, and he had been kind to her at the risk of his life; now he was cast into black depression because of her.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had flung her arms around him and paid attention to his attempts to master himself. His whole body shook with sudden sobs, and his cheek against hers ran wet with tears.

Crooning silly wordless noises, she guided him to the bunk where he had been sitting, cleared enough space for them both, and urged him to sit down beside her. Stroking his hair, she kissed away his tears and waited for him to recover.

In a little while he was self-possessed enough to realize what had happened, and to blush at this unforgivable breach of a proper Carrig noble's façade, but before he could waste his breath on explanations and apologies Maddalena forestalled him.

“Oh, Saikmar, I was so afraid I'd made you angry with me! Why have you been avoiding me for so long?”

He didn't reply, and she hurried on, “Is it that like those other silly refugees you think I'm supernatural, not a flesh-and-blood girl? Here, feel me—am I not human?” She caught up his hand and pressed it against her cheek.

Almost inaudibly, he said, “No, I'm the one who has been silly. I've been childish!

Should I not be pleased that those who once reviled me for bringing a new mouth to the sanctuary have blessed me instead, patting their full bellies and bowing as I go by? My life is going to be far more peaceful this winter than it was last.”

“But empty!” Maddalena countered. “I’d rather die alone in the snows than face a life without friendship, thinking sad thoughts and hating each day as it breaks. They speak of omens, and my coming as some kind of miracle! I know nothing of miracles and care less. I only know I’m in a strange fearful land, and the one person who has shown friendship to me has taken to *hiding* from me! Why, Saikmar—why?”

Saikmar hesitated. He said at length, “I’m not the only person in the sanctuary.”

“But no one else will treat me as a real person! They’re frightened to talk to me, refugees and staff alike, as though I were—well, some kind of idol struck to life by the gods!” She linked her fingers in his and squeezed almost violently. “But I am a human being, Saikmar, I am!”

“Yes, of course you are,” he comforted. “Yet... No, I’d be foolish to speak of such a thing.”

Abruptly she caught on. Eyes wide, she gazed at him. “Oh, no...” she whispered. “How could I not have thought of that? You did hope I was superhuman, didn’t you? Because you found me in the parradile nest, and the parradile is sacred in Carrig. You wanted me to be a messenger from the gods, here to aid you back to your home!”

For a long moment Saikmar did not respond; then he gave a tiny nod.

Maddalena was appalled. The reason for his coldness had been right under her nose, and she had failed to recognize it. Naturally Saikmar would have taken anything to do with the parradile—symbol of kingship in Carrig—as being directed at himself, and when he heard his suspicion that her arrival was a divine omen confirmed by Nyloo his hopes of achieving his ambition must have run high. When the old priestess later declared that she had, instead, been sent to save the loyal adherents of this northern cult from starvation, he must have suffered a tremendous psychological blow.

At random she suggested that if she had not turned up so providentially, the hatred of the other refugees for him might have climaxed in his being attacked or driven out, and then what hope would there have been that he could save his city? But the argument rang hollow in her ears. She did not really believe he was Carrig’s sole hope, and apparently he did not either; he merely kept up the pretense in order to give himself a reason to go on living.

Perhaps in a few days, she thought, when he had had a chance to think things over, he might relent and feel the need for company again. Accordingly, feeling rather downcast, she left him after only a few more minutes, and instead of going back to the loneliness of her own cabin began to wander absentmindedly along the passageways, scarcely noting where she was or who she met.

She came at last to the entrance, where the half-dome of snow closed away the sanctuary from the arctic night, and where it was customary for the children who were being schooled in the mysteries to spend an hour or two daily on guard by

themselves, as a test of their ability to concentrate. Before she discovered how strictly disciplined the children were, Maddalena had tried speaking to them while they were on duty, and been dismayed at the stony silence she encountered. Saikmar had explained why, though, and this time she merely paused and looked to see which of the children occupied the post.

It was Nyloo's companion, the little girl with old-wise eyes whose name she had found to be Pettajem—"Little Jewel." Pettajem was usually so self-possessed and mature for her age that Maddalena was astonished to realize she was crying, although she was bravely fighting the tears and snuffling when they threatened to run too freely.

Maddalena forgot the frigid reception she had had from other children keeping watch here, and ran toward her.

"Pettajem! What's the matter?"

The girl's mouth worked and she turned her big dark eyes up, but she said nothing. Maddalena sighed. It would probably be better not to interfere, she decided, and was on the point of turning away when a curious scraping sound reached her ears. It seemed to be coming through the snow-wall, and suggested that something outside might be trying to burrow its way in.

Maddalena stared at Pettajem. If some wild creature were trying to break the wall in, ought not something to be done about it? She said, "Is it the noise which frightens you?"

A hesitant nod.

"Have you told Nyloo about it?"

The child's obstinate silence gave way, and in a tear-choked voice she answered, "Y-yes! She says it is the sound of him-who-was-lately-accursed, trying to get back in!"

Maddalena made a disgusted noise. Graddo was certainly long dead, and as for ghosts, not for all the sanctuaries on Fourteen was she going even to pretend to believe in them. There was something alarmingly and indisputably physical about the scrabbling she could hear, louder than ever now, through the hard-packed snow.

"Are there big wild beasts this far north?" she asked Pettajem. The child shook her head.

"Nothing bigger than a quet can live in this region, and quets go to sleep for the winter!"

*Whatever a quet might be...*

A thought suddenly struck her. Could the source of the noise possibly be human? Could it, specifically, be Gus Langenschmidt, having survived the crash of the landing-craft and somehow found his way here? She was so overcome by the idea that she strode forward to the snow-wall—ignoring a horrified cry from Pettajem—and rapped three times on its hard surface. It had been compacted by beating while it was built, and conducted sound well.

There came three knocks in answer. She jumped to the conclusion she had been right, and snapped at Pettajem.

“Go tell Nyloo this is no ghost trying to get in!”

She did not wait to see if the child obeyed, but drew her knife, which she now kept by her always against emergencies, and began to carve hunks out of the wall with it. Wailing in dismay Pettajem took to her heels.

The unknown burrower had worked well. It was only moments before the wall was breached and the arctic wind came through the gap, stinging her eyes and blinding her for a few seconds. Gasping as the chill caught her by the throat, she leapt aside. Blocks of compressed snow weighing twenty pounds and more were smashed loose as the intruder widened the hole vigorously.

Maddalena wiped her eyes and looked again, and after a pause for incredulity, began to laugh. She was still laughing when people began to hurry down the passage toward her—Nyloo, others of the staff, several of the refugees who had been alarmed by Pettajem’s shouts for help, and even Saikmar startled out of his despondency.

It was to him that Maddalena spoke.

“Here’s *your* omen, the one that’s meant for you and no one else! Look!”

Saikmar nodded and smiled against his will. So did many of the others. You couldn’t take the intruder seriously despite its vast bulk, for it looked so woebegone: its hide dull with frost, its neck drooping, its shoulders, which could just be seen poking through the hole in the wall, shaking with the cold.

It was the friendly parradile.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



There was far less wrangling over the admission of the parradile to the sanctuary than there had been over letting in Maddalena. Partly, the refugees were chastened by what had happened to Graddo; partly, with the diet synthesizer in operation, no one could justifiably argue about shortage of food; but above all, staff and refugees alike were shaken to their mental foundations by this succession of miraculous events and were resigned to accepting them as they came. Certainly the peaceful behavior of the parradile, which most of them believed to be dangerously savage, and the affectionate way Maddalena and Saikmar treated it, suggested that strong magic had been at work.

Saikmar, who had naturally made a study of parradiles’ habits as all contenders in the king-hunt must, declared at once that it had been unable to stand the cold even with the help of its unprecedented nest, and Maddalena questioned him

closely about the species. Snapped clear out of his fit of depression, Saikmar answered eagerly. What he told her was unscientific and disorganized; but it was based on close observation, and her superficial knowledge of biology and ecology enabled her to fill in some of the gaps.

One could guess just by watching parradiles that they had a fantastically high rate of metabolism. The amount of energy required to fuel a beast that in mature adulthood had a wingspread of a hundred and twenty feet, yet could take off from level ground without a run and glide a thousand miles before touchdown, beggared the imagination. Logically, parradiles had to feed very often and ate vast amounts when they did. With the coming of winter, although they were omnivorous, they could seldom find enough food to keep their bodies functioning at maximum efficiency. Consequently they, or at least the variety inhabiting the neighborhood of Carrig, went into hibernation for about four or five months. A mother with young was the only exception; she had to remain alert to protect her offspring, and would therefore stock her lair with emergency food to gulp down if trouble caused her to use up her meager resources of energy.

But such a species could not become truly torpid without suffering permanent harm, just as a man's limb cannot be frozen without severe damage. Parradiles, therefore, were commonest in the equatorial zone. Down there, however, there were many carnivores that fancied nothing better than a helpless baby parradile. Hence the breed to which the king-parradile of Carrig belonged had taken to making winter lairs in the Smoking Hills, where the ground was always warm. In this way they protected themselves against the risk of frostbite and economized on the food they would otherwise have to consume to keep their temperature at its normal fever-high level.

"I was astonished," Saikmar declared, "when I saw that this parradile had made itself a nest! Such a thing had never before been heard of!" He glanced at Maddalena, standing beside the parradile and absently stroking its head. The creature seemed to like that. She had gone pale. "Is something wrong?" he demanded.

"N-nothing," Maddalena forced out. But for the latest of several times since arriving on this planet she wanted to kick herself for overlooking the obvious. Saikmar had mentioned the unique parradile-nest before, and she had been distracted by something else preoccupying her mind—perhaps, too, she had been prevented from paying attention to it by Saikmar's dismissal of the claim some people made concerning parradiles having learned the trick of soaring in volcanic updraughts from men in their gliders. It did indeed seem reasonable that any flying creature would discover that in the course of nature.

Inventing a nest, though... ! If this beast beside her had really figured out for itself that it needed insulation against heat-loss in this bitter climate, that indicated perhaps the highest order of intelligence ever encountered in a nonhuman creature!

Briskly she pulled herself together and began to issue orders, which were obeyed mainly because everyone else was too dazed by the parradile's arrival to question them. There would be time later for inquiries and tests; what mattered now was to find somewhere for the beast to live.

She picked on three of the refugees who had shown enough initiative to repair the snow-wall without being told, pushing the displaced blocks roughly back into place and pouring water into the gaps to make a solid mass of ice again. With their assistance she selected a cabin near the canteen, which had probably been a food-store when the ship was spaceworthy, but which had not been used for a long time because there was a crack in its external wall. She ordered a panel of basketwork to be forced into the gap and caulked with the pitchlike material customarily used for crack-sealing, then instructed one of Nyloo's colleagues to run a new steam pipe from the fusion reactor into this cabin. There was some objection raised to this, but she got her way. A heap of old rags, and, dug out from some remote cranny, a mattress that had escaped cutting up for children to play with, were put down for the parradile to lie on; and it seemed well pleased with that.

"Parradiles are cleanly beasts," Saikmar warned. "They do not foul their lairs. We must arrange for that also."

A curious feeling of unreality overcame Maddalena. She said, "Then let's see if we can teach this one to use human sanitation!"

She would have thought that Nyloo was too old and world-weary for anything to shake her now. But when the parradile had shown that it got the idea—it had taken minutes only—they found the priestess sitting in a corner by herself, saying over and over again the same words.

"Miracle upon miracle," she was saying. "That I should live to see these days!"

Saikmar, pale-faced, his eyes bright and round, kept shaking his head. He too was incredulous, and his manner toward Maddalena was half-fearful, half-adoring.

"But how can a parradile behave so?" he burst out. "It has learned how to conduct itself in the space of a few hours! Even children may come close and stroke its legs! Are these the fierce beasts we have hunted in the air for who knows how long?"

Maddalena, leaning back on the bunk in his cabin where she had slept the first few days after her arrival, said quietly, "Tell me, Saikmar, have your people always hunted the parradile for a dangerous meat-eater and man-killer?"

Saikmar sat down and gave a shrug. "That, no. At least not in Carrig. Twywits—my own clan-sign—are hunted that way, because they take young graats in the fields, and sometimes they kill children or old peasant-women. To us the parradile has always been something different. The king-hunt is a formal ceremony. We respect and admire the parradile even in the act of slaying it—it seems a most noble creature. I think it may be respect that has led us gradually to confine the king-hunt to our best and most skillful young men, as though only those who themselves are noble are fit to go forth against it."

That, Maddalena thought, was a remarkably acute piece of social analysis for someone who could not take a detached view.

She said, "I don't know your city, Saikmar. Would you say that the parradile is killed not because it menaces the citizens, but because by magical association its

nobility comes to him who kills?”

Saikmar hesitated. At length he said, “Yes. Yes, I think that must be true. Although magic in Carrig is the prerogative of Clan Parradile, as here of the priests and priestesses, so I know little of such matters.”

“*Are* parradiles a threat to human beings?”

“Well, the species that lairs in the Smoking Hills is merely the largest of several kinds of parradile. It’s believed that there are very many across the ocean to the west, in a land men have never visited—or, as the ancient legends suggest, perhaps in the land from which men were expelled for their arrogance toward the gods. And the fisherfolk who work the western seas tell of parradiles swooping on their boats and being saved only because skillful bowmen shot the creatures down. I saw the hide of one once; it was of the same shape but different coloring from ours. Also there are the species in the southland which seldom come to the Smoking Hills because the king is jealous of his rights and beats off all intruders. Or rather...”

He clenched his fists and swallowed hard. “Or rather, he *was*. I had grown up all my life with the old king that Belfeor slew; I cannot imagine any other than him. My apologies. I had been going to answer your question. Yes, the southern parradiles have been reliably reported to attack graats, and some say they have taken children. They are not regarded as sacred in the south—but of course you know that. Are there not parradiles around Dayomar?”

Were there? Maddalena was at a loss. She compromised. “Naturally I have seen them, but we don’t take the particular interest in them that you do.”

“Yes, naturally.” To her relief, he was not in a suspicious mood; he was too excited. “But I’ve heard that they are indeed hunted down in the southland, even killed for food—is that not so?”

“Why, yes,” Maddalena agreed at random. But she wanted to dig deeper into this. It seemed important. Frowning a little, she went on, “If I’ve followed you correctly, your parradiles are the largest kind, so they must eat more than most. Yet they don’t rob your farmers?”

“Never.” Saikmar blinked at her. “On every farm there is a patch of land where parradiles may come if they wish and eat what they find; and when animals are slaughtered, offal is put out for them; and when caravans are taxed by the excise, one-twentieth part of their pickled meats and dried fish is taken as customs toll and set out among the volcanoes for the parradiles to help themselves. This is a very ancient custom, and the parradiles are well content with it, I think.”

“Does no one ever complain about having to give up food to them—perhaps in a bad year for the harvest?” Maddalena suggested. There was a tantalizing half-formed idea at the edge of her awareness; she was desperately afraid it might vanish before it became clear.

“Oh, people may grumble,” Saikmar shrugged. “But I don’t believe they would ever withhold the food. Is it not better this way than in the southland, where parradiles are likely to steal your farmstock without permission?”

“It sounds as though men and parradiles have achieved a working agreement,”

Maddalena said. And here was the idea, full-blown in her mind! She almost jumped to her feet with excitement.

“Saikmar! Is there any reason why from mutual tolerance men and parradiles should not advance to being *allies*?”

“What?”

“The parradile helped me—” She caught herself; her story was not that it had found her lost in the snow, but that it had carried her from the southland by divine inspiration, and she didn’t want that tale investigated too closely. She covered her slip of the tongue. “Helped you and me both, carrying us down from its lair to the sanctuary. In our turn we helped it by giving warmth, shelter, and food. Plainly this is a beast capable of high feelings even as far as gratitude. Why should we not try and tame it completely, so that when spring comes it will carry us back to Carrig?”

Saikmar closed his eyes and swayed a little where he sat. The idea of such an enormous change was altogether outside his mental range. He said faintly, “No!”

“Why not?” Maddalena pressed.

“No! The parradile is a noble animal—to debase it to a kind of flying graat would be unworthy...”

His words tailed away.

*Graat... ?* Lines from *The Ballad of Red Sloin* came back to him unbidden, and he remembered his thoughts as he kept watch the night before the fatal king-hunt which saw Belfeor usurp power in Carrig. There had once, according to that ballad, been another clan, Clan Graat. He had reasoned then that, since all the other clan-totems were wild and savage beasts, there might have been a time when the graat was too, before it became the standard meat- and pack-animal over the known world.

So change of that sort was at least not unprecedented. Yet he could not escape the idea that it would be degrading to the parradile. He said so.

“Has the foul Belfeor not degraded the parradile?” Maddalena countered. “Did you not say yourself that the parradile must have taken refuge here in the Arctic because Belfeor’s men had driven his kind out of the Smoking Hills?”

Saikmar nodded, his mouth working a little. Maddalena saw she had made an impression, and hurried on.

“Then why should not men and parradiles work together to regain their stolen rights?”

Saikmar sighed. He said after a pause, “When you put it like that, it seems most reasonable. Yet—how? What could one fugitive man and one fugitive parradile do to overthrow Belfeor, his cronies, and those dishonorable folk in Carrig who doubtless by now have followed Ambrus into his service?”

An excellent question! To conceal the fact that as yet she had not thought so far, Maddalena countered with another.

“Is there a chance of finding other parradiles near here? How many were there in the Smoking Hills?”



“Few. Always few. Though parradiles elsewhere breed big litters and multiply rapidly, those near Carrig bear many of their young dead—why is not known. Some have claimed that parradiles too lie under a curse of the gods, but this I’ve never brought myself to believe.”

To Maddalena the reason was obvious: the high background radiation in the Smoking Hills, due to the rich deposits of high-number elements which had doubtless attracted Belfeor. Presumably some mechanism of natural selection was at work, favoring strains with especially high resistance. Perhaps also the parradile who had befriended them was unique—a million-to-one mutation of exceptional intelligence. She would have to assume so until the facts were proved otherwise. She pondered for a while, and suddenly slapped her knee. It had become blindingly clear in an instant.

“Listen, Saikmar!” she said urgently. “I think I see a way in which even one parradile might help you to win back Carrig!”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



To the southland city of Dayomar, winter came bringing not storm and snow, like Carrig’s winter, but a succession of miserable drizzles and fogs. If snow did fall, it was barely more than sleet, and instead of whitening over the dirty streets and the dull, interchangeable houses it merely made the puddles deeper and the people wetter.

Galactic Agent Slee had been based in Dayomar since the start of his tour of duty, the best part of eight years ago. He had expected to adjust to the climate along with everything else, but he still kept falling victim to the midwinter depression he had felt the first time he saw the city roofed by dank dripping clouds and walled in by thin gray mists.

That apart, he had adjusted well to his role, and it was rare for him to daydream of other, more civilized worlds. He enjoyed all the luxuries that his adopted homeland could afford... and after all, his tenure would not last forever.

Lately, however, his comfortable, undemanding, even pleasant existence had been shattered by a succession of rude intrusions beyond his control. Northward at Carrig, in particular, he was certain something had gone badly amiss, but he had no news he could trust, and would get no more until the winter snows were melted from the mountain passes and caravans could once more get through. If there were going to be any caravans next summer. Since this mysterious Belfeor took over, merchant after merchant who ordinarily conducted profitable trade with the northern city had come back red with fury at the arrogance of the new rulers and swearing to turn elsewhere.

On top of that, there was the problem of the disappearance of the cruiser supposed to be bringing him a substitute agent, the girl Maddalena Santos. It wasn't unknown for a ship to vanish without trace—an overoptimistic pilot, for instance, might return to real space too deep inside the planet's atmosphere, causing overheating and possibly explosion—but that had been Gus Langenschmidt's cruiser, and Gus didn't *allow* mistakes like that!

Still, it could have been accident. Failing evidence to the contrary, it was accident; no stretch of the imagination could encompass the idea of the natives detecting a Patrol cruiser, let alone shooting it down. However that might be, he was still left without the help he'd asked for. Commandant Brzeska had been regretful, but firm. He positively could not spare another operative. Maddalena Santos had only been available because he was thinking of dismissing her back to Earth, and now he was deprived not only of her services but of a complete cruiser-crew into the bargain, including his most experienced Patrol Major. Until someone had been found to take over Langenschmidt's beat—covering a dozen systems—and another cruiser had been requisitioned from Earth, Slee was just going to have to manage with local resources.

Except that he didn't *have* any resources.

And from every side throughout the summer new fragments had come to him to be added to the picture he was compiling of events in Carrig. The usurper Belfeor and his gang of bandits—at least, people said they behaved like bandits rather than civilized folk, and it was no news that there were gangs of nomad outlaws at large on the eastern plains of this continent—Belfeor's men, whoever they were, were changing things left, right, and center. It was reported that the citizens of Carrig were being forced to work some kind of diggings among the Smoking Hills, and this fitted all too well with Slee's theory concerning the discovery of gunpowder. Hence, in another year or two at most, one could look for Carrig to launch wars of aggression against its neighboring city-states and probably establish supremacy on the western side of the continent. It was one thing to have recognized the eventual probability of such a process, as predicted by experts in social geography, but something else altogether to find yourself living squarely on the likeliest line of march.

Additionally, there was the risk that if Belfeor really did treat his subordinates so abominably, one of them might defect and sell the secret of explosives to his opponents, which would make the wars much bloodier and far less conclusive.

The prospect, in general, was even gloomier than a winter's day in this depressing city.

He was pondering the situation for the uncountable time one afternoon as he plodded down a broad but muddy and rutted street on the way back from a meeting with a wealthy merchant who wanted to purchase the "contract of one of Slee's best hetairas and set her up in a house of her own. The negotiations had been lengthy and led nowhere, and he was not in the best of tempers as he marched homeward on his platform-soled wooden shoes, six inches high. They had to be so thick because the puddles were deceptively deep. On either side of him walked an attendant holding the poles of a sort of awning that served instead of an umbrella.

Being servant-class, the attendants had no shoes, and their bare feet squelched through the mud with irregular sucking noises.

They were passing the porch-sheltered doorway of an empty house when a voice called out, "Slee!"

Startled, he halted and spun round. Out of the shadows jumped a sturdy beggar—a common sight in Dayomar—clad in filthy, wet rags smeared with mud, but with fine white teeth gleaming in an obsequious smile. Putting out his alms bowl, the beggar began to bow and cringe, uttering singsong cries in the traditional beggar's manner.

"Most noble and exalted, the fortune that smiles on me today is as though the sun had shone at midnight and swept away a great darkness! Your honor will remember without doubt, for his memory is as all his other attributes, most wonderful and perfect, that this humble beggar's sister Melisma, daughter of Yull and Mazia, was in his service. Will your honor take pity on a man who does not prosper in the beggar's trade, who would acquire some new skill and serve loyally in the household of a generous master?"

One of Slee's attendants made to beat the beggar out of the way with the pole of the awning. Slee stopped him with a curt gesture.

"Melisma's brother, are you?" he said. "Follow, then, and I'll find some place for you—in the kitchen, perhaps."

"Your honor is the kindest of men!" the beggar yelled, and fell in behind, cavorting with joy like a dancer in ecstasy.

"And what the hell are *you* doing disguised as a beggar on the streets of Dayomar?" Slee demanded, falling into a soft chair. "Don't worry about being overheard; these are my personal quarters and any servants who prowl around know they're earning a whipping, so they keep away."

"Hmm!" Langenschmidt scowled through the steam rising from the hot bowl of chay he had been given. "Sounds as though you've adapted almost too thoroughly to the local customs! Never mind that, though. Well, I've had the devil of a time getting here—it took me almost two months, and more than once I was sure I wasn't going to make it. First off, do you know there's a ship in orbit around this planet, and possibly more than one?"

Slee jerked forward in his chair.

"That's right. The moment my cruiser emerged from subspace they shot us down... just in case you were wondering what had happened to us. Fortunately I was already in the landing-craft we were dropping to put down Maddalena Santos, and I was able to jet clear before the cruiser blew up. They tried a second shot and gashed the hull of the landing-craft—probably thought they'd disabled it—but I managed to duck into atmosphere, with the tail-edge of the gash blowing off so much red-hot metal I guess it looked as though we were on fire. At any rate they didn't shoot again. Maddalena baled out somewhere in the Arctic; she might conceivably have made it to a village somewhere, but even if she did she must be

snowed in for the winter, and I'm afraid the chances are all against it, because that's such a sparsely populated region. It's a terrible waste; I don't know what impression you got of the girl from Pavel Brzeska, but under her conceited façade I think there was the raw material for a competent Corps agent.

"Anyhow, I dropped the landing-craft in the Western Ocean. I baled out myself as I was crossing the coast. It was night, luckily, and I don't think anyone would have taken the ship for more than a very bright meteorite. I stole some native clothing and destroyed my own gear, and ever since then I've been begging my way to Dayomar to link up with you. I got here this morning. They put me in jail once on the way, and whipped me out of town once, and I'm hungry and I'm bone-weary and a couple of times I've been very sick, not having any medicines with me... Sorry. I'm rambling. Thanks for catching on so quickly when I spoke to you."

"Well, you did call me Slee, didn't you? And nobody in Dayomar knows me by that name. But this ship in orbit that shot you down! That means—"

"That means your clever theory about someone inventing gunpowder is so much comet-dust. Belfeor who wields the lightning is a man from off the planet with an energy gun. And more than likely we've got another Slaveworld case on our hands, with the population of Carrig being exploited to mine the deposits of radioactives in the Smoking Hills. Right?"

Slee got to his feet. "Communicator!" he said.

It was local night on the airless world of the Corps base, but Commandant Brzeska came to answer, sleepy-eyed.

His instant reaction on recognizing Langenschmidt was amazed delight, but it took only the baldest outline of the major's story to start him looking grave.

When he had heard Langenschmidt out, and Slee had added some details, which had seemed insignificant but took on a different complexion once they'd assumed Belfeor came from another planet, Brzeska nodded thoughtfully.

"We can take action on this, all right," he said. "And no bones about legality or illegality either. Shooting down a Patrol cruiser—that's cooked them properly. Gus, I'll take this straight to be computed, of course, but in the meantime do you have any suggestions where they might hail from?"

"Most likely from a world that's seriously short of radioactive elements, and not wealthy enough to turn over to fusion reactors instead of fission. Somewhere like Cyclops, for example."

"I'll follow that up," Brzeska nodded. "If you found one ship in orbit, the chances are good that they have a second one as well and take turns in ferrying out the ore. I'll have all the subspace trace records checked and see if we can establish a line-of-flight for them. It's bound to take a while to fix their origin beyond doubt, but from now on this gets five-star priority. Slee, they've had a year and a half to dig in—How bad a mess have they made of the local culture?"

Slee hunched forward. "Well, my latest news dates back to before Gus's arrival, of course; just about the same time the hill passes were snowed up and the caravans

quit for the season. Up till then I think they'd been moderately careful. Probably they bribed as much as they coerced. But once they realized they'd wrecked a Patrol ship they may very well have thrown caution to the winds and decided to ship as much ore out as they could, regardless of how brutal they had to be to get it."

"You mean they'd be tempted to overreach themselves because they're under pressure. Very likely. In which case the locality should be absolutely resonating with subspace drive-traces. All right then—unless there's anything else very urgent, I'll start the wheels turning at once, and you'd better get busy drafting a plan to ease Belfeor off the planet with minimum disturbance for the natives. It won't be simple, but we must avoid a spectacular show of force at all costs. Gus, how about you? Want me to have you picked up?"

Langenschmidt shook his head tiredly. "My crew's gone," he said after a pause. "I shan't feel up to going back on the beat with a new team—there'd be too much heartbreak in it. I'll stay here. I don't doubt Slee can use all the help that's available. And when the affair in Carrig is straightened out, I'll claim my pay and retire. I'm well overdue, as you know."

"As you like," Brzeska said neutrally. "And—good luck."

It was twenty-seven eternal days before he called back, but when he did the news he had was excellent.

"Your inspired guess was right, Gus!" he exclaimed. "They're from Cyclops. It's a predatory sort of world, just the kind of place where a scheme like this might be hatched. Over the past year and a half someone has been shipping in high-grade radioactives, claiming that they'd made a strike in an uninhabited system. So far six cargoes have found their way on to the market. It looks as though they're deliberately keeping the price up by releasing a little at a time. But they've been making so many flights from Fourteen that the neighborhood practically has ruts in its subspace continuum. We've monitored two flights in the past three weeks. This implies that they're caching the stuff somewhere nearer to Cyclops. Perhaps they're planning to pull out some time soon and just continue to let a flow from the cache trickle through whenever they need more money."

"Who are they?" Langenschmidt demanded. "Is there anyone—uh—immovable behind them?"

"Good point," Brzeska nodded. "The way things are set up on Cyclops, I wouldn't have been surprized to find they had high-level government connivance. Luckily, though, they appear to be a gang of adventurers in business on their own account. About a hundred of them, as far as we've been able to establish up to now."

"That fits with the reports I've had," Slee confirmed. "Have you any idea how they found out about this planet? We don't exactly publicize the resources of ZRP's."

"We're not certain yet, but we're on the track of a failed Corps probationer called Meard, who dropped out of sight at just about the right time. There's no record of his death or of his having emigrated, but he hasn't been seen by anyone for the best part of two years, and the last sighting of him we've been able to confirm was in the

company of a man who answers the description of Belfeor.” Brzeska turned over some notes in front of him. “Ah! Here’s the answer to something you’ve probably been wondering about. Do you know how they’re getting the radioactives off the planet?”

“We had been arguing about that,” Slee agreed. “They’d hardly dare to set down ships in plain sight. Are they using Carrig gliders, by any chance?”

“They are indeed. We have a very well screened robot photo-satellite orbiting over the Great Eastern Desert. The ore comes in by gliders fitted with some sort of crude rocket-assist, and a ferry lands to fetch it when the natives are safely out of sight again.” The commandant leaned back. “Now you can tell me something. How are we going to shift Belfeor without the natives guessing that there’s been outside interference?”

“The only idea we’ve come up with so far is that it *must* look to the people of Carrig as though the forces of nature—in other words, the gods—are working against Belfeor. We can certainly foment unrest in the city even if it doesn’t yet exist, and my bet is that it does. And then... Well, there are some fine healthy volcanoes in the Smoking Hills.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Still smarting from the contempt he had read in the eyes of those who had spoken with him a few minutes before, Ambrus—who could not call himself “son of Knole” any longer, having disowned his clan—entered the private apartments of the regent of Carrig, in the base of the high watchtower topping the fortress. Once he had come and gone here like a man with authority... and was. Had not his own father then been the lord of the city? Now he had to creep about furtively, expecting any moment that a voice from a shadow would demand what he was doing here.

The shame of it was like a knife in his vitals.

Every day that passed was making him more and more regret the decision he had taken. He had thought he was being clever and farsighted to throw in his lot with the newcomers. Did not Belfeor and his companions generate marvels as freely as a knotty torch threw out sparks? Their miraculous weapons! The awe-inspiring machines they had constructed among the Smoking Hills! He had been so certain he was right that even when his father threw himself to his death from the parapet of the tower, he had felt no guilt—only pity for a rigid old man who could not adapt to a changing world.

Now, however...

He had been hopeful an hour or two back, when it was expected the newcomers to be sensible of that great sacrifice, to make him welcome among them and shower

him with gifts that might tempt others to follow his example. Instead, to a man, and to a woman, which was even worse—in Carrig a noble was not accustomed to being patronized by women!—they scorned him, ordered him out of their way, and ultimately had grown to ignore him. He was utterly alone. No one would befriend him anymore.

He had been hopeful an hour or two back, when it was reported to him that nobles of his former clan, Clan Parradile, wanted to talk to him. He thought perhaps they were relenting of their harsh treatment, willing to show mercy and take him back. Not at all. Although they had addressed him with stiff politeness, their respect was sarcastic and he could read disdain in their eyes. They would not have exchanged a word with him but for compelling necessity.

“This year,” said Sir Gurton Knole who had inherited the chieftaincy of the clan, “the first new moon of spring falls late.” He was Ambrus’ uncle, the late Sir Bavis’ younger brother, and once they had been friends and enjoyed cousinly affection between them.

Not anymore. His manner was as cold as mountain ice.

Ambrus nodded warily. He had paid scant attention to the schooling he’d been given in the priestly business of his clan, but the humblest peasant knew that the spring new moon fell late, early or in between in a three-yearly cycle.

“We have a new ruler,” Sir Gurton said, and pulled a sour face. “Last year preparations for the king-hunt were put in hand as usual, and without even going forth in a glider he killed the king from the ground with his lightning bolts. The contest was a mockery. Still, the forms were observed after a fashion.”

Ambrus remembered that shameful occasion well. He had still been convinced of his own cleverness, though, and had laughed at the old men’s forebodings. This year, he was not so sure any longer.

“But now,” Sir Gurton resumed, “we have sent many times to Belfeor concerning the king-hunt, and we have had no reply. He has ordered the would-be contenders to work in the Smoking Hills and forget their glider-practice—which many of them had done anyway, of course, thinking that this year Belfeor will once more stand on the ground and despitefully cut the new king from the sky. Men are saying—and this, Ambrus, I must emphasize, because although you have disowned us you were born into Clan Parradile and no man can escape the obligations of his birth—men are saying that Belfeor is mocking the gods as our ancestors did before the Fall which drove us into the unkind lands of the far north. They say further, and I do not disagree, that if he goes on thus the gods will be angry and will smite the sun again, so that men will be burned from the face of the earth and this time without survivors.”

Hearing these terrifying words delivered in so grave a tone, Ambrus was alarmed. He said, “What do you want of me?”

“Go to Belfeor. Ask him what arrangements have been made for the king-hunt this year. He will not answer our inquiries, but perhaps *you*”—Sir Gurton’s voice was harsh with contempt—“perhaps you can gain his ear.”

That was the errand on which Ambrus found himself bent.

This spring promised to be unusually warm; already all snow had gone from Carrig territory, and the first caravans had come from the south two weeks previously—half the size of the kind that Trader Heron had once brought, but he was dead, first victim of Belfeor’s rapacity. The heat, though, was not why Ambrus found himself sweating as he knocked on the wall beside the door of the regent’s private office. Once it had been his father’s.

He could hear voices behind the door, but he had to knock again more loudly before Belfeor uttered his sour invitation to come in. He stepped into the room.

With Belfeor were Pargetty, the fair, nervous man who had been his companion since the earliest days, and the woman Yanna, with her brilliant red mouth and her eyes like chips of rock, who had led the rest of Belfeor’s folk from their presumptive bandit lair in the mountains to install themselves in Carrig. Certain documents were piled on the table at which they sat, and they seemed to have been interrupted in a discussion of these.

*What is it?*“ Belfeor snapped. *It had better be important—we don’t like to be interrupted.*“

Ambrus squared his shoulders, trying to emulate the dignity of his late father, and looked the usurper straight in the eye.

“I am sent by my former clan, that of the Parradile,” he said. “I am charged to discover what preparations you have made for the king-hunt, as law and custom require.”

“Go away and stop bothering me,” Belfeor grunted, and turned his back on Ambrus.

Nervous as always, Pargetty cleared his throat. He said, “Uh—Belfeor, that’s not wise, you know. Out of deference to local tradition you really ought to…” His voice tailed away.

“There won’t be a king-hunt this year,” Belfeor said. Ambrus took half a pace forward, unable to believe his ears.

“What?” he burst out.

“You heard me,” Belfeor retorted. “What is there for anyone to hunt? Those damned parradiles were interfering with our work, so back in the fall I had every last one of them cleared out of the hills and either killed or sent packing. Go away and forget this superstitious nonsense.

“Look out!” cried Yanna in alarm. He jerked around in his chair just in time to see Ambrus, face twisted with rage and terror, raise clawed hands to close on his throat. He jumped to his feet and snatched an energy gun from his belt.

“Out!” he barked. “Unless you want to fry like your precious parradiles!”

Utterly broken, Ambrus turned and crept from the room.

The rest of the day, his mind kept ringing like a gong with reverberations of



panic. What would become of Carrig if the ordained rituals were forgotten? He was not a very intelligent person—he had taken a long while to realize that, but now he had admitted the truth of his father’s charge that he was unfit for the regency. He could not even organize his own life successfully, let alone guide the fate of a populous city. And his father had also been right to say that a man could not break free of the duties the gods imposed—was that not the very cause of his own downfall, abandoning the clan into which the gods had seen fit to have him born?

Similarly, obligations were laid upon the city as a whole, chief among which was the king-hunt. To discard them was to flout the gods. And everyone knew how mankind had been driven from a fairer world because they had been arrogant.

The gods’ vengeance might be delayed, but it was certain. He had aided and abetted Belfeor—how could he hope to escape their wrath?

He made up his mind before the evening what he was going to do. Already not only the members of the two small caravans, but also many peasants from the nearby villages, had come into Carrig for the time of festival. The peasants were simple, uneducated folk who could never quite get the calendar straight. To them, the advent of spring was a good enough measure to fix the king-hunt by, and in years when the new moon fell late, they would turn up a week or two beforehand and be glad to pass their time idly in the city after the difficulties of winter. They had been less touched than the city-folk by Belfeor’s interference, for the common food-supply depended on their sowing and gathering. Aside from a regular quota of laborers that they also had to find for Belfeor’s mines—at which they had merely grumbled, as they would have at a new tax—they had hardly noticed the impact of the usurpers. They were used to doing what the lords of Carrig told them. The lords of Carrig had made their life safe from bandits: soldiers from Carrig could be called on to hunt down wild beasts threatening their stock and their children, and if their lands were ruined by volcanic eruptions they could appeal to the lords of Carrig for help and housing—Why should they question the wisdom of the latest in the line?

But the news that Belfeor had discontinued the king-hunt, had even driven the parradiles away from the Smoking Hills: *that* would stir them, he felt sure!

Accordingly, that evening he did something he had not dared to do in many months: he ventured out into the city itself. He had to go alone. One by one, even his personal servants had slipped away since his father killed himself, until any service he could command was on Belfeor’s sufferance, usually backed up with the threat of an energy gun.

Oh, by the gods! How Carrig had been changed! They had not forgotten him, as he half-hoped they might. Even the children on the streets knew him, and ran after him shouting his name and flinging mud. Before he had gone a mile he knew his purpose was defeated, and if he persisted he might well be waylaid in some dark alley and beaten to death. He turned to flee from a gang of children who were hurling not merely mud but stones also, and blinded by some ordure that had hit him in the face he ran headlong into a man emerging from a tavern. “Steady now!” the stranger said, catching Ambrus to save him from falling. He barked at the children, telling them to give over and go home.

“But that’s Ambrus the traitor!” their leader shrilled. The stranger detached his

arm from Ambrus' grip and caught the boy by the ear. He said, "Did you never hear the proverb, 'Whoever durst call me accursed came off the worst'? Get you gone before I take the flat of my sword to your backside!"

Clawing dirt from his eyes, Ambrus saw that his rescuer was a big man, powerful in spite of having gray hair and a lined face. Though the gang of children included several in their teens and numbered twenty to his one, they hesitated and finally turned away. As far as the street corner they kept looking back, but the stranger outstared them and eventually they disappeared.

"I cannot thank you enough, sir," Ambrus said humbly. "Yet I suppose they cannot be blamed. Doubtless their parents taught them to call me traitor." The words were bitter in his mouth, but he had to utter them.

"So you're Ambrus, are you?" the gray-haired man said. "Yes, I've heard such talk about you myself. But 'traitor' is a hard name to call a man, and I know little of the cause for it, being a newcomer to this city who came in "with one of the spring caravans. Treachery is something I'd want to see proof of before I'd join a crowd hurling stones. Yes indeed! Tell me, though—if the townsfolk think thus harshly of you, what brings you out among them alone? Are you not of a noble family, with servants and men-at-arms to protect you?"

Astonished that he was able to make such free admissions to a man he had never met before, Ambrus explained his plight.

"No king-hunt!" The gray-haired man spoke in a tone of amazement, but Ambrus could have sworn that underneath he detected an inexplicable hint of delight. Why should a man like this be pleased at the news? By his manner and clothing Ambrus guessed him to be a prosperous merchant, and he should have been dismayed at missing the chance of fat profits. There was no time, though, to speculate on this mystery; his rescuer was turning back to the tavern he had just left, insisting that Ambrus come along.

Ambrus protested feebly that if he was taken into a tavern some ruffian would certainly attack him. The other brushed his objections aside.

"Not in here, they won't! Most of my friends who came in with the same caravan are here. They'll protect you if you need protection. Come along!"

And he dragged Ambrus inside.

It was as he had promised. Though some of the tavern's clients screamed with rage as they recognized the new arrival and jumped up with the intention of going for him, a signal from the gray-haired man was enough to produce for each would-be attacker two others from among the customers to discourage them. Ambrus wondered who in the world his new acquaintance might be, that so many men would unquestioningly obey his instructions.

"Up there on the table!" the gray-haired man commanded, gesturing. "Tell this company what you have just told me!"

Quaking, but determined to put a bold face on things, Ambrus complied. He made no secret of his own former allegiance to Belfeor, but claimed that he had had no intention of abetting sacrilege. He said he had taken it for granted that if the

usurper had seized power legally—by killing the king—he would continue to uphold the ancient customs. Now he had learned about the parradiles being driven from the Smoking Hills; he had repented, and wanted nothing more to do with Belfeor’s gang.

A solemn hush followed his statement. It was broken by the gray-haired man, who clapped his hands and declared that they had heard an honest admission of error. Reluctant nods came from all around the tavern, and someone called down the curse of all the gods on Belfeor, provoking a roar of approval. To show his sincerity Ambrus fervently echoed the wish.

“Good!” said the gray-haired man. “But I’m afraid this won’t be the end of it for you, friend Ambrus! You’re in too deep simply to wash your hands of the dirt you’ve picked up. Still, your involvement may perhaps be turned to some advantage. Let’s take counsel as to how you may best exploit any confidence Belfeor still reposes in you.”

Puzzled, Ambrus said, “Sir, you say you’re a stranger in this city—What makes you take so keen an interest in our affairs?”

“I’m a man who hates injustice where it’s found,” the gray-haired man answered. “Sit down, have a drink, and let’s talk of what needs to be done.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



“If you hadn’t got out of the way in time,” the woman Yanna said, “I swear that barbarian would have strangled you!”

“Ambrus?” Belfeor leaned back in his chair. “Ambrus is a silly little coward. Not like his father, who was in charge here when Pargetty and I first arrived. Old Sir Bavis had guts and to spare. They said a lot of dirty things about how he’d fixed the king-hunt to keep himself in his job for the previous eighteen years, but no one ever called him a coward and lived to repeat it. He even tried to give me orders—me! Of course, when he found out I wasn’t impressed by his threats of divine vengeance he chucked himself off the tower, but you can’t imagine Ambrus having even that sort of misplaced courage, can you?”

“I think you’re leading us into real trouble,” Pargetty said in a hesitant tone.

“Trouble?” Belfeor echoed sarcastically. “What trouble? Everything’s going as smooth as oil! We’re getting enough ore out to—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Pargetty interrupted. “You may laugh at the idea of divine vengeance, but to these people it’s something absolutely real. And the way you’re flouting local superstitions—”

Belfeor snorted. “You and your damned Corps indoctrination! Next you’ll be

telling me that the Corps is right to leave these barbarian worlds to their own devices.”

Pargetty flushed. He said defensively, “You know how the Corps treated me! And it was because I stood up and said what I thought about their attitude to the ZRP’s, leaving dozens of habitable worlds to the mercy of a bunch of mud-grubbing barbarians. But they’re still a factor to be reckoned with, and there’s no point in deliberately courting extra problems, is there? You’re willing enough to listen to me when I’m talking about untapped resources on this planet, but when I try and give you advice about the people you spit in my eye!”

His voice had risen to a raucous pitch. Startled at this from the normally diffident Pargetty, Belfeor shrugged.

“Okay, so tell us about the people!”

Pargetty drew a deep breath. “Look! Of course it’s true that thanks to the Corps these people have been cut off from Galactic civilization and reverted to such a primitive level you can’t really regard them as human, but even so they do have their own hopes and beliefs and ambitions and aspirations, and they have to be taken into account.”

“Hark at the preacher!” Belfeor sneered. “I never knew you cared so much about these savages, Meard!”

“Don’t use that name on this world!” Yanna broke in. It was her turn to sound nervous. She glanced around as though expecting someone to have overheard.

“You stay out of this,” Belfeor snapped. “Our friend Pargetty was lecturing us about the natives. Let him finish—he hasn’t made a worthwhile point yet, and he’d better if he doesn’t want to waste my time.”

“Think about our situation!” Pargetty exclaimed. “There are a hundred and two of us in a city of seventeen thousand-odd. Already the peasants from the surrounding area are pouring in by the villageful for the spring festival. How are they going to react to your canceling the king-hunt? We’re outnumbered a hundred and seventy-to-one even without the villagers! And what about the people who’ve come with the spring caravans? They’re bound to be angry and disappointed—the king-hunt is what draws them here, and they won’t like to be cheated of their chance to trade. Haven’t you thought of all that, Belfeor?”

Belfeor negligently drew the energy gun with which he had threatened Ambrus. “There’s enough charge in one of these to fry a hundred and seventy people,” he said. “If they stand still long enough and don’t run away in panic as they’ve done up till now! Damnation, Pargetty, what’s made you change your tune like this? Were you lying when you said if I made myself legal ruler of Carrig I could run the show without opposition?”

“Didn’t you pay attention to anything I told you?” stormed Pargetty. “You made yourself ‘regent’ of Carrig, not ‘ruler’! As far as the natives are concerned, the lords of this city are only viceroys for the gods, and to prove that the gods still approve of them being in charge they have to perform various rituals and symbolic actions, like killing the parradile. They see themselves as existing in a universal nexus of divine forces, and they expect their rulers to be bound by the laws they themselves

respect.”

Belfeor gazed at him coldly. “Hah! This is a far cry from what you told us while we were planning the operation, isn’t it? You insisted the scheme was foolproof; you said the natives would blindly obey anyone who went through the initial rigmarole to make things look legal!”

Pargetty slumped back in his chair. “I thought it was obvious that you couldn’t change the people’s superstitious nature overnight,” he retorted. “Don’t you understand anything about the primitive mentality?”

Yanna said slowly, “Belfeor, I think Pargetty has a very important point there. You ought to do as he says. After all, he’s been right all along the line so far.”

Belfeor slapped his open hand on the table before him. He said, “Now you listen to me! Pargetty, you asked if I’d given any thought to our situation. I’ll ask you the same question. Have you forgotten that those stupid fools aboard the *Wolfshark* shot down a ship? We don’t know what it was—it fell into atmosphere and burned up—but what else is it likely to have been except a Patrol cruiser, here to rotate an agent or maybe even to drop someone off to replace Heron? Sure, we can rely to some extent on the Corps’s resources being overstretched, so they probably couldn’t spare a ship to investigate immediately, but they’re bound to turn up sooner or later.

“Before that happens, I want, you want, we all want to stockpile enough radioactives to keep us in luxury the rest of our lives. That’s the purpose of the operation, isn’t it? What’s more, we need enough in hand to finance any legal fight we may get involved in if someone opens his big mouth later on and they find out where our ore-strike was actually made. That means we *have* to drive the natives and keep up the output from the mines. We’ve just about broken even so far; having to buy a second ship used up our first year’s profit—or hadn’t that occurred to you? Once we get clear of here, with a decent cache of radioactives in the home system that we can draw on as it suits us, we’re laughing! We can lie till we’re blue about where it’s coming from; we can live in style, and with luck we’ll even be able to afford longevity treatments. That’s what you’re after, isn’t it? You missed out on your chance to earn a .century of extra life in the Corps, and this is your only way to recoup! So why in the galaxy do you want to waste time on some lunatic superstition when what we have to do is mine and ship, mine and ship, every possible minute until we’re forced to quit?”

“Fixing up the king-hunt to keep the natives happy isn’t wasting time!” Pargetty flared. “It’s—it’s insurance!”

“Go and fix it, then! You’re no use to me in your present state of dithering. Put on your little show for the locals—it’s about all you’re fit for. Though I’ve no idea where you’re going to find a parradile for the hunt. I had them cleared out of the hills; I told you.”

“You should have consulted Pargetty before you did that,” Yanna said. “What was the point of it, anyway?”

“They were such a damned nuisance!” Belfeor rapped. “They interfered with our prospectors—you could hardly walk into a cave in the hills without finding

one—and what’s more they’ve been bleeding the local farmers white, eating about a fifth of their produce. Parasites would be a better name for them than parradiles!”

Pargetty looked pale and sick. “Oh, you’ve probably already cooked us,” he said, getting to his feet. “You’ve blasted local tradition wide open like the insensitive idiot you are. I’ll go and arrange a king-hunt with Sir Gurton Knole. Maybe that’ll give us a breathing-space. But I won’t make any promises. My guess is that your stupidity and incompetence have made certain of a rebellion already!”

Belfeor was so surprised at this display of spirit from the normally inoffensive Pargetty that he was still gaping wordlessly when the door of the room slammed shut.

“Good news,” Gus Langenschmidt said quietly into the communicator.

“Tell me, then,” Brzeska invited.

“I’m speaking from a tavern in Carrig that we’ve more or less taken over. Slee fixed it up for us to come in with a caravan from Dayomar. The way he organized adequate cover on short notice for the whole sixty of us was an absolute model of efficiency, and I think he deserves a merit entry on his record for it. We came in as a group of mercenary soldiers to guard the caravan; he planted a bandit-scare in Dayomar and within days it got to the point where no caravan master could have put his show on the road without an escort. Then, of course, Slee offered our services, and there we were.

“We’ve been here about twenty days now. It’s very lucky that this turned out to be a year when the spring new moon falls late; we’ve had a chance to take proper stock of the situation, and it’s just what we hoped for. I don’t know whether Belfeor realizes, though if he is relying on a failed Corps probationer for advice he damned well ought to, but he’s sitting on a ticking bomb. He’s disregarded local custom so flagrantly even the turncoats who threw in their lot with his gang have had second thoughts. The other evening I walked out of the tavern and found Ambrus being stoned by a gang of kids. Know who I mean?”

Brzeska nodded. “The renegade son of the former regent, correct?”

“That’s him. Well, he’d just had it from Belfeor’s own lips that there wasn’t going to be a king-hunt this year, and he was scared out of his wits, scared enough to come down into the city at the risk of his life to spread the news. So I put him up on a table in the tavern and made sure that the most gossipy clients heard the story right away.

“That was precisely what we needed. The city’s on the boil now. Everyone’s just waiting for the night of the new moon; then, if Belfeor doesn’t call the king-hunt as he’s meant to, they’ll go and pull him into little bits, energy guns notwithstanding. It’s going to be a bloody mess, but it means we can keep our interference to a minimum.

“Possibly it was hearing the reaction to Ambrus’ announcement which changed Belfeor’s mind—I don’t know. Anyway, a day or two later Sir Gurton Knole, the current head of Clan Parradile, was instructed to organize a king-hunt after all. But

it's too late for that. It'll be a farce, and everyone knows it. Traditionally, the best young pilots from all the clans practice for months on end in their gliders before going out to shoot the king down with great big pointed darts. They're fired from a sort of crossbow arrangement, the bow part being fixed and the bowstrings being made of the dried elastic juice of a local tree, called kowtschook. Look into the etymology of that if you get time—it's an interesting survival.

“After what happened last year, when Belfeor just stood on a handy hill, looking inappropriately bored, and shot down a parradile with his energy gun, the young men are understandably not enthusiastic. Instead of spending their time practicing for the hunt, they've preferred to plot against Belfeor—when they were allowed a rest from the mines in the Smoking Hills. For all I know, there's a local underground resistance as well as the one we're whipping up. In fact I'm sure there must be.

“Speaking of the mines, by the way, I managed to plant a couple of agents there, and they say there's no doubt at all of what the gang are up to. They have crushers, grinders, sedimentation apparatus, all kinds of prospecting and mining gear, which they've illegally imported. They're refining the radioactives down to about 88 percent pure and flying them out by glider to the place you told us about. I've been wondering whether you could locate their cache. It must be pretty close to Cyclops, probably even in their home system if they have an asteroid belt, which seems like the logical hiding place, and by this time it's probably big enough to give a blip on a mass-detector. They're refining about four or five tons a day, and that's a hell of a lot of heavy elements.”

“We're taking care of that,” Brzeska said. “As soon as we can detach a cruiser from somewhere else, it's going to scout the Cyclops system. As you say, by now the cache must be pretty conspicuous.”

“Excellent.”

“How about the—ah—the *divine intervention*?”

“All in hand,” Langenschmidt said. “That's why I planted those agents in the mines. Half Carrig will probably be knocked down by the eruptions, but Belfeor won't be among the people who get up afterward.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



No matter how widely publicized, a denial never catches up with a rumor. Gus Langenschmidt watched with satisfaction, during the days that followed, how that ancient precept was being proved all over again in Carrig.

Once having allowed Ambrus to put into circulation the original story that there was to be no king-hunt, Belfeor had made certain that even those who most dearly

desired to see him return to conformity with the obligations of a regent, scoffed at the parody of a hunt that was being organized this year. It was clear that the usurper was acting under duress, not from a proper sense of his duty toward the gods, and consequently the most ignorant and docile of the peasants who had massed in the city for the festival decided that he was no longer the lawful lord of Carrig, but a tyrant and blasphemer to be defied at all costs. The city-folk, of course, had had two full years to reach the same conclusion, and in every home, every tavern, every inn, the commonest toast was always to Belfeor's downfall.

Late arrivals wanting to place their usual wagers on the contenders in the king-hunt found there were no betting-tables set up; over the doors of the houses and shops there were symbols of all the clans except the clan of the invaders, who had long ago forgotten the totem Pargetty advised them to adopt; bolder spirits dipped their festival garlands in black dye and hung them out in tatters, stark sign of the city-wide mourning... and not merely mourning, but grumbling that grew louder and louder with each day that passed.

A sense of sullen resistance was abroad, until one could almost feel the foundations of the city vibrating with suppressed anger.

Other factors reinforced the universal sense of the gods', displeasure. Sited where it was, Carrig had a level of background radiation ten or twelve percent higher than the planetary average, thanks to the radioactive deposits in the volcanic range. However, the local people had developed good tolerance for it, and while the incidence of abortions was higher than in the southland, they hardly realized the fact.

Among the peasants farming the actual slopes of the Smoking Hills, though, the chances of stillborn and deformed children were unusually great. The peasants themselves generally put up with this; they were used to having to bury every second or third child before the age of a year, and anyhow their little farms could not support very large families. Moreover, in the hot southlands it was notorious that disease accounted for an equally high proportion of babies.

Despite this customary resignation to fate, there had always been a slow trickle of young married couples toward the city, in the hope of escaping the danger of bearing dead offspring. Now that they were being compelled to work in Belfeor's mines without adequate radiation shielding, the city-folk also were losing their babies, and once Langenschmidt had planted a rumor to account for this in terms of a curse from the gods, it ran through the entire territory like wildfire.

Pleased, he cast about for ways of stressing Belfeor's evil nature still further. The citizens of Carrig were much concerned about signs and portents, he remembered. Obviously it would help things along if a few suitable miracles could be arranged...

Carved in the rock at the foot of the citadel on which the temple and the fortress perched, there was an ancient statue of Larso-Veng, the god of good fortune, which was very popular with the townsfolk. It was the custom for people concluding contracts about some business venture to go to the statue and pat its plump jolly face before putting things in hand. Even foreign caravan-masters often did so, and



no barge-skipper would fail to visit the statue before shipping cargoes down-river to the coast.

The morning after Langenschmidt decided it was time for omens, the skipper and helmsman of a boat that had come specially to Carrig for the king-hunt, decided not to stay after all, since the hunt would be such a sorry farce this year, and went gloomily to touch the statue. They reached up toward its face, on which centuries of gentle stroking had put a high gloss, and discovered to their amazement that the stone cheeks were wet.

Exclaiming, they looked closer, and saw that out of the god's eyes slow tears were oozing.

The same evening a graat went mad in the marketplace. One moment it had been standing quietly under its load of cloth while its owner discussed the price of a bale of felt with a stall-holder, looking docile enough for a curious soldier, a caravan guard, to prod and pat it as though with a mind to buying it; the next instant saw it rear on its hind legs, shrieking and kicking out in all directions. It took six men to rope it and hold it still long enough for it to be killed.

Furious, the owner entirely agreed with the soldier about the reason for the graat's maddened cavorting. This whole city of Carrig was unlucky now. Had not the god of good fortune wept over the condition of the place?

Going to the never-failing well in the back courtyard of Clan Twywit's town house, to which the family always moved from its country estate for the season of the spring new moon, a brawny cook dropped her bucket twenty feet to the water and drew it up full of scarlet blood. She let it fall again, screaming, and a score of scullions, turnspits, skivvies and footmen came to see what was wrong. Gawping, they agreed among themselves that so many miracles in so short a time could indicate only one thing.

As one, they turned and stared at the high pinnacle of the watchtower atop the fortress. Belfeor was there...

One of them was deputed to take the news to Sir Malan Corrie himself, so that he should be fully aware of the serious situation.

When the stories of the omens he had organized came back in embroidered form to the tavern where Langenschmidt had established his headquarters, he was astonished and delighted to discover how word-of-mouth transmission had improved the raw material. The well in Clan Twywit's house, for example, into which he had contrived to have spilled a scarlet dye, was now reported to be full of dead bodies, murdered and thrown there during the winter by Belfeor's henchmen. People swore that the maddened graat in the marketplace had screamed curses in a human voice, damning Belfeor. And the god of good fortune had not merely had tears oozing from tiny sacs concealed in its eye-sockets; its whole expression was said to have changed from merry joviality to deepest gloom.

It sounded as though he was on the right track. With the help of his colleagues he

dreamed up another handful of similar omens and made sure that they were witnessed by the largest possible number of solid, trustworthy citizens. It was like pouring oil on a fire of damp wood.

Two days later still, with the new moon imminent, the workers in the mines mutinied. One of the overseers was tossed into an ore-crusher before the lavish use of energy guns restored order; and even then the men refused to work at more than a snail's pace until Belfeur himself came and assured them that the king-hunt would indeed take place and they would be given time off to watch it. According to Langenschmidt's two agents in the mine, Belfeur looked badly upset and kept screaming insults at his followers.

In the evening it was announced that he had sent for Sir Gurton Knole, presumably to discuss matters of ritual, but by that time Langenschmidt had played his ace of trumps. He had sent out his entire band of sixty Corps agents on a single errand: to inform as many people as possible that Belfeur had driven the parradiles out of the Smoking Hills. What then was he going to hunt this year?

Then he sat back, rubbing his hands, and waited for the usurper to tumble into the trap he had dug himself.

Last year Ambrus had still felt sure enough of himself to endure standing on this parapet around the watchtower without brooding on the fact that his father had cast himself to his death from a spot not five yards distant.

This year...

He tried to avoid the eyes of his uncle, Sir Gurton, standing beside Belfeur in his ceremonial regalia, and to concentrate instead on watching the sun set over the westerly end of the Smoking Hills. It was a fine clear evening, and the sun was tinging the few low clouds with pink.

But to look at the Smoking Hills now was to look at Belfeur's handiwork. A web of machinery had been spun across them, at the cost of who could tell how many lives: gantry cranes, cableways, chains of ore-buckets leading down from the mine openings to the huge crushers and refining machines. By turning his coat, Ambrus had escaped having to slave over there like the majority of the adult males in Carrig, but he knew at secondhand all about what went on there, and the memory of what he had been told made his stomach churn.

Against his will he found himself turning to glance at Belfeur, and was pleased to see how completely the man had lost his self-possession. His face was dark with suppressed anger and he was sweating copiously. By his side Pargetty was trying to calm him, but that seemed to be just one more irritation. Finally he burst out savagely, "How much longer do we have to stand around here like dummies?"

Pargetty looked appalled. His eyes burning, Sir Gurton half-turned.

"Till the evening star appears," he snapped.

"This—this rigmarole!" Belfeur took out a kerchief and mopped his perspiring forehead. "Stupid, time-wasting... Oh, what's the odds? It's got to be done, I guess."

Pargetty made another attempt at hushing him. He took no notice. “And what happens if there isn’t a parradile out there for me to kill, hey?” he demanded. “Is that allowed for in your damn-fool ritual?”

Sir Gurton scowled and did not deign to answer. Ambrus clenched his fists. How could he ever have been so blind as to throw in his lot with this arrogant babbler? He felt his cheeks grow hot with shame. To put an extra pace between himself and the man for whom he now felt only repugnance, he took a step back, and the heavy ceremonial sword slung at his side tapped his thigh, swinging.

Faint in the distance could be heard the noise as the nobles of Carrig assembled for the evening ceremony. In past years there would have been shouting and excitement, a sense of grand occasion. Now there was merely the dull tramp of many feet, with sometimes a door slamming to. The servers, acolytes, and sages, ranked on the parapet according to traditional form, shifted restlessly from foot to foot. Ambrus wondered why they had permitted him to join them; having disowned his clan he should not legally be taking part. Possibly the answer was that they gave him so little thought now they did not care whether he was present or not.

“I think I see the evening star,” whispered the sharpest-eyed of the young servers, staring upward with concentration. He reached for Sir Gurton’s staff, meaning to guide it in the right direction in case the old man’s vision had not yet shown the star to him.

At that very moment, however, something dark and flapping rose from among the smoke that crested the volcanoes. All those on the parapet exclaimed with one voice.

“The king! The king!”

“Yes, but there’s something strange about it!” Ambrus said excitedly. “Look! It’s carrying something in its talons!”

Sir Gurton, peering where the others pointed, hesitated. He said, “Can anyone discern what it is?”

“I think,” the young server said, and had to swallow nervously before going on—“I think it’s a man. Hanging by some kind of harness under the parradile’s body!”

They stared incredulously for a long moment. This was so extraordinary that even Sir Gurton forgot he had not yet made the formal announcement to open the king-hunt season. Belfeor broke the silence impatiently at last.

“Well, what different does it make?” he roared. “There’s a parradile—isn’t that what you wanted?”

No one took any notice. The parradile was gliding closer, crossing the outskirts of the city, giving the occasional lazy stroke with its vast wings to keep it on a course directly toward the fortress. It was plain now that the server’s keen sight had been as reliable as ever. A man was indeed hanging under the parradile’s belly, cradled in a sitting position in a web of strong cords.

“Oh, I’ve had enough of this nonsense!” Belfeor said suddenly. “There’s a parradile, and you’ve been pestering me to kill a parradile, and to me it makes no

difference whether I kill it now or later. I'm going to get the job over with!"

He pulled the energy gun from the holster on his belt.

Ambrus did not consciously decide what he was going to do. He seemed to be driven by a force outside himself—a force stemming from centuries of tradition, but reaching back beyond tradition to an original divine law. His right arm jerked down; his hand closed fast on the hilt of his ceremonial sword and tugged it from the scabbard.

The blade whistled as it slashed the air.

With his energy gun raised in the very act of sighting on the parradile, the usurper's skull was cleft from crown to chin. The sword stuck fast and Belfeor's fall snatched it from Ambrus' hand.

Pargetty screamed like a woman and fumbled for his own gun. Ambrus snarled at him—no one else had had time to move—and hurled himself in a wild charge. His shoulder took Pargetty in the chest and his impetus carried them both across the parapet, over the low ledge, and into the empty air beyond.

When the screaming had ended, Sir Gurton made a sign with his right hand. "He has made amends," he said heavily. "Now may his father be reborn in peace."

As though an enormous load had been lifted from their backs, all those standing around straightened themselves and began to smile. Only the young server, shocked at the sight of Belfeor's gory corpse, had to turn away and vomit against the wall.

"The question remains," Sir Gurton said after a pause, "what shah be done with those who follow this—this lump of carrion here? In a moment men will go to see what fell from the tower; they will find Pargetty dead and Ambrus with him. Moreover, it is my obligation to declare the king-hunt due. Since the parradile approaching us is male, that in default of challengers must be the new king. And tomorrow—"

He was interrupted by the keen-eyed server. Recovered from his fit of nausea, the boy had turned back to resume his proper position, but suddenly he was shouting and waving.

"Look! See who it is that rides beneath the parradile! It's Saikmar son of Corrie, that I swear!"

In amazed silence they watched the parradile come sliding down the air toward the tower. And the rider was Saikmar. No mistaking that long-boned figure, that sharp face now half-concealed behind a manly beard, that regal bearing so reminiscent of his father. The parradile brought itself up short, hovering with gentle slaps of its pinions so that Saikmar swung close enough to call to them.

"Have you declared the king-hunt due?" he cried. They had not expected such a question. It was a moment before Sir Gurton could find an answer. He went forward, shouting that they had not.

"Do not do so, then!" Saikmar said. "We of Carrig shall nevermore kill the king-parradile. Henceforward we are friends and allies of his kind! Has not this noble creature borne me back to dethrone the usurper? Sound the signal for revolt!"

And, as though his words were the trigger, the Smoking Hills blew up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



It was established afterward that not a single citizen of Carrig was killed in the eruptions. Almost all the peasants from the nearby farms had gone into the city for the king-hunt; those unlucky ones chosen by lot to stay behind and keep guard against wild animals fled directly they felt the ground begin to shudder, and suffered little worse than sprained ankles and burns from flying cinders. As to the workers in the mines, Belfeor's overseers had resigned themselves to letting them too go down into the city, knowing they would mutiny if the privilege were denied. They, however, remained to make ready a new shipment of radioactives.

They were all killed.

Langenschmidt's agents, by showing a quick and alert understanding of their work—but not so quick as to arouse suspicion—had got themselves appointed crew-bosses so as to work with only occasional supervision by Belfeor's men. This gave them their opportunity to filch sufficient partly refined uranium to build a small fission-bomb—extremely makeshift, but adequate. They secreted it in an old parradile lair where the heat of the“ rock indicated that a vein of lava ran close to the surface, down-slope from a particularly active crater. Before leaving for the city with the rest of the workers, they fused the thing and fervently hoped that it would function. Probably there had never been such a weird bomb in history; it was of the primitive missile-and-target type, and what slammed the two components together was crude black powder made of native sulfur, powdered charcoal, and potassium nitrate from parradile dung.

It worked extremely well.

Much of the blast, naturally, was wasted; it shot loose stones out of the mouth of the cave like grapeshot from a cannon. But enough was contained to split wide open the vein of lava penned behind the rock wall. The sullenly bubbling volcano sprang enormous leaks around the sides of its crater and streams of molten rock began to pour down the hillside.

Within a short while, the heat of the escaping lava had made the neighboring rocks plastic. The tremendous weight of the lava in adjacent craters bowed the softened rock, deformed it like clay, created a passage for more and still more lava.

The earth began to shake.

North of Carrig the snows were still melting and the rivers and streams were swollen. A hundred thousand tons of rock slid down into the course of one such river, blocking its normal channel and making it overflow into the honeycomb passages of a stratum of pumice underlying the cone of one of the biggest of all the

volcanoes. Gas had bubbled through the rocks here while they were cooling. The water was able to spill downward for three hundred feet before it encountered a layer at red heat and exploded into steam.

The Smoking Hills shrugged like a giant awakened, and the whole world shook.

After Saikmar had shouted to them, the nobles of Clan Parradile who were gathered on the parapet of the tower needed no second bidding. Sir Gurton wrenched Ambrus' sword free from Belfeor's head, chopped unskillfully through the neck of the corpse, set the bloody token on his ceremonial staff as a standard of revolt, and hastened to the great hall of audience where the clansmen were already assembled.

There was a howl of triumph as he marched stately on to the dais and showed that the usurper was dead. Moments later, the men and women who had gathered so gloomily were pouring back down the steep path to the city with cries of joy.

Twenty of the young men who might have been contenders in the king-hunt stormed through Belfeor's apartments, routing out the half-dozen of his followers who skulked there and in most cases taking them completely by surprise. Two valiant youths were burned down by an energy gun, but the killer was cut across the face with a sword and instants later had been knocked helpless to the floor.

Chanting an ancient song of victory, the little group then lashed their captives' hands behind their backs and hobbled their ankles to stop them running away. Like harnessed graats, they drove them in the wake of those who had gone to rouse the populace.

They found that a horde of enraged citizens was already flooding through the streets toward the market square, shouting from one to another the fantastic news—that Saikmar son of Corrie had returned on the wings of a parradile to liberate the city. Most of those who heard did not believe, until they came into the market place and saw that Saikmar was indeed there, standing on a tall dais hastily improvised from bits of merchants' stalls, with the parradile beside him like a resting angel.

Others than the young men who had scoured the fortress had come upon Belfeor's followers, and they had not been so gentle. Forcing their way through the crowd they came with bleeding corpses, cheered by their fellow citizens, until they could hurl them at Saikmar's feet like tribute brought to a god. Twenty or more bodies sprawled at last in a heap.

Saikmar was yelling encouragement and approval, his eyes bright under his wild tangled hair, but nothing could be heard over the ceaseless applause of the crowd. At the back of the square, perched comfortably on the roof of a small wooden porch, Langenschmidt watched the celebrations. Well, it had come off, and it looked very much as though it would have done so even without his interference. What a master-stroke by this young man, to tame a parradile and come back to the city on its wings! That alone was enough to brand him a miracle-worker in the eyes of the common folk.

And Belfeor according to rumor was dead—yes, there was the proof: Sir Gurton

showing his head to the people on the end of a staff, handing the staff to Saikmar now with its grisly ornament leaking bits of brain...

Langenschmidt closed his eyes reflexively. The parradile had extended its long neck and snuffed at the blood on the staff; in the next second he expected it to gulp the head down, and he had no wish to watch that happen.

Instead, however, the parradile turned away to give Saikmar a hopeful nudge. Understanding the gesture at once, the young man laughed, handed the staff back to Sir Gurton, and yelled something to the people on the ground. From the wreckage of the market-stalls they began to pass him vegetables, hunks of salted meat, dried fish on long strings of seaweed, and balls of the sticky sugary plant-sap which served in Carrig for a sweetener. Taking these offerings, Saikmar fed them to the parradile with his own hands.

Langenschmidt had expected renewed cheering at the sight. Far from it: there was a sudden hush, reverent and incredulous. Of course—a tame parradile was unprecedented, and the natives must regard this as supernatural.

Taking advantage of the near-silence, Saikmar began to shout again as he went on dropping food in the parradile's blood-red maw.

“Belfeor the usurper drove the parradiles out of the Smoking Hills, which was blasphemy! He cheated the rightful rulers out of Carrig, which was wickedness! Together I and this parradile returned to claim our rights, and each has helped the other to success.

“I therefore decree that men shall never again go forth to kill the parradile!”

There was a stir of dismay from conservative-minded listeners, but sensing that Saikmar had not finished, others in the audience silenced their objections.

“Does a man kill his most loyal friends?” Saikmar cried. “We have customarily gone out to slay the king so that his nobility and grandeur might pass to the successful challenger. Did that nobility come to Belfeor? It did not! He was base, and not all the parradiles in the world could have infected *him* with nobility!”

Chorused agreement from the crowd was cut short by grumbling from the Smoking Hills, and people looked about them apprehensively. Langenschmidt snatched a quick glance to see that the escape route he had mapped for himself was still open.

“In the northern sanctuary where I found asylum, this parradile sought shelter under the same roof! This is a sign, for me and for Carrig. The Smoking Hills are erupting now to show the anger of the gods—the parradiles will lack for homes until the ground has cooled. I say let us give them homes in our city that they helped us to win back! Let men and parradiles befriend each other!”

Something huge and glowing shot across the sky, and a sound followed like a giant clapping his hands. Saikmar took no notice, but the parradile paused in its feeding and cocked its head. The air was growing sulfurous.

Langenschmidt prepared to climb down from his perch. He had no wish to be caught in a stampede if there was a major earthquake and the crowd panicked, especially since it was growing dark.

“In future,” Saikmar shouted, “the spring festival shall be held not to kill the king but to show him our friendship, and the gliders and the parradiles shall fly together among the Smoking Hills for a week on end, with great rejoicing!”

At the promise that there would still be festivals, the crowd brightened, and someone began to call blessings on Saikmar’s head. In the midst of this, the earthquake Langenschmidt had been anticipating shook the city very gently, and the porch on which he sat tilted under his weight with a cracking noise. He jumped to the ground and hurried away. It would be safer to be on the other side of the river, well clear of the town, if anything more serious happened.

Another and stronger shock followed as he was running up the paved road toward the bridge. No one else was in sight. Even the customs officers, he guessed, would have left their posts and gone to join their fellow-citizens in the square.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the watchtower on top of the fortress had been jarred by the second quake. A crack had appeared in its circular parapet and it had shed a few of its stones. There was going to be a hell of a mess in Carrig, especially if any of the timber houses collapsed and caught fire, but by this time practically everyone who could walk must be in or around the market, and that was close enough for the river to offer a refuge in emergency. He hoped that none of his agents had been caught up in the throng; he’d been too busy most of the day to keep in touch.

Still, the eruptions had had to be fairly violent. Their purpose was not merely to convince the people of Carrig that the gods were angry; there was the even more important aim of wrecking Belfeor’s off-world mining equipment beyond repair.

Pausing by the customs house for a last lingering look at the city, he was astonished to hear a girl’s voice softly speak his name—his real name, not the name he had been going under in Carrig. He whirled, and from the shadow of a doorway stepped a figure he recognized instantly. Tired, dirty, disheveled, hair tousled and feet bare, but with eyes as bright as stars, it was Maddalena Santos.

It took him a long moment to react, but when he did he was so overcome he threw his arms around her.

“Maddalena!” he exclaimed. “What in the galaxy are *you* doing here?”

“I came by parradile,” she said, and grinned broadly. “I presume it worked, or else you wouldn’t be leaving before the fun’s over.”

“Worked?” Langenschmidt repeated blankly.

“Yes! Did Saikmar’s arrival not start a revolt against Belfeor, as we hoped it would?”

Langenschmidt looked her over incredulously. He said, “Was it *your* idea to tame the parradile, then?”

“Oh, we didn’t have to tame it, not in the ordinary sense. Parradiles are probably the most intelligent nonhuman creatures we’ve ever run across, if this one’s a fair example—intelligent enough to distinguish between individual human beings and tell which are friends and which are not. But... yes, it was my idea to have Saikmar ride back to Carrig on the sacred animal and dethrone the usurper. *Did it work?*”



“If I’d only known you were alive and hatching a plot like that...” Langenschmidt sighed. “The trouble and inconvenience I could have saved myself! Yes, of course it worked! I saw Belfeor’s head on a pole myself, just a few minutes ago, and—Never mind, that can wait till later. The last thing I want right now is to be trapped by another earthquake. Let’s get across this bridge in case it falls down!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“We’ve got the full picture now,” Commandant Brzeska said. “Shimazi was the last of the agents to get away from Carrig, and he reached Dayomar with a southbound caravan yesterday. We’ve had a report from him over Slee’s communicator. He says the eruptions succeeded completely in their objective—all the mine shafts were collapsed, all the mining equipment worth mentioning was melted down by the lava, and the Smoking Hills have obligingly covered the remains with several feet of ash and pumice. The course of a small river has been changed, and about five or six hundred villagers have been made homeless, but it turns out that the only people killed were Belfeor’s technicians who were working on the site at the time.”

“What about the other things they imported?” Langenschmidt said. “They must have had maybe a hundred energy guns, for example.”

“That was one of the things Shimazi took care of,” Brzeska shrugged. “He planted a few hints in receptive ears to the effect that anything belonging to Belfeor’s henchmen must necessarily be contaminated with evil, so Saikmar issued a decree ordering the collection of all their gear and had it dropped into a volcanic crater.”

Langenschmidt gave a satisfied grunt and crossed his legs. “I suppose the city suffered pretty badly, didn’t it? When I pulled out, even that big solid watchtower on the fortress looked a trifle shaky.”

“Yes, I’m afraid there was a lot of fire-damage. Of course, they must be used to that since they build so much in timber. Fortunately, though, it’s local summer, and even though there are about eight thousand people having to camp out on the edge of town, they have plenty of graat-hide tents, and Shimazi says they’re going to build huts to carry them through the winter and expect to have the city more or less back to normal by a year from next fall.”

“Is all this Saikmar’s doing?” Maddalena inquired from the chair next to Langenschmidt’s.

“Mostly. He and his Clan Twywit, which seems to include several extremely able men, had the situation under control when Shimazi left. It was his idea to requisition all the available hides to make tents for the homeless, and he organized emergency food and water supplies very quickly. I think he’ll do a good job;

certainly he's started out well."

"What happened to Belfeor's gang?" Langenschmidt asked. "I saw a few of them being whipped into the marketplace, roped together and hobbled, but at least twenty of them were killed outright and dragged to the square as corpses."

"The survivors were—uh—disposed of in the same way as the energy guns." Brzeska had to swallow hard. "They were taken up in gliders and dropped down a volcano. Shimazi saw two of them being executed like that. It's a traditional punishment, I believe, for people who profane the temple or the images of the gods."

Langenschmidt nodded confirmation. "Maybe I've been infected with barbaric notions, but I can't feel sorry for the bastards—they more than earned their fate by the way they slave-drove the workers in the mines. What have you told the government of Cyclops, by the way?"

"That a number of their citizens, not all of whom have yet been identified, conspired in or connived at the shooting down of a Patrol cruiser. That shut them up very effectively. No matter what opinions they hold about keeping the ZRP's isolated, they can't excuse the mass murder of your crew. When they asked whether the criminals were going to be handed over for punishment by their own planetary authorities, we answered that it was impossible because having landed illegally on Fourteen they infringed local custom and were dealt with summarily by the natives. I actually said they were all dropped down volcanoes; we believed that this was the best way of discouraging anyone else from trying a repeat performance. There's no telling how many people on Cyclops Meard may have tried to interest in exploiting Fourteen's mineral deposits before he contacted Belfeor, so if we give the impression that the natives took care of Belfeor's gang unaided we'll be erring on the side of caution."

"Did Shimazi say anything about the parradile?" Maddalena inquired. "I got very fond of that animal, you know."

"Oh, yes! Much to the dismay of the head of Clan Parradile, who wanted to treat the beast as some kind of sacred relic, it's become the beloved pet of the whole population. It's been waddling around the city being fed and patted by all and sundry, and some of the more adventurous children had persuaded it to give them short flights over the countryside. Their parents are terrified, but they've all come back safely so far."

"Splendid!" Maddalena said. "I'm quite convinced, by the way, that if parradiles are raised from birth in human company they're going to display more and more evidence of high intelligence. I wouldn't be surprised if they wound up talking."

She hesitated. "Uh—excuse me asking this, commandant, but can I take it that your next report on me will be a bit more favorable?"

"You can. In fact, I've already arranged to have you confirmed in your lieutenancy because of what you did on Fourteen. It was an excellent job in extremely difficult circumstances."

"Congratulations," Langenschmidt said dryly. Maddalena flushed.

“It seems clear,” Brzeska went on, “that your natural aptitude is not for administrative work at base. I’d like to recommend you for a planetary agent’s post if you’re interested. Your tour will be twenty years minimum, of course, so think it over and let me know in a week or two.”

Maddalena bit her lip. “Would I be allowed to volunteer as the new agent in Carrig?” she suggested.

“You would *not*.” Brzeska was firm. “The reason’s simple: although I concede that everything you did was necessary under the circumstances, you did cause a hell of a lot of disruption at both the sanctuary and Carrig. We daren’t send you back among the same people. You’ve made too much of an impact on too many of them. The ideal agent is someone who hears everything and affects nothing. You should realize that—I’m surprised you asked the question when you knew what the answer bad to be.”

She shrugged. “Overdramatizing again, I guess,” she admitted. “I was wondering what it would be like to be Lady Melisma.”

“Saikmar’s consort?” Brzeska gave a chuckle. “He must have made quite an impression on you, then—as much as you did on him. Did you know that after the earthquakes he sent out forty heralds to hunt for you?”

“Well I did—uh—break our date, of course. He was expecting to find me where the parradile put us down after flying from the sanctuary. You’d never believe how strong those beasts are! It carried us two hundred miles nonstop on the longest leg of the trip, the first one... Oh well! Poor Saikmar!”

“I shouldn’t worry,” Brzeska said with a glint of humor. “If I know these primitive cultures, you’ve almost certainly been immortalized in an interminable ballad by now. Everybody is much happier that way, believe me.”

He rose from his chair. “Let me know what you decide about that on-planet agent’s job, won’t you?” he added, offering his hand.

“I expect I’ll take it,” she answered.

“And you, Gus? You’re going to retire, aren’t you?”

Langenschmidt shook his head. “I changed my mind,” he said. “What in hell would I do with myself for another seventy years?” He checked and glanced at Maddalena. “Something wrong?”

“No, nothing wrong.” She sounded bewildered. “I was just surprised to realize that I know now why people can say things like that. I must have changed a hell of a lot.”

She shrugged and went out. Langenschmidt paused a moment before following her. He said under his breath, “Pavel, when I get a new beat, make sure that kid’s on it, will you? I think she’s going to make history, and I’d like to be around to watch her.”

Cautiously, because the stonework had become shaky in the great eruptions, Saikmar scrambled up the narrow stairs to the parapet of the watchtower. The

masons had done makeshift repairs, but the moment he discovered what they were up to he had sent them off to build barracks for the homeless; that was far more urgent. The tower was all right provided it wasn't apt to fall down on people's heads.

Emerging from the head of the narrow stairway, he picked his way to the edge. Shading his eyes, he stared out across the city and toward the hills, straining to see if there was anything large and flapping over there.

No sign.

He slammed fist into palm angrily. What could have become of that parradile? No one had seen it for days! Alarming suspicions raced through his mind—possibly some idiot, knowing how trusting it had become, had fed it unwholesome food, so that now it lay sick somewhere, perhaps even dead... If anyone had indeed done that, Saikmar promised himself, that person would be very, very sorry.

Abruptly his depression lifted and he let out a delighted cry. *There* it was, coming over the horizon—and by all the gods, not one parradile only, but a whole gaggle of the things, four, five, eight, eleven of them! What had he been worrying about? Wasn't it to be expected that the parradile might grow lonely and go hunting others of its kind?

Now, of course, this meant they would have to give the creatures names and teach them to answer to them. But a name for his rescuer, and Carrig's, suggested itself at once. That parradile was going to be called Sloin!

Chuckling with relief, he waited as the huge graceful flock approached circling the tower suspiciously, and their leader, the newly baptized Sloin, came to perch on the parapet and wave proudly at his companions with one wing. Saikmar patted the big-mouthed head affectionately. Then he tried to entice the others down too, but they were too frightened.

Sloin seemed to shrug. He took off with a blast of air that almost knocked Saikmar sprawling, and out of the hovering group he sorted a handsome young female, obviously his mate. Prodding and grunting at her, he compelled her to come close enough for Saikmar to pat her head also, but could not persuade her to settle on the tower.

"Oh, well!" he seemed to say at last, and with a final nod toward Saikmar he led his subjects swooping down to be fed in the market square.

Saikmar watched them go with envy in his heart. The new king-parradile had found subjects for him now, and a fine consort besides, and doubtless in a little while the parradiles would be again as numerous as before Belfeor ordered their slaughter. Whereas he...

"Oh, Melisma!" he groaned aloud to the air. There was no trace of her anywhere, the woman he had hoped to make his bride and equal ruler of this great city! It was small consolation to reflect that just as she had appeared mysteriously in the parradile's lair far to the north, so she had gone mysteriously when the parradile returned her to the south. Could she have been real? She had given him many delicious proofs of her femininity, but that didn't mean she was not in fact the creation of a friendly god...

An idea came to him. Though Melisma had gone, she need not be forgotten. Not if he had anything to do with it.

He hurried back down the stairs of the tower. When he came back into the regent's apartments, he sent the first servant he saw on an urgent errand, and sat waiting impatiently for it to be completed.

Only a few minutes had passed when the harper came in and gave a low sweeping bow. "What does it please Saikmar that I should sing?" he inquired.

"I don't want you to sing. Not yet. I want you to make a new ballad. It will be called *The Ballad of Lady Melisma*, and these are the events that must be included. They are strange and wonderful, and the song must be couched in strange and wonderful language to suit the subject. Do you understand?"

The harper seated himself on his red velvet stool. "I hear and obey," he said. "I will do my best."

"It must begin with the arrival of Belfeor," Saikmar said, leaning his sharp chin on his hand. "When he usurped power the gods were angry, and so this is what they planned..."

