

CITY OF THE CHASCH

TO ONE SIDE of the Explorator IV flared a dim and aging star, Carina 4269; to the other hung a single planet, gray-brown under a heavy blanket of atmosphere. The star was distinguished only by a curious amber cast to its light. The planet was somewhat larger than Earth, attended by a pair of small moons with rapid periods of orbit. An almost typical K2 star, an unremarkable planet, but for the men aboard the Explorator IV the system was a source of wonder and fascination.

In the forward control pod stood Commander Marin, Chief Officer Deale, Second Officer Walgrave: three men similarly trim, erect, brisk of movement, wearing the same neat white uniforms, and so much in each other's company that the wry, offhand intonations in which they spoke, the half-sarcastic, half-facetious manner in which they phrased their thoughts, were almost identical. With scanscope-hand-held binocular photomultipliers, capable of enormous magnification and amplification-they looked across to the planet.

Walgrave commented, "At casual observation, a habitable planet. Those clouds are surely water-vapor."

"If signals emanate from a world," said Chief Officer Deale, "we almost automatically assume it to be inhabited. Habitability follows as a natural consequence of habitation."

Commander Marin gave a dry chuckle. "Your logic, usually irrefutable, is at fault. We are presently two hundred and twelve light-years from Earth. We received the signals twelve light-years out; hence they were broadcast two hundred years ago. If you recall, they halted abruptly. This world may be habitable; it may be inhabited; it may be both. But not necessarily either."

Deale gave his head a doleful shake. "On this basis, we can't even be sure that Earth is inhabited. The tenuous evidence available to us-

Beep beep went the communicator. "Speak!" called Commander Marin.

The voice of Dant, the communications engineer, came into the pod: "I'm picking up a fluctuating field; I think it's artificial but I can't tune it in. It just might be some sort of radar."

Marin frowned, rubbed his nose with his knuckle. "I'll send down the scouts, then we'll back away, out of range."

Marin spoke a code-word, gave orders to the scouts Adam Reith and Paul Waunder. "Fast as possible; we're being detected. Rendezvous at System axis, up, Point D as in Deneb."

"Right, sir. System axis, up, Point D as in Deneb. Give us three minutes."

Commander Marin went to the macroscope and began an anxious search of the planet's surface, clicking through a dozen wavelengths. "There's a window at about 3000 angstroms, nothing good. The scouts will have to do all of it."

"I'm glad I never trained as a scout," remarked Second Officer Walgrave. "Otherwise I also might be sent down upon strange and quite possibly horrid planets."

"A scout isn't trained," Deale told him. "He exists: half acrobat, half mad scientist, half cat burglar, half-

"That's several halves too many."

"Just barely adequate. A scout is a man who likes a change."

The scouts aboard the Explorator IV were Adam Reith and Paul Waunder. Both were men of resource and stamina; each was master of many skills; there the resemblance ended. Reith was an inch or two over average height, dark-haired, with a broad forehead, prominent cheekbones, rather gaunt cheeks where showed an occasional twitch of muscle. Waunder was compact, balding, blond, with features too ordinary for description. Waunder was older by a year or two; Reith however, held senior rank, and was in nominal command of the scout-boat: a miniature spaceship thirty feet long, carried in a clamp under the Explorator's stern.

In something over two minutes they were aboard the scoutboat. Waunder went to the controls; Reith sealed the hatch, pushed the detach-button. The scout-boat eased away from the great black hull. Reith took his seat, and as he did so a flicker of movement registered at the corner of his vision. He glimpsed a gray projectile darting up from the direction of the planet, then his eyes were battered by a tremendous purple-white dazzle.

There was rending and wrenching, violent acceleration as Waunder clutched convulsively upon the throttle, and the scout-boat went careening down toward the planet.

Where the Explorator IV had ridden space now drifted a curious object: the nose and stern of a spaceship, joined by a few shreds of metal, with a great void between, through which burnt the old yellow sun Carina 4269. Along with crew and technicians, Commander Marin, Chief Officer Deale, Second Officer Walgrave had become fleeting atoms of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, their personalities, brisk mannerisms, and jocularities now only memories.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SCOUT-BOAT, STRUCK rather than propelled by the shockwave, tumbled bow over stern down toward the gray and brown planet, with Adam Reith and Paul Waunder bumping from bulkhead to bulkhead in the control cabin.

Reith, only half-conscious, managed to seize a stanchion. Pulling himself to the panel, he struck down the stabilization switch. Instead of a smooth hum there was hissing and thumping; nevertheless the wild windmilling motion gradually was damped.

Reith and Waunder dragged themselves to their seats, made themselves fast. Reith asked, "Did you see what I saw?"

"A torpedo."

Reith nodded. "The planet is inhabited."

"The inhabitants are far from cordial. That was a rough reception."

"We're a long way from home." Reith looked along the line of non-signifying dials and dead

indicator lights. "Nothing seems to be functioning. We're going to crash, unless I can make some swift repairs." He limped aft to the engine room, to discover that a spare energy-cell, improperly stowed, had crushed a connection box, creating a chaotic tangle of melted leads, broken crystals, fused composites.

"I can fix it," Reith told Waunder, who had come aft to inspect the mess. "In about two months with luck. Providing the spares are intact."

"Two months is somewhat too long," said Waunder. "I'd say we have two hours before we hit atmosphere."

"Let's get to work."

An hour and a half later they stood back, eyeing the jury-rig with doubt and dissatisfaction. "With luck we can land in one piece," said Reith gloomily. "You go forward, put some power into the lifts; I'll see what happens."

A minute passed. The propulsors hummed; Reith felt the pressure of deceleration. Hoping that the improvisations were at least temporarily sound, he went forward and resumed his seat. "What's it look like?"

"Short range, not too bad. We'll hit atmosphere in about half an hour, somewhat under critical velocity. We can come down to a soft landing-I hope. The long-range prognosis-not so good. Whoever hit the ship with a torpedo can follow us down with radar. Then what?"

"Nothing good," said Reith.

The planet below broadened under their view: a world dimmer and darker than Earth, bathed in tawny golden light. They now could see continents and oceans, clouds, storms: the landscape of a mature world.

The atmosphere whined around the car; the temperature gauge rose sharply toward the red mark. Reith cautiously fed more power through the makeshift circuits. The boat slowed, the needle quivered, sank back toward a comfortable level. There came a soft report from the engine room and the boat began to fall free once more.

"Here we go again," said Reith. "Well, it's up to the airfoils now. Better get into ejection harness." He swung out the sideflaps, extended the elevators and rudder and the boat hissed down at a slant. He asked, "How does the atmosphere check out?"

Waunder read the various indices of the analyzer. "Breathable. Close to Earth normal."

"That's one small favor."

Looking through scansopes, they could now observe detail. Below spread a wide plain or a steppe, marked here and there with low relief and vegetation. "No sign of civilization," said Waunder. "Not below, at any rate. Maybe up there, by the horizon-those gray spots ..."

"If we can land the boat, if no one disturbs us while we rebuild the control system, we'll be in good shape ... But these airfoils aren't intended for a fast landing in the rough. We'd better try to stall her down and eject at the last instant."

"Right," said Waunder. He pointed. "That looks like a forest-vegetation of some sort. The

ideal spot for a crash."

"Down we go."

The boat slanted down; the landscape expanded. The fronds of a dank black forest reached into the air ahead of them.

"On the count of three: eject," said Reith. He pulled the boat up into a stall, braking its motion. "One-two-three. Eject!"

The ejection ports opened; the seats thrust; out into the air snapped Reith. But where was Waunder? His harness had fouled, or the seat had failed to eject properly; and he dangled helplessly outside the boat. Reith's parachute opened, swung him up pendulum-wise. On the way down he struck a glossy black limb of a tree. The blow dazed him; he swung at the end of his parachute shrouds. The boat careened through the trees, plowed into a bog, Paul Waunder hung motionless in his harness.

There was silence except for the creaking of hot metal, a faint hiss from somewhere under the boat.

Reith stirred, kicked feebly. The motion sent pain tearing through his shoulders and chest; he desisted and hung limp.

The ground was fifty feet below. The sunlight, as he had noted before, seemed rather more dim and yellow than the sunlight of Earth, and the shadows held an amber overtone. The air was aromatic with the scent of unfamiliar resins and oils; he was caught in a tree with glossy black limbs and brittle black foliage which made a rattling sound when he moved. He could look along the broken swath to the bog, where the boat sat almost on an even keel, Waunder hanging head-down from the ejection hatch, his face only inches from the muck. If the boat should settle, he would smother-if he was still alive even now. Reith struggled frantically to untangle himself from his harness. The pain made him dizzy and sick; there was no strength in his hands, and when he raised his arms there were clicking sounds in his shoulders. He was helpless to free himself, let alone assist Waunder. Was he dead? Reith could not be sure. Waunder, he thought, had twitched feebly.

Reith watched intently. Waunder was slipping slowly into the mire. In the ejection seat was a survival kit with weapons and tools. With his broken bones he could not raise his arms to reach the clasp. If he detached himself from the shrouds he would fall and kill himself... No help for it. Broken shoulder, broken collarbone or not, he must open the ejection seat, bring forth the knife and the coil of rope.

There was a sound, not too far distant, of wood striking wood. Reith desisted in his efforts, hung quietly. A troop of men armed with fancifully long rapiers and heavy hand-catapults marched quietly, almost furtively, below.

Reith stared dumbfounded, suspecting hallucination. The cosmos seemed partial to biped races, more or less anthropoid; but these were true men: people with harsh, strong features, honey-colored skin, blond, blond-brown, blond-gray hair and bushy drooping mustaches. They wore complicated garments: loose trousers of striped brown and black cloth, dark blue or dark red shirts, vests of woven metal strips, short black capes. Their hats were black leather, folded and creased with out-turned earflaps, each with a silver emblem four inches across at the front of a tall crown. Reith watched in amazement. Barbarian warriors, a wandering band of cutthroats: but true men, nonetheless, here on this unknown world over

two hundred light-years from Earth!

The warriors passed quietly below, stealthy and furtive. They paused in the shadows to survey the boat, then the leader, a warrior younger than the rest, no more than a youth and lacking a mustache, stepped out into the open and examined the sky. He was joined by three older men, wearing globes of pink and blue glass on their helmets, who also searched the sky with great care. Then the youth signaled to the others, and all approached the boat.

Paul Waunder raised his hand in the feeblest of salutes. One of the men with the glass globes snatched up his catapult, but the youth yelled an angry order and the man sullenly turned away. One of the warriors cut the parachute shrouds, let Waunder fall to the ground.

The youth gave other orders; Waunder was picked up and carried to a dry area.

The youth now turned to investigate the space-boat. Boldly he clambered up on the hull and looked in through the ejection ports.

The older men with the pink and blue globes stood back in the shadows, muttering dourly through their drooping whiskers and glowering toward Waunder. One of them clapped his hand to the emblem on his hat as if the object had jerked or made a sound. Then, at once, as if stimulated by the contact, he stalked upon Waunder, drew his rapier, brought it flickering down. To Reith's horror Paul Waunder's head rolled free of his torso, and his blood gushed forth to soak into the black soil.

The youth seemed to sense the act and swung about. He cried out in fury, leaped to the ground, marched over to the murderer. The youth snatched forth his own rapier, flicked it and the flexible end slashed in to cut away the emblem from the man's hat. The youth picked it up, and pulling a knife from his boot hacked savagely at the soft silver, then cast it down at the murderer's feet with a spate of bitter words. The murderer, cowed, picked up the emblem and moved sullenly off to the side.

From a great distance came a throb of sound. The warriors set up a soft hooting, either as a ceremonial response or in fear and mutual admonition, and quickly retreated into the forest.

Low in the sky appeared an aircraft, which first hovered, then settled: a sky-raft fifty feet long, twenty feet wide, controlled from an ornate belvedere at the stern. Forward and aft great lanterns dangled from convolute standards; the bulwarks were guarded by a squat balustrade. Leaning over the balustrade, pushing and jostling, were two dozen passengers, in imminent danger, so it seemed, of falling to the ground.

Reith watched in numb fascination as the craft landed beside the scout-boat. The passengers jumped quickly off: individuals of two sorts, non-human and human, though this distinction was not instantly obvious. The non-human creatures-Blue Chasch, as Reith was to learn-walked on short heavy legs, moving with a stiff-legged strut. The typical individual was massive and powerful, scaled like a pangolin with blue pointed tablets. The torso was wedge-shaped, with exoskeletal epaulettes of chitin curving over into a dorsal carapace. The skull rose to a bony point; a heavy brow jutted over the ocular holes, glittering metallic eyes and the complicated nasal orifice. The men were as similar to the Blue Chasch as breeding, artifice and mannerism allowed. They were short, stocky, with bandy-legs; their faces were blunt and almost chinless, with the features compressed. They wore what appeared to be false craniums which rose to a point and beetled over their foreheads; and their jerkins and trousers were worked with scales.

Chasch and Chaschmen ran to the scout-boat, communicating in fluting glottal cries. Some clambered up the hull, peered into the interior, others investigated the head and torso of Paul Waunder, which they picked up and carried aboard the raft.

From the control belvedere came a bawled alarm. Blue Chasch and Chaschmen looked up into the sky, then hurriedly pushed the raft under the trees and out of sight. Once again the little clearing was deserted.

Minutes passed. Reith closed his eyes and considered the evil nightmare from which he hoped to wake, secure aboard the Explorer.

&npsb: A thudding of engines aroused him from torpor. Down from the sky sank still another vehicle: an airship which, like the raft, had been built with small regard for aerodynamic efficiency. There were three decks, a central rotunda, balconies of black wood and copper, a scrolled prow, observation cupolas, weapon ports, a vertical fin displaying a gold and black insignia. The ship hovered while those on the decks gave the space-boat a fastidious inspection. Some of these were not human, but tall attenuated creatures, hairless, pale as parchment, with austere countenances, languid and elegant attitudes. Others, apparently subordinates, were men, though they displayed the same attenuated arms, legs and torso, the sheep-like mannerisms. Both races wore elaborate costumes of ribbons, flounces, sashes. Later Reith would know the non-human folk as Dirdir and their human subordinates as Dirdirmen. At the moment, dazed by the immensity of his disaster, he noted the splendid Dirdir airship only with disinterested wonder. The thought, however, seeped into his mind that either these tall pale folk or their predecessors at the scene had destroyed the Explorer IV, and both had evidently tracked the arrival of the scout-boat.

Dirdir and Dirdirmen scrutinized the space-boat with keen interest. One of them called attention to the print left by the Chasch raft, and the discovery created an instant atmosphere of emergency. Instantly from the forest came stabs of purple-white energy; Dirdir and Dirdirmen fell writhing. Chasch and Chaschmen charged forth, Chasch firing hand-weapons, Chaschmen running to throw grapples at the ship.

The Dirdir discharged their own hand-weapons, which exuded a violet flare and whorls of orange plasma; Chasch and Chaschmen were consumed in a purple and orange blaze. The Dirdir ship lifted, to be constrained by grapples. The Dirdirmen hacked with knives, burnt with energy pistols; the ship broke free, to fluting cries of disappointment from the Chasch.

A hundred feet above the bog the Dirdir turned heavy plasma-beams upon the forest and burnt a series of reeking avenues, but failed to destroy the raft, from which the Chasch were now aiming their own great mortars. The first Chasch projectile missed. The second struck the ship under the hull; it slewed around under the impact, then gave a great dart off into the sky, flitting, lurching, jerking like a wounded insect, upside-down, then right-side up, with Dirdir and Dirdirmen falling off, black specks drifting down the slate-colored sky. The ship veered south, then east and presently was lost to sight.

Chasch and Chaschmen came forth to gaze after the Dirdir ship. The raft slid forth from the forest, hovered over the scoutboat. Grapples were dropped; the boat was lifted from the mire. Chasch and Chaschmen climbed aboard the raft; it slanted up into the air and moved off to the northeast, with the space-boat slung below.

Time passed. Reith hung in his harness, barely conscious. The sun settled behind the trees; dimness began to drift over the landscape.

The barbarians reappeared. They went to the clearing, made a desultory inspection, looked up into the sky, then turned away.

Reith gave a hoarse call. The warriors snatched out their catapults, but the youth made a furious gesture to restrain them. He gave orders; two men climbed the tree, cut the parachute shrouds to leave the ejection seat and Reith's survival gear swinging in the branches.

Reith was lowered to the ground, none too gently, and his senses went dim at the grating of bones in his shoulder. Forms loomed above him, speaking in harsh consonants and broad vowels. he was lifted, placed in a litter; he felt the thud and swing of footsteps; then he either fainted or fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

REITH AWOKE To the flicker of firelight, the murmur of voices. Above was a dark canopy, to either side a sky full of strange stars. The nightmare was real. Aspect by aspect, sensation by sensation, Reith took stock of himself and his condition. He lay on a pallet of woven reeds which exuded a sourish odor, half-vegetable, half-human. His shirt had been removed; a harness of withe constricted his shoulders and provided support for his broken bones. Painfully he raised his head and looked around. He lay in an open-sided shelter of metal poles covered with fabric. Another paradox, thought Reith. The metal poles indicated a high level of technology; the weapons and manners of the people were purely barbaric. Reith tried to look toward the fire, but the effort pained him and he lay back.

The camp was in the open country; the forest had been left behind; so much was evident from the stars. He wondered about his ejection seat and the attached survival pack. Seat and pack had been left dangling, so he recalled to his regret. He had only himself and his innate resources to depend upon—a quality somewhat augmented by the training forced upon a scout, some of which Reith had considered pedantic over-elaboration. He had assimilated vast quantities of basic science, linguistic and communication theory, astronautics, space and energy technology, biometrics, meteorology, geology, toxicology. So much was theory; additionally he had trained in practical survival techniques of every description: weaponry, attack and defense, emergency nutrition, rigging and hoisting, space-drive mechanics, electronic repair and improvisation. If he was not killed out of hand, as had been Paul Waunder, he would live—but to what purpose? His chances of returning to Earth must be considered infinitesimal, which made the intrinsic interest of the planet less stimulating.

A shadow fell across his face; Reith saw the youth who had saved his life. After peering through the dark the youth kneeled down, proffered a bowl of coarse gruel.

"Thanks very much," said Reith. "But I don't think I can eat; I'm constricted by the splints."

The youth leaned forward, speaking in a rather curt voice. Reith thought his face strangely stern and intense for a boy who could not be more than sixteen years old.

With great exertion Reith pulled himself up on his elbow and took the gruel. The youth rose, moved a few paces back, stood watching as Reith tried to feed himself. Then he turned and called a gruff summons. A small girl came running forward. She bowed, took the bowl and

began to feed Reith with earnest care.

The boy watched a moment, evidently mystified by Reith, and Reith was perplexed no less. Men and women, on a world two hundred and twelve light-years from Earth! Parallel evolution? Incredible! Spoonful by spoonful the gruel was placed in his mouth. The girl, about eight years old, wore a ragged pajama-like garment, not too clean. A half-dozen men of the tribe came to watch; there was a growl of conversation which the youth ignored.

The bowl was empty; the girl held a mug of sour beer to Reith's mouth. Reith drank because it was expected of him, though the brew puckered his lips. "Thank you," he told the girl, who returned a diffident smile and quickly departed.

Reith lay back on the pallet. The youth spoke to him in a brusque voice: evidently a question.

"Sorry," said Reith. "I don't understand. But don't be irritated; I need every friend I can get."

The youth spoke no more and presently departed. Reith leaned back on his pallet and tried to sleep. The firelight flickered low; activity in the camp dwindled.

From far off came a faint call, half howl, half quavering hoot, which was presently answered by another, and another, to become an almost identical chanting of hundreds of voices. Raising up on his elbow once more, Reith saw that the two moons, of equal apparent diameter, one pink, the other pale blue, had appeared in the east.

A moment later a new voice, nearer at hand, joined the far ululation. Reith listened in wonder; surely this was the voice of a woman? Other voices joined the first, wailing a wordless dirge, which, joined to the far hooting, produced a colloquy of vast woe.

The chant at last halted; the camp became quiet. Reith became drowsy and fell asleep.

In the morning Reith saw more of the camp. It lay in a swale between a pair of broad low hills, among multitudes rolling off to the east. Here for reasons not immediately apparent to Reith the tribesmen elected to sojourn. Each morning four young warriors wearing long brown cloaks mounted small electric motorcycles and set off in different directions across the steppe. Each evening they returned, to make detailed reports to Traz Onmale the boyruler. Every morning a great kite was paid out, hoisting aloft a boy of eight or nine, whose function was evidently that of a lookout. Late in the afternoon the wind tended to die, dropping the kite more or less easily. The boy usually escaped with no more than a bump, though the men handling the lines seemed to worry more for the safety of the kite; a four-winged contraption of black membrane stretched over wooden splints.

Each morning, from beyond the hill to the east, sounded a fearful squealing, which persisted for almost half an hour. The tumult, Reith presently learned, arose from the herd of multilegged animals from which the tribe derived meat. Each morning the tribe butcher, a woman six feet tall and brawny to match, went through the herd with a knife and a cleaver, to excise three or four legs for the needs of the day. Occasionally she cut flesh from a beast's back, or reached through a wound to carve chunks from an internal organ. The beasts made little protest at the excision of their legs, which soon renewed themselves, but performed prodigies of complaint when their bodies were entered.

While Reith's bones mended his only contacts were with women, a spiritless group, and with Traz Onmale, who spent the greater part of each morning with Reith, talking, inspecting Reith's habiliments, teaching the Kruthe language. This was syntactically regular but

rendered difficult by scores of tenses, moods and aspects. Long after Reith was able to express himself, Traz Onmale, in the stern manner so much at odds with his years, would correct him and indicate still another intricacy of usage.

The world was Tschai, so Reith learned; the moons were Az and Braz. The tribesmen were Kruthe or "Emblem Men," after the devices of silver, copper, stone and wood which they wore on their hats. A man's status was established by his emblem, which was reckoned a semidivine entity in itself, with a name, detailed history, idiosyncrasies and rank. It was not too much to say that rather than the man carrying the emblem, the emblem controlled the man, as it gave him his name and reputation, and defined his tribal role. The most exalted emblem was Onmale, carried by Traz, who prior to assuming the emblem had been an ordinary lad of the tribe. Onmale was the embodiment of wisdom, craft, resolution and the indefinable Kruthe virtue. A man might inherit an emblem, take possession after killing its owner, or fabricate a new emblem for himself. In the latter case, the new emblem held no personality or virtue until it had participated in noteworthy feats and so acquired status. When an emblem changed hands the new owner willy-nilly assumed the personality of the emblem. Certain emblems were mutually antagonistic, and a man coming into possession of one of these at once became the enemy of the holder of the other. Certain emblems were thousands of years old, with complex histories; some were fey and carried a weight of doom; others impelled the wearer to hardihood or some specific sort of berserker elan. Reith was sure that his perception of the symbolic personalities was pale and gray compared to the intensity of the Kruthe's own comprehensions. Without his emblem the tribesman was a man without a face, without prestige or function. He was in fact what Reith presently learned himself to be; a helot, or a woman, the words in the Kruthe language being the same.

Curiously, or so it seemed to Reith, the Emblem Men believed him to be a man from a remote region of Tschai. Far from respecting him for his presence aboard the space-boat, they thought him a subordinate to some non-human race unknown to them, as the Chaschmen were subordinate to the Blue Chasch, or the Dirdirmen to the Dirdir.

When Reith first heard Traz Onmale express this point of view, he refuted the idea indignantly. "I am from Earth, a far planet; we are not ruled by anyone."

"Who built the space-boat then?" Traz Onmale asked in a skeptical voice.

"Men, naturally. Men of Earth."

Traz Onmale gave his head a dubious shake. "How could there be men so far from Tschai?"

Reith gave a laugh of bitter amusement. "I've been asking myself the same question: How did men come to Tschai?"

"The origin of men is well-known," said Traz Onmale in a frigid voice. "We are taught this as soon as we can speak. Did you not receive the same instruction?"

"On Earth we believe that men evolved from a protohominid, which in turn derived from an ancient mammal; and so on back to the first cells."

Traz Onmale looked askance at the women who worked nearby. He gave them a brusque signal. "Be off, we are discussing men's matters."

The women departed with clacking tongues, and Traz Onmale looked after them in disgust.

"The foolishness will be all over camp. The magicians will be annoyed. I must explain to you the true source of men. You have seen the moons. The pink moon is Az, abode of the blessed. The blue moon is Braz, a place of torment, where evil folk and kruthsh' geir* are sent after death. Long ago the moons collided; thousands of folk were dislodged and fell to Tschai. All now seek to return to Az, good and evil alike. But the Judgers, who derive wisdom from the globes they wear, separate good men from the bad and send them to appropriate destinations.

"Interesting," said Reith. "What of the Chasch and the Dirdir?"

"They are not men. They came to Tschai from beyond the stars, as did the Wankh; Chaschmen and Dirdirmen are unclean hybrids. Pnume and Phung are spew of the northern caves. We kill all with zeal." He regarded Reith sidelong, brows knit severely. "If you derive from a world other than Tschai, you cannot be a man, and I should order you killed."

"That seems overly harsh," said Reith. "After all, I have done you no harm."

Traz Onmale made a gesture to indicate that the argument had no relevance. "I will defer judgment."

Reith exercised his stiff limbs, and diligently studied the language. The Kruthe, he learned, held to no fixed range, but wandered the vast Aman Steppe, which spread across the south of the continent known as Kotan. They had no great knowledge of conditions elsewhere on Tschai. There were other continents--Kislovan to the south; Charchan, Kachan, Rakh on the other side of the world. Other nomad tribes roamed the steppe; in the marshes and forests to the south lived ogres and cannibals, with a variety of supernatural powers. The Blue Chasch were established to the far west of Kotan; the Dirdir, who preferred a cold climate, lived on Haulk, a peninsula reached south and west of Kislovan, and on the northeast coast of Charchan.

Another alien race, the Wankh, were also established on Tschai, but the Emblem Men knew little of these folk. Native to Tschai was an eerie race known as the Pnume, also their mad relatives, the Phung, regarding whom the Kruthe were reluctant to speak, lowering their voices and looking over their shoulders when they did so.

Time passed: days of bizarre events, nights of despair and longing for Earth. Reith's bones began to knit and he unobtrusively explored the camp.

About fifty sheds had been erected in the lee of the hill, the roofs butted end to end to form what from the air would seem a fold or declivity on the hillside. Beyond the sheds was a cluster of enormous six-wheeled motor drays, camouflaged under tarpaulins. Reith was awed by the bulk of the vehicles and would have examined them more closely were it not for the band of sallow urchins which followed him about, attentive to his every move. Intuitively they sensed his strangeness and were fascinated. The warriors, however, ignored him; a man without an emblem was little more than a ghost.

At the far end of camp Reith found an enormous machine mounted on a truck: a giant catapult with a thrust-arm fifty feet long. A siege engine? On one side was painted a pink disc, on the other a blue disc: reference, so Reith assumed, to the moons Az and Braz.

Days passed, weeks, a month. Reith could not understand the inactivity of the tribe. They were nomads; why did they keep so long to this particular camp? Every day the four scouts rode forth, while overhead swung the black kite, veering and dipping while the rider's legs

swung doll-like back and forth. The warriors were clearly restive, and occupied themselves practicing the use of their weapons. These were of three sorts: a long flexible rapier with a cutting and stabbing tip, like the tail of a ray; a catapult, which used the energy of elastic cables to shoot short feathered bolts; a triangular shield, a foot in length, nine inches across the base, with sharp elongated corners and razor-sharp side-edges serving additionally as a thrusting and hacking weapon.

Reith was tended first by the eight-year-old urchin, then by a small hunched crone with a face like a raisin, then by a girl who, were it not for her joylessness, might have been attractive. She was perhaps eighteen years old, with regular features, fine blonde hair typically tangled with twigs and bits of fodder. She went barefoot, wearing only a smock of coarse gray homespun.

One day, as Reith sat on a bench, the girl came past. Reith caught her around the waist, pulled her down upon his knee. She smelled of furze and bracken, and the moss of the steppes, and a faintly sour scent of wool. She asked in a husky alarmed voice, "What do you want of me?" And she tried half-heartedly to rise.

Reith found her warm weight comforting. "First, I'll comb the twigs from your hair ... Sit still now." She relaxed, eyes turned sidelong at Reith; puzzled, submissive, uneasy. Reith combed her hair, first with his fingers, then with a chip of broken wood. The girl sat quietly.

"There," said Reith presently. "You look nice."

The girl sat as in a dream. Presently she stirred, rose to her feet. "I must go," she said in a hurried voice. "Someone might see." But she lingered. Reith started to pull her back, then thought better of the impulse and let her hurry away.

The next day she chanced past again, and this time her hair was combed and clean. She paused to look over her shoulder, and Reith could remember the same glance, the same attitude from a hundred occasions on Earth; and the thought made him sick with melancholy. At home the girl would be reckoned beautiful; here on Aman Steppe, she had no more than a dim awareness of such matters ... He held out his hand to her; she approached, as if drawn against her will, which was undoubtedly the case, for she knew the ways of her tribe. Reith put his hands on her shoulders, then around her waist, kissed her. She seemed puzzled. Reith asked, smiling, "Hasn't anyone done that before?"

"No. But it's nice. Do it again."

Reith heaved a deep sigh. Well, why not? ... A step behind him: a buffet sent him sprawling to the ground, accompanied by a spate of words too fast for his understanding. A booted foot struck into his ribs, sending shivers of pain through his mending shoulder.

The man advanced on the cringing girl, who stood with fists pressed to her mouth. He struck her, kicked her, pushed her out into the compound, cursing and bawling insults: "disgusting intimacy with an outland slave; is this your regard for the purity of the race?"

"Slave?" Reith picked himself up from the floor of the shed. The word rang in his mind. Slave?

The girl ran off to huddle under one of the towering wagons. Traz Onmale came to look into the uproar. The warrior, a stalwart buck of about Reith's own age, pointed a quivering finger toward Reith. "He is a curse, a dark omen! Was not all this foretold? Intolerable that he

should spawn among our women! He must be killed, or gelded!"

Traz Onmale looked dubiously toward Reith. "It seems that he did small damage."

"Small damage indeed! But only because I happened past! With so much energy for ardor, why is he not put out to work? Must we pamper his belly while he sits on pillows? Geld him and set him to toil with the women!"

Traz Onmale gave a reluctant assent, and Reith, with a sinking heart, thought of his survival kit dangling from the tree, with its drugs, transcom, spanscope, energy pack, and, most especially, weapons. For all their present benefit to him they might as well be with the Explorator IV.

Traz Onmale had summoned the butcher-woman. "Bring a sharp knife. The slave must be made placid."

"Wait!" gasped Reith. "Is this any way to treat a stranger? Have you no tradition of hospitality?"

"No," said Traz Onmale. "We do not. We are the Kruthe, driven by the force of our Emblems."

"This man struck me," protested Reith. "Is he a coward? Will he fight? What if I took his emblem from him? Would I not then be entitled to his place in the tribe?"

"The emblem itself is the place," Traz Onmale admitted. "This man Osom is the vehicle for the emblem Vaduz. Without Vaduz he would be no better than you. But if Vaduz is content with Osom, as must be so, you could never take Vaduz."

"I can try."

"Conceivably. But you are too late; here is the butcherwoman. Be good enough to disrobe."

Reith turned a horrified glance upon the woman, whose shoulders were broader than his own and inches thicker, and who advanced upon him wearing a face-splitting grin.

"There is still time," muttered Reith. "Ample time." He turned upon Osom Vaduz, who snatched forth his rapier with a shrill whine of steel against hard leather. But Reith had stepped in close, within the six-foot reach of the blade. Osom Vaduz tried to leap back; Reith caught his arm, which was hard as steel; in his present condition Osom Vaduz was by far the stronger man. Osom Vaduz gave his arm a mighty jerk to fling Reith to the ground. Reith pulled in the same direction, swung around to drag Osom Vaduz reeling off-balance. Reith thrust up his shoulder, Osom Vaduz rolled across his hip and crashed to the ground. Reith kicked him in the head, grounding his heel into Osom Vaduz's throat, to crush the windpipe. As Osom Vaduz lay twitching and croaking his hat rolled off; Reith reached for it but the Chief Magician snatched it away.

"No, by no means!" cried the magician in a passion. "This is not our law. You are a slave; a slave you remain!"

"Must I kill you too?" asked Reith, edging ominously forward.

"Enough!" cried Traz Onmale peremptorily. "There has been enough killing. No more!"

"What of the emblem?" asked Reith. "Do you not agree it is mine?"

"I must consider," declared the youth. "In the meanwhile, no more. Butcher-woman, take the body to the pyre. Where are the Judgers? Let them come forth and judge this Osom who carried Vaduz. Emblems, bring forth the engine!"

Reith moved off to the side. A few minutes later he approached Traz Onmale. "If you wish, I will leave the tribe and go off by myself."

"You will know my wishes when they are formulated," declared the lad, with the absolute decisiveness conferred upon him by the Onmale. "Remember, you are my slave; I ordered back the blades which would have killed you. If you try to escape, you will be tracked, taken, flogged. Meanwhile you must gather fodder."

It seemed to Reith as if Traz Onmale were straining for severity, perhaps to divert attention-his own as well as everyone else's-from the unpleasant order he had given to the butcherwoman and which, by implication, he had rescinded.

For a day the dismembered body of Osom, who once had carried the emblem Vaduz, smoldered within a special metal kiln, and the wind blew a vile stench through the camp. The warriors uncovered the monstrous catapult, started the engine and brought it into the center of the compound.

The sun sank behind a bank of graphite-purple clouds; sunset was an angry welter of crimson and brown. Osom's corpse had been consumed; the fire was ashes. With all the tribe crouching in murmurous ranks, the Chief Magician kneaded the ashes with beast-blood to form a cake, which was then packed into a box and lashed to the head of a great shaft.

The magicians looked into the east, where now rose Az the pink moon, almost at the full. The Chief Magician called in a great belling voice: "Az! The Judgers have judged a man and found him good! He is Osom; he carried Vaduz. Make ready, Az! We send you Osom!"

The warriors on the catapult engaged a gear. The great arm swung across the sky; the elastic cables ground with tension. The shaft with Osom's ashes was laid in the channel; the arm was aimed toward Az. The tribe set up a moan, rising to a throaty wail. The magician cried: "Away to Az!"

The catapult gave a heavy twunggg-thwack! The shaft sped away too swiftly to be seen. A moment later, high in the sky, appeared a burst of white fire; and the watchers gave a sigh of exaltation.

For another half-hour the folk of the tribe stood looking up toward Az. Did they envy Osom, Reith wondered, presumably now rejoicing in the Vaduz palace on Az? He sought among the dark shapes, lingering before going to his pallet, until, with a smile of grim amusement for his own weakness, he realized that he was hoping to locate the girl who had occasioned the entire affair.

On the following day Reith was sent forth to gather fodder, a coarse leaf terminating in a drop of dark-red wax. Far from resenting the work, Reith was happy to escape the monotony of the camp.

The rolling hills extended as far as the eye could reach, alternate cusps of amber and black under the windy sky of Tschai. Reith looked south, to the black line of forest, where his ejection seat still hung in a tree, or so he hoped. In the near-future he would ask Traz Onmale to conduct him to the spot ... Someone was watching him. Reith swung around, but saw nothing.

Wary, watching from the corner of his eyes he went about his task, plucking leaves, filling the two baskets he carried on a shoulder-pole. He started down into a swale, where grew a copse of low bushes, with leaves like red and blue flame. He saw the flutter of a gray smock. It was the girl, pretending not to see him. Reith descended to meet her and they stood face to face, she half-smiling, half-cringing, awkwardly twisting her fingers together.

Reith reached forth, took her hands. "If we meet, if we are friends, we'll get in trouble."

The girl nodded. "I know ... Is it true that you are from another world?"

"Yes."

"What is it like?"

"It's hard to describe."

"The magicians are foolish, aren't they? Dead people don't go to Az."

"I hardly think so."

She came closer. "Do that again."

Reith kissed her. Then he took her by the shoulders and held her back. "We can't be lovers. You'd be made unhappy, and get more beatings..."

She shrugged. "I don't care. I wish I could go with you back to Earth."

"I wish you could too," said Reith.

"Do that again," said the girl. Just once more..." She gave a sudden gasp, looking over Reith's shoulder. He jerked around, to see a flicker of movement. There was a hiss, a thud, a heartrending sob of pain. The girl sagged to her knees, fell over on her side, clutching at the feathered bolt buried in her chest. Reith gave a hoarse call, looked wildly here and there.

The skyline was clear; no one could be seen. Reith bent over the girl. Her lips moved, but he could not hear the words. She sighed and relaxed.

Reith stood looking down at the body, rage crowding all rational thought from his mind. He bent, lifted her-she weighed less than he expected-and carried her back to camp, reeling and straining. He took her to the shed of Traz Onmale.

The boy sat on a stool, holding a rapier which he glumly twitched back and forth. Reith lay down the body of the girl as gently as he was able. Traz Onmale looked from the body to Reith with a flinty stare. Reith said, "I met the girl picking fodder. We were talking-and the bolt hit her. It was murder. The bolt might have been meant for me."

Traz Onmale glanced down at the bolt, touched the feathers. Already warriors were

sauntering close. Traz Onmale looked from face to face. "Where is Jad Piluna?"

There were mutters, a hoarse voice, a summons. Jad Piluna approached: one whom Reith had noticed on previous occasions: a man of dash and flair, with a keen high-colored face, a curious V-shaped mouth, conveying, perhaps unintentionally, a continual insolent mirth. Reith stared at him in a fascination of loathing. Here was the murderer.

Traz Onmale held out his hand. "Show me your catapult."

Jad Piluna tossed it, an act of casual disrespect, and Traz Onmale turned up a glittering glance. He looked at the catapult, checked the claw release and the film of grease customarily applied by the warriors after using their weapons. He said: "The grease is disturbed; you have fired this catapult today. The bolt"-he pointed down at the corpse-"has the three black bands of Piluna. You killed the girl."

Jad Piluna's mouth twitched, the V broadened and narrowed. "I meant to kill the man. He is a slave and a heretic. She was no better."

"Who are you to decide? Do you carry Onmale?"

"No. But I maintain that the act was accidental. It is no crime to kill a heretic."

The Chief Magician stepped forward. "The matter of intentional heresy is crucial. This person"-he pointed toward Reith" is clearly a hybrid; I would suppose Dirdirman and Pnumekin. For reasons unknown he has joined the Emblem Men and now circulates heresy. Does he think we are too stupid to notice? How wrong he is! He suborned the young woman; he led her astray; she became worthless. Hence when-

Traz Onmale, again displaying the decisiveness so astonishing in a lad so young, cut him short. "Enough. You talk nonsense. The Piluna is notoriously an emblem of dark deeds. Jad, the carrier, must be brought to account, and Piluna curbed."

"I claim innocence," said Jad Piluna indifferently. "I give myself to the justice of the moons."

Traz Onmale squinted in anger. "Never mind the justice of the moons. I will give you justice."

Jad Piluna gazed at him without concern. "The Onmale is not permitted to fight."

Traz Onmale looked around the group. "Is there no noble emblem to subdue the murderous Piluna?"

None of the warriors responded. Jad Piluna nodded in satisfaction. "The emblems stand aloof. Your call has no effect. But you have laid a slur on Piluna; you have used the word 'murderer.' I demand vindication from the moons."

In a controlled voice Traz Onmale said, "Bring forth the disc."

The Chief Magician departed, to return with a box carved from a single huge bone. He turned to Jad Piluna. "To which moon do you call for justice?"

"I demand vindication from Az, moon of virtue and peace; I ask Az to demonstrate my right."

"Very well," said Traz Onmale. "I beseech Braz, the Hellmoon, to claim you for her own."

The Chief Magician reached into the box, brought forth a disc, on one side pink, on the other blue. "Stand clear, all!" He spun the disc into the air. It tilted, wobbled, seemed to float and glide, and landed with the pink side on top. "Az, moon of virtue, has decided innocence!" called the magician. "Braz has seen no cause to act."

Reith gave a snort of sour amusement. He turned to Traz Onmale. "I call upon the moons for judgment."

"Judgment in regard to what?" demanded the Chief Magician. "Certainly not your heresy! That is demonstrable!"

"I ask that the moon Az concede me the emblem Vaduz, so that I may punish the murderer Jad."

Traz Onmale gave Reith a startled glance.

The Chief Magician cried out in indignation. "Impossible; how can a slave carry an emblem?"

Traz Onmale looked down at the pathetic corpse and gave a curt sign to the magician. "I release him from bondage. Throw the disc to the moons."

The Chief Magician stood curiously stiff and reluctant. "Is this wise? The emblem Vaduz-

"-is hardly the most noble of emblems. Throw."

The magician glanced askance at Jad Piluna. "Throw," said Jad Piluna. "Should the moons give him to the emblem I will cut him into small strips. I have always despised the Vaduz trait."

The magician hesitated, considering first the tall hard-muscled figure of Jad Piluna, then Reith, equally tall but thinner and looser, and still lacking his full vigor.

The Chief Magician, a cautious man, thought to temporize. "The disc is drained of its force; we can have no more judgments."

"Nonsense," said Reith. "The disc is controlled, so you claim, by the power of the moons. How can the disc be drained? Throw the disc!"

"Throw the disc!" ordered Traz Onmale.

"Then you must take Braz, for you are evil and a heretic."

"I have called on Az, which can reject me if it chooses."

The magician shrugged. "As you wish. I will use a fresh disc."

"No!" exclaimed Reith. "The same disc."

Traz Onmale sat erect and leaned forward, his attention once again engaged. "Use the same disc. Throw!"

With an angry gesture the Chief Magician snatched up the disc, spun it high and twinkling into the air. As before, it wobbled, seemed to float, drifted down with the pink face up.

"Az favors the stranger!" declared Traz Onmale. "Fetch the emblem Vaduz!"

The Chief Magician stalked to his shed and brought it forth. Traz Onmale handed it to Reith. "You now carry Vaduz: you are an Emblem Man. Do you then challenge Jad Piluna?"

"I do."

Traz Onmale turned to Jad Piluna. "Are you prepared to defend your emblem?"

"At once." Jad Piluna whipped forth his rapier, flourished it whistling around his head.

"A sword and hand-foil for the new Vaduz," said Traz Onmale.

Reith took the rapier which presently was tendered him. He hefted it, whipped the blade back and forth. Never had he handled so supple a sword, and he had handled many, for swordsmanship was an element of his training. An awkward weapon, in some respects, useless for close-range fighting. The warriors at practice held their distance from each other, swinging, slashing, lunging, swerving the blade down and up, in and out, but using relatively little footwork. The triangular knife-foil for the left hand was also strange. He swung the blade back and forth, watching Jad Piluna from the corner of his eyes, who stood contemptuously at ease.

To attempt to fight the man in his own style was equivalent to suicide, thought Reith.

"Attention!" called Traz Onmale. "Vaduz challenges Piluna. Forty-one such encounters have occurred previously. Piluna has humiliated Vaduz on thirty-four occasions. Emblems, address yourselves."

Jad Piluna instantly lunged; Reith parried without difficulty, hacked down with his own blade: a blow which Jad Piluna glossed off with his knife-shield. As he did so Reith jumped forward, struck with the point of the knife-shield, to puncture Jad Piluna's chest: a trifling wound, but sufficient to destroy Piluna's complacency. Eyes bulging in wrath, the red in his face almost feverish, he leaped back, then launched a furious attack, overwhelming Reith by sheer strength and technical brilliance. Reith was extended to the utmost even to fend away the whistling blade, without thought for counterattack. His shoulder gave a sudden ominous twinge and began to burn; he panted for breath. The blade slashed into his thigh, then his left bicep; confident, gloating, Jad Piluna pressed the attack, expecting Reith to fall back, to be carved into tatters. But Reith lurched forward, knocked aside the blade with his knife-shield, slashed at Jad Piluna's head and struck the black hat askew. Jad Piluna stepped back to set his hat straight but Reith jumped forward again, inside comfortable fighting distance with the rapier. He struck with the knife-shield, batted again at Jad Piluna's hat, knocked it off, and with it the emblem Piluna. Reith dropped the knife-shield, seized the hat. Jad, bereft of Piluna, stood back aghast, his face ringed by brown curls. He lunged; Reith swung the hat, caught the rapier in the ear-flaps. He stabbed with his own rapier, piercing Jad's shoulder.

Jad frantically disengaged his rapier, gave ground, anxious to gain more room, but Reith, panting and sweating, pressed him.

Reith spoke: "I hold the emblem Piluna, which has rejected you in disgust. You, the murderer, are about to die."

Jad gave an inarticulate call, lunged to the attack. Again Reith swung the hat, to catch the rapier in the flaps. He thrust and ran Jad, one-time carrier of Piluna, through the abdomen. Jad struck down with his foil, knocked the rapier from Reith's grip. A grotesque moment he stood looking at Reith in horror and accusation, the blade protruding from his body. He tore it out, flung it aside, advanced on Reith who groped for his dropped knifeshield. As Jad lunged Reith picked up the foil, hurled it point first into Jad's face. The point struck into Jad's open mouth and became fixed, like a fantastic metal tongue. Jad's knees buckled; he collapsed to the ground, and lay with fingers twitching.

Reith, breath rasping in his throat, dropped the hat with proud Piluna into the dirt and went to lean on the pole of a shed.

There was no sound throughout the camp.

Finally Traz Onmale said, "Vaduz has overcome Piluna. The emblem takes on luster. Where are the Judges? Let them come to judge Jad Piluna."

The three magicians came forward, glowering first at the new corpse, at Traz Onmale and sidelong at Reith.

"Judge," ordered Traz Onmale in his harsh, old-man's voice. "Be sure to judge correctly!"

The magicians consulted in a mutter; then the Chief Magician spoke. "Judgment is difficult. Jad lived a hero's life. He served Piluna with distinction."

"He murdered a girl."

"For good cause: the taint of heresy, traffic with an unclean hybrid! What other religious man might not do the same?"

"He acted beyond his competence. I instruct you to judge him evil. Put him on the pyre. When Braz appears, shoot the evil ashes to hell."

"So be it," muttered the Chief Magician.

Traz Onmale went off into his shed.

Reith stood alone at the center of the compound. In uneasy groups the warriors spoke together, glancing toward Reith with distaste. The time was late afternoon; a bank of heavy clouds obscured the sun. There were flickers and twitches of purple lightning, a hoarse mutter of thunder. Women scurried here and there, covering bundles of fodder and jars of food-pod. The warriors bestirred themselves to tighten the lines holding the tarpaulins down over the great wagons.

Reith looked down at the girl's corpse, which no one seemed interested in carrying away. To allow the body to lie out all night in the rain and wind was unthinkable. Already the pyre was alight, ready to receive the hulk of Jad. Reith lifted the girl's body, carried it to the pyre and, ignoring the complaints of the old women who tended the flames, laid the body into the kiln with as much composure and grace as he could manage.

With the first spatters of rain, Reith went to that storage shed which had been given over to his use.

Outside the rain pelted down. Sodden women built a rude shelter over the pyre and continued to feed the flames with brush.

Someone came into the shed. Reith backed into the shadows, then the firelight shone on the face of Traz Onmale. He seemed somber, dejected. "Reith Vaduz, where are you?"

Reith came forth. Traz Onmale looked at him, gave his head a glum shake. "Since you have been with the tribe, everything has gone wrong! Dissension, anger, death. The scouts return with news only of empty steppe. Piluna has been tainted. The magicians are at odds with the Onmale. Who are you, why do you bring us such woe?"

"I am what I told you I am," said Reith: "a man from Earth."

"Heresy," said Traz Onmale, without heat. "Emblem Men are the spill of Az. So say the magicians, at least."

Reith pondered a moment, then said, "When ideas are in contradiction, as here, the more powerful ideas usually win. Sometimes this is bad, sometimes good. The society of the Emblems seems bad to me. A change would be for the better. You are ruled by priests who-"

"No," said the boy decisively. "Onmale rules the tribe. I carry that emblem; it speaks through my mouth."

"To some extent. The priests are clever enough to have their own way."

"What do you intend? Do you wish to destroy us?"

"Of course not. I want to destroy no one-unless it becomes necessary to my own survival."

The boy heaved a heavy sigh. "I am confused. You are wrong-or the magicians are wrong."

"The magicians are wrong. Human history on Earth goes back ten thousand years."

Traz Onmale laughed. "Once, before I carried Onmale, the tribe entered the ruins of old Carcegus and there captured a Pnumekin. The magicians tortured him to gain knowledge, but he spoke only to curse each minute of the fifty-two thousand years that men had lived on Tschai ... Fifty-two thousand years against your ten thousand years. It is all very strange."

"Very strange indeed."

Traz Onmale rose to his feet, looked up into the sky, where wind-driven wrack flew across the night sky. "I have been watching the moons," he said in a thin voice. "The magicians are watching likewise. The portents are poor; I believe that there is about to be a conjunction. If Az covers Braz, all is well. If Braz covers Az, then someone new will carry Onmale."

"And you?"

"I must carry aloft the wisdom of Onmale, and set matters right." And Traz Onmale departed the shed.

The tempest roared across the steppe: a night, a day, a second night. On the morning of the

second day the sun rose into a clear windy sky. The scouts rode forth as usual, to return pellmell at noon. There was an instant explosion of activity. Tarpaulins were folded, sheds were struck, packed into bundles. Women loaded the drays; warriors rubbed their leap-horses with oil, threw on saddles, attached reins to the sensitive frontal palps. Reith approached Traz Onmale. "What goes on?"

"A caravan from the east has been sighted at long last. We shall attack along the Ioba River. As Vaduz you may ride with us and take a share of plunder."

He ordered a leap-horse; Reith mounted the ill-smelling beast with trepidation. It jerked to the unfamiliar weight, thrashing up its knob of a tail. Reith yanked at the reins; the leap-horse crouched and sprang off across the steppe while Reith held on for dear life. From behind came a roar of laughter: the hooting and jeering of experts for the tribulations of a tenderfoot.

Reith finally brought the leap-horse under control and came plunging back. A few moments later the group swept off to the northeast, the black long-necked brutes lunging and foaming, the warriors leaning forward on the saddleplats, knees drawn up, black leather hats flapping; Reith could not help but feel an archaic thrill at riding in the savage cavalcade.

For an hour the Emblem Men pounded across the steppe, bending low when they crossed over skylines. The rolling hills flattened; ahead lay a vast expanse streaked with shadows and dull colors. The troop halted on a hill while the warriors pointed here and there. Traz Onmale now gave orders. Reith pulled his mount up close and strained to listen. "-the south track to the ford. We wait in Bellbird Covert. The Ilanths will make the ford first; they will scout Zad Woods and White Hill. Then we sweep upon the center and make off with the treasure vans. Is all clear? So onward, to Bellbird Covert!"

Down the long slope rushed the Emblems, toward a far line of tall trees and a group of isolated bluffs overlooking Ioba River. In the shelter of a deep forest the Emblem warriors concealed themselves.

Time passed. From afar sounded a faint rumble, and the caravan appeared. Several hundred yards in advance rode three splendid yellow-skinned warriors, wearing black caps surmounted by jawless human skulls. Their beasts were similar to, but larger and rather more bland than the leap-horses; they carried sidearms and short swords, with short rifles laid across their laps.

Now, from the standpoint of the Emblems, everything went awry. The Ilanths failed to plunge across the river but waited watchfully for the caravan. To the river-bank lumbered motordrays with six-foot wheels, piled to astonishing heights with bales, parcels and in certain cases, cages in which huddled men and women.

The caravan commander was a cautious man. Before the drays attempted the ford, he stationed gun-carts to command all the approaches, then sent Ilanths to scout the opposite bank.

In Bellbird Covert the Emblem warriors cursed and fumed. "Wealth, wealth! Goods galore! Sixty prime wagons! But suicide to attempt an attack."

"True. The sand-blasts would strike us down like birds!"

"Is it this for which we waited three tedious months in the Walgram Rolls? Is our luck then so vile?"

"The omens were wrong; last night I looked up at blessed Az; I saw it jib and careen through the clouds: a definite admonition."

"Nothing goes right, all our ventures are thwarted! We are under the influence of Braz."

"Braz-or the work of the black-haired sorcerer who slew Jad Piluna."

"True! And he has come to scathe the raid, where we have always enjoyed success!"

And sour looks began to be turned toward Reith, who made himself inconspicuous.

The war leaders conferred. "We can achieve nothing; we would strew the field with dead warriors and drown our Emblems in Ioba River."

"Well, then-shall we follow and attack at night?"

"No. They are too well-guarded. The commander is Baojian; he takes no risks! His soul to Braz!"

"So, then-three months dawdling for naught!"

"Better for naught than for disaster! Back to camp. The women will have all packed, and so east to Meraghan."

"East, more destitute than when we came west! What abominable luck."

"The omens, the omens! All are at odds!"

"Back to camp, then; nothing for us here."

The warriors swung about and without a backward look sent the leap-horses plunging south across the steppe.

During the early evening, surly and glum, the troop arrived back at the campsite. The women, who had all packed, were cursed for neglect; why were not cauldrons bubbling? pots of beer ready to hand?

The women bawled and cursed in return, only to be drubbed. All hands finally pulled gear and food helter-skelter from the drays.

Traz Onmale stood brooding apart, while Reith was pointedly ignored. The warriors ate hugely, grumbling all the while, then, seated and exhausted, lay back beside the fire.

Az had already risen, but now up into the sky sailed the blue moon Braz, angling athwart the course of Az. The magicians were first to notice and stood with arms pointing in awe and premonition.

The moons converged; it seemed as if they would collide. The warriors gave guttural sounds of dread. But Braz moved before the pink disc, eclipsing it utterly. The Chief Magician gave a wild bellow to the sky: "So be it! So be it!"

Traz Onmale turned and went slowly off to the shadows where by chance stood Reith. "What

is all the tumult?" Reith asked.

"Did you not see? Braz overpowered Az. Tomorrow night I must go to Az to expiate our wrongs. No doubt you will go as well to Braz."

"You mean, by way of fire and catapult?"

"Yes. I am lucky to have carried Omnale as long as I have. The bearer before me was not much more than half my age when he was sent to Az."

"Do you think this ritual has any practical value?"

Traz Onmale hesitated. Then: "It is what they expect; they will demand that I cut my throat into the fire. So I must obey."

"Better that we leave now," said Reith. "They will sleep like logs. When they awake we will be far from here."

"What? The two of us? Where would we fare?"

"I don't know. Is there no land where folk live without murder?"

"Perhaps such places exist. But not on Aman Steppe."

"If we could take possession of the scout-boat, and if I were given time to repair it, we could leave Tschai and return to Earth."

"Impossible. The Chasch took the ship. It is lost to you forever."

"So I fear. In any case, we'd do better to depart now than wait to be killed tomorrow."

Traz Onmale stood staring up at the moons. "Onmale orders me to stay. I cannot pervert the Onmale. It has never fled; it has always pursued duty to the death."

"Duty doesn't include futile suicide," said Reith. He made a sudden motion, seized Traz Onmale's hat, wrenched loose the emblem. Traz gave a croak of almost physical pain, then stood staring at Reith. "What do you do? It is death to touch the Onmale!"

"You are no longer Traz Onmale; you are Traz."

The boy seemed to shrink, to lessen in stature. "Very well," he said in a subdued voice. "I do not care to die." He looked around the camp. "We must go afoot. If we try to harness leap-horses they will scream and gnash their horns. You wait here. I will fetch cloaks and a parcel of food." He departed, leaving Reith with the emblem of Onmale.

In the light of the moons he looked at it and it seemed to stare back at him, issuing orders of baleful import. Reith dug a hole in the ground, dropped in Onmale. It seemed to shiver, give a soundless shriek of anguish; he covered the gleaming emblem, feeling haunted and guilty, and when he rose to his feet his hands were shaking and clammy, and sweat trickled down his back.

Time passed: an hour? Two hours? Reith was unable to estimate. Since arriving on Tschai his time sense had gone awry.

The moons slid down the sky; midnight approached, passed; night sounds came in off the steppe; a faint high-pitched yelping of nighthounds, a great muffled belch. In the camp the fires dwindled to embers; the mutter of voices ceased.

The boy came silently up behind him. "I'm ready. Here is your cloak and a pack of food."

Reith was aware that he spoke in a new voice, less certain, less brusque. His black hat seemed strangely plain. He looked at Reith's hands and briefly around the shed, but made no inquiry concerning the Onmale.

They slipped off to the north, climbed the hillside so as to walk along the ridge. "We'll be easier for the night-hounds to see," muttered Traz, "but the attenders keep to the shadows of the swales."

"If we can reach the forest, and the tree where I hope my harness still hangs, we'll be considerably safer. Then..." He paused. The future was a blank expanse.

They gained the crest of the hill and halted a moment to rest. The high moons cast a wan light across the steppes, filling the hollows with darkness. From not too far to the north came a series of low wails. "Down," hissed Traz. "Lie flat. The hounds are running."

They lay without moving for fifteen minutes. The eerie cries sounded again, toward the east. "Come," said Traz. "They're circling the camp, hoping for a staked child."

They struck off to the south, up and down, avoiding the dark swales as much as possible. "The night is old," said Traz. "When light comes the Emblems will trail us. If we reach the river we can lose them. If the marshmen take us, we'll fare as badly, or worse."

For two hours they walked. The eastern sky began to show a watery yellow light, barred by streaks of black cloud, and ahead rose the loom of the forest. Traz looked back the way they had come. "The camp will be astir. The women will be fire-building. Presently the magicians will come to seek out the Onmale. That would have been me. Since I am gone the camp will be in turmoil. There will be curses and shouts: high anger. The Emblems will run to their leap-horses, and be off pellmell!" Once more Traz searched the horizons. "They'll be along soon."

The two walked, and reached the edge of the forest, still dark and dank and pooled with night shadows. Traz hesitated, looking into the forest, then back across the steppes.

"How far to the bog?" asked Reith.

"Not far. A mile or two. But I smell a berl."

Reith tested the air and detected an acrid fetor.

"It might be only the spoor," said Traz in a husky voice. "The Emblems will be here in a very few minutes. We'd best try to reach the river."

"First the ejection harness!"

Traz gave a fatalistic shrug, plunged into the forest. Reith turned a last look over his shoulder. At the far dim edge of vision a set of hurrying black specks had appeared. He

hurried after Traz, who moved with great care, stopping to listen and smell the air. In a fever of impatience Reith pressed at his back. Traz speeded his pace, and presently they were almost running over the sodden leaf-mold. From far behind Reith thought to hear a set of savage boots.

Traz stopped short. "Here is the tree." He pointed up. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," said Reith with heartfelt relief. "I was afraid it might be gone."

Traz climbed the tree, lowered the seat. Reith snapped open the flap, with drew his hand-gun, kissed it in rapture, thrust it in his belt.

"Hurry," said Traz anxiously. "I hear the Emblems; they're not far behind."

Reith pulled forth the survival pack, buckled it on his back. "Let's go. Now they follow at their own risk."

Traz led the way around the bog, taking pains to conceal the signs of their passage, doubling back, swinging across a twenty-foot finger of black muck on a hanging branch, climbing another tree, letting it bend beneath his weight to carry him sixty feet away to the opposite side of a dense clump of reeds. Reith followed each of his ploys. The voices of the Emblem warriors were now clearly audible.

Traz and Reith reached the edge of the river, a slow-flowing flood of black-brown water. Traz found a raft of driftwood, dead lianas, humus, held together by living reeds. He pushed it off into the stream. Then he and Reith hid in a nearby clump of reeds. Five minutes passed; four of the Emblem Men came crashing through the bog along their trail, followed by a dozen more, with catapults at the ready. They ran to the river's edge, pointed to the marks where Traz had dislodged the raft, searched the face of the river. The mass of floating vegetation had drifted almost two hundred yards downstream and was being carried by a swirl in the current to the other bank. The Emblems gave cries of fury, turned and raced at top speed through the murk and tangle, along the bank toward the drifting raft.

"Quick," whispered Traz. "They won't be fooled long. We'll go back along their tracks."

Back away from the river, across the bog and once more into the forest, Traz and Reith ran, the calls and shouts at first receding to the side, then becoming silent, then once again raised in a sound of furious exultation. "They've picked up our trail once again," gasped Traz. "They'll be coming on leap-horses; we'll never-" He stopped short, held up his hand, and Reith became aware of the acrid half-sweet fetor once again. "The berl," whispered Traz. "Through here ... Up this tree."

With the survival pack dangling at his back Reith followed the boy up the oily green branches of a tree. "Higher," said Traz. "The beast can lunge high."

The berl appeared: a lithe brown monster with a wicked boar's-head split by a vast mouth. From its neck protruded a pair of long arms terminating in great horny hands which it held above its head. It seemed to be intent on the calls of the warriors and paid no heed to Traz and Reith other than a single swift glance up toward them. Reith thought he had never seen such evil in a face before. "Ridiculous. It's only a beast..."

The creature disappeared through the forest; a moment later the sound of pursuit halted abruptly. "They smell the berl," said Traz. "Let's be off."

They climbed down from the tree, fled to the north. From behind them came yells of horror, a guttural gnashing roar.

"We're safe from the Emblems," said Traz in a hollow voice. "Those who live will depart." He turned Reith a troubled glance. "When they go back to the camp there will be no Onmale. What will happen? Will the tribe die?"

"I don't think so," said Reith. "The magicians will see to that."

Presently they emerged from the forest. The steppe spread flat and empty, drenched in an aromatic honey-colored light. Reith asked, "What is to the west of us?"

"The West Aman and the country of the Old Chasch. Then the Jang Pinnacles. Beyond are the Blue Chasch and the Aesedra Bight."

"To the south?"

"The marshes. The marsh men live there, on rafts. They are different from us: little yellow people with white eyes. Cruel and cunning as Blue Chasch."

"They have no cities?"

"No. There are cities there"-Traz made a gesture generally toward the north-"all ruined. There are old cities everywhere along the steppes. They are haunted, and there are Phung, as well, who live among the ruins."

Reith asked further questions regarding the geography and life of Tschai, to find Traz's knowledge spotty. The Dirdir and Dirdirmen lived beyond the sea; where, he was uncertain. There were three types of Chasch: the Old Chasch, a decadent remnant of a once-powerful race, now concentrated around the Jang Pinnacles; the Green Chasch, nomads of the Dead Steppe; and the Blue Chasch. Traz detested all the Chasch indiscriminately, though he had never seen Old Chasch. "The Green are terrible: demons! They keep to the Dead Steppe. The Emblems stay to the south, except for raids and caravan pillage. The caravan we failed to loot skirted far south to avoid the Greens."

"Where was it bound?"

"Probably Pera, or maybe to Jalkh on the Lesmatic Sea. Most likely Pera. North-South caravans trade between Jalkh and Mazuun. EastWest caravans move between Pera and Coad."

"These are cities where men live?"

Traz shrugged. "Hardly cities. Settled places. But I know little, only what I have heard the magicians say. Are you hungry? I am. Let us eat."

On a fallen log they sat and ate chunks of caked porridge and drank from leather flasks of beer. Traz pointed to a low weed on which grew small white globules. "We'll never starve so long as pilgrim plant grows ... And see yonder black clumps? That is watak. The roots store a gallon of sap. If you drink nothing but watak you become deaf, but for short periods there is no harm."

Reith opened his survival pack: "I can draw water from the ground with this sheet of film, or convert sea-water with this purifier ... These are food pills, enough for a month This is an energy cell ... A medical kit ... Knife, compass, scanscope Transcom ..." Reith examined the transcom with a sudden thrill of interest.

"What is that device?" asked Traz.

"Half of a communication system. There was another in Paul Waunder's pack, which went with the space-boat. I can broadcast a signal which will bring an automatic response from the other set and give the other set's location." Reith pushed the Find button. A compass arrow swung to the northwest; a counter flashed a white 6.2 and a red 2. "The other set-and presumably the space-boat-is 6.2 times 10 to the second, or 620 miles northwest."

"That would be in the country of the Blue Chasch. We knew that already."

Reith looked off to the northwest, ruminating. "We don't want to go south into the marshes, or back into the forest. What lies to the east, beyond the steppes?"

"I don't know. I think the Draschade Ocean. It is far away."

"Is that where the caravans come from?"

"Coad is on a gulf which connects to the Draschade. Between is all of Aman Steppe, the Emblem Men and other tribes as well: the Kite-fighters, the Mad Axes, the Berl Totems, the Yellow Blacks and others beyond my knowledge."

Reith considered. His space-boat had been taken by the Blue Chasch into the northwest. Northwest therefore seemed the most reasonable direction in which to fare.

Traz sat dozing, chin on his chest. Wearing Onmale he had demonstrated a bleak unrelenting nature; now, with the soul of the emblem lifted from his own, he had become forlorn and wistful, though still far more reserved than Reith thought natural.

Reith's own eyelids were drooping with fatigue: the sunlight was warm; the spot seemed secure ... What if the berl should return? Reith forced himself to wakefulness. While Traz slept he repacked his gear.

CHAPTER THREE

TRAZ AWOKE. HE turned Reith a sheepish look and rose quickly to his feet.

Reith arose; they set forth: by some unspoken understanding into the northwest. The time was middle morning, the sun a tarnished brass disc in the slate sky. The air was pleasantly cool, and for the first time since his arrival on Tschai Reith felt a lifting of the spirits. His body was mended, he had recovered his equipment, he knew the general location of the scout-boat: immeasurable improvement over his previous situation.

They trudged steadily across the steppe. The forest became a dark blur behind them: elsewhere the horizons were empty. After their midday meal they slept for a period; then, awakening in the late afternoon, they went on into the northwest.

The sun dropped into a bank of low clouds, casting an embroidery of dull copper over the top. There was no shelter on the open steppe; with nothing better to do they walked on.

The right was quiet and still; far to the east they heard the wailing of night-hounds but were not molested.

The following day they finished the food and water from the packs which Traz had supplied and began to subsist on the pods of pilgrim plant and sap from watak roots: the first bland, the second acid.

On the morning of the third day they saw a fleck of white drifting across the western sky. Traz flung himself flat behind a low shrub and motioned Reith to do likewise. "Dirdir! They hunt!"

Reith brought forth his scanscope, sighted on the object. With elbows on the ground he zoomed the magnification to fifty diameters, when air vibration began to confuse the image. He saw a long flat boat-like hull, riding the air on rakish cusps and odd half-crescents: an aesthetic style, apparently, rather than utilitarian design. Crouched on the hull were four pale shapes, unidentifiable as Dirdir or Dirdirmen. The flyer traveled a course roughly parallel to their own, passing several miles to the west. Reith wondered at Traz's tension. He asked, "What do they hunt?"

"Men."

"For sport?"

"For sport. For food, as well. They eat man-meat."

"I'd like to have that flyer," mused Reith. He rose to his feet, ignoring Traz's frantic protests. But the Dirdir flyer disappeared into the north. Traz relaxed, but searched the sky.

"Sometimes they fly high and look down until they spot a lone warrior. Then they drop like perriaults, to noose the man, or engage him with electric swords."

They walked on, always north and west. Toward sunset Traz once again became uneasy, for reasons Reith could not discern, though there was a particularly eerie quality to the landscape. The sun, obscured by a mist, was small and dim and cast a light as wan as lymph over the vastness of the steppe. There was nothing to be seen save their own long shadows behind them, but as Traz walked he looked this way and that, pausing at times to search the way they had come. Reith finally asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Something is following us."

"Oh?" Reith turned to look back across the steppe. "How do you know?"

"It is a feeling I have."

"What would it be?"

"Pnumekin, who travel unseen. Or it might be nighthounds."

"Pnumekin: they are men, are they not?"

"Men in a sense. They are the spies, the couriers of the Pnume. Some say that tunnels run

beneath the steppe, with secret entrance traps, perhaps under that very bush!"

Reith examined the bush toward which Traz had directed his attention, but it seemed ordinary enough. "Would they harm us?"

"Not unless the Pnume wanted us dead. Who knows what the Pnume want? ... More likely the night-hounds are out early."

Reith brought forth his scanscope. He searched the steppe, but discovered nothing.

"Tonight," said Traz, "we had best build a fire."

The sun sank in a sad display of purple and mauve and brown. Traz and Reith collected a pile of brush and set a fire.

Traz's instinct had been accurate. As dusk deepened to dark a soft wailing sounded to the east, to be answered by a cry to the north and another to the south. Traz cocked his catapult. "They're not afraid of fire," he told Reith. "But they avoid the light, from cleverness ... Some say they are a kind of animal Pnume."

The night-hounds surrounded them, moving just beyond range of the firelight, showing as dark shapes, with an occasional flash of lambent white eye-discs.

Traz kept his catapult ready. Reith brought forth his gun and his energy cell. The first fired tiny explosive needles, and was accurate to a distance of fifty yards. The cell was a multiple-purpose device. At one end a crystal emitted either a beam or a flood of light at the touch of a switch. A socket allowed the recharging of the scanscope and the transcom. At the other end a trigger released a gush of raw energy, but seriously depleted the energy available for future use, and Reith regarded the energy cell as an emergency weapon only.

With night-hounds circling the fire he kept both weapons ready, determined not to waste a charge unless it was absolutely necessary. A shape came close; Traz fired his catapult. The bolt struck home; the black shape bounded high, giving a contralto call of woe.

Traz re-cocked the catapult, and put more brush on the fire. The shapes moved uneasily, then began to run in circles.

Traz said gloomily, "Soon they will lunge. We are as good as dead. A troop of six men can hold off night-hounds; five men are almost always killed."

Reith reluctantly took up his energy-cell. He waited. Closer, in from the shadows danced and spun the night-hounds. Reith aimed, pulled the trigger, turned the beam halfway around the circle. The surviving night-hounds screamed in horror. Reith stepped around the fire to complete the job, but the night-hounds were gone and presently could be heard grieving in the distance.

Traz and Reith took turns sleeping. Each thought he kept sharp lookout, but in the morning, when they went to look for corpses, all had been dragged away. "Crafty creatures!" said Traz in a marveling voice. "Some say they talk to the Pnume, and report all the events of the steppe."

"What then? Do the Pnume act on the information?"

Traz shrugged doubtfully. "When something terrible happens it is safe to assume that the Pnume have been at work."

Reith looked all around, wondering where Pnume or Pnumekin, or even night-hounds, could hide. In all directions lay the open steppe, dim in the sepia dawn gloom.

For breakfast they ate pilgrim pod and drank watak sap. Then once more they began their march northwest.

Late in the afternoon they saw ahead an extensive tumble of gray rubble which Traz identified as a ruined city, where safety from the night-hounds could be had at the risk of encountering bandits, Green Chasch or Phung. At Reith's question, Traz described these latter: a weird solitary species similar to the Pnume, only larger and characterized by an insane craft which made them terrible even to the Green Chasch.

As they approached the ruins Traz told gloomy tales of the Phung and their macabre habits. "Still, the ruins may be empty. We must approach with caution."

"Who built these old cities?" asked Reith.

Traz shrugged. "No one knows. Perhaps the Old Chasch; perhaps the Blue Chasch. Perhaps the Gray Men, though no one really believes this."

Reith sorted over what he knew of the Tschai races and their human associates. There were Dirdir and Dirdirmen; Old Chasch, Green Chasch, Blue Chasch and Chaschmen; Pnume and the human-derived Pnumekin; the yellow marsh-men, the various tribes of nomads, the fabulous "Golds," and now the "Gray Men."

"There are Wankh and Wankhmen as well," said Traz. "On the other side of Tschai."

"What brought all these races to Tschai?" Reith asked—a rhetorical question, for he knew that Traz would have no answer; and Traz gave only a shrug in reply.

They came to mounds of silted-over rubble, slabs of tip-tilted concrete, shards of glass: the outskirts of the city.

Traz stopped short, listened, craned his neck uneasily, brought his catapult to the ready. Reith, looking about, could see nothing threatening; slowly they moved on, into the heart of the ruins. The old structures, once lofty halls and grand palaces, were toppled, decayed, with only a few white pillars, posts, pedestals lifting into the dark Tschai sky. Between were platforms and piazzas of wind-scoured stone and concrete.

In the central plaza a fountain bubbled up from an underground spring or aquifer. Traz approached with great circumspection. "How can there fail to be Phung?" he muttered. "Even now—" and he scrutinized the tumbled masonry around the plaza with great care. Reith tasted the water, then drank. Traz, however, hung back. "A Phung has been here."

Reith could see no evidence of the fact. "How do you know?"

Traz gave a half-diffident shrug, reluctant to expatiate upon a matter so obvious. His attention was diverted to another more urgent matter; he looked apprehensively around the sky, sensing something below the threshold of Reith's perceptions. Suddenly he pointed. "The Dirdir boat!" They took shelter under an overhanging slab of concrete; a moment later

the flyer skimmed so close above that they could hear the swish of air from the repulsors.

The flyer swung in a great circle, returned to hover over the plaza at a height of two hundred yards.

"Strange," whispered Traz. "It's almost as if they know we're here."

"They may be searching the ground with an infrared screen," whispered Reith. "On Earth we can track a man by the warmth of his footprints."

The flyer floated off to the west, then gathered speed and disappeared. Traz and Reith went back out upon the plaza. Reith drank more water, relishing the cold clarity after three days of watak sap. Traz preferred to hunt the large roach-like insects which lived among the rubble. These he skinned with a quick jerk of the fingers and ate with relish. Reith was not sufficiently hungry to join him.

The sun sank behind broken columns and shattered arches; a peach-colored haze hung over the steppe which Traz thought to be a portent of changing weather. For fear of rain, Reith wished to take shelter under a slab, but Traz would not hear of it. "The Phung! They would sniff us out!" He selected a pedestal rising thirty feet above a crumbled staircase as a secure place to pass the night. Reith looked glumly at a bank of clouds coming up from the south but made no further protest. The two carried up armloads of twigs and fronds for a bed.

The sun sank; the ancient city became dim. Into the plaza wandered a man, reeling with fatigue. He rushed to the fountain and drank greedily.

Reith brought out his scanscope. The man was tall, slender, with long legs and arms, a long fallow head quite bald, round eyes, a small button nose, minute ears. He wore the tatters of a once-elegant garment of pink and blue and black; on his head was an extravagant confection of pink puffs and black ribbons. "Dirdirman," whispered Traz, and bringing forth his catapult, took aim.

"Wait!" protested Reith. "What do you do?"

"Kill him, of course."

"He is not harming us! Why not give the poor devil his life?"

"He only lacks the opportunity," grumbled Traz, but he put aside the catapult. The Dirdirman, turning away from the fountain, looked carefully around the plaza.

"He seems to be lost," muttered Reith. "I wonder if the Dirdir boat was seeking him. Could he be a fugitive?"

Traz shrugged. "Perhaps; who knows?"

The Dirdirman came wearily across the plaza and took shelter only a few yards from the foot of the pedestal, where he wrapped himself in his tattered garments and bedded himself down. Traz grumbled under his breath and lay back into the twigs and seemed to go instantly to sleep. Reith looked out across the old city and mused upon his extraordinary destiny ... Az appeared in the east, glowing pale pink through the haze to send a strange light along the ancient avenues. The vista was one of eerie fascination: a scene unreal, the

stuff of strange dreams. Now Braz lifted into the sky; the broken columns and toppled structures cast double shadows. One particular shape at the end of an avenue resembled a brooding statue. Reith wondered why he had not noticed it previously. It was a gaunt-man-shaped figure seven or eight feet tall, legs somewhat apart, head bowed as if in intense concentration, one hand under the chin, the other behind the back. The head was covered by a soft hat with a drooping brim; a cloak hung from the shoulders; the legs seemed encased in boots. Reith looked more intently. A statue? Why did it not move?

Reith brought forth his scanscope. The creature's visage was in dark shadow; but, adjusting focus, zoom and gain, Reith was able to glimpse a long, gaunt countenance. The gnarled halfhuman, half-insect features were set in a frozen grimace; as Reith watched, the mouth-parts worked slowly, moving in and out ... The creature moved, taking a single long stealthy step forward, again freezing into position. It held a long arm aloft in a minatory gesture, for no purpose comprehensible to Reith. Traz had awakened; he followed Reith's gaze. "Phung!"

The creature whirled about as if it had heard the sound and danced two great strides to the side.

"They are insane," whispered Traz. "Mad demons."

The Dirdirman was not yet aware of the Phung. He fretfully moved his cloak, trying to make himself comfortable. The Phung made a gesture of gleeful surprise, and gave three bounds which took him to a spot only six feet from the Dirdirman, who still fidgeted with his cloak. The Phung stood looking down, again nonmoving. It stooped, picked up several small bits of gravel. Holding its long arm over the Dirdirman, it dropped one of the pebbles.

The Dirdirman gave a fretful jerk, but, still not seeing the Phung, settled himself again. Reith winced and called out: "Hey!,"

Traz hissed in consternation. The effect upon the Phung was comical. It gave a great leap back, turned to stare toward the pedestal, arms outspread in extravagant surprise. The Dirdirman, on his knees, discovered the Phung, and could not move for horror.

"Why did you do that?" cried Traz. "It would have been content with the Dirdirman."

"Shoot it with your catapult," Reith told him.

"Bolts won't touch it, swords won't cut it."

"Shoot at its head."

Traz gave a despairing sound, but bringing forth his catapult, he aimed and snapped the release. The bolt sped toward the pallid face. At the last second, the head jerked aside, the bolt clashed against a stone buttress.

The Phung picked up a chunk of rock, swung back its long arm, hurled the rock with tremendous force. Traz and Reith fell flat; the stone splintered behind them. Reith wasted no further time and aimed his gun at the creature. He touched the button; there was a click, a hiss; the needle struck into the Phung's thorax, exploded. The Phung leapt into the air, uttered a croak of dismay and came down in a heap.

Traz clutched Reith's shoulder. "Kill the Dirdirman, quick! Before he flees."

Reith descended from the pedestal. The Dirdirman snatched forth his sword; apparently the only weapon he carried. Reith put his gun in his belt, held up his hand. "Put up your sword; we have no reason to fight."

The Dirdirman, puzzled, moved back a step. "Why did you kill the Phung?"

"It was about to kill you; why else?"

"But we are strangers! And you"-the Dirdirman peered through the gloom-"are sub-men. Do you think to kill me yourself? If so-"

"No," said Reith. "I only want information; then, so far as I am concerned, you may go on your way."

The Dirdirman grimaced. "You are as mad as the Phung. Still, why should I persuade you differently?" He came a step or two forward, to inspect Reith and Traz at closer range. "Do you inhabit this place?"

"No; we are travelers."

"Then you would not know of a place suitable for me to spend the night?"

Reith pointed to a pedestal. "Climb to the top, as we have done."

The Dirdirman gave his fingers a petulant flicker. "That is not to my taste, not at all. And there may well be rain." He looked back to the slab of concrete under which he had taken shelter, then to the corpse of the Phung. "You are an obliging pair: docile and intelligent. As you see, I am tired and must be allowed to rest. You are at hand; I would like you to stand guard while I sleep."

"Kill the nauseous brute!" muttered Traz in a passion.

The Dirdirman laughed: a queer gasping chuckle. "That's more the way of a sub-man!" He spoke to Reith. "Now you are a queer one. I can't place your type. Some strange hybrid? Where, then, is your home region?"

Reith had decided that the less attention drawn to himself the better; he would say no more of his terrestrial origin. But Traz, stung by the Dirdirman's condescension, cried out: "Not a region! He is from Earth, a far world! The home of true men like myself! You are a freak!"

The Dirdirman wagged his head reproachfully. "Of madfolk, a pair. Well, then, what can one expect?"

Reith, uncomfortable at Traz's disclosures, quickly changed the subject. "What do you do here? Was the Dirdir flyer searching for you?"

"Yes, I fear so. They did not find me, I took good care to ensure."

"You are a fugitive?"

"Precisely."

"What is your crime?"

"No matter; you would hardly understand; it is beyond your capabilities."

Reith, more amused than annoyed, turned back to the pedestal. "I plan to sleep. If you intend to live till morning, I suggest that you climb high, out of reach of the Phung."

"I am puzzled by your solicitude," was the Dirdirman's wry remark.

Reith made no reply. He and Traz returned to their pedestal and the Dirdirman gingerly climbed another nearby.

The night passed. The clouds pressed heavily upon them, but produced no rain. Dawn came imperceptibly; and presently brought light the color of dirty water. The Dirdirman's pedestal was bare. Reith assumed that he had gone his way. He and Traz descended to the plaza, built a small fire to dispel the chill. Across the plaza the Dirdirman appeared.

Observing no signs of hostility, he approached step by step, at last to stand a wistful fifty feet away, a long loose-limbed harlequin with garments much the worse for wear. Traz scowled and prodded the fire, but Reith gave him a civil greeting: "Join us, if you're of a mind."

Traz muttered, "A mistake! The creature will do us harm! Such as he are smooth-tongued and supercilious; and man-eaters to boot."

Reith had forgotten this latter characteristic and gave the Dirdirman a frowning inspection.

For a period there was silence. Then the Dirdirman said tentatively, "The longer I consider your conduct, your garments, your gear, the more puzzled I become. Whence did you claim to originate?"

"I made no claims," said Reith. "What of yourself?"

"No secret there. I am Ankhe at Afram Anacho; I was born a man at Zumberwal in the Fourteenth Province. Now, having been declared a criminal and a fugitive, I am of no greater consequence than yourselves, and I will make no pretensions otherwise. So here we are, three unkempt wanderers huddled around a fire."

Traz growled under his breath. Reith, however, found the Dirdirman's frivolity, if such it was, refreshing. He asked, "What was your crime?"

"You would find it difficult to understand. Essentially, I disregarded the perquisites of a certain Enze Edo Ezdowirram, who brought me to the attention of the First Race. I trusted to ingenuity and refused to be chastened. I compounded my original offense; I exacerbated the situation a dozen times over. At last in a spasm of irritation, I dislodged Enze Edo from his seat a mile above the steppe." Ankhe at Afram Anacho made a gesture of whimsical fatalism. "By one means or another I evaded the Derogators; so now I am here, without plans and no resources other than my-" Here he used an untranslatable word, comprising the ideas of intrinsic superiority, intellectual elan, the inevitability of good fortune deriving from these qualities.

Traz gave a snort and went off to hunt his breakfast. Anacho watched with covert interest and presently sauntered after him. The two ran here and there through the rubble, catching and eating insects with relish. Reith contented himself with a handful of pilgrim pods.

The Dirdirman, hunger appeased, returned to examine Reith's clothes and equipment. "I believe the boy said 'Earth, a far planet.' " He tapped his button-nose with a long white finger. "I could almost believe it, were you not shaped precisely like a sub-man, which renders the idea absurd."

Traz said in a somewhat lordly tone, "Earth is the original home of men. We are true men. You are a freak."

Anacho gave Traz a quizzical glance. "What is this, the creed of a new sub-man cult? Well then, it is all the same to me."

"Enlighten us," requested Reith in a silky voice. "How did men come to Tschai?"

Anacho made an airy gesture. "The history is well-known and perfectly straightforward. On Sibot the home-world the Great Fish produced an egg. It floated to the shore of Remura and up the beach. One half rolled into the sunlight and became the Dirdir. The other rolled into the shade and became Dirdirmen."

"Interesting," said Reith. "But what of the Chaschmen? What of Traz? What of myself?"

"The explanation is hardly mysterious; I am surprised that you ask. Fifty thousand years ago the Dirdir drove from Sibol to Tschai. During the ensuing wars Old Chasch captured Dirdirmen. Others were taken by the Pnume; and later by the Wankh. These became Chaschmen, Pnumekin, Wankhmen. Fugitives, criminals, recalcitrants and biological sports hiding in the marshes interbred to produce the sub-men. And there you have it.

Traz looked to Reith. "Tell the fool of Earth; explain his ignorance to him."

Reith only laughed.

Anacho gave him a puzzled appraisal. "Beyond question you are a unique sort. Where are you bound?"

Reith pointed to the northwest. "Pera."

"The City of Lost Souls, beyond the Dead Steppe ... You will never arrive. Green Chasch range the Dead Steppe."

"There is no way to avoid them?"

Anacho shrugged. "Caravans cross to Pera."

"Where is the caravan route?"

"To the north, at no great distance."

"We will travel with a caravan, then."

"You might be taken and sold for a slave. Caravan-masters are notoriously without scruple. Why are you so anxious to reach Pera?"

"Reasons sufficient. What are your own plans?"

"I have none. I am a vagabond no less than yourself. If you do not object, I will travel in your company."

"As you wish," said Reith, ignoring Traz's hiss of disgust.

They set forth into the north, the Dirdirmen maintaining an inconsequential chatter which Reith found amusing and occasionally edifying, and which Traz pretended to ignore. At noon they came to a range of low hills. Traz shot a skate-shaped ruminant with his catapult. They built a fire, broiled the animal on a spit and made a good meal. Reith asked the Dirdirman, "Is it true that you eat human flesh?"

"Certainly. It can be the most tender of meats. But you need not fear, unlike the Chasch, Dirdir and Dirdirmen are not compulsive gourmands."

They climbed up through the hills, under low trees with soft blue and gray foliage, trees laden with plump red fruits which Traz declared poisonous. Finally they breasted the ridge, to look out over the Dead Steppe: a flat, gray waste, lifeless except for tufts of gorse and pilgrim plant. Below, almost at their feet, ran a track of two wide ruts. It came up from the southeast, skirted the base of the hills, passed below, then three miles northwest turned among a cluster of rock towers, or outcrops, which rose near the base of the hills like dolmens. The track continued to the northwest, dwindled away across the steppe. Another track led south through a pass in the hills, another swung away to the north-east.

Traz squinted down at the outcrops, then pointed. "Look yonder through your instrument."

Reith brought forth his scanscope, scrutinized the outcrops.

"What do you see?" asked Traz.

"Buildings. Not many-not even a village. On the rocks, gun emplacements."

"This must be Kazabir Depot," mused Traz, "where caravans transfer cargo. The guns protect against Green Chasch."

The Dirdirman made an excited gesture. "There may even be an inn of sorts. Come! I am anxious to bathe. Never in my life have I known such filth!"

"How will we pay?" asked Reith. "We have no coin, no trade-goods."

"No fear," declared the Dirdirman. "I carry sequins sufficient for us all. We of the Second Race are not ingrates and you have served me well. Even the boy shall eat a civilized supper, probably for the first time."

Traz scowled and prepared a prideful retort; then, noticing Reith's amusement, managed a sour grin of his own. "We had best depart; this is a dangerous place, a vantage for the Green Chasch. See the spoor? They come up here to watch for caravans." He pointed to the south, where the horizon was marked by an irregular gray line. "Even now a caravan approaches."

"In that case," said Anacho, "we had best hurry to the inn, to take accommodation before the caravan arrives. I have no wish for another night on the gorse."

The clear Tschai air, the extent of the horizons, made distances hard to judge; by the time the three had descended the hills the caravan was already passing along the track: a line of sixty or seventy great vehicles, so tall as to seem top-heavy, swaying and heaving on six ten-foot wheels. Some were propelled by engines, others by hulking gray beasts with small heads which seemed all eyes and snout.

The three stood to the side and watched the caravan trundle past. In the van three llanths scouts, proud as kings, rode on leaphorses: tall men, wide-shouldered, narrow of hip, with keen sharp features. Their skins were radiant yellow; their raven-black hair, tied into stiff plumes, glistened with varnish. They wore long-billed black caps crowned by jawless human skulls, and the plume of hair rose jauntily just behind the skull. They carried a long supple sword like that of the Emblems, a pair of hand-guns at their belts, two daggers in their right boot. Riding past on their massive leap-horses they turned uninterested glances down at the three wayfarers, but deigned no more.

Great drays rumbled past. Some were top-heavy with bales and parcels; others carried tiers of cages, in which blank-faced children, young men, young women, were mixed indiscriminately. Every sixth vehicle was a gun-cart, manned by grayskinned men in black jerkins and black leather helmets. The guns were short wide-mouthed tubes for the discharge, apparently by propulsor-field, of projectiles. Others, longer, narrow of muzzle, were hung with tanks, and Reith presumed them flame-ejectors.

Reith said to Traz, "This is the caravan we met at lobu Ford."

Traz gave a gloomy nod. "Had we taken it I might yet have carried Onmale ... But I am not sorry. There was never such a weight as Onmale. At night it would whisper to me."

A dozen of the drays carried three-story lodges of blackstained timber, with cupolas, decks and shaded verandahs. Reith looked at them with envy. Here was the comfortable way to travel the steppes of Tschai! A particularly massive dray carried a house with barred windows and iron-bound doors. The front deck was enclosed by heavy wire mesh: in effect, a cage. Looking forth was a young woman, with a beauty so extraordinary that it seemed to have a vitality of its own, like the Onmale emblem. She was rather slight, with skin the color of dune sand. Dark hair brushed her shoulders; her eyes were the clear browngold of topaz. She wore a small rose-red skull-cap, a dull red tunic, trousers of white linen, rumped and somewhat soiled. As the dray lurched past she looked down at the three wayfarers. For an instant Reith met her eyes, and was shocked by the melancholy of her expression. The dray rolled past. In an open doorway at the rear stood a tall woman, bleak-featured, with glittering eyes, an inch-long bristle of brown-gray hair. In vast curiosity Reith applied to Anacho for information, but to no avail. The Dirdirman had neither knowledge nor opinion.

The three followed the caravan past the fortified rock-juts, into a wide sandy compound. The caravan master, a small intensely active old man, ranged the vehicles in three ranks: the cargo wagons next to the depot warehouse, then the slave-carriers' houses and barracks, and finally the gun-carts with the weapons directed toward the steppe.

Across the compound stood the caravansary, a slope-sided two-storied structure of compacted earth. The tavern, kitchen and common-room occupied the lower floor; on the second was a row of small chambers opening upon a porch. The three wayfarers found the innkeeper in the common-room: a burly man in black boots and a brown apron, with skin as gray as wood-ash. With raised eyebrows he looked from Traz in nomad costume to Anacho and his once-elegant Dirdir garments to Reith, in Earthstyle whipcord breeches and jacket, but made no difficulty about providing accommodation and agreed to provide new garments

as well.

The chambers were eight feet wide, ten feet long. There was a bed of leathern thongs across a wooden frame, with a thin pallet of straw, a table with basin and ewer of water. After the journey across the steppe, the accommodations seemed almost luxurious. Reith bathed, shaved with the razor from his survival kit, donned his new garments in which he hoped to be less conspicuous: loose trousers of brown-gray canvas, a shirt of rough white homespun, a black short-sleeved vest. Stepping out on the porch, he looked down into the compound. His old life on Earth: how remote it seemed! Compared to the bizarre multiplicity of Tschai, the old existence was drab and colorless-though not the less desirable for all that. Reith was forced to admit that his initial desolation had become somewhat less poignant. His new life, for all its precariousness, held zest and adventure. Reith looked across the compound toward the dray with the iron-bound house. The girl was a prisoner: so much was evident. What was her destiny that she should display such anguish?

Reith tried to identify the dray, but among so many humped, peaked and angular shapes it could not be found. Just as well, he told himself. He had troubles enough without investigating the woe of a slave girl, glimpsed for five seconds in all. Reith went back into his room.

Certain items from his survival kit he thrust into his pockets; the rest he concealed under the ewer. Descending to the common-room, he found Traz sitting stiffly on a bench to the side. In response to Reith's question, he admitted that he had never before been in such a place and did not wish to make a fool of himself. Reith laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, and Traz managed a painful grin.

Anacho appeared, less obviously a Dirdirman in his steppedweller's garments. The three went to the refectory, where they were served a meal of bread and thick dark soup, the ingredients of which Reith did not inquire.

After the meal Anacho regarded Reith through eyes heavy-lidded with speculation. "From here you fare to Pera?"

"Yes."

"This is known as the City of Lost Souls."

"So I understand."

"Hyperbole, of course," Anacho remarked airily. "'Soul' is a concept susceptible to challenge. The Dirdir theologies are subtle; I will not discuss them, except to remark that-no, best not to confuse you. But back to Pera, the 'City of Lost Souls,' as it were, and the destination of the caravan. Rather than walk, I prefer to ride; I suggest then that we engage the best and most comfortable transport the caravan-master can provide."

"An excellent idea," said Reith. "However, I-"

Anacho fluttered his finger in the air. "Do not concern yourself; I am, for the moment at least, disposed kindly toward you and the boy; you are mild and respectful; you do not overstep your status; hence-"

Traz, breathing hard, rose to his feet. "I carried Onmale! Can you understand that? When I left camp do you think that I neglected to take sequins?" He thumped a long bag down upon

the table. "We do not depend on your indulgence, Dirdirman!"

"As you wish," said Anacho with a quizzical glance toward Reith.

Reith said, "Since I have no sequins, I gladly accept whatever is offered to me, from either of you."

The common-room had gradually filled with folk from the caravan: drivers and weaponeers, the three swaggering llanths, the caravan-master, others. All called for food and drink. As soon as the caravan-master had eaten, Anacho, Traz and Reith approached him and solicited transportation to Pera. "So long as you are in no hurry," said the caravan-master. "We wait here until the Aig-Hedajha caravan comes down from the North, then we travel by way of Golsse; if you are in haste you must make other arrangements."

Reith would have preferred to travel rapidly: what would be happening to his space-boat? But with no swifter form of transport available, he curbed his impatience.

Others also were impatient. Up to the table marched two women in long black gowns with red shoes. One of these Reith had seen previously, looking from the back of the dray. The other was thinner, but taller, with a skin even more leaden, almost cadaverous. The tall woman spoke in a voice crackling with restrained anger, or perhaps chronic antagonism: "Sir Baojian, how long do we wait here? The driver says it may be five days."

"Five days is a fair estimate."

"But this is impossible! We will be overdue at the seminary!"

Baojian the caravan-master spoke in a professionally toneless voice: "We wait for the southbound caravan, to exchange articles for transshipment. We proceed immediately thereafter."

"We cannot wait so long! We must be at Fasm for business of great importance."

"I assure you, old mother, that I will deliver you to your seminary with all the expedition possible."

"Not fast enough! You must take us on at once!" This was the hoarse expostulation of the other, the burly slab-cheeked woman Reith had seen previously.

"Impossible, I fear," said Baojian briskly. "Was there anything else you wished to discuss?"

The women swung away without response and went to a table beside the wall.

Reith could not restrain his curiosity. "Who are they?"

"Priestesses of the Female Mystery. Do you not know the cult? They are ubiquitous. What part of Tschai is your home?"

"A place far away," said Reith. "Who is the young woman they keep in a cage? Likewise a priestess?"

Baojian rose to his feet. "She is a slave, from Charchan, or so I suppose. They take her to Fasm for their triennial rites. It is nothing to me. I am a caravaner; I ply between Coad on

the Dwan to Tosthanag on the Schanizade Ocean. Whom I convoy, where, to what purpose-" He gave a shrug, a purse of the lips. "Priestess or slave, Dirdirman, nomad or unclassified hybrid: it's all the same to me." He gave them a cool grin and departed.

The three returned to their table.

Anacho inspected Reith with a thoughtful frown. "Curious, curious indeed."

"What is curious?"

"Your strange equipment, as fine as Dirdir stuff. Your garments, of a cut unknown on Tschai. Your peculiar ignorance and your equally peculiar competence. It almost might seem that you are what you claim to be: a man from a far world. Absurd, of course."

"I made no such claim," said Reith.

"The boy did."

"The question, then, is between you and him." Reith turned to watch the priestesses, who brooded over bowls of soup. Now they were joined by two more priestesses, with the captive girl between them. The first two reported their conversation with the caravan-master with many grunts, jerks of the arms, sour glances over the shoulder. The girl sat dispiritedly, hands in her lap, until one of the priestesses prodded her and pointed to a bowl of soup, whereupon she listlessly began to eat. Reith could not take his eyes from her. She was a slave, he thought in sudden excitement; would the priestess sell? Almost certainly not. The girl of extraordinary beauty was destined for some extraordinary purpose. Reith sighed, turned his gaze elsewhere, and noticed that others-namely the llanths-were no less fascinated than himself. He saw them staring, tugging at their mustaches, muttering and laughing, with such lascivious jocularly that Reith became annoyed. Were they not aware that the girl faced a tragic destiny?

The priestesses rose to their feet. They stared truculently in all directions and led the girl from the room. For a time they marched back and forth across the compound, the girl walking to the side, occasionally being jerked into a trot when her steps lagged. The llanth scouts, coming out of the common-room, squatted on their heels by the wall of the caravansary. They had exchanged their war-hats with the human skulls for square berets of soft brown velvet, and each had pasted a vermilion beauty disc on his lemon-yellow cheek. They chewed on nuts, spitting the shells into the dirt and never taking their eyes from the girl. There was badinage between them, a sly challenge, and one rose to his feet. He sauntered across the compound and, accelerating his steps, came up behind the marching priestesses. He spoke to the girl, who looked at him blankly. The priestesses halted, swung about. The tall one raised her arm, forefinger pointed at the sky, and called out an angry reprimand. The llanth, grinning insolently, held his ground. He failed to notice the burly priestess who came up from the side and dealt him a vicious blow on the side of the head. The Ranth tumbled to the compound, but leapt to his feet instantly, spitting curses. The priestess, grinning, moved forward; the llanth tried to strike her with his fist. She caught him in a bear hug, banged his head with her own, lifted him, bumped out her belly, propelled him away. Advancing, she kicked him, and the others joined her. The llanth, surrounded by priestesses, finally managed to crawl away and regain his feet. He shouted invective, spat in the first priestess's face, then, retreating swiftly, rejoined his hooting comrades.

The priestesses, with occasional glances toward the llanths, continued their pacing. The sun sank low, sending long shadows across the compound. Down from the hills came a group of

ragged folk, somewhat undersized, with white skins, yellow-brown hair, clear sharp profiles, small slanting eyes. The men began to play on gongs, while the women performed a curious hopping dance, darting back and forth with the rapidity of insects. Wizen children, wearing only shawls, moved among the travelers with bowls, soliciting coins. Across the compound the travelers were airing blankets and shawls, hanging the squares of orange, yellow, rust and brown out to flap in the airs drifting down from the hills. The priestesses and the slave girl retired to their ironbound dray-house.

The sun set behind the hills. Dusk settled over the caravansary; the compound became quiet. Pale lights flickered from the dray-houses of the caravan. The steppes beyond the outcrops were dim, rimmed by plum-colored afterglow.

Reith ate a bowl of pungent goulash, a slab of coarse bread and a dish of preserves for his supper. Traz went to watch a gambling game; Anacho was nowhere to be seen. Reith went out into the compound, looked up at the stars. Somewhere among the unfamiliar constellations would be a faint and minuscule Cepheus, across the Sun from his present outlook. Cepheus, an undistinguished constellation, could never be identified by the naked eye. The Sun at 212 light-years would be invisible: a star of perhaps the tenth or twelfth magnitude. Somewhat depressed, Reith brought his gaze down from the sky.

The priestesses sat outside their dray, muttering together. Within the cage stood the slave girl. Drawn almost beyond his will, Reith circled the compound, came up behind the dray, looked into the cage. "Girl," he said. "Girl."

She turned and looked at him, but said nothing.

"Come over here," said Reith, "so that I can speak to you."

Slowly she crossed the cage to peer down at him.

"What do they do with you?" Reith asked.

"I don't know." Her voice was husky and soft. "They stole me from my home in Cath; they took me to the ship and put me in a cage."

"Why?"

"Because I am beautiful. Or so they say... Hush. They hear us talking. Hide."

Reith, feeling craven, dropped to his knees. The girl stood holding to the bars, looking from the cage. One of the priestesses came to look in the cage and, seeing nothing amiss, returned to her sisters.

The girl called softly down to Reith. "She is gone."

Reith rose to his feet, feeling somewhat foolish. "Do you want to be free of this cage?"

"Of course!" Her voice was almost indignant. "I don't want to be part of their rite! They hate me! Because they are so ugly!" She peered down at Reith, studied him in the flicker from a nearby window, "I saw you today," she said, "standing beside the track."

"Yes. I noticed you too."

She turned her head. "They come again. You had better go."

Reith moved away. From across the compound he watched the priestesses thrust the girl into the dray-house. Then he went into the common-room. For a period he watched the games. There was chess, played on a board of forty-nine squares with seven pieces to a side; a game played with a disc and small numbered chips, of great complication; several card games. A flask of beer stood by every hand; women of the hill tribes wandered through the room soliciting; there were several brawls of no great consequence. A man from the caravan brought forth a flute, another a lute, another drew sonorous bass tones from a long glass tube; the three played music which Reith found fascinating if only for the strangeness of its melodic structure. Traz and the Dirdirman had long gone to their chambers; Reith presently followed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reith Awoke with a sense of imminence which for a space he could not comprehend. Then he understood its source: it derived from the girl and the Priestesses of the Female Mystery. He lay scowling at the plaster ceiling. Utter folly to concern himself with matters beyond his comprehension! What, after all, could he achieve?

Descending to the common-room, he ate a dish of porridge served by one of the innkeeper's slatternly daughters, then went out to sit on a bench, aching for a glimpse of the captive girl.

The priestesses appeared, proceeded to the caravansary with the girl in their midst, looking neither right nor left.

Half an hour later they returned to the compound, and went to talk to one of the small men from the hills, who grinned and nodded obsequiously, eyes glittering in a fascination of awe.

The llanths trooped from the common-room. With sidelong glances toward the priestesses and leers at the girl, they crossed the compound, brought forth their leap-horses and began to pare the horny growths which gathered on the gray-green hides.

The priestesses ended their discussion with the mountainman and went to walk out on the steppe, back and forth in front of the outcrops, the girl lagging a few steps behind, to the exasperation of the priestesses. The llanths looked after, muttering to themselves.

Traz came out to sit by Reith. He pointed across the steppe. "Green Chasch are near: a large party."

Reith could see nothing. "How do you know?"

"I smell the smoke of their fires."

"I smell nothing," said Reith.

Traz shrugged. "It is a party of three or four hundred."

"Mmmf. How do you know that?"

"By the strength of the wind, the smell of the smoke. A small group makes less smoke than a large group. This is the smoke of about three hundred Green Chasch."

Reith threw up his hands in defeat.

The llanths, mounting their leap-horses, bounded off into the outcrops, where they halted. Anacho, standing by, gave a dry laugh. "They go to plague the priestesses."

Reith jumped to his feet, went out to watch. The llanths waited till the priestesses strode by, then bounded forth. The priestesses sprang back in alarm; the llanths, cawing and hooting, snatched up the girl, threw her over a saddle and carried her off toward the hills. The priestesses stared aghast; then, screaming hoarsely, they all ran back to the compound. Seizing upon Baojian the caravan-master, they pointed trembling fingers. "The yellow beasts have stolen the maid of Cath!"

"Just for a bit of sport," said Baojian soothingly. "They'll bring her back when they're through with her."

"Useless for our purposes! When we have journeyed so far and borne so much! It is utter tragedy! I am a Grand Mother of the Fasm Seminary! And you will not even help!"

The caravan-master spat into the dirt. "I help no one. I maintain order in the caravan. I steer my wagons, I have time for nothing else."

"Vile man! Are these not your underlings? Control them!"

"I control only my caravan. The event occurred upon the steppe."

"Oh, what shall we do? We are bereft! There will be no Rite of Clarification!"

Reith found himself in the saddle of a leap-horse, bounding across the steppe. He had been activated by an impulse far below the level of his conscious mind; even while the leap-horse took him on prodigious bounds across the steppe he marveled at the reflexes which had sent him springing away from the caravan-master and up onto the leaphorse. "What's done is done," he consoled himself, with somewhat bitter satisfaction; it seemed that the plight of a beautiful slave-girl had taken precedence over his own woes.

The llanths had not ridden far; up a little valley to a small flat sandy area under a beetling boulder. The girl stood bewildered and cowering against the stone; the llanths had only just finished tying their leaphorses when Reith arrived. "What do you want?" asked one without friendliness. "Away with you; we are about to test the quality of this Cath girl."

Another one gave a coarse laugh. "She will need instruction for the Female Mysteries!"

Reith displayed his gun. "I'll kill any or all of you, with pleasure." He motioned to the girl. "Come."

She looked wildly around the landscape, as if not knowing in which direction to run.

The llanths stood silently, black mustaches a droop. The girl slowly clambered up on the horse in front of Reith; he turned it about and rode off down the valley. She looked at him with an unreadable expression, started to speak, then became silent. Behind, the llanths

mounted their own horses and bounded off past, yipping, hooting, cursing.

The priestesses stood by the entry to the compound, gazing across the steppe. Reith halted the horse and considered the four black-clad shapes, who at once began to make peremptory signals.

The girl spoke frantically: "How much did they pay you?"

"Nothing," said Reith. "I came of my own accord."

"Take me home," begged the girl. "Take me to Cath! My father will pay you far more-whatever you ask of him!"

Reith pointed to a moving black line at the horizon. "I suspect those are Green Chasch. We'd best go back to the inn."

"The women will take me! They will put me in the cage!" The girl's voice quavered; her composure-or perhaps it was apathy-began to disintegrate. "They hate me, they want to do their worst!" She pointed. "They come now! Let me go!"

"Alone? Out on the steppe?"

"I prefer it!"

"I won't let them take you," said Reith. He rode slowly toward the caravansary. The priestesses stood waiting at the passage between the rock juts. "Oh noble man!" called the Grand Mother. "You have done a fine deed! She has not been defiled?"

"It is no concern of yours," said Reith.

"What's this? Not our concern? How can you say so?"

"She is my property. I took her from the three warriors. Go to them for restitution, not to me. What I have taken, I keep."

The priestesses laughed hugely. "You ridiculous cockbird of a man! Give us our property, or it will go poorly with you! We are Priestesses of the Female Mystery."

"You will be dead priestesses if you interfere with me or my property," said Reith. He rode past, into the compound, leaving the priestesses staring after. Reith dismounted, helped the girl to the ground, and now he understood why his instinct had sent him in pursuit of the llanths, all the urging of good judgment to the contrary.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She reflected, as if Reith had asked the most perplexing of riddles, and answered with diffidence. "My father is lord of Blue Jade Palace." Then she said, "We are of the Aegis caste. Sometimes I am announced as Blue Jade Flower, at lesser functions Beauty Flower, or Flower of Cath ... My flower-name is Ylin-Ylan."

"That is all somewhat complicated," stated Reith, to which the girl nodded, as if she too found the matter overly profound. "What do your friends call you?"

"That depends on their caste. Are you high-born?"

"Yes, indeed," said Reith, seeing no reason to claim otherwise.

"Do you intend me to be your slave? If so, it would not be proper to use my friend-name."

"I've never owned a slave," said Reith. "The temptation is great-but I think I'd rather use your friend-name."

"You may call me the Flower of Cath, which is a formal friend-name, or, if you wish, my flower-name, Ylin-Ylan."

"That should do, temporarily at least." He surveyed the compound, then, taking the girl's arm, led her into the common-room of the caravansary, and to a table at the back wall. Here he studied the girl, Ylin-Ylan, the Beauty Flower, the Flower of Cath. "I don't quite know what to do with you."

Out in the compound the priestesses were expostulating with the caravan-master, who listened with gravity and politeness.

Reith said, "The problem may be taken out of my hands. I'm not sure of my legal footing."

"There are no laws here on the steppe," the girl said. "Fear alone rules."

Traz came to join them. He appraised the girl with disapproval. "What do you intend with her?"

"I'd see her home, if I could."

"You would want for nothing, if you did so," the girl told him earnestly. "I am the daughter of a notable house. My father would build you a palace."

At this Traz showed less disapprobation, and looked off to the east as if envisioning the journey. "It is not impossible."

"For me it is," said Reith. "I must go to find my space-boat. If you want to conduct her to Cath, by all means do so, and make a new life for yourself."

Traz looked dubiously out at the priestesses. "Without warriors or weapons, how could I convey one like her across the steppes? We'd be enslaved or killed out of hand."

Baojian the caravan-master entered the room, approached. He spoke in an even voice: "The priestesses demand that I enforce their claims, which I will not do, since the transfer of property occurred away from my caravan. However, I agreed to put the question: what are your intentions in regard to the girl?"

"It is no concern of theirs," said Reith. "The girl has become my property. If they want compensation, they must approach the llanths. I have no business with them."

"This is a reasonable statement," remarked Baojian. "The priestesses understand as much, although they protest their misfortunes. I am inclined to agree that they have been victimized."

Reith looked to see if the caravan-master was keeping a straight face. "Are you serious?"

"I think only in terms of property rights and security of transfer," declared Baojian. "The priestesses have suffered a great loss. A certain sort of girl is necessary for their rite; they strove inordinately to procure a suitable participant, only to lose her at the last minute. What if they paid a salvage fee-let us say, half the price of a comparable female?"

Reith shook his head. "They suffered loss, but I feel no concern whatever. After all, they have not come to rejoice with the girl for having regained her freedom."

"I suspect that they are in no mood for merrymaking, even at so happy an occasion," remarked Baojian. "Well, I will communicate your remarks. Doubtless they will make other arrangements."

"I hope the situation will not affect the convenience of our travel?"

"Naturally not," declared the caravan-master emphatically. "I enforce total ban upon thieving and violence. Security is my stock in trade." He bowed and departed.

Reith turned to Traz and Anacho, who had come to join the group. "Well, what now?"

"You are as good as dead," said Traz gloomily. "The priestesses are witch-women. We had several such among the Emblems. We killed them and events went for the better."

Anacho inspected the Flower of Cath with the cool detachment he might have used for an animal. "She's a Golden Yao, an extremely old stock: hybrids of the First Tans and the First Whites. A hundred and fifty years ago they became arrogant and contrived to build certain advanced mechanisms. The Dirdir taught them a sharp lesson."

"A hundred and fifty years ago? How long is the Tschai year?"

"Four hundred and eighty-eight days, though I see no relevance to the discussion."

Reith calculated. A hundred and fifty Tschai years was equivalent to about two hundred and twelve Earth years. Coincidence? Or had the Flower's ancestors dispatched that radio beam which had brought him to Tschai?

The Flower of Cath was regarding Anacho with detestation. She said in a husky voice, "You are a Dirdirman!"

"Of the Sixth Estate: by no means an Immaculate."

The girl turned to Reith. "They torpedoed Settra and Balisidre; they wanted to destroy us, from envy!"

"'Envy' is not the proper word," said Anacho. "Your people were playing with forbidden forces, matters beyond your comprehension."

"What happened after?" asked Reith.

"Nothing," said Ylin-Ylan. "Our cities were destroyed, and the receptories and the Palace of Arts, and the Golden Webs-the treasures of thousands of years. Is it any wonder we hate the Dirdir? More than the Pnume, more than the Chasch, more than the Wankh!"

Anacho shrugged. "Expunging the Yao was not my doing."

"But you defend the deed! This is the same!"

"Let us talk of something else," suggested Reith. "After all, the happening is two hundred and twelve years gone."

"Only a hundred and fifty!" the Flower of Cath corrected him.

"True. Well, then, what of you? Would you like a change of clothes?"

"Yes. I have worn these since the unspeakable women took me from my garden. I would like to bathe. They allowed me water only enough to drink..."

Reith stood guard while the girl scrubbed herself, then handed in steppe-travelers' garments which made no distinction between male and female. Presently she emerged, still half-damp, wearing the gray breeches and tan tunic, and they once more went down to the common-room, and out upon the compound, to discover an atmosphere of urgency, occasioned by the Green Chasch, who had approached to within a mile of the caravansary. The gun emplacements on the rock juts had been manned; Baojian was driving his gun-carts up into the openings where they commanded all avenues of approach.

The Green Chasch showed no immediate disposition to attack. They brought up their own wagons, ranged them in a long line, erected a hundred tall black tents.

Baojian pulled at his chin in vexation. "The North-South train will never join us with nomads so near. When their scouts see the camp they'll back away and wait. I foresee delay."

The Grand Mother set up an indignant outcry. "The Rite will proceed without us! Must we be thwarted in every particular?"

Baojian held out his hands to implore reason. "Can't you see the impossibility of leaving the compound? We would be forced to fight! We may have to do so in any event!"

Someone called, "Send the priestesses forth to dance their 'Rite' with the Chasch!"

"Spare the unfortunate Chasch;" spoke another impudent voice. The priestesses retreated in a fury.

Dusk settled over the steppe. The Green Chasch started up a line of fires, across which their tall shapes could be seen to pass. From time to time they seemed to halt and stare toward the caravansary.

Traz told Reith, "They are a telepathic race; they know each other's minds. Sometimes they seem to read the thoughts of men ... I myself doubt that they do. Still-who knows?"

A scratch meal of soup and lentils was served in the common room, with dim lights to prevent the Chasch from silhouetting those on guard. A few quiet games were played to the side. The Ilanths drank distillation, and presently became loud and harsh, until the innkeeper warned them that he maintained as stringent a policy as did the caravan-master, and that if they wished to brawl they must go forth on the steppe. The three hunched forward over their table, hats pulled thwartwise across their yellow faces.

The common-room began to empty. Reith took Ylin-Ylan the Beauty Flower to a cubicle beside his own. "Bolt your door," he told her. "Do not come out until morning. If anyone tries the door, pound on the wall to wake me."

She looked at him through the doorway with an unreadable expression and Reith thought never had he seen more appealing a sight. She asked, "Then you really do not intend me to be a slave?"

"No."

The door closed, the bolt struck home. Reith went to his own cubicle.

The night passed. On the following day, with the Green Chasch still camped before the caravansary, there was nothing to do but wait.

Reith, with the Flower of Cath close by his side, inspected the caravan guns-the so-called "sand blasts"-with interest. He learned that the weapons indeed fired sand, charging each grain electrostatically, accelerating it violently almost to light speed, augmenting the mass of each grain a thousandfold. Such driven sand-grains, striking a solid object, penetrated, then gave up their energy in an explosion. The weapons, Reith learned, were obsolete Wankh equipment, and were engraved with Wankh writing: rows of rectangles of different sizes and shapes.

Returning to the caravansary, he found Traz and Anacho arguing as to the nature of the Phung. Traz declared them to be creatures generated by Pnumekin upon the corpses of Pnume. "Have you ever seen a pair of Phung? Or an infant Phung? No. They go singly. They are too mad, too desperate, to breed."

Anacho waved his fingers indulgently. "Pnume go singly as well, and reproduce in a peculiar manner. Peculiar to men and sub-men, I should say, for the system seems to suit the Pnume admirably. They are a persistent race. Do you know that they have records across a million years?"

"So I have heard," said Traz sourly.

"Before the Chasch came," said Anacho, "the Pnume ruled everywhere. They lived in villages of little domes, but all trace of these are gone. Now they keep to caves and passages under the old cities, and their lives are a mystery. Even the Dirdir consider it bad luck to molest a Pnume."

"The Chasch then came to Tschai before the Dirdir?" Reith inquired.

"This is well-known," said Anacho. "Only a man from an isolated province-or a far world-could be ignorant to the fact." He gave Reith a quizzical glance. "But the first invaders indeed were the Old Chasch, a hundred thousand years ago. Ten thousand years later the Blue Chasch arrived, from a planet colonized an era previously by Chasch spacefarers. The two Chasch races fought for Tschai, and brought in Green Chasch for shock-troops.

"Sixty thousand years ago the Dirdir arrived. The Chasch suffered great losses until the Dirdir arrived in large numbers and so became vulnerable, whereupon a stalemate went into effect. The races are still enemies, with little traffic between them.

"Comparatively recently, ten thousand years ago, space-war broke out between the Dirdir and the Wankh, and extended to Tschai when the Wankh built forts on Rakh and South Kachan. But now there is little fighting, other than skirmishes and ambushes. Each race fears the other two and bides its time until it can expunge all but itself. The Pnume are neutral and take no part in the wars, though they watch with interest and take notes for their history."

"What of men?" asked Reith guardedly. "When did they arrive on Tschai?"

Anacho's side-glance was sardonic. "Since you claim to know the world where men originated, this information should be in your possession."

Reith refused to be provoked and made no comment.

"Men originated," said the Dirdirman in his most didactic manner, "on Sibol and came to Tschai with the Dirdir. Men are as plastic as wax, and some metamorphosed, first into marsh-men, then, twenty thousand years ago, into this sort." He pointed toward Traz. "Others, enslaved, became Chaschmen, Pnumekin, even Wankhmen. There are dozens of hybrids and freakish races. Variety exists even among the Dirdirmen. The Immaculates are almost pure Dirdir. Others exhibit less refinement. This is the background for my own disaffection: I demanded prerogatives which were denied me, but which I adopted in any event..."

Anacho spoke on, describing his difficulties, but Reith's attention wandered. It was clear, to Reith at least, how men had come to Tschai. The Dirdir had known space-travel for more than seventy thousand years. During this time they evidently had visited Earth, twice at the very least. On the first occasion they had captured a tribe of photo-Mongoloids; on the second occasion, twenty thousand years ago, according to Anacho-they had collected a cargo of proto-Caucasoids. These two groups, under the special conditions of Tschai, had mutated, specialized, remutated, respecialized to produce the bewildering diversity of human types to be found on the planet.

So then: the Dirdir undoubtedly knew of Earth and its human population, but perhaps reckoned it still a savage planet. Nothing could be gained by advertising the fact that Earth was now a spacefaring world; indeed Reith could envision calamity arising from the knowledge. There were no clues aboard the space-boat to point to Earth, except possibly the corpse of Paul Waunder. In any event the Dirdir had lost possession of the space-boat to the Blue Chasch.

Still unanswered was the question: who had fired the torpedo that destroyed the Explorator IV?

Two hours before sundown the Green Chasch broke camp. The high-wheeled wagons milled in a circle; the warriors mounted on monstrous leap-horses, lunged and bounded; then at some imperceptible signal-perhaps telepathic, reflected Reith-the band formed a long line and moved off toward the east. The Ilanth scouts set forth and followed at a discreet distance. In the morning they returned to report that the band seemed to be veering to the north.

Late in the afternoon the Aig-Hedajha caravan arrived, laden with leather, aromatic logs and mosses, tubs of pickles and condiments.

Baojian the caravan-master took his wagons and drays out upon the steppe, to effect

exchanges and transshipments. Derricks rolled between the two caravans, swinging goods back and forth; porters and drivers toiled and strained, sweat rolling down their naked backs and into their loose brown breeches.

An hour before sunset the transfer of goods had been effected and a call came into the common-room for all passengers. Reith, Traz, Anacho and the Flower of Cath started across the compound. The priestesses were nowhere to be seen; Reith assumed that they were aboard their house.

They walked out under the rock juts toward the caravan. There was a sudden jostle; arms gripped Reith in a bear-hug and he was pressed against a soft wheezing body. He struggled; the two toppled to the ground. The Grand Mother gripped him in her massive legs. Another priestess seized the Flower of Cath and dragged her at an awkward lope out to the caravan. Reith lay enfolded in masses of flesh and muscle. A hand squeezed his throat; blood surged through his arteries and his eyes began to start. He managed to free an arm, drove stiff fingers up into the Grand Mother's face, into something moist. She gasped and wheezed; Reith found her nostrils, clenched, twisted; she cried out and kicked; Reith rolled free.

An llanth was rummaging through his pack; Traz lay limp on the ground; Anacho was coolly defending himself against the swordplay of the remaining two llanths. The Grand Mother grabbed for Reith's legs; Reith kicked furiously, won free, lurched aside as the llanth investigating his pack looked up and flicked a knife at him. Reith struck up at the lemon-yellow chin with his fist; the man went down. Reith leapt on the back of one of the llanths who were attacking the Dirdirman, bore him down, and Anacho deftly stabbed him. Reith side-stepped a thrust from the third llanth, seized the outstretched arm, threw the man cartwheeling over his shoulder. The Dirdirman, standing by, struck down with his sword, nearly cutting through the yellow neck. The remaining llanth took to his heels.

Traz, tottering to his feet, stood holding his head. The Grand Mother was at this moment mounting the steps into the drayhouse.

Reith in all his existence had never been so angry. He picked up his pack, marched to where Baojian the caravan-master stood directing the passengers to their compartments.

"I was attacked!" stormed Reith. "You must have noticed! The priestesses have dragged the Cath girl into their house and hold her prisoner!"

"Yes," said Baojian. "I saw something of the sort."

"Well, then, assert your authority! Enforce your ban on violence!"

Baojian gave his head a prim shake. "The affair occurred on that strip of the steppe between the compound and the caravan, where I make no effort to maintain order. It appears that the priestesses have recovered their property in the same manner by which they lost it. You have no cause for complaint."

"What?" roared Reith. "You'll let them inflict an innocent person with their Female Mystery?"

Baojian held out his hands. "I have no choice. I cannot police the steppe; I do not care to try."

Reith burnt him with a stare of fury and contempt, then turned to examine the priestesses' dray-house.

Baojian said, "I must caution you against disorderly conduct while you are a passenger. I meticulously enforce caravan discipline."

Reith for a space could find no words. At last he stuttered, "Have you no concern for evil deeds?"

"Evil?" Baojian laughed sadly. "On Tschai the word has no meaning. Events exist-or they do not exist. If a person adheres to some other system of conduct he himself will swiftly cease to exist-or else becomes mad as a Phung. So now, permit me to show you your compartment, as we set forth at once. I want to put leagues behind us this night, before the Green Chasch return. It seems that now I have only a single scout."

CHAPTER FIVE

REITH, TRAZ AND Anacho were assigned compartments on one of the barrack drays, each containing a hammock and a small locker. Four wagons ahead was the dray-house of the priestesses. All night it rolled on its great wheels, showing no lights.

Unable to contrive any feasible rescue scheme, Reith went to his hammock, and was sent into a sleep almost hypnotic by the motion of the wagon.

Shortly after the wan sun rose from the murk, the caravan halted. The folk of the caravan filed past a commissary wagon and each was handed a pancake heaped with hot meat, a mug of hot beer. Low mist hung in wisps and drifts; the small noises of the caravan only seemed to accentuate the vast silence of the steppe. Color was forgotten; there was only the slate of the sky, drab gray-brown of steppe, watered milk of the mist. From the dray-house came no sign of life; the priestesses did not appear, nor was the Flower of Cath permitted on the caged foredeck.

Reith sought out the caravan master. "How far is the way to the seminary? When will we arrive?"

The caravan-master munched his pancake while he considered. "We camp tonight by Slugah Knoll. Another day to Zadno's Depot, then the next morning to Fasm Junction. None too soon for the priestesses; they fear that they will be late for their Rite."

"What is this 'Rite'? What goes on?"

Baojian shrugged. "I can only report rumor. They are a select group, the priestesses, and they hate men, so I am told, with abnormal fervor. The feeling extends to every aspect of the ordinary male-female relationship, and includes such women who stimulate erotic conduct. The Rite seems to purge these intense emotions; and I am told the priestesses become afflicted with a frenzy during the solemnities."

"Two and a half days, then."

"Two and a half days to Fasm Junction."

The caravan moved across the steppe, on a course parallel to the hills which heaved up,

now high, now low, to the south. Occasionally clefts or chasms led away into the hills; occasionally there were copses and groves of spindly vegetation. Reith, sweeping the landscape with his spanscope, glimpsed creatures watching from the shadows; he guessed them to be Phung, or possibly Pnume.

For the most part his attention was fixed on the dray-house. It evinced no life or motion by day, and the dimmest of flickering lamplight by night. Occasionally Reith jumped down from the great wagon on which he rode to walk beside the caravan. Whenever he approached the dray-house a weaponeer in a nearby guncart quickly swiveled around his weapon. Baojian clearly had given orders that the priestesses were not to be molested.

Anacho tried to divert him. "Why concern yourself for this isolated female? You have spared not a glance for the three slave troupes forward. Everywhere people live and die: you are oblivious. What of the victims of the Old Chasch and their games? What of the cannibal nomads who herd men and women through the Kislovan mid-region as other tribes herd fat-humps? What of the Dirdir and Dirdirmen in Blue Chasch dungeons? All these you ignore; you are bemused by moth-dust: a fascination with this one female and her grotesque tribulations!"

Reith managed a grin. "One man can't do everything. I'll make a start, saving the girl from the Rite ... if I can."

An hour later Traz made a similar protest. "What of your space-boat? Are you abandoning your plans? If you interfere with the priestesses, they will have you killed or maimed."

To which Reith gave a series of patient nods, admitting the justice of Traz's remarks, but not allowing himself to be persuaded by them.

Towards the end of the second day the hills became stony and abrupt, and at times cliffs loomed over the steppe.

At sunset the caravan came to Zadno's Depot, a small caravansary dug into the face of one of the cliffs, where it halted to discharge parcels of goods and to take on rock crystals and slabs of malachite. Baojian marshaled his wagons close up under the cliff, with the gun-carts facing the steppe. Reith, passing the priestesses' dray-house, was galvanized by a low wail, the poignant call a person might give while dreaming. Traz, almost in a panic, seized his arm. "Don't you see that you are watched every instant? The master expects you to make a disturbance!"

Reith turned a wolfish grin around the caravan. "I'll make a disturbance, no fear as to that! Mind you, I want you to stay clear! Whatever happens to me, go on your way!"

Traz gave him a glance of reproach and indignation. "Do you think I would stand aside? Are we not comrades?"

"Yes. Still-

"There is no more to be said," stated Traz, with more than a trace of the Onmale crispness.

Reith threw up his hands, walked away from the dray-house, out upon the steppe. Time was growing short. He must act but when? During the night? During the trip to Fasm Junction? After the priestesses left the caravan?

To act now was to bring instant disaster upon himself.

Likewise during the night, or on the morrow, when the priestesses, realizing his desperation, would be at their most vigilant.

At Fasm junction, after they had left the protection of the caravan-master, what then? This was the unknown quantity. Presumably they would take steps to guard themselves well.

Twilight gave way to night; menacing sounds came from the steppe. Reith went to his compartment, lay in his hammock. He could not sleep; he did not wish to sleep. He jumped to the ground.

The moons were in the sky. Az hung halfway down the west and presently disappeared behind a cliff. Braz, low in the east, threw a melancholy glimmer across the landscape. The depot was- almost completely dark, except for a few guard-lights: no roisterous common-room here. Within the dray-house lights still flickered, as the occupants moved here and there, more active than usual, or so it seemed. Suddenly the lights were extinguished; the house went dark.

Reith, restless and uneasy, circled back around the dray. A sound? He stopped short, peering into the dark. Something was afoot. The sound came again: the scrape of a moving vehicle. Abandoning caution, Reith ran forward. He stopped short. Near at hand came the sound of low voices. Someone stood even nearer, a black bulk in the shadows. There was sudden vicious motion, something struck Reith's head. Lights danced in his brain, the world turned over-

He recovered consciousness to the same scraping sound that he had heard before: creak-scrape, creak-scrape. From a subconscious reservoir of memory came the knowledge that he had been handled, lifted, dealt with... He felt constricted; he could not move his arms and legs. Under him was a hard surface which thudded and jarred: the cargo deck of a small wagon. Above was the night sky, with crags and ridges bulking up at either hand. The wagon evidently proceeded by a rough track up through the hills. Reith strained to move his arms. They were tied with coarse twine; the effort caused him agonizing cramps. He relaxed, clenching his teeth. From the front came gruff conversation; someone looked back at him. Reith lay still, feigning insensibility; the dark shape turned away. Priestesses, almost certainly. Why was he bound, why had they not killed him out of hand?

Reith thought that he knew.

He strained at his bonds but again succeeded only in causing himself pain. Whoever had bound him had been in great haste. Only his sword had been taken from him; at his belt was still his pouch.

The wagon gave a great thump; Reith bounced, which gave him an idea. He squirmed, inched himself toward the rear of the wagon, sweating for fear that someone would turn to look at him. He reached the edge of the deck; again the wagon lurched and Reith dropped off. The wagon rumbled on, into the dark. Ignoring his bruises, Reith twisted, turned, rolled himself off the track, down a rocky slope into deep shade. He lay still, fearful that his fall from the wagon had been noticed. The squeak-scrape of the wagon had receded; the night was quiet except for a hoarse whisper of wind.

Reith heaved, lurched, raised to his knees. Groping through the dark, he found a rough edge of rock and began to grind at his bonds. The process was interminable. His wrists became

raw and bloody; his head throbbed; a curious feeling of unreality overcame him, a nightmarish identification with the dark and the rocks, as if all shared the same elemental consciousness. He cleared his mind, sawed at his bonds. The cords finally parted; his arms came free.

For a moment he sat back, flexing his fingers, easing his muscles. Then he bent to free his legs, an operation maddeningly tedious in the dark.

At last he rose to his feet, to stand swaying, holding to a rock for support. Over the highest ridge of mountainside came Braz to fill the valley with the palest of illuminations. Reith painfully climbed up the slope and at last gained the road. He looked up and down the track. Behind lay Zadno's Depot; ahead at some unknown distance rolled the wagon, going creak-scrape, creak-scrape, perhaps more rapidly now that the priestesses had discovered his absence. Aboard the wagon, almost certainly, was Ylin-Ylan. Reith set out in pursuit, limping, hobbling, at as rapid a pace as he could manage. According to Baojian, Fasm junction was another half a day by caravan, the Seminary at an unknown distance from the junction. This mountain track was evidently a shorter and more direct route.

The way began to climb, angling up to a gap through the hills. Reith stumbled doggedly forward, gasping for breath. He had no hope of overtaking the wagon, which moved at that unvarying pace established by the pad pad pad of the pull-beast's eight soft feet. He reached the gap and paused to rest, then set off once more, descending toward a forested upland, indistinct in the inkblue light of Braz. The trees were wonderful and strange, with trunks of glimmering white rising as spirals, winding round and round, sometimes engaging the spirals of near trees. The foliage was tattered black floss, and each tree terminated in a rough pitted ball, vaguely luminescent.

From the forest came sounds: croaks, groans laden with such human woe that Reith paused often in his stride, hand in his pouch on the comforting shape of his energy cell.

Braz sank into the forest; wisps of foliage glinted, zones of shimmer moved through the trees to keep pace as Reith passed.

He walked, trotted, loped, slowed to a walk once more. A large pallid creature glided quietly through the air above him. It seemed as frail as a moth, with huge soft wings and a round baby's head. Another time Reith thought to hear grave voices speaking, at not too far a distance. When he stopped to listen, there was nothing to hear. He continued, fighting the conviction that he moved in a dream, through an endless mental landscape, his legs carrying him back rather than forward.

The road rose sharply, angled through a narrow gorge. At one time a high stone wall had barred the gap; now it lay in ruins. A tall arched portal remained standing, under which passed the road. Reith stopped short, disturbed by a prickling beneath the surface of his mind. The situation was too blandly innocent, or so it seemed.

Reith tossed a rock through the gap. No response, no reaction. He left the road and with great care picked his way across the ruined wall, pressing close against the side of the gorge. After a hundred feet he returned to the road. He looked back, but if danger actually existed at the portal it could not be detected in the dark.

Reith pushed forward. Every few minutes he stopped to listen. The walls of the gorge fell apart and dwindled in height, the sky came closer, the Tschai constellations lit the gray rock of the hillsides.

Ahead: a glow in the sky? A murmur, a sound half-strident, half-harsh. Reith went forward at a stumbling run. The road raised, twisted over a knoll, Reith stopped, looking down on a scene as weird and wild as Tschai itself.

The Seminary of the Female Mystery occupied an irregular flat area surrounded by crags and cliffs. A massive four-story edifice of stone was built in a ravine, to straddle a pair of crags. Elsewhere were sheds of timber and wattle, animal pens and hutches, outbuildings, cribs and racks. Directly below Reith a platform projected from the hill, with a two-story building to the sides and the rear.

Gala events were in progress. Flames from dozens of flambeaux cast red, vermilion and orange light upon two hundred women who moved back and forth, half-dancing, half-lurching, in a state of entranced frenzy. They wore black pantaloons, black boots and were elsewhere naked, with even the hair shaved from their heads. Many were without breasts, displaying a pair of angry red scars: these women, the most active, marched and trooped, bodies glistening with sweat and oil. Others sat on benches slack and dull, resting, or exalted beyond mere frenzy. Below the platform, in a row of low cages, a dozen naked men stood crouched. These men produced the harsh chant Reith had heard from the hills. When one faltered, jets of flame spurted up from the floor beneath him, and he once more screamed his loudest. The flames were controlled from a keyboard in the front; here sat a woman dressed completely in black, and it was she who orchestrated the demoniac uproar. There, thought Reith, but for the bump of a wagon-there sing I.

A singer collapsed. Jets of flame only caused him to twitch. He was dragged forth; a bag of transparent membrane was pulled over his head and tied at the neck; he was tossed into a rack at the side. Into the cage was thrust another singer: a strong young man, glaring in hatred. He refused to sing, and suffered the jets in furious silence. A priestess came forward, blew a waft of smoke into his face; presently he sang with the rest.

How they hated men! thought Reith. A troupe of entertainers appeared on the stage-tall emaciated clown-men with skins bleached white, eyebrows painted high and black. In horrified fascination Reith watched them cavort and caper and with earnest zest defile themselves, while the priestesses called out in delight.

When the clown-men retired a mime appeared: he wore a wig of long blonde hair, a mask with wide eyes and a smiling red mouth, to simulate a beautiful woman. Reith thought, They hate not only men, but love and youth and beauty!

As the mime expatiated his shocking message, a curtain to the back of the platform drew back revealing a huge naked cretin, hairy of body and limb, in a state of intense erotic excitement. He worked to gain entry into a cage of thin glass rods, but could not puzzle out the working of the latch. In the cage cowered a girl wearing a gown of thin gauze: the Flower of Cath.

The androgynous mime finished his curious performance. The singers were instructed to a new chant, a soft hoarse baying, and the priestesses crowded close around the platform, intent on the efforts of the fumbling brute.

Reith already had departed from his vantage. Keeping to the shadows, he circled down around toward the rear of the platform. He passed a shed where the clown-men rested. Nearby, a set of pens held two dozen young men, apparently destined to sing. They were guarded by a wizened old woman with a gun almost as large as herself.

From the front came a sudden avid murmur. The brute apparently had fumbled open the latch to the cage. Giving no thought to gallantry, Reith dropped down behind the old woman, felled her with a blow, ran along the line of pens, throwing open the doors. The men thrust pell-mell out into the corridor, while the troupe of clown-men watched in consternation.

"Take the gun," Reith told the freed men. "Free the singers."

He jumped up into the wings of the platform. The brute had entered the cage and was ripping the girl's gauze gown. Reith aimed his gun, sent an explosive needle into the bulging back. A thwump!--the brute jerked, seemed to puff. He raised on tiptoes, twisted about and fell dead. Ylin-Ylan the Flower of Cath, looking around with dazed eyes, saw Reith. He motioned; she stumbled from the cage, across the platform.

The priestesses cried out first in fury, then in fear, for certain of the free men, bringing the gun out on the stage, fired again and again into the audience. Others released the singers. The young man most recently caged charged for the priestess at the console. He seized her, dragged her to the vacated box, locked her within; then returning to the console, pressed home the firevalve, and the priestess sang an ululating contralto. Another of the erstwhile captives seized a torch, fired one of the sheds; others took clubs and began to bludgeon the wailing celebrants.

Reith led the sobbing girl down around the outskirts of the tumult, and was able to snatch up a cape which he drew about the shoulders of the girl.

Priestesses were trying to flee the area-up the hillside, down the east road. Some tried to wriggle their half-naked bodies under sheds, only to be dragged back by the heels and clubbed.

Reith led the girl down the main road toward the east. From the stable came rushing a wagon frantically urged by four priestesses. Tall and dominant bulked the Grand Mother. As Reith watched, a man vaulted up on the bed of the wagon, seized the Grand Mother and sought to strangle her with his bare hands. She reached up with her massive arms, drew him down, cast him on the deck and started to stamp on his head. Reith leapt up behind her, gave her a push; she fell off the wagon. Reith turned to the other priestesses: the three who had traveled with the caravan. "Off! To the ground!"

"We'll be killed! The men are mad things! They are killing the Grand Mother!"

Reith turned to look; four men had surrounded the Grand Mother, who stood at bay, roaring like a bear. One of the priestesses, taking advantage of Reith's distraction, tried to knife him. Reith threw her to the ground, and the other two as well. He pulled the girl up beside him and drove down the east road toward Fasm Junction.

Ylin-Ylan the Flower of Cath huddled against him, exhausted, apathetic. Reith battered, bruised, dry of emotion, hunched in the seat. The sky behind them reddened; flames licked up into the black sky.

CHAPTER SIX

AN HOUR AFTER dawn they reached Fasm junction: three bleak structures of earthen brick on the edge of the steppe, the tall walls punctuated by the smallest and narrowest of black windows, a stockade of timber surrounding. The gate was closed; Reith halted the wagon, pounded and called, to no effect. The two, comatose from fatigue and the dullness following extreme emotion, settled themselves to wait until the folk in the junction saw fit to open the gates.

Investigating the back of the wagon Reith found, among other effects, two small satchels containing sequins, to a number Reith could not even estimate.

"So now we have the priestesses' wealth," he told the Flower of Cath. "Enough, I should think, to buy you safe passage home."

The girl spoke in a puzzled voice: "You would give me the sequins and send me home and you demand nothing in return?"

"Nothing," said Reith with a sigh.

"The Dirdirman's joke seems real," said the girl sternly. "You act as if you were indeed from a distant world." And she turned half away from him.

Reith looked off across the steppe, smiling somewhat sadly. Assuming the unlikely, that he were able to return to Earth, would he then be content to remain, to live his life out and never return to Tschai? No, probably not, mused Reith. Impossible to predict official Earth policy, but he himself could never be content while the Dirdir, the Chasch and the Wankh exploited men and used them as despised subordinates. The situation was a personal affront. Somewhat absently he asked Ylin-Ylan, "What do your people think of the Dirdirmen, the Chaschmen, the others?"

She frowned in perplexity, and seemed, for some reason obscure to Reith, annoyed. "What is there to think? They exist. When they do not disturb us, we ignore them. Why do you speak of Dirdirmen? We were speaking of you and me!"

Reith looked at her. She watched him with passive expectancy. Reith drew a deep breath, started to move closer to her, when the gate into the depot raised and a man looked forth. He was squat, with thick legs, long arms; his face was big-nosed and askew, with skin and hair the color of lead: evidently a Gray.

"Who are you? That's a Seminary wagon. Last night flames burnt the sky. Was that the Rite? The priestesses are as eerie as potlinks during the Rite."

Reith gave him an evasive answer and drove the wagon into the enclosure.

They breakfasted on tea, stewed herbs, hard bread and went back out to the wagon to await the arrival of the caravan. The early morning mood had passed; both felt heavy and uncommunicative. Reith relinquished the seat to Ylin-Ylan and stretched out in the bed of the wagon. In the warm sunlight both became drowsy and slept.

At noon the caravan was sighted: a heaving line of gray and black. The surviving Ilanth scout-and a scowling round-faced youth promoted to the position from gunner arrived at the junction first, then, wheeling their leap-horses, bounded back to the caravan. The tall wagons drawn by soft-footed beasts arrived, the drivers hunched in voluminous cloaks, faces thin under long-billed hats. Then came barrack-wagons with passengers sitting in the openings

to their cubicles. Traz greeted Reith with obvious pleasure; Anacho the Dirdirman gave an airy flutter of the fingers which might have meant anything. "We were sure that you had been killed or kidnapped," Traz told Reith. "We searched the hills, we went out on the steppe, but found nothing. Today we were going to seek you at the Seminary."

"We?" asked Reith.

"The Dirdirman and myself. He's not such a bad sort as one might think."

"The Seminary no longer exists," said Reith.

Baojian appeared, stopped short at the sight of Reith and Ylin-Ylan but asked no questions. Reith, who half-suspected Baojian of facilitating the priestesses' departure from Zadno's Depot, volunteered no information. Baojian assigned them to compartments, and accepted the priestesses' wagon as passage payment to Pera.

Bundles were discharged at the Junction, others were loaded aboard the wagons, and the caravan proceeded to the northeast.

Days passed: easy idle days of trundling across the steppe. For a period they skirted a wide shallow lake of brackish water, then with great caution crossed a marsh overgrown with jointed white reeds. The scout discovered an ambush laid by a dwarfish tribe of marshmen, who at once fled into the reeds before the caravan guns could be brought to bear.

On three occasions Dirdir aircraft swooped low to inspect the caravan, on which occasions Anacho concealed himself in his compartment. Another time a Blue Chasch platform slid overhead.

Reith would have enjoyed the journey had he not been anxious in regard to his space-boat. There was also the problem of Ylin-Ylan, the Flower of Cath. Upon reaching Pera, the caravan would return to Coad on the Dwan Zher, where the girl could take passage aboard a ship for Cath. Reith assumed this to be her plan, though she said nothing of the matter and in fact had become somewhat cool, to Reith's puzzlement.

So went the days, and the caravan crept northward, under the slate-dark skies of Tschai. Twice thunderstorms shattered the afternoon, but for the most part the weather was even. They passed through a dark forest, and the next day followed an ancient causeway across a vast black quagmire covered with bubble-plants and bubble-insects simulating the bubble-plants. The quagmire was the habitat of many fascinating creatures: wingless frog-sized things which propelled themselves through the air by a vibration of fan-like tails; larger creatures, half-spider, half-bat, which, anchoring by means of an exuded thread, rode the breeze on extended wings like a kite.

At Wind Mountain Depot they met a caravan bound for Malagash, south behind the hills on the Hedajha Gulf. Twice small bands of Green Chasch were sighted, but on neither occasion did they attack. The caravan-master declared them to be mating groups en route to a procreation area north of the Dead Steppe. On another occasion a troop of nomads halted to watch them pass: tall men and tall women with faces painted blue. Traz identified them as cannibals and stated that the women fought in battle on an even footing with the men. Twice the caravan passed close to ruined cities; once it swung south to deliver aromatics, essences and amphere wood to an Old Chasch city which Reith found peculiarly fascinating. There were myriads of low white domes half-hidden under foliage, with gardens

everywhere. The air held a peculiar freshness, exuded by tall yellow-green trees, not unlike poplars, known as adarak. These, so Reith learned, were cultivated by Old Chasch and Blue Chasch alike for the clarity which they gave the air.

The caravan halted on an oval area covered with thick short grass, and Baojian immediately called all the personnel of the caravan about him. "This is Golsse, an Old Chasch city. Do not leave the immediate area, or you may be subject to Old Chasch tricks. These can be mere mischiefs' such as trapping you in a maze or dosing you with an essence that will cause you to exude a frightful odor for weeks. But if they become excited, or feel particularly humorous, the tricks may be cruel or fatal. On one occasion they stupefied one of my drivers with essence, grafted new features on his face and a great gray beard as well. Remember, then: do not under any circumstances stray from this oval, even though the Chasch may tease or tempt you. They are an old and decayed race; they are without pity and think only of their odors and essences, and their fanciful jokes. So be warned: keep to the oval, do not wander off in the gardens, no matter what the beguilement, and if you value your life and sanity, do not enter the Old Chasch domes."

He said no more.

Goods were loaded upon the low Chasch motor-drays, operated by a few dispirited Chaschmen: smaller and perhaps not so evolved as the Blue Chaschmen Reith had seen before. They were slight and stooped, with gray wrinkled faces, bulging foreheads, mouths puckered into little buds above nonexistent chins. Like the Blue Chaschmen they wore a false scalp which butted over their eyes and rose to a point. Their demeanor was furtive and hurried, they spoke to none of the caravan personnel, and had eyes only for their work. Four Old Chasch presently appeared. They walked directly below the barrack car; Reith saw them close at hand and was reminded of large silverfish grotesquely endowed with semi-human legs and arms. Their skin was like ivory satin, almost imperceptibly scaled; they seemed fragile, almost desiccated; they had eyes like small silver pellets, independently swiveling and in constant motion. Reith watched them with great interest; they felt his gaze and paused to look up to where he sat. They nodded and gave him affable gestures, to which Reith replied in kind. For a moment longer they inspected him with their bright silver eyes, and then passed on.

Baojian wasted no time at Golsse. As soon as he had reloaded his drays with cases of drugs and tinctures, bales of lacy cloth, dried fruit in cakes and packs, he marshaled the wagons and set off once more to the north, preferring to pass the night on the open steppe rather than risk the caprices of the Old Chasch.

The steppe was empty grassland, flat as a table. Standing on the barrack-wagon Reith could see twenty miles through his scope, and so spied a large band of Green Chasch even before the scouts. He notified Baojian, who immediately ordered the caravan into a defensive ring with the guns commanding the entire surrounding area. The Green Chasch loped up on their massive beasts, holding yellow and black flags afloat on their lances, signifying truculence and bellicosity. "They have just come down from the north," Traz told Reith. "This is the meaning of the flags. They gorge on fluke-fish and angbut; their blood becomes rich and thick, which makes them irritable. When they fly yellow and black even the Emblems retire rather than face them in battle."

Yellow and black flags regardless, the Green warriors did not molest the caravan but halted a mile distant. Reith studied them through his scope, to see creatures vastly different from the Old Chasch. These were seven and eight feet tall, massive and thick-limbed, their scales clearly defined and of a glistening metallic green. Their faces were small, brooding,

wickedly ugly under the massive jut of their scalps. They wore rude leather aprons and shoulder harness, in which hung swords, battle-picks and catapults similar to those of the Emblems. Troublesome creatures to encounter in close combat, thought Reith. They sat on their beasts studying the caravan for a full five minutes, then swung away and bounded off to the east.

The caravan re-formed itself and continued along the track. Traz was puzzled by the diffidence of the Green Chasch. "When they carry yellow and black, they are insensate. Perhaps they prepare an ambush from behind a forest."

Baojian suspected a similar stratagem and kept his scouts far forward for the next few days. At night there were no special precautions taken, inasmuch as the Green Chasch became torpid in the dark and huddled in groaning grunting masses until daybreak.

Pera lay ahead: the caravan terminus. Reith's transcom specified a vector of sixty miles west to the mate transcom. He made inquiry of the caravan-master, who informed him that the Blue Chasch city Dadiche was situated at this location. "Avoid them; a wicked lot they are, subtle as the Old Chasch, savage as the Greens."

"They have no commerce with men?"

"There is considerable trade; in fact, Pera is a depot for trade with the Blue Chasch, which is carried on by a caste of draymen operating out of Pera; only these draymen gain access to Dadiche. Of all the Chasch I find the Blues most detestable. The Old Chasch are not a friendly folk, but they are malicious, rather than harsh. Sometimes of course, the effect is the same, just as the storm"-he pointed toward the west where great masses of black cloud filled the sky-"will wet us no less than submersion in the ocean."

"You will turn directly about at Pera and return to Coad on the Dwan Zher?"

"Within three days."

"In all likelihood the Princess Ylin-Ylan will return with you and take ship for Cath."

"All very well; can she pay?"

"Certainly."

"Then there is no difficulty. What of you? Do you wish to go to Cath likewise?"

"No. I'll probably remain at Pera."

Baojian, with a darting glint of a glance for Reith, gave his head a wry shake. "The Golden Yao of Cath are estimable folk. But then, nothing of Tschai is predictable except trouble. The Green Chasch are dogging us. A miracle that they have not attacked. I begin to hope that we may reach Pera without incident."

Baojian was to be denied. With Pera already in view-a city of ruined halls and toppled monuments surrounding a central citadel, much like those others they had passed-the Green Chasch bounded in from the east. Coincidentally the storm broke. Lightning crashed down upon the steppe; to the south black brooms of rain swept down upon the land.

Baojian decided that Pera offered no refuge and ordered the caravan into its defensive

circle. Barely soon enough: this time the Green Chasch showed neither indecision nor diffidence. Bent low on their great beasts, they came charging forward, intent only on penetrating the ring of wagons.

The caravan guns gave their curious gurgling belch, barely heard through the thunder, and the rain made efficient weapon handling difficult. The Green Chasch, coordinated perhaps telepathically, bounded forward; some were struck by the sand blast and killed; some were crushed under their toppling beasts. For a space there was sheer confusion, then new ranks sprang over the thrashing bodies. Again the gunners fired frantically through the rain, with the lightning and thunder providing a mind jarring accompaniment to the battle.

The Green Chasch fell faster than they could advance, and changed their tactics. Those who had been dismounted, crouched behind leaphorse hulks, brought their catapults to bear; the first shower of bolts killed three gunners. The mounted warriors charged again, hoping to gain the circle by sheer momentum. Again, they were thrown back, the vacated guns having been manned by drivers, and again there was a shower of bolts and more gunners dropped from the gun platforms.

The Green Chasch lunged forward a third time, their mounts bounding and capering. Behind them, lightning fractured the black sky, with the thunder an incessant background to the cries and screams of the battle. The Green Chasch were taking terrible losses, the ground heaved with groaning shapes, but others leapt forward and at last the guns were in range of Green Chasch swords.

The result of the battle was no longer in doubt. Reith took the Flower of Cath's hand, beckoned to Traz. The three struck out for the city, joining a line of panic-stricken fugitives from the barrack-wagons, which now was joined by the drivers and surviving gunners. The caravan was abandoned.

Screaming in triumph, the Green Chasch bounded among the fugitives, hacking off heads, chopping down through necks and shoulders. A flaming-eyed warrior lunged at Reith, Ylin-Ylan and Traz. Reith had his gun ready, but hesitated to waste the precious pellets and dodged under the hissing sword-stroke. The leap-horse, swerving, skidded on the wet turf; the warrior was flung bellowing sidewise. Reith ran forward, raised his Emblem cutlass high, hacked at the thick neck, cut through cords, filaments and tubes. The warrior kicked and thrashed in appalling reluctance to die; the three did not wait. Reith took up the sword, which was somewhat crudely forged from a single bar of steel as tall as himself and wide as his arm. It was too heavy and long to be wieldy; he cast it down. The three proceeded through the rain, now falling in such heavy sheets as to obscure vision. The Green Chasch occasionally were glimpsed as bounding phantoms; occasionally the wraith-like shapes of fugitives could be seen, bending forward, crouched to the rain, hurrying with all speed for the ruins of Pera.

In sodden clothes, with the ground streaming beneath their feet, the three finally reached a tumble of concrete slabs marking the outskirts of Pera, and considered themselves somewhat safer from the Green Chasch. They took shelter under an overhanging jut of concrete, to stand shivering and miserable while the rain thrashed down in front of their faces. Traz said philosophically, "At least we are at Pera, where we intended to come."

"Ingloriously," said Reith, "but alive."

"Now what do you think to do?"

Reith reached into his pouch, brought forth the transcom, checked the vector indicator. "It points to Dadiche, twenty miles west. I suppose I'll go there."

Traz gave a disapproving sniff. "The Blue Chasch will deal severely with you."

The girl of Cath suddenly leaned against the wall, put her face in her hands and began to weep: the first time Reith had seen her give way to emotion. Somewhat tentatively he patted her shoulder. "What's the trouble? Other than being cold, wet, hungry and scared?"

"I'll never be home to Cath. Never! I know this."

"Of course you will! There will be other caravans!"

The girl, clearly unconvinced, wiped her eyes and stood looking out across the dismal landscape. The rain now began to slacken. The lightning flickered off to the east; the thunder became a sullen rumble. A few minutes later the clouds broke and sunlight slanted through the rain to glisten on wet stone and puddles. The three, still somewhat damp, emerged from their refuge, almost to collide with a small man in an ancient leather cloak, carrying a bundle of faggots. He jumped back in alarm, dropped his bundle, darted back to snatch it up and was about to race away when Reith caught hold of his cloak. "Wait! Not so fast! Tell us where we can find food and shelter!"

The man's face slowly relaxed. Warily, under bushy eyebrows, he looked from one to the other, then with great dignity jerked his cloak from Reith's grasp. "Food and shelter: these be hard to come by; only by toil. Can you pay?"

"Yes, we can pay."

The man considered. "Now, I have a comfortable dwelling, of three apertures..." Reluctantly he shook his head. "But best that you go to the Dead Steppe Inn. If I took you in, the Gnashters would gain my profit, and I would have naught."

"The Dead Steppe Inn is the best of Pera?"

"Yes, a fine hostelry indeed. The Gnashters will tax your wealth, but this is what we must pay for our security. In Pera no one may rob or rape but Naga Goho and the Gnashters; and this is a boon. What if everyone enjoyed this license?"

"Naga Goho is the ruler of Pera, then?"

"Yes, one might say so." He pointed to a massive structure of blocks and slabs on the central eminence of the city. "There is his palace, on the citadel, and there he lives with his Gnashters. But I will say no more; after all, they have worried the Phung out to North Pera; there is trade with Dadiche; bandits avoid the city; affairs could be the worse."

"I see," said Reith. "Well then, where do we find the inn?"

"Yonder, at the foot of the hill: at the caravan's end."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DEAD STEPPE INN was the most grandiose structure Reith had yet seen in a ruined city: a long building with a complicated set of roofs and gables built against the central hill of Pera. As in all the inns of Tschai, there was a large common-room with trestle-tables, but rather than rude benches, the Dead Steppe Inn boasted fine high-backed chairs of carved black wood. Three chandeliers of colored glass and black iron illuminated the room; on the walls hung a number of very old terra-cotta masks: visages of some fanciful half-human folk.

The tables were crowded with fugitives from the caravan; a savory odor of food hung in the air. Reith began to feel somewhat more cheerful. Here, at least, were a small few concessions to comfort and style.

The innkeeper was a small plump man with a neat red beard, protuberant red-brown eyes. His hands were in ceaseless motion and his feet shifted back and forth as if haste dominated his life. At Reith's request for accommodation he waved his hands in despair. "Have you not heard? The green demons destroyed Baojian's train. Here are the survivors, and I must find room. Some cannot pay; what of that? I am ordered by Naga Goho to extend shelter."

"We were also with the caravan," said Reith. "However, we can pay."

The innkeeper became more optimistic. "I'll find you a single room; you must make the best of this. A word of advice." Here he looked swiftly over his shoulder. "Be discreet. There have been changes at Pera."

The three were shown to a cubicle of adequate cleanliness; three pallets were brought in. The inn could provide no dry clothing; with garments still damp the three descended to the common-room, where now they discovered Anacho the Dirdirman, who had arrived an hour before. Off to the side, staring thoughtfully into the fire, was Baojian.

For supper they were served ample bowls of stew, wafers of hard bread. While they were eating seven men entered the room to stand looking truculently this way and that. All were strong big-boned men, a trifle fleshy with ease, florid with good living. Six wore dull red gowns, stylish black leather slippers, rakish caps hung with baubles. Gnashters, thought Reith. The seventh, wearing an embroidered surcoat, was evidently Naga Goho: a man tall and thin, with a peculiarly large vulpine head. He spoke to a room which had become hushed: "Welcome all, welcome all to Pera! We have a happy orderly city, as you will notice. Laws are sternly enforced. A sojourn tax is collected as well. If anyone lacks funds he must contribute his labor for the common benefit. So, then-are there questions or complaints?" He looked about the room, but no one spoke. The Gnashters circulated through the room, collecting coins. Reith grudgingly paid a tax of nine sequins for himself, Traz and the Flower of Cath. None of the folk present seemed to find the exaction unreasonable. So pervasive was the lack of social discipline, Reith decided, that exploitation of advantage was taken for granted.

Naga Goho noticed the Flower of Cath and stood erect, preening his mustache. He signaled to the innkeeper, who hastened to present himself. The two held a muttered colloquy, Naga Goho never taking his eyes from Ylin-Ylan.

The innkeeper crossed the room, muttered in Reith's ear. "Naga Goho has taken note of the woman." He indicated the Flower. "He wants to know her status: is she slave? daughter? wife?"

Reith glanced sidewise at Ylin-Ylan, at a loss for immediate response; already he saw the girl stiffening. If he declared her to be alone and independent he put her at the mercy of Naga Goho. If he claimed her as his own he would no doubt provoke her indignant disclaimer. He said, "I am her escort, she is under my protection."

The innkeeper pursed his lips, shrugged and went to report to Naga Goho, who made a small curt gesture and turned his attention elsewhere. Not long after he departed.

In the small room Reith found himself in a state of disturbing propinquity with the Flower of Cath. She sat on her pallet, clasping her knees disconsolately. "Cheer up," said Reith. "Things aren't all that bad."

She gave her head a mournful shake. "I am lost among barbarians: a pebble dropped in Tembara Deep, gone from mind."

"Nonsense," scoffed Reith. "You'll be traveling home with the next caravan to leave Pera."

Ylin-Ylan was unconvinced. "At home they will name another the Flower of Cath; she will take my flower at the Banquet of the Season. The princess will beseech the girls to name their names, and I will not be there. No one will ask me and no one will know my names."

"Tell me your names then," said Reith. "I'd like to hear."

The Flower turned to look at him. "Do you mean this? Do you mean what you ask?"

Reith was puzzled by her intensity. "Certainly."

The girl turned a swift glance toward Traz, who was occupied in arranging his pallet. "Come outside," she whispered in Reith's ear and jumped to her feet.

Reith followed her to the balcony. For a period they leaned together, elbows touching, looking out over the ruined city. Az rode high among broken clouds; below were a few dismal lights; from somewhere came a reedy chant, the twang of a plectrum. The Flower spoke in a quick hushed voice: "My flower is the Ylin-Ylan, and this you know; my Flower name. But that is a name used only at demonstrations and pageants." She looked toward him breathlessly, leaning so close that Reith could smell the clean tart-sweet scent of her person.

Reith asked in a husky voice, "You have other names too?"

"Yes." Sighing, she edged closer to Reith, who began to feel out of his depth. "Why have you not asked before? You must have known I would tell."

"Well, then," asked Reith, "what are your names?"

Demurely, she said, "My court name is Shar Zarin." She hesitated then, leaning her head on his shoulder (for Reith's arm was around her waist), she said, "My child name was Zozi, but only my father calls me that."

"Flower name, court name, child name ... What other names do you have?"

"My friend-name, my secret name, and-one other. My friend-name, would you hear it? If I tell you, then we are friends, and you must tell me your friend-name."

"Certainly," croaked Reith. "Of course."

"Derl."

Reith kissed her upturned face. "My first name is Adam."

"Is that your friend-name?"

"Yes ... I suppose you'd call it that."

"Do you have a secret name?"

"No. Not that I know of."

She gave a small nervous laugh. "Perhaps it is just as well. For if I asked you, and you told me, then I would know your secret soul, and then-" Breathlessly she looked up at Reith. "You must have a secret name; one that only you know. I have."

Intoxicated, Reith tossed caution to the winds. "What is yours?"

She raised her mouth to his ear. "L'lae. She is a nymph who lives in clouds over Mount Daramthissa, and loves the star-god Ktan." She looked toward him, melting, expectant, and Reith kissed her fervently. She sighed. "When we are alone, you shall call me L'lae and I will call you Ktan and that shall be your secret name."

Reith laughed. "If you like."

"We shall wait here, and soon there will be a caravan east: back across the steppe to Coad, then by cog across the Draschade, to Vervode in Cath."

Reith put his hand on her mouth. "I must go to Dadiche."

"Dadiche? The city of the Blue Chasch? Are you still so obsessed? But why?"

Reith raised his eyes, looked off into the night-sky, as if to draw strength from the stars, though none of those visible could possibly be the Sun ... What could he say? If he told the truth she would think him insane, even though her ancestors had beamed signals to Earth.

So he hesitated, disgusted by his own softness of spirit. The Flower of Cath--Ylin-Ylan, Shar Zarin, Zozi, Derl, L'lae, according to the social circumstances-put her hands on his shoulders and peered up into his face. "Since I know you for Ktan and you know me for L'lae, your mind is my mind; your pleasure is my pleasure. So-what prompts you for Dadiche?"

Reith drew a deep breath. "I came to Kotan in a space-boat. The Blue Chasch almost killed me, and conveyed the space-boat to Dadiche, or so I suppose. I must recover it."

The Flower was bewildered. "But where did you learn to fly a spaceboat? You are no Dirdirman or Wankhmen ... Or are you?"

"No, of course not. No more than you. I was instructed."

"It is all such a mystery." Her arms twitched on his shoulders. "And were you able to recover the space-boat, what would you do?"

"First, take you to Cath."

The fingers now gripped his shoulders, the eyes searched his through the darkness. "Then what? You would return to your own land?"

"Yes."

"You have a woman-a wife?"

"Oh no. No indeed."

"Someone who knows your secret name?"

"I had no secret name until you gave me one."

The girl took her hands from his shoulders, and, leaning on the rail, stared moodily out across old Pera. "If you go to Dadiche, they will smell you and kill you."

"Smell me? How do you mean?"

She turned him a quick look. "You are a puzzle! So much you know, and so little! One would think you from the farthest island of Tschai! The Blue Chasch smell as accurately as we can see!"

"I still must make the trial."

"I don't understand," she said in a dull voice. "I have told you my name; I have given what is most precious to me; and you are unmoved. You do not alter your way."

Reith took her in his arms. She was stiff, then gradually yielded. "I am not unmoved," said Reith. "Far from it. But I must go to Dadiche--for your sake as well as mine."

"How my sake? To be carried back to Cath?"

"That, and more. Are you happy to be dominated by Dirdir and Chasch and Wankh, not to mention the Pnume?"

"I don't know ... I had never thought of it. Men are freaks, afterthoughts, so they tell us. Though Mad King Hopsin insisted that men came from a far planet. He called to them for help, which of course never came. That was a hundred and fifty years ago."

"It's a long time to wait," said Reith. He kissed her once more; she submitted listlessly. The fervor was gone.

"I feel-strange," she mumbled. "I don't know how I feel."

They stood by the rail, listening to the sounds of the inn: soft hoots of laughter from the pot-room; complaints of children, the scolding of their mothers. The Flower of Cath said, "I think I will go to bed now."

Reith held her back. "Derl."

"Yes?"

"When I come back from Dadiche-"

"You will never come back from Dadiche. The Blue Chasch will take you for their games ... Now I will try to sleep, and forget that I am alive."

She went back into the cubicle. Reith remained out on the balcony, first cursing himself, then wondering how he could have acted differently, unless he were composed of something other than flesh and blood.

Tomorrow, then: Dadiche, to learn once and for all the shape of his future.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NIGHT PASSED; morning came: first a wash of sepia light, then a wan yellow glare, then the appearance of Carina 4269. From the kitchens rose the smoke of fires, the rattle of pans. Reith descended to the common-room, where he found Anacho the Dirdirman before him, sitting over a bowl of tea. Reith joined him and was likewise brought tea by a kitchen-wench. He asked, "What do you know of Dadiche?"

Anacho warmed his long pale fingers around the bowl. "The city is relatively old: twenty thousand years or so. It is the main Chasch spaceport, though they have little communication with their homeworld Godag. South of Dadiche are factories and technical plants, and there is even some small trade between Dirdir and Chasch, though both parties pretend to the contrary. What do you seek at Dadiche?" And he fixed Reith with his owlish water-gray eyes.

Reith reflected. He gained nothing by confiding in Anacho, whom he still regarded as something of an unknown quantity. Finally he said, "The Chasch took something of value from me. I want to get it back, if possible."

"Interesting," said Anacho with a sardonic overtone to his voice. "I am piqued. What could the Chasch take from a sub-man that he would travel a thousand leagues to recover? And how could he expect to recover it, or even find it?"

"I can find it. What happens next is the problem."

"You intrigue me," said the Dirdirman. "What do you propose to do first?"

"I need information. I want to learn if persons such as you and I can enter Dadiche and depart without hindrance."

"Not I," said Anacho. "They would smell me for a Dirdirman. They have noses of astonishing particularity. The food you eat delivers essences to your skin; the Chasch can identify these, and separate Dirdir from Wankh, marsh-dwellers from steppe-men, rich from the poor; not to mention the variations caused by disease, uncleanness, unguents, waters, a dozen other conditions. They can smell salt air in a man's lungs if he has been near the ocean; they can

detect ozone on a man coming down from the heights. They sense if you are hungry, or angry, or afraid; they can define your age, your sex, the color of your skin. Their noses provide them an entire dimension of perception."

Reith sat reflecting.

Anacho arose, went to a nearby table where sat three men in rough garments: men with waxy white-gray skins, light-brown hair, mild large eyes. To Anacho's questions they gave deferent responses; Anacho ambled back to Reith.

"Those three are drovers; they visit Dadiche regularly. The country is safe to the west of Pera; the Green Chasch avoid the city guns. No one will molest us along the road-

"Us'? You are coming?"

"Why not? I have never seen Dadiche or its outlying gardens. We can hire a pair of leap-horses and approach Dadiche within a mile or so. The Chasch seldom leave the city, so the drovers tell me."

"Good," said Reith. "I'll have a word with Traz; he can keep the girl company."

At a corral to the rear of the inn Reith and the Dirdirman hired leap-horses of a tall rubber-legged breed strange to Reith. The ostler threw on the saddles, shoved guide-bars through holes in the creatures' brains, at which they screamed and whipped the air with their palps. The reins were attached, Reith and Anacho vaulted up into the saddles; the beasts made angry sidling leaps, then sprang off down the road.

They passed through the center of Pera, where, over a considerable area, folk had built all manner of dwellings from the rubble and slabs of concrete. There was a greater population than Reith had expected, numbering perhaps four or five thousand. And up on top of the old citadel, brooding over all, was the crude mansion in which lived Naga Goho and his retinue of Ghashters.

Coming into the central plaza Reith and Anacho stopped short before a display of horrid objects. Beside a massive gibbet were flaying-stocks stained with blood. Poles held aloft a pair of impaled men. From a derrick swung a small cage; inside crouched a naked sun-blackened creature, barely recognizable as a man. A Gnashter lounged nearby, a heavy-jowled young man wearing a maroon vest and a knee-length black kilt: the Gnashter uniform. Reith reined up the leap-horse and, indicating the cage, addressed the Gnashter. "What was his crime?"

"Recalcitrance, when Naga Goho called his daughter to service."

"What then? How long does he swing thus?"

The Gnashter glanced up indifferently. "Another three days he'll last. The rain freshened him up; he's full of water."

"What of those?" Reith pointed to the impaled corpses.

"Defaulters. Certain graceless folk begrudge a tithe of their wealth to Naga Goho."

Anacho touched Reith's arm. "Come."

Reith slowly turned away; impossible to right all the wrongs of this dreadful planet. But looking back toward the wretch in the cage, he felt a flush of shame. Still-what options were open to him? To embroil himself with Naga Goho could easily mean the loss of his life, with no benefit to anyone. If he were able to regain his space-boat and return to Earth, the lot of all men on Tschai must be improved. So Reith told himself, and tried to put the dismal scene out of his mind.

Beyond Pera were large numbers of irregular plots, where women and girls cultivated all manner of crops. Drays loaded with food and farm produce moved westward along the road toward Dadiche: a commerce surprising to Reith, who had expected no such formalized trade.

The two rode ten miles, toward a low range of gray hills. Where the road rose into a steep-walled ravine a gate barred the way and they were forced to wait while a pair of Gnashers inspected a dray piled with crates of cabbage-like pulps, then levied a toll upon the drayman. Reith and Anacho, passing the gate, paid a sequin each.

"Naga Goho misses few chances to profit," Reith grumbled. "What does he do with his wealth?"

The Dirdirman shrugged. "What does anyone do with wealth?"

The road wound up, passed through a notch. Beyond lay the land of the Blue Chasch: a wooded countryside meshed by dozens of little rivers, easing in and out of innumerable ponds. There were a hundred sorts of trees: red feather-palm, green conifer-like growths, black trunks and branches hung with white globes; and many groves of adarak. The entire landscape was a single garden, tended with meticulous care.

Below was Dadiche: low flat domes and curving white surfaces, half-submerged in foliage. The size and population of the city was impossible to estimate; there was no differentiation between city and park. Reith was forced to admit that the Blue Chasch lived in pleasant circumstances.

The Dirdirman, conditioned to other aesthetic precepts, spoke with condescension. "Typical of the Chasch mentality: formless, chaotic, devious. You have seen a Dirdir city? Truly noble! a sight to stop the heart! This half-bucolic botchery"--Anacho made a scornful gesture "reflects the caprice of the Blue Chasch. Not as flaccid and decadent as the Old Chasch of course-remember Golsse? but then the Old Church have been moribund for twenty thousand years ... What do you do? What is that instrument?"

For Reith, unable to contrive a method to read his transcom dials discreetly, had brought it forth. "This," said Reith, "is a device which indicates the direction and distance of three and a half miles." He sighted along the needle. "The line passes through that large structure with the high dome." He pointed. "The distance is about right."

Anacho was looking at the transcom with gloomy fascination. "Where did you get this instrument? It is of a workmanship I have never seen before. And those markings: neither Dirdir nor Chasch nor Wankh! Is there some far corner of Tschai where submen make goods of this quality? I am astounded! I have believed the sub-men incapable of any activity more complicated than agriculture!"

"Anacho, my friend," said Reith, "you have a great deal to learn. The process will come as

an appalling shock to you."

Anacho massaged his undershot jaw, pulled the soft black cap down over his forehead. "You are as mysterious as a Pnume."

Reith brought the scanscope from his pouch, inspected the landscape. He traced the course of the road, down the hill, through a grove of flame-shaped trees with enormous green and purple leaves, thence to a wall which he had not previously noticed and which evidently guarded Dadiche from the Green Chasch. The road passed through a portal in this wall and into the city. At intervals along the road were drays entering Dadiche loaded with comestibles, leaving with crates of manufactured goods.

Anacho, inspecting the scanscope, made a clicking sound of irritated puzzlement, but restrained his comments.

Reith said, "No point in going further down the road; however, if we rode along the ridge a mile or two, I could take another sight on that big building."

Anacho made no objection; they rode south almost two miles, then Reith took a new reading of the transcom. The line of sight passed through the same large domed structure. Reith gave a nod of certainty. "In that building are articles which at one time were mine, and which I want to recover."

The Dirdirman's lips twitched in a grin. "All very well-but how? You can't ride into Dadiche, pound on the door and cry 'Bring out my object!' You will be disappointed. I doubt if you are a thief sufficiently deft to fool the Chasch. What will you do?"

Reith looked longingly down at the great white dome. "First, closer reconnaissance. I need to look inside that building. Because what I want most might not be there at all."

Anacho shook his head in mild reproach. "You talk in riddles. First you declare that your articles are there, then that they may not be there after all."

Reith merely laughed, far more confidently than he felt. Now that he was close to Dadiche, and presumably to the space-boat, the task of regaining possession seemed overwhelming. "Enough for today, at any rate. Let's be back to Pera."

They rode, swaying and lurching on the leap-horses, and returned to the road, where they halted for a space watching the drays rumble past. Some were propelled by engines, others by slow-going pull-beasts. Those to Dadiche carried foodstuffs: melons, stacks of dead reed-walkers, bales of dingy white floss spun by swamp insects, nets bulging with purple bladders. "These drays go into Dadiche," said Reith. "I'll go with them. Why should there be difficulty?"

The Dirdirman gave his head a lugubrious shake. "The Blue Chasch are unpredictable. You might find yourself performing tricks for their amusement. Such as walking rods over pits full of filth or white-eyed scorpions. As you gain equilibrium, the Chasch heat the rods, or send electricity through, so that you bound back and forth and perform desperate antics. Or perhaps you will find yourself in a glass maze with a tormented Phung. Or you might be blindfolded and set in an amphitheater with a cyclodon, also blindfolded. Or-were you Dirdir or Dirdirman, you might be set to solving logical problems to avoid unpleasant penalties. Their ingenuity is endless."

Reith scowled down at the city. "The draymen risk all this?"

"They are licensed and go and come unmolested, unless they violate an ordinance."

"Then I will go as a drayman."

Anacho nodded. "The obvious stratagem. I suggest that tonight you strip off your clothes, rub yourself with damp soil, stand in the smoke of burning bones, walk in pull-beast dung, eat panibals, ramp and smudgers, all of which permeate the body with odor, and wipe the grease into your skin. Then dress from skin outward in drayman's garments. As a last precaution, never pass upwind of a Blue Chasch and never exhale where one might detect the odor of your teeth or your breath."

Reith managed a wry grin. "The scheme sounds less feasible every minute. But I don't care to die. I have too many responsibilities. Such as returning the girl to Cath."

"Bah!" snorted Anacho. "You are a victim of sentimentality. She is a troublemaker, vain and self-willed. Leave her to her destiny,,

"If she were not vain I'd suspect her of stupidity," declared Reith with feeling.

Anacho kissed his fingertips: a gesture of Mediterranean fervor. "When you say 'beauty,' you must mean the women of my race! Ah! Elegant creatures, pale as snow, with pates naked and glossy as mirrors! So near to Dirdir that the Dirdir themselves are beguiled ... Each to his own taste. The Cath girl can never be other than a source of tribulation. Such women trail disaster as a cloud trails rain; think of the times she has led you into contention!"

Reith shrugged, and kicked the leap-horse into motion; they bounded east along the road, back down upon the steppe, off toward the mound of gray-white rubble which was Pera.

Late in the afternoon they entered the ruined city. They returned the leap-horses to the stables, crossed the plaza to the long half-subterranean inn, with the low sun shining on their backs.

The common-room was half-full of folk consuming an early supper. Neither Traz nor the Flower of Cath was here, nor were they in the sleeping cubicles on the second floor. Reith returned downstairs and found the innkeeper. "Where are my friends: the boy and the Cath girl? They are nowhere on the premises."

The innkeeper drew a sour face, looked everywhere but into Reith's eyes. "You must know where she is; how could she be elsewhere? As for the lad, he went into an unreasonable fury when they came to take her. The Gnashters broke his head and dragged him off to be hanged."

In a voice precise and controlled Reith asked, "How long ago did this occur?"

"Not long. He'll still be kicking. The lad was a fool. A girl like that is flagrant enticement; he had no right to defend her."

"They took the girl to the tower?"

"So I suppose. What's it to me? Naga Goho does as he pleases; he wields power in Pera."

Reith turned to Anacho, handed over his pouch, retaining only his weapons. "Take care of my belongings. If I don't return, keep them."

"You plan to risk yourself again?" asked Anacho in wonder and disapproval. "What about your 'object'?"

"It can wait." Reith ran off toward the citadel.

CHAPTER NINE

THE LIGHT OF the setting sun shone full on the stone platforms and mounting blocks surrounding the gibbet. Colors held the curious fullness of all the Tschai colors: even the browns and grays, mustards, dull ochers, earthen colors in the garments of those who had come to watch the hanging imparted a sense of rich essence. The dull-red jackets of the Gnashters glowed rich and ripe; there were six of these. Two stood by the gibbet rope; two supported Traz, who stood on limp legs, head bowed, a trickle of blood down his forehead. One leaned negligently by a post, hand by his slung catapult; the last spoke to the apathetic herd before the gibbet.

"By order of Naga Goho, this furious criminal who dared use violence upon the Gnashters must be hanged!"

The noose was ceremoniously dropped around Traz's neck. He raised his head, turned a glassy look around the crowd. If he noticed Reith he gave no sign. "May the incident and its consequences teach obedience to all!"

Reith walked around to the side of the gibbet. No time now for delicacy or squeamishness-if, in fact, such occasions ever occurred on Tschai. The Gnashters at the hoist-rope saw him approach, but his demeanor was so casual that they gave him no heed and turned to watch for their signal. Reith slid his knife into the heart of the first, who croaked in surprise. The second looked about; Reith cut his throat with a back-hand stroke, then threw the knife to split the forehead of the Gnashter who stood by the gibbet-pole. In an instant the six had become three. Reith stepped forward with his sword and cut down the man who had uttered the proclamation, but now the two holding Traz, drawing blades, rushed at Reith, jostling each other in outrage. Reith jumped back, aimed his Emblem catapult, shot the foremost; the second, now the sole survivor of the six, stopped short, Reith attacked him, struck the sword from his hand, felled him with a blow to the side of the head. He freed the noose, yanked it tight around the neck of the fallen Gnashter, pointed to two men at the front of the fascinated onlookers. "Heave now; heave on the rope. We'll hang the Gnashter, not the boy." When the men hesitated, Reith cried: "Heave on the rope; do my bidding! We'll show Naga Goho who rules Pera! Up with the Gnashter!"

The men sprang to the rope: high into the air swung the Gnashter, kicking and flailing. Reith ran over to the derrick. He loosed the rope which held the cage aloft, lowered it to the ground, threw open the top. The wretch within, crouched and cramped, looked up in fearful expectation, then an impossible hope. He tried to raise himself, but he was too weak. Reith reached down, helped him forth. He signaled to the men who had hoisted on the rope. "Take this man and the lad to the inn; see that they are cared for. You need fear the Gnashters no more. Take weapons from the dead men; if Gnashters appear, kill them! Do you understand? There are to be no more Gnashters in Pera, no more taxes, no more hangings,

no more Naga Goho!"

Diffidently men took the weapons, then turned to look up toward the citadel.

Reith waited only long enough to see Traz and the man from the cage helped toward the inn, then he turned and ran up the hill toward Naga Goho's makeshift palace.

A wall of piled rubble lay across the path, enclosing a courtyard. A dozen Gnashters lounged at long tables, drinking beer and munching strips of pickled reed-walker. Reith looked right and left, slid along the wall.

The hill fell away below to become a precipice; Reith pressed closer to the wall, clung to the corners and crevices of the blocks. He came to an aperture: a window crisscrossed by iron bars. Cautiously Reith looked within, to see only darkness. Ahead was a larger window, but the way was perilous, sheer over a seventy-foot drop. Reith hesitated, then proceeded, moving with painful slowness, hanging to the rough edges and crevices by his fingertips. In the gathering dusk he was inconspicuous, a blot on the wall. Below spread old Pera, with yellow lights beginning to flicker among the ruins. Reith reached the window, which was screened by a grille of woven reeds. He looked through, into a bed-chamber. On a couch was the outline of someone sleeping—a woman. Sleeping? Reith peered through the gloom. The hands were raised in supplication, the legs were gracelessly sprawled. The body lay very still. The woman was dead.

Reith tore open the grille, climbed into the room. The woman had been beaten about the head and strangled; her mouth was open, her tongue protruded foolishly. Alive she had been not uncomely, or so Reith conjectured. Dead, she was a sad sight.

Reith took three long strides to the door, looked out into a garden courtyard. From an archway opposite came a murmur of voices.

Reith slipped across the courtyard, looked through the archway, into a dining hall hung with rugs patterned in yellow, black, red. Other rugs muffled the floor; the furnishings were heavy chairs, a table of age-blackened wood. Under a great candelabra flaring with yellow lights sat Naga Goho at his evening meal, a splendid fur cloak thrown back from his shoulders. Across the room sat the Flower of Cath, head downcast, hair hanging past her face. Her hands were clasped in her lap; Reith saw that her wrists were bound with thongs. Naga Goho ate with exaggerated delicacy, conveying morsels to his mouth with mincing twitches of finger and thumb. As he ate he spoke, and as he spoke he flourished a short-handled whip in a mood of sinister playfulness.

The Flower sat with a still countenance, never raising her eyes from her lap. Reith watched and listened for a moment, one part of him as single-minded as a shark, another disgusted and horrified, still another sardonically amused for the grotesque surprise awaiting Naga Goho.

He stepped quietly into the room. Ylin-Ylan looked up, face blank. Reith signaled her to silence, but Naga Goho perceived the focus of her eyes and swung around in his chair. He jumped to his feet, the fur cloak falling to the floor. "Ha ho!" he cried out, startled. "A rat in the palace!" He ran to seize his sword from the scabbard over the back of the chair; Reith was there first, and, not deigning to draw his own blade, struck Naga Goho with his fist and sent him sprawling across the table. Naga Goho, a strong active man, turned an agile somersault, came up on his feet. Reith leapt after him, and now it developed that Naga Goho was as skilled in Tschai hand-fighting as Reith in the intricate techniques of Earth. To

confuse Naga Goho, Reith began to throw left jabs into his face. When Naga Goho grasped for Reith's left arm, to attempt a throw or a bone-break, Reith stepped in and hacked at Naga Goho's neck and face. Naga Goho, desperate, attempted a terrible sweeping kick, but Reith was ready; seizing the foot, he yanked, twisted, heaved, to break Naga Goho's ankle. Naga Goho fell on his back. Reith kicked his head and a moment later Naga Goho lay with arms triced up behind him, a gag in his mouth.

Reith liberated Ylin-Ylan, who closed her eyes. So pale was she, so drawn, that Reith thought that she would faint. But she stood up, to stand weeping against Reith's chest. For a moment or two he held her, stroking her head; then he said, "Let's be out of here. So far we've had good luck; it may not last. There are a dozen or more of his men below."

Reith tied a length of thong around Naga Goho's neck, yanked. "To your feet, quick now."

Naga Goho lay back, glaring, making angry sounds through his gag. Reith picked up the whip, flicked the side of Naga Goho's face. "Up." He hauled on the thong; the erstwhile chieftain rose to his feet.

With Naga Goho hobbling in great pain, they passed along a hall lit with a reeking cresset, entered the courtyard where the Gnashters sat over tankards of beer.

Reith gave the thong to the Flower. "Walk on through; don't hurry. Pay no heed to the men. Lead the Goho on down the road."

Ylin-Ylan, taking the thong, walked through the courtyard leading Naga Goho. The Gnashters swung around on their benches, staring in wonder. Naga Goho made hoarse urgent noises; the Gnashters rose irresolutely to their feet. One of them came slowly forward. Reith stepped into the courtyard holding the catapult. "Back; into your seats."

While they stood, he slipped across the courtyard. Ylin-Ylan and Naga Goho were starting down the hill. Reith told the Gnashters, "Naga Goho is finished. So are you. When you come down the hill, you had better leave your weapons behind." He backed out into the dark. "Don't any come after us." He waited. From within came a furious babble of talk. Two of the Gnashters strode toward the opening. Reith appeared in the gap, shot the foremost with his catapult, stepped back into the dark once more. Within the courtyard, while Reith dropped a new bolt into the slot, was utter silence. Reith looked back in. All stood at the far side of the courtyard, staring at the corpse. Reith turned, ran down the path, where the Flower struggled to control Naga Goho, who jerked at the neck thong, trying to pull her close so that he might fall upon her, perhaps knock her down. Reith took the thong, dragged Naga Goho stumbling and hopping at a smart pace to the foot of the hill.

Az and Braz both rode the eastern sky; the white blocks of old Pera seemed to glow with a wan intrinsic light.

In the plaza stood a crowd of people, brought forth by rumors and wild reports, ready to slink off among the ruins should the Gnashters come marching down from the palace. Seeing only Reith, the girl and the stumbling Naga Goho, they called out in soft surprise and came step by step closer.

Reith halted, looked around the circle of faces, pallid in the moonlight. He gave a yank on the thong, grinned at the crowd. "Well, here is Naga Goho. He is chieftain no more. He committed one crime too many. What shall we do with him?"

The crowd moved uneasily, eyes shifting up to the palace, then back to Reith and Naga Goho, who stood glaring from face to face, promising dire vengeance. A woman's voice low, husky, throbbing with hate, said: "Flay him, flay the beast!" "Impalement," muttered an old man. "He impaled my son; let him feel the pole!" "The flame!" shrilled another voice. "Burn him with slow fire!"

"No one counsels mercy," Reith observed. He turned to Naga Goho. "Your time has come." He pulled off the gag. "Do you have anything to say?"

Naga Goho could find no words, but made only strange noises at the back of his mouth.

Reith said to the crowd. "Let's make a quick end to him, though he probably deserves worse. You-you-you." He pointed. "Lower the Gnashter. It's the rope for Naga Goho."

Five minutes later, with the dark form kicking in the moonlight, Reith spoke to the crowd. "I am a newcomer to Pera. But it's clear to me, as it must be to you, that the city needs a responsible government. Look how Naga Goho and a few thugs brutalized the entire city! You are men! Why act like animals? Tomorrow you must meet together, to select five experienced men for your Council of Elders. Let them pick a chieftain to rule for, say, a year, subject to the approval of the Council, who should also judge criminals and impose penalties. Then you should organize a militia, a troop of armed warriors to fight off Green Chasch, perhaps hunt them down and destroy them. We are men! Never forget this!" He looked back up toward the citadel. "Ten or eleven Gnashters still hold the palace. Tomorrow your Council can decide what to do about them. They may try to escape. I suggest that a guard be posted: twenty men up along the path should be ample." Reith pointed to a tall man with a black beard. "You look to be a stalwart man. Take the job in hand. You are captain. Pick two dozen men, or more, and mount guard. Now I must go to see my friend."

Reith and the Flower started back to the Dead Steppe Inn. As they moved away they heard the black-bearded man say, "Very well, then; for many months we have performed as poltroons. We'll do better now. Twenty men with weapons; who'll step forward? Naga Goho escaped with simple hanging; let's give the Gnashters something better..."

Ylin-Ylan took Reith's hand, kissed it. "I thank you, Adam Reith."

Reith put his arm around her waist; she stopped, leaned against him and once again fell to sobbing, from sheer fatigue and nervous exhaustion. Reith kissed her forehead; then, as she turned up her face, her mouth, in spite of all his good intentions.

Presently they returned to the inn. Traz lay asleep in a chamber off the common-room. Beside him sat Anacho the Dirdirman. Reith asked, "How is he?"

Anacho said in a gruff voice, "Well enough, I bathed his head. A bruise, no fracture. He'll be on his feet tomorrow."

Reith went back to the common-room. The Flower of Cath was nowhere to be seen. Reith thoughtfully ate a bowl of stew and went up to the room on the second floor, where he found her waiting for him.

She said, "I have still my last name, my most secret name, to tell my lover alone. If you come close-"

Reith bent forward and she whispered the name in his ear.

CHAPTER TEN

ON THE FOLLOWING morning Reith visited the drayage depot at the extreme south of town: a place of platforms and bins piled with the produce of the region. The drays rumbled up to the loading areas, the teamsters cursing and sweating, jockeying for position, oblivious to dust, smell, protest of beast, complaints of the hunters and growers, whose merchandise was constantly threatened by the jostling wagons.

Some of the wagons carried a pair of teamsters, or a draymaster and a helper; others were managed by a single man. Reith approached one of these latter. "You haul to Dadiche today?"

The draymaster, a small thin man with black eyes in a face which seemed all nose and narrow forehead, gave a suspicious jerk of the head. "Aye."

"When you arrive in Dadiche, what is the procedure?"

"I'll never arrive to begin with, if I waste my time talking."

"Don't worry; I'll make it worth your while. What do you do?"

"I drive to the unloading dock; the porters sweep me clean; the clerk gives me my receipt; I pass the wicket and take either sequins or vouchers, depending on whether I have an order for return cargo. If I have return cargo I take my voucher to the proper factory or warehouse, load and then start back for Pera."

"So, then-there are no restrictions to where you drive in Dadiche?"

"Certainly there are restrictions. They don't like drays along the river-side among their gardens. They don't want folk to the south of the city near the race-course, where teams of Dirdir pull the chariots, or so it is said."

"Elsewhere, no regulations?"

The draymaster squinted at Reith across the impressive beak of his nose. "Why do you ask such questions?"

"I want to ride with you, to Dadiche and back."

"Impossible. You have no license."

"You will provide the license."

"I see. No doubt you are prepared to pay?"

"A reasonable sum. How much will you demand?"

"Ten sequins. Another five sequins for the license."

"Too much! Ten sequins for everything, or twelve if you drive where I bid you."

"Bah! Do you take me for a fool? You might bid me drive you out Fargon Peninsula."

"No risk of that. A short distance into Dadiche, to look at something which interests me."

"Done for fifteen sequins, no iota less."

"Oh, very well," said Reith. "But I'll expect you to provide me drayer's clothes."

"Very well, and I'll give you further instructions: carry none of your old metal; this retains a scent to alarm them. Throw off all your clothes, rub yourself in mire, and dry yourself with annel leaves, and chew annel to disguise your breath. And you must do this at once, for I load and leave in half an hour."

Reith did as he was bid, though his skin crawled at the clammy feel of the drayer's old garments, and the loose-brimmed old hat of wicker and felt. Emmink, as the drayer called himself, checked to make sure Reith carried no weapons, which were forbidden within the city. He pinned a plaque of white glass on Reith's shoulder. "This is the license. When you pass the gate, call out your number, like this: 'Eighty-six!' Then say no more and do not get down from the dray. If they smell you out for a stranger, I can do nothing to help, so do not look to me."

Reith, already uneasy, was not encouraged by the remarks.

The dray rumbled west toward the crumble of gray hills, carrying a cargo of reed-walker corpses, the yellow bills and staring dead eyes alternating with rows of yellow feet to form a macabre pattern.

Emmink was surly and uncommunicative, he showed no interest in the motive for Reith's visit and Reith, after several attempts at conversation, fell silent.

The dray ground up the road, the torque generators at each wheel spinning and groaning. They entered the pass which Emmink named Belbal Gap, and before them spread Dadiche: a scene of bizarre and somewhat menacing beauty. Reith's uneasiness became keener. Despite his soiled garments, he did not feel that he resembled the other drayers and could only hope that he smelled like a drayer. What of Emmink? Would he prove dependable? Reith considered him surreptitiously: a dry wisp of a man, with skin the color of boiled leather, all nose and narrow forehead, his little mouth pinched together. A man like Anacho, like Traz, like himself, ultimately derived from the soil of Earth, mused Reith. How dilute now, how tenuous, was the terrestrial essence! Emmink had become a man of Tschai, his soul conditioned by the Tschai landscape, the amber sunlight, the gunmetal sky, the quiet rich colors. Reith cared to trust the loyalty of Emmink no farther than the length of his arm, if as far. Looking out over the extent of Dadiche, he asked, "Where do you discharge your cargo?"

Emmink delayed before answering, as if searching for a plausible reason to decline response. Grudgingly he said, "Wherever I get the best price. It might be North Market or River Market. It might be Bonte Bazaar."

"I see," said Reith. He pointed to the great white structure he had located the day before. "That building there: what is that?"

Emmink gave his narrow shoulders a twitch of disinterest. "It is none of my affair. I buy, transport, and sell; beyond that, I care nothing."

"I see ... Well, I want to drive past that building."

Emmink grunted. "It is to the side of my usual route."

"I don't care if it is. That's what I'm paying you for."

Emmink grunted again, and for a moment was silent. Then he said: "First to the North Market, to secure a quote on my corpses, then to the Bonte Bazaar. On the way I will pass the building."

They rolled down the hill, across a strip of barrens strewn with junk and refuse, then into a garden of feathery green shrubs and mottled black and green cycads. Ahead rose the wall surrounding Dadiche, a structure thirty feet high built of a brown glossy synthetic material. Through a gate passed drays from Pera submitting to scrutiny from a group of Chaschmen in purple pantaloons, gray shirts and tall conical hats of black felt. They carried sidearms and long thin rods, with which they prodded the loads of incoming drays. "What's the reason for that?" Reith asked, as the Chaschmen somewhat lackadaisically stabbed through the heaped cargo of the dray ahead.

"They prevent Green Chasch from stealing into the city. Forty years ago a hundred Green Chasch entered Dadiche hidden in cargo; there was a great slaughter before all the Green Chasch were killed. Oh, Blue Chasch and Green Chasch are bitter enemies! They love to see the other's blood!"

Reith asked, "What do I say if they ask me questions?"

Emmink shrugged. "That's your affair. If they ask me, I'll tell them you paid for transportation into Dadiche. Is it not the truth? Then you must tell your truth, if you dare ... Shout your number when I shout mine."

Reith gave a sour grin but said nothing.

The way was clear; Emmink drove up through the portal and stopped upon a red rectangle. "Forty-five," he bawled. "Eighty-six," yelled Reith. The Chaschmen stepped forward, thrust rods into the stack of reed-walker corpses while another walked around the dray: a stocky man with bandy legs, features crowded together at the bottom of his face, as chinless as Emmink but with a small snub nose, a lowering forehead rendered grotesque by the false scalp which rose into a cone six inches or more above his normal skull. His skin was leaden, tinged with blue which might have been cosmetic. His fingers were short and stubby, his feet broad. In Reith's opinion he deviated from the human form, as Reith knew it, considerably further than did Anacho the Dirdirman. The man glanced indifferently at Emmink and Reith, stepped back with a wave of his arm. Emmink pushed forward the power-arm and the dray lurched ahead into a wide avenue.

Emmink turned to Reith with a sour grin. "You're lucky none of the Blue Chasch captains were on hand. They'd have smelled you sweating. I could almost smell you. When a man is afraid he sweats. If you want to pass as a drayman, you'll need a cold-blooded disposition."

"That's asking a lot," said Reith. "I'll do my best."

Into Dadiche rolled the dray. Blue Chasch could be seen in their gardens, tending arbors, stirring stone troughs, moving quietly in the shadows surrounding their round-roofed villas. Occasionally Reith sensed odors from a garden or a trough: wafts tart, pungent, spicy, reeks of burnt amber, candied musk, anomalous ferments, disturbing by their uncertainty: were they repulsive or exquisitely delightful?

The road continued among the villas for a mile or two. The Blue Chasch put no store by what Reith considered a normal regard for privacy; and their villas seemed spaced without any concern for the road. Occasionally Chaschmen and Chaschwomen could be seen at menial or laborious tasks; seldom did Reith notice Chaschmen in the company of the Blue Chasch; always they worked separately, and when they were by chance in physical contiguity, each ignored the other as if he did not exist.

Emmink made no comments or observations. Reith expressed wonder at the apparent obliviousness of the Blue Chasch to the drays. Emmink gave a snort of bitter amusement. "Don't be fooled! If you think them vague, only try to slip off the dray and walk into one of the villas! You'd be pinned down in a trice, and conveyed to the gymnasium to demonstrate at their games. Ah, cunning, cunning, cunning! As cruel as they are ludicrous! Pitiless and sly! Have you heard of their trick with poor Phosfer Ajan the drayer? He stepped down from his dray to answer a call of nature: mad folly, of course. What could he expect but resentment? So Phosfer Ajan, with feet tied, was placed in a vat, with putrid foulness up to his chin. At the bottom was a valve. When the slime became too hot, Phosfer Ajan must dive to the bottom, turn the valve, whereupon the stink would become bitter cold, and Phosfer must dive and grope again, while slime singed and froze him by turns. Still, he persevered; he dived and groped stoically, and on the fourth day they allowed him to his dray, so that he might bear his tale back to Pera. As may be adduced, they fit the game to the occasion, and a more resourceful set of humorists has never been known." Emmink turned to Reith his calculating glance. "What offense do you plan against them? I can predict to some degree of accuracy how they will respond."

"No offense," said Reith. "I am curious, no more, and wish to see how the Blue Chasch live."

"They live like facetious maniacs, from the standpoint of all who annoy them. I have heard that they especially enjoy pranks with a bull Green Chasch and a fledged Phung, together of course. Next, should they be lucky enough to capture a Dirdir and Pnume, these are urged through laughable antics. All in a spirit of fun, of course; the Blue Chasch above all dislike boredom."

"I wonder why there is not a great war to the finish," pondered Reith. "Are not the Dirdir more powerful than the Blue Chasch?"

"They are indeed; and their cities are grand, or so I have heard. But the Chasch have torpedoes and mines ready to destroy all the Dirdir cities in case of attack. It is a common situation: each is sufficiently strong to obliterate the other; hence neither dares more than minor unpleasantness ... Ah well, so long as they ignore me, I shall do the same for them ... There ahead is North Market. Notice, the Blue Chasch are everywhere at hand. They love to bargain, though they prefer to cheat. You must be silent. Make no sign, give no nod or shake! Otherwise they will claim that I have sold at some ruinous price."

Emmink turned his dray into an open area protected by an enormous parasol. Now began the most frantic bargaining Reith had ever seen. A Blue Chasch, approaching, examining the reed-walker corpses, would croak a proffer which Emmink would decline in a scream of outrage. For minutes the two would heap abuse on each other, sparing no aspect of the

other, until suddenly the Blue Chasch would make a furious gesture of disgust and go to seek his reed-walkers at another dray.

Emmink gave Reith a malicious wink. "Once in a while I hold the price up, just to excite the Blues. Also I find out what the selling prices are about to be. Now we'll try Bonte Bazaar."

Reith started to remind Emmink of the wide oval building, then thought better of it. Crafty Emmink had forgotten nothing. He swung around the dray, drove it out along a road running south a quarter mile inland from the river, with gardens and villas intervening. On the left were small domes and sheds among sparse-foliaged trees, areas of dirt where naked children played: the homes of the Chaschmen. Emmink said with a leer: "There's the start of the Blue Chasch themselves; so it was explained to me by one of the Chaschmen in loving detail."

"How so?"

"The Chaschmen believe that in each grows a homunculus which develops throughout life and is liberated after death, to become a full Chasch. So the Blue Chasch teach; is it not ludicrous?"

"So I would say," replied Reith. "Haven't the Chaschmen ever seen human corpses? Or Blue Chasch infants?"

"No doubt. But they supply explanations for every discord and discrepancy. This is what they want to believe: how else can they justify their servitude to the Chasch?"

Emmink was perhaps a more profound individual than his appearance suggested, thought Reith. "Do they think the Dirdir originate in the Dirdirmen? Or Wankh in the Wankhmen?"

"As to that," Emmink shrugged, "perhaps they do ... Look now; yonder is your building."

The cluster of Chaschmen huts was behind, concealed by a bank of pale green trees with huge brown flowers. The dray skirted the central node of the city. Beside an avenue were public or administrative buildings, supported on shallow arches, with roof-lines of variously curved surfaces. Opposite rose the great structure which contained the space-boat, or so Reith believed. It was as long as a football field and as wide, with low walls and a vast half-ellipsoidal roof: an architectural tour de force by any standards.

The function of the building was not apparent. There were few entrances, and no large openings nor facilities for heavy transport. Reith finally decided that they were traveling along the building's back elevation.

At Bonte Bazaar Emmink sold his corpses to the tune of furious haggling, while Reith kept to the side and downwind from Blue Chasch buyers.

Emmink was not totally pleased with the transaction. Returning to the dray after unloading, he grumbled, "I should have had another twenty sequins; the corpses were prime How could I make this clear to the Blue? He was watching you and trying to catch your air; the way you dodged and ducked would have aroused suspicion in an old Chaschwoman. By all standards of justice you should reimburse me for my loss."

"I hardly think he got the better of you," said Reith. "Come; let's drive back."

"What of my lost twenty sequins?"

"Forget them; they are imaginary. Look; the Blues are watching us."

Emmink hastily jumped into the driver's seat and started up the dray. Apparently from sheer perversity, he began to return by the same road he had come. Reith spoke sternly: "Drive by the east road, to the front of the big building; let's have no more tricks!"

"I always drive to the west," whined Emmink. "Why should I change now?"

"If you know what's best for you-"

"Ha, threats? In the middle of Dadiche? When all I need do is signal a Blue-"

"It would be the last signal of your life."

"What of my twenty sequins?"

"You've already had fifteen from me, plus your profit. No more of your complaints! Drive as I tell you or I'll wring your neck."

Wheezing, protesting, casting spiteful glances from the side of his face, Emmink obeyed.

The white building loomed ahead. The road ran parallel to the front at a distance of seventy-five yards, with a strip of garden intervening. An access road turned off from the main avenue, to run in front of the building. To drive along the access road would have rendered them highly conspicuous, and they continued along the main avenue in the company of other drays and wagons, and a few small cars driven by Blue Chasch. Reith gazed anxiously at the facade. Three large portals broke the front wall. Those to the left and center were shut; the far right portal was open. As they passed Reith looked in, to see the loom of machinery, the glow of hot metal, the hull of a platform similar to that which had lifted the space-boat away from the swamp.

Reith turned to Emmink. "This building is a factory where airships and spacecraft are built!"

"Yes, of course," grunted Emmink.

"I asked you as much; why did you not tell me?"

"You weren't paying for information. I give nothing away."

"Drive around the building again."

"I must charge you an additional five sequins."

"Two. And no complaints, or I'll rattle your teeth."

Cursing under his breath, Emmink swung the dray around the factory. Reith asked, "Have you ever looked into the center or the left of the building?"

"Oh yes; several times."

"What is there?"

"How much is the information worth?"

"Not very much. I'd have to see for myself."

"A sequin?"

Reith nodded shortly.

"Sometimes the other portals are ajar. In the center they construct sections of spaceships, which are then rolled out and carried away for assembly elsewhere. In the left they build smaller spaceships, when such are needed. Recently there has been little work; the Blue Chasch do not like to travel space."

"Have you seen them bring spaceships or space-boats here for repair? Several months ago?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"The information will cost you money," said Reith. Emmink showed great yellow teeth in a grin of sardonic appreciation and said no more.

They started along the front a second time. "Slow," Reith ordered, for Emmink had pushed the power-arm hard over and the old dray rattled at full speed along the avenue.

Emmink grudgingly obliged. "If we go too slow they'll think us curious, and ask us why we peer and crane our necks."

Reith looked along the road adjacent to the building, along which walked a few Blue Chasch, a somewhat larger number of Chaschmen.

Reith said to Emmink, "Pull off the road; stop the dray for a minute or two."

Emmink began his usual protest, but Reith pulled back the power-lever and the dray wheezed to a halt. Emmink stared at Reith, speechless with fury.

"Get out; fix your wheels, or look at your energy cell," said Reith. "Do something to keep occupied." He jumped to the ground, stood looking at the great factory, for such seemed to be the nature of the building. The portal on the right was tantalizingly open. So near yet so far ... If only he dared cross the seventy-five yards to the portal, and look inside!

What then? Suppose he saw the space-boat. It certainly would not be in operative condition; chances were good that Blue Chasch technicians had at least partially disassembled the mechanism. They would be a puzzled group, thought Reith. The technology, the engineering, the entire rationale of design would seem strange and unfamiliar. The presence of a human body would only puzzle them the more. The situation was by no means encouraging. The boat was possibly within, in a dismantled and non-usable condition. Or it was not. If it should be there he had not the remotest idea of how to gain possession of it. If it was not in the building, if only Paul Waunder's transcom was there, then he must revise his thinking and make new plans ... But at the moment the first step was to look inside the factory. It seemed easy. He needed only to walk seventy-five yards and look ... but he did not dare. If only he were in some disguise to deceive the Blue Chasch-which could only mean the guise of a Chaschman. Far-fetched, thought Reith. With his well-marked features, he resembled a

Chaschman not at all.

The reflections had occupied him a very short time: hardly a minute, but Emmink clearly was becoming restive. Reith decided to seek his counsel.

"Emmink," said Reith, "suppose you wanted to learn if a certain object-for instance, a small spaceship-was inside that building, how would you go about it?"

Emmink snorted. "I would consider no such folly. I would resume my place on the dray and depart while I still had health and sanity."

"You can think of no errand to take us into the building?"

"None whatever. A fantasy!"

"Or close past that open portal?"

"No, no! Of course not!"

Reith longingly considered the building and the open portal. So near and yet so far ... He became furious with himself, at the intolerable circumstances, at the Blue Chasch, Emmink, the planet Tschai. Seventy-five yards: the work of half a minute. He said curtly to Emmink: "Wait here." And he started walking with long strides across the planted area.

Emmink gave a hoarse call. "Come here, come back! Are you insane?"

But Reith only hastened his steps. On the walk beside the building were a few Chaschmen, apparently laborers, who paid him no heed. Reith gained the walk. The open portal was ten steps ahead. Three Blue Chasch stepped forth. Reith's heart pounded; his palms were damp. The Blue Chasch must smell his sweat; would they know it for the odor of fear? It seemed as if, engrossed in their own affairs, they might not notice him. Head bowed, loose-brimmed hat in front of his face, Reith hurried past. Then, with only twenty feet to the portal, the three swung around as if activated by the same stimulus. One of the Blue Chasch spoke in a gobbling mincing voice, the words formed by organs other than vocal chords. "Man! Where go you?"

Reith halted and responded with the explanation he had formed as he had crossed from the main avenue. "I came for scrap metal."

"What scrap metal?"

"By the portal, in a box; so they told me."

"Ah!-" a blowing gasping sound, which Reith was unable to interpret. "No scrap metal!"

One of the others muttered something quietly, and all three emitted a hiss, the Blue Chasch analogue of human laughter.

"Scrap metal, so? Not at the factory. There: notice that building yonder? Scrap metal yonder!"

"Thank you!" called Reith. "I'll but look." He went the last few steps to the open portal, looked into a great space murmurous with machinery, smelling of oil and metal and ozone. Nearby

were platform components in the process of fabrication. Blue Chasch and Chaschmen alike worked, without obvious caste distinction. Around the walls, as in any Earthly factory or machine shop, were benches, racks and bins. In the center were a cylindrical section of what apparently would be a medium sized spaceship. Beyond, barely visible, was a familiar shape: the space-boat on which Reith had come down to Tschai.

He could detect no damage to the hull. If the machinery had been dismantled, no evidence was apparent. But a good deal of distance intervened between himself and the boat, and he had time only for a single glimpse. Behind him the three Blue Chasch stood staring at him, massive blue-scaled heads half-inclined as if listening. They were, so Reith realized, smelling him. They seemed suddenly intent, suddenly interested and began to walk slowly back toward him.

One spoke, in his thick queer voice: "Man! Attention! Return here. There is no scrap metal."

"You smell of man-fear," said another. "You smell of odd substances."

"A disease," replied Reith.

Another spoke. "You smell like a strangely dressed man we found in a strange spaceship; there is about you a factitious quality..,"

"Why are you here?" demanded the third of the group. "For whom do you spy?"

"No one; I am a drayer, and I must return to Pera."

"Pera is a hive of spies; time perhaps that we sifted the population."

"Where is your dray? You did not arrive on foot?"

Reith started to move away. "My dray is out on the avenue." He pointed, then stared in consternation. Emmink and the dray were no longer to be seen. He called back to the three Blue Chasch, "My dray! Stolen! Who has taken it!" And with a gesture of hasty farewell for the puzzled Chasch, he darted off into the planted area separating the two roads. Behind a hedge of white wool and gray-green plumes he paused to look back and was by no means reassured. One of the Blue Chasch had run a few steps after him and was pointing some sort of instrument here and there through the planting. A second was speaking with great urgency into a hand microphone. The third had gone to the portal and was peering toward the space-boat, as if to verify its presence.

"I've done it for sure," Reith muttered to himself. "I've pulled the whole business down around my ears." He started to turn away, but paused an instant longer to watch as a squad of Chaschmen, wearing uniforms of purple and gray, drove up the factory road on long low slung motorcycles. The Blue Chasch gave terse instructions, pointing toward the planted area. Reith waited no longer. He ran to the avenue, and as a dray loaded with empty baskets rolled smartly by, he sprang out, caught hold of the tailgate, pulled himself up on the bed and crawled behind a stack of baskets, without arousing the attention of the draymaster.

Behind came half a dozen motorcycles at great speed. They passed the dray with an angry whirl of electric propulsion. To set up a roadblock? Or to reinforce the guards at the main gates?

Possibly both, thought Reith. The venture, as Emmink had predicted, was about to end in fiasco. Reith doubted that the Blue Chasch would involve him in their infamous games; they would prefer to extract information from him. And then? At best, Reith's freedom of action would be curtailed. At worst-but this bore little thinking about. The dray was rattling along at a good pace, but Reith knew he had no chance of passing through the gate. Close to the North Market Reith dropped to the ground and at once took cover behind a long low structure of porous white concrete: a warehouse or a storage shed. Finding his view constricted, he climbed upon a wall, thence to the roof of the shed. He could see down the main avenue to the gate, and his fears were amply justified: a number of purple and gray-uniformed security police stood beside the portal inspecting traffic with great care. If Reith was going to leave the city he must choose some other route. The river? Conceivably he could wait till night and float down the river unseen. But Dadiche extended a score or more miles along the riverbank, with other Blue Chasch villas and gardens beyond. Additionally, Reith had no knowledge of the creatures inhabiting the river. If they were as noxious as other forms of Tschai life, he wanted nothing to do with them.

A faint hum attracted Reith's attention. He looked up, startled to see an air-sled, not a hundred yards distant, sliding quietly by. The passengers were Blue Chasch, wearing peculiar headgear like enormous moth antennae. Reith was initially sure that he had been seen; then he was sure that the antennae were some sort of olfactory amplifiers: equipment being used to track him down.

The air-sled proceeded without change of course. Reith released his pent breath. His apprehension apparently had been unfounded. What were the tall antennae? Ceremonial vestments? Adornments? "I may never know," Reith told himself. He searched the sky for other skysleds, but none could be seen. Raising to his knees, he once again looked all around. Somewhat to the left, behind a screen of the everpresent adarak trees, was North Market: white concrete parasols, suspended discs, glass screens; moving figures wearing black, dull blue, dull red; scales glinting gunmetal blue. The breeze, blowing from the north, carried a complicated reek of spice; of sour vegetable matter; of meat cooked, fermented, pickled; of yeasts and mycelium cake.

To the right were the huts of Chaschmen, scattered through the gardens. Beyond, pressed up against the wall, was a large building screened by tall black trees. If Reith could climb to the top of this building he might possibly cross the wall. He looked at the sky. Dusk was the best time for such a venture, a matter of two or three hours.

Reith descended from the roof, and stood a moment thinking. The Blue Chasch, so sensitive to odors; would they not be able to track him by scent, like bloodhounds? It was not an unreasonable theory, and if so, he had no time to spare.

He found two short lengths of wood, tied them to his shoes, and, taking long steps, stalked carefully away through the garden.

He had traveled only fifty yards when he heard sounds behind him, and instantly took cover. Peering back through the shrubbery, he saw that his hunch had not only been accurate, but timely. By the shed stood three Chaschmen security guards in purple and gray uniforms, with a pair of Blue Chasch, one of whom carried a detector-wand connected to a pack and thence to a mask across his nasal orifice. The Blue Chasch, waving the wand across the ground, sniffed out Reith's tracks without difficulty. At the back of the building the creature became confused, but presently discerned evidence of Reith's sojourn on the roof. All drew back warily, apparently believing Reith still on top.

From his vantage point fifty yards distant Reith chuckled, wondering what the Blue Chasch would think when they found no Reith on the roof and no perceptible trace of his departure. Then, still on his wooden clogs, he continued through the gardens toward the wall.

With a great caution he approached the large building and halted behind a tall tree to take stock of the situation. The building was dark and gloomy, apparently unoccupied. As Reith had supposed, the roof was very close to the top of the wall.

Reith looked back over the city. More sky-sleds were visible, at least a dozen. They flew low over the area he had just crossed, trailing black cylinders on wire: almost certainly olfactory pickups. If one passed overhead or downwind, whatever distinctive odor Reith exuded must be detected. It was obviously important that he take cover swiftly, and the somber building against the wall seemed the only practical cover: if it was unoccupied.

Reith watched another few minutes. He could discern no stir of movement within. He listened but heard no sounds; still he dared not approach. On the other hand, glancing over his shoulder at the air-sleds, he dared not remain. Discarding the clogs, he took a tentative step forward-then, hearing sounds behind him, sprang back into concealment.

There were measured tones of a gong. Up the road came a procession of Chaschmen muffled in gray and white. In the van, four carried a white-draped corpse on a bier; behind marched Chaschmen and Chaschwomen sighing and keening. The building was a mausoleum or mortuary, thought Reith; the somber aspect was no deception.

The gong strokes slowed. The group halted below the portico of the building. The gong became still. In utter silence the bier was brought forward and placed upon the porch. The mourners drew back and waited. The gong struck a single tone.

A door slowly opened, a gap which seemed to extend into an infinite void. An intense golden ray slanted down upon the corpse. From right and left came a pair of Blue Chasch, wearing a ceremonial harness of straps, tabs, golden whorls and tassels. They approached the corpse, drew down the pall to expose the face and the beetling false skull, then stepped aside. A curtain descended to hide the corpse.

A moment passed. The ray of golden light became a glare; there was sudden plangent sound, as of a broken harpstring. The curtain lifted. The corpse lay as before, but the false skull was split and the cranium as well. In the cold brain sat a Blue Chasch imp, staring forth at the mourners.

The gong struck eleven jubilant strokes; the Blue Chasch cried out, "The elevation has occurred! A man has transcended his first life! Partake of beatitude! Inhale the jubilant odor! The man, Zugel Edgz, has given soul to this delightful imp! Could there be greater felicity? Through diligence, by application of approved principle, the same glory may come to all! In first life I was the man Sagaza Oso-" spoke one. "I was the woman Diseun Furwg," spoke the other. "-So with all the others. Depart then in joy! The imp Zugel Edgz must be anointed with healthful salve; the empty man-hulk will return to the soil. In two weeks you may visit your beloved Zugel Edgz!"

The mourners, no longer dejected, returned down the path to quick strokes of the gong, and were lost to sight. The bier with corpse and staring imp slid into the building. The Blue Chasch followed, and the door closed.

Reith gave a quiet laugh, which he quickly stifled as a skysled drifted alarmingly close.

Creeping through the foliage, he approached the mortuary. No one, Chasch or Chaschman, was in sight; he slipped around to the rear of the building, which almost abutted the wall.

Low to the ground was an arched opening. Reith sidled close, listened, to hear a muffled grind of machinery, and he winced at the thought of the grisly work being done. He peered into the dimness to see what appeared to be a storeroom, a repository for discarded objects. On racks and shelves were pots, jars, heaps of old garments, a clutter of dusty mechanisms for purposes unimaginable. The room was untenanted, apparently little used. Reith took a final look at the sky and slipped into the building.

The room communicated with another, through a wide low arch. Another room lay beyond, and another, and another, all illuminated by a sickly glow from ceiling panels. Reith was content to crouch behind a rack and wait.

An hour passed, two hours. Reith became restless and made a cautious exploration. In a side chamber he found a bin containing false craniums, each with a label and a series of characters. He picked one up, tried it on. It seemed to fit; Reith detached and discarded the label. From a pile of garments he selected an old cloak and drew it up under his chin. From a distance, at a casual glance, he might conceivably be taken for a Chaschman.

There was a fading of light at the window; looking forth Reith saw that the sun had settled into a wrack of clouds. The adarak trees moved against a background of watery light. Reith climbed forth, scrutinized the sky; no sky-sleds were immediately evident. Reith went to a convenient tree and started to climb. The bark was a slippery pulp, which made the project more difficult than he had anticipated. At last, sticky with aromatic sap, sweating under his ill-smelling garments, he gained the roof of the mortuary.

He crouched, looked out over Dadiche. The sky-sleds had disappeared; the sky was brown-gray with oncoming dusk.

Reith went to the back edge of the roof, looked across at the wall. The top surface was about six feet distant, flat, with foothold prongs at fifty-foot intervals. Warring devices? Reith could imagine no other purpose. On the other side was a drop of thirty feet-twenty-five feet, if he hung by his hands before he let himself fall. Reith appraised the chances of landing without broken bones or sprained joints: about two in three, depending upon the ground beneath. With a rope, the descent would be effortless. In the basement of the mortuary he had seen no ropes, but there were quantities of old garments to be knotted together. First: what would happen if he reached the top of the wall?

To learn, Reith doffed his cloak. Moving along the rooftop until he was opposite one of the prongs, he swung the cloak out and over the prong.

The result was instant and startling. From the prongs to either side lances of white fire darted forth, piercing the cloak, setting it aflame. Reith snatched it back, stamped out the blaze, looked hurriedly back and forth along the wall. Undoubtedly an alarm had been set off. Should he risk leaping the wall, fleeing across the waste? The chances, very bad in any case, would be nonexistent if he should become caught in the open. He ran to the tree, descended far more rapidly than he had mounted. Over the city sky-sleds were already appearing. Reith heard a far weird whistling which set his nerves on edge ... He ran, cloak flapping, back under the trees. A gleam of water attracted his attention: a small pond, overgrown with pallid white water-plants. Throwing off his cloak and false cranium, Reith jumped into the water, submerged himself up to his nose, and waited.

Minutes passed. A squad of security guards on electric motorcycles dashed past. Two sky-sleds trailing scent-detectors drifted overhead, one to his right, the other to his left. They disappeared to the east; clearly the Blue Chasch thought he had crossed the wall, that he was at large outside the city. If this was the case, if they presently decided that he had escaped into the mountains, his chances would be thereby much improved ... He became aware of something moving along the bottom of the pond. It felt muscular, purposeful. An eel? a watersnake? A tentacle? Reith jumped out of the pond. Ten feet away something broke the surface and made a sound like a snort of disgust.

Reith seized up the cloak and the false cranium and trudged dripping back down away from the mortuary.

He came upon a small lane winding among the Chaschmen bungalows. By night they seemed close, secretive, locked-in. The windows were small and none lower than eight feet from the ground. Some exuded a wavering yellow light, as if from a lamp, which puzzled Reith. Surely a race as technically capable as the Blue Chasch could provide their underlings electric or nucleonic illumination ... Another paradox of Tschai.

The wet clothes not only chafed but smelled abominably—a situation which might camouflage his own scent, thought Reith. He pulled the false cranium over his skull, threw the cloak around his shoulders. Walking slow and stiff-legged, he continued toward the gate.

The sky was dark; neither Az nor Braz was in the sky, and the byways of Dadiche knew only the most casual illumination. Two Chaschmen came into view. Reith pulled down his chin, hunched his shoulders, walked stolidly forward. The two passed with no more than a glance.

Somewhat encouraged, Reith reached the central boulevard with the gate two hundred yards ahead. High lamps cast a yellow glare into the portal. Three guards in purple and gray were still in evidence, but they seemed slack and uninterested, and Reith was reinforced in his belief that the Blue Chasch thought him gone from the city.

Unfortunately, thought Reith, the Blue Chasch were wrong.

He considered the feasibility of sauntering up to the portal, dashing through and away into the darkness. The sky-sleds would instantly be after him, as well as platoons of guards on electric motorcycles. What with his reeking clothes, he would have no place to hide—unless he discarded all his garments and ran naked through the night.

Reith gave a soft grunt of disapproval ... His attention was attracted by a tavern in the basement of a tall building. From the low windows came flickering red and yellow light, hoarse conversation, an occasional gust of bellowing laughter. Three Chaschmen came lurching forth; Reith turned his back and looked through the window down into a murky taproom, lit by firelight and the ubiquitous yellow lamps. A dozen Chaschmen, faces pinched and twisted under the grotesque false crania, sat hunched over stone pots of liquor, exchanging lewd banter with a small group of Chaschwomen. These wore gowns of black and green; bits of tinsel and ribbon bedizened their false scalps; their pug-noses were painted bright red. A dismal scene, thought Reith; still, it pointed up the essential humanity of the Chaschmen. Here were the universal ingredients of celebration: invigorating drink, gay women, camaraderie. The Chaschman version seemed somewhat leaden and dour ... Another pair of Chaschmen passed close to Reith without remark. So far the disguise had been effective, though whether it would pass a more detailed examination Reith was uncertain. He walked slowly toward the gate, until he was barely fifty yards distant. He dared approach no further. He slid into a niche between two buildings and settled himself to watch

the gate.

The night went on. The air became still and cold and Reith became aware of odors from the Dadiche gardens.

He dozed. When he awoke Az had appeared behind a line of sentinel adarak. Reith shifted his position, groaned, massaged his neck, recoiling at the odor of the still damp garments.

At the gate two of the security guards had disappeared. The third stood torpidly, half-asleep. In the booths the attendants sat looking morosely out over the empty spaces. Reith settled back into his niche.

The east became bright with dawn; the city came alive. New personnel arrived at the portal. Reith watched the incoming and outgoing groups exchange information.

An hour later drays began to arrive from Pera. The first, drawn by a pair of great draft beasts, brought casks of pickles and fermented meat, and stank with a fervor that put Reith to shame. On the driver's bench sat two persons: Emmink, more sour, sulky and dire than ever, and Traz. "Forty-three," shouted Emmink. "A hundred and one," called Traz. The guards came out, counted barrels, inspected the wagon, then ordered Emmink to proceed.

As the wagon passed, Reith emerged from his niche, walked close beside. "Traz."

Traz looked down and made a small exclamation of satisfaction. "I knew you'd still be alive."

"Just barely. Do I look like a Chaschman?"

"Not too much. Keep the cloak over your chin and nose When we come back from market, up under the right foreleg of the right beast."

Reith turned aside into a secluded little nook behind a shed and watched the wagon move off toward the market.

An hour later it returned, moving slowly. Emmink guided it along the right side of the road. It passed Reith; he emerged from his hiding place. The wagon stopped; Traz jumped down as if to lash the barrels more securely, but blocking off the view from the rear.

Reith ran forward, ducked under the draft beast. Between the first and second right-hand legs hung a great leathery flap of skin. Between the belly and the skin five thongs had been tied to make a tight cramped hammock, into which Reith inserted himself. The wagon started forward; Reith could see nothing but the gray belly, the dangling flap, the first two legs.

The wagon paused at the gate. He heard voices, saw the pointed red sandals of the security guards. After a suspenseful wait, the wagon started forward, rumbled out toward the surrounding hills. Reith could see the gravel of the road, an occasional bit of vegetation, the ponderous legs, the dangling flap which at every step clamped in upon him.

At last the dray halted. Traz peered under the beast. "Out, no one is watching."

With almost insane relief Reith pulled himself from under the beast. He ripped off the false cranium, flung it in a ditch, threw off the cloak, the stinking jacket, the shirt, clambered up on the bed of the dray, where he slumped back against a barrel.

Traz resumed his seat beside Emmink, and the dray started forward. Traz looked back with concern. "Are you ill? Or wounded?"

"No. Tired. But alive-thanks to you. And Emmink, as well, or so it appears."

Traz gave Emmink a frowning glance. "Emmink has been no great help. It was necessary to make threats, to inflict a bruise or two.

"I see," said Reith. He turned a critical glance upon the draymaster's hunched shoulders. "I've had one or two harsh thoughts in connection with Emmink myself."

The shoulders quivered. Emmink swung around in his seat, thin face split in a yellow-toothed grin. "You'll recall, sir, that I conveyed you and instructed you, even before I knew your lordship's high rank."

"High rank'?" asked Reith. "What 'high rank'?"

"The council at Pera has appointed you chief executive," said Traz. And he added, in a disparaging tone: "High rank of a sort, I suppose."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

REITH HAD No inclination to rule Pera. The occupation would exhaust his energy, destroy his patience, restrict his scope of action and bring him no personal advantage. Perforce, he would tend to govern in terms of Earth social philosophy. He considered the population of Pera: a motley group. Fugitives, criminals, bandits, freaks, hybrids, nondescripts, nonesuchs: what would these poor wretches know of equity, juridical procedure, human dignity, the ideal of progress?

A challenge, to say the least.

What of the space-boat, what of his hopes of returning to Earth? His adventures in Dadiche had verified only the location of the space-boat. The Blue Chasch would doubtless be amused and interested should he demand the return of his property.

&nbs; Inducements? Reith could hardly promise Earth military assistance against the Dirdir or the Wankh-whichever were the current adversaries of the Blue Chasch. Compulsion? He had no leverage, no force to apply.

Another matter: the Blue Chasch were now aware of his existence. Undoubtedly they wondered as to his identity, his homeland. Tschai was vast, with remote regions where men might have produced almost anything. The Blue Chasch must even now be anxiously consulting their maps.

As Reith reflected, the dray ground up the hill, passed through Belbal Gap, rumbled down toward the steppe. Sunlight warmed Reith's skin; the steppe wind blew away the stench. He became drowsy and presently fell asleep.

He awoke to find the dray trundling over the ancient pavements of Pera. They entered the

central plaza at the base of the citadel. As they passed the gibbets Reith saw swinging eight new bodies: Gnashers, the rakish swagger of their garments now a bedraggled and pathetic joke. Traz explained the circumstances, in the most casual of voices. "They decided to come down from the citadel, and so they did, waving their hands and laughing, as if the whole affair were a farce. How indignant they became when the militia seized them and hoisted them aloft! They were dead before they had ceased complaining!"

"So now the palace is empty," said Reith, looking up at the mass of slabs and stones.

"So far as I know. I suppose you will choose to live there?"

Traz's voice held a faint note of disapprobation. Reith grinned. The influence of Onmale persisted and occasionally manifested itself.

"No," said Reith. "Naga Goho lived there. If we moved in, people would think we were a new set of Gohos."

"It is a fine palace," said Traz, dubious now. "It contains many interesting objects ..." He turned a quizzical glance toward Reith. "Apparently you have decided to rule Pera."

"Yes," said Reith. "Apparently I have."

At the Dead Steppe Inn Reith rubbed himself in oil, soft sand, sifted ashes. He rinsed himself in clean water and repeated the process, thinking that soap would be one of the first innovations he would bring to the people of Pera, and Tschai at large. Was it possible that a substance so relatively simple as soap was unknown on Tschai? He would ask Derl, Ylin-Ylan, whatever her name, if soap was known in Cath.

Scrubbed, shaved, in fresh linen and new sandals of soft leather, Reith ate a meal of porridge and stew in the common room. A change in the atmosphere was apparent. The personnel of the inn treated him with exaggerated respect; others in the room spoke in quiet voices, watching him from the side of their faces.

Reith noticed a group of men standing in the compound, muttering together and peering into the inn from time to time. When he had finished his meal they entered and came to stand in a line in front of him.

Reith looked them over, recognizing some who had been present at Naga Goho's execution. One was thin and yellow, with burning black eyes: a marsh-man, Reith guessed. Another appeared to be a mixture of Chaschman and Gray. Another was typical Gray, of medium height, bald with putty-colored skin, a fleshy lump of a nose, glossy protuberant eyes. The fourth was an old man from one of the nomad tribes, handsome in a haggard, wind-driven fashion; the fifth was short and barrel-shaped, with arms dangling almost to his knees, of derivation impossible to calculate. The old man of the steppes had been designated spokesman. He spoke in a husky voice. "We are the Committee of Five, formed according to your recommendation. We have held a long discussion. Inasmuch as you have been of assistance in destroying Naga Goho and the Gnashers, we wish to appoint you headman of Pera."

"Subject to our restraint and advice," appended the Chaschman-Gray.

Reith had still not come to a definite, irrevocable decision. Leaning back in his chair he surveyed the committee, and thought that seldom, if ever, had he seen a more

heterogeneous group.

"It's not quite so easy," he said at last. "You might not be willing to cooperate with me. I wouldn't take on the job unless I was guaranteed that cooperation."

"Cooperation toward what?" the Gray asked.

"Toward changes. Extreme, far-reaching changes."

The committeemen examined him cautiously. "We are conservative folk," the Chaschman--Gray muttered. "Life is hard; we cannot afford risky experiments."

The old nomad gave a harsh crackling laugh. "Experiments! We should welcome them! Any change can only be for the better! Let us hear what the man proposes!"

"Very well!" acceded the Chaschman--Gray. "It does no harm to listen; we are not committed."

Reith said, "I am of this man's opinion." He indicated the old nomad. "Pera is a tumble of ruins. The people here are little better than fugitives. They have no pride or self-respect; they live in holes, they are dirty and ignorant, they wear rags. What's worse, they don't seem to care."

The committee blinked in surprise. The old nomad gave a hoarse jeering laugh; the Chaschman--Gray scowled. The others looked doubtful. Retiring a few paces, they muttered among themselves, then turned back to Reith. "Can you explain in detail what you propose to do?"

Reith shook his head. "I haven't given the matter any thought. To be blunt, I am a civilized man; I was educated and trained in civilized circumstances. I know what men can achieve. It is a great deal more perhaps than you can imagine. The folk of Pera are men; I would insist that they live like men."

"Yes, yes," cried the marsh-man, "but how? In what particular?"

"Well, in the first place, I would want a militia, disciplined, and well trained, to maintain order, to protect the city and caravans from the Green Chasch. I would organize schools and a hospital; later a foundry, warehouses, a market. Meanwhile I would encourage people to build houses, in clean surroundings."

The committeemen fidgeted uneasily, looking askance at one another and at Reith. The old nomad grunted. "We are men, of course; who has denied it? And since we are men, we must live carefully. We do not desire to be Dirdir. Suffice that we survive."

The Gray said, "The Blue Chasch would never allow such pretensions. They tolerate us at Pera only because we are inconspicuous."

"But also because we supply certain of their wants," stated the short man. "They buy our produce cheap."

"It is never wise to irritate those in power," argued the Gray. Reith held up his hand. "You've heard my program. If you won't cooperate wholeheartedly-select another chief."

The old nomad turned a searching glance at Reith, then drew the others apart. There was heated argument. Finally they returned. "We agree to your terms. You will be our chief."

Reith, who had been hoping that the committee would decide otherwise, heaved a small sigh. "Very well, so be it. I warn you, I'll demand a great deal from you. You'll work harder than ever before in your lives-for your own ultimate good. Or at least I hope so."

He spoke to the committee for an hour, explaining what he hoped to achieve, and succeeded in arousing interest, even guarded enthusiasm.

Late in the afternoon, Reith, with Anacho and three of the committee members, went to explore the erstwhile palace of Naga Goho.

Up the winding path they walked, with the grim pile of masonry looming overhead. They passed through the dank courtyard, into the main hall. Naga Goho's cherished possessions: the heavy benches and table, the rugs, wall-hangings, tripod lamps, the platters and urns were already filmed over with dust.

Adjoining the hall were sleeping chambers, smelling of soiled clothing and aromatic unguents. The corpse of Naga Goho's concubine lay as Reith had first discovered it. The group hastily drew back.

On the other side of the hall were storerooms stacked with great quantities of loot: bales of cloth, crates of leather, parcels of rare wood, tools, weapons, implements, ingots of raw metal, flasks of essence, books written in brown and gray dots upon black paper, which Anacho identified as Wankh production manuals. An alcove held a chest half-full of sequins. Two smaller coffers contained jewels, ornaments, trinkets, trifles: a magpie's hoard. The committeemen selected steel swords with filigree pommels and guards for themselves; Traz and Anacho did likewise. Traz, after a diffident glance at Reith, arrayed himself in a fine golden ocher cloak, boots of soft black leather, a beautifully wrought casque of thin steel, drooping and splaying to protect the nape of the neck.

Reith located several dozen energy pistols with spent powercells. These, according to Anacho, could be recharged from the power-cells which drove the drays: a fact evidently unknown to Naga Goho.

The sun was low in the west when they departed the gloomy palace. Crossing the courtyard Reith noticed a squat door set back in a niche. He heaved it open, to reveal a flight of steep stone stairs. Up wafted a dismal draft, reeking of mold, organic decay, filth-and something else: a musky dank stench which stiffened the hairs at the back of Reith's neck.

"Dungeons," said Anacho laconically. "Listen."

A feeble croaking murmur came up from below. Inside the door Reith found a lamp, but was unable to evoke light. Anacho tapped the top of the bulb, to produce a white radiance. "A Dirdir device."

The group descended the steps, ready for anything, and stepped forth into a high-vaulted chamber. Traz, seizing at Reith's arm, pointed; Reith saw a black shape gliding quietly off into the far shadows. "Pnume," muttered Anacho, hunching his shoulders. "They infest the ruined places of Tschai, like worms in old wood."

A high lamp cast a feeble light, revealing cages around the periphery of the room. In certain

of these were bones, in others heaps of putrefying flesh, in others living creatures, from whom issued the sounds which the group had heard. "Water, water," moaned the shambling figures. "Give us water!"

Reith held the lamp close. "Chaschmen."

From a tank to the side of the room he filled pannikins of water and brought them to the cages.

The Chaschmen drank avidly and clamored for more, which Reith brought to them.

Heavy cages at the far end of the room held a pair of massive motionless figures with towering conical scalps.

"Green Chasch," whispered Traz. "What did Naga Goho do with these?"

Anacho said, "Notice: they peer in a single direction only, the direction of their horde. They are telepathic."

Reith dipped up two more pans of water, thrust them into the cages of the Green Chasch. The creatures reached ponderously, sucked the pans dry.

Reith returned to the Chaschmen. "How long have you been here?"

"A long, long time," croaked one of the captives. "I cannot say how long."

"Why were you caged?"

"Cruelty! Because we were Chaschmen!"

Reith returned to the committeemen. "Did you know they were here?"

"No! Naga Goho did as he pleased."

Reith moved the lynch-pins, opened the doors. "Come forth; you are free. The men who captured you are dead."

The Chaschmen timorously crept forth. They went to the tank and drank more water. Reith turned back to examine the Green Chasch. "Very strange, strange indeed."

"Perhaps Goho used them as indicators," Anacho suggested. "He would know at all times the direction of their horde."

"No one can talk to them?"

"They do not talk; they transfer thoughts."

Reith turned to the committeemen. "Send up a dozen men, to carry the cages down to the plaza."

"Bah," muttered Bruntego the Gray. "Best kill the ugly beasts! Kill the Chaschmen as well!"

Reith turned him a quick glare. "We are not Gnashters! We kill from necessity only! As for

the Chaschmen, let them go back to their servitude, or stay here as free men, whatever they wish."

Bruntego gave a sour grunt. "If we do not kill them, they will kill us."

Reith, making no answer, turned the lamp toward the remote parts of the dungeon, to find only dank stone walls. He could not learn how the Pnume had departed the chamber, nor could the Chaschmen give any coherent information. "They would come, silent as devils, to look at us, with never a word, nor would they bring us water!"

"Odd creatures," ruminated Reith.

"They are the weirds of Tschai!" cried the Chaschmen, trembling to the emotion of their new freedom. "They should be purged from the planet!"

"As well as the Dirdir, the Wankh and the Chasch," said Reith, grinning.

"No, not the Chasch. We are Chasch, did you not know?"

"You are men."

"No, we are Chasch in the larval stage; this is prime verity!"

"Bah!" said Reith, suddenly angry. "Take off those ridiculous false heads." He stepped forward, jerked away the conical headpieces. "You are men, you are nothing else! Why do you allow the Chasch to victimize you?"

The Chaschmen fell silent, glancing fearfully at the cages as if they expected a new incarceration.

"Come," said Reith brusquely. "Let's get out of here."

A week passed. With nothing better to do, Reith flung himself into his job. He selected a group of the most obviously intelligent young men and women, whom he would teach and who would teach others. He formed a civic militia, delegating authority in this case to Baojian, the erstwhile caravan-master. With the help of Anacho and Tostig the old Nomad, he drew up a tentative legal code. Over and over he explained the benefits to be derived from his innovations, arousing a variety of responses: interest, apprehension, dubious sneers, enthusiasm, as often as not blank incomprehension. He learned that there was more to organizing a government than merely giving orders; he was required to be everywhere at once. And always at the back of his mind was apprehension: what were the Blue Chasch planning? He could not believe that they had so easily abandoned their efforts to capture him. Beyond doubt they employed spies. They would therefore be informed of events in Pera, and hence be in no great haste. But sooner or later they would come to take him. A man of ordinary prudence would flee Pera instantly. Reith, for a variety of reasons, was disinclined to flight.

The Chaschmen from the dungeons displayed no eagerness to return to Dadiche; Reith assumed that they were fugitives from Chasch justice. The Green Chasch warriors were a problem. Reith could not bring himself to kill them, but popular opinion would have been outraged had he released them outright. As a compromise the cages stood in the plaza, and the creatures served as a spectacle for the people of Pera. The Green Chasch ignored the attention, facing steadily to the north, telepathically linked-so stated Anacho-to the parent

horde.

Reith's principal solace was the Flower of Cath, although the girl mystified him. He could not read her mood. During the long caravan journey she had been melancholy, distraught, somewhat haughty. She had become gentle and loving, if at times absentminded. Reich found her more alluring than ever, full of a hundred sweet surprises. But her melancholy persisted.

Homesickness, decided Reith; almost certainly she longed for her home in Cath. With a dozen other preoccupations, Reith postponed the day when he must reckon with Derl's yearnings.

The three Chaschmen, so Reith presently learned, were not citizens of Dadiche, but hailed from Saaba, a city to the south. One evening in the common-room they took Reith to task for what they characterized as "extravagant ambitions." "You wish to ape the higher races; you will only come to grief! Sub-men are incapable of civilization."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Reith, amused by their earnestness.

"Of course we do; are we not Chaschmen, the larval stage of the Blue Chasch? Who would know better?"

"Anyone with a smattering of biology."

The Chaschmen made fretful gestures. "A sub-man, you; and jealous of the advanced race."

Reith said, "In Dadiche I saw the mortuary or death-house-whatever you call it. I saw the Blue Chasch split a dead Chaschman's skull and put a Blue Chasch imp into the cold brains. They play games with you; they trick you to ensure your servitude. The Dirdir no doubt use a parallel technique upon the Dirdirmen, though I doubt if the Dirdirmen expect to become Dirdir." He looked down the table to Anacho. "What of that?"

Anacho's voice trembled slightly. "The Dirdirmen do not expect to become Dirdir; this is superstition. They are Sun, we are Shade; but both from the Primeval Egg. Dirdir are the highest form of cosmic life; Dirdirmen can only emulate, and this we do, with pride. What other race has produced such glory, achieved such magnificence?"

"The race of men," said Reith.

Anacho's face twitched in a sneer. "In Cath? Lotus-eaters. The Merribs? Vagrant artisans. The Dirdir stand alone on Tschai."

"No, no, no!" bawled the Chaschmen simultaneously. "Submen are the culls and dross of Chaschmen. Some become clients of the Dirdir. True men come from Zoor, the Chasch world."

Anacho turned away in disgust. Reith said, "This is not the case, though I don't expect you to believe me. You are both wrong."

Anacho the Dirdirman spoke in a voice carefully casual. "You are so definite; you puzzle me. Perhaps you can enlighten us further."

"Perhaps I can," said Reith. "At the moment I don't care to do so."

"Why not?" Anacho persisted. "Such enlightenment would be useful to all of us."

"The facts are as well-known to you as they are to me," said Reith. "Draw your own deductions."

"Which facts?" blurted the Chaschmen. "What deductions?"

"Aren't they plain? The Chaschmen are in servitude, precisely as are the Dirdirmen. Men are not biologically compatible with either of these races, nor with the Wankh nor the Pnume. Men certainly did not originate on Tschai. The deduction is that they were brought here as slaves, long ages ago, from the world of men."

The Chaschmen grunted; Anacho raised his eyes and studied the ceiling. The men of Pera sitting at the table sighed in wonder.

There was further talk, which became excited and vehement as the evening wore on. The Chaschmen went off to a corner and argued among themselves, two disputing with one.

On the following morning the three Chaschmen departed Pera for Dadiche, riding, so it happened, Emmink's dray. Reith watched them go with misgiving. They would undoubtedly report upon his activities and radical doctrines. The Blue Chasch would not approve. Existence, Reith reflected, had become extremely complex. The future seemed murky, even grim. Once again he considered hasty departure into the wilderness. But the prospect still had no appeal.

During the afternoon Reith watched the first draft of the militia at drill: six platoons of fifty men each, armed diversely with catapults, swords, short cutlasses, in striking variety of garments: pantaloons, smocks, burnouses, flared jackets with short skirts, rags and strips of fur. Some wore beards, others varnished topknots; the hair of others hung to their shoulders. Reith thought that never had he seen so sad a spectacle. He watched in mingled amusement and despair as they stumbled and slouched, with grumbling bad grace, through the exercises he had ordained. The six lieutenants, who showed no great enthusiasm, perspired and swore, gave orders more or less at random, while Baojian's aplomb was sorely taxed.

Reith finally demoted two lieutenants on the spot and appointed two new men from the ranks. He climbed up on a wagon, called the men in about him. "You are not performing well! Don't you understand what you are here for? To learn to protect yourselves!" He looked from one sullen face to another then pointed down to a man who had been muttering to his fellow. "You! What are you saying? Speak up!"

"I said that this prancing and marching is foolishness, a waste of energy; what benefit can arise from such antics?"

"The benefit is this. You learn to obey orders, quickly and decisively. You learn to function as a corps. Twenty men acting together are stronger than a hundred men at odds with each other. In a battle situation the leader makes plans; the disciplined warriors carry out these plans. Without discipline, plans are useless and battles are lost. Now do you understand?"

"Bah. How can men win battles? The Blue Chasch have energetics and battle-rafts. We have a few sand-blasts. The Green Chasch are indomitable; they would kill us like emmets. It is easier to hide among the ruins. This is how men have always lived in Pera."

"Conditions are different," said Reith. "If you don't want to do a man's work, you can do a woman's work and wear woman's clothes. Take your choice." He waited but the dissident only glowered and shuffled his feet.

Reith came down from the wagon and gave a series of orders. Certain men were sent up to the citadel to fetch bolts of cloth and leather. Others brought shears and razors; the men of the militia, despite protests, were shorn clean. Meanwhile the women of the city had gathered and were put to work cutting out and sewing uniforms: long sleeveless smocks of white cloth with black lightning-bolts appliquéd to the chest. Corporals and sergeants wore black shoulder tabs; the lieutenants had short red sleeves to their uniforms.

On the following day the militia, wearing the new garments, drilled again, and on this occasion were noticeably smarter-indeed, thought Reith, almost jaunty.

On the morning of the third day after the Chaschmen's departure Reith's doubts were resolved. A large raft, sixty feet long and thirty feet wide, came gliding over the steppe. It flew in a single slow circle over Pera, then settled into the plaza directly before the Dead Steppe Inn. A dozen burly Chaschmen-Security Guards in gray pantaloons and purple jackets-jumped out and stood with hands at their weapons. Six Blue Chasch stood on the deck of the raft staring around the plaza from under overhanging brows. These Blue Chasch appeared to be special personages; they wore tight suits of silver filigree, tall silver morions, silver caps at the joints of their arms and legs.

The Blue Chasch spoke briefly to the Chaschmen; two marched to the door of the inn, and spoke to the innkeeper. "A man calling himself Reith has established himself as your chief. Fetch him forth, to the attention of the Lord Chasch."

The innkeeper, half-awed, half-truculent, was prompted to a snarling obsequiousness. "He is somewhere at hand; you will have to wait till he arrives."

"Notify him! Be quick!"

Reith received the summons gloomily, but without surprise. He sat thinking a moment or two; then, heaving a deep sigh, he came to a decision, which, for better or worse, must alter the lives of all the men of Pera, and perhaps all the men of Tschai. He turned to Traz, gave a set of orders, then slowly went into the common-room of the inn. "Tell the Chasch that I'll speak to them in here."

The innkeeper relayed the message to the Chaschmen, who in turn spoke to the Blue Chasch.

The response was a set of glottal sounds. The Blue Chasch descended to the ground, approached the inn, to stand in a silver-glittering line. The Chaschmen entered the inn. One bawled, "Which is the man who is chief? Which is he? Let him hold up his hand!"

Reith thrust past them and stepped out into the compound. He faced the Blue Chasch, who stared back at him portentously. Reith examined the alien visages with fascination: the eyes like small metal balls glistening under the shadow of the cephalic overhang, the complex nasal processes, the silver morion and filigree armor. At the moment they seemed neither crafty, whimsical, capricious, nor given to cruel facetiousness; their mien rather was menacing.

Reith confronted them, arms folded across his chest. He waited, exchanging stare for stare.

One of the Blue Chasch wore a morion with a higher spine than the others. He spoke, in the strangled glottal voice typical of the race. "What do you do here in Pera?"

"I am the chosen chief."

"You are the man who made an unauthorized visit to Dadiche, who visited the District Technical Center."

Reith made no reply.

"Well then," called the Blue Chasch, "what do you say? Do not deny the charge; your scent is individual. In some fashion you entered and departed Dadiche; and made furtive investigations. Why?"

"Because I had never visited Dadiche before," said Reith. "You are now visiting Pera without express authorization; however, you are welcome, so long as you obey our laws. I would like to think that the men of Pera could visit Dadiche on the same basis."

The Chaschmen gave hoarse chuckles; the Blue Chasch stared in gloomy shock. The spokesman said, "You have been espousing a false doctrine, and persuading the men of Pera to folly. Where do you derive these ideas?"

"The ideas are neither 'false doctrine' nor 'folly.' They are self-evident."

"You must come with us to Dadiche," said the Blue Chasch, "and clarify a number of peculiar circumstances. Go aboard the sky-raft."

Reith smilingly shook his head. "If you have questions, ask them now. Then I will ask you my questions."

The Blue Chasch made a signal to the Chaschmen guards. They moved forward to seize Reith. He took a step back, looked up at the upper windows. Down came a fusillade of catapult bolts, piercing the Chaschmen's foreheads and necks. But those bolts aimed at the Blue Chasch swerved aside, diverted by a force-field, and the Blue Chasch stood unscathed. They seized their own weapons, but before they could aim and fire, Reith unfolded his arms. He held his energy cell. In a quick sweep of his arm he burnt off the heads and shoulders of the six Blue Chasch. The bodies sprang into the air by some peculiar reflex, then sprawled to the ground with a multiple thud, where they lay covered by globules of molten silver.

The silence was complete. The onlookers seemed to be holding their breaths. All turned to look from the corpses to Reith; then, as if by single presentiment, all turned to look toward Dadiche.

"What will we do now?" whispered Bruntego the Gray. "We are doomed. They will feed us to their red flowers."

"Precisely," said Reith, "unless we take steps to prevent them." He signaled to Traz; they collected weapons and other gear from the headless Blue Chasch and the Chaschmen; then Reith ordered the bodies carried away and buried.

He went to the sky-raft, climbed aboard. The controls--clusters of pedals, knobs and flexible

arms-were beyond his comprehension. Anacho the Dirdirman came up to look casually into the raft. Reith asked, "Do you understand the working of this thing?,"

Anacho gave a contemptuous grunt. "Of course. It is the old Daidne System."

Reith looked back along the length of the raft. "What are those tubes? Chasch energetics?"

"Yes. Obsolete, of course, compared to Dirdir weapons."

"What is the range?"

"No great distance. These are low-power tubes."

"Suppose we mounted four or five sand-blasts on the raft. We'd have considerable fire-power."

Anacho gave a curt nod. "Crude and makeshift, but feasible."

On the afternoon of the following day a pair of rafts drifted high above Pera and returned to Dadiche without landing. The next morning a column of wagons came down from Belbal Gap, conveying two hundred Chaschmen and a hundred Blue Chasch officers. Overhead slid four rafts, carrying Blue Chasch gun-crews.

The wagons halted a half-mile from Pera; the troops deployed into four companies, which separated and approached Pera from all four sides, while the rafts floated overhead.

Reith divided the militia into two squads, and sent them sidling through the ruins, to the outskirts of the city on the south and west sides, where the Chasch troops would make first contact.

The militia waited until the Chaschmen and the Blue Chasch, moving warily, had penetrated a hundred yards into the city. Suddenly appearing from concealment, all fired weapons: catapults, sand-blasts, hand-guns from the Goho arsenal, those taken from the Chasch corpses.

Fire was concentrated on the Blue Chasch, and of these two-thirds died in the first five minutes, as well as half the Chaschmen. The remainder faltered, then fled back out onto the open steppe.

The rafts overhead swooped low and began to sweep the ruins with slay-beams. The militia now took shelter while the rafts descended even lower.

High above appeared another raft: that which Reith had armed with sand-blasts, then had taken five miles out on the steppe and hidden under brush. It dropped quietly upon the Chasch rafts, lower, lower, lower ... The men at the sand-blasts and at the energetic beams opened fire. The four rafts dropped like stones. The raft then crossed the city and opened fire on the two companies which were entering the north and east sectors of the city, while the militia opened fire from the flanks. The Chasch troops drew back with heavy losses. Harassed by the bombardment from the air, they broke ranks and streamed off across the steppe in total disorder, pursued by the Peran militia.

CHAPTER TWELVE

REITH CONFERRED WITH his victory-flushed lieutenants. "We won today because they took us light. They still can bring overwhelming force against us. My guess is that tonight they will organize a strong war party: all their rafts, all their troops. Then tomorrow they will come forth to punish us. Does this sound reasonable?"

No one made dissent.

"Since we are committed to hostilities, best that we take the initiative, and try to arrange a few surprises for the Chasch. They have a poor opinion of men, and we might be able to do them some harm. This means taking our limited fire-power to where it can do the most damage."

Bruntego the Gray shuddered and clasped his hands to his face. "They have a thousand Chaschmen soldiers, and more. They have sky-rafts and energetic weapons-whereas we are only men, armed for the most part with catapults."

"Catapults kill a man just as dead as energy beams," Reith commented.

"But the rafts, the projectiles, the power and intelligence of the Blue Chasch! They will destroy us totally and reduce Pera to a crater."

Tostig the old nomad demurred. "We have served too well, too cheaply in the past. Why should they rob themselves for the sake of sheer drama?"

"Because that is the Blue Chasch way!"

Tostig shook his head. "Old Chasch perhaps. Blue Chasch no. They will prefer to besiege us, starve us, and take the leaders back to Dadiche for punishment."

"Reasonable," agreed Anacho, "but can we expect even Blue Chasch to behave reasonably? All Chasch are half-mad."

"For this reason," said Reith, "we must match them caprice for caprice!"

Bruntego the Gray said with a sniff, "Caprice is the only quality in which we can match the Blue Chasch."

The discussion continued; proposals were set forth and debated and at last agreement was grudgingly reached. Messengers were sent forth to arouse the population. Amid some small protest and wailing, women, children, the aged and the uncooperative were marshaled aboard drays and sent off through the night, to a dismal gorge twenty miles south, where they would establish a temporary camp.

The militia assembled with all its weapons, then marched off through the night toward Belbal Gap.

Reith, Traz and Anacho remained in Pera. The cage containing the Green Chasch warriors had been swathed in cloth and loaded aboard the raft. At sunrise Anacho took the raft aloft and sent it sliding in that direction toward which the Green Chasch sat staring: north by east. Twenty miles passed beneath, and another twenty; then Traz, who sat watching the Green

Chasch through a peephole, cried out, "They are turning, twisting about-toward the west!"

Anacho swung the raft toward the west, and a few moments later a Green Chasch encampment was discovered in a grove of grass-trees beside a swamp. "Don't approach too closely," said Reith, examining the camp through his scanscope. "It's enough to know that they are here. Back to Belbal Gap."

The raft returned south, skimming the palisades which faced west toward the Schanizade Ocean. Passing over Belbal Gap, they settled upon a vantage point overlooking both Dadiche and Pera.

Two hours passed. Reith became increasingly fretful. His plans were based upon hypothesis and rational supposition; the Chasch were a notoriously capricious race. Then from Dadiche, to Reith's vast relief, came a long dark column. Looking through his scanscope Reith saw a hundred drays loaded with Blue Chasch and Chaschmen, as many others carrying weapons and crates of equipment.

"This time," said Reith, they take us seriously." He scanned the sky. "No rafts visible. Undoubtedly they'll send something up for reconnaissance, at the very least ... Time to be moving. They'll be coming through Belbal Gap in a half-hour."

They took the raft down to the steppe and landed several miles south of the road. They rolled the cage to the ground, pulled away the covering cloth. The monstrous green warriors sprang forward to peer out across the landscape.

Reith unlocked the door, slipped back the bolt and retreated to the raft, which Anacho at once took into the air. The Green Chasch sprang forth with ear-splitting yells of triumph, to stand like giants. They rolled their metallic eyes up at the raft, raised their arms in gestures of detestation. Turning swiftly north, they set off across the steppe, at the stiff-legged Green Chasch jog.

Over Belbal Gap came the drays from Dadiche. The Green Chasch stopped short, stared in wonder, then jogged forward to a clump of Bart-furze and stood immobile, almost invisible.

Down the track came the great drays, until the line of vehicles stretched a mile across the waste.

Anacho slid the raft up a dark gully, almost to the ridge, and landed. Reith searched the sky for rafts, then looked out across the panorama to the east. The Green Chasch, among the gartfurze copses, could not be seen. The war force from Dadiche was a menacing dark caterpillar crawling toward the ruins of old Pera.

Forty miles north the Green Chasch were camped.

Reith returned to the raft. "We've done what we can. Now, we wait."

The Blue Chasch expedition approached Pera, broke into four companies as before and surrounded the deserted ruins. Energetic beams were aimed at suspected strong-points; scouts ran forward under cover of the weapons. They gained the first tumble of concrete blocks, then, drawing no fire, paused to regroup and to select new objectives.

Half an hour later the scouts emerged from the city, herding before them those folk who, from obstreperousness or simple inertia, had elected to remain in Pera.

Another fifteen minutes passed while these persons were interrogated. There was a period of indecision as the Blue Chasch leadership took counsel among themselves. Clearly the empty city was an unexpected development, and posed a perplexing dilemma.

The companies which had circled the city returned to the main force; presently all started back toward Dadiche, disconsolate and grim.

Reith searched the northern waste for movement. If there was validity in the theory of telepathic communication between the Green Chasch, if they hated the Blue Chasch as furiously as reported, they should now be appearing on the scene. But the steppe spread away into the northern murk empty and devoid of movement.

Back toward Belbal Gap moved the Blue Chasch war-force. From the dark green gart-furze, from copses of laggard bush, from salt-grass clumps, apparently from nowhere, erupted a horde of Green Chasch. Reith could not comprehend how so many warriors, riding gigantic leap-horses, had approached so inconspicuously. They hurled themselves upon the column, striking ten-foot arcs with their swords. The heavy weapons on the drays could not be brought to bear; the Green Chasch raged up and down the line doing carnage.

Reith turned away, half-sickened. He climbed aboard the raft. "Back across the mountains, to our own men."

The raft joined the militia at the agreed rendezvous, a gully half a mile south of Belbal Gap. The militia set off down the hill, keeping to the cover of trees and moss-hedge. Reith remained with the raft, searching the sky through the scanscope, apprehensive of Blue Chasch reconnaissance rafts. As he watched, a score of rafts rose from Dadiche to fly at full speed to the east: apparently reinforcement for the beleaguered war-party. Reith watched them disappear over Belbal Gap. Turning the scanscope back toward Dadiche, he glimpsed a sparkle of white uniforms up under the walls. "Now," he told Anacho. "As good a time as any."

The raft slid down toward the main portal into Dadiche: closer and closer. The guards, conceiving the raft to be one of their own, craned their necks in perplexity. Reith, steeling himself, pulled the trigger of the forward sand-blast. The way into Dadiche was open. The Pera militia surged into the city.

Jumping down from the raft, Reith sent two platoons to seize the raft depot. Another platoon remained at the portal with the greater part of the sand-blasts and energetics. Two platoons were sent to patrol the city and enforce the occupation.

These last two platoons, as fierce and unrelenting as any other inhabitants of Tschai, ranged through the half-deserted avenues, killing Blue Chasch and Chaschmen, and any Chaschwomen who offered resistance. The discipline of two days swiftly evaporated; a thousand generations of resentment exploded into blood-lust and massacre.

Reith, with Anacho, Traz and six others, rode the raft to the District Technical Center. The doors were closed; the building seemed vacant. The raft dropped beside the center portal; sandblasts broke down the doors. Reith, unable to contain his anxiety, ran into the building.

There, as before: the familiar shape of the space-boat.

Reith approached with heart thumping in his throat. The hull was cut open; the

drive-mechanisms, the accumulators, the converter: all had been removed. The boat was a hulk.

The prospect of finding the boat in near-operative condition had been an impossible dream. Reith had known as much. But irrational optimism had persisted.

Now, irrational optimism and all hope of return to Earth must be put aside. The boat had been gutted. The engines had been dismantled, the drive-tank opened, the exquisite balance of forces disrupted.

Reith became aware of Anacho standing at his shoulder. "This is not a Blue Chasch space-boat," said Anacho reflectively. "Nor is it Dirdir, nor Wankh."

Reith leaned back against a bench, his mind drained of vigor. "True."

"It is built with great skill; it shows refined design," mused Anacho. "Where was it built?"

"On Earth," said Reith.

"Earth'?"

"The planet of men."

Anacho turned away, his bald harlequin-face pinched and drawn, the axioms of his own existence shattered. "An interesting concept," he murmured over his shoulder.

Reith looked somberly through the space-boat but found little to interest him. Presently he returned outside, where he received a report from the platoon guarding the portal. Remnants of the Blue Chasch army had been sighted coming down the mountainside, in sufficient numbers to suggest that they had finally beaten off the Green Chasch.

Those platoons which had been sent to patrol the city were completely out of control and could not be recalled. Two platoons held the landing field, leaving only a single platoon at the portal-something over a hundred men.

An ambush was prepared. The portal was returned to the similitude of normalcy. Three men disguised as Chaschmen stood inside the wicket.

The remnants of the war-force approached the portal. They noticed nothing amiss and started to enter the city. Sand-blasts and energetics opened fire; the column withered, dissipated. The survivors were too stunned to resist. A few tottered wildly back into the parkland, pursued by yelling men in white uniforms; others stood in a stupid huddle to be passively slaughtered.

The battle-rafts were luckier. Observing the debacle, they swooped back up into the sky. The militia-men, unfamiliar with the Blue Chasch ground guns, fired as best they could and, more by luck than by skill, destroyed four rafts. The others swung in high bewildered circles for five minutes, then bore south, toward Saaba, Dkekme, Audsch.

Spasms of fighting occurred throughout the rest of the afternoon, wherever the Peran militia encountered Blue Chasch who sought to defend themselves. The remainder-aged, females, imps alike-were slaughtered. Reith interceded with some success on behalf of the Chaschmen and Chaschwomen, saving all but the purple and gray-clad security guards,

who shared the fate of their masters.

The remaining Chaschmen and Chaschwomen, throwing aside their false crania, gathered in a sullen crowd on the main avenue.

At sunset the militia, sated with killing, burdened with loot and unwilling to prowl the dead city after dark, assembled near the portal. Fires were built, food prepared and eaten.

Reith, taking pity on the miserable Chaschmen, whose world had suddenly collapsed, went to where they sat in a dispirited group, the women keening softly for those who were dead.

One burly individual spoke up truculently. "What do you propose to do with us?"

"Nothing," said Reith. "We destroyed the Blue Chasch because they attacked us. You are men; so long as you do us no harm, we shall do you none."

The Chaschman grunted. "Already you have harmed many of us."

"Because you chose to fight with the Chasch against men, which is unnatural."

The Chaschman scowled. "What is unnatural about that? We are Chaschmen, the first phase of the great cycle."

"Utter nonsense," said Reith. "You are no more Chasch than the Dirdirman yonder is Dirdir. Both of you are men. The Chasch and the Dirdir have enslaved you, plundered your lives. High time that you knew the truth!"

The Chaschwomen halted their keening, the Chaschmen turned blank faces toward Reith.

"So far as I am concerned," said Reith, "you can live as you like. The city of Dadiche is yours-so long as the Blue Chasch do not return."

"What do you mean by that?" quavered the Chaschmen

"Precisely what I said. Tomorrow we return to Pera. Dadiche is yours."

"All very well-but what if the Blue Chasch come back, from Saaba, from Dkekme, from the Lizizaudre, as they surely will?"

"Kill them, chase them away! Dadiche is now a city of men! And if you don't believe that the Blue Chasch victimized you, go look into the death-house under the wall. You are told that you are larva, that the imp germinates in your brain. Go examine the brains of dead Chaschmen. You will find no imps, only the brains of men.

"So far as we are concerned, you can return to your homes. The only proscription I put upon you are the false heads. If you wear them we will consider you not men but Blue Chasch and deal with you accordingly."

Reith returned to his own camp; diffidently, as if they could not believe Reith's statement, the erstwhile Chaschmen slipped off through the dusk for their homes.

Anacho spoke to Reith. "I listened to what you said. You know nothing about the Dirdir and the Dirdirmen! Even were your theories valid, we would still remain Dirdirmen! We

recognize excellence, superlativity; we aspire to emulate the ineffable-an impossible ideal, since Shade can never out-glow Sun, and men can never surpass Dirdir."

"For an intelligent man," snapped Reith, "you are extremely obstinate and unimaginative. Someday I am sure you will recognize your error; until then, believe whatever you care to believe."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEFORE DAWN THE camp was astir. Drays laden with loot moved off westward, black against the ale-colored sky.

In Dadiche, the Chaschmen, peculiarly bald and gnomish without their false skulls, collected corpses, carried them to a great pit and buried them. A score of Blue Chasch had been flushed from hiding. The killing lust of the Perans having subsided, they were confined in a stockade, from which they stared in stone-eyed bewilderment at the coming and going of the men.

Reith was concerned over the possibility of counterattack from the Blue Chasch cities to the south. Anacho made light of the matter. "They have no stomach for fighting. They menace the Dirdir cities with torpedoes, but only to avoid war. They never challenge, they are content to live in their gardens. They might send Chaschmen to harass us, but I suspect they will do nothing whatever, unless we threaten them directly."

"Perhaps so." Reith released the captive Blue Chasch. "Go to the cities of the south," he told them. "Inform the Blue Chasch of Saaba and Dkekme that if they molest us we will destroy them."

"It is a long march," croaked the Blue Chasch. "Must we go on foot? Give us one of the rafts!"

"Walk! We owe you nothing!"

The Blue Chasch departed.

Still not wholly convinced that the Blue Chasch would refrain from seeking vengeance, Reith ordered weapons mounted on those nine rafts captured at the Dadiche depot and flew them to secluded areas on the hills.

On the following day, in the company of Traz, Anacho and Derl, he explored Dadiche in a more leisurely fashion. At the Technical Center he once more examined the hulk of his spaceboat, with an eye to its ultimate repair. "If I had the full use of this workshop," he said, "and if I had the help of twenty expert technicians, I might be able to build a new drive system. It might be more practical to try to adapt the Chasch drive to the boat but then there would be control problems ... Better to build a whole new boat."

Derl frowned at the quiet space-boat. "You are so intent, then, on departing Tschai? You have not yet visited Cath. You might wish never to depart."

"Possibly," said Reith. "But you have never visited Earth. You might not want to return to

Tschai."

"It must be a very strange world," mused the Flower of Cath. "Are the women of Earth beautiful?"

"Some of them," Reith replied. He took her hand. "There are beautiful women on Tschai, as well. The name of one of them is-" And he whispered a name in her ear.

Blushing, she put her hand to his mouth. "The others might hear!"