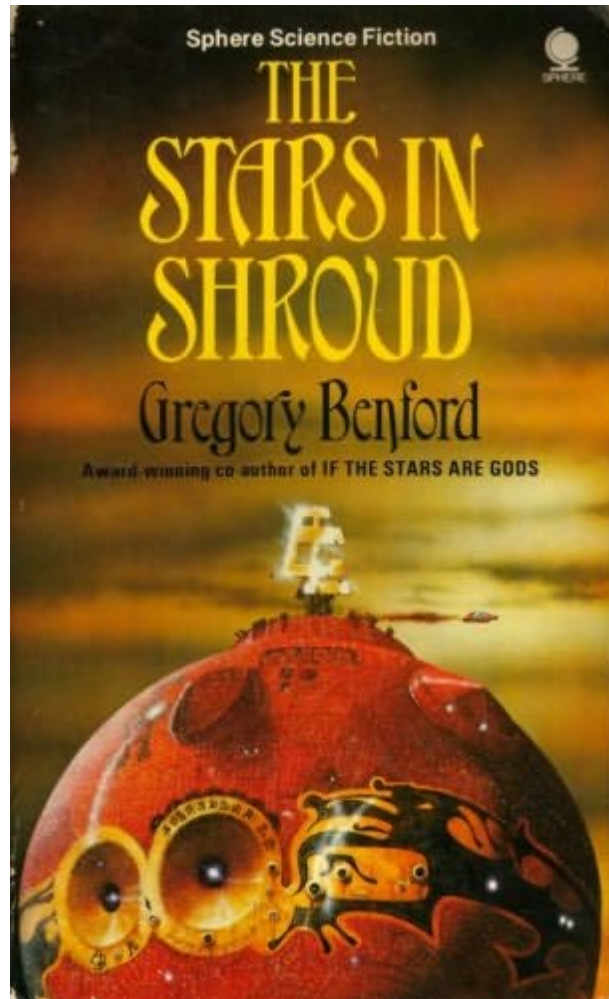




Color-- [-1-](#) [-2-](#) [-3-](#) [-4-](#) [-5-](#) [-6-](#) [-7-](#) [-8-](#) [-9-](#)



Text Size-- [10--](#) [11--](#) [12--](#) [13--](#) [14--](#) [15--](#) [16--](#) [17--](#) [18--](#) [19--](#) [20--](#) [21--](#) [22--](#) [23--](#) [24](#)



Deeper Than the Darkness

aka The Stars in Shroud

By

Gregory Benford

Contents

[PART I](#)
[PART II](#)
[PART III](#)
[PART IV](#)



DEEPER THAN THE DARKNESS

Copyright ©, 1970, by Greg Benford

All Rights Reserved.

Part of this novel appeared in the form of a novelette under the same title in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and is copyright ©, 1969, by Mercury Press, Inc.

Printed in U.S.A.



To Joan—
remember?



PART I

The Hand upon them.

Strangled shout.



It was about an hour into morning shift. I was planning out my day. I had to arrange the routing work I could do using the screen, so that it didn't conflict with the eating routine, the kids' use of the screen for school hours, and the best times to go for a walk in the tubes.

The kids were pouting, for some reason, and I was having trouble concentrating on the alterations that had been made in the production schemes since yesterday. If you don't get the changes down pat in the morning you'll be sending new goods to depot's that don't handle that product anymore, and the losses can eat up your day's management commission before the complaint feedback reaches you.

I'd just about gotten it down when time came for the kids' first lecture, and I had to give up the screen. I

settled down in the dining booth to review my notes but it wasn't ten minutes before they started whining.

"*Dad-Ay*, why do we have to watch this old stuff?" Romana said, jerking her chin up with a regal look. "None of the other cubes in this block even *carry* Schoolchannel anymore."

"Uh," said Chark, "and it's *boring*. Everybody knows you can't learn fast without tapping. We're going to turn out to be rennies."

"Rennies?"

"Renegades," Angela said from the kitchen cloister. "It's new slang. You should watch the entertainment channel more." The words were normal but her tone had an edge on it. She'd tried the manual breakfast this morning and it hadn't worked out, but *indocing*—or was that outdated term still around?—was one of our flash points. She stood in the doorway and looked at me with her mouth tightened.

"Don't you think it's about time you started to listen to what other people think, Ling? Finally?"

"No." I looked away and started underlining some parts of my notes. Chark dialed the 3D volume down and the room fell silent. I wasn't going to get away with a light dismissal.

"*Dad-Ay*..."

"If you'd just read some of the articles we gave you," Chark began in a measured, reasonable tone, "and talked to a counselor at the center, you'd understand why we need tapping now. You were out there yourself, Dad, so..."

"Yes," I said sharply. "I was out there. And none of you were. You believe anything the Assembly says is good for the common defense, but don't expect me..."

I stopped. It wasn't going to do any good. I wouldn't tell them the guts of what happened out there—that was buried away in a file somewhere with red Secret stickers all over it, and until the stickers came off I couldn't say anything.

Angela broke her rigid silence, and I could tell that what she was going to say had been held back for a long time. "Why do you tell them such things? They'll respect you even less if you try to pretend there's some big mystery about what you did out there. You were just a shuttle captain, a pickup convoy to get the survivors off *Regeln* after the *Quarn* hit it. And you didn't even get many off, either."

"Something happened. Something really happened."

The children had become quiet, the way they do when they sense that the grownups have forgotten they're around, and maybe a fight was going to start. Angela and I both noticed it at the same time.

"All right. Well talk about it later," I said. The kids went back to their lecture, grumbling to each other, and Angela walked into the bedroom, probably to pout. It was one more nick in a marriage that was already eroding.

We would talk later, and there would be accusations and complaints and I couldn't explain.

But it happened. It caught me in a wave of hard color, a menace subtle and faceless, and the wave threw me up on this barren spiritual shore. To wait, and while waiting to die. It happened during that quick run into the *Regeln* system to drop and grab whatever was left before the *Quarn* returned.

The crew didn't take it well. Fleet took us off a routine run and outfitted the ships with enough extras to

put the convoy on the lowest rung of warship class. But men take time to adjust. Most of them were still nervous and edgy about the changes that had been made. They were suddenly *oraku*, warrior status. They didn't like it—neither did I—but there was nothing to be done. It was an emergency.

I had us roar out of port at full bore, giving the ships that hot gun-metal smell, and that kept them busy for a while. But maintenance is maintenance and soon they found the time to tie themselves in knots, wringing out self-doubts with fidgeting fingers. In a few days the results began to come up through the confessional rings: anxieties, exclusion feelings, loss of phase.

"I told Fleet we'd have this," I said to Tonji, my Exec. "These men can't take a sudden change of status and role." I let go of the clipboard that held the daily report and watched it strike the table top with a slow-motion clatter in low gee.

Tonji blinked his simian eyes languidly. "I think they're overreacting to the danger involved. None of us signed for something like this. Give them time."

"Time? Where am I going to get it? We're only weeks out of Regeln now. This is a large group, spread over a convoy. We'll have to reach them quickly."

He unconsciously stiffened his lips, a gesture he probably associated with being tough-minded. "It will take effort, it's true. But I suppose you realize there isn't any choice."

Was that a hint of defiance in his voice, mingled with his habitual condescension? I paused, let it go. "More Sabal, then. Require all senior officers to attend as well."

"You're sure that's enough, sir?"

"Of course I'm not sure! I haven't got all the answers in my pocket. This convoy hasn't had anything but shuttle jobs for years."

"But we've been reassigned..."

"Slapping a sticker on a ship doesn't change the men inside. The crews don't know what to do. There isn't any confidence in the group, because everyone can sense the uncertainty. Nobody knows what's waiting for us on Regeln. A crewman wouldn't be human if he didn't worry about it."

I looked across the small cabin at my kensdai altar. I knew I was losing control of myself too often and not directing the conversation the way I wanted. I focused on the solid, dark finish of the wood that framed the altar, feeling myself merge with the familiarity of it. Focus down, let the center flow outward.

Tonji flicked an appraising glance at me. "The Quarn were stopped on Regeln. That's why we're going."

"They'll be back. The colony there beat them off, but took a lot of losses. It's now been twenty-four days since the Quarn left. You've heard the signals from the surface—they're the only ones we got after their satellite link was destroyed. The correct code grouping is there, but the signal strength is down and transmission faded. Whoever sent them was working in bad conditions, or didn't understand the gear, or both."

"Fleet doesn't think it's a trap?" Tonji's features, Mongol-yellow in the diffused light of my cabin, took on a cool, sly look.

"They don't know. I don't either. But we need information on Quarn tactics and equipment. They're a race of hermits, individuals, but somehow they cooperate against us. We want to get an idea how."

"The earlier incidents..."

"They were just that—incidents. Raids. Fleet never could unravel enough coherent information out of the surviving tapes, and there were no survivors.

"But this time the colonists stood off a concentrated attack."

"Yes. Perhaps there are good records on Regeln."

Tonji nodded, smiling, and left after proper ceremonies. I was sure he knew everything I'd told him, but he'd seemed to want to draw the details out of me, to savor them.

For the better the mission, the gaudier the reports, then all the faster would rise the fortunes of Mr. Tonji. A war—the first in over a century, and the first in deepspace—has the effect of opening the staircases to the top. It relieves a young officer of the necessity of worming his way through the belly of the hierarchy.

I reached out, dialed a stargate of Regeln's neighbors, studied.

The Quarn had been an insect buzzing just beyond the range of hearing for decades now. Occasional glancing contacts, rumors, stories. Then war.

How? Security didn't bother to tell lowly convoy captains—probably only a few hundred men anywhere knew. But there had been a cautiously-worded bulletin about negotiations in the Quarn home worlds, just before the war. The Council had tried to establish communal rapport with some segment of Quarn society. It had worked before, with the Phalanx and Angras.

Among the intellectual circles I knew—such as they were—it was holy dogma. Sense of community was the glue that held a culture together. Given time and correct phase it could bind even alien societies. In two cases it already had.

And it wove a universe for us. A world of soft dissonances muted into harmonies, tranquil hues of waterprints fading together.

To it the Quarn were a violet slash of strangeness. Hermit-like, they offered little and accepted less. Privacy extended to everything for them; we still had no clear idea of their physical appearances. Their meetings with us had been conducted with only a few individual negotiators.

Into this the Council had moved. Perhaps a taboo was ignored, a trifle overlooked. The mistake was too great for the Quarn to pass; they came punching and jabbing into the edge of the human community. Regeln was one of their first targets.

"First Sabal call." Tonji's voice came over the inboard. "You asked me to remind you, sir."

It was ironic that Tonji, with all his ancestors citizens of Old Nippon, should be calling a Sabal game to be led by me, a half-breed Caucasian—and I was sure it wasn't totally lost on him. My mother was a Polynesian and my father a truly rare specimen: one of the last pure Americans, born of the descendents of the few who had survived the Riot War. That placed me far down in the caste lots, even below Australians.

When I was a teenager it was still socially permissible to call us *ofkaipan*, a term roughly analogous to *nigger* in the early days of the American Republic. But since then had come the Edicts of Harmony. I imagine the Edicts are still ignored in the off-islands, but with my professional status it would be a grave breach of protocol if the word ever reached my ears. I'd seen it often enough, mouthed wordlessly by an orderlyman who'd just received punishment, or an officer who couldn't forget the color of my skin. But

never aloud.

I sighed and got up, almost wishing there were another of us aboard, so I wouldn't have moments of complete loneliness like this. But we were rare in Fleet, and almost extinct on Earth itself.

I uncased my formal Sabal robes and admired their delicate sheen a moment before putting them on. The subtle reds and violets caught the eye and played tricks with vision. They were the usual lint-free polyester that shed no fine particles into the ship's air, but everything possible had been done to give them texture and depth beyond the ordinary uniform. They were part of the show, just like the bals and chants.

During the dressing I made the ritual passes as my hands chanced to pass diagonally across my body, to induce emotions of wholeness, peace. The vague fears I had let slip into my thoughts would be in the minds of the crew as well.

The murmur in our assemblyroom slackened as I appeared; I greeted them, took my place in the hexagon of men and began the abdominal exercises, sitting erect. I breathed deeply, slowly, and made hand passes. At the top of the last arc the power was with me and, breathing out, I came *down* into focus, outward-feeling, *kodakani*.

I slowed the juggling of the gamebals, sensing the mood of the hexagon. The bals and beads caught the light in their counter cadences, glancing tones of red and blue off the walls as they tumbled. The familiar dance calmed us and we moved our legs to counter-position, for meditation.

My sing-chant faded slowly in the softened acoustics of the room. I began the Game.

First draw was across the figure, a crewman fidgeting with his Sabal leaves. He chose a passage from the Quest and presented it as overture. It was a complex beginning—the Courier was endowed with subtleties of character and mission. Play moved on. The outline of our problem was inked in by the others as they read their own quotations from the leaves into the Game structure.

For the Royal Courier rode down from the hills, and being he of thirst, hunger and weariness, he sought aid in the town. Such was his Mission that the opinion he gained here of the inhabitants of the village, their customs, honesty and justice (not only to the Courier, but to themselves), would be relayed to the Royal Presence as well. And thence, it is said, to Heaven. Having such items to barter, he went from house to house. ...

After most entries were made, the problem maze established had dark undertones of fear and dread. As expected.

I repeated the ritual of beads. And rippling them slowly through my fingers, I began the second portion of Sabal: proposal of solution. Again the draw danced among the players.

So: You are one of two players. There are only two choices for you to make, say red and black. The other player is hidden, and only his decisions are reported to you.

If both of you pick red, you gain a point each. If both are black, a point is lost. But if you choose red and your opponent votes black, he wins *two* points, and you lose two.

He who cooperates in spirit, he who senses the Total wins.

Sabal is infinitely more complex, but contains the same elements. The problem set by the men ran dark with subtle streams of anguish, insecurity.

But now the play was returning to me. I watched the solution as it formed around the hexagon. Rejoiced

in harmony of spirit. Indicated slight displeasure when divergent modes were attempted. Rebuked personal gain. And drew closer to my men.

"Free yourself from all bonds," I chanted, "and bring to rest the ten thousand things. The way is near, but we seek it afar."

The mood caught slowly at first and uncertainty was dominant, but with the rhythm of repetition a compromise was struck. Anxiety began to submerge. Conflicting images in the Game weakened.

I caught the uprush of spirit at its peak, chanting joyfully of completion as I brought the play to rest. Imposed the dream-like flicker of gamebal and bead, gradually toning the opticals until we were clothed in darkness. Then stillness.

The fire burning, the iron kettle singing on the hearth, a pine bough brushing the roof, water dripping.

The hexagon broke and we left, moving in concert.

The Game on our flagship was among the best, but it was not enough for the entire mission. I ordered Sabal as often as possible on all ships, and hoped it would keep us in correct phase. I didn't have time to attend all Games, because we were getting closer to drop and all details weren't worked out.

In the hour preceeding the Jump I made certain that I was seen in every portion of the ship, moving confidently among the men. The number of ships lost in the Jump is small, but rising dangerously and everyone knew it.

I ended up on the center bridge to watch the process, even though it was virtually automatic. The specialists and crewmen moved quickly in the dull red light that simulated nightfall—Jump came at 2200—and fifteen minutes before the computers were set to drop us through, I gave the traditional order to proceed. It was purely a formalism, but in theory the synchronization could be halted even at the last instant. But if it was, the requirements of calculating time alone would delay the Jump for weeks. The machines were the key.

And Justly so. Converting a ship into tachyons in a nanosecond of real-space time is an inconceivably complex process. Men invented it, but they could never control it without the impersonal, faultless coordination of microelectronics.

In theory it was simple. The earnest, careful men who moved around me on the center bridge were preparing the convoy to flip over into *faster* than light. In the same way that a fundamental symmetry provided that the proton had a twin particle with opposite charge, helicity, and so on—the anti-proton—there was a possible state for each particle, called the tachyon.

Just as the speed of light, c , is an upper limit to all velocities in our universe, in the tachyon universe it is a lower limit. To us, a particle with zero kinetic energy sits still; it has no velocity. A tachyon with no energy is on the other side of the coin—it moves with infinite velocity. As its energy increases it *slows*, relative to us, until at infinite energy it travels with velocity c .

As long as man remained in his half of the universe, he could not exceed c . This was a fundamental limitation, as irrevocable as the special principle of relativity.

So he must leave it. By converting a particle into its tachyon state, allowing it to move with a nearly infinite velocity and then shifting it back to real space, one effectively produces faster than light travel. The study of the famous tachyon cross section problem—*how* do you make it convert, and then get it

back—occupied the best minds of humanity for more than thirty years. It also birthed the incredible complexity of microelectronics, because only with components that operated literally on the scale of atomic dimensions could you produce the coherent, complexly modulated electromagnetic waves that could regulate the tachyon's Jump cross section.

I smiled to myself in the red glow. *That* had been a triumph. It occurred some decades after the establishment of Old Nippon's hegemony, and made possible almost instant communication with the first Alpha Centauri colony. Particles can be used to produce electromagnetic waves, and waves carry signals.

But not men. It was one thing to greatly enlarge the Jump cross section of a single particle, and quite another to do it for the unimaginable number of atoms that make up a man, or a ship.

It was Okawa who found the answer, and I had always wondered why the Jump drive did not bear his name. Perhaps he was born of impure strains. Okawa reasoned by analogy, and the analogy he used was the laser.

In the laser the problem is simply to produce a coherent state—to make all the excited atoms in the solid emit a photon at the same time. The same problem appeared in the faster than light drive. If *all* the particles in the ship did not flip into their tachyon state at the same time, they would all have vastly varying velocities, and the ship would tear itself apart. Okawa's achievement was finding a technique for placing all a ship's atoms in "excited real tachyon states." In the excited state their tachyon cross sections were large. But as well, they could be triggered at the same time, so that all Jumped together, coherently.

I looked at the fixed, competent faces around me in the bridge. It was a little more than one minute to Jump. The strain showed, even though some tried to hide it. The process wasn't perfect and they knew it.

Nothing was said about it at the Fleet level, but microelectronic equipment had been deteriorating slowly for years. The techniques were gradually being lost, craftsmanship grew rare and half-measures were used. It was part of the slow nibbling decline our society had suffered for the last half century. It was almost expected.

But these men bet their lives on the Jump rig, and they knew it might fail.

The silvery chimes rang down thin, padded corridors, sounding the approach of Jump. I could feel the men in the decks around me, lying in near darkness on tatami mats, waiting.

There was a slightly audible count, a tense moment and I closed my eyes at the last instant.

A bright arc flashed beyond my eyelids, showing the blood vessels, and I heard the dark, whispering sound of the void. A pit opened beneath me, the falling sensation began.

Then the fluorescents hummed again and everything was normal, tension relieved, men smiling.

I looked out the forward screen and saw the shimmering halo of gas that shrouded the star of Regeln. At our present velocity we would be through it in a day and falling down the potential well directly toward the sun. There wasn't much time.

We had to come in fast, cutting the rim of plasma around Regeln's star to mask our approach. If we dropped in with that white-hot disk at our backs we would have a good margin over any detection system that was looking for us.

Regeln is like any life-supporting world: endlessly varied, monotonously dull, spiced with contrast wherever you look, indescribable. It harbors belts of jungle, crinkling gray swaths of mountains,

convoluted snake-rivers and frigid blue wastes. The hazy air carries the hum of insects, the pad of ambling vegetarians, the smooth click of teeth meeting. And winds that deafen, oceans that laugh, tranquility beside violence. It is like any world that is worth the time of man.

But its crust contains fewer heavy elements than are necessary for the easy construction of a Jump station or docking base. So it fell under the control of the colonization-only faction of Fleet. They had moved in quickly with xenobiologists to perform the routine miracles that made the atmosphere breathable.

Wildlife was some problem, but during the twenty-odd years the atmosphere was being treated a continent was cleared of the more malignant varieties. There was a four-meter scorpion which could run like a deer, among other things. I saw it in an Earthside zoo, and shuddered.

Drop time caught us with only the rudiments of a defense network. There simply wasn't time to train the men, and we were constantly missing relevant equipment. I wished for better point-surveillance gear a hundred separate times as we slipped into the Regeln system.

But no Quarn ships were visible, no missiles rose to meet us. Tonji wanted to get out of the sky as soon as physically possible, even though it would've been expensive in reaction mass. I vetoed it and threw us into a monocycle "orange slice" orbit for a look before we went down, but there turned out to be nothing to see after all.

Our base was buttoned up. No vehicles moved on the roads, not even expendable drones for surveillance. I had prints of the base defenses, even the periscope holes, but when we checked there was no sign that they were open. Scattered bluish clouds slid over the farmhouses and fields of grain, but nothing moved on the surface.

There wasn't time to think, send down probes, play a game of cat and mouse. I had a drone massing out to the system perimeter, where random radiation from the star wouldn't mask the torch of an incoming Quarn ship, but I couldn't rely on it completely. "Skimmers ready, sir," Tonji said.

"Good. Order all three down immediately." The skimmers were fast, and can usually maneuver around manual surface-air defenses.

They landed easily, formed a regulation triangle defense in the valley where the colony's HQ was buried under a low, crusty hill, and reported back. When their skins had cooled to the minimum safety point they popped out their hovercraft and moved off, checking the covered entrances. No signals were coming out of the hill. There were no flash marks nearby, no sign of the use of any weapons.

A pilot landed near the main entrance, shucked his radiation gear for speed and tried the manual alarms mounted for emergency purposes near the vault door. Nothing.

I got all this over TV, along with a running account of additional data from the other ships spread out in orbit around Regeln. The pilot on the ground asked for further instructions. From the sound of his voice I could tell the order he wanted was to pull out, and fast, but he didn't expect to get it.

And I couldn't give it. You don't walk away from a colony that's in trouble, even if it does look like an obvious trap.

"Tell him. to use his sappers," I said. "Get the others over there too, but keep watching the other entrances from orbit. It's going to take a while to kick in the door, but we've got to look inside."

Tonjii nodded and started to code. "Tell him I'm coming down too."

He looked at me, surprised for the first time since I had known him.

I rang Matsuda over inboard and placed him in temporary command of the convoy in orbit. "Tonji is coming with me. If the Quarn show, give us an hour to get up here. If we don't make it, mass out. Don't hang around. These ships are worth more than we are."

I looked at Tonji and he smiled.

The shuttle down was slow but gentle, since it was designed for pushing soft flatlanders back and forth from orbit. I didn't have time to enjoy the ride because I was listening to the efforts of the ground crew to blow the hatch off the entrance. Regeln's sky flitted past, a creamy blend of reds and blues like a lunatic tropical drink, and then we were down.

The pilot of the hovercraft that took me out to the site was Jumpy, but we made it faster than I would've thought possible. I was out the hatch before they got chocks under the wheels and the lieutenant in charge came toward me at double-time.

"Had to drill and tap, sir," he said quickly, saluting. "We're ready to blow it."

I gave the nod and we ducked behind a gentle rise at the base of the hill, a hundred meters away from the portal. Everything was dead still for a moment and I thought for the first time that the ground beneath me was alien, a new planet. In the rush I'd accepted it as though it were Earth.

The concussion was as sharp as a bone snapping and debris showered everywhere. In a moment I was moving up with the main body of men, before the dirt had cleared. The portal was only partially opened, a testament to the shelter's designer, but we could get through.

Three runners went in with lights and were back in minutes.

"Deserted for the first few corridor levels," one of them said. "We need more men inside to keep a communications link."

Tonji led the next party. Most of the crewmen were inside before word came back that they'd found somebody. I went in then with three guards and some large arc lamps. None of the lighting in the corridors of the shelter was working—the bulbs were smashed.

Men were clustered at one end of the corridor on the second level, their voices echoing nervously off the glazed concrete.

"You've got something, Mr. Tonji?" I said. He turned away from the open door, where he had been talking to a man whose uniform was covered with dirt. He looked uncertain.

"I think so, sir. According to the maps we have of the base, this door leads to a large auditorium. But a few meters inside—well, look."

I stepped through the door and halted. A number of steps beyond, the cushioned walkway ended and a block of *something*—dirt, mostly, with fragments of furniture, wall partitions, unidentifiable rubble—rose to the ceiling.

I looked at Tonji, questioning.

"A ramp downward starts about there. The whole auditorium is filled with this—we checked the lower floors, but the doors off adjacent corridors won't open."

"How did it get here?"

"The levels around the auditorium have been stripped bare and most of the wall structure torn out, straight down to the bedrock and clay the base was built on. Somebody carted a lot of dirt away and dumped it in here." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"What's that?" I pointed at a black oval depression sunk back into the gray mass of dirt, about two meters off the floor.

"A hole. Evidently a tunnel. It was covered with an office rug until Nahran noticed it." He gestured back at the man in the dirty uniform.

"So he went inside. What's there?"

Tonji pinched his lip with a well-manicured thumb and forefinger. "A man. He's pretty far back, Nahran says. That's all I can get out of Nahran, though—he's dazed. The man inside is hysterical. I don't think we can drag him out through that hole; it's too narrow."

"That's all? One man?"

"There might be a lot of people inside there. We've heard noises out of several of these holes. I think this thing that fills the auditorium is honeycombed with tunnels. We've seen the entrance of several more from the balcony above."

I checked the time. "Let's go."

Tonji turned and started back through the door.

"No, Mr. Tonji. This way."

For a second he didn't believe it, and then the glassy impersonal look fell over his face. "We're both going to crawl in there, sir?"

"That's right. It's the only way I can find out enough to make a decision."

He nodded and we spent a few minutes arranging details, setting timetables. I tried to talk with Nahran while I changed into a tight pullover work suit. He couldn't tell me very much. He seemed reticent and slightly dazed. Something had shocked him.

"Follow immediately after me, Mr. Tonji." We both carefully emptied our pockets, because the passage was obviously too narrow to admit anything jutting out. Tonji carried the light. I climbed up onto the slight ledge in front of the dark oval and looked across the slate gray face of the thing. It was huge.

Men were crowding in the doorway of the thing. I waved with false heartiness and began working my legs into the hole. I went straight down into a nightmare.

My thighs and shoulders braked me as the force of gravity slowly pulled me down the shaft. I held my arms above my head and close together, because there wasn't much room to keep them at my sides.

After a moment my feet touched, scraped, and then settled on something solid. I felt around with my boots and for a moment thought it was a dead end. But there was another hole in the side, off at an angle. I slowly twisted until I could sink into it up to my knees.

I looked up. It wasn't more than three meters over my standing height to the top of the shaft, but it seemed to have taken a long time to get this far. I could see Tonji slowly settling down behind me, towing

a light above his head.

I wriggled into the narrow side channel, grunting and already beginning to hate the smell of packed dirt and garbage. In a moment I was stretched flat on my back, working my way forward by digging in my heels and pushing with my palms against the walls.

The ceiling of the tunnel brushed against my face in the utter blackness. I felt the oppressive weight of the packed dirt crushing down on me. My own breath was trapped in front of my face and I could hear only my own gasps, amplified.

"Tonji?" I heard a muffled shout in reply. A trace of light illuminated the tunnel in front of me and I noticed a large rock was embedded in the side. The auditorium was probably filled with a skeleton of stone that supported the packed soil.

I came to a larger space and was able to turn around and enter the next hole head first. The entrance way was wide, but it quickly narrowed and I felt mud squeeze between my fingers. The walls pressed down. Some of the clay had turned to mud.

A chill seeped up my legs and arms as I inched forward. I twisted my shoulder blades and pulled with my fingers. The going was easier because the passage tilted slightly downward, but the ooze sucked at me.

I wondered how a man could have gotten in here, or out. With every lunge forward my chest scraped against the sides, rubbing the skin raw and squeezing my breath out. It seemed just possible that I could get through.

Tonji shouted and I answered. The reply was muffled against the wall and I wondered if he had heard. I could feel the irregular bumps in the wall with my hands, and I used them to measure how far I had come.

Progress was measured in centimeters, then even less. My forearms were beginning to stiffen with the effort.

A finger touched the wall, found nothing. I felt cautiously and discovered a sudden widening in the tunnel. At the same instant there was a scraping sound in the night ahead of me, the sound of something being dragged across a floor. It was moving away.

I got a good grip on the opening, pushed and was through it. I rolled to the side and kept close to the wall. Flickers of light from Tonji showed a small, rectangular room, but there was no one in it. A row of darkened holes were sunk into the opposite wall.

Tonji wriggled through the passage, breathing heavily in the cold air. The light he carried was almost blinding, even though it was on low beam.

I found I could get to my knees without bumping my head. I stretched out my cramped legs and rubbed them to start circulation.

"Nothing here," he said in a whisper.

"Maybe. Throw the beam on those holes."

He played it across the opposite wall.

"Aeeeeeee!"

The shrill scream filled the surrounding area and I caught sight of a head of filthy hair that wrenched further back into the uppermost hole.

I started toward him on hands and knees and stopped almost immediately. The floor below the holes was strewn with excrement and trash. Tonji swallowed and looked sick.

After a moment I moved forward and my boot rattled an empty food tin. I could barely see the man far back in his hole.

"Come out. What's wrong?" The man pressed himself further back as I picked my way toward him. He whimpered, cried, hid his face from the light.

"He won't answer," Tonji said.

"I suppose not." I stopped and looked at some of the other holes. The rock on this side of the room was intolerable. I hadn't noticed it in the tunnel because there was a cool draft blowing out of one of the holes in the wall. It kept the air in the room circulating away from the tunnel we'd used.

"Flash the light up there," I said. A human hand hung out of one of the holes. Cloth and sticks had been stuffed into the opening to try to keep in the smell.

There were other holes like it. Some others were packed with food, most of it partially eaten.

"Can we go back?" Tonji asked.

I ignored him and moved closer to one of the openings with a larger mouth. It sucked the dank air around me down into a black hole. In the empty silence I could hear the faint echoes of wailing and sobbing from further inside. They mingled together in a dull hum of despair.

"Bring the light," I said.

"I think it's getting colder in here, sir." He hesitated a moment and then duck-walked closer.

The man was still moaning to himself in his hole. I clenched my jaw muscles in involuntary revulsion and with an effort of will reached out and touched him. He cringed away, burrowing down, sobbing with fear.

There was part of a sleeve left on his arm—the light blue doth of the Fleet. I looked back at the tunnel we'd just used and estimated the difficulty of pulling a struggling man through it.

"We're not going to get any more out of this," I said.

The cold was clinging to my limbs again, but Tonji was sweating. He looked about the hole nervously, as if expecting attack. The silence was oppressive, but I seemed to hear more clearly now the convulsive sobbing from further inside the mound.

I motioned quickly to Tonji and we pressed ourselves into the tunnel. I made as rapid progress as I could with him scrambling close at my heels.

The dead weight squeezed us with rigid jaws. I tried to notice markings on the sides that would measure how far we had come, but I began to get confused.

It took me a moment to realize the air was definitely getting worse. It clung to my throat and I couldn't get enough. My chest was caught in the tunnel's vise and my lungs would never fill.

Between wriggings to squirm up the slight grade, I stopped to listen for sounds from the men at the

entrance. Nothing. The long tunnel pressed at me and *I* gave myself over to an endless series of pushing and turning, rhythmically moving forward against the steady hand of gravity and the scraping of the walls.

Tonji's beam sent dim traces of light along the walls. I noticed how smooth they were. How many people had worn them down? How many were in here? And, God, *why?*

The tunnel began to narrow; I got through one opening by expelling all my breath and pushing hard with my heels. Coming in hadn't seemed this hard.

There was an open space that temporarily eased the pressure, and then ahead I saw walls narrowing again. I pushed and turned, scrabbling on the slick dirt with all my strength. A flicker of light reflected over my shoulder and I could see the passage closing even further.

Impossible. A massive hand was squeezing the life out of me and my mind clutched frantically at an escape. The air was positively foul. I felt ahead and grunted with the effort. The walls closed even more. I knew I couldn't get through.

My hand touched something, but I was too numbed with the cold to tell what it was.

"Light," I managed to whisper. I heard Tonji turning, breathing rapidly, and in a moment the beam got brighter.

It was a man's foot.

I recoiled; for a moment I couldn't think and my mind was a flood of horror.

"Back," I gasped. "We can't go this way."

"This... way... we came in."

"No." Suddenly the air was too thick to take any longer.

I started to slide backward.

"Go on!" He hit my boots with a free hand.

"Back up, Mr. Tonji."

I waited and the dirt pressed at me, closing in everywhere. It was only mud. What if it collapsed?

Tonji was silent and after a moment I felt him move back. I had been holding my breath ever since my hand, felt that human foot, and I let it out as I scrambled back down the tunnel. The man hadn't been there long, but it was enough. The air was heavy with it.

I noticed I was sweating now, despite the chill. Had we taken the right hole when we left the man back there? We could be working our way further into the mound, not out of it.

How long could I take the air? I could tell Tonji was on the edge already. Did we miss a turn coming out and go down the wrong way? It was hard to imagine in the closeness of the tunnel.

My ribs were rubbed raw and they stung whenever I moved. The weight closed on me from every direction. I pulled backward slowly, trying to collect my thoughts. I moved automatically.

After a few moments my left hand reached out and touched nothing. I stopped, but Tonji went on, as if in a stupor. I listened to his moving away, blinking uncomprehendingly at the hole to my left, and tried to

think.

"Wait! This is it!"

We had both missed the turn, somehow. The air had dulled our minds until we noticed nothing without conscious effort.

I turned and worked myself into the opening. Tonji was returning and the direct glare of the beam was almost painful. He moaned something but I couldn't understand.

The passage gradually widened and I caught glimmerings of light ahead. In a moment I was standing in the vertical shaft and a man was dropping a line down to me. My hands slipped on it several times as they pulled me up.

For a few minutes I sat by the entrance, numb with fatigue. The men crowded around us and I looked at them as if they were strangers. After a while I picked out a lieutenant.

"Get—Jobstranikan down here." Jobstranikan had psychotherapy training, and this was clearly his job.

Orders were given and men scattered. After a moment I got up and changed back into full uniform. A runner was waiting outside the door, his nose wrinkling at the stench I had ceased to notice.

"Sir, reports from lower levels say there are more like this. There appear to be people in them too. The coordination center was untouched, and it's five levels down. I think they've got some of the tapes ready to run."

I turned to Tonji. "Try to get that man out of there. Do it any way you can, but don't waste time. I'll be in the center."

The walk through the next two levels was like a trip through hell. The stink of human waste was overpowering, even though the ventilation system was working at full capacity. Arc lights we had brought down threw distorted crescents of faint blue and white along walls smeared with blood, food, excrement.

Echoes of high, gibbering wails, haunted the lower floors, coming from the hiding places. They had burrowed far back into the walls in spots but most of the tunnel mouths were in monstrous, huge mounds like the one above. They weren't hiding from us alone; their warrens were surrounded by piles of refuse. They had been in there for weeks.

Jobstranikan caught up with us just before we worked our way to the center.

"It's difficult, sir," he said. "It's like the legends—the country of madness, possessed by devils and monsters."

"What's happened to them?"

"Everything. At first I thought they had a complete fear of anything that they could sense—light, movement, noise. But that's misleading. They screech at each other incoherently. They won't let us touch them and they cry, scream, and fight if we try."

"Has Tonji been able to get any of them out?"

"Only by knocking them unconscious. One of his men was bitten badly when they tried to drag that man out. Getting anyone out of this mess is going to be a major job."

There was a guard outside the center. Broken bits of furniture and electronics gear were strewn down the

corridor, but inside the center itself everything was in order.

"The hatch was sealed electronically and coded, sir," the officer inside explained. "We brought down the tracers and opened it. Somebody must have seen what was happening and made certain no one could get in here before we arrived."

I walked over to the main display board. Technicians were taping the readouts we would need from the center's computer bank, working with feverish haste. I motioned Danker back to duty and turned to the officer.

"Have you got any preliminary results? Is there an oral log that covers the Quarn attack?"

"No oral yet. We do have a radar scan." He fitted a roll into the projector attachment of the display board. "I've cut it to begin with the first incursion into this system."

He dimmed the lights in this section to the center and the green background grid of a radar scan leaped into focus. The relative locations of the other planets in the Regeln system were shown—here lumps of cold rock, for the most part—and a small Quarn dot was visible on the perimeter of the screen, glowing a soft red.

"They took their time getting here, apparently." The projection rate increased. More dots joined the first to form a wedge-shaped pattern. A blue line detached itself from the center of the screen and moved outward, shrinking to a point—a defensive move from Regeln.

"All available missiles seem to have been fired. The Quarn took a few hits, but they could outmaneuver most of them. I'm afraid we launched too soon and by the time our seekers were within range their fuel reserves weren't up to a long string of dodges."

The red dots moved quickly, erratically, in a pantomime dance with the blue defenders. The distance between them was never short enough to permit a probable kill with a nuclear charge, and eventually the blue dots fell behind and were lost. They winked out when their reaction mass was exhausted.

"Except for the atmospheric ships, that finished their defenses. This colony wasn't built to carry on a war. But something strange happened."

The Quarn ships drifted toward center screen at an almost leisurely pace. A small missile flared out, went into orbit around Regeln and disappeared.

"That was the satellite link. They got that and then..."

"And then left," I finished. The red dots were backing off. They gradually picked up velocity, regrouped and in a few minutes slipped off the grid. The screen went black.

"That is all we have. This clipping covered about eight days, but we can't be sure anybody was watching the last part of it because the recording mechanism was automatic. It stopped when it ran out of film. This room may have been sealed any time after they launched their missiles."

"None of this explains what happened here. The Quarn didn't touch Regeln, but this shelter is full of lunatics. Something made the Quarn stop their attack and leave." I looked around at the banks and consoles. I could feel a tightness forming somewhere. That old feeling of Tightness, certainty of position, was slipping away.

"Get every record you can, in duplicate tapes if possible," I ordered, trying to shrug off the mood. The officer saluted and I went back into the corridors with a guard detail. I made a note to get respiration

packs down here as soon as possible, and meanwhile held my breath as long as I could between gasps.

The route we took back was different, but no less horrible. Here there were bodies lying among the wreckage, most of them in advanced stages of decay. Two of my guards gagged in the close, putrid atmosphere of the corridors. We kept moving as quickly as we could, avoiding the half-open doors from which came the faint shrill gibbering of madmen. Most of the bodies we saw had been stabbed or clubbed and left to die. A large proportion were women. In any contest of strength they wouldn't last long, and they hadn't received any special consideration.

When we reached the perimeter Tonji had established, the air improved. Men were moving along the corridors in teams, spraying the walls with a soapy solution.

"The water and drainage systems are still working, so I decided to use them," Tonji said. He seemed to have recovered from the tunnel. "Wherever we can we're sealing off the places where they lived, and merely hope we can keep the halls clean."

Jobstranikan came around a nearby corner portal we'd blasted through only a short while before. "Any new ideas?"

"Not as yet, I fear." He shook his head and the long Mongolian locks tangled together on the back of his neck. He wore it in traditional semi-tribal fashion, like most of my officers. It was dull black, in the manner of the soldiers of the Khan and the Patriarch, and braided at the tail with bright leather thongs. The style was as old as the great central plains of Asia.

"I can make no sense of it. They fought among themselves at first, I think, for the bodies we've found are at least weeks old. Since then they've stayed back in those holes they made for themselves, eating the food supplies they'd gotten earlier. But they don't want to leave. Every one I've seen wants to burrow into the smallest volume possible and stay there. We've found them in cupboards, jammed into ventilation shafts, even..."

"Signal for me?" I asked the crewman in charge. We'd reached a temporary communications link. He handed me a receiver and I pulled the hushpiece over my head. If this was what I thought it was, I didn't want anyone to know before I told them.

It was Matsuda. "Our drone is registering approaching extra-solar ships. Preliminary trajectory puts them into the Regeln orbit."

I let out a long breath. In a way I'd almost been expecting it.

"What's their Doppler shift?"

There was a pause, then: "It's not enough for them to be braking from a star jump. The spectroscope says they're on full torch, however. They couldn't have been accelerating very long."

"In other words, this is the same group that hit—or didn't hit—Regeln the first time. How long can we have on the surface?"

"Sir, readout says you can stay down there about five hours and not incur more than five percent risk to the convoy. Can you get them out if I give you that much?"

"We'll see," I said, and went back to Tonji.

It was impossible. With all shuttles and skimmers we saved a little over three thousand, only a fraction of

the colony's population. Most of the interior of the shelter was never reached.

As it was, we boosted late and a Quarn interceptor almost caught us. A yellow fusion burst licked at us as we pulled away, so we never saw what the rest of the Quarn did to Regeln, and I don't suppose anyone else will either because it's in the middle of their territory now.

After a few unsuccessful attempts I decided to stop trying to communicate with the lunatics we had scattered among the ships. Jobstranikan wanted to try treatment on some of them, but the medics were having a hell of a time just patching up their injuries, and infections and treating malnutrition.

The Quarn didn't try to follow us out of the system. I thought this strange, and so did Tonji.

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "We don't know a lot about their drive systems, but they might have a good chance of catching us. It would certainly be worth a try. If you've set a trap, why spring it halfheartedly?"

"Maybe it's not that kind of trap," I said.

Tonji frowned. "Do you mean they might be waiting for us further along trajectory? We're already out of detection range of any Quarn ships, and the Jump is coming up. They'll never trace us through that."

"No, nothing. It was just a thought." Not a well-defined one, at that. Still, something was bothering him. It wasn't lessened any when Tonji reported the results from Intelligence.

"The computer analysis of the colony's radar scan is finished," he began. "Regardless of what happened to the colony itself, the machines have a low opinion of Quarn tactics. Regard."

He flicked on a screen above my desk and the pattern of red and blue points on a green grid began to repeat itself. "Notice this stage, shortly after initial contact."

The blue dots danced and played as they moved in, performing an intricate pattern of opposing and coalescing steps. The red Quarn ships back-pedaled and moved uncertainly.

"The Quarn had ballistic superiority and more maneuverability. But notice how they avoided the Regeln missiles."

The red points dodged back, moving in crescents that narrowly avoided the feints and slashes of blue. The crescent formed, fell back. Again. And again. The Quarn were using the same tactic, relying on their superior power to carry them beyond Regeln attack at the cusp-point. I'm not a tactician, but I could see it was wasteful of energy and time.

"They continued this until the interceptors ran out of reaction mass. If they'd been pitted against equals the engagement wouldn't have lasted two minutes."

I clicked off the screen. "What does it mean?"

Tonji poked the air with a finger. "It means we've got them. Over the last year they've had the luck to hit border planets that weren't first-line military emplacements. We haven't had a look at their techniques because they didn't let anyone get away. But these tactics are schoolbook examples! If this is the best they can do, we'll wipe them out when our fleets move in."

He was overenthusiastic, but he was right. Our defenses were solidly based on the fleet-principle, with interlocking layers of tactical directorates, hundred-ships armadas and echelons of command. It was very much like the surface aquatic navies of Earth history. On these terms, the Quarn were disasterously

inferior.

The news should have quieted the unease I felt, but instead it grew. I began to notice outbreaks of rudeness among the crew, signs of worry on the faces of the officers, disruption of spirit. The tedium of caring for the colonists could certainly account for some of it—they refused to be calmed and had to be restrained from destroying their room furniture. They were using it to construct the same sort of rat holes we'd found them in.

But that wasn't all. Crewmen began missing meals, staying in their cabins and not talking to anyone else. The ship took on a quiet, tense mood. I ordered resumption of the Games at once.

We almost got through it.

There was divisive talking and nervousness instead of the steady calm of self-contemplation, before the Sabal began, but the opening rituals damped and smoothed it. I thought I detected a relaxation running like a wave through the hexagon. Muscles unstiffened, consciousness cleared and we drew together.

It is usual in the Game to choose a theme which begins with a statement of the virtue of community, test it, and then return to initial configuration, the position of rest. I anticipated trouble, but not enough to make a change of game plot necessary. The plot ran smoothly at first, until we came to first resolution point.

One of the lower deckmen, who had been in the shelter caverns from the first entry, was called by the chance of the Game to make the decision. He hesitated, looked guiltily at his card and beads, and made a choice that profited himself at the expense of the other players.

Everything came to a stop.

I could feel the group teetering on edge. The men were straining for sense of harmony and trying to decide how to play when their turn came. A bad play isn't unknown to Sabal, but now it could be dangerous.

I repeated the confirmation ritual, hoping it would calm them—and myself—but the next play was a choice of withdrawal. No gain for the individual, but the group did not profit, and the net effect was bad. Fear began to slip from member to member down the hexagon.

The plays came rapidly now. Some men tried to reinforce the message and cast configurations that benefited the group. They were swamped, one by one, and the Game began to fall apart.

I used the chant. Tranquility, detachment, the words rose and fell. Interpenetrating. Interconverting. The mosquito bit the bar of iron.

My own cast held them for a while out of respect for my position, but in a quick string of plays its advantage was nibbled away.

Then the flood came. A dozen casts went by, all having loss of phase. The theme was not gain, but a pulling away from the group, and that was what made the failure so serious. Withdrawal strikes at the social structure itself.

I seized control of the Game, breaking off a subplot that was dragging us deeper. I drew a moral, one I'd learned years before and hoped to never use. It slurred over the resolution of the Game and emphasized the quality of the testing, without questioning whether the test had been met. It was an obvious loss, but it was all I could do.

The hexagon broke and the men burst into conversation, nearly panic-stricken. They moved out of the room, jostling and shoving, and broke up as they reached the halls. A few glanced quickly at me and then looked away. In a moment the only sound was the hissing of the air system and the distant quick tapping of boots on deck.

Tonji remained. He looked puzzled.

"What do you think it means?" I said.

"Probably just that the mission was too much for us. Well be all right after landfall."

"I don't think so. Our Games worked well before; but this one shattered before it was half finished. That's too much of a change."

"What, then?"

"It's something to do with this mission. Something... What percentage of the crew have regular contact with the Regeln survivors?"

"With the way the nursemaid shifts are set up now, about sixty percent. Every man who's replaceable for more than an hour on his job has to help feed and clean them, or assist the psych teams who are working on the problem."

"So even though we're off Regeln, most of the men continue to see them."

"Yes, but it's unavoidable. Our orders were to bring back as many as we could, and we are."

"Of course." I waved my hand irritably. "But the Game failed tonight because of those survivors, I'm sure of that. The strain of putting this set of crews into war-status duty isn't small, but we've allowed for it in our planning. It doesn't explain this."

Tonji gave me a stiff look. "Then what does?"

"I don't know." I was irritated at the question, because I *did* know—in a vague, foreboding sense—and his question uncovered my own fear.

"The Sabal Game has something to do with it. That and the way our ships—hell, our whole society—has to be run. We emphasize cooperation and phase. We teach that a man's happiness depends on the well-being of the group, and the two are inseparable. Even in our contacts with alien races, until the Quarn, we spread that philosophy. We try to draw closer to beings who are fundamentally different from us."

"That's the way any advanced society must be structured. Anything else is suicide on the racial scale."

"Sure, sure. But the Quarn apparently don't fit that mold. They've got something different. They work almost completely alone and live in cities only, I suppose, because of economic reasons. Most of what we know about them is guesswork because they don't like contact with others, even members of their own race. We've had to dig out our own data bit by bit."

Tonji spread his hands. "That's the reason for this mission. The Regeln survivors may be able to tell us something about the Quarn. We need an idea of how they think."

"From what we've seen of them, I don't think they'll be any help. The survivors have gone too far over the edge, and already they're threatening the convoy."

"Threatening? With what?"

"Disruption, mutiny—something. All I can say is that when this Sabal started, the crew was in bad condition, but they could be reached. They still communicated.

"During the Game, though, the tension *increased*. We didn't witness here the exposure of what the men were thinking. Their fears were augmented, piled on top of each Other. I could feel it running through the subplots they made a part of the Game. There's something we do—and the Game is just a way of concentrating it—that increases the unbalance we picked up from the Regeln survivors."

"But in the Game we duplicate our society, our way of living. If *that* amplifies the unbalance..."

"Exactly," I said despairingly. "Exactly."

I slept on it that night, hoping something would unravel the knot of worry while I slept. Over a lonely breakfast in my cabin I reviewed the conversation and tried to see where my logic was leading.

A sense of dread caught my stomach and twisted it, turning to lead the meal of rice and sea culture broth.

How can a man step outside himself and guess the reactions of aliens utterly unlike him? I was trying to find the key to the riddle of Regeln with all the elements in full view.

Something formed. I let my senses out through the ship, feeling the usual rhythms of life, reaching for the... other. An alien element was there. I knew, with a new certainty, what it was.

I picked up my tea cup and focused on my kensdai altar. The deep mahogany gave me confidence. Power and resolution flowed outward from my body center. I balanced the cup lightly in my hand.

And it slammed it down. Jump was coming. I had to stop it.

I had forgotten that Tonji was to be bridge officer during the Jump. He was making routine checks in the somber green light of morning watch. Men moved expertly around him, with a quiet murmur.

"Great greetings of Morn, sir," he said. "We have come to the point for your permission to Jump."

Then it was already late, far later than I'd thought. I looked at him steadily.

"Permission denied, Mr. Tonji. Ready a subspace transmission."

I could feel a hush fall on the bridge.

"May I ask what the transmission will say, sir?"

"It's a request to divert this convoy. I want the expedition put into decontamination status until this is understood."

Tonji didn't move. "There are only a few moments until Jump, sir."

"It's an order, Mr. Tonji."

"Perhaps if you would explain the reasoning, sir?"

I glanced at the morning board. It showed a huge sick report, accompanied by requests of most crewmen to remain in quarters. All divisions were undermanned.

It fitted. In a few days we wouldn't be able to operate at all.

"Look," I said impatiently. "The Quarn did something to our people. Perhaps something smuggled in by an agent. I don't know exactly how, but those colonists have been given the worst traumas anybody has ever seen."

"An agent? One of our own people?"

"It's been done before, by idealists and thugs alike. But the important point is that when we picked up Quarn ships on our screens they weren't trying any maneuvers to throw off detectors or give false images. It was a classic ballistic problem they presented to us, and all we had to do was leave Regeln early enough to outmass them. They *wanted* us to escape."

"But look at their maneuvers on that first run against Regeln, the one that ran our people underground. That's all the evidence we need. They're children when it comes to military tactics. The second approach was simple, yes, but it was probably all they could do."

"I don't think so, not if the Quarn are half as intelligent as the rest of our data tells us. So their first attack *did* drive the colonists under—fine. It got all the Regeln population in one place, inside the shelter where whatever techniques the Quarn knew could go to work. What looked like an error was a feint."

"Think. A knowledge of sophisticated tactics is a rather specialized cultural adaptation. For all we know, it may not be very useful in the kind of interstellar war we've just gotten into. The fact that the Quarn don't have it doesn't mean they're inferior. Quite the opposite, probably. Regeln was a trap."

"If it was, we escaped," Tonji said sharply.

"No, Mr. Tonji, we didn't. We're just serving as a convenient transport for what the Quarn want to get into the home worlds—the Regeln survivors."

"But *why*?"

"You know the analogy we use in the Game. Mankind is now, at last, an organism. Interdependent. We're forced to rely on each other because of the complexities of civilization." My own voice sounded strange to me. It was tired and a note of despair had crept in.

"Of course," Tonji said impatiently. "Go on."

"Has it ever occurred to you that once you admit society is like an organism, you admit the possibility of contagious diseases?"

"Quite frankly, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"The survivors. They're enough of a test sample to set it off, apparently. An average crew member spends several hours a day with them, and the continual exposure is enough."

"Why aren't you affected, then? And the men who aren't on the sick list—why don't they have it?"

"Minor variations in personality. And there's something else. I checked. Some of them are from the off-islands, like me. We're different. We didn't grow up with the Game. We learned it later on the mainlands. Maybe that weakens its effect."

He shook his head. "Yes, this tiling the colonists have is different, but..."

"It claws at the mind. It's irrational. We're the product of our ancestors, Mr. Tonji, and these ancestors knew terrors we cannot comprehend. Remember, this is a new psychosis we've found on Regeln, a

combination. Fear of light, heat, heights, open spaces. That last one, agoraphobia, seems strongest. The Quarn have worked on a first-class horror for us, and this convoy is set as the carrier."

"A carrier for a mental disease?" Tonji said contemptuously.

"Yes. But a disorder we've never seen before. An amalgam of the fundamental terrors of man. A collective society has the strength of a rope, because each strand pulls the same way. But it has weaknesses too, *for the same reason*."

The men were watching us, keeping very still. I could hear the thin beeping of monitoring units.. Tonji's skin had a slight greenish cast and his eyes looked back at me impersonally with a cool blackness.

"We're carrying it with us, Tonji. The survivors are striking the same resonant mode with us that the Quarn found in them. The Quarn hit at us through our weaknesses. They're hermits, and they see us more clearly than we see ourselves. Our interdependence, the Game and all of it, communicates the disease."

I noticed that my hand was tightening convulsively on the console at my side. Tonji stood motionless.

"Stop the Jump, Mr. Tonji, and the transmission."

He motioned to an assistant and the Jump was canceled. He stood motionless for a moment, looking at me. Then he took a quick backward step, came to attention and saluted. When he spoke the words were measured carefully and accompanied by that same blank stare.

"Sir, it is my duty to inform you that I must file Duty Officer's Report when your dispatch is transmitted. I invoke Article Twenty-seven."

I froze.

Article Twenty-seven provides that the duty officer may send a counter-argument to the Commander's dispatch when it is transmitted. When he feels the Commander is no longer able to conduct his duties.

"You're wrong, Mr. Tonji," I said slowly. "Taking these survivors—and by now, most of the crew—into a major port will cause more damage than you or I can imagine."

"I have been observing you, sir. I don't think you're capable of making a rational decision about this thing."

"Man, think! What other explanation can there be for what's happening to this ship? You've seen those tapes. Do you think the scraps of information on them are worth the risk of delivery? Do you think *anyone* can get even a coherent sentence out of those lunatics we're carrying?"

He shook his head mutely.

I looked across the dark void between us. He was a man of the East, and I represented the dead and dying. In the histories they wrote, the ideals my ancestors held were called a temporary abnormality, a passing alternative to the communal, the group-centered culture.

Perhaps they were right. But we had met something new out here, and I knew they wouldn't understand it. Perhaps the Americans would have, or the Europeans. But they were gone.

I should have anticipated that the lost phase we all felt would take different forms. Tonji chose ambition above duty, above the ship.

If Fleet upheld him there would be promotions, even though he had used Article Twenty-seven. And I

stood here, bound by rules and precedents. If I made a move to silence Tonji it would count against my case with Fleet. We were on a rigid protocol now that the Article was used, and nothing I could do would stop it.

"Mr. Tonji! You realize, don't you, that one of us will be finished when this is over?"

He turned and looked at me, and for a moment a flash of anticipation crossed his face. He must have hated me for a long time.

"Yes, I've thought of that. And I think I know which one of us it will be."

He didn't finish the sentence aloud. He mouthed it, so only I could see his lips move.

"... *ofkaipan*."

He was right. Fleet wanted to talk to anyone who'd had battle contact with the Quarn, and they weren't ready to wait for a convoy commander with suspicions and a theory. And Tonji, a Mongol, had political contacts.

We lingered in real-space for a week, waiting for the decision, and then jumped. The trial was short.

"Haven't you gone out for your walk yet?" Angela said.

The sound startled me, even though I'd been blocking out the noise of the kids and their viewscreen. She stood in the door of our bedroom a few feet away, the lines of tension still set in the pale yellow cast of her face. I was beginning to think they would never smooth out again. She had been pretty, once.

"I guess I forgot it. Want to go with me?"

She nodded and I got up from the cramped breakfast nook, stacking the papers I still hadn't reviewed.

I cut the corridor lights before we stepped outside our apartment door and we linked hands automatically. I put my right palm on the wall and we inched forward. The terror caught at me, but I fought it down.

"Honestly, I don't see why you're so set against tapping for the children." Her voice was hollow in the darkness. It reflected off the glazed concrete that was close and sheltering. "With all of us at war, any aid to increase education is a godsend. Without it they just fall further and further behind their playmates."

"What playmates? Children don't play anymore. Games take space." We rounded a corner and stumbled on someone who was doubled up on the floor clutching at himself in spasms. From the sound of his breathing I guessed he'd had an attack and couldn't go any further. We edged around him.

"Well, not the same way we did. But they have their games, new ones. You've got to accept the world as it is."

"Accept this crowding? Accept the fear that crushes you whenever you step outside? Accept the fact that a third of the population can't work and we who can—even with our guts twisted up inside—must support them?"

Her hand tightened convulsively on mine. "You know that can't be helped! We're in a... stage of evolution of society. Withdrawal is necessary to achieve greater phase, later."

"And meanwhile the Quarn take one system after another. They've cut us off from most of our raw

materials already and we can't muster the men to stop them. Maybe if we're lucky they'll cut us off from our own lies before all this is over."

"Now *that* is completely unreasonable," she said icily. "It ties in with all your other ideas, like not letting Romana and Chark have tapping."

"Not letting the government tinker around in their minds, you mean, with one of their schemes for increasing the war effort. Let Chark have a brain tap so all he cares about is torch chamber design, say, and will never be happy when he's not doing it. That's right, I won't. Our kids will need every bit of mental balance they have to stay alive as a defeated race, and I don't intend to rob them of it."

We passed by some of the lower-level apartments hastily thrown up by the government for the more severe cases. Whimpering came from the little holes where things that had been human beings were curled up into tight balls, desperately trying to shut out the light, the sounds, all of the awful enormity of sheer open space.

Angela descended into her glacial silence, maintaining only a fingertip touch with me to retain her orientation. The walks didn't seem to do either of us any good any longer, so I suppose there is a limit to their therapeutic value. I had gone about as far as I could go, as one of the original cases, and our small apartment was the largest volume my senses could stand.

Even then, the world wasn't real to me. It was filled with a thousand devious terrors—the accidentally thrown light switch, an unsuspected window in an unfamiliar wall.

Out on the edge of our pitifully shrinking empire, the Fleet played at war with the only toys it knew—guns, ships, beams—while their enemy (and what was he like, to be so wise?) fought with the only ultimate weapons between races: their weaknesses.

I did not feel at home on the Earth any longer. My life lay in dark halls, jammed with people I could understand but whose fears I hated because they were mine as well.

I would welcome the Quarn, when they came. I had been alone a long time.



PART II

No rest or solace,

Black despair and doubt.



I spun.

Spun with aching slowness, so that star points of blue and red and orange seemed to creep across the vision port in front of my helmet. I timed a revolution. It was a measure of the error the *Sasenbo* made when it dropped the capsule out of Jump space.

A rather large error. Probably within Fleet margins, but surely no less an irritant for all that.

It meant that every revolution Lekki's violet disk lanced into my eyes for an instant before the helmet polarizer buzzed on to compensate for the glare. For a few moments everything was blackness except for the dark blue jewel that crawled in a chord across the port and then snapped off again.

But there was compensation. Shortly after Lekki came Veden, wrapped in ivory clouds, eclipsing its moon, filling half the sky. Occasionally I could make out a rough contour of the only continent, Baslin, a dull patch against the brilliant reflected light from the oceans. It all swept by, serene as though in meditation, soundless.

I knew I was falling toward Veden and if the pickup shuttle failed to reach me I would take a long, smooth ellipse down into her. Flame like a coal, fall a cinder. A sacrifice to her regal orbit, marred only by an animal cry of despair at frequencies to which she never listened. Not her, not Veden.

To whom did she pay attention, spinning with ancient purposes? To Lekki, Star of India? Or to the dark mote that raced with frantic energy around the Star of India? Or to the dark mote that raced with frantic energy around the Star, the Neutron Being?

Gods and planets do not speak. She would not say.

"Have you on visual." My suit spoke to me. "If you can drop a little lower I can match in my present trajectory."

I thumbed on my binocs, but without a referent I couldn't pick out the shuttle. I stretched my arms and legs as far as the cylinder allowed—it had about as much room as a clothes closet—and unlocked the jet plates. A slight pressure forward and I could feel the tug of acceleration along my back. I activated attitude control and the rotation stopped. Something had restrained me from halting it before, perhaps the feeling that without it I was entering this sun system naturally, unspoiled, changing nothing. Reborn.

It might be possible, a new beginning. But even as I thought it my critical faculty clicked on again, and I knew that I'd never believed that was the reason I'd accepted the new post on Veden. I would try, yes. But I could not believe that I would succeed.

The shuttle was visible now. It came sliding up from the white rim of the planet as though it were on an invisible wire, sure and swift and impersonal, a black spot against the muted whites and blues of Veden. If it had not been between me and the planet it would have been invisible in the utter black of high vacuum.

I wasn't in orbit around Veden. The *Sasenbo* had popped me out of Jump at a velocity guaranteed to keep me from slicing into the atmosphere for a few hours, but the built-in uncertainties of Jump, plus the economics of making small adjustments in the capsule's exit velocity in real-space, demanded that anything as delicate as an orbital trajectory was out of the question. An officer of my rank wouldn't bother to request one of an ordinary cruiser, much less ask it of the *Sasenbo*, a Fleet Sensor Carrier on its way to the latest site where the Quarn had been seen.

It was a stroke of undeniable luck to get a berth on *Sasenbo* at all immediately after my reappointment. The way the war was going, it sometimes took months to get orders pressed for even the primary Fleet centers. The Empire was a network of processes, coiling and twining through each other, understood in minute parts by an army of clerks and computers. The Quarn had been cutting strands of the web for three years. They picked off colonies deftly, with almost no effort. When Fleet computers war-gamed a probable assault in a particular system, dozens of ships would mass and wait. But the Quarn hit elsewhere.

The solution was seemingly obvious: the computers were operating on false premises. They thought in terms of feints and shifts, subtle balances of power and advantage. Points were assigned to men and ships, bases and colonies. Endless integral equations assessed the economic implication of a given loss—damage to production routines, holdups in transport, loss of raw materials.

The Quarn did not think that way. They were doing something else, and no one could guess the next stop. The Empire was falling apart in a slow-motion, grinding, roiling way. The Plague—for what else could one call the aching agoraphobia that turned a man in upon himself?—was growing, spreading out from Earth along the Jump lanes.

No, the Quarn were bent on something more. Not merely destroying man. Perhaps changing him.

"Your course is adequate." The shuttle pilot's voice came through thinly in the crackle and hiss of my open suit radio. "I'll take care of the final corrections. Secure your attitude control board."

I locked everything back into place and watched the blazing white cylinder grow. I never tired of watching the stately maneuvering of craft in orbit. They move as though some unheard rhythm times them, unperturbed and answerable to no one. The shuttle drifting toward me gave the perfect illusion of freedom. But it was doomed to fall into the boiling sea of air below us and regain its mortality, be weathered and aged even as men are.

The cylinder was maneuvering now with short bursts of gas that momentarily blurred the crisp outlines of Veden behind it, like heat waves on a warm afternoon. I could see the heavy shielding around its communications pod that identified it as an atmospheric craft. The few delicate spines of antennas that it used in orbit would be retracted before the atmosphere could sear them away at entry.

A black rectangle formed in the side and grew. I was falling straight into it. Inside, harsh violet lights winked on and I could see the braking pads standing out from the walls of the pickup port.

Why violet? I blinked my eyes but the afterimage faded very slowly. My polarizers had compensated almost immediately, but the instant of lag had been enough to blind me in one spot of my vision field for more than a minute.

I watched the port grow with my peripheral vision. The shuttle was at least ten times larger than my capsule and it appeared to be outfitted for a variety of tasks. Grapples were tucked under the belly, waldo arms recessed beneath the pilot's slot, and a long thin line ran down its side—from there would come the thin delta wings for skipping along the top of the atmosphere.

"I'm coming in nicely," I said. The violet rectangle grew and filled the port. We hit the pads gently and I heard a faint clank as something wrapped around the outside.

"Contacts register correctly," the pilot said. "Are you familiar with the mechanism for securing—?"

"I'll mention it if I have any trouble," I said. "But why the colored light? It's rather difficult to see in here." I popped the release on the capsule hatch and the violet came flooding in. It would have been unbearable without polarizers. I pushed off gently with my elbows and drifted out of the capsule and up to the ceiling.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I've got the illumination set for Veden surface levels. Switching over to Earth standard."

The violet phosphors died and white ones flared into brilliance above them. Everything was silent, except for the small pings of my suit contracting as I moved. Gently, gently. I remembered my deepspace work of decades past and kept my knees bent, moved slowly and thought out every action.

The elastic cables were fitted into slots near the capsule. I reeled them out and used a suit jet to swing around the capsule in a circle, the line trailing after me. The third cable grip refused to close for a moment when I tried to lock it and I was afraid it had cold-welded in the open position, but after some tapping it shut. The lines restrained any motion of the capsule perpendicular to its axis and two axial rods kept it from sliding out of the cocoon of cables. I checked the job twice. If the capsule with all my luggage in it broke loose when we hit the atmosphere it could go straight through the shuttle's skin.

"All done." I spoke into my suit mike. The blinker over the exit winked twice in confirmation and a panel slid back into place, shutting out the stars. I slipped through the circular exit tube and found it easy going because of the rungs inside. A few twists and turns following the blinkers and I dropped into a flight seat.

"I routed you through to the copilot's spot, sir," the voice said. I turned to my left and saw a small man looking at me across an imposing bulge of hardware. "It's a more comfortable seat than the passenger compartment. The view is better here too."

His skin was jet black. A Negro? But I'd thought none survived the Riot War. Something about the virus blight that swept down out of Europe.

Then I realized the cabin was illuminated in violet and my polarizers had cut in the moment I entered. The pilot's skin must be the muddy tan of the Indians, but my polarizers deepened it to black.

"Lance Officer Shandul, sir." He gave an abbreviated salute. I nodded back.

"This is what the sunlight is like on Veden, Mr. Shandul?" I waved an arm at the phosphors ringing us. "I knew it was weighted in the ultraviolet, but I'm not prepared to take much of this."

"Yes, sir; perhaps I can lower it somewhat. I fear we are not modified to permit Earth illumination levels here in the cockpit, for which I am sorry. Upon reentry we will not need interior lights at all. I can extinguish them in a few moments. I hope it will not be uncomfortable for you then."

"No, no. Just take us down." I looked out the transparent nose of the shuttle for the first time. The horizon was a sharp brittle line dividing the milky swirls of Veden's oceans and clouds from the obsidian depths of nothingness. My polarizers smothered the stars so that the low curve of the planet gave way not to the glimmering sparks of distant life, but to zero, blankness, the fatal cold entropy death. As I watched, Shandul touched a control and the ship rotated slightly. Lekki slid into a corner of my vision screaming to be seen. I glanced at it and it turned white. Careless. I would have a blind spot there for minutes.

I looked down at Veden. ("Down" by training; the antigeo pills were working and even peering straight down at the surface I didn't feel the visceral clench of infinite, terrifying fall.) Now that I knew what her light was like, I thought I could see a tinge of reflected violet in the white of the clouds.

"It will require a few moments to complete recalculation of orbits, sir."

"Why? Aren't we on a one-orbit ellipse?"

"No, sir. The delay in picking you up came from the time necessary for me to complete satellite maintenance."

I frowned. I had thought the wait was a little long. "What kind of maintenance?"

"Micro-meteorite repair for damage to weather observation devices, sir. Also replacement of some failed components. We do not have many opportunities to get this shuttle into orbit of late, so I was ordered to finish all the backlog of work up here."

"Ordered by whom?"

Shandul glanced at me hesitantly. Even through the helmet I could read from his expression that he sensed the possibility of getting into the middle of a dispute between officers, and that was the last thing he wanted.

"First Officer Majumbdahr, sir. We are very poorly supplied with chemical fuels here on Veden and..."

"That's all right." I waved it away. "I merely wondered." I looked away from him, out at Veden, and changed the subject.

"Then you had to finish your other work before meeting my trajectory. How long will it take us to get down?"

Shandul smiled, the brilliant flash of white showing his obvious relief at being free of the matter. "Two hours approximately, sir. We are in an unfortunately difficult position from which to regain the Kalic field in a low pass. Fleet Control is now loading a revised orbital sequence in my autopilot"—he thumped the electronics gear between us—"so when I've verified readout we..."

I kept the same interested expression on my face but stopped listening to Shandul. A technician will ramble on for hours about his specialty and it can be fascinating, but for the moment I wanted to enjoy the view.

Still, he had told me something I hadn't expected. It was natural that a way station planet like Veden would be low on chemical fuels—with a population of twenty-odd million it couldn't have a major industrial base to manufacture them, and at transport cost rates on the Jump, Earth certainly wasn't going to ship fuels out here—but somehow I'd expected Veden to be better off than *this*. Imagine delaying weather satellite repair to save fuel!

It was another reminder of how relatively unimportant Veden was, and therefore of what a low rating it had in Fleet priorities. Yet Fleet Control here needed a Director, so on Earth they had scrubbed through the lists of discarded officers and found me.

Me. Ling Sanjen. Cashiered before the Quarn war was even recognized for what it was, my papers stuck into the dead file, my body dumped into that miserable hole of the Therapy Warrens, to live out what remained of a life with my family.

I wondered where they were now. When their agoraphobia grew worse and mine became inexplicably better, we separated for "medical reasons." I realized I had to, one day when I looked up from the routing schedules that were boring me to distraction, and saw three strangers living with me in the rancid stench of the Warrens. Their eyes were dead to me. I don't think they knew what was happening to them, or even if the particularly cared.

And my wife—Angela?—all that's holy, I was beginning to have trouble remembering her name!

Angela wrapped herself around the children, preferring their dreams and tinsel hopes to my bitterness. Until she lied to me, and then to them, and finally to herself. When she lost that, the inner kernel of honesty, it all began to go quickly.

They moved shortly after, on medical orders, for they were losing control, sliding down the path I knew so well by now. Medical took them to the Slots, as the slang called the building.

I visited them there. Slimy halls with unmentionable gobbets running down the wall, people stacked in like so many lumps of vegetable matter to be tended and noted and, when they died, disposed of. I went to

their slot index. Just three numbers together, each hole large enough for a man to crawl in and crouch. The wall was seven slots high, and they were spaced two steps apart. ,

The hall was one of twenty in the building. It ran for two city blocks.

There were five such buildings in my city. I never had the courage to estimate how many the slots held.

Angela and the children didn't recognize me. They couldn't. By that time they were unable to see.

As I walked out amid the groans and screams and foul drippings, I wondered for the thousandth time: Why am I not with them?

The weakness caught at me, like all the other men on the convoy to Regeln. But for me it passed. I improved. And no one knew why.

Medical division asked a few questions, nodded their heads, and went away. It seemed to confirm something they knew, but what?

A few weeks later I received a reactivation order from Fleet, a skimpy briefing, and in a matter of days I was massing out on the *Sasenbo*.

To a minor post, a spot they had to fill but not with an able fighting man, not with someone who had proven he was fit for the hard cutting edge of combat.

A position good enough for an *ofkaipan*. For Ling Sanjen.

"... so you can probably take some hours of rest if you like, sir." Shandul was looking expectantly at me.

"Uh, how long would you say?"

"At least a few hours. Your velocity was retrograde relative to Veden, so it will require time to get us into a favorable orbit for reentry. I am required to stand watch, but there is no reason for you to remain awake, sir."

I nodded and smiled. I checked my chronometer inside my helmet, still set on *Sasenbo* ship time, and found it was late evening. I felt tired and free fall sleep is far better than sleep in a gee field, even the light point eight four gee of Veden. I also felt a certain tension, an anticipation of the whole new life I could start when I reached the surface.

But wishing wouldn't make the shuttle arrive any sooner.

I meditated for a moment to calm myself and then made a sign to Shandul that I would sleep.

I clenched my muscles tightly and kept my breathing at a slow measured pace. Gradually I let the tightness drain out of me, loosening joints and fibers and threads. My body broke up into pieces, formed a locus of a sphere around me and fell away.

It was a sound like fingernails scraping on metal, shrieking in the narrow confines of the cabin. My suit seemed to amplify it, piling harmonic on harmonic until it ceased to be a noise and became a force.

Abruptly it died away and I realized with a blank that most of the witches' wail had been a dream and the thread was slipping from consciousness. The thin airy whistle that came from all around me was the usual first sign of reentry.

I opened my eyes, stretched and looked out at the fuzzy line of Veden's horizon. It was very high, as though the shuttle's nose was pointing nearly straight down at the surface.

"Aren't we going in a little steeply?" I asked.

"Ah, you have awakened, sir. But I fear I do not understand your question."

"I thought we were going to dip in along the top of the atmosphere, like skipping a rock across water. It looks like we're almost falling into it."

"Oh. We have been decelerating for some time and are now into the gliding entry. The angle relative to local horizontal is probably somewhat larger than you have experienced on other planets, sir, because we have lighter gravity here. Our atmosphere is spread out to a larger radius." Shandul looked a little smug at being able to lecture me.

But he was right, of course. Veden's light gee pull meant the atmosphere wasn't pressed down as much and atmospheric pressure didn't fall off as rapidly, so it was "softer" at the top.

It was a small matter but it pointed up the fact that I would have to watch myself here, learn new reflexes, be more careful for the first few months. I'd never been to a low mass planet before—for a variety of reasons involving gas capture, tidal effects and the thousand other accidents that must occur to produce a livable planet, a mass much lower than Earth's isn't likely to be hospitable to man, so you don't get to see many of them—and Veden's was only point six Earth masses.

I felt the tug of more acceleration and the high, tearing whine of scorched wind rose. The computer output stuttered next to my left elbow and Shandul glanced at the display screen briefly to confirm that he was still, on path. The seat shuttered beneath me and I felt a slight tilting away from "down."

Clouds like frozen custard slid by below and through some scattered holes I could begin to make out topography. I knew the dots of ivory ice caps that rested at the poles, smothered in snow clouds, were over the curved rim of Veden at this low an altitude, and below the large lazy oceans would give me nothing to see. But we should be falling toward the single continent by now, intuition told me. It was over three thousand miles long, a great rectangular splotch, almost the only dry land on the planet. I craned to see it.

We were falling faster now and occasionally the rockets would speak with a short snarl to slow us. Abruptly we fell through what looked to be a high altitude stream formation and below, fat, bunched clouds like cushions were scattered over the sharply cut coastline of Baslin, mother continent of New India.

It was raw. The battered coast gave way to mountains that lanced into the interior. A giant had stamped down the edges of Baslin and pulled out the middle, for now a plateau rose in the center and sent down winding fingers of rivers that carved and slashed at its edges, forming narrow valleys. It was a work uncompleted, a stone forgotten when the sculptor walked away and threw his tools into the empty seas.

I watched the lowlands as they enlarged and fell away behind us. Shandul was resting comfortably at the controls with all his concentration focused on the verifying displays from Fleet Control in Kalic. The bucking and tremors that shook me passed through him like a wave, never diverting his attention. The dull thunder as we fell prevented most conversation and I didn't try to force one. Below, the plateau was approaching. Every human on Veden lived on it, drank from its rivers, peered over the edge into the boiling chaos of the lowlands.

"Parachute going out," Shandul said. The sharp crack of the ejection snapped me forward against my

restraining belts. Parachute? Dissipating velocity with a chute was efficient, but most prosperous areas didn't take the trouble.

We were above the plateau now and I caught fields of intense magentas and yellows among the riot of jungle. We were falling along a river valley that was a holiday patchwork against the slate gray peaks that jutted up and tore the clouds.

The shuttle seemed to be drifting steadily down, gyros correcting smoothly for the turbulence. The rear TV showed a slight wake, but no orange blur of ionized gases—that had vanished with the use of non-charring heat shields. I studied the land below with the vision hood down over the scope, but the color washed out details.

Below, the river writhed and I suddenly recognized it: Tankjor, the torrent that bled Baslin's major lake, The Lapis. And on the shores of those quiet waters was Kalic, our destination, capital of Baslin and thus Veden.

We hit an air pocket that seemed to have no bottom and I felt a sudden wave of nausea snatch at me. I was losing my nogee equilibrium. Guiding rockets fired in synchronization with dull slapping thumps that rattled my teeth. We banked slowly.

Ahead, fractured purple and green winked from The Lapis and the rigid sprawl of Kalic's streets fanned out to greet me as we adjusted and dropped into a low, comfortable glide. Lekki broke from behind a virginal white cloud as we cleared the stony margin of the last peak.

A great gray expanse loomed ahead and Shandul made a slight correction. The ship dropped like a sack of sand again and colors tumbled off to my side as we turned for final approach. I looked outside.

Glimpse of tranquil sky framed by mountains. Quiet drifting feeling. The shuttle jarred, rumbled at me and we were rolling on our landing gear, land animals again, slaves of gravity.

The shuttle coasted up to a wing of a long low building at the edge of the gray field. I could make out a mass of men standing in formation and as we drew nearer they separated into three squares with a delegation out front, all casting long shadows in the late afternoon.

"Very good, Mr. Shandul," I said as we braked to a halt. A stubby cart swung alongside us to spray the hull with water and instantly the scene outside vanished in a swirl of steam.

"Thank you, sir. If you'll exit through the side—" He gestured to a port that slid open. I stepped through and out onto a platform. I reached up and opened my suit to external pressure and a wave of music burst over me. It was a long, solemn dirge of some complexity, but it grated my teeth. More appropriate to a wake, perhaps. Or it might be a subtle indication of how the staff felt about their new *ofkaipan* Director.

"Greetings, sir!" an officer called at my elbow and the troops in formation snapped into a salute. I tried to make my replying salute as clipped and neat as possible, but the suit was a hindrance.

"Mr. Majumbdahr," I said, "your men look very well turned out." It was easy to recognize his long jaw line and elaborately curled hair from the personnel records I'd studied on the *Sasenbo*. I turned to the next man, shorter and obviously a purebred Hindie.

"My compliments to you as well, Mr. Gharma. I believe Mr. Shandul is under your command—he handled his ship nicely on the trip down."

All through this my polarizers were clicking madly off and on as I turned at angles to the direct violet glare of Lekki, which was setting on the horizon.

"If I can get this off, I can review the troops," I said, reaching for my helmet.

Majumbdahr gestured to stop me. "Sir, this light may be harmful to your eyes. We've shortened the ceremony to allow for this. A few more minutes and we can escort you inside, where it will be more comfortable."

I frowned, but said nothing. The band, which I'd just located, was standing on a direct line between the platform and Lekki, and it had just started into a slightly brisker tune, heavy on cymbals and drums. Probably the Veden anthem. I stood still until it was over, returned a last salute and followed Gharma and Majumbdahr down the ramp to the field. We walked along a roped-off path in front of the troops with an appropriately regal silence and entered the Fleet Control building.

Inside there was a medical party waiting for me.

"I should think, Mr. Majumbdahr, that a review of the troops is standard for the introduction of a new Fleet Control Director."

An officer with surgeon's insignia raised his hand. "I believe Mr. Majumbdahr was acting on a request by me, sir. We received word that you had not been acclimatized to Veden, due to the shortness of time. I feared exposure to Lekki without your polarizers would damage your retinal tissue." As he spoke our party walked along a dimly lit corridor. I felt awkward and irritated, dragging along the suit.

He turned to the rest of them outside a doorway—I noticed his name plate read Imirinichin—and said, "I believe we can fit contact filters for you, sir, without the rest of the Control staff following us around. If you please?"

"Yes, surely." I waved a hand and they broke up. Majumbdahr and Gharma, my two Executive Officers, took chairs in a waiting room across the hall. Imirinichin and I went in the doorway and suddenly the world brightened for me. It was an ordinary office except for a few specialized instruments on one wall. I turned to see Imirinichin, a lean man with the slow smile and wrinkled eyes of one who jests well, putting on goggles.

"The light in here is adjusted to be comfortable for you, and tolerable for me if I wear these. If you'll sit in that chair—"

A nurse came in wearing the same goggles, her slimness molding the uniform she wore more than I would have believed possible, and helped me lower my bulk into place. She expertly unfastened my helmet. In a moment I was free of the suit and no longer feeling like a turtle caught in a sand pit. She lowered a cantilevered mask over my face, fitted twin cylinders to my eyes with infinite care and flipped a switch.

The room went dark, as nearly as I could tell with my eyes almost covered, and a competent hum came from the apparatus around me. In a moment the computer had finished measuring my cornea, making inquiries of my retinal cells, musing over the patterns of red blood vessels, and switched itself off. The mask came away.

"You see, sir," Imirinichin said from a comfortable red office chair opposite me, "Veden is unusual in many ways. The first thing a newcomer notices is the high ultraviolet content of Lekki. Exposure to it will burn out a man's retinal tissue in a few days. There's infrared in intensities sufficient to keep the planet's ecological processes going—photosynthesis and so forth—but the atmosphere can't filter out enough of the violet to make it comfortable for eyes that were developed in the green jungles of Earth."

"So what do I do?" I should have expected something of the sort as soon as I popped out of Jump space and saw Lekki.

"Well, it's no problem—your contacts are being made up now. You've had experience wearing ordinary contact lenses before?"

I blinked and popped my two lenses out into my hand. Like ninety percent of the human race, I wore them. (Interesting: humanitarian though universal medical care may be, the bad genes that lived because of it insure that not one human in ten could survive in the droughted Africa where the race was born, from defective eyesight alone.)

"Good." He found a small box for them and nodded at the nurse. "I think the new ones should be ready now." A chime rang as he said it.

I watched the nurse bend over and take a small machine-wrapped package out of a chute transport slot. In a moment tears were running down my face as I tried to fit in contacts that nearly covered my entire cornea.

"They must be that large, sir, to protect the entire eye," Imirinichin said. "Contact filters are a rather specialized branch of photoplastic engineering, and these were developed here on Veden by the original colonists over two hundred years ago. Without them, we'd all be blind."

I struggled with the contact filters a few more minutes—it was surprising how quickly they seemed comfortable to me—and looked up to find the room bathed in a dusky twilight. With the contacts in almost all the spectrum as seen on Earth was filtered out. If this was what Imirinichin saw, he was nearly blind in this room.

"No, I am even worse off than you," he said when I asked him. "I'm adapted. People who plan to become permanent inhabitants—and that's almost everyone on Veden, for there is little commerce with other systems these days—have their retinal patterns and cells altered to accommodate Lekki's spectrum. The alteration is much more comfortable than the contacts you're wearing.

"I'm able to get around this office because I'm familiar with it. It's been mine for forty years. But as I sit here, looking at you, only a vague outline comes though." He smiled. "Let me switch back to the usual phosphors."

When the banded patterns of light flared on I could see again clearly. Imirinichin and the girl took off their strange goggles.

"We wear these shields to prevent the high infrared of Sol light from burning *us*," he said, walking around to his desk. "But I'm afraid you'll not enjoy the advantage of a skin morphology. I take it you are here on a rotating assignment?"

I nodded. I couldn't hope to be kept in service after what the Council called the "current crisis" was over. If it was ever over.

"Then skin treatments to make prolonged exposure to Lekki possible are not favored for you. They are usually irreversible. Once you had the treatments you could not live anywhere near a G-sequence star."

"You have had one, then?"

He nodded and gestured light at the girl, who was bent over me, studying the fit of my contacts through a flash blinker. "We all do, those of us who are natives. But you, sir, will have to wear the more formal Fleet uniform designed for Veden. It covers you nearly completely. I'll have some sent round in the morning."

The blinker stopped and the girl nodded prettily. The entire time I had been in the room she had not let a

word pass her lips. When the fluttering yellow afterimage had faded I looked around to test my vision.

"Everything seems normal," I said, "but the colors..."

He chewed his lip and looked a bit chagrined. "Yes, there's that. We can't obtain a complete compensation over the entire spectrum, so colors will be shifted and changed for you. I hope it will not be of great inconvenience to you, sir."

"No, I'll adjust." I stood up and looked briefly at both of them. It was going to be quite a change. "I believe my Executive Officers are waiting outside."

Gharma came toward me, his smile flashing brilliantly against chestnut brown skin pocked with the large pores of the Hindic. He was a heavysset man with dark hair and eyes that expanded a fraction just before he spoke, as though the words were going to explode out of him. We exchanged pleasantries about my contacts. He curled his words out lazily and yet precisely for the inspection of the listener.

Majumbdahr followed him, taller and with the slightly slanted eyes and lighter complexion that spoke of his mixed ancestry. "It's after normal working hours," he said. "I don't think a tour of the Fleet Authority offices would be particularly useful for you today, sir."

"I presume you've gathered the usual summary for my review?"

He smiled. "Certainly. Do you want to read them on your first evening on Veden?"

"I thought I might. It was a tiring trip. I will probably want to sleep. Where are my offices?"

Gharma motioned to an elevator. "The staff are probably gone by now." We rode up seven floors and emerged in an ornately styled warren of carpeted rooms walled with imposing bookshelves in something like leather and wood, but with a raw orange cast that signified their native origin. I made a note to find out what they were; materials like them were rare on Earth. My suite was varied: chart rooms crammed with orbital simulation displays and direct readout screens; space for secretaries and aides; conference chambers with more of the leather and wood; a private communications link that could override the Control facilities in an emergency; files of tape and film; and lastly my office, hushed in soft textures and tones, space for pacing or thought or meditation, an enormous desk—wood again—with every conceivable aid built into it. It overlooked the field, and a line of forest beyond that underlined the wavering wink of Kalic's city lights in the distance. Dusk was ending and black fingers cloaked the field as I watched a steady line of cars wind away.

"The summary, sir," Majumbdahr said. I took the case with a large red *Priority* seal on it and tucked it under my arm as we went out.

"Your quarters are some distance," Gharma said. "I believe Mr. Majumbdahr has taken care of preparations there."

"Fine," I said, my voice echoing in the elevator as we went down. "I would like to see both of you gentlemen tomorrow morning, nine hundred hours. We'll have quite a bit to talk over."

Gharma said good night and Majumbdahr led me out the front entrance. It was a rather impressively delicate structure, curved lattices supported by columns and cantilevered beams of rakish tilts that would have been impossible in heavier gravities. Everywhere curves; no angles, no sharpness or sudden contrast to jar the eye. A man's voice reflecting back from the building carried the (tinkling) sound of hidden laughter.

Majumbdahr pushed the car's throttle forward and we pulled out smoothly. Steam cars fueled with low-grade hydrocarbons are prevalent in the colonies; they haven't been seen on Earth for a century or more, owing to the depletion of the oil reserves. We slipped easily into thin traffic of the same type vehicles and weaved through broad boulevards without important conversation. I wanted the chance to see the city, and generally I was impressed. It had an air of quiet and tranquility that was becoming quite rare on Earth, and Majumbdahr himself had none of the hidden panic I'd lived with in the men of the *Sasenbo*. He obviously knew how the war was going—everyone down to the middle administrative levels of Fleet did—but it didn't trouble him, and it never entered our conversation.

We turned onto what appeared to be country roads and in a few minutes were gliding into the long shadow of a hill. Through the yellows and greens of low brush, the plants themselves now indistinct, I could see the dull blue winking of water.

"Your home has The Lapis at its doorstep," Majumbdahr said. "Lekki rises directly across the lake most of the year. We usually get a fog in early evening, but sunrise burns it off."

Fleet found it good policy to house their primary officers in the best residential districts in the colonies. That established their social class and made for easy relations with civilians at the top of the local governments. It was easy to see Veden fit the rule.

The house was a faint blur high up the hill, its soft light filtered through slender ferns and a trace of gathering mist. We purred up the driveway and stopped at the base of a ramp. Something fluttered low over our heads, gliding silently as a wisp of fog, and lit in a fern. It warbled a high singsong call and was answered from somewhere down by the lake, a sad note that drifted up through the gathering wetness in the air.

The house had a look of softened aluminum and tile and blackened enamel. Its roof floated high above visible support and symmetric rectangular blocks of warm light reached out to gather the forest around it like a blanket. The fog was rolling in over it now, bringing a faint trace of body and flavor to the air.

The thick door was opened by a small brown man with a touch of gravity in his manner. Patil, the houseboy, I learned, was an honored domestic of many years service. He was quiet and efficient and had us seated within a moment by an open fire (burning wood!) with sweating drinks in our hands. He introduced Jamilla, a woman of indeterminant age with smooth skin and a look of playfulness about her: my second rank domestic, cook and bedchamber girl. Majumbdahr explained that although Veden was infrequently visited, the normal formalities and liberties common to the Empire were the custom here too, and I should not have difficulty in adjusting.

We walked onto a stone platform that jutted out from the house to meet the tops of trees that grew from below. I was still wearing my Spartan coverall that was standard gear with space suits.

"Patil will dress you in the Fleet uniform appropriate to Veden on the morrow," Majumbdahr said. He looked at me curiously, as if trying to understand this strange new Director who demanded the official Summary in his first hour on the planet, and showed no indication of interest in meeting other officers his first evening.

A small creature, something like a mouse with bat wings and furry topknot, coasted in through layers of fog and landed on my shoulders. I picked him up on a finger and saw his wings were translucent and covered with fine pearly drops of moisture.

"An air squirrel," Majumbdahr said. "Scavengers, if you let them be. They're really too friendly for their own good."

"There seems to be much flying life here." I listened to the beat of wings above us and the faint high cries of pursuit.

"Low gravity. We have not been harmful to most of the forms, so they do not resettle on other parts of Baslin."

"Why couldn't they migrate to the lowlands and leave the plateau to men?"

He smiled. "The same reason we do not live there. Between Lekki and the Black Dwarf, both of them with mass greater than Sol, Veden is subject to large tidal forces. The winds and heat of the lowlands are too variable and totally, unpredictable. Up here on the plateau we know the prevailing winds—always inward, from the sea. The flying animals do too. They couldn't survive in eighty mile gales any better than we."

He took the air squirrel from my finger, coaxed it with a crumb from his pocket and threw the bread up into the air. The animal leaped, caught it with a snap and coasted away on an updraft. I looked at Majumbdahr and decided I liked him. Which was well, for if I followed my plan he would be one of the few Vedens I would know.

We said our ritual farewells and I finished my inspection of my home, Patil and Jamilla following at a discreet distance and seeming pleased when I approved. I exchanged pleasantries with them, saw that my belongings from the shuttle were stored properly and had Patil lay out my bedclothes.

A warm bath braced me and shortly afterward I sprawled on my bed and cracked the seal on my case.

I studied the Situation Report from Fleet Headquarters first. This was what I'd been waiting weeks and months to see. As a passenger on the *Sasenbo* I'd heard rumors and gossip but no reliable hard information about the war, but now as a Director, no matter how low, I was entitled to know.

Siganex IV had fallen. The same pattern again as on Regeln: a tactical fent by the Quarn, the Plague descending, death and chaos. There was a three-dimensional star chart included showing the new boundaries of the Empire and probable points for the next Quarn attack. It was a shock. The last such display I had seen was shortly after Regeln, and the pitiful collapsed ball I saw now was a fraction of the Empire then. Several isolated outposts had been taken in the last few weeks, I noted, and the pinpoint lights which indicated Fleet's dispersal of ships were asymmetric, off balance and obviously unable to coherently defend the contracting boundaries.

I thumbed for a closeup on my flatpad display device and the region around Lekki and the Black Dwarf leaped into focus. There were few neighbors. The red star Elaren blazed down on a small radioactive ferrite extracting mission fourteen lights out. Beyond that were a few other temporary expeditions on inhospitable worlds, there for limited scientific or economic purposes. The nearest full status colony, larger even than Veden, was Calning, in orbit around a massive gas giant of a planet that in turn circled an F9 star. None of these had detected Quarn. The nearest contact was seventy-eight lights out, a very recent sighting only seven lights from the massive colony and base at Beta Hydri. The Quarn appeared to be trying to pinch the Empire's sphere into two irregular volumes of human-occupied space. But if past experience was any help, this pattern was as much the product of the Quarn's irregular tactics and seemingly random strikes as anything else.

That was the point: the fact that Veden was buried deep in the remaining Empire volume was no insurance that Quarn would not appear here tomorrow. This was an arbitrary war, not played according to the traditional game psychology of Fleet's computers. As yet no one knew how or even why the Quarn took a planet. Or what could stop them.

So Veden wasn't safe. I would have to oversee the steady rain of transferring ships dropping out of Jump space, looping around the dwarf and off to some new destination with only a brief burst of news as greetings—oversee it all, keep the Jump ships and ancient ramscoops moving, while watching over my shoulder to see if the Quarn had suddenly winked into existence behind me.

I picked up the Local Situation Report and then tossed it aside. Gharma and Majumbdahr could brief me on that tomorrow. I was hungry for more details about the Quarn but the terse Fleet dispatch wasn't giving anything away that it didn't have to. ,

Next came the Local Personnel file. I checked the names and positions that interested me and the small piezoelectric monitor beamed a request back to the computer sitting under my offices. In a moment it gave a squeal that meant the required information was logged into its ferrite memory and I cradled the flatpad on my knees, flexed my back, which was becoming accustomed to significant gravities again, and started to read.

Mahesh Majumbdahr, age forty-seven Earth years, six feet two inches (same as myself), hair black, eyes black, born Earth (I raised my eyebrows at that) to Mainland parents of low stock; parents emigrated when he was five, settled on Veden. Attended usual series: primary, technical, sensitivity and arts, showed proficiency in athletics and played *odeynsn* professionally for four years, enjoyed some fame as writer of haiku, joined Fleet at age twenty-five. Security cleared maximum for Lekki system. Married on long term contract, terminated three years ago with mutual consent.

There was much more relating to his professional career, and I absorbed it automatically. But what I was after was more than the raw facts of the man: I needed to know him, what bias he had, how well he could work on a closely personal basis. Most of that can only be judged by intuition.

Lapanthul Gharma, age fifty-two Earth years, six feet even, hair brown, eyes green, descendant of three generations native to Veden, considered high caste (this last a recent entry; perhaps caste was only lately added as relevant data?) and of high standing in local sect (unnamed). Parents both of notable rank; father recently retired from political circles to devote his time to meditation and enlightenment (hand-written note: rumored he was forced out in power play by agricultural interests). Entered Fleet service at age twenty-one and declared for commission two years later. (No known other interests.) Same security clearance. Married permanently. (Interesting. Quite rare.)

I went down the list of other staff members, some of them unusual, others dull as dirt. Strange what Personnel will think relevant and stick in a man's file. Read several accounts of illicit affairs and resultant difficulties, none of them bearing even slightly on Fleet business or security reliability, then chucked it aside. No time for gossip. (Not much, anyway.)

With surprise I felt a touch of hunger. I sounded a chime over my bed and Jamilla came in with lowered eyes, took my request for fruit and padded quietly out.

I leaned back and thought about my two Executive Officers. Gharma seemed more steady, but less fond of the spark of a new idea. Majumbdahr might make a better friend, if that was what I was after.

And maybe I was. I had decided on the *Sasenbo* to save my time on Veden, not become tangled in the thousand loose ends of a military command. There was only one way to do that: find a core of men you could trust and let them make a lot of the decisions. Gharma and Majumbdahr were going to be the core. It had to be more than the usual delegation of authority—every officer knows he must release some of his hold or hell end up ordering his paper clips—and I would have to play it by ear.

I needed time. Fleet was finished; not for me the plugging of holes in a crumbling dike.

I had lost everything, been cast out. There was no joy left for me in Sabal, in the warm knit that held me since I was a boy. I had to find something more. Veden was the spiritual center of the Hindic minority, a small fragment of the Empire that rejected the Mongol culture as well as it could. Perhaps they had something for me here. If not, I had accepted the commission under false hopes and might as well be back in the Slots.

The Hindic and the Quarn. I felt a tension between the two. Veden was at least still human. The Quarn held all the mystery and hope of the unknown.

Jamilla entered with a bowl of cylindrical fruit and a snifter of red liquid. The fruit was tough at first but after a moment's chewing released juices with the flavor of warm almonds. The drink was a clashing of the tang of oranges with a smooth background like apricot nectar that somehow resolved itself and quenched my thirst.

I caught Jamilla studying me with interest. No more than a fraction of the people here were Mongol in descent, and certainly she had seen few Polynesians such as me. I supposed my lighter hair and thin beard (a gene of the Caucasoids, that) were unusual, but...

Normal formalities and liberties, Majumbdahr had said. I raised an eyebrow in speculation. It had been a long time.

I finished eating, put the tray aside and made a formal sign understood throughout the Empire.

Jamilla smiled and unfastened the brass buckle at her side. Her sansari was a wisp of cloth wound into expert folds over her slim body. Watching her gracefully remove it was an entertainment. She came into bed with the good taste not to extinguish the rights as she entered. She was a scent as sweet as the wind.

In the morning Patil aided me in fitting my Fleet Kochu robes. They were designed to cover the wearer against Lekki's ultraviolet, and were robes only by convention for they retained pants and vest. The only addition was a cowl that rode on the back of my neck and could be slipped over to shade my face.

My contact filters flushed the morning with an orange tinge even though Lekki's violet dot threw shattered light up to me from The Lapis. The water traced a pencil line of horizon across two-thirds of the view from my home and I could see the current ripples as the triple tides of Lekki, the Dwarf and Pincter, Veden's moon, pulled at the lake. The beach a hundred meters below was a broad white plain worn smooth by the hissing waves.

All this I saw while blinking the contacts into place and walking down the ramp to my staff car. The driver saluted, and with a slight piping of steam we went down into the world of men.

Our route skirted the capital. I noted that the thin towers in the distance did not swirl in a dank layer of brown hydrocarbons, as some, industrial colonies still did—principally those with antiquated ideas of "free choice." It was a hopeful sign.

I wasted an hour in the unavoidable preliminaries in my new offices; nodding at secretaries, exchanging ritual salutes with second and third rank administrators, accepting a traditional welcoming gift of burnished rice and layered spices (take one mouthful, then offer it to the troops). Then to the main conference room, filled with twenty staff workers. Their eyes widened slightly as I sent them all on detailed, eminently defensible tail-chasing jobs that would take days or weeks to complete. Correlate fluctuations in rice crop and number of ships passing through the Flinger; compile composite history of all minority economic alternatives used on Veden which had applicability to Empire economy; detail origin of more recent sects (this I could actually use); each division prepare reports, sharpen up training schedule,

stipulate defense capability, justify all current supply levels. The orders were a compendium of jargon and catchphrases, but it accomplished the result: keep them busy, get them out of the room. When only Majumbdahr and Gharma remained I relaxed.

"Now tell me about Baslin. What are the people thinking?"

"Not very much thinking is being done," said Majumbdahr slowly. "There's a great deal of reacting, though."

"How do you mean?"

"They're confused. The reports from the colonies further out haven't been precisely encouraging."

"Are you sure this isn't simply what you've been hearing from the population of Kalic? On Earth the city populations are breaking down much faster than the rural areas."

"Even on Veden, sir," Gharma broke in, "there are not substantial numbers living among the jungles. They are not a significant group."

"Why aren't they spread out?"

"You haven't seen Kalic yet," Majumbdahr said. "Veden isn't like the other colony worlds—the Mongol cluster-home isn't popular here."

Gharma gestured with his hands as if a flower were unfolding. "Our cities are as pods on a quasimakas plant, spaced to insure adequate sunlight and full growth. The openness of the growthlands is always with us. To live otherwise is..." He stopped awkwardly, realizing that he had almost implied a criticism of the Mongol aesthetics, to which presumably I would subscribe.

I gave him a soft smile. "I quite understand. The same principles once held even on Earth. Necessities of population changes these things." I turned to Majumbdahr. "I take it you feel even the citizens of Kalic and the other outlying cities are not truly in what the Empire would regard as an urban environment?"

"Yes, as far as I understand Fleet's analysis."

"I think it is certainly true, sir," Gharma said. "Veden is much more stable because of it."

Majumbdahr looked at him a little sourly. "I wonder about that."

I glanced a question.

"Well, sir," he said quickly, bringing his hands together on the opaque gray of the conference table. "I don't like the feeling that's running through Kalic. I wasn't born here, but I think I have a good grasp of the gestalt. People are seething inside. It hasn't come out yet, but it will."

Gharma shook his head. "As you may see, sir, we have talked of this before."

"Natural enough. In the absence of a Director you were responsible for knowledge of the political side. It's an open secret that Fleet is now relying more on its reports from Directors than the official opinion given by the Embassies."

Gharma blinked rapidly. "Oh no, I'm afraid you do not understand. This is not a political matter at all. We are speaking here of the tranquility and enlightenment of the people."

I nodded, silently pleased. They were both showing a sensitivity that might easily have been drilled out of

them , by now, in Fleet. I couldn't use men who thought like political hacks, glutted with details and trivia, statistics and polls, afflicted with a ward heeler's smug myopia, stuttering out data.

"Of course." Majumbdahr waved the comment away with rough hands too large for the rest of his body. "But sit in the temples, Lapanthul"—side glance to me—"Mr. Gharma. They're stirring. Their meditation is not enough."

"Is that true, Lapanthul?" I said.

"I do not *feel* that it is—and that is the final test. But I am not quite as, ah, basic as Mahesh. I do not move in quite the same spheres as he."

Majumbdahr settled back in his formed plastic chair. "What he means is that his sect is very high in caste, and mine lies somewhere in the middle." He grinned. "It gives one a different slant, I'd imagine."

"Caste? I'd thought..."

Gharma cleared his throat. "Yes, it does exist on Veden. We all know the Empire has no such thing, but I have heard that we are not alone—other colonies, and not Hindic in origin, have caste, or something like it." He said this with the somewhat stiff and defiant air of a man confessing a minor but habitual vice. "But *caste*. The term..."

"Historically it was an evil thing," Majumbdahr said. "The choice of word is unfortunate. I've always held it should be something like 'station.'" With this he glanced up at Gharma. "But the social conventions favored the traditional term. It does not have the same connotation as in Old India."

Gharma smiled brilliantly. "He means to say, *not yet*. Mahesh thinks we're headed that way, nonetheless."

I realized that they were good friends, despite their differences. There was a warmth in their argument, as though it were an old shoe they felt comfortable wearing.

"All right, so there's caste," I said, sighing slightly. There was something about this conversation, a sort of agonizing slowness to converge on the point that may have been just the Hindic way of doing things. I was going to have to get used to a more indirect approach. "It would seem that by traditional sociological principles that would make Vedens more secure, happier with their place. But that's no help. People throughout the Empire were contented, they hadn't lost phase. But I've seen all of them struck down by the Plague. They had no defense."

Gharma looked suddenly sadder. "We know that. I don't understand how it could happen, when—"

"Have you had any cases here yet?"

Both of them looked slightly startled, as though the thought hadn't occurred to them that Veden was vulnerable. "Nothing has been reported—" Gharma started.

"Do you know how to recognize the symptoms? Has Fleet sent through instructional information, case histories?"

"Yes, a little. I have read it myself. It is difficult to believe." Gharma shook his head slowly, as if realizing for the first time that the Plague was real and not just the abstract subject of a series of dispatches.

"Break out all the material you have on the Plague," I said. "Form up classes from personnel not on essential duty. Get space in the civilian press for full coverage: how to spot the symptoms, first signs that

you may be getting it yourself, treatment, history, the works. You've delayed on this too long. Veden isn't an exception—the Plague will hit here, eventually, and we've *got* to be prepared." I banged my fist down on the table.

Gharma got up and went over to a wall communicator, spoke into it in a whisper and returned. "Done," he said softly.

How could they have let it go? It was one thing to be bottled up on this outpost, watching the ships flash through the Flinger but seldom having one land—and quite another to forget about defending the planet.

"I take it these measures are of some use against the Plague?" Majumbdahr asked.

"Perhaps, perhaps," I said, distracted. Did they know how much I'd been through? Forget it; no time to worry. "They seem to slow it down and sometimes keep the people alive. That's all we know, but it's enough."

"I think the people probably know more than you'd think, Lapanthul," Majumbdahr said. "There have been numerous news services' reports, 3D programs. Not much, to be sure"—he glanced at me to show that he knew as well as anyone about Fleet censorship—"but I think they may be prepared for it, the Plague, when it comes. Giving them the complete facts will make it easier—fear comes from the unknown, not the known. That's why they're in the streets-fear."

"The streets?" I asked.

"Civil disturbances," Gharma said earnestly. "A few, and quickly contained."

"What about?"

"Fleet movements aren't well-kept secrets," Majumbdahr said. "A lot of civilians work in Communications, so they know there isn't a respectable Task Force near this system. If the Quarn hit us we'd stand alone, with just a few ships." Gharma nodded. "I don't think they realize quite that they *are* afraid. The violence is so undirected—"

"Reporting, sir!" It was an official Fleet secretary I'd sent on a makework assignment an hour ago. "Fleet vessel *LS. Colon* has passed formal recognition procedures after emerging from Jump space and requests final orbital check for her Flicker orbit."

A mass of jargon that meant I had to give my final meaningless approval of an orbit already programmed for the ship. The *L.S. Caton* had been locked into the course ever since it popped out of Jump space several days ago, but the ancient formalities of the Port Master had to be observed.

"Granted," I said. "I'd like to observe the looping if possible."

"That will be this afternoon," Majumbdahr said. "I'm sure Control would welcome a visiting inspection, sir."

I nodded, restless. I really didn't give a damn about Fleet business any longer; I wanted to see Veden, meet the myriad sounds and smells of a new world, not sit in this office.

"Mr. Majumbdahr! Do you think you could find a suitable restaurant in Kalic for lunch?" I said.

He smiled as though he sensed my' impatience. I gave Gharma a sharp salute of dismissal and in a moment we were out, away, free, my long official limousine moving like a whale among the thin schools of stubby personal cars on the highway.

The avenues were incredibly broad, so that even in heavy traffic we moved quickly. Ferns lined the boulevards and great clusters of iridescent blossoms hung over us. Even when we entered the city there was no sudden laying on of man's hand; I could glimpse the flutter of walls and of the ferns, but the bare baked quality of a city open to the air was missing.

Everywhere there was color. Magenta fronds, tangled snake vines of chilled deep green, the impersonal dulled tan of the highway; and all crowned by a clear sky of even blue. The colors reminded me of my contact filters and I blinked rapidly a few times. They were occasionally uncomfortable.

Vegetation thinned and the curving slopes of buildings flowed down to the highway. None of them fronted on the traffic, evidently to avoid exposing their visitors to any more noise than was necessary.

The driver found an official ramp and parked. Majumbdahr and I left the limousine and took an express lift down to the commercial streets below and then across three blocks diagonally. We emerged on a large square bustling with the noonday rush, the clicking of hundreds of sandals, the murmur of conversation as knots of friends drifted past.

The shops that lined the tiled walkways were fairly small, most of them, and displayed their wares with abandon, letting robes spill from their holders; beads and books piled together in the display cases; fruits and spices competed for the same spot in a window. There was a cheerful easiness about it, and the people were the same: talking, laughing, greeting the price of items with a feigned sharp bark of disbelief.

We cut across the square with Lekki straight overhead, burning a hole in heaven. A few men and women, clad in raiments of vaguely religious tones, were speaking to the passersby of their mission in life, advising them of the benefits that accrued to anyone of their chosen faith. But not pushing it, not with the intense drive of the cultists I had seen on Earth. There was a relaxed air here.

Five of the women in a circle chanted:

"I am

Not great or small

But only

Part of All."

We turned into a narrow street, almost an alley, that was the exact opposite of the clean, broad streets I'd seen. Here the even sheet of plastiform street changed into a bumpy track of black cobblestone that wound among shops which were themselves irregular in pitch and structure. Some huddled together and others sprawled out, but all were busy with people buying and selling, bartering in, high-pitched tones, inspecting the goods, eyeing the shopkeepers. It was like a page of history. I recognized emblems and signets of Old India, some even dating from before the Riot War.

"This is part of the 'reconstructed' district," Majumbdahr said, "devoted to retaining the atmosphere of the Hindic past. Much of it is honest and true to the original. Those rice bins"—he gestured at an enormous tub with an indecipherable scrawl in red on the side—"contain pure strains a gourmet would have recognized even in Old India. They're kept in controlled environments so the Veden ecology doesn't alter them even slightly."

"All this to retain the old ways?"

"The flavor of the past keeps us in touch with our roots. These things, these crafts and methods"—he motioned about us—"were part of the Rebirth of the Hindic people after the Riot War. It is well to keep them. They might be useful even again."

I looked at him curiously, wondering if he was thinking of the Quarn.

We made our way through streets that seemed to reek of ancient ways and thoughts. I paused occasionally to watch a grinder or a spindrifter at work, saw an elementary syncon computer being used to operate a foundry that produced images of Fanakana, a winged dragon-dog of early (and now dead) mythology, walked among carved erotic statues ten meters high, sniffed the grainy texture of air filled with the sweat of work and reek of spices.

It was a bit unconventional for Majumbdahr to bring me here. Usually a Fleet underofficer would take his superior to a more formal and military luncheon, to demonstrate his seriousness. But then, Majumbdahr was an unconventional officer.

I remembered one of the incidents related in his file. Some years ago, in a lesser post, Majumbdahr had dined alone in the Kalic officers' mess. The room was busy and waiters did not notice him, seated in a far corner. He became impatient. But instead of stalking out, Majumbdahr went to a phone booth and called a restaurant that delivered meals. He asked them to bring a spiced dahlma to the officers' mess. When it arrived he made no great show of eating, but a few officers noticed and the story spread. The Commandant heard of it and investigated the standards of service in the mess. Soon matters improved. And through it all Majumbdahr had said nothing, never raised his voice in criticism. It was an effective technique.

We reached a small squat restaurant and found our way inside through near-total darkness, sweeping by bead curtains under the guidance of a wrinkled old headwaiter.

"It is very fine," I said after we were seated. "I have seen nothing to equal this district anywhere in the Empire."

Majumbdahr smiled deprecatingly. "Really? But these things are necessary—cultural drifts occur without them. How is it done on Earth?"

"By symbols, mostly," I said, trying to phrase my answer correctly. "We—or rather, they—focus on the part rather than the whole. Instead of a statue, a stone. A forest becomes a plate of wood. And there is the Sabal Game, of course."

He nodded. "The Game is played here, as well, but only by a few. We do not find it particularly relevant to our needs."

The waitress brought a steaming plate of rolled breads like papadams, with meat inside soaking in a sauce. "What replaces it?" I asked.

"A number of things, perhaps none of them as impressive as the Game. This district, for one. The isolation we have from the rest of the Empire helps, too—few cross-cultural influences manage to get here, and when they do they're sometimes so extraneous as to have no effect. And of course the tradition of the Savant, the Saint, the Guru."

I finished the breads—which had turned out to be a sort of woven rice cake instead—and paused. "This meat? Is it—"

"Of course." Majumbdahr shrugged. "Organic products."

"I've heard of colony planets on which—"

"Not here. No lower forms are slaughtered."

I smiled and continued eating a side dish of marinated vegetables placed at my elbow. The alternative to the organic tanks—once it was agreed that animals, being spiritually of the same Order, could not be harmed—was vegetarianism, a singularly difficult and unhealthy path.

"Savants, you said?" I continued. "We had few of those on Earth or the colonies I visited."

"I don't believe the practice is part of the Mongol heritage. In the dead religion of Confucianism it had a place, I'm told, but the Riot War ended that."

"Some hold it died in the First Republic that was formed on the mainland just before the War."

Majumbdahr bit his lip uncomfortably. "Perhaps, but it doesn't matter." He didn't want to get involved in the intricacies of Empire political history, particularly since they might still touch on the present. "The old ways of Zen, when they reached the inlands after the War, fairly well destroyed the appointed station of the Guru. One doesn't need a guide to find what is all around him and yet within himself."

"I would not put it quite that way," I said, laughing gently. I remembered my first instruction, the koan I had wrestled with for seeming ages when I was a boy. It was a classic ambiguity, simple and full of depth for meditation. Its eleventh century name (Christian reckoning) was the "Three Barriers of Hung-Lun."

Question: Everybody has a place of birth. Where *is* your place of birth?

Answer: Early this morning I ate white rice gruel. Now I'm hungry again.

Question: How is my hand like the Buddha's hand?

Answer: Playing the lute under the moon.

Question: How is my foot like a donkey's foot?

Answer: When the white heron stands in the snow it has a different color.

The first answer? It indicates that facts of birth and death are snowflakes in the great wind of time, as trivial as the eternal cycle of hunger and satiety. The second: let loose your constant reasoning, sing to the moon and be the Buddha. Be *here*. And the third? I do not think I can express it, even now, in words.

That was the first stage, zazen, individual perceptions of the essential. After that came social awareness, the gestalt, the Game.

"Perhaps all this—the Guru, the spiritual leader—isn't strong enough in our time to hold your society together," I said. We had finished the gatan curry laced with coriander and the world had taken on a deep, salty tang. I knew I had to go slowly in drawing information from Majumbdahr, since that is the way of the Hindic, but even in the lazy warmth after the meal I had to hold myself in check.

"We seem to be doing well," he said, nostrils flaring slightly.

"No disturbances, not even a hint?"

"I've started training the regular police to control them. But it will take time; we're not accustomed to that

sort of thing."

"What—"

A low rumbling cry came from outside, the sound of many voices. I bit into the tart sweetness of a mandarin and listened to the sound grow and be matched by the shuffling sound of running. I looked inquiringly at Majumbdahr.

"It might be some Lancers. They sometimes do this in the old district—"

"Lancers? Why—" Impatient to move, I got up and threaded my way out through the topple tables of the restaurant. As I went out the door the sound burst over me and a man slammed into my shoulder, pitching me to the side.

The crowd was backed up flush with the shops, facing toward the narrow street, packed in tightly. I couldn't see a thing. The chanting came nearer. It was almost covered by the babble of conversation from the pedestrians, who were obviously expecting a show.

Majumbdahr materialized beside me. "Help me break through," I yelled.

Together we pushed against the wall of backs keeping us from the street, first out of coordination and then shoving together, until something gave. I jostled forward through the bodies, ignoring scowls and snarls. In a moment I was near the front.

The Lancers had just gotten to this point and were streaming by, shouting something about Veden and rights, waving tapestries on bamboo poles, stamping and hooting and jamming the onlookers back from the center of the path. The crowd didn't seem to be worried or afraid; they treated it as a lark, an entertainment. It seemed to me a lot of noise for nothing—it was impossible to tell what they were shouting about.

Then I heard a slight scream from further back in the Lancer column. A sharp cry of pain, a bark of outrage. Then another. People around me stirred. The barrage of sound from the Lancers increased in volume but now I could hear the screams clearly over the chant.

Majumbdahr caught my eye and gestured toward the cries, which seemed to be getting closer. I nodded, asked a question with my eyebrows. He shrugged. Evidently this latest touch was new to him too.

And to the crowd as well. They pushed back toward the shops, trying to get away from the center of the street. In a moment I stood alone, watching men and women struggling to press into the already crowded shops.

The Lancers came on. Two hundred must have passed already. The chant was fading gradually and, standing there, even in my coverall uniform and cowl, I felt vaguely defenseless as I waited for whatever was coming around the next corner. But an officer does not run.

The end of the Lancer column broke around the corner of a shop further down the alley. Young men in loincloths, carrying short, stubby clubs lashed out at the crowd cowering in doorways. Perhaps a dozen of them.

Majumbdahr stood at my right. One of them laughed, struck a man in the side, hurled an oath at him and passed on. The Lancers in column were smiling too. A lark. Holiday afternoon, for them.

They saw us. Three broke out of file and converged on us, rocking the clubs loosely in their hands, casual.

I went back into rest position, left forearm out, right leg cocked back and keeping balance over my body center. Right arm tucked into side. Training school memories. Watch their faces, focus forward, eyes front but seeing everything to the sides.

The first one swung a club down with his right and I blocked with my forearm, dropping further back. He went slightly off balance and I raised my right knee, shot out a chopping foreleg kick that caught him in the stomach, and dropped back to balance.

The kick wasn't strong enough. Getting old. He came forward again, this time favoring his right side where the kick had landed. Side chop with the club, very fast. I stepped back again, watching him move. No opening worth the chance.

The third man stood aside, watching.

Majumbdahr was moving in the corner of my eye, trying to wrestle his man to the ground. Mine came at me again. This time he rushed a little and his right foot came down too early for the overhead blow he'd planned.

I stepped forward, chopped his arm and shot my left elbow into his face as he stumbled past me. He landed unevenly on the obsidian cobblestones. He shook his head, too dazed to get up.

The third man had vanished with the tail of the Lancer column and Majumbdahr had his pinned to the ground. I felt a little silly, a senior officer fighting in the streets, and the civilians were eyeing me curiously.

"Send for the police!" I shouted at one of them. Then I noticed the crumpled form further down the street.

It was a girl, unconscious. Her black hair fanned out in a crescent around her head and there was an ugly red patch on her scalp. I cradled her head to see if there were any other wounds. Someone came over and volunteered that the Lancers hadn't struck her; she must have fallen in the rush.

Police whined over in a helicopter and dropped into the street on ladders; evidently ground transport through the reconstructed district was too slow. I held the girl's head and ignored the two Lancers, who were being led away. Somehow I didn't want to let go of her. She was injured in a stupid, pointless demonstration—if that was the right name—and I felt strangely responsible. If I'd pressed Gharma about civil disturbances I might've been working on the problem instead of sightseeing in town. And this was just the sort of thing that the Quarn could use, I knew.

It had the feel of strangeness, of people going off their precarious balance. The Hindic peoples were always pacifists. We even had trouble recruiting Fleet base personnel on Veden. A group like the Lancers was totally at variance with the traditions here. Yet they *were* here, and the crowds had smiled, perhaps even identified with them. Why? Did the Lancers express something they all wanted to say, but couldn't?

Someone was tapping me on the shoulder. I looked up into Majumbdahr's face and at once realized that I didn't want to let the girl go. Holding her like this was a form of therapy for me, something to bring me out of the shock of the scuffle I'd had. It had been years since I'd even practiced personal martial arts. But I still wasn't going to let her go.

"Medical is here, sir," he said. "They'll be wanting..."

"Tell them... tell them to treat her and deliver her to my personal home," I said without thinking. "I want to talk to her." I looked down and saw her for the first time. Until now she had just been something to

hold. Was I really so lonely?

I watched the ambulance pull away with her and recognized that I was slowly coming out of the slight autohypnosis I'd given myself just before the fight. Training was reasserting itself. Majumbdahr finished talking to the head of the police squad and motioned to me.

"We can catch an air carrier at the head of this street, sir," he said. "That'll be the fastest way to return to Fleet Control."

Fleet schedules wait for no one, even the Director. The *L.S. Colon* was going through the Flinger and that was the best time to observe the process. Local police reported some Lancers in custody and no other disturbances in Kalic. I sent a priority demand for a summary on all such past incidents and took a lift to Control Central.

It wasn't all that impressive. Computers look much the same everywhere and most of the Flinger's detection and sensor grid was of necessity in close orbit around the Lekki-Jagen system. So the large room with display screens, verbal and typewriter input-output systems, primary and backup consoles, low-glare phosphors glowing a sullen red, the eternal clacking of printouts and mutter of conversations escaping from silencing mikes—the room was ordinary, pedestrian. Except for the display screens.

For my benefit the center screen was a full color display of Lekki, blown up and polarized to avoid eyestrain.

Dark vortices churned on her surface, streamers gouged holes in naked blackness for an instant and disappeared. Gharma was in my escort and kept up a smooth line of explanation to which I half listened. People at work craned in their buckets, ignoring the outputs they monitored for a look at the new boss. I ignored it all and studied the screen. Gharma was explaining that Lekki was loosely termed an F2 star, but strictly speaking wasn't on the main sequence at all. Jagen, the neutron star, had changed Lekki's evolutionary cycle.

"And Jagen? Can I see it?"

"Only by absorption, of course," he said. "This shot is from one of our satellites about a third of an astronomical unit out from Lekki. Here"—he thumbed a control—"is the view from one on the other side, same radius. I'll enlarge it."

The screen turned pale violet and then a dot appeared at the edge and crawled across. It was absolutely black and the image seemed to warp. Detail of Lekki behind it flickered and faded from view as the dot moved.

Jagen, the Black Dwarf. Neutron Being.

Gharma gave me the standard lecture, filling in areas I hadn't known. Nine kilometers in diameter, mass somewhat less than Sol's, a very old neutron and Jagen orbited around their center of mass with a period only a little longer than a day (Earth day—Veden's was seventy-three minutes shorter). As I watched, Jagen inched across the enlarged view and vanished at the border. Fast, incredibly fast, but—

"Only a day? When the two stars are separated by six Sol radii?"

Gharma blinked at me pedantically. "Truly, it is a surprise for a visitor. But that is the crux, the reason Veden was terraformed for a century to provide a base near Lekki. Jagen rotates about the system center of mass with a velocity nearly a thousandth of light speed. That's a tremendous energy and

momentum source. It drives the Flinger."

"Sir," an aide interrupted Gharma, "the *L.S. Colon* is into rebound orbit now." Gharma dialed the monitor control in his palm again and the screen shifted to catch up with the neutron star. It appeared again, moving from the left, with its fuzzy halo of light. Of course! The fantastic gravitational potential at the neutron star's surface was refracting the light from Lekki, scrambling the detail we would usually see.

"The *Caton* is at maximum stress now," Gharma said, and from the right edge of the screen crept a tiny glint of light. The fleck of white rushed in toward the neutron star and as we watched silently it arced *around* Jagen in a deformed parabola, and raced away. The process was over almost before I had pieced it together, an incredibly graceful and intricate dance of the spheres.

"A successful rebound," said Gharma. "The *Caton* has picked up almost twice Jagen's orbital speed and is heading out at an angle to the ecliptic plane. It's due to phase into Jump space in five hours, as soon as it clears the high radiation levels near Lekki."

It was as simple a process as one could imagine, really, easily derived from Newton's laws. The *Caton* came falling in obliquely toward the Lekki-Jagen system, intersecting the Jagen orbit and moving opposite to the rotation of the Black Dwarf. It passed close to the neutron star, on the side away from Lekki, and dipped deep into Jagen's steep gravitational potential. With a perfect counterbalancing of velocities and the star's brutal pull the ship could weave around it, almost allowing itself to be captured, and then break free. When it escaped it was on the side of Jagen facing Lekki; it had performed a turnabout in along a nearly circular arc.

But now it had picked up twice the orbital velocity of Jagen itself—in a sense, the *Caton* underwent an elastic collision with the neutron star and its gravitational field, like a ball rebounding off the front fender of an express train. The *Caton* had stolen energy and momentum from the Lekki-Jagen rotation and was now smoothly casting off into deepspace. Destination: Abee IV, a desert planet circling a G3 star over three hundred light-years away.

Abbe moved with high velocity relative to the *Caton's* home port, Earth. So the *L.S. Caton* had to catch up with Abbe system. Reaching a high velocity requires fuel and time. It was far cheaper for the *Caton* to perform a quick detour through Jump space to the Lekki-Jagen system, spend a few days undergoing an elastic collision with the neutron star's field, and emerge with the correct velocity to match the Abbe system.

I'd drifted off; Gharma was lecturing me on the dynamics again: "... was of course a pure accident of stellar dynamics. A free star cannot capture another in a stable orbit, so Jagen must have been present when Lekki was forming."

"I'm surprised a livable planet came of such a wedding," I said.

"Only marginally. Veden required a century of bioengineering before it was habitable, and even now, two centuries later, we cannot venture down to the lowlands from this plateau. The lowlands are hot, winds are a constant danger to air flight, and the seacoasts are ripped by tides. The tidal influences of two stars and a moon can become quite wicked at times."

"It seems like a tremendous effort just to get the Flinger. After all, fuel can't be that expensive."

"Remember, sir, that the Jump space power requirements are proportional to the volume of the ship. Empty fuel tanks take just as much room as full ones, in a ship with rigid superstructure. So Jump-class vessels are much more economical if they carry as little fuel as possible. And you're neglecting the ramscoops as well."

I nodded. The scoop ships, gulping down interstellar hydrogen with gigantic magnetic fields and spewing it out the end for propulsion, were the long-term backbone of the Empire, little publicized.

A planet that sent out, say, a rare alloy native only to its system, couldn't program the ramscoop ship for a definite destination, because by the time the ship spanned a hundred light-years its target might have changed economic structure entirely. The time lag was too great.

So the volume of space around Lekki-Jagen served as a storage area, a cosmic clearing house for this region of the Empire. Moving large masses through Jump space was beyond the resources of a new colony planet. But ramscoops were cheap and easy to build. When the colony got a product it thought might sell—and so bring in currency and bartered goods in return—it packed a shipment into a ramscoop and programmed the onboard computer for Lekki-Jagen. When it arrived a half century later it was cataloged and directed into a waiting orbit.

There it sat. If no other colony bid for it the ramscoop orbited silently forever, costing its owners periodic docking fees to pay for Fleet Control. Usually it sold rather quickly. Then it was reprogrammed for the buyer's system, dropped through the Flinger and shot out into deepspace at a respectable velocity. The Flinger could cut fifty percent off the transit time of a fifty light-year journey, because without it the scoops required long weary years to pick up their initial velocity.

"... but there is no nearby planet in this system, so we have quite a volume of storage for the scoops. They are within easy laser range of Fleet Control." Gharma looked at me as though I were a slow student who insisted on falling asleep in class.

"No nearby planet? I thought there was a gas giant nearby."

"Out at ten Earth astronomical units, yes."

"But by the classical Titus-Bode rule there should be a planet at, ah, around five and a half A.U., shouldn't there? I suppose the rule doesn't hold up for binaries, though—it's based on a theory of convection dust accumulation. Wouldn't apply with Jagen in the works. Interesting, that the giant at ten A.U. fits the rule."

Gharma looked at me carefully. "You *seem* to know more astrophysics than I'd thought, sir." Which was precisely what I wanted him to conclude.

"I'm due back at my office about now, I believe," I said, getting up. I wanted to know more about the Flinger, but the best way to get a good background is through the computer, where stupid questions don't arouse the staff officers to condescension.

Jagen was a fascinating object. One other neutron star had been found within the Empire, drifting alone in space. (Pulsars, it had turned out, weren't neutron stars after all, but another type of final equilibrium for cold matter.)

Jagen was bound in a tight, almost circular ellipse around Lekki, and had been there for at least a billion years. The Black Dwarf reflected little light, emitted far down in the infrared and had long since lost any magnetic field. The tidal effects of its passing were easily observable on the surface of Lekki, where huge rippling waves of boiling, fusing helium roiled and tossed at the beck of the little giant.

I stood and watched the photosphere in closeup as Jagen swept by. The center of mass of the binary system lay near Lekki's surface, so as the neutron star went by a portion of Lekki's sphere included the axis about which the two stars rotated. This produced slashing storms of ionized gases, ripped by the tidal tug of Jagen and trying to maintain an equilibrium against the complex competition of magnetic and

gravitational forces that laced the star.

"How long can it last this way, Mr. Gharma?" I said softly, gesturing at the brawling chaos on the screen.

"Several thousand more years, I'm told. Energy losses will eventually draw the two together."

"Jagen will drop into Lekki?"

"And then the balance will change. Veden will be jammed with scientists, then. It will provide a one-time entertainment. Most expect Lekki to nova."

"I see." I gazed a long moment at the violet turmoil millions of miles away, watched it licking at raw vacuum, hissing at the quiet stars around it.

When I returned to my office Gharma had some routine work and the first returns from some of the makework I'd assigned earlier. I brushed them aside.

"You may be interested in this one, nonetheless, sir," he said, and laid an engraved invitation on my desk. "It is an invitation from the First Bridge Society."

"First Bridge? Odd name."

"A very exclusive private club. The original ramscoop that discovered Veden had a strict discipline system. Highest ranking officers were from the First Bridge. The club now carries the same connotation." He lowered his eyes. "The previous Director was a member."

Ah. This was the first tentative feeler for the sort of social acquaintances a Director was expected to make among the natives.

Fleet was as much a political instrument as any other branch of the Empire. It needed support through the colonies as well as in the centers on Earth. This was a traditional function of my position.

"Decline it," I said, and cut off his startled reply. "Is that summary on religious institutions I requested ready? Good. And send in Mr. Majumbdahr."

When he appeared I said. "I assume that girl has been treated and taken to my residence; I'll be going there shortly."

"I might remind you, sir, that tomorrow is a festing day here, a holiday."

"Fine, I'll have an opportunity to—" I stopped and thought. "Mr. Majumbdahr, if you are not busy, I wonder if you would consider accompanying me on an informal tour of Kalic's religious centers? It's something of a preoccupation of mine."

"I would be honored, sir."

It was really a dirty trick; a junior officer cannot easily turn down an invitation from his superior for anything with social overtones. I needed a companion to find my way through the maze of religions in Kalic. Since Majumbdahr wasn't married, I could tell myself that at least I wasn't taking the man away from his family.

When I reached home the orange luster of dusk was settling across the lake. The fluttering sounds of things in flight echoed through the spindly ferns that clothed my home in brooding quiet. As I walked up the front ramp I noticed a mark on the glass wall of the den, and beneath it a white bird lay sprawled in death on the patio. It was larger than a dove and had delicate striations of blue and pink over its neck.

Evidently it had failed to see the glass and had flown straight into it, breaking its back.

Patil admitted me and announced that dinner would be ready shortly. He mentioned the girl and I asked for her.

She came into the den padding softly on the thick rug. She was tall, a trifle thin, and wore a sansari of rough, durable green weave that set off her black hair.

"I thought I would ask you a few questions about the incident this afternoon," I said. She nodded. "Your name?"

"Rhandra Minadras of the family Talin."

"Why were you in the street? Were you shopping?"

"No, I was searching employment. I was reared in the country, in agricultural arts. But recently I decided to come to Kalic and attempt something new. I thought the traditional shops would want unskilled labor." She spoke quickly but not with a sharp tone, and looked down at her feet occasionally.

"You know the Lancers?"

"I've heard of them, met a few. They say their 'demonstrations' are just sport, but I think not!"

"Why?"

"They're afraid. Afraid of the Quarn and what might happen if they reach Veden."

"Strange for the young to fear so much."

"Oh no," Rhandra said, looking up in surprise, eyes widened, "they are the least in phase. They have not yet come to compromise with the strains of adolescence, or cultivated the old ways. I wouldn't expect them to be as secure as an older man."

"Perhaps," I said, uncomfortably aware that I was an older man and felt blessed little inner peace of late. "There was never anything like them before, was there?"

She shook her head, liquid hair rippling. "Not that I've heard. But I'm new to Kalic."

Patil entered and announced dinner. I stood and felt a sudden twinge of soreness in my back, a reminder of the scuffle. "New? You have no lodging, then? Stay in my guest room until you find something suitable."

She made the usual gestures of refusal but eventually accepted. It was clear she had few plans. My reasons for making the offer were equally vague; I was attracted to her by some elusive chemistry not merely sexual. Guilt for the incident that afternoon, and loneliness. She was something to shelter.

Rhandra excused herself for a moment to change into more formal dress. She appeared a moment later in something slightly better and clinging and walked over to the glass wall overlooking the patio. She stood looking at the mist drift in from the lake.

Suddenly a large bird dropped down from the ferns on wide, powerful wings and glided by parallel to the house, peering in at us with electric yellow eyes. She jumped back, startled, and thumped against a column. She made a sound like a bird smashing into a glass wall.

We banked heavily into the wind and came down fast over the northern outskirts of Kalic. Multicolored patches of jungle slid below and then a large domed building swept by, rosy pink in the midmorning light, a bulb frozen as it popped from the ground. Majumbdahr brought us in evenly and settled into a parking space near the entrance. "The Palace of Shiva," he announced.

"I've heard of this," Rhandra said as we got out. "It's the new Council of Churches center, isn't it?"

"Yes. Some call it bargain basement religion, but I suppose there isn't anything basically wrong with representing all major sects in one place," Majumbdahr said.

"It makes for better communication," she said.

We entered beneath a sloping hyperbola of grained obsidian that served as a fulcrum for an arc that spanned the dome. In my uniform and cowl I was easy to spot and as we came through the massive doors a party descended on us.

"Director Sanjen, this is quite unexpected," a large woman wrapped in red silks said, ignoring the fact that if I were unexpected she wouldn't be greeting me. "We of the Council had of course planned to request your presence in the proper manner..."

"But we are certainly overjoyed to be honored with an early visit," finished a short, emaciated man with wrinkled brown skin.

"Sir, this is the Madi, leader of the Benagathaman sect," Majumbdahr said, motioning toward the woman and bowing low, "and Mr. Fanesh of the Litlapans." I performed ritual bows and gave them a glassy smile. We spoke for some moments about the lovely dome, the skybats which wheeled and swooped through its upper reaches in Lekki's light that streamed through the translucent patches of decoration.

Dignitaries arrived and were introduced, only to be shouldered aside by others. I never had a chance to say more than a line or two to any of them, but the Madi, who seemed to be the most commanding, managed to keep up a fairly steady stream of information about their various sects and cults. She evidently served as a social chairman for them all. After a few more minutes I began to bridle at the thought of standing in the foyer of the dome and exchanging pleasantries with them all morning, and said so.

"Of course, Director, I would be glad to take you on a tour of the Temples and schools," the Madi said. In a few moments we had cut ourselves loose from the caravan that promised to form behind us.

She took us to a small cloister. A man was sitting in it, perfectly erect.

"He is awakening the serpent," the Madi said reverently.

The man began his exercises and the Madi described what he was doing, evidently without disturbing his concentration.

The coiled serpent, she explained, is named Kundalini. When she is awakened she is the vital force in the man, and must be forced to ascend from her sleeping place at the base of the spine. She passes through a narrow canal in the spine and thus into the brain, where she consummates her symbolic wedding with Shiva, the other vital life force. So comes liberation of the spirit and right accord with nature.

"I mean this all symbolically," said the Madi, clasping her palms together in a gesture of pleasure, "but we of the Benagathaman sect have experimented with these ancient techniques, and find them successful."

I didn't reply and she went on with the description. Kundalini was awakened by muscular contractions in

the abdomen. Asvini mudra, the most essential, is a rhythmic rippling and dilation of the anal sphincter.

As I watched, the man, his skin like worn bronze, turned his tongue upward and backward, touching the palate in the roof of his mouth. After a moment, the Madi told us, his tongue reached the holes of the nostrils opening into the mouth, sealing them off. (For months, she said he had been "milking his tongue"; stroking it for hours to make it supple and long.)

He sealed his ears with his thumbs, eyes with index fingers, nostrils with the middle fingers. He went rigid.

"He is repeating his mantra, his Basic Sound," the Madi said. "Thusly the serpent begins to *suffocate*."

Abruptly the man's stomach ballooned outward and sucked in several times. "This is to make the serpent pass the gateway into the spine." There were three gateways and six power centers in the spine, each requiring that the snake be forced through. She described in detail the position of the thousand-petaled lotus at each station, and its flowering as Kundalini passed. When the movements are performed precisely and correctly, Sanadhi, or Yoga enlightenment, is attained.

The Madi stopped talking in her singsong voice and I looked at the man. He was sitting still, releasing his fingers one at a time and breathing again.

"Is that it? Nothing happens?" I said.

She wagged a finger at me. "The *first* attempts are not successful. One must not be impatient."

"How do you tell if he is closer to enlightenment?"

"He passed into higher states. The exercises and movements become *surer*. He is always in total bodily control."

"But it can't be seen otherwise? Doesn't his relationship with people change?"

"Director, it is not necessary." She arched a brown eyebrow at me. "In the minds of those who have Total Understanding, the body is the supreme arbiter of Sanadhi." Her intonation, rising up on a word, made one hear when she was capitalizing a word of particularly profound importance.

"Then Yoga won't counter loss of phase?"

"Perhaps, in time." She waved a silken handkerchief at the man, who was now beginning the ritual again. "But that is *not* the point. These things must be realized with the Heart and Spirit, not merely in the Mind. It may take you a while to come upon such Knowledge." She made an impressive pause. "Certainly, we shall be prepared to help you."

"Quite."

"The Benagatham is more than you might assume," she said, smiling at me as we left the cloister, her lips a glaring red gash between swelling hills of cheek caked with a lemony powder. "It is a Movement, a Crusade. The difficulties I hear you and your comrades are finding with those aliens, the, the—"

"Quam."

"Yes, Quam. I think it is simply a matter of the Wrong Spiritual Avenue."

"Perhaps."

"And if I am right"—she lowered her eyes modestly—"the Empire could learn something from the

Benagathamam."

We crossed the foyer, sandals clacking back echoes from the domed egg far above.

There were other cloisters, other Yoga and Hindic exercises.

After the first they all ran together and dulled my senses. Lectures on conservation of the Vital Fluid; attempts to revive the lost Old Indian art of levitation; men who could pop steel bands wrapped around their chests; men who, with sheer will power and proper body control, could raise the temperature of a room five degrees; people who spoke to hallucinations; men who lived though buried alive for hours; women who whispered to dice and made them perform; a first order Yogi who could stop his heart for two minutes; walkers on water; and more, more than I could absorb. Some of the feats were amazing, but not so odd that they couldn't be explained by pedestrian science. The more fantastic were not as advertised—the water walker was getting better and had performed for small select groups before, but found his Spiritual Essence debilitated by the presence of doubters.

We lifted off at sunset and the dome of Shiva fell away quickly. I was exhausted. Not by muscular fatigue, but by the failure of expectations.

The Benagathamam sect and the others in the dome were fairly recent offshoots of the traditional Hindic religious line. Their absorption in the cheap tricks of Yoga, the pseudo-rationalization by which the beautiful parable of Kundalini's passage had been debased into exercises of the stomach muscles, and all the rest—it was a falling back into the dark past, reliance on graven images and gods, an abandonment of the peace and serenity of the Hindic society.

They didn't know it, but the cults, the Lancers, the castes were symptoms. Hindic Veden was decaying.

Because of the Quarn? Possibly. When the disease is unknown, any symptom may be important.

But perhaps Veden was simply going bad at the core, like the Empire itself.

Fleet Control had an efficient rumor-mongering service and its results were duly logged into computer storage for use by the Director. Most of the information was worthless. But some reports spoke of a rise in crimes of violence that were hushed up by the close-knit Hindic family structure; the sudden influx of mentally disturbed cases in medical centers; a pattern of breakdown in the rural areas that caused the young to move into the cities.

I peered out the plastiform bubble over our skimmer and watched lights wink on, bright sentinels against the reddening dusk. In the west of Kalic, the inexpensive homes, families were performing their ritual chants for solidarity before the serving of the evening meal. Properly rendered, it brought contentment and security without the dullness of orthodoxy or the weight of dogma.

Without something—rituals, the Sabal Games, wise ministering of the guru—a man could slide into the weak fragmentation of the Plague. Or worse, he could fall into the fatal error of trying to relieve his isolation by following the king ape pattern, impose his will on others, disrupt tradition for the sake of change alone. And so disorient his brothers, step on the accelerator of technology, create massive loss of phase.

Somehow order was breaking down. Must empires always fall? Was there *some* fatal mechanism in man that hated permanence?

I shook my head against the night. Rhandra sat brooding in the seat next to me, her hair like rippling shadows. She had been disturbed by the Palace of Shiva as well. She came from simple rural origins and

was breaking away, but it was clear the contorted Yoga was not her answer.

I laughed inwardly *to* myself. Poor thing, she was just as confused as I. I reached over and held her hand and she smiled shyly at me in the darkness.

We landed near my home, on a flat pad settled into the hill. Patil was waiting there with a message which had just been forwarded by the watch at Fleet Control.

Quarn had been sighted near Calning, the large colony only fifty-three lights from Lekki. A scouting party was observed and fled into Jump space.

It might be a preliminary for an attack on Calning and it might not. The aliens had made feints before.

But it did mean something. The Quarn were striking further into the Empire's shrinking sphere.

Veden, storage house and communications link for the Empire, lay nearby. We wouldn't be safe much longer.



PART III

Rising to the Scepter

They struggled all the more.



Imagine a river.

Flecked with foam. Swirling and rushing, collector of oddments of debris, bits of dirt, crumbs of civilization.

The Empire is thus. The random currents deposited their burden on Veden and departed, in each instant changing.

I began to realize that the Jump ships, however much glamour is theirs, were only a fraction of the traffic that passed through the Flinger.

Most of the Jump ships were engines of war. Merchants must pick more modest transport since they aren't supported by the taxes of a hundred worlds. Thus, the ram-scoops.

Fleet Control was dropping them through the Flinger at an average rate of one a day. The total number of scoops orbiting the Lekki-Jagen system was almost constant, so as well, one incoming scoop per day had to be laser-guided through the last stages of deceleration and coaxed into a stable ellipse.

That represents a fantastic flux of information. I had to oversee a lot of it, make decisions about anything out of the ordinary.

Although the scoops and Jump ships passed regularly through the Flinger, very few of them ever sent anything down to Veden. There was no reason. Veden had few rare raw materials, no advanced

technology, few cultural objects of interest to the predominantly Mongol Empire. We usually received a squirt of civilian news on tightbeam laser, but that was it. Usually.

"What's this?" I asked Gharma one day. "The *Chenuung*, a Jump ship, is dropping a one-man flyer."

"A moment," he said, thumbing a readout screen. "Yes. He's a replacement for the astronomical observatory."

"Observatory? Where?"

"On the other side of Veden."

"There're just a few islands there."

"Correct. It's not really an observatory in the usual sense. All the sensors are orbiting further in. The base here just monitors their readout. The observatory is on the reverse side of the planet because of signal-to-noise troubles from our transmissions." He explained all this in a pedantic tone.

"All right." I approved it and sent it to store-and-forward. "What are they observing? Optical work?"

"No. Gravitational radiation."

"Uh? Why?"

"Lekki and Jagen, revolving about each other, are always accelerated. The accelerations involved are huge, though—that's why the Flinger is a convenient source of energy. Whenever a mass is accelerated it radiates gravitational waves, just as a charge gives off electromagnetic radiation when one gives it a push."

"The output from Lekki-Jagen is large enough to be measured?" I said wonderingly. "Yes, I suppose it must be. Incredible."

"It's the only one in the Empire. The observatory has been here over two centuries, compiling data to test the Dbook Theory. One of the original scientists died a year or two ago—that's why the replacement."

"The man had been here two hundred Earth years? He must have been dedicated."

"I gather. Still, remember that we live longer on Veden, perhaps due to the light gravity."

I laughed. "What you really mean is that the helter-skelter of the Empire doesn't penetrate here, eh? And you're right. The social pressures on Earth probably cut a decade or two off the life span. Maybe that accounts for the higher spiritual state you're always implying Vedens have."

Gharma smiled slowly, seeing that I was mocking him. "I don't see—"

"Cliché sociology. On Earth an introduction to the Sabal Game doesn't come until the age of forty, usually closer to fifty. Below that age physiology makes meditation and group perception difficult."

"So that longevity assures enlightenment? But if one plays the Game a century and a half, doesn't boredom set in?" He chuckled politely.

"No. No." I suddenly felt very sad. Sense of loss. "I don't think it was boredom that drove me out."

Gharma muttered something, embarrassed that he had triggered a sadness within me.

"I'm one hundred and seventeen now," I said to him. "I wonder—would you have guessed it? I don't seem to be proceeding on the usual lines. I'm not making progress toward enlightenment. I—"

But it was too much.

Too much, I hadn't come to Veden to bury myself in a welter of detail. But I did. The Temple of Shiva had blunted my fervor for Hindic religion and for a while I didn't try to regain it. I substituted work.

I set up regular training classes for the troops in riot control and internal security. The men responded well, glad to be acting again, but troubled (I suspected) at this first evidence of concern among Fleet Control.

Jagen, the Black Dwarf, spun in tune. Veden was subject to a biennial coincidence between Lekki, Jagen and its moon; an enormous tide rose and smashed itself against the lowlands. Winds roared and Fleet Control buttoned up for three days. We evacuated a few thousand persons from the mountain peaks in the east of Baslin, where the gusts reached two hundred miles per hour.

Over the next few months I received more reports of theft and beatings in the cities. Majumbdahr managed to penetrate some of the natural Hindic reserve in local officialdom against reporting such incidents and thereafter we got a reasonably accurate picture of what was happening. The curve for small, random, purposeless crime had a steep positive slope.

The rumor-mongering facility picked up more whispers about Quarn spies, planned Quarn landings, suspected neighbors, sightings of strange ships in the skies.

Domestic issues came and went. Majumbdahr and Gharma handled them. I kept myself isolated, never attended official functions. The Madi called, sent invitations, implored me to visit the Temple of Shiva again, to follow the lessons they offered, to come to banquets and receptions. I was invited to join social clubs, attend concerts, clasp the moist palms of a hundred strangers.

I ignored them all.

And walked the streets of Kalic. Spoke with Krishna priests in yellow dhotis and shaven heads, wondered on the riddles that they told. Flew through valleys crystalline with the sparkle of fresh rain on the leafy roof of the jungle. Peered over the awful edge into the turbulent lowlands.

Walking in the after hours, feeling the tremor and pulse of the people, sometimes with them and sometimes not.

Wondering why I had been spared of the Plague when it seemed I would go down with it. Why me? Why did my wife and children fall and not myself?

No one answered. Not the priests, convoluted in their own internal worlds. Not I.

Nor did the temples and maqanes that Gharma took me to in the holidays that came regularly. I found them formal and meaningless.

There is a higher form of loneliness that can't be damped by contact with only one or two persons. Perhaps this is what the young cannot see. When a man lives two centuries, continuity is lifeblood. I was losing my sense of community.

Had I ever had it? Yes—before Regeln. Or was that a delusion too? It had all been simple, before the Quarn.

They were near now. A month after the sortie against Calning the same scenario that I had seen on Regeln went through its mechanical motions again.

Communication winked out. There were a few strangled threads of contact, then nothing. By now Fleet sent no expeditions to rescue survivors. They had learned enough from my expedition, I suppose.

Over the next few months three more colonies fell in much the same manner.

Fleet subspace transmissions mentioned them a few times, at first with alarm and then subtly skirting the issue. Then they were gone. We were advised to not speak of these planets again.

In Fleet engagements two of our Jump ships were lost to unknown causes. They simply vanished, ceased transmission.

Four Quarn ships were observed to self-destruct to avoid capture.

After all this time we still knew next to nothing about the Quarn. Analysis showed that they had a tolerance to acceleration about the same as men—assuming the ships were not automatic. They reacted occasionally to laser signals tuned to infrared frequencies. Their ships bore no distinguishable markings.

Somehow this gradually diffused into the Veden population. The informant network picked it up as rumors, then as commonly accepted knowledge.

There were a few incidents of arson. Ridicule of police. Small riots, then larger.

Political parties that had been dormant formed again. Vegetarian cults, merchants' parries, groups in favor of breaking free of the Empire; they gained members and published newspapers.

The prominent parties demanded to know what defenses had been readied for use against the Quarn. When I first heard this I laughed—did they think anything would stop the Quarn?

But gestures were necessary. I sent more sensors out on long orbit to the edge of the Lekki-Jagen system. The few thermonuclear warheads I had were readied and encased in shells with high power ionic boosters. As well, the volume of space around Veden was saturated with scoops waiting to be purchased; they would provide a good screen for orbiting missiles.

Still, I could only hope to stop a few Quarn ships.

The Regeln pattern, though, called for no formal invasion at all. The colonists on Regeln had been disarmed by the Plague. Their defenses had done them no good at all.

I brooded. Things went on as before; I buried myself in routine. Was it deceptive? The chants of the priests sang in my mind, lulled me.

Five months after I'd arrived on Veden the first Plague case was diagnosed. It was a man in Kalic of weak religious background and few family ties. He did not respond to treatment.

The Plague began to spread.

The copters buzzed all around us, ringing the area. I moved awkwardly away from the copter that had landed myself and my staff.

The thick acrid stench of burning buildings drifted down the broad street and seeped in through my suit filters. The angry roar of the crowds was dulled by the wailing of police sirens. I could tell they were

coming this way.

"Majumbdahr!" I called. He came trotting over. "What happened to that sleeper gas?"

"Ordnance couldn't locate any more," he puffed. "They used the last of it an hour ago. It didn't stop them."

I ground my teeth. No time to have a batch made up; I wasn't even sure there was a chemist in Kalic who knew the process.

"Form up the men you have. They still carry anamorphine?"

"Yes, most of them." He nodded slowly, dazed with fatigue.

"Gharma said the Lancers were 'slowing down.'"

"I think they are," Majumbdahr said. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision. Smoke drifted across and paled Lekki's great eye. "They've been going for six hours. The troops are pretty beat themselves."

"This should be the last of it, then, for a while," I said and saluted. Another copter decked with a whine behind me. Gharma jumped out and walked over.

"It's dying down elsewhere, sir," he reported.

"About time." I'd followed the riot from Fleet Control since morning until I couldn't stand to be inside any longer. It was good to be out in the field and get the taste of what was happening.

Troops formed up in a line across the street. The muted bass of the crowd deepened.

"It's hard to understand," I said, looking at the thin column moving up. "Only a month since the first Plague victim."

"How does it go in most cases?" Gharma asked.

"All I know is what I saw on Earth," I said, trying to shrug in my suit. The constant-volume joints impaired me. "It wasn't anything like this. People simply waited until they contracted the Plague and then they died. They didn't turn out into the streets, bum and loot."

"They had more phase, on Earth?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have guessed it. There's something peculiar about the Veden personality. They seem to be coming out from under some inhibition at last and the pressure is blowing the top off."

"The old ways are not enough," Gharma said flatly.

"Why? Why should they fail now?"

"It is a crisis point," he said. "The order we had is lost."

I looked at him closely. Behind his plastiform face shield his skin was polished walnut. "*You* say that? You, believer in formalized religion?"

"Formalized, yes. Perhaps dead as well. When something is finished you cast it aside. We need a new social ordering here, a new dedication."

Two blocks down, the edge of the mob swept around a corner and flowed into the street. Tinkling of

glass. Rough-edged cry of frustration.

I glanced at Gharma. What did he mean? How could he watch his world dissolve so calmly? He looked content. Almost smug.

The mob streamed toward us. I licked away a salty tang of sweat. My contact filters stung my eyelids when I blinked; I'd been wearing them too much, indoors and out.

I could feel the hollow drumming of a thousand running feet. Fifty meters in front of me the mob bore down on the line of troops. Most of the Lancers seemed young. They grinned.

When they were within a few meters of the line my troops fired a volley of darts and some went down, drugged with anamorphine. A canister of homemade gas blossomed in the line and blew away.

Most of the crowd's rush halted but here and there they broke through. The line wavered. Men fell.

The mob caught the smell of victory.

I suddenly realized I was exposed. A knot of Lancers dashed by me. Gharma was cut off to the left with a squad.

I unhooked my gun. Majumbdahr shouted orders over the suit radio that echoed in my helmet.

Three Lancers converged on me. I took ready position. One carried a chain wrapped around his wrist; no worry there. The other two had cobblestones from the old district and one flashed a knife. All relatively useless against body armor.

They came at me together in a rush.

I brought the tube of my gun down viciously, chopping the first Lancer's arm. The man dropped his knife with a gasp of pain.

I stepped to the left and took a blow on my back armor that rattled my teeth. The chain whipped around my helmet with a crash and partially obscured my field of vision.

I crouched and fired two darts. They made an angry splatting sound. Thumb over to extra-strong anamorphine. Lancer moving in; focus on him. Fire. Miss. Fire again. He caught it in the groin. Staggered away, collapsed.

One left. Turn—where is he? A bottle bounced off my arm and shattered on the sidewalk.

I heard the whistle of the chain again. Duck.

This time I caught the Lancer before he could back away. I cracked the gun tube across his kneecap. He almost fell on the bottle shards but managed to roll to one side.

I blinked sweat out of my eyes. Hot. People all around me. Expand attention out, watch for an attack.

A man appeared from nowhere and threw a cobblestone. It hit my solar plexus and the armor carried a ringing up to my ears.

I thrust out with the gun tube. The Lancer brought a stick around and parried neatly. He backed away, glancing to the sides for support.

I raised the muzzle of the gun. He danced to the side at just the right instant and the dart whizzed past

him.

The Lancer threw his pipe and ran. I ducked, fired, missed again. He dodged behind Majumbdahr, who was coming to help me.

The crowd was falling back. My troops let out a thin cheer and started to reform.

"You all right?" Majumbdahr said.

"Sure." I grinned at him. "Those fellows can certainly be offensive, though, can't they?"

We met in a restaurant in Old Town. Majumbdahr and Gharma had shown a touch of surprise when I told them they'd find me there, but I was bored with the stiffness of my official offices, and after the riots I needed a quietness.

Men in severe robes milled around the entrance as I went in, chattering, comparing notes, pointing at the black columns that twined through the sky from fires that still smoldered.

Majumbdahr and Gharma were already there, waiting at a cloistered table in the back.

"You've recovered from the brawl, then?" Majumbdahr said as I sat down.

"Still hurts down my back," I said. "It'll be sore tomorrow. Stupid to get caught out like that I should've been up in a copter. How about you two?"

Gharma lifted a steaming fork of food and made a face. "Elementary violence I can usually overcome. The Pindang Kol here is trying to even the score."

"Pretty bad," Majumbdahr agreed, putting down his fork. "I'm glad I wasn't very hungry." He looked up at me. "Order something for you, sir?"

"Later. I finished my report on the copter coming over here. I thought Old Town would relax me, restore some balance. I won't have the report transmitted to Fleet Central on Earth until I've had a chance to go over it again."

"It must be rather difficult to compose," Majumbdahr said.

I sighed. "Rather. It's not easy to admit you're losing control of the situation."

"Couldn't you... soften the impact?" Gharma said. "Perhaps it's not building as swiftly as we think—"

"No. Half-truths are dangerous; sooner or later you might inadvertently tell the wrong half."

"I agree," Majumbdahr said, hunching down with his elbows on the table. "Fleet has the right to hear it all, straight."

"Especially since this form of the sickness is new," I added. "There has never been violence like this before. I've asked some psychers; they don't understand it. It is out of the pattern."

"I'll have a summary of my part of today's operation by the morning," Gharma volunteered. "We estimated at least a tenth of Kalic's population was out in the streets, hysterical."

"How is the building going?" I said to Majumbdahr.

"On schedule. The hospital space can be supplied with preform construction units and most of it deployed by machines. The only hold up was in the blueprints."

"Blueprints for hospitals? I thought they were standard."

"I checked standing orders and then asked Central on Earth. They want us to build some... Slots."

I stared at him for a long moment. "I should've been told. What did you do?"

"Called in a civilian. Used ordinary hospital prints."

"Good. You're legally in the clear. Local commanders can make such changes, as long as there aren't too many of them."

Majumbdahr had sensed my mood well. I hated the Slots and all the memories they brought back.

"I think it was a wise decision for several reasons," Gharma said. "The psychological impact on the people would be great."

"Yes," I said, "when you begin building Slots you've admitted it's over, you've given up."

"Well, I give up on the Pindang Kol," Gharma said, pushing his plate away. "I'll eat elsewhere."

He smiled but the humor of the moment was strained. The things we had left unspoken filled the incense-laden room and distracted our thoughts.

They knew as well as I that a judgment of incompetence against a Fleet Director—that is, me—would not neglect the Executive Officers immediately below him. If I went I might well take Majumbdahr and Gharma with me.

"Do you think we should stop the building of rural retreats, sir?" Majumbdahr said.

"No. Move as many as possible out of Kalic and into the retreats. You've said before"—I glanced at Gharma—"that Vedens are country folk. Maybe they'll snap out of it if we get enough out of the cities."

"Is there any correlation in the background of the rioters?" Gharma asked.

"No, none." I looked down at the table and felt a wave of defeat wash over me. "Some are from the city, others fresh from the forests. No religious similarities. Widely varying income levels and education. The only thing they have in common is that this morning they finally got fed up with it all and started burning or hitting a policeman or just running down the street."

"Berserkers." Majumbdahr rubbed his hands together, thinking.

"What?" I said.

"Berserkers. In ancient times the natives of the Norse Lands on Earth had a ritual way to break free of society. Small deviations from the conventional weren't permitted"—he smiled at Gharma—"but if the pressure got to be too much, a man could run berserk, go mad until he felt ready to go back to his life."

"You're implying that's what happened here today?" I said.

"Perhaps. I don't know. What set them off, why all at once?"

"It's not my field," I said, shaking my head. "Too much for one day."

"Are you still interested in our religions, sir?" Gharma said abruptly.

"Why, yes." I looked up.

"There have been reports..."

"Of a new sect, the Lengen," Majumbdahr finished. "Gharma and I saw some mention of them in one of the surveys you ordered."

"Some acquaintances of mine have gone to the Lengen. The beliefs are somewhat vague"—Gharma gestured, smiling slightly—"but it is always such, with these new groups."

"They have strong support among the poor, I have heard," Majumbdahr said. "I don't know how many followers there are. Not many, I'd suspect."

"Look," I said, blinking wearily, "there are a thousand cultists every square block in this city. I seem to have met every one of them. If there's nothing special—"

"Ah, I think there is," Gharma said seriously. "There is something strange—but you should see for yourself, sir. I only volunteer this because you expressed an interest."

"And the Lengen are not as those thousand you mentioned," Majumbdahr said earnestly. "They are not of the city."

"No. They maintain a compound on the border of the jungle, in the farm districts," Majumbdahr said.

"Very far?"

"We can reach it by copter."

I considered. I was tired, but underneath it I knew the numb fatigue came from boredom and loneliness, mostly; not the strain of muscles in honest work.

"I'll go."

They smiled. Was I so far into the pits of depression that they showed joy when I responded at all? Strange.

I glanced out a thin window nearby. "It will be good to escape Kalic, to get outdoors again... 'Outdoors'—a queer word, isn't it? Arrogant. As if the universe were defined in relation to the places where we live. Odd... almost as odd as assuming I can make contact with an interior world by living in a rigorously ceremonial one. Who is to say it's so?"

Rambling, rambling. I jerked myself back to the present "Dusk is falling. Shouldn't we be going?"

"Yes, I'll go call a copter now. One can pick us up a few blocks from here," Majumbdahr said.

"Delay a bit," Gharma said. "I thought I would check in with Control first, sir. I should stay in the city. It would probably be best if one of us was on duty in case—"

"Yes," I said. "Go with Majumbdahr and get an all-points report for me before we leave. I can review it in the copter. Majumbdahr and I will go out alone."

Majumbdahr got up and threw a few coins on the table. They rang softly in the still velvet closeness. Gharma rose, saluted a trifle formally, and followed Majumbdahr out.

This last gesture was typical of Gharma. Through these months the three of us had become friends, but I felt much closer to Majumbdahr. His spontaneity often broke through the officer's crust. But in Gharma I still detected an undercurrent of reserve and cool assessment that I did not like. It was not in my nature to enjoy being judged.

I decided to eat while I waited. The copter could wait. I would need the energy. And of course it was one way to demonstrate to my two executive officers that, friends or no, they would still wait at my leave.

I ordered the Pindang Kol and a biryani. Pindang Kol turned out to be a broth of cabbage and root vegetables, heavy in coriander. It was terrible.

We fell into a blotch of pale orange light. The Lengen compound swam in a sea of black, humid jungle. Floodlights picked out forests of tents pitched for pilgrims, cooking areas of rough stone, wooden platforms for meditation.

Roughly in the center was a large multilayered yellow tent. We banked toward it and set down in a clearing beaten clean by tire foot traffic.

"How can you be sure we'll be granted an audience?" I shouted to Majumbdahr as the props roared the instant before landing.

"I called ahead. They realize you have little time. I imagine there'll be no difficulty."

As we stepped off onto the Veden soil that was still cooling from the heat of the day a small man rushed out of the crowd gathered around the field.

"Director Sanjen!" he cried. "I have been sent to guide you to the Master." The man was dressed in cheap robes. Most of the people standing and watching were poor, farmer class. Or else they had renounced material things to follow the Lengen.

I nodded and we walked to the large tent. The crowd parted as we approached. I couldn't help comparing this with the behavior of the mobs I'd faced earlier in the day.

The tent was more complex than it looked. A maze of rooms kept groups of pilgrims separated and allowed the priests, clad in deep blue robes, to move in and out without disturbing meditations and rituals.

We were ushered into a warm little hexagonal room bounded by folds of cloth. We sat lotus fashion between two place settings of many bowls, plates and tumblers. There were eating sticks from several cultures, lacquered spatulas and shallow canisters. I wondered what it was all about.

Presently a low woodwind tone sounded in the still air.

A tall man walked slowly to the center of the room. His green robes covered him entirely with only a shadowed triangular slit for eyes and mouth. I could see nothing of his expression.

"Finally you come here." The voice was deep and rich with an odd inflection.

I pressed my hands together in greeting. "I am seeking a thing and I do not know quite what it is—"

"Begin ritual. Silence. Attention."

He produced a bowl and began pouring a thin liquid into the cups before Majumbdahr and me. A priest appeared with other foods that steamed in the cool night air.

We began preparing the food. It was to be ladled into the proper bowls, mixed in precise proportions, arranged and ordered. I gave Majumbdahr a side glance and found him watching me. He did it all smoothly.

After a few moments I noticed a rhythm to the procession of plates and odors. Salt of fishes. Tang from ripe fruit. Rough feel of the broadcloth napkins.

It was warm and soothing. I relaxed and my senses flowed out. I looked down on myself as I floated in a corner of the tent. Feeling all, knowing nothing.

There was a sudden white light. I wept.

And I was there.

Labels, you see, are meaningless. Worse, they are distracting.

Within a while I had focused completely on the exercises. My mind stilled. I did not think of how amazing this was, of how my present state resembled something I had known in the past and only achieved then by months of contemplation. I didn't consider any of these things. I simply was.

The ongoing moment was reality; there was nothing else. I didn't frame trite philosophy like "The future will take care of itself." There *was* no future. Only *now* existed.

"You see what?" the Master said.

"You," I said. I didn't need to turn to sense Majumbdahr at my side.

"You're different," Majumbdahr said.

I had no reply to this, nor any need to frame one. The moment I began labeling or explaining my focus would shift to the explanation and away from my centering of attention.

"Is first form," the Master said. "You see?" He leaned toward me from his lotus position. "First ally the mind. Cannot find outside without knowing inside." He made something like a laugh. "This is due by not thinking various things, one after another."

"Unconditional nature?" I asked.

"Part. Is only part. Beginning."

I sat. The world reformed, clouded, spun away. After a time of absence I returned to my place and focused once more on the eating ritual. Gradually it released its hold over me. I was coming back to the world.

But not the world I had left. Now I had a hint of my place within it.

We moved away from the large tent that I had now learned to call the Ashram, after the Old Indian word for place of wisdom study. I walked slowly and felt the pleasant crunch of broken ground beneath my feet. One thing at a time. Focus.

The Master, I noticed, was very tall. Seven feet, perhaps more. Low gravity? Focus, focus.

Majumbdahr and I rifted off and climbed swiftly. "You've made great progress, I believe, sir," he said.

I felt a comradeship with him. He had not reached this state but he had pointed the way. He was a friend.

There would be others, too, who were close. Community.

We slipped through the winds toward Kalic; winking lights like scattered jewels upon a rug. I thought of a bird, its back broken, lying beside a glass wall.

Rhandra moved coquettishly on me, smiling like an imp. The oil on both our bodies gave every caress a tingling after-memory of sensation.

Her oiled muscles rippled, coaxing me. We both knew it was no use; I was finished for that morning, energies spent.

She made a sign, a joke. Crude country humor. I laughed.

A few feet away, beyond the glass patio partition, wing-mice and a jawbird pecked at remains of breakfast. We were lying on a broad cushion, she astride. Lekki had just peeped over the afterbeam of the house, making me glad I'd put in my contact filters.

The phone rang.

She lifted a leg and rolled off. I got up slowly, reluctant to leave. A button on the phone glowed red, emergency pattern, so I hurried.

"Good morning, sir." Gharma's voice, tense. "I've put Fleet Control on emergency alert status. A sensor drone has just registered two blips out of Jump space, unscheduled."

"How far?"

"Just beyond the edge of the planetary system. Doppler shows they're massing into Veden orbit pretty fast."

"Got a mass reading yet?"

"Yes, just came in. Usual ship size. Something else too... well, I'll check that later. Could be a mistake. But the two ships come in clearly."

"I'll be there," I said, and hung up.

I took my leave of Rhandra and masked my fear with irritation. Irritation at the stack of work that the sightings promised, at the delay, the stupidity of doing a job I didn't give a damn about when I wanted to be with Rhandra, to go back to the Lengen compound.

I took a copter to Fleet Control. High-strung conversations trailed off into silence as I marched through the front offices. Everyone knew. The news was in the gossip mill by now.

It was much as Gharma had said. I watched the flickering readout from the mass detector silently.

"You have all the *scoop* orbits logged into our ballistic programs, don't you?" I asked Majumbdahr. "Of course."

"Start plotting intersection orbits for them. If those two ships keep coming we can probably catch them in the backwash from the ramscoops."

"I don't think that would be wise, sir," Gharma pointed out. "The scoops won't start smoothly with just the orbital velocities they have now. The intruders will have ample warning."

I looked steadily at him. "Okay. Use the scoop maneuvering rockets to alter their orbits and bring them in close to the bogies. Then blow them up."

"A fusion explosion?"

I nodded.

"It may work. I'll log it in."

I smiled at him wryly. "Don't worry about the expense. I'm sure Fleet will stand the cost of a few scoops."

"What are they, sir?" Majumbdahr asked.

"Quarn."

For the next few hours I watched the small dots drop steadily in toward the Lekki-Jagen system. Normal Fleet operations continued; a few colonies bought raw materials, organ replacements, sophisticated technology or rare metals that they'd need a century or two from now; the appropriate ramscoops were cut out from the herd and sent through the Flinger. When they reached the rim of the system the scoops would be turned on and they would go boosting off to their destinations at quite a respectable velocity.

The computers spun silently as they guided and totaled the transactions of interstellar finance, transferring marks in one account to similar squiggles in another. I waited and watched.

In the afternoon reports came in about small incidents in Kalic and the provincial cities: arson, random destruction. The hospitals were filling with Plague victims. The only good point the Slots had was that they were easy to build; decent facilities took longer. A Fleet communique arrived questioning the holdup in Slot construction; I told my staff to throw it away.

Fleet also bothered us for more news about the intruders. Any unusual maneuvers? Spectral distribution of torch? Any transmissions, attempts at contact?

I sent answers and *some* questions of my own. When were they going to send me some Jump ships? How many wing were within striking distance? What was my priority?

I got back equivocating long-winded replies. Even if they were Quarn, two ships weren't that many, were they? Fleet had numerous responsibilities, I must remember. Ships were available, yes, but only for verified Quarn incursions. These were difficult times. Meanwhile, keep us informed.

"Gharma reporting, sir." His image appeared on a screen beside the main display in my command module. "I've been tracing down something I noticed earlier. We thought it was a mistake, but it holds up under several cross-checks of the equipment."

"Something on the mass detector?" I asked.

"Yes. It's coming in normal to the ecliptic plane. Under ordinary scanning operations it probably wouldn't be noticed."

"What is it?"

"That's the problem," he said, and looked a little uncertain. "We get a strong signal, but the object is fairly far out. Or we think it is."

"Think?"

The main screen cleared and was replaced by the large-scale readout from the detectors. The two intruders were clearly visible. Far above the ecliptic plane, almost off the screen, was a small dot. It was very black and the computer-printed grid lines warped around it tightly.

"Appears to have high mass," I said.

"We estimate point seven solar masses," Gharma said. "But optically we can't find a thing out there. Personally, I think it's an error. The detectors are just barely able *to* pick it up. They could be off quite a bit on the mass."

"Doppler?"

"That's wrong too. Very high, positive."

I shook my head. "Keep watching it. Let me know if anything changes. But don't waste time—I want to know what those other two are doing."

I didn't have long to wait. At seventeen hundred hours they reversed torch and started slowing down. They skimmed along a path just beyond reach of the ramscoops.

They were taunting us, making fun of our defenses. I was sure they were Quarn. An hour later the spectral data was sufficiently ordered to prove me right; I reviewed all of it and then filed a report with Fleet. The report on yesterday's riots went in too, but I didn't wait around to get a reaction from Fleet Central. I had better things to do.

I took Rhandra. We went by the air-cushioned rail system this time, a somewhat more humble mode of transport than the copter. We passed over fields of quasimakas, the Veden staple. Large chunks of the umbrella-domed plant were broken off along the ripened edges and sent into Kalic daily. It was a hearty, mealy fruit. Even the stems were dried and beaten and then woven into a coarse red fabric.

We both saw the Master. I was surprised we could, arriving on short notice. Thousands camped around the Ashram awaiting audiences. They seemed to be of a higher class this evening, better dressed.

And so we went into the Ashram, sat and learned. Rhandra seemed to know the basic parts of the eating and drinking rituals instinctively; were they part of usual Hindic ceremony? The Master was gentle with her, coaxing the proper response when she rushed the movement or allowed her attention to become distracted by the soft clicking of the implements, the flicker of ornamental candles, the occasional murmur of crowds from outside.

How to describe a state of mind? In essence it is a condition of being, not a definition. Words can't quite get at it.

Rough mosaics of light. Images came and went; I simply noted them. Sexual scenes, random; they did not stir me. Coiled snakes snapping at bats.

I was moving but there was no way to tell how it was done. Fixed lights to one side; metal? plastic? screens that flicked light at me.

Suddenly, no sound. No pressure of floor mat on ankles. Lifting.

It was as before. I expanded outward. Could sense Rhandra nearby, essence of her drifting like scent on the wind. In pursuit Of infinity. Lose the way Thus: serenity.

But later, much later, something. Something... Try to catch—

Why me? Why am I—

My state of mind was changing. Part of me was—

Why should I survive the Plague?

Doubts and hidden thoughts came drifting up. Clearing out musty corners. Was *I* doing this? Feeling of unrest.

Then I had it. The answer was there, fully formed in my mind.

I'm an *ofkaipan*. Despised.

Better not go into that restaurant. You know—embarrassed nudge of elbow. Quickly walk on.

Shake hands at a reception, feel slight cold withdrawal, formal face smiling but not masking glittering eyes of malice.

Deliveries to home slow, poorly packaged. Insolent servants of superior officers cast you a look, up and down, smile ever so slightly. Make a face behind your back; you catch it in a mirror.

In a shop: Perhaps we can find something more suitable in here—Lead you to rack of marked-down merchandise, scruffy, out of fashion.

With: I'm sorry, the Commandant is out. We don't know when to expect him back.

And: You realize, of course, there may be a delay in taking care of this matter; this office is very busy.

Stares in crowds. Best not go down that street. Look of *Why did he come here? Why doesn't he get back where he belongs?*

It doesn't happen all the time. Just enough to keep you off balance. Never knowing when it's a natural mistake or hidden hate. That was the worst of it, never knowing for sure.

But that was what saved you.

How does a man feel community and gain sense of phase when he *knows* he is despised? He can't enter into the Sabal Game fully. He might *think* so, struggle to convince himself. But the grip would not be sure.

The Plague was designed for the Mongol Empire. It spread through the Game.

I saw, now, that I had always kept a part of myself separate. I couldn't fully trust a Mongol. Certainly not a bastard like Tonji.

So the Plague had brushed by me. Something did not quite work and though I felt the loss of phase for a while, I recovered.

I escaped because I was a detested thing, an *ofkaipan*. My wife was Mongol and the children were closer to her. They had fallen.

I felt a spurt of joy. I was free. I could be anything I wanted. My efforts to fit into the Mongols had failed by some thin margin. The margin saved me.

I dropped down the long end of a telescope. The world collapsed. Rhandra was there, warm, molecular bed of cell wisdom, receptive. Shadowed inlets of rest.

We came back together.

The Master sat upright. The fall of his robes outlined thin legs and knobby knees. There was a faint musty odor to him and the cowl hid his face. What sort of man could this be, to lead me so well?

He was gracefully finishing his ritual. Long delicate fingers in blue gloves plucked the implements from their places and set them aside in definite order.

"Nature satisfied," he said, deep bass. "Are many levels awareness. One step, then two. Break"—he reached up and made a quick snapping motion—"then grow. Every day new."

He cocked his head over to lie on his shoulder in that peculiar Hindic gesture of questioning. I smiled slightly (focus, focus) and bowed. Rhandra, looking a little shaken, did the same.

Outside I glanced at my timepiece and was startled at how much time had passed. Wherever I had been, it had taken long hours.

Still we did not feel like leaving. We strolled among the pilgrims and conversed with them. I wore ordinary street clothes so none recognized my rank or station.

The people here were different. Or perhaps I looked upon them with fresh eyes. Their sentences came forth naturally, without the stilted manner I had heard so much these months. As I got to know them lately Gharma and Majumbdahr had relaxed and now spoke easily. But these people, followers of the Lengen, accepted me instantly.

We talked of the quasimakas crop, what it was like to sweat in the sweet fields and feel the pull of your muscles. Machines weren't used for the harvest; it was held that the experience was therapeutic, so most Vedens took part in some phase of it.

They spoke without hesitation of why they had come here. There were many priests using the same rituals as the Master. Quite a few of the pilgrims used terms that meant to me they had entered the same completely concentrated state. They mentioned a sense of living completely in the moment, neither anticipating or remembering other events.

Some who had been here for a while asked me if I had heard the voice. I shook my head. The asker of questions, one said. Ah, that I knew. *I* framed the questions. But I admitted that at times it did sound like another voice probing my mind.

A few talked of the missions the voice had assigned them: small exercises to discipline the body, works to perform, steps to take in their personal lives.

I listened to all this raptly as the dawn broke from gray to gold. How many pilgrims were there? I asked. Many, too many to count. More poured in every day as the word spread. Others left in groups on missions for the Master, keeping the population of the compound balanced. Thousands had left only three days ago and not returned, yet their places were already filled.

This last piece of information gave me an idea but I brushed it away. I was tired. Rhandra was falling asleep on my shoulder.

A bedchamber was quickly found for us. I gathered we were important guests; the fact that we had seen the Master personally raised eyebrows.

Rhandra and I were glad to be left alone. We needed to explore ourselves and assess what had happened. You do not change yourself permanently with one experience—each advance takes work and hard dedication to consolidate it.

We were to have an audience with the Master again in late afternoon. I called Majumbdahr privately and told him not to contact me unless the situation were critical.

He had nothing new to report than the steady rise of turbulence in Kalic.

Rhandra and I ate, talked and made love. Sharing our experiences in the last day had brought us closer and we found we could convey much by simple gestures or a word. I had been long without such contact.

We wrapped ourself in the black blanket of sleep, unaware of what awaited us.

Something had happened to me.

Rhandra clutching handhold next to me. I piloted. Wild. Coming in too low. Ahead the obese dome of the Palace of Shiva tilted, righted itself, grew.

"Are you sure we should go?" Rhandra said softly.

"They pressed an invitation on us."

"On Majumbdahr, I thought you said."

"They've called me before. Still anxious to give me the laying on of hands."

"Well—"

"When Majumbdahr mentioned it I told him to call and give them warning."

He'd called me just after our early evening audience with the Master. Nothing new brewing in Kalic. A few grouchy messages from Fleet Central demanding more information. Trivial, trivial. Answer them tomorrow. Then he mentioned another invitation from the Palace.

Something made me consider it. I'd brushed them off before. But maybe there was something to them after all. I went back to see the Master. He told me to meditate with him upon the subject. After a few minutes I realized what I wanted to do. Got up, found Rhandra, flashed a sentence at Majumbdahr through the aether, caught a speed slid. To here.

I landed, a little rough, spitting gravel to the side. Escorted Rhandra to ground with elaborate courtly gestures.

Madi hustling out of darkness. Lights go up around landing area. Welcoming party surrounding—

"We're so *happy* to see you *here*!" said the Madi. She fluttered at Rhandra, pursed lips. Rhandra bowed with courtesy, smiling demurely. I muttered a pleasantry. Easy, easy. Little out of control here.

Mr. Fanesh clenched my hand and shook it eagerly.

Others drifted into my field of vision, murmured something and went away. I gathered I was meeting people. Couldn't remember any names.

"The reception is just beginning, Director," the Madi said. We walked toward the dome. "Our banquet

will be *afterward*. Some demonstrations by the priests will be given. I *hope*—"

"What's your opinion of the Lengen?" I said.

"Oh. Well. I've *heard* of them, of course." She looked around at the knot of people following us.
"Doctor Jampul would know more."

She waved a tall gaunt man over. "The Doctor is Professor of Languages at the Institute here. He keeps up on the *other* sects that come and go outside Kalic."

He gave me a gristly smile and I said something in greeting. Moved like he was controlled. Robot. Pedantic look about him; the sort of man who can see sin in syntax.

"Lengen?" he said, stroking his chin. "They have a lot of followers, those ones. I think they're recent. I hadn't heard of them a year ago."

"Who is the Master?" I asked. We were passing through the central foyer and into a large room filled with chattering people.

"That," he said, "is something of a mystery. Few get to see him. There are many priests but the Master apparently converted them after his first appearance some months ago."

"You haven't asked him to the Palace of Shiva?"

Beside me the Madi looked uncomfortable. "We tried," she said. "He did not seem very interesting. In fact, we were *rebuffed*."

Things a little slow for me. Cretins. Need air.

"We would like a place to prepare ourselves," I said. "It was a hectic journey."

"Ah, surely." Crowd parted, we went through. Up a shadowed corridor. Thick aromas from kitchens nearby, muffled footsteps. Rhandra with me, Madi leading. "If you require servants—" No, shake head. Swish of curtain closing on departing rump of the Madi.

Whoosh, sit down. Head a little off tilt. Long day or something. Rhandra looking at me, puzzled.

Jump up, grab her. Thrash around. Eek, tip over urn.

Mad pawing. Bang into chair, laughing wildly. Sloppy kisses. Imitation of enraged ape. Shuffle around room, chasing her. She laughs. Scampers away.

Blunder into bowl of sweetmeats. Both of us fall on them smacking lips. Pop down four at a go. Hungry. Meditation takes a lot out of a man. Needs of the flesh follow me everywhere, even through a detour.

Laugh. Fall down. Lie there a few minutes. Then it's time to be getting back to the reception. Struggle up.

We made our way through rat maze and back to the avalanche of accents. Heads turned at our entrance. Formal smiles. Wonder what they think. Is my cowl on right? Lint from floor on my back?

Madi sweeps over with bow wave of lesser lights behind.

"I'm sure we all want to hear your opinions on the riots, Director." She looks around for someone to second the motion, beaming. Others chime in. Didn't catch all they said. Rhandra smiles prettily.

"Well, I don't know," I said. Stalling for time. "It could mean anything, right?" Wrong note there. Try again.

"We're doing everything we can to control it." That's it. Sound statement, means nothing. Look like a bank president.

"But we have all these *people* drifting into the *city*," the Madi said. Cluster of onlookers nods.

"I don't have authority to close Kalic to the countryside," I said. Even better. Little simpleminded. Act a buffoon, they never suspect you of pilfering the petty cash.

Professor Jampul shook his head sagely. "It's simply beyond reason," he said. "There is nothing to drive those people insane. We live in a calm, stable time."

"Calm for *you*, Professor." The Madi giggled nervously. "Not for the Director here. I have *heard*"—raised eyebrow at me—"of Quarn ships near Veden. That must be keeping you busy."

Think: has that information been released yet? Doesn't matter, must be rumors out by now.

"Afraid they'll rape you in your bed?"

Gasps, slight rustle. Wrong thing to say? Ride over it "I don't think there's any danger of that. They won't be able to land unless they're much stronger than we think."

Polite murmurs. "Oh?" from Professor Jampul. "And just what is their approximate strength?" He glanced at Rhandra and back to me.

Don't want to give away classified information. Could be a spy, stab me in the men's room, press secrets out my ears.

"Why are you looking at her?" I said loudly.

White faces, nervous chatter.

"Wondering where we went when we got here? Follow us to that back room, sneak a peep through the curtains?"

"Ling," Rhandra said, putting a hand on my arm.

"See us set upon each other lasciviously?"

Heavy gong. "I believe the banquet has begun," said the Madi. I found myself shuffling into a large canopied room filled with curved tables. Pungent smell of soup. Waiters moving swiftly to seat the most important guests—us—first.

Rhandra next to me. Mr. Fanesh on the left, Professor Jampul across. The Madi next to him. Cozy. Meeting of old friends, kiss my forehead, initiate me into the holy rites.

I drank some water. Clear and cold. Feeling better. Focus, focus. Laughed to myself. Crowd chanting in theater. Fixed my attention on the soup. Sweet, little hint of thyme. Flavoring stone at the bottom. Don't roll it around in your mouth, not polite. Nor spit it into your palm.

Soup went down with a sucking sound. Sit straight, grow up to be a big boy. (Why should I want to be big? Die faster.) Spine down, pointing, quivering with expectation.

Conversation swirls around. Make small talk with back part of my mind, leave motor control to another, rest is free to walk. We only use a tenth of it at a time, they say. Rest never clocks in. Featherbedding. Union dues in arrears.

Look around the room. As big numbers like myself eat lowly converts are demonstrating their disciplines at the perimeter of the room. Attract some attention, people pointing, some at me. Rude, rude. Palace of peasants. No, not at me. Something behind me.

Turn, eyes widen with surprise. The little brown Yogi is going through his exercises. Raising the coiled serpent, Kundalini. Demon eyes look through me. Remember I've got contact filters on, but he is native, has had his retinal patterns adjusted. Son of Veden. Evil look to him. Funny I didn't notice it before.

He shifts position. Tilts forward, does rocking exercise accompanied with rippling of stomach muscles. I feel sick. He looks like something reptilian, frog body, thing born of weathered oceans. The frog came in on little flat feet. Wonder if that will get him to unconditional state.

Turn back to table. Soup had been replaced by mixture of vegetables. Spartan, no sauce.

"Director, you spoke earlier of the Lengen," Professor Jampul said. Madi smiled uncertainly. Afraid to start conversation again, pounce on her with wooden fangs, slaver over her heavy jowls. "Have you had any experience with them?"

"A little. I went out for an audience. I found the Master quite impressive." There, better. Sounded just right. "How so?" Erudite eyebrows arches.

"His ritual. It forms a mood, a feeling I can't express." That's it. Vague.

"Oh, he used the Hindic *rituals*, then?" the Madi said. "I suppose. I don't have enough experience to say where they came from." Disclaim all knowledge. Slide away from specifics.

"Well, he must be a truly magnetic man," the Madi said. Rhandra gave me a seductive wink, setting off flares in my belly. Mind darts around. Looking for way out. Getting hot in here. Look around at other tables, clogged with rheumatic and respectable bodies. All dead inside, no light flickering through pupils.

Reminds me of holy cadaver they showed me last time I was here. All sliced up for the preservatives to go in, stringy muscles. Gray look to him, ancient saint (imported), naked teeth wobbling in the candlelight. The Madi told me to touch him, Director, he was a truly enlightened one. Legendary, performed miracles. I touched a knee, half expecting him to still be warm.

Main course materializes. Confection of shimmering lightness. Innocent plant with its throat cut and diced out for my inspection. Can't quite place the aroma. Spun cottony webs melt away on my teeth. Elusive flavor down into the stomach, ion processes plate it out on the sides, membranes suck it up.

"Actually, you know," I said, leaning across to skewer the Madi with my eye, "the Lengen have it all over you."

Puzzled frown. Delicate tongue darts out to lick away gob of doomed vegetable from lip. "What do you mean?"

"Simplicity. Appeals to everyone. The Lengen haven't got your six-handed statues. No oil torches. Just the straight goods."

"Well, sir," Professor Jampul said, "I'm sure certain elements find that sort of thing appealing. But the nuances of one's faith, a true feeling of community—"

"Garbage. You aren't going to get it with your inter-religious committees or that pitiful Yogi sitting like a frog over there."

Rhandra laughing. "Ling."

Shrug it off. Good feeling climbing up from my toes. Something they put in the main course? Feels fresh to be honest.

"What you need is a good old Hindic chant. Simple. No atonal verities. Something to give you focus."

"Really, Director," the Madi said, "the *ancient* forms are—"

"Ommmmmm," I hummed. Good. Spontaneous. Shivers down the throat. "OOOOOmmmmmm."

"I *don't* see—"

"OOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMM!"

The anvils dropped from my feet. Up onto the table, arms spread. "OOOOMMMM!" Professor Jampul peering up at me, mouth open. Wave to Rhandra, smile. Suicide perched for the jump. Crowd pointing up at him. Long way down. Yeah, lookit those eyes, give you odds he jumps.

"Alert!" I called. "Beware the frog man! He will eat your toes." Yogi blinks at finger lancing at him. Broken trance. See, knew it was no good.

"OOOOOOMMMM!" Over the edge. Grab Rhandra's hand. The Madi tipping over backward in her chair, clawing at the air. Levitate, lady. It's *in* this year.

Dodge around servants and down the long room, all eyes tracing us, monomaniac radar. Footsteps after us. Excuse me, sir, but the Fleet Control Director has gone mad. Would you be good enough to follow him and see that he doesn't get into trouble?

Out into the foyer. Robes flapping around me, Rhandra sleek like a tiger as she runs. Panting. Little out of shape, office job doing me in. Your body attacks you at moments of crisis.

Someone coming. Dodge through an alcove and into another corridor. Same one we were in before. How do we get out of here? Back to foyer—no, voices coming from there now. Footsteps getting nearer.

Quick, in here. Nimble of foot, close partition. A chamber for meditation. Flickering candles, cloying incense. Empty. Little pillows for cross-legged converts, looking like a field of squashed mushrooms.

In the center is a small brass figure of Shiva. Rippling hands, ferocious expression. *Evil* is *Live!* spelled backward. Why did they name this palace after you, kid? Brahma and Vishnu get a much better press. The statue glared at me, probably getting ready for cosmic war on Rogerzee and the rest of the infidels.

Doesn't look contented. Take it? Might be useful in the afterlife. Swish, hands like birds, into my robes it goes.

Rhandra whispering something. Ignore her. Time to follow one's own divine muse. *His life was a work of art*, reads my epitaph. Attention to detail turns the trick. Voices outside moving by. Here am I, doing warm-up exercises for immortality. Ah, but will I make the team?

Enigmatic sounds. Coast clear? Peek. Damn contact filters cut too much of the light, can't make out anybody. Take a deep breath. Live a life of existential risk: go!

Leap into corridor, Rhandra with me. Soundless demon strikes in the night.

Nobody there.

This way. Around a corner. Voices. Weave away from them, don't pant. Ruin and scandal await you. Through passageway, priests look up surprised. Wave, maniac grin, use the teeth. Over to the left. Right, now down these stairs. Maybe we'll discover the secret dungeon. No, a door. Push open a crack. Fresh night air. Outside, down the path.

Stop to get bearings. Rhandra points to the right. Yes. Landing lights are off, not expecting us. Slipped through their lines.

Into the speed sled. Start it up. Rhandra takes the controls. I smile, feeling weak. She looks concerned. Surprise, surprise. I fall asleep.

"It was an unusual evening," Rhandra said, smiling slightly.

"Yes," I said. I buried my face in my hands, rubbing my eyes. I felt no tension. In fact, I seemed to be perfectly ordinary. "A good word. Unusual. Disasterous fits pretty well, too."

"Why?"

"A Director doesn't act like that. Fleet thinks the Empire is built on formalities and they might be right. I violated a few hundred canons regarding relations with the natives last night."

"How would Fleet ever find out?"

"Ah. Simple girl." I reached out and ruffled her hair as she sat on the floor at my feet. "Fleet has a thousand eyes. They'll know. And they might very well yank me out of this assignment."

A morning beam from Lekki slanted in to warm my feet. I was fed and comfortable. The future didn't seem to matter much. I knew the Master had touched off something inside me and made me perform last night, but the underlying reason didn't concern me at the moment. That was still *me* at the Palace, not someone else. It was an identity I hadn't seen very often since the playful days of childhood and it was welcome back. Whether it was useful to me in my present position was a different matter and I really didn't give a damn.

Rhandra must have been reading my mind. She kissed my knee and said, "Whoever it was, I liked him."

There was a knock at the door. When I opened it Jamilla bowed, not glancing inside, and said in a low voice, "There is a call for you from Mr. Majumbdahr. In your office."

I pulled on a robe and went down the hall. I threw his image on the large projector, killed the camera at my end and sat down.

"Good morning, sir," Majumbdahr said when he saw I wasn't going to transmit an image. "Kalic has quieted down a bit. There are routine messages from Fleet Central, which I've answered. They did an analysis of the strategic situation in this sector and give us a fifteen percent probability of a Quarn thrust within ten days, falling off a little after that. Someone is a little disturbed at Central, though, because they're sending a Jump ship."

"Why?" .

"It carries medium range armament. We can use it to catch Quarn ships out to several hundred A.U."

"That's useless. The Quarn will simply decoy one lone Jump ship out until they get it clear of the system. Then they hit us fast and leave."

Majumbdahr looked uncomfortable. "Control said that's all they can spare us."

"All right." I shrugged. "I'll use it for reconnaissance in the immediate vicinity. It'll be a help. What else?"

"A few odds and ends. I had to listen to an hour of righteous indignation from a Vedanta sect about the gravitational radiation station on the other side of the planet."

"Huh? Whatever for?"

"They think the scientists there are drawing the energy out of the neutron star and will make it fall into Lekki. Say it's a Quarn plot. They want us to stop it."

"Good grief. Say, about that station—any chance they can pick up that anomaly Gharma mentioned coming in perpendicular to the ecliptic? It's just on the edge of detectability for our equipment."

"An interesting thought; I'll check into it. That anomaly, by the way, is getting closer. But the technicians haven't been able to straighten out yet whether it's the range finder or mass register that's malfunctioning. Gharma's been riding them but they say the instruments are fine. They can't explain the results, though."

"Keep them at it when they have time. But keep most of Fleet Control watching traces in the plane of the ecliptic. If the Quarn are going to match orbital velocity with Veden they've got *to* come at us that way. Anything more?"

"Uh, yes," he said and ricked his lips. "The Madi called this morning. She wanted to send a priority message to Fleet Central. She. said she would pay for it herself."

"Um. And what did you do?"

"I think I've misplaced it somewhere."

"I see. Well, we're not here to carry messages for civilians."

"No."

"Signing off, then." As his image dwindled I thought I saw him smiling.

The Master loomed above me. He filled the room, the whole universe. Warm close feel of Rhandra beside me, sweet air of incense, sticky pull of robes on my flesh—all fell away into nothing.

I was totally focused on the Master. As I slid into it I asked *What state is this?* and almost before the question had formed I felt the peace begin. Ripples of worry smoothed and vanished. A state of no definition, no thought, no method. To put aside the thousand things and, in stillness, retain yourself.

"This is done by not thinking various things, one after another," the Master said, his deep rolling voice breaking a long silence.

I laughed. Sound to the side: soft tinkling chuckle of Rhandra.

"Like—that," I said, abruptly snapping my fingers. It was very clear what he meant. Just—that. No

words. Only being.

The Master nodded.

"There is more," he said. "Many things you must know. Not as they seem."

I waved a hand in question, laid my head upon my shoulder. The Master moved his body to shield his hand but I caught a glimpse of a small box. He fingered it.

I heard a low smooth tone that died away as I concentrated on it. A strange prickly shock ran down my neck. I was falling. What—?

Coming back again. I expanded until I could see myself below. Deep white craters that were pores on my face. I shivered in the hurricane breath that swept down from the nostril mountain.

You can be close. Warm. Gather once more into the lap of sunlight. The Master said all this, but with no words.

"There are others near you," Rhandra said. "We are far greater friends than you might know."

I started to turn my head toward her and stopped, fixed in the Master's stare.

They have led you through the steps necessary to appreciate our purposes. When you first came to Veden you were not in a pure state. The path was not open to you.

Now you are in readiness. The Master made ritual passes of welcome, his gloved hands rippling in the soft air.

Those who helped you and were of aid, though you knew them imperfectly, are—

Suddenly I saw Gharma and Majumbdahr standing to both sides of the Master. They must have entered from the wings, quietly standing in place until my attention was focused on them.

—quit of their tasks. You were not ready for me. They saw this. It was in the pace of tightness that you learned Veden first, felt what happened here, saw the signs of ruin.

Majumbdahr grinned wryly at me. I felt a sudden burst of affection for this man who had worked and planned beside me, and at all times sensed my inner turmoil. I owed him much.

Gharma gazed at me calmly. His heavy lids shadowed his dark eyes, adapted for Veden. He was a strange, deep man moved by traditions and social conventions I would never fully know. Yet he too had helped me.

"You lost phase." The Master's deep voice broke the silence. "Became lonely. Isolated. They—" He gestured at Majumbdahr and Gharma and then, with an abrupt, jerking motion, at Rhandra seated beside me.

"I was feeling the same way, Ling," Rhandra said to me. Her voice sounded as though she were far away. "I came to the Lengen. The Master has shown me other sides of myself. When he told me of you I offered to help—to watch over you, guide you to fullness."

"The meeting in the old Hindic section was arranged?" I said slowly.

"Not really. I was there to study you from the crowds. When the Lancers hit me I didn't know you would see me later. It was your kindness that brought us together."

I nodded. The Master had seen even that. He knew, simply from the reports of Majumbdahr and Gharma, what I needed.

I felt a floating, boundless serenity. I looked down on the room bordered by folds of cloth and watched it as a spectator. Rhandra and I sat together in closeness. The Master in his bulky robes was bracketed by Majumbdahr and Gharma. The things they had said did not disturb me. They had conspired to save me from myself and for that I could only give thanks.

I made a gesture of gratefulness. The Master made ritual passes again *over* the dining implements before him.

"Is not all." He pressed the small box again, fingering it delicately. I felt myself rising again.

"Look."

The Master stood up in one smooth motion. He twisted two points in his robes and they slid away. He stood nearly naked.

He was thin, incredibly thin. Long bones moved visibly in his arms and legs, rippling the taut, pale white skin. His fingers were like sticks with large knobby joints. A barrel chest. No body hair.

His feet were dark semicircles of thick, tough fiber spanned by radial ridges of cartilage that served much the same function as toes.

His eyes were deep and black. The mouth curved upward in a thin red line. There was no nose.

A translucent wedge of tissue jutted out where ears would have been. He stood, rocking slightly on the wide base of his feet.

There was utter silence.

He was an alien.

The body was unlike anything I knew among the races within the Mongol Empire. Even those races were seldom allowed to leave their home stars, so there was little chance that one would appear on Veden.

I looked at the Master for long moments. I could not fear him.

In a way, this was the answer I had been seeking. The two threads of my life were tied up at last.

The Master was a Quarn.

Like all intelligent races, they came out of nothingness armed with their own peculiar insights and talents.

There had been another Empire, then. Far mightier than that of the Mongol, comprising many more races. It had already begun to decline when the Quarn were young.

Other races ebbed into lassitude and death. The Empire came apart from sheer lack of interest. Yet the Quarn lived on; their time was not yet come. In the dying embers of that Empire they had learned much. Through the long centuries of isolation that followed they hoarded their knowledge and studied.

Finally age caught up with even them. Their spirit drained slowly away, as they had seen happen to others. The artifacts of their forefathers remained but not the will to build more or to improve on the old.

Then came Man. The Mongol Empire licked at the edge of the Quarn life sphere. The wisest among the Quarn studied the history of the earlier Empire and recognized some of the same symptoms.

Man dominated every other race and culture he met. He suppressed minorities within his own civilization.

It was easy to see why the Mongol Empire had expanded so rapidly.

The history of Man was the history of cycles. A continual tension existed between Man the social animal and Man the individualist. Stress on one aspect or another oscillated slowly through the gradual upward climb toward a world culture. The Asian continent was the last local area in which the virtues of community dominated. When virtually all the human race outside of pockets on the Asian mainland were destroyed in the Riot War, this cycle was disturbed. Asia rose to dominance. Simultaneously, Man achieved the technology to reach the stars.

The Mongol Empire expanded outward on a wave of psychic energy released by the melding of the entire human race into one community.

But Man was not meant fully for community. The duality of his nature was the ultimate source of his resilience and his strength. The Mongol Empire had to fail.

When the Quarn first met it the Empire had begun to slow down and become formalized. Given time the formalities would chafe. Rebellion would bring harsh measures. The Empire would begin to split.

The best way to avoid revolution at home was war abroad. It was part of a classic pattern. The leaders of the Mongol Empire would find it profitable to disturb the peace of the surrounding races. The basic instability of the Empire would expend itself on other, more stable cultures.

The Quarn had studied Man for long decades before deciding on a course of action. They would have to force Man back upon his origins, rid him of the Empire that would eventually crush him. They would use his own weaknesses against him—the only mature way to wage war between radically different cultures.

They pieced together ships that could barely survive in combat with Empire forces. It was the most they could do with the decaying technology they possessed. The ancient Quarn had left giant devices in free space which could perform enormous tasks—move a planet through Jump space, damp the bright fire of a star—but these the Quarn could not morally use in battle. They had to depend upon what they could mend and make serviceable by themselves.

... All this came to me as the Master spoke in the quietness of the Ashram. As Majumbdahr and Rhandra and Gharma listened to a tale they had heard before. As I tried to fathom a completely alien mind.

"What, then," I said, lifting up my open hands at the cloth walls, "is all this?"

"Veden is a unique case," Gharma said. "We are not part of the Mongol Empire here. Some of us will not be victims to the Plague because we were never part of the Mongol community. For the same reason *you* are not."

"Me?"

"You *ofkaipan*." The Master looked at me intently.

"You are among the saved," Rhandra said softly.

"Saved? Because I was despised?"

"Because you are not susceptible to the Plague," Majumbdahr said. "Neither are we. The Quarn are going to find as many people who are not Plague victims—I call them Patanen, 'they who laugh at Fate'—and sneak them out of the Empire to a star system with an Earth-like planet."

"Nucleus," the Master said. "New start."

"What happens to Earth?" I said.

"When the Empire has shrunk down to a few systems the Quarn will withdraw. Earth can cure itself or go under," Gharma said evenly.

I nodded. I could see what was coining next. "You want me to help transport Patanen from Veden."

"No." The Master chuckled. "More important. Many on Earth."

"We want you to help get the *ofkaipan*—the off-islanders—from Earth. They must be saved as well," Majumbdahr said.

"Veden will be a free planet soon," Gharma said. "The Empire cannot hold it for long, or the space around it. From that point on it will be allowed to go its own way."

"Why don't the Quarn bring all the Patanen from the planets of the Empire to Veden, then?"

"No room," the Master said. "Strain food supply. Destroy harmony of city and nature."

"Even many Vedens are affected by the Plague, as well," Gharma pointed out. "There will be turmoil here to which we would only aggravate if all the Patanen were sent."

"How many ships of Patanen will there be?"

"Perhaps fifty," Majumbdahr said.

"Simple to find ships in colonies," the Master said. "Not so on Earth."

"Then this sort of thing is taking place in all the colonies?" I said. "The Quarn hope to get enough Jump ships to carry *all* the Patanen? That's impossible."

"If they were living, breathing humans, yes," Majumbdahr assented. "There wouldn't be room on the ships. But we're going to seize cargo vessels if possible. And we'll freeze the passengers before we take them on." I looked inquiringly at the Master.

"No, no," he said. "No freezing, quite. Just cool down."

"Processes for lowering body temperature to a degree or two above freezing are well known," Gharma said.

"I remember," I said. "It's not used very much but I suppose we can do it. The metabolic rate slows a great deal, but not enough to permit the subject to outlive a ramscoop flight. It's not used on most Jump ships because they are military—the only kind of ship I've had experience with."

I paused. Without thinking, without questioning at all, I had accepted the word of the Master. The task was to be done; therefore I would do it.

When one is truly focused, decisions are simple. There is no worry, for worry is wasted mental motion, nervous jittering of the mind.

Was I so focused? I shrugged the question off. Paying attention to it would only destroy concentration.

"There will be people on Earth who can cool and store the bodies properly?" I asked.

The Master nodded. "We have many followers on the off-islands. A few know the techniques."

"Followers? The Lengen are allowed on Mongol planets—even Earth?"

"No." He shifted his weight as though he were uncomfortable in Veden's gravity field. His robes, which he had wrapped back around his thin body, spread out from his zazen sitting position like a green fan. "Other places, we hide."

"The guru tradition doesn't exist on other planets," Gharma broke in. "It would appear strange if the Lengen arose."

"Then there are Quarn everywhere," I mused. "On all the colony planets, even on Earth."

"Search for remnants," the Master said.

"All that's to be left of humanity," I said. "And *I* am to get them off Earth? Even with your help—"

"With the help of us all," Majumbdahr said slowly. "You didn't think we would remain on Veden when you were summoned?"

I looked at Rhandra. "And you?"

"Of course," she said. Soft as night, her eyes.

"How do we get there?"

"The Jump ship Fleet Central is sending," Majumbdahr said. "It is due in a few days."

"They won't necessarily orbit Veden."

"If you ask, they must," Gharma said.

"True, in the region surrounding Veden I command. But the crew will not surrender the ship to me."

"Take it," the Master said.

"How?"

"With planning I think it can be done," Majumbdahr said, a calculating look on his face. "Fleet Control has some stun gas in reserve. If we can manufacture a pretext for a party from Veden to visit the Jump ship—"

"Yes," I said, "that would work. Gas in the air system would disable the ship before communications section could get off a warning to Fleet Central on Earth. If we do it right there won't even be time for an emergency distress signal."

The Master held his hands together, palms inward, a gesture of pleasure.

"It moves as planned," he said.

I looked at him carefully. His bald head, uncovered, shone in the light. An alien. Yet I felt no fear.

I knew I would follow him. Perhaps what I had seen earlier—the Master's vision of his race, a noble effort to discipline mankind before it could harm others—wasn't the whole truth. The Master, after all, was not a god, but only another intelligent being. The Quarn obviously were superior to men in these matters—otherwise why would I be here now?—and their judgment should be trusted.

All this I thought—but it was not what I *felt*. Inside I carried a quiet, steady faith in the Master. I could feel my inner nature rebelling whenever I began to doubt and question. It provoked a vague, uncomfortable tension.

I relaxed. With focus, everything else went away.

"You wonder," the Master said, peering steadily at me. "Not understand what you feel."

I nodded.

"Your enlightenment has not come," he said. "Still"—he slapped his fists together into a ball—"locked. Sometimes try to get out. I help it."

"Words, words," I said. "I don't know—"

"Remember? When last you left?"

"Yes. I went to a banquet."

"And there. Your nature escaped."

"That was me?"

The Master smiled, his head bobbing. "You spoke clearly through to your Self. Free."

"Don't have to check with management upstairs." I laughed and suddenly felt emptied. Gush, just like that. Bad air out.

The Master palmed his tiny slab of metal. Was he helping me with it in some way? Play the mystic chimes. Music freshens the manic brain.

I noticed my friends smiling. They had known it, that night. I was slowly realizing that everything was part of the whole, planned to bring me to this point.

"For once we saw the free Ling Sanjen," Majumbdahr said.

Gharma smiled serenely. Rhandra gave her quick warm laugh of silk and silver.

"You'll see more of him now," I said quietly.

There was more. More planning, speculation on possible alternate courses, arranging of schedules. Orders to be issued. People coordinated. Only a few of the Lengen converts could go with us and they had to be carefully selected. The Master would do that.

So when we left the Ashram later—much later—I felt as though I were at the end of a long journey. I wanted to rest and yet I could not. More lay ahead.

As we returned to Kalic I watched the quasimakas fields slide by outside, thinking of how little of Veden I had seen. My life seemed to be made up of places I had never fully understood. I never had time to feel the true pulse but instead was rushed on to the next environment. The years spent in the Mongol culture

were not enough to lead me to community—and I realized now that infinite time probably wouldn't have been long enough.

But this time I felt optimistic. I had uncovered at least a part of my true nature. The Master could show me more, I knew. Veden had given me that and I was grateful.

I looked out on the spreading growth on all sides and rubbed my eyes that ached from overuse of the contact filters. Majumbdahr, Gharma and Rhandra talked and laughed, but I was tired and went to sleep. I would have stayed up if I had known it was to be the last time I would ever see the Veden countryside.



PART IV

And were cast down into darkness

Far deeper than before.



It was good to sit once more in the captain's chair on the bridge deck. The *Fariiken* was a Class IV Jump ship, usually used for interception and planetary defense. Like all Jump vehicles it was a sphere (to give maximum volume for surface area) with slight dimples of communication grids that broke the clean organiform surface. Enclosed in the sphere was the life-system cylinder. The rest of the ship's volume held engines and reaction mass. The cylinder in turn contained several smaller coaxial cylinders that comprised the levels and decks.

The bridge was inside the smallest cylinder and thus enjoyed the most shielding from any radiation that penetrated our screens. Here I sat. As I toyed with the visual display and let myself become accustomed to the sounds of normal ship operation again, I never thought of the tons of high density fluids that surrounded me in all directions, encasing the life cylinder and waiting to be fed to the engines. I had never been on a ship in which the reaction mass was appreciably depleted—and the diameter of the sphere contracted—so I regarded the Bag, as it was called, as a nearly rigid object. No one who went into space ever dwelled for long on the fact that organic wastes which are difficult to process are pumped into the Bag for fuel, either. It was not a thought that inspired serenity.

"Majumbdahr reporting, sir."

"Sit down," I said. "And drop the 'sir.' Perhaps the Council on Earth would consider us to be Fleet Officers still, but I don't."

"I see your point," he said, slipping into the form-fitting chair next to me. Automatically he glanced at the visible indicators and verified that all systems were working properly; not even decades on the ground can take that training out of an officer.

"As you've just seen, everything is functioning," I said wryly. "Which means there isn't any particular reason for me to be sitting here watching the computers do their job. But I do it anyway."

"Waiting is never simple."

"It would be easier if I *felt* like a captain. But here on the *Fariiken* it's not the same. I have too much time to think."

"Perhaps because you no longer carry the weight of the Sabal Game on your single back?" he said gently.

"True. That, and the fact that I am no longer following orders from faceless officers in Fleet Central. Independence brings its own fresh breath."

"Independence, indeed. I just verified that all extra-planetary communications gear on Veden has been destroyed. We can't call anyone for help now."

"Ah? How did you check that?"

"One of our men, a Lengen follower, sent me a signal—oh, I see what you mean."

"Small matter. I'm sure if you passed on him he can be trusted to disable the last transmitter."

"There didn't seem to be any chance that Fleet Control would recover quickly after we disappeared—or at least, that's what our man said in that last signal. "No one can follow us either, then?"

"That's a calculated risk."

"We'll be through the Flinger in another day."

"But we don't know how quickly a junior officer will react, sir. That's a big unknown."

"Who do you think it will be?"

Majumbdahr pondered a moment. "The medical officer, Imirinichin. I think he's always had an itch to command. He might jump at the opportunity."

I shook my head. "He didn't strike me that way. In any case, how can they be sure something's radically wrong?"

"Do you think Imirinichin will believe the story we sent out on tightbeam?" .

"It's not so wild, as Fleet orders go these days. Something might have happened that necessitated the *Fariiken's* leaving on the double. And it *would* have taken time for us to get clear of the background radiation from the reaction engines, in that ancient skimmer of ours."

Majumbdahr studied his fingers and looked at me doubtfully. "Even Fleet doesn't snatch away a Director, plus staff officers."

I sighed. "All right, it's not a particularly good cover story. But what does it matter? There's not much they can do. They can't even see us anymore, can they?"

"No. Not on the mass detectors—I saw them put out of commission myself. Fleet Control is still receiving telemetered data from all the sensor satellites orbiting Lekki-Jagen, though. They can pick us up on that."

"Very accurately?"

"No, the satellites weren't designed for that."

"I thought not." I released the catch on my chair and revolved it around to face down the bridge. The

padded luxury of officer's country lay in the next cylinder layer out; even that couldn't compare with the bridge, though. Here a soft quiet atmosphere of rugs with thick pile, padded instrument panels, muffled monitoring beeps and scented air helped maintain calm and alertness. It was a far better appointed ship than any I had commanded before.

The *Fariiken* had also been ridiculously easy to capture. "What was the ship's crew like when you put them in the skimmer?" I said suddenly. "I was here on the bridge. I didn't see much of the action."

"There wasn't much trouble, sir," Majumbdahr said, shrugging. "The stun gas probably hasn't worn off yet."

"What about some of those crew quarters I saw? The ones we've closed off."

Majumbdahr shifted uneasily, making the chair seem as if it were too small for him. "They were a bit messy, yes. Two or three of the crewmen had holed up in there. They barricaded the room with furniture. Sealed off *most* of the air ducts with wadded plastic writing paper."

"Plague victims?"

"Yes. We didn't bother to clean them up—just threw them into the skimmer with the rest."

I looked down the bridge, thinking. Most of the spots for technicians were empty. Battle Control, the largest part of the bridge, was completely darkened. We didn't plan on fighting anyone.

"The *Fariiken* is a first line vessel. It should carry the absolutely best crew available."

"But three of them became Plague victims before the ship could reach Veden," Majumbdahr said.

"The Empire must be coming apart faster than we thought," I said. "Veden must be a haven of sanity by now."

"Imagine commanding a ship with a crew like that," Majumbdahr said.

I looked at him. Evidently he didn't know about Regeln or anything I'd done before I came to Veden. He hadn't seen my personnel file. Well, someone has; the Master had referred to it during my meditation with him yesterday. A good thing they had too—otherwise the Lengen wouldn't have known precisely how to handle me after I'd arrived. "Yes," I said, "the captain must have been under considerable strain. Otherwise I don't think he wouldn't swallowed such a pretext for our skimmer to come up and make direct contact."

Majumbdahr smiled. The ruse had been his invention and he was proud of it. "I don't think you realize what Fleet has on its mind these days, sir. You didn't read the incoming garbage we got from Fleet Central every day. Half of it was about Quarn spies, mysterious codes and security measures. The *Fariiken* got most of those messages too. What's more reasonable than Veden having a few spies?"

"I know—I remember the message I signed," I said. I thumbed the *Fariiken* log into the visual display. One of the last entries read:

STATISTICAL COINCIDENCE MEASUREMENTS OF BACKGROUND
ELECTROMAGNETIC SPECTRUM IN THIS SYSTEM INDICATE PEAKED ACTIVITY ON
THREE DISTINCT FREQUENCY BANDS OVER PERIOD OF LAST 37 DAYS.
RESPECTFULLY SUGGEST THIS MAY INDICATE QUARN SENSORS ORBITING
LEKKI-JAGEN AT UNKNOWN RADIUS. WE CANNOT BE SURE OF INTERCEPTION-FREE
TRANSMISSION OF ORBITAL PARAMETRIC LOG AS REQUESTED BY YOU. HUMBL Y

REQUEST LOG BE DELIVERED IN SKIMMER CONJUNCTION 1346 HOURS 14758A BX 409 TRANSFER. LING SANJEN, DIRECTOR. The Orbital Parametric Log was a block of orange plastic a foot on a side, with delicate black ferrite stains embedded along fracture interfaces and slippage lines, carrying a thousand miles of magnetic memory in a three-dimensional array. A computer could read the swirl of dots at a glance. It included the orbital data for everything larger than a shard of rock that circled about Lekki-Jagen. In particular it pinpointed every ramscoop in a parking orbit. The OPL was a detailed and accurate record and far more precise than any survey the *Fariiken* could make by herself in a reasonable time. It was indispensable. The *Fariiken* would have to know the sheep before it could pick out the wolves.

"I'll admit, though, it worked," I said. "I had my doubts at the time, but I suppose it doesn't take much to fool men who don't suspect you might be working for the other side."

I stood up. "Mr. Majumbdahr, if you'll relieve me..."

"I believe you said we were Fleet officers no more," Majumbdahr said, getting to his feet, laughing. "But I suppose somebody has to stand watch."

"There won't be anything to watch until *we're* nearly in the Flinger," I said. "Things are a trifle dull on the bridge right now."

I walked down a corridor between banks of detection equipment, nodding occasionally at technicians and officers who were at their consoles. We had forty-seven people on the *Fariiken*—just barely enough to keep her running, considering that the Master, Rhandra and a few of the Lengen priests were useless. Hopefully, on Earth we would pick up a few more trained spacemen.

I went down the nearest ramp into officers' quarters, B deck. Strictly speaking, it should be C deck because the inner tube of the life cylinder is a separate level. No one lives there, of course—it has little "gravity" due to the rotation of the life cylinder, being at the center, and is usually kept at high vacuum anyway. The tube is kept clear under normal operation. It is the axis of the Hie cylinder and extends out to the organiform surface of the ship. In an emergency the crew could pour into the tube, travel outward to the skin and escape into free space.

The *Fariiken* was heavily loaded with reaction fluid now, so the Bag was nearly fully distended. The tube—which was organiform and would contract along its length as the Bag emptied—extended several hundred meters from the life cylinder to the ship's skin. Attached to it at regular intervals were pods that housed deepspace equipment, skimmer ports, small life support pockets in case of extreme emergency, and cargo holds. If you could see through the colloidal fluids that filled the Bag, the *Fariiken* would look like a snare drum—the life cylinder—with a thick rod stuck through the middle. From the rod float sacks filled with cargo and other items. The whole contraption rotates to supply artificial gravity and is isolated from the reaction fluids by a flexible organiform envelope.

The *Fariiken* doesn't look very much like the traditional ideas of a spaceship, but then, inherited preconceptions shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of efficient physics. The configuration is stable and because of the viscosity of the reaction fluids can withstand quite high levels of shear. The radiation pattern surrounding a Jump ship when the tachyon drive is on obeys a sine squared distribution about the cylinder axis; this means the most shielding is needed normal to the axis and, conveniently enough, the sphere of reaction fluid around us provides precisely that.

I passed quickly through B deck and down another ramp into C deck—crew quarters. Rhandra and I had chosen a small cabin near the top of the cylinder—"up" meaning along the ship's line of flight—because we wanted privacy. There was enough room for five times our company, but the Master

and most of the Lengen had taken suites on B deck.

"No news," I said as I keyed the door and walked in. Rhandra was lying on her cushioned mat, hand over her eyes. She sat up at the sound of my voice. Her hair tumbled slowly in the weak gravity.

"That word I am glad to hear," she said and kissed me. "There has been too much news of late."

"Tired?"

"I shouldn't be, I know. Lighter gravity and all that. But I am."

"It's been a long week since we were last in the Ashram," I said, sitting on her mat. "Things have moved too quickly."

"A year ago a trip to Kalic was a big event," she said with a slight smile. "Now I'm on my way to Earth. Yes, it is a little quick."

I lay back and pulled her to me. "Earth is just a stopover," I said. "We'll be there only a few days. At our present fuel levels we can get clear of the Empire in one Jump, with a little sacrifice in accuracy. We'll be free of all this forever."

"All this... deceit?" she said quietly.

I nodded ruefully. "Yes, I suppose that's it. Maybe that's why the last week has been so wearing on us all. I didn't like lying to my officers about the skimmer flight and faking that electromagnetic spectrum report. It didn't feel good."

"We don't like being conspirators."

"There's no reason we should. No integrated personality should have to function that way."

"I don't know. If we'd known about the Master earlier—"

"It wouldn't seem so strange."

She nodded. I parted my robes and opened hers as well. Our bodies fit together naturally, softly, as though we had been married for decades. We formed a warm, secure pocket in the austerity of the narrow crew quarters.

"Some of the others don't seem to be bothered, though," Rhandra said.

"Who?"

"Gharma."

"Ah. I haven't seen much of him, there hasn't been time to talk. He does seem more assured than Majumbdahr. Neither of them have spent much time on Jump ships."

"Most of the Lengen priests had never seen a skimmer before—not that I had, either," Rhandra said. "It's hard to tell whether they have difficulty adjusting to low gee and the impersonality of this... this metal cavern. They don't speak to me."

"Or me," I said lazily. I was beginning to relax and I didn't care about the subtleties of Veden manners. I had never learned anything about them, anyway, except that necessary to visit the holy places.

"They seem more rigid than the priests I met at the Ashram," she said.

"You hadn't seen those Lengen before?"

"A few I knew, but none well. One priest from my home district was a friend of my family and I came to understand him in my time in the Ashram. He wasn't selected to come with us."

I yawned. "Maybe the ones here were picked for courage. Or calmness under stress. Or maybe the Master just likes them better."

"I suppose you're right," she said, nuzzling her nose into my cheek. "I'll take some time to come to fullness with all this—it feels a little strange, right now. That's what the Master told me today."

"Oh, yes, you've just come back from your audience, haven't you? How was it?"

She chuckled softly in the folds of my neck. "I was awkward. I couldn't seem to concentrate."

"Um hum."

"I suppose I'm still reacting to his being a Quarn. I didn't have any idea, you know, until that night."

"It bothers you?"

"A little. He really is alien, completely different, but most of the time I don't notice it. The Master knows so much about my reactions and how I feel, even before I know myself."

"That is what makes him the Master and us his followers."

She hit me playfully. "No need to be pompous," Rhandra said. "I don't want you to lie around like an old bear and make stuffy pronouncements. You'll begin to sound like the priests."

I faked a yawn and then rolled her over on top of me. She pushed away automatically when I let go of her hips. Her shove tilted her back toward my raised knees. She gave another awkward jerk to get free that I helped along and before she could move again she was spinning in the air three feet off the floor. I kept her tumbling with my bare feet for another ten seconds, laughing at the startled cries of outrage, and let her drop. She hit our pad with a thump.

"Rrroww!" she said.

"There'll be more if you don't allow me my share of dignity. Until you've spent a month or two in low gee you'll be at my mercy."

"So sorry, master. I did not understand the gravity of the situation."

"For a farm girl, you're learning fast. Throw me my sandals."

"Why?"

"You've forgotten? The Master doesn't grant audiences only to the hangers-on, you know. Captain Ling Sanjen has his needs, too."

"Try not to get your knees locked in the zazen position," she said. "Ship's stores don't carry very much rubbing oil."

I gave her a kiss, a mock salute and went out into the corridor. The violet phosphors were widely spaced

here because few of the Lengen had elected to live in crews' quarters. The *Farriken* had ordinary Sol standard phosphors when we took her, so it was necessary to change them to Veden's unusual spectral distribution. Phosphors operate on direct electrical a.c. current that is conducted through a thin layer on the surface. It's a one-step process that converts electrical energy into heat and light emitted by the phosphor bands painted onto the wall between the two electrical contacts. To change the color of the light one simply paints over the old phosphor with a new one.

The job was done immediately after we came aboard, but the Lengen priests weren't skilled and out here on C deck they had rushed through, slapping on phosphor paint in broad, thin swabs. The result was a spectral distribution of light that looked like a cloudy day to a Veden native and deep twilight to an Earthman. I still wore my Veden contact filters; Rhandra and the rest had their retinal systems altered at birth to accommodate Lekki's light, so it was impossible to operate any part of the ship without Veden-normal illumination. The Master, I'd been told, had specially prepared contact filters that enabled him to get around fairly well; the correction was not perfect. Evidently his world, wherever it was, had a rather complicated sunlight spectrum. Or perhaps his eyes had been evolved for a different role; ours, after all, lay somewhere between the primate eyes useful for finding static, colorful fruit and the carnivore eyes that could pick out a flicker of motion hundreds of meters away. Just thinking about my contact filters made my eyes itch; I rubbed them. I threaded my way through C deck and up the ramp into B deck without meeting a soul. I was already adjusting to low gee; I could feel the difference in centrifugal acceleration between B and C deck. Out at the edge of the life-system cylinder, on E deck where the computers and stationary backup hardware are kept, the apparent gravity is more than one third Earth's. On C deck it was about a sixth and on B one seventh. That made a difference of about four pounds in my weight, which may sound like a lot. But if I'm thinking of something else as I walk up a ramp I don't notice the difference until I get to the bridge, where gravity is less than a tenth Earth gee. Add to that the Coriolis force that kept trying to make me walk into the righthand wall, and there were quite a few reminders that I was inside a life-system that rotated about every minute. Maybe that was the reason the Lengen priests were a bit stiff—they were simple people devoted to loss of the immediate self through total awareness, and the *Fariiken*, with its similarities to life on Veden, mingled with striking differences, would probably disturb their concentration. "Director!"

I turned. Gharma was approaching down a brightly lit corridor perpendicular to my own. "I'm going to the Master," I said.

"Very good. You do not mind if I accompany you?"

I laid my hand on my right shoulder in the Veden gesture of friendship. "A few words may do us both well."

"I have been tending to the preparation of the cooling vaults. I estimate we will be able to hold all the Master anticipates, barring accidents."

"Where will they be?"

"Most will be stored in the pods off the tube," Gharma said. He walked stiffly beside me, arms held behind him and shoulders squared. He looked like more of a soldier than he ever had on Veden. "There are sealed compartments on D and E deck, however, that can be used. I am arranging a schedule for the priests so that we may install cooling apparatus during the Jump interval."

"There will probably be about a week in Jump space, the computers say. Majumbdahr is handling the calculation and he's new at it so there may be a ten percent error. Is that enough time?"

He nodded. "Yes. I think so." He seemed to be computing something mentally.

"Are you sure E deck is all right?"

"I am sure the space required—"

"No, I mean the gravity."

"I'm afraid—"

"Look, these are people well be stacking in, not cord-wood. How would you like to lie in one position for a month in a third of a gee?"

"Oh. I didn't—"

"It's not your fault. The *Fariiken* library probably doesn't carry enough on cold-shipping. When cooled bodies lie in a static gravity field they undergo corpuscular damage and muscle deterioration just because a few layers of tissue are supporting the rest of the body. Even people who are alive get bedsores."

"What can we do?"

"If we put bodies on D and E deck we'll have to rotate them regularly. That requires manpower we probably won't be able to spare. Are you sure you can't get them all into the pods? The gravity is practically zero there."

"I—I will try." Gharma jerked his head to look at me, then looked away. We were approaching the Master's suite. I refastened my robes in the conservative style demanded for an audience—the same robes as on Veden, still necessary to protect my skin from the ultraviolet of the phosphors.

"Well, here we are," I said lamely. There was something about Gharma's heavy manner that made conversation with him difficult. I kept feeling as though I had to think of something to say next.

"This is your regular audience time?" he said.

"No, I phoned him that I would have some time now. I don't have a schedule."

"I hope you appreciate the honor of being so close to the Master," Gharma said. "Most must wait for their audience."

"You've had yours today?"

"No. No, I am later. I have seen the Master a short while ago and now I go to relay a message from him to Majumbdahr."

"About what?"

"Quartering of crew in Earth orbit, some details of the flight. Everything must be carefully managed for speed and security. The pickup from Earth's surface has to be well timed," Gharma said.

"Why doesn't the Master tell Majumbdahr himself?"

"He has elected to relay instructions through you and me. He is easily tired, as you know. The Master is living under conditions that are considerably different from his home world."

"What do you know about his planet?"

"Nothing more," he said quickly.

I tilted my head at him. "How long have you known that the Master was a Quarn, Mr. Gharma?"

He hesitated a moment, blinked. "Since my conversion. He went among the high castes first and was rejected by all but me. I am the only one from the very beginning."

"Well," I said uncomfortably, "very good. I, uh, I think I'll go in now."

I passed through the unsealed door of the suite and brushed aside the red bead curtain that shielded the inner vestibule. The Master sat within.

My meditation was as before. Each time it deepened and yielded greater growth and harmony within myself. Afterward we talked. Usually we touched on only personal matters, but on this occasion I asked the Master about the Plague.

"We induced it," he said. He sat on a slightly raised platform before me, still heavily cloaked and with only his eyes—a light red, due to his contact filters—visible in the shadows. "We had studied your origins. Knew your evolutionary purpose. Accidents of form in each species—scent centers, pressure areas, visual band, taste sensitivity—both define and constrain. We used them."

I shook my head, wondering. "How?"

"Humans have—tension." He made a steeple of his hands and pressed the fingers together, smiling with thin lips. "Early primates hunted in packs. Tribes. Sense of community was high."

"Our natural state."

"Then, yes. Not now." He laughed abruptly, deeply. "Mind says otherwise. Says you are alone. Others do not think the same, feel the same, own same ground, have your mate. Your tribe wants help with hunting. Rewards you with own identity, own *you*. You have own cave. You can find a mate. Sets up tension." He held up a right fist. "You." The left hand enclosed the fist. "And others. Balance is somewhere between."

"A balance you destroyed," I said.

He held up his left hand for me to stop. "Restored. You have a natural fear—repressed terror—of too much crowding. Sabal submerges it. We release fear, let it come out. Lights near edge of your spectral range. Faster than thirty beats a second. Keyed sounds to create muscular reaction by acting on direct synapse level of nerves. Airborne drugs if needed."

"Fear of humanity, of other humans? Why. doesn't it go away when the treatment stops?"

"Society represses crowd fear, makes it more strong. When we stop, their first move is to assure sense of community again—it is what they have been taught to do. Amplifies fear again, so soon after."

"You have killed millions, billions."

"Do you mourn?"

"No." I looked off into space. "I can't anymore. They were strangers to me, even though I lived with them all my life. But did it have to come now?"

"Better now," he said slowly. His presence in the room was overpowering. "Other—older—races will be spared the explosions of your dying days. If we control it—damp it when it has served well enough—we can save some men. Men not vulnerable." He had explained as though to a child, carefully and with a

quiet intensity.

"Patanen. *Ofkaipan*?"

"Same, now. Many more in your colonies. Community bond not so easy there."

"But this is the only ship going to Earth."

He nodded. His cowl slipped back an inch and revealed his gleaming bald head. "No other colonies are safe as Veden. Few men are brave as you."

I laughed. "You must always speak the truth, Master. 'He who is wise, saves his compliments.' "

He shook his head. "But it is true. It is true."

The neutron star clutched at me. It pulled me back into my acceleration couch, trying to drag me down the bridge into the tail of the *Fariiken*. It wouldn't succeed. The ship was built to take much more than the one Earth gee I was demanding of her. We wouldn't come closer than ten thousand miles to Jagen, even throwing in the relativistic corrections to our orbit, so the seven-mile sphere of neutronium could exert only the relatively mild tidal stresses we were feeling.

The mind reassures, but the body is ignorant. My muscles kept tensing to fight the slowly gathering gravitational force, even though I knew I was safe. There was no low throb of the fusion drive my subconscious had come to associate with accelerations in free space, so it was convinced something had gone wrong.

I was facing straight along the axis of the bridge. The ship had rotated around until its axis pointed straight through the neutron star several hours ago and now small pings and snaps echoed off the tough organiform deck as the stress increased. A stylus rolled a short distance on the console at my side and came to a stop against a toggle switch. Otherwise the bridge seemed dead. The technicians were buried in their own cocoons, monitoring data as we neared the point of peak acceleration. Everyone else was unnaturally calm.

"Intercom signal." Majumbdahr's voice came from behind me. I flipped on the speaker. It was the Master. "Could I have visual?" he said.

"You're in your suite, aren't you? Good. Third switch on your left," I said. I thumbed the main bridge display screen on as well.

Lekki boiled below us. Streamers blotted the surface and coiled upward along the local field lines to disperse in the vacuum of space. I watched a center of turbulence trace a curve from the upper corner of the screen, whipping the ion winds around it in a deep violet dance. It was some moments before I realized that I was watching the center of mass of the Lekki-Jagen system as it moved over the surface of Lekki. Both Jagen and Lekki orbited in circles about that point.

I enlarged the upper corner with a finger control and searched against the deep blue haze that framed the rim of Lekki. There it was, a dark dot. Surface temperature a balmy ten thousand degrees, just what it could pick up from Lekki's radiation. A sphere of matter compressed down to the ultimate limit, electrons overcoming their own Fermi pressure and collapsing in on protons to become neutrons at a density of a thousand million million grams per cubic centimeter. The gradient of gravitational potential around it was enormous.

And we were falling into it.

"There's something new coming in from the satellites." Majumbdahr broke the silence. "It looks like a torch spectrum they're picking up."

I swiveled around to watch the board face-on, bracing myself against the tug. "What do they say otherwise?"

"We're on course. Speed already about three percent of light. But I don't like—"

"Verify it."

He spoke into a muffled mike and punched a new program into the computers. I glanced down at Gharma, lying in the Engine and Fuel Systems command couch, and found him studying me.

"Yes," Majumbdahr said after a few minutes, "several sensor satellites have it now."

"How far out is it?" I said.

"Fifty-three million miles," Majumbdahr said.

"Are you sure it's a fusion flame?"

"Yes."

The white torch of a reaction engine had flared on behind us. We were linked into the sensor satellites around Lekki-Jagen and they had picked it up while we were relatively blinded by the radiation levels coming from Lekki.

"A ramscoop, then," I said.

"Yes."

I pressed the *Emergency Station* button. A wail sounded down the bridge, heads raised to look at us and then ducked back to their consoles. I was in standard suit with my hood on to ward off the ultraviolet and I could feel an icy trickle of sweat running down my back.

"Imirinichin," Majumbdahr said.

"It appears as though our esteemed medical officer has picked up the fallen standard," I said. "Give me an intercept."

"Computing," Majumbdahr said, distracted by his console.

"We're going into rebound, sir," Gharma said over the intercom. I glanced up at the screen. Jagen had grown into a sullen red ball bathed in a spray of violet lines—images of the stars behind it, their light shifted by the deep gravitational potential around the Black Dwarf.

A sharp jab of pain in my side. I had been leaning against the couch arm too long, awkwardly braced against the leaden fingers of the tidal pull. I swung the couch around with a touch of the arm control. I could still follow the board and read computer outputs by turning my head.

"Maximum stress," Gharma called. He was taking over some of Majumbdahr's job while the other man worked to correlate the data from dozens of sensor satellites and find where the ramscoop was going.

I watched the screen. We were looping around Jagen, falling in toward Lekki. I heard the cooling systems rise higher in pitch. The organiform of the ship's skin had converted to a metal-like polish hours

ago to reflect away most of Lekki's heat.

"The ramscoop will just make it," Majumbdahr said hurriedly. "Intercept in fourteen minutes, twenty-one seconds." We were through the loop. The screen could no longer pick up Jagen as an absorbing dot against the plasma haze around Lekki because we were between the two stars, picking up speed now. The violet lines around the neutron star were clear, though, and gave a good fix on its position. The lines curved somewhat because we were almost up to one percent of c . In a few minutes we would be traveling in the same direction as the Earth-Sol system, but with a much higher velocity.

"Computing a dodge pattern?" I asked.

"Done. Wait—our mass detector is operable again. I'll try for some new data from it. The readings should be more accurate than all these coincidence measurements I've been using from the satellites."

"How does it appear to you, sir?" Gharma asked.

"Imirinichin is smarter than I guessed," I said. "He waited until the moment we were so close to Jagen that the mass detector wouldn't function properly and we were almost blinded."

My intercom buzzed. I thumbed it off; there wasn't time to talk to anyone but bridge officers. I thought of Rhandra in our cabin on C deck. She must have heard the alarm. She would wonder what was wrong and have no one to ask.

"We can't clear the blast, sir," Majumbdahr said. "It looks like Imirinichin has a nice fat window for detonation of the ramscoop fusion plant. We can't avoid the radiation entirely, but I can cut it down a bit with some maneuvering."

"Do it," I said. "And check back with the mass detector. You've narrowed its range down to get a good reading on this scoop, haven't you? Look for something further out."

In the moment of silence I listened to the whine of the air circulators, trying to think. Visual display showed us pulling ahead of Jagen on an orbit slightly further in toward Lekki. I glanced down the bridge. Technicians stopped their watch to look at the main screen. A Lengen priest further down the way was doing ritual hand passes, perhaps to calm himself.

"You're right, sir," Majumbdahr said. "Three more scoops are moving further out from the first."

"It's a blind," I said. "The first fusion blast jams our sensors and the later scoops hit us before we can recover."

"We have attained maximum rebound velocity, sir, as computed," Gharma broke in.

"Give me a new course, Mr. Majumbdahr," I said. "Maximize the square of the distance we can get between us and all four of the plasma clouds that will ride out on shock-waves from the detonated scoops."

"Computing," Majumbdahr said. I glanced at the visual display. Three minutes had passed since we left the Flinger.

"I'm displaying the new course," Majumbdahr said.

Our flight path was a stylized line skirting out from Lekki-Jagen. A dashed line appeared beside it with slightly less curvature. At the edge of the screen was a red dot, the first ramscoop. It hardly seemed to move and I knew even that apparent velocity was due to the relative movement of the *Fariiken*. The

scoops could not reach any significant speed in the time remaining, but it was enough to move them into our path.

"Log new course," I ordered. "Automatic firing sequence."

Immediately I felt the tug of our own motors. Gyros brought us around, breaking the grip of Jagen's and Lekki's tidal forces. Our real course began to follow the dashed line on the screen.

"Get an estimate of radiation damage," I said. Majumbdahr punched a signal button and somewhere down the bridge a technician responded. The numbers flashed on my screen.

"High," I said. "Too damned high. We can't take that."

"I cannot give you anything better, sir," Majumbdahr said. "They have us boxed in a narrow channel."

I nodded, noticing that our local ship's "gravity" was easing back to normal.

"Prepare to go into Jump space," I said.

Everyone hesitated a moment.

"It's a risk we must take," I said.

"Yes, sir," Majumbdahr said. He thumbed the signal button and a hooting wail sounded through the bridge. The light dimmed automatically to conserve power.

"How large are the tensor elements in the regions just in front of the first scoop?" I said.

A technician somewhere answered me. "Within five percent of critical, sir."

"Have many ships been lost going into the Jump under those conditions?" I said into the intercom.

"A few, I think. It is difficult to calculate the probability. Uncertainties—"

"I know. If the local gravitational stress tensor isn't just right we'll never come out of Jump space," I said.

"Jump computation finished, sir," Majumbdahr broke in. "Power reserves adequate," Gharma said.

"Wait—I'm getting something more," Majumbdahr said. "The mass detector is back on full scan and—ah, I see."

"See what?" I said.

"It's that anomaly again, sir. Something out above the plane of the ecliptic."

"It's still there?" I frowned. "I thought it was some sort of error in the sensor."

"That is what I thought, as well," Majumbdahr said. "I haven't looked out of the plane of the ecliptic since we came on board. But it's still there."

"It can't be a ramscoop," Gharma said. "We never orbited any that—"

"Of course not," I said irritably. "It registers as a large mass. How far out is it?"

"More than a thousand million miles," Majumbdahr said, "perhaps further."

"Oh, no trouble after all," Gharma said. "Hell, I thought you had something close by," I said. "So did I,"

Majumbdahr said slowly. "The range of scan on this Class IV detection system is greater than I thought. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "We have nothing to do but wait."

The dashed line was filling quickly as we traced along our altered flight path. The red dot crept nearer.

"I wonder what it is," Majumbdahr said. "Mass reads larger than any ship. Could be a large asteroid."

"How accurate is that mass data?" I said. "With a mass this high, our equipment isn't good. From asteroid size up to Sol mass, they all register the same." I frowned.

"Jump coming up, sir," Gharma said. "Four minutes." The gong signal grew louder.

"Could you do a velocity fix?" I said. "Yes," Majumbdahr said, and reached for his console. "That will require computer time," Gharma said. "Yes, you're right," I said quickly. "I don't want to take any capability away from the Jump calculation. Cancel that, Mr. Majumbdahr."

Time was running down. I found myself gripping the arms of my couch and relaxed. The red dot seemed to be almost dead ahead.

Suddenly it grew in size on the screen. It was a slowly expanding circle, nearly scarlet.

Gharma looked at me. "The ramscoop just blew," I said. "That's the plasma cloud we're seeing. High energy particles should be along in a moment."

The radiation detectors in the *Fariiken's* skin gave a confirming buzz. I was suddenly very glad for the tons of reaction fluid between us and free space.

"Imirinichin is willing to sacrifice several scoops to stop us," Gharma said. "That represents a substantial financial loss to the Empire. He must be very sure something is wrong."

"Is there any chance one of the Lengen we left behind has given us away?" I asked.

Gharma shook his head. "No. Imirinichin is ambitious. More so than I had thought."

Majumbdahr looked up. There was nothing more for him to do; the computers had it all now. "It doesn't make any difference whether Imirinichin is sure, or whether anyone talked. He hasn't got anything better than a signal laser to communicate with. The subspace systems are all beyond repair. He can't call ahead to Earth or anyplace else."

"We hope," I said. "I didn't see them destroyed and we have nothing more than the word of our man at Fleet Control to go on."

"I fear it is too late for us to change our minds now," Gharma said.

"No," I said wryly, "we're fresh out of alternatives." I thumbed over to general intercom and punched the number of my cabin.

"Rhandra," I said when the receiver clicked, "we are going to Jump. Rest, close your eyes."

The red circle swept out to meet us. I got a visual scan of the space ahead, past the plasma billowing toward us. Far away, Veden shone brightly. The Star of India, forever serene. I was leaving it all.

"Time," Majumbdahr said.

There was a rush, a swirl of light.

It worked. We made it.

It took us eight days to reach the Sol system. Ordinarily the tachyon drive would get us there in the flicker of an eyelid, but we could not travel freely.

The Flinger had saved us valuable reaction mass by boosting the *Fariiken* up to nearly relativistic speeds; now we had to ease back down to match Earth's velocity. The difference in gravitational potential was some help in shedding energy—Earth wasn't as deep in Sol's potential well as the *Fariiken* was in Lekki's at our Jump point. Momentum transfer to interstellar dust through our screening fields accounted for most of the energy, though. We followed a skipping course, winking out of Jump space into the vacant silken blackness one finds between the stars. Here the curvature of four-space is slight and the unavoidable risk of the tachyon drive a minimum. From a technical point of view it was a milk run even with the *Fariiken* far understaffed. But there were other jobs and these kept me quite busy.

Surprisingly, activity lifted my spirits. I had always detested intrigue—thus my failure at the low order palace politics of Fleet. The week before we occupied the *Fariiken* was thick with deception and the stench of the half-lie; I became depressed almost without realizing the cause. But when Imirinichin had shown his hand—and I hoped he was cursing himself now for playing it a moment too soon—I had felt an old exhilaration, one I thought long dead. It came from being involved again, from caring about the result of my efforts.

I had come to think of myself, over the last few decades, as a man of contemplation. Somewhere in my scholastic years I had decided that men of action—the only kind worth admiring, I thought then—seldom studied the works of great thinkers. For practical reasons, perhaps, yes, but not as a habit of mind. So, much later, when I sought wisdom as solace from the world, what in boyhood was a conviction had become an unconscious axiom, and it placed me firmly in the role of an introvert among men who did things.

Becoming the captain of the *Fariiken* taught me otherwise. I liked action and movement, the singing zest of conflict, but it had to be to some purpose. I hadn't cared about patching together the tottering Mongol Empire. I needed purposeful thought and work that a man could do with pride, not the constricted sense of human possibility—of which the Sabal Game was a subtle but integral part—of the Mongol. My work in Fleet had a touch of that, in the beginning. Gradually it had ebbed away as I rose in the ranks until I did not even know it was gone.

I had been over half a century in Fleet. Most of it I worked in the naked night at the edge of the Empire, with mining shuttles, skimmers, hop transports, suborbital cyclers, cargo barges. As I began to move inward, to the places of power—but still not behind an office console, dealing in words instead of ships—the knowledge that I, an off-islander, would never sit on the councils of Fleet Central on Earth, never make a mark that would last, gnawed at me, blunted *my* ambition.

There are many ways to shorten a man. Cynicism, is the easiest. That I affected for a while and then turned to the Sabal Game for what refuge it could give.

The Game fostered the illusion—a pleasant one, I'll admit—that I was in community with any man. I needed that. In the Game there were no *ofkaipan*. But then, the Game was gone.

For eight days we Jumped and waited, Jumped and waited.

Our sensor ears strained to filter through the random noise of weakly recombining molecules, hydrogen gas, dust. We listened for the electromagnetic mutter of a pursuing ship, or for one waiting near our next

Jump point.

There were no signals from Veden among the heavy traffic of subspace communication. I had the technicians monitor the Veden signal codes carefully, performing a random errors check on the computers. This was essential. If Imirinichin repaired his subspace communications system Earth would lay a trap for us.

It would be just as dangerous if Fleet' got no messages at all from Veden. With a Class IV vessel in the vicinity, total silence was unlikely; a typical colony would forward every breath of rumor, once it thought Fleet Central believed them enough to send a Jump ship.

I had Gharma prepare and transmit a regular series of routine reports, with unremarkable statistics and standard pleas for more assistance. I continued to write the Director's report, chronicling further riots and unrest and complaining a bit about my command. They were a lot of fun to write.

Several of them could be interpreted two ways, but in the bowels of Fleet Control I was sure no one would guess the second (usually scatological) meaning. A dangerous amusement, perhaps, but a man who is suddenly free does not act like a file clerk.

We did not dare long Jumps because they are much easier to detect. We did not want a Fleet vessel by chance picking up a backwash emission from an unscheduled ship—Fleet might easily conclude that it was a Quarn scout and converge an entire Fleet Wing on us.

Thus our Jumps were short and we sent forward a Jump battle probe before each step of the flight. The probes were basketball-sized packages of sensors which could Jump—once—almost to the edge of the Empire. Their power sources lasted only around thirty minutes and during that time they blurted back everything they found and then died, exhausted.

For eight days we limped along, constantly firing feeler probes ahead to be sure a surprise wasn't waiting at the next intermediate Jump point. In a way it was comforting, after the glare of Lekki, to see the black bare silence of deepspace on the primary visual display. Majumbdahr handled most of the battle probes. He quickly learned the steps for ejecting them from the organiform skin of the *Fariiken* and guiding them free of pur screening fields so that they would have a clear volume for their Jump. The instrumentation of the probes was sophisticated but he mastered it and soon was even using them as a check on the subspace communicators, to be sure the *Fariiken* didn't by chance miss a transmission from Veden while in a communications "shadow" relative to the Lekki-Jagen system.

The day before we reached Sol, Gharma and I filed the usual official *Fariiken* reports with Fleet Central, duly coded by the captain, and suggested that, since all was quiet in the Lekki-Jagen system and had been for some time, the *Fariiken* be sent home. Another fake signal of ours, this time under Veden codes, reported that the Director concurred with this opinion.

In a few hours we had a reply. Fleet Central agreed and sent along an incoming pattern for the approach to a parking orbit around Earth. There was a note appended telling the *Fariiken*'s captain to stress the scarcity of Fleet ships when speaking with the Veden Director, remember that the Director was inordinantly sensitive about the defense of the Lekki-Jagen system, and beat a quick path back to Earth.

I decided to signal confirmation to Fleet Central. The incoming pattern they sent wasn't useful for us but if we just ignored it and emerged from Jump space somewhere else there would be hell to pay. Earth defenses could pick up any ship that came out of Jump within a light-year; it left a clear signature of pulsed radiation the sensor net would identify instantly.

So at the last minute I sent a request for a new pattern, explaining that we had too high a matching

velocity and didn't want to waste time cutting it down—a Jump time was already computed and anyway the *Fariiken* could decelerate enough if Fleet Central would simply move our Jump point further away from Earth.

I had guessed, correctly, that Fleet Central would move our Jump point out but also give us some discretion about precisely where we emerged. This meant Fleet Central would not know exactly where to find the *Fariiken* if anything went wrong at the last minute.

Nothing happened, though.

I picked our Jump point carefully. We came out four hundred thousand miles from Earth with Luna directly between us and Earth. There was some squawking from Fleet Central, the technicians told me—Traffic Direction on Earth wouldn't dare complain officially to a Fleet captain—because they didn't like to bother getting a fix on our position through the Luna Control station.

We moved inward at a high velocity, all the time in Luna's sensor shadow. There were unavoidable lags in telemetry between Earth and Luna Control that shaved a hairline of accuracy off our known position.

I personally oversaw the routine replies to Fleet Control. They sent us our orbital trajectory and we confirmed but didn't lessen speed.

Fleet was evidently pulling most Jump ships not immediately needed into a dense screen around Earth. We were to be stationed a bit in from the Luna orbit as part of a shifting defense grid. As far as I knew no Quarn ship had ever violated the Sol system. The precautions seemed rather heavy. But then, Fleet knew more than anyone about the decay of the colonies. They were probably quite frightened. In that case surveillance around Earth was most likely being stepped up.

Quite all right. We could deal with that, too.

"Mr. Majumbdahr," I said, wheeling about in my couch. Two couches down Majumbdahr looked up from his console. The bridge was quiet.

"Sir?" he said.

"In a few minutes well move clear of Luna's sensor shadow I don't expect any trouble. On our present course I don't expect that we need take any action for at least an hour. I invite you to take command of the bridge."

I gave a swooping, overly formal gesture at my console and got up. Majumbdahr smiled. I left the soft murmur of the bridge and headed for the ramp down to B deck. It was time for my daily audience with the Master and I did not intend to let anything interfere.

Curiously, my studies with the Master had not brought me any further in the last eight days. I was happier, granted. But that was due to the fact that for once I had meaningful work, honest work. A man is defined by the job he does.

Perhaps, in the rush of sending the battle probes and readying the coldsleep vaults, I had missed some of the Master's subtle ministerings. But looking back, I had enjoyed more the hours I spent with Rhandra, and felt more lightened by them. Rhandra was infinite, like all women. And women, of course, were the first aliens men had ever met, and the only ones we would never quite fathom. All rest and refuge, do they contain.

I threaded through the labyrinth of B deck, with its walls purposefully overcurved to disperse noise, to the Master's suite. Through the faceted bead curtain, past priests in study. Audience requested with the

proper motions, ritual passes to calm the mind, forgetting all that is past.

Our silent meditations were comforting but I was only beginning to work into it when the Master nodded abruptly and spread his hands, palms down, to signal the end.

"State is not right," he said quickly. "Attempting focus while mind goes—" He twirled a finger around by his head.

"I—I do not *feel* so—" I said.

"Ah," he said, nodding vigorously, "*are*. Look at position. Not resting weight through body center."

I looked down. As far as I could tell I was in proper sitting form, a slight variation in the stylized Buddha pose. My alignment of spine felt correct.

Strange. Surely I wasn't fooling myself that well. There had always been some telltale signs before to show how I was throwing off my own concentration. Today my mind was clear and properly placid.

"See now?" the Master said, breaking the pause. "No."

"Ah." His eyes darted over to the wall clock and back. I noticed that he was unconsciously tapping the mat with his webbed feet. "Understandable. Important moment approaches. Perhaps—perhaps is a bad time."

"Master," I said, "I can learn as much in these moments as in any other. My inner light is not disturbed by the approaching crisis. I have come that far."

In truth I felt slighted by his assumption that I was getting nervous about the mission. Enlightenment allows one to live entirely in the moment, and while I had not attained the Buddha state, the evidence of my own mind told me that I had come fairly close to it before and was not too distant from it now.

"No," he said. Once more a glance at the clock. A slap on the knee. "You do not know. I judge your mood not right for study. There are many things you have to learn—"

"And self-knowledge is usually bad news?" I smiled. "Wrong time," he said, not catching my shift of mood. With a start I realized that it was not I who was nervous and distracted, but the *Master*.

I was stunned. He carried no aura of serenity about him now; he appeared to be simply another man worrying about something. Not only that, but he had misjudged my own state and not been sensitive enough to see his own error.

As I took my leave of him I watched the Master carefully. There was no doubting it. The Master was not in his focused state; he acted like a first year crewman before a battle.

And yet he was the Master. He had told me things I would never have known without him, led me down paths into my self that I had never found in a thousand Sabal Games.

As I walked slowly away from his suite, though, I put the question from my mind. Such a problem is not soluble by aimless worrying. It would be a waste of time—and I suppose in some sense unhealthy—to do so.

There were things to be done soon, and my attention was needed there.

Near the upramp to the bridge I met Majumbdahr.

"A moment," he said.

"I was on my way—"

"A second then. I need your consent to use another Jump battle probe."

"Why? We have only a few left."

"Do you remember the anomalous mass we saw on the detectors back in the Lekki-Jagen system?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"I've had a little free time the last day or so. As you know we finished the coldsleep vaults early—I thought it was a good idea to give the men who worked on them a rest, and I took one, too. I had a few hours to go back over all the data we accumulated but didn't process."

"That's the sort of thing you do for relaxation?"

"Well..." Majumbdahr looked a little sheepish. "I've never had equipment this good to work with before. I thought I'd try out a few problems."

"Find anything?"

He suddenly sobered. "Perhaps. I'd never been able to get an estimate of its velocity before—"

"Why?"

"I think you'll remember, sir, that you canceled the calculation because we were going into the Jump and couldn't spare the computer time. In your estimation." He looked at me a bit too innocently.

"All right. Maybe it was an unnecessary precaution. But you've done it by now?"

"Yes. Whatever that object is, the velocity is high and rather remarkable."

"How so?"

"The path it's following doesn't look like an accidental trajectory. It's going to come quite close to Lekki."

"Couldn't it be interstellar matter drifting in?"

"Not likely. It has a speed order of magnitude greater than the relative velocities of star systems in the cluster of which Lekki-Jagen is a part."

"Well, all right. Then it's a fragment from halfway across the galaxy. So what?"

"If that's so then there's nothing to concern us. But suppose it's something else? A Colossus?"

That stopped me. In the twenty-second century some factions had abandoned their planets for political reasons and cast off into deepspace. They didn't have Jump ships. Instead they built crude reaction engines into asteroids, put most of their party into coldsleep, and set out. Most had never been found.

"I see." I frowned. "No Colossus has been seen for centuries."

"That is one of the possibilities. Another is that it might be a large mass on a freefall orbit into Lekki. But..."

"Improbable, I agree."

"I also correlated the data logged in from the sensor satellites around Lekki-Jagen. We were monitoring them continuously on the flight into the Flinger."

"That sort of thing isn't very accurate for readings above the plane of the ecliptic, is it?"

"No, but their results agree, within built-in error limitations, with the mass detector."

I had to admit it interested me. Sending a probe back would take some of Majumbdahr's time, but I felt I owed him something for the good job he had done on the coldsleep vaults. I couldn't demand too much of the man—after all, he wasn't an underling on a Fleet ship.

As well, I couldn't see any further use for the battle probes. The *Fariiken* would make one long Jump from near Earth, out beyond the Empire. We would not need to check ahead to be sure anyone lay in wait.

"You can have the probe," I said. "Will you need anyone to help with activating it?"

"I think not," he said. "I'll probably alert Gharma to keep a running register on the bridge, in case it transmits back when I'm not on duty. The technicians were told we wouldn't be using any more probes and I don't want the signal thrown out as an irrelevant transmission."

"Fine," I said. "Let me know what you find. *Go* for a good velocity fix and see if you can sharpen the mass estimate. Are you going to send it off soon?"

"I thought I'd wait until you're down on the surface making the pickup. Things should be quiet then and I'll have the time."

"You're sure Fleet won't pick up the probe's backwave when it Jumps?"

"I'll drop it into an orbit slightly lower than the ship's. Half the signal will be scrambled by the upper atmosphere and then absorbed by the Earth. The ship will shield the rest. There's a small angle in between that will let some out, but I don't think the intensity will be high enough to register on Fleet's network."

"Double-check that. It's vital."

"I will. My audience with the Master is coming up in a minute; I'll run the check again after that."

"It might be well to skip it today," I said slowly. "The Master is not quite himself. I think the journey has disturbed him in some way."

Majumbdahr frowned but said nothing. "Remember, he is in a strange environment. And his race is old. His kind may not be well adapted to change."

"Ah, yes. Perhaps..." Majumbdahr's voice trailed off into thought. After a moment he nodded absentmindedly and went back to the bridge.

I made my way down into C deck. Just who was the Master, when he was himself? I wondered.

C deck is large and I had not bothered to memorize the corridor plan. Consequently this time I blundered into one of the dark areas before I noticed where I was going.

Not all of the ship was converted to Lekki's light spectrum. We hadn't brought enough Lekki phosphors

up in the skimmer and anyway most of the ship wasn't needed, so it was a waste of time to repaint the Sol phosphors everywhere. C deck had quite a few such spots because the rest of the Lengen chose to live in officers' quarters, B deck.

I walked into the dark section several yards before I realized what it was. To ordinary human eyes, of course, the hallway ahead of me wasn't unlit at all. The Sol phosphors still glowed. But with my Veden contact filters on I saw only a dim, hazy ship's corridor, a curious green instead of white.

I was glad we weren't going to spend too many more days in the *Fariiken*. The green tone was a little eerie. It and other touches of Earth reminded me of my past. At the moment I didn't want to remember.

Rhandra bounced up when she heard my coded key in the lock.

"I've been waiting," she said. "Let's go to the view pod. I want to see Luna."

"Well—" I looked longingly at our sleeping pad. "I thought I might rest—"

"You'll get more sleep when you deserve it," she said. "First take me to the pod. I want the first-class tour and a snappy lecture."

"Hey, what's that?" I pointed.

"A figure of Shiva. Remember? You stole it from the Temple."

"Oh. Yes." I looked at the many-headed brass god with hands as sharp as knife blades.

"Did I run around with that under my robes? Lucky I didn't disembowel myself."

"I brought it. A keepsake. It will make us remember—"

"What I can be?"

I gave her an exaggerated leer. "Some things are better left—"

"Let's go! Luna doesn't wait."

Indeed, she didn't. We were sweeping around her quite quickly. Her ancient craters were seeded with yellow jewels of light that stood out clearly. I took off my contact filters to see better and Rhandra had to get along with a dim image since, as a native, her eyes had been adapted surgically to Veden.

Luna's raw crust had a curious green tinge to it I had never noticed before. I could not tell whether my *memory* was bad or if the contact filters had subtly altered my habits of perception; possibly both.

Earth gleamed in the distance. I had just begun to point out continents when Gharma shouldered into the small pod. "Here you are," he said, ignoring Rhandra. "Why aren't you on the bridge?"

"We needn't take any action for nearly an hour," I said, nettled.

"This is an important step. If anything goes—"

"I can be reached by intercom here." He glanced at Rhandra and looked at me coldly. "The Master wants us to be particularly careful. You should be at your post."

And not here wasting time with this farm-country girl? I thought. "Do I take orders from you now, or the Master?"

"I speak for him."

"Brothers, we are all Lengen," Rhandra said. "Quarreling—"

"There are levels of knowledge among the Lengen," Gharma said, "just as there are grades of priests."

"We are not priests," Rhandra said.

"No layman understands all Lengen principles at once. We must follow the Master and do his bidding even when we do not understand. The rioters on Veden were loyal. They obeyed the Master's guidance."

I had been looking at Luna. My eyes snapped back at Gharma and I looked at him as though I had never seen him clearly before. "What guidance?" I said.

"If they had kept repressing their fears the Plague would have entered. We could not have that. Expression through action—they needed it."

"But I thought the people who fought in the streets fell to the Plague afterward," Rhandra said.

"The riots helped forestall it. We had to keep them balanced as long as possible."

"You knew of this," I said, "when you were containing the riots with me?"

"Yes. In the evenings I helped ready them for the next day. The Lengen converts were not a majority, but they triggered it. In the final stages we had nearly two thousand. The Master could not handle that many converts. We allowed them to stay in the Ashram because the Master thought the, ah, therapy would not be lasting if they returned to their homes. Without large crowds they lost all feeling of release and catharsis."

"Was this one of the levels of knowledge' you mentioned?" I said.

"Well, yes. It was not so much a secret. We—the Master and I and a few others—felt it would be best if you did not know immediately that the Lengen catalyzed the disorders in the streets of Veden. It might have influenced your state of mind if you knew the Lengen had—indirectly—caused some of the disturbances you had tried to control. Your self-pride—"

"Quite right," I said curtly.

"Opposition from the Fleet troops was essential. The people identified you subconsciously with outsiders, the Plague, even the Quarn."

"Are there any other—secrets?" I said. My throat was dry. I felt empty.

"Only spiritual ones," Gharma said. "Those you can only discover yourself. Much depends on one's early education. On Veden, had you been a native, you would have been of high caste. Your views on these matters would be different, more like mine. The Master and I are in accord, I believe. Perhaps when you have studied—"

"Perhaps," I said. "I'm going to the bridge now."

"Of course." He stepped aside and we moved away from him down the corridor. In a moment we were beyond earshot.

"What—?" Rhandra said.

"I think he believed the Master had told me," I said. "Maybe I was supposed to learn today, but the Master forgot."

"Did he mean that word, caste?"

"I hope he meant class instead. But maybe to Gharma they've been the same thing, all along."

Rhandra looked concerned. I told her to go back to the pod and watch the show; it wouldn't be long now. She kissed me absently and went away.

As soon as I reached the bridge I called Majumbdahr on private intercom.

"About the probe," I said. "Don't tell Gharma or anyone else. Monitor it yourself."

"Fine, it doesn't matter to me. Why—"

"Good," I said, and cut him off.

Then I turned my attention to the preparations. We were coming in toward Earth on low torch and keeping usual telemeter contact with Fleet Central and Luna Control as well. Everything was going quite routinely. I handled several incoming dispatches about our orbit and transfer of supplies. Some personnel were to be reassigned to a newly commissioned Class V vessel. Additional Fleet Central estimates of the strategic situation would be beamed aboard in two hours. A report was requested—no, demanded—on the men who had displayed Plague symptoms.

We arranged the fusion torpedoes carefully.

The men had to do their training in the eight days of the transit and most of them had never seen a Class IV weapons system before. Majumbdahr and Gharma hadn't much experience in that direction, either, so most of the job of overseeing fell to me.

The job of calculating precise placements of the torpedoes I left to the computers. They decided on a minimum of eleven torpedoes, all encased in shells that made for a "bright" ionization cloud. Eleven would give us a complete shield and even overload some of the orbiting sensor net we were trying to blind.

After all the rehearsal and training, execution was anti-climactic. The torpedoes went off with hollow thumps, almost simultaneously. I watched them accelerating out—clumsy weapons, not used even once successfully against the Quarn—to form a twisting pattern on the visual display.

The Earth Defense Screen was a spider web of microelectronics that, the press agency said, could pick up a sneeze on Venus. It was a gossamer net, sensitive and delicate, and stupid.

I had always thought the EDS was badly designed. It began as a tracking system much like the short-range net that reports on incoming aircraft at a terrestrial airport. As Fleet grew some other components were added to sense further out and give warning of hostile craft. When the Quarn war started the EDS was strengthened by adding many more sensors to the orbiting grid. Now a ship could be nailed to within a hundred yards of its true location. The grid would even pick up one-man lifeboats.

All this was attained by multiplying the number of units, but never changing their sensitivity. The grid sensors were well enough shielded to withstand solar storms, if, given warning. But with no warning they peered naked into the void, and there was their weakness.

Our torpedoes exploded at the same instant that I sent an emergency distress signal under the *Fariiken's* code.

Nearby sensors were obliterated by the boiling wave of electromagnetic radiation and high-energy particles that seared them. That same wave blinded sensors further away and scrambled the reception of others further out.

We calculated that nothing between Earth and Luna could pick up the *Fariiken's* silhouette as we accelerated and plunged inward. We were buttoned up tight, antennas tucked in to escape the scorching ionized gas. The cloud of fusion debris expanded around us, spreading confusion through the Emergency Response sections of Fleet Control, but our steady acceleration pulled us slowly out of it. Earth's magnetic field forced the cloud to spread as it moved Earthward, still following the trajectory we'd assigned the torpedoes, and soon Eskimos must have noticed the brightening of the aurora borealis due to the high energy electrons.

We flew blind, with only the mass detector to guide us. But the *Fariiken's* permanent log knew the region around Earth the way my tongue knows my teeth and we had no doubt about the course we were following.

When the *Fariiken* burst clear of the snarling ball of death behind us we were hanging above a bunched configuration of ramscoops. The scoops were there awaiting loading with Earth cargo for the colonies. They were in a standard parking orbit that had not deviated in a century; I could have given the orbital coordinates to within one percent from memory. But I didn't have to; they were entered in the ship's permanent log.

The ramscoops provided our sensor shield. There were several hundred near us. Some were damaged and pitted and probably would never be used again unless an emergency arose. Others were being loaded by automatic shuttles. Every few days a scoop was nudged out of orbit by low impulse reaction motors and accelerated until the hydrogen scoop could pick up enough mass to cut in.

This ever-changing configuration of metal and organiform ships was confusing to the Fleet Ships Catalog; it usually wasn't included in the Catalog readout. If we had any chance of going unseen for a day or more while in orbit at a hundred and eighty miles out, hiding in the ramscoop polar parking orbit was it.

"What?" I said.

"You must follow our plans," the short man said. "They have been carefully worked out. We—"

"Cursed be your plans! I am not going to risk my men by bringing them in here in copters."

The man turned and looked appealingly at two figures seated a short distance away. They were heavily robed and sat very tall and erect. I guessed they were Quarn. But they did not speak and their hooded eyes stared out at us impassively.

He turned back to me, tight lines of tension around his mouth. "You understand... our Masters thought speed was..."

"It's important that we move these vaults quickly, yes," I said. "But air traffic is monitored. I arranged a pretext through Air Control, using a faked code—that's how I was able to fly my copter in here. If you people haven't rigged something like that I'm not going to call back to my skimmer and order out the rest of the copters."

"If you arranged it before, Captain—"

"No. I'm not going to use that dodge more than once." I wiped sweat from around my neck with a

handkerchief Rhandra had slipped into my pocket. I thanked her for the tenth time; it was sweltering here.

We stood in the entrance bay of a storage warehouse. Through a partially opened slide door I could see the parched, dusty street outside. The warehouse was in the oldest part of a midcountry off-island city, Naga, on the island of Luzon. In the distance, ringed in gray haze, stood Mayon, the volcanic fire-spitter. As a boy I had seen it belch orange tongues into the tropical skies. Now it lay dormant.

The short man in front of me shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. He must have been one of the Pantanen, and yet he seemed impossibly dull-witted.

"Look," I said. "There's no reason why we have to carry the coldsleep vaults by air. I'll grant that time is important. But my skimmer can make its run any time during the next few hours with about the same risk. We won't lose very much by taking a little longer to get the vaults to the skimmer, if we can be sure that we don't arouse curiosity in the local authorities."

"Trouble?" I turned. Gharma was shuffling slowly toward us from the inner bay of the warehouse. In Sol light he was nearly blind, but he had insisted on coming down in the skimmer and the Master agreed.

"They want us to take the vaults out in copters. Without a believable cover we'll never make it. Air Control will spot unauthorized traffic in this area and wonder what's going on," I said.

"I see."

"I still think—" the short man began.

"Quiet," I said. "There's got to be another way." I tried to think.

"The men inside have almost finished wrapping the insulation," Gharma said. "Things will be ready in a short while."

"Say, how did you get the insulation here?" I said to the man.

"We brought it in on ground-effect trucks .this morning. Why—"

"That's what well use. The trucks have a good cover?"

"Well, yes. They're usually used to haul construction materials for the new Slots that are being built. We got them for the day."

"We'll have to do it that way." I turned to Gharma, blinking back the sweat that trickled down from my eyebrows. "Tell the men inside to send the fully packaged vaults out on the conveyors. I'll send a scrambled message ahead to the skimmer."

"All right."

"And have them hold one of the vaults before sealing it. I want to be sure they've connected the coolant elements correctly. One slip and those people will die before we get them to the *Fariiken*."

I double-timed out to the copter. It was hidden in a side alley where it shouldn't attract very much attention. The area was nearly deserted anyway. Little commerce flowed in Naga now.

I sent the message in a squirt pulse and then sat back a moment in the copilot couch, panting heavily. After all, I told myself, the heat can't be that bad. I grew up in temperatures like this. But the thought did nothing to slow my heart. One of these decades I was going to have to admit that I was getting older.

I jumped down and stood in the alleyway. There was some shade here but the stench seemed to rise from the ground and wrap itself around me. It was more than the damp tropical odor that the earth gave off as it cooled in shadow—it was the smell of the Slots. There might be one near. Or perhaps it was impossible to escape them on Earth anymore. That was why the streets were empty, I was sure.

A mile away an acrid black finger curled up into a dense clotted cloud: a fire. A Slot? Eventually there would be no one healthy enough to tend the Plague victims, and then a fire would rage beyond control.

I turned and went inside. The short man was talking anxiously to the two seated Quarn. They did not notice me as I went through to the main bay where the vaults were being packaged. A guard armed with a stun rifle nodded me through.

The coldsleep vaults were rectangular, eight by six by ten feet. They held about a dozen people and a temporary coolant system. They were covered in a brown flexible insulation with grappling holds fitted into recessed pockets in the sides. A circular hole in one end was sealed; when we got them to the *Fariiken* the connection with the permanent cooling system would be made there. I looked around for a vault without a completed insulation wrapper. There was none.

"Where is an open vault?" I called to Gharma.

He walked over, followed by a tall Quarn. The Quarn was having difficulty moving in Earth's gravity; he made his steps quickly and waited between each one for an instant of rest.

"I checked the coolants myself. There was no need to hold one for you," Gharma said.

"How do you know where to look?"

"There were some tapes in the *Fariiken's* supplementary library. I reviewed the circuits—"

"I'm afraid I can't trust that. If you haven't had any experience—wait, that one over there." I pointed.

"The men haven't finished taping it down."

"There is no time."

"I want to look inside. It won't harm the bodies in there. Even if something is wrong I won't have to break the seals on their personal quilt bags for more than a few seconds." I moved toward the men who were working over the vault.

"There is no time."

"I don't give a damn what you say, Gharma. This is my responsibility."

He motioned to the Quarn. The tall figure stepped forward and said slowly, "He is right. No time. Stop."

I looked at the Quarn steadily for a moment. He was a Master. Not my Master, but of his race.

"All right." I looked out over the warehouse bay where over two hundred men labored to finish. They spoke with the faint lisping accent of the off-islands that I had trained myself to avoid.

"How are they going to get up to the ship?" I asked the Quarn. "We're taking them, aren't we?"

"They come later. Shuttle."

"Oh." I watched them work, these men so like what I had been. Sibilant sounds wafted through the heavy heat. I felt a sudden intense loyalty to them, to the off-islands, to everything that was human but not of the

Empire.

Earth had fallen further than I had guessed. The Plague was everywhere, even here. The faked signal we had used to mask the skimmer's descent had gone unquestioned; Fleet Central seemed undermanned and in the wake of the fusion screen we threw out ordinary orbit to surface flights were not checked. I hoped it would still be that way when we took off in a few hours. There was no way of knowing what the situation was back on the *Fariiken*. I had left orders to keep strict communications silence all the while in orbit. Any faint trace of a suspicious message could be easily traced if the source were this close to Earth. So for the moment we operated in the dark. If the *Fariiken* ran into trouble we would never know it until we reached her in the skimmer.

"These are all your Patanen?" I asked the Quarn. "There couldn't be more than a thousand packed into these vaults." He gestured with painful slowness. "We had not much time. The Plague grew swiftly."

The men had finished sealing the last vault. I climbed up onto a catwalk and made a megaphone of my hands.

"We are going out into the streets now. Remember that you are laborers just doing a job. If anything goes wrong get down and stay there. The guards have stun and laser weapons. Let them do the shooting.

"The skimmer is waiting in a clump of jungle outside Naga. Once we're there, load as fast as possible. But don't speed going through the streets. And remember your friends, wives and children are in these vaults. "God grant that you be safe. "Let's go."

We glided in easily, the skimmer like a small gray bat nudging into the enormous brown basketball of the *Fariiken*. I put my hand on the strutwork by my couch and through the glove of my suit I could feel the faint irregular tremors of activity from the main compartments behind me. There the few Lengen converts from Veden who had deepspace work experience would be freeing the coldsleep vaults of the lines and breakweights that secured them for the flight up from Naga.

I was forward, near the nose. A small portal showed a bald stretch of the *Fariiken's* skin that crept by as our pilot made a few minute corrections. There was a ringing as we locked into position over the tube's mouth. I looked up and caught a view of Earth and stars that careened lazily around. We were fastened above the mouth of the tube and thus were on the axis of rotation of the ship. I felt a slight centrifugal tug toward the skimmer's nose, but not enough to disturb my unusually clumsy maneuvers.

There was traffic over my suit radio but I ignored it. I was commander here in word only; the pilot and dockers knew what to do and I didn't.

I moved gently over to the small lock that serviced the forward and pilot's area. It unsealed easily, since there was no pressure differential between inside and outside, and I slipped through. The first thing I did was secure a suit line to an inlaid hold bar. Then I kicked away from the skimmer, over the lip of the tube mouth below me, and settled to the surface of the *Fariiken* with a small burst of my attitude control. As soon as my boots hit I found another hold bar and clipped a suit line to it. The changes from ship's gravity to Earth to weightlessness had disoriented my reflexes and I knew it; best to be safe.

I looked around. On the other side of the circular tube mouth I could see Majumbdahr's yellow suit. He was watching the skimmer as some men came out of the aftlock. Then he spotted my suit and waved. I gestured and he started to secure a line in preparation for jetting over my way. I looked for Gharma and couldn't see him. He was probably still in the skimmer. Some of the men had found some deepspace hand flashlights that could be altered to give a high violet component and Gharma was using that when I last saw him in the skimmer. It was a good thing he had it; bringing him along was stupid and I only consented because the Master had seemed so certain about it. Gharma was the only adapted Veden we

took along. The rest of the *men* had contact filters like me and so could see clearly on Earth when the filters were removed. When I went back into the *Fariiken* bridge, though, the filters would have to go back in. On the bridge we had altered everything, even the visual displays, for eyes adapted to Lekki's light.

Men were working swiftly around the skimmer. It was pinned over the round mouth of the *Fariiken's* central tube. As I watched, the underbelly of the skimmer yawned open and the first coldsleep vault glided slowly out, straight down into the tube. A few men used their hands but most employed zero-torque cranes and grapples. Here weight vanished but inertia did not; a man could be crushed by a vault out of control.

The men working to unload the skimmer were all, I noticed, ones who, had served under me at Fleet Control on Veden. None of the fully robed Lengen priests came from Fleet. Priests all came from the Veden countryside, where the Master had first taught. Presumably a small Quarn craft had landed him there.

Majumbdahr was jetting toward me. I released my line to the skimmer because it looked as though it was blocking some men in their work and the motion brought my eyes up to rest on Earth.

We were sweeping south over New Guinea. I could see tumbled ridges of green-brown jungle sliced by muddy gray rivers. Men lived there now, but still not many. I had been there once, been bitten and itched and sweated to distraction, and sworn I would never come back. Now it was absolutely certain I would keep the promise.

To the east lay the Solomons. Lumps of brown strewn to the horizon by a careless Creator, now bathed in reflected sunlight from the Pacific that swathed it in ruddy splendor, a light like the crystallized air of the centuries. I had holidayed on one of those specks, eaten a fierce vegetable curry, washed it down with dark stout. It had been soft and lazy there, I remembered, and the accumulated sediment of the long Mongol past had lain lightly on the brows of the people.

Majumbdahr's helmet clinked against mine.

"I didn't want to call you on radio," his tinny voice said.

"Everything on schedule?" I asked, even though I knew if it wasn't I would've heard as soon as we were within suit radio range.

"Yes. I've got the readout from the battle probe."

"Oh. What—"

"Come." He glided away, looked back to see that I was following, and jetted into the mouth of the tube. I followed, released my line and plunged after him.

The first hundred and fifty feet of the tube are organiform so that it can be distended to house the skimmer while in flight. After that it narrows and the walls harden from organiform to a crusty organic-plastic to light amalgam to metal. The storage pouches Majumbdahr had arranged down the outside of the tube. They were rubbery, semirigid rectangular constructs that gained most of their stability from the high density reaction fuel that encased them. They were tough sacks, attached to the tube and floating in our fuel. The *Fariiken* was not designed as a heavy cargo vessel and this series of attached cargo pouches was the best we could manage.

Majumbdahr braked to a stop by the hatch of one such pouch, opened it and motioned me in. I went

through, bounced off the elastic wall inside and sat on the floor. It was small; not more than three vaults could be packed in and safely mounted to the outer tube wall. Most of the heat thrown off by the vault coolers would be absorbed by the reaction fluid, since the walls were purposefully not insulated.

Majumbdahr touched his helmet to mine. "I don't want anyone to see us talking. Here are the fax sheets I got just half an hour ago."

The pouch had one ordinary Sol lamp and a Veden phosphor. My suit tried to compensate and I found reading difficult. The arrays of numbers and one delicately traced line meant little to me.

"I got a split transmission from the probe, separated by fifty-three minutes. That gave me a parallax measurement for both mass and velocity of the anomalous object."

"And?" I said.

"I think it's a white dwarf fragment. It has about two tenths of a Sol mass."

"Too large to be a Colossus."

"Yes. It's enormous, twenty times as large as Jupiter."

"That's a hell of a chunk."

"But that isn't what makes it so unusual. It's the velocity." Majumbdahr looked at me steadily through his face plate. "That large mass is already close to the center of the system. And it's going to hit Jagen. Not Lekki. Jagen." Something went cold inside me. "That is impossible," I said.

"I integrated the orbit twice, carefully. I get the same answer."

"But it's so impossible," I said. "Lekki has more than twice the mass of Jagen. It has a broader potential well. Any random fragment coming out of interstellar space would be much more likely to fall into Lekki—if it didn't ride a hyperbola—fight out of the system anyway—than into a little dot whirling around Lekki."

"True," he said. "If it is a random fragment. This isn't." Suddenly I remembered the Master's voice, long ago: *The ancient Quarn left giant devices... they could move a planet through Jump psace ...* I looked at Majumbdahr.

"That's right," he said. "The Master mentioned it, just in passing. The ancient Quarn. I don't think we were to ever know of this or guess its meaning."

"He has deceived us."

"Yes."

"But I don't know why. It's a large mass, to be sure. When it hits Jagen it will become part of the neutron star. The added mass will contract the orbit Veden follows by... well, about ten percent. That will make Veden uninhabitable—"

"Yes. Veden is finished. But that is not all." I shook my head numbly.

"Remember the observation station on Veden? They measured gravitational radiation from the dipole that Lekki-Jagen form. When I saw this curve—the fragment will collide with Jagen in less than forty hours—I remembered them."

"When the fragment hits—"

"In the last instant the fragment will fall through an extremely steep gravitational potential. There will be a burst of gravitational radiation. It will propagate out in a shock-wave about one light-second in length. I cannot calculate what the wave will do. Perhaps it will not harm anything on the surface of a planet, so Veden may be safe. I am not a physicist, I do not know."

"What about the ramscoops in parking orbit?" He shook his head. "I think they may be damaged. There is a resonant effect involved. If the wavelengths in the moving front of the Shockwave are of the same size as a ship, the wave might tear the ship apart. Certainly some energy will be delivered to a small object like a ramscoop—small compared to a planet—but I cannot say how much."

"So the ramscoop fleet may be harmed. It would be a terrible blow to the Empire. All the long-term resources would be lost. But I don't understand how that could make any difference in the war. It will be over soon, it must." .

"I do not follow it, either. If destroying Veden were the object—"

"No, that isn't it, there *is* no point. Any inhabited planet could be made unlivable by drawing it ten percent closer to its star, and that ignores the effect the fragment's mass has on the star itself. It may cause a complete change in the fusion cycle or even create a nova. I am not an astronomer, I cannot tell. But the destruction of Veden cannot be the point of all this. There are easier ways to kill a planet's people."

I looked carefully at the fax sheets, grasping for some clue. There was so much—

"What's this?" I said, pointing at a separate set of figures and code dots. The dots looked vaguely familiar.

"One last deception," Majumbdahr said somberly. He sounded very tired, weighed down by his knowledge. "It is a subspace communication trace. The signal came from Veden."

"Mr. Gharma's man did not silence the last communicator."

"No. Not that, beside the fate of Veden, the matter makes any difference."

"Wait a moment," I said. "What does the trace say?"

"I don't—"

Suddenly I recognized it. "It's an emergency call pattern. Highest priority. That's all I can tell without a decoder. But this signal is short, so that may be all it contains."

We sat for a moment and stared at each other bleakly. For me the shock was too great; it would take a while to sink in.

"I don't know what is happening," Majumbdahr said after a moment, "but the Master has hidden this from us. What should we do?"

I tapped my teeth together, thinking. "We've been in this pouch too long. We'll be missed, soon. Go out and supervise the rest of the unloading from the skimmer. I'll go into the ship and try to find out more. Take the fax sheets with you; it would seem strange if I had some with me after returning from Earth. I'll meet you in your cabin when I have something new."

We tripped the hatch and went out. Majumbdahr moved toward the skin using handholds in the wall of

the tube. He did not use his jets because men were maneuvering cold-sleep vaults toward us from outside and blocked most of the tube. Beyond them I could see the belly of the skimmer disgorge another vault and figures jockey it into a triangular grip for handling. In a moment Majumbdahr's yellow suit was hidden by the working parties.

A figure separated from the nearest vault and floated with its back toward me, watching Majumbdahr. The man wore a green suit but he was shadowed by the vault and I could not read his number. I started to move inward along the tube. In a moment the man turned and looked back at me. I could see his number.

It was Gharma.

I kicked off and drifted quickly inward toward the main lock. When I reached the smaller bore where the tube entered the life cylinder I chanced another look over my shoulder but could not pick Gharma out from the other figures. By the looks of the work it was going to take a fair amount of time to unload and mount the vaults. There were not many men trained for no gee manual labor.

I passed the main lock and let my velocity carry me to a smaller personnel lock that entered the bridge far from the central bridge where the captain's couch was located. This lock was near the nearest downramp to C deck. A hundred yards further along the tube ended and the reaction motors began.

I unsuited and wasted no time reaching our cabin on C deck.

Rhandra had just finished a bath and was lying nude on our sleeping pad. There was a moment of sheer incongruity in which I realized that, despite all that was happening to me, life for Rhandra had gone on at something like its usual pace. Somewhere in the universe there were still people who took baths and read books, watched rainstorms and made love.

She was, as always, a quiet pool in still forests. I told her of Majumbdahr and the fax sheets. She listened, nodded, furrowed her brow. I sat cross-legged on the pad next to her as she lay. Her oils after the bath were sweetly pungent; I found myself admiring her small breasts that are so much in fashion. She had prominent nipples as well, which I have always thought so fetching.

The crowded conditions of mainland Mongol culture forced a change in the role of nakedness, much as it had in Japan even before the Riot War. A nude woman was not nearly as stimulating to a mainlander as she was to me; mainlanders, with defused responses, were more sensitive to nuances, fluttering eyelashes, glimpses of thigh through sheer silk...

I breathed deeply. I should not have allowed myself to become so distracted, and yet I knew why I did it. I did not want to dwell upon the Master and what he had done.

"What can the subspace signals mean?" Rhandra said, breaking my mood.

"I don't know what any of this means," I said. "It was all carefully planned. Gharma reminded me of the computer time problem just in time to stop us from finding out about the incoming white dwarf fragment. Had it not been for Majumbdahr's curiosity we wouldn't know any of this."

"Ling," she said softly, "you told me about Regeln and the trap the Quarn set there."

"Yes."

"Could this be another?"

"For who? Who is the trap set for?"

"Whoever answers the signals from Veden."

Something fit together. "Of course," I said. "Gravitational radiation. It'll catch them all."

It was her turn. "Who?"

"A Fleet Wing of Jump ships. The distress signal is requesting help, probably reporting a large Quarn concentration. Fleet Central is nervous and edgy already, they might well believe it. They already think the *Fariiken* fused into dust on its incoming orbital run, for unknown reasons."

"What will they do then?"

"When emergencies stack up, reactions become automatic," I said, thinking. "Fleet Central will probably honor Veden's request for one or two Fleet Wings. An entire wing could reach the vicinity around Lekki-Jagen within a day. Exactly when they arrive depends on Fleet's assessment of the tactical situation around Veden."

"And that, in turn, is based on what Veden tells them about the Quarn ships."

"Quite. It shouldn't be very difficult to arrange matters so the wing arrives only an hour before the fragment collides with Jagen."

"Wouldn't they see the fragment?"

"Probably not. They'll be wondering where the Quarn have gone and when they'll return. The wing commander will probably decide to keep his ships on peak Jump status in case he needs to move suddenly, but it doesn't matter. The gravitational wave will finish off the wing anyway."

"But why? Isn't there some chance—"

"It will be too weak to tear the ships apart? Maybe. I don't know. But the Jump drives would never survive it. A sudden change in the local stress tensor will feed energy *back* into the microelectronics and ruin them. The wing will be disabled."

"They couldn't—well, repair it? Or maneuver some way?"

"No. The Jump drive is a sensitive network; once it is damaged it can't just be slapped back together and expected to work. A Jump ship doesn't carry oversized reaction motors, either. It can't, it needs the mass for the tachyon drive. But all that's beside the point, because they'll surely be damaged somewhat, and a crippled wing won't hold very long, even against what the Quarn can bring up."

"How many wings are there?"

"Four complete, one just a pack of remnants left over from lost campaigns."

At this moment, for the first time, I began to believe it might be so. "Perhaps something in the Quarn psychology makes them think in terms of traps and deadfalls," I said.

"If that is so," Rhandra said in a whisper, "what has the Master planned?"

For a long moment we were silent. I found my rubbing stone by the side of the pallet and palmed its gray curves rhythmically, trying to calm my thoughts. Then Rhandra brought out the unspoken between us.

"Why did Gharma not let you see inside the vaults?" she said.

I shook my head mutely.

"Then I wonder," she said, "just who is in them."

I wanted to stay here, with her, and think. But there was no more to be learned from guesses.

"I'm going to Majumbdahr," I said, rising. "Let no one in here and don't answer the intercom."

I made my way quickly, seeing no one, to B deck. Majumbdahr lived alone in a small staff officer's cabin slightly off the central corridor that ran around the circumference of the B deck cylinder. The ship's air circulation was quiet and I could hear from overhead the faint clicks and thuds of people moving on the bridge. Apparently activity was increasing in preparation for massing out of orbit. The loading of the vaults must be halfway finished.

There was no response to my knock at Majumbdahr's door. He probably had not come in from the loading crew yet. I used my coded captain's key to let myself in.

I was wrong. He was there.

He swayed gently, lightly in the air currents of the cabin. Blood dripped steadily from him and spattered red the cushioned floor.

He had been Mahesh Majumbdahr, a brave and honest man, and now he was dead.

He had been trussed expertly, knees bent and ankles bound, wrists wired together behind his back. He was hanging face-down three feet off the floor. Plastic tubing laced through the wrist and ankle knots and was in turn caught at the midpoint by a loop of ship's cord that ran vertically to hang by the catch of an air duct. The body was nearly level except for the head, which hung down toward the floor.

Blood ran freely from a large X that had been slashed across his chest, slicing through the coverall he had worn and cutting deep into the abdomen. His face was mutilated. The bright scarlet pattered regularly off his nose and was forming a large pool beneath him.

I recognized it, vaguely, from my reading of Veden history. It was a ritual Bengal execution, done with a two foot short-sword which, in ancient times, had religious significance.

There was no sign of the sword. I found a small wire cutter and managed to work through the ship's cord. I caught the body as it fell and rolled it onto its side. There wasn't anything more to do. He was clearly dead and from the blood clotting at the edges of his wounds I guessed he had been there for at least fifteen minutes. With head wounds so extensive brain damage due to loss of oxygen would already be setting in.

I was numb but I moved, almost automatically. The fax sheets with probe data were gone. There was nothing in the cabin that seemed out of the ordinary.

All I could think, over and over, was *So it has come to this*. At the doorway I turned and looked back at the body, slumped in a lake of scarlet that was quickly filming over with a ruddy, used brown. It was no longer Majumbdahr, only a butchered side of meat. They had taken away all reason, all nobility, and left carrion.

I went to the door quickly, locked it behind me and slipped around a corner. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a head jerk back into another corridor. I could not tell who it was, but when I reached the spot he was gone. I ran.

Energy boiled out of me. I pelted down the nearest ramp and onto C deck, fear, rage, desperation licking at my heels. The air sang past and my heart thumped and for once I felt as though I could elude whatever sought me, outrun them all, break free again.

I didn't remember the turns or forks but suddenly I was outside our cabin, puffing, eyes stinging. I keyed the door and burst in, babbling, shouting for Rhandra. She turned, from belting up a shortbreec at her waist, saw me, eyes widened.

"The blood—"

I looked down. Majumbdahr's blood stained my coverall from shoulder to thigh.

"He's dead," I said. "Slaughtered. For the fax sheets, I'm sure."

She stared at me, unbelieving, then bit her lips and found a towel and efficiently, coolly went about sopping up the blood from me. "It's Gharma, isn't it?" she said, throwing the towel away. "He knows—"

"He saw us. Must have guessed."

"What—"

"We can't stay here. Someone saw me." Without waiting for a reply I grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door. I locked it and led the way around to an upramp, a different one than the ramp I'd come down.

"We don't have any arms," I said, "but there's an emergency locker on the bridge we can reach. It contains stun charges and laser pistols." We padded quietly up the ramp and into B deck. We crept into a corridor, watching in all directions, and then trotted down it to the next intersection. "If they—" I started, but Rhandra cut me off.

"Someone that way," she said. I listened. Slight murmur of conversation. It got louder. I squatted down to the deck and edged around the corner, hoping I would be harder to spot if my head didn't show at eye level.

Two priests were walking our way. Their robes were gathered about them but in the blue folds I could see handguns carried at the ready. I visualized the plan of B deck and realized that they were probably coming from the Master's suite.

I backed away from the corner. "Come on. Back to C deck," I said. We turned and ran, keeping the sounds of our breathing down and depending on the cushioned deck to muffle our steps. It felt unnatural to wear my boots inside the ship, but I had forgotten to take them off when I got out of my suit.

Down the ramp, onto C deck, turn to right and go down a few doors. Listen for anyone coming. In a few moments there came the soft slap of the priests' sandals on the ramp. We dropped back.

The priests were not talking now and I had trouble telling where they were going. We came to an intersection and I paused. One corner to the left the semidarkness of the Sol light area began. A few corridors more on the right was our cabin. We could duck into the Sol light area and never be seen. It was the safe thing to do.

But I had been running long enough.

"Wait," I said. Rhandra gave me a questioning look with a raised eyebrow.

The two priests appeared down the corridor, moving purposefully. It was a moment before they noticed us and the first one who did raised his free hand in a gesture of greeting. That alone was enough to give them away; no priest is obvious or demonstrative in public.

I paused just long enough for them to be sure it was me. "Come on!" I whispered, and we bolted from the corridor, down to the left. There was a shout behind us.

We shot into the gloom of the Sol light section and I put out my hand, feeling the doorways as we ran past. Then the wall fell away and I knew we were at another intersection. This far into the area where it was nearly dead black, I could barely make out the outlines of the intersecting corridor.

I pulled Rhandra into it and whispered for her to stand still. I reached up and pulled the skin around my right eye tight, blinked once, and my contact filter popped out into my cupped hand. The left one came out as easily.

I could see. Colors were a fraction more true and my eyes were free of the slight strain I always felt with the filters in. Rhandra was blind in this light. She started to speak but I hushed her.

"Stay here. Get down on the deck and lie against the wall. There's less chance they'll stumble over you there." I kissed her once and stepped back into the intersection we'd just left.

The priests were standing only twenty yards away, halfway into the unreclaimed Sol light section. One of them caught my movement in the twilight they could perceive and raised his hand to fire.

That settled the last question. They weren't coming to ask questions or bring me to the Master.

I dove to the side just as he fired, groaned loudly and trotted down the corridor. They took the bait. I could hear their sandals clicking as they hurried.

It was a tricky game I was playing. If I went too far into the darkness they would give up the chase and come back for us with hand torches. But if I stayed on the perimeter of the area they could still see well enough to take wild shots at me, and that might keep them occupied.

It did, at least once more. They shot at me at the next point. I stopped and called out and two short bolts fused the ceiling; most people shoot high when they can't see the target well.

I was playing this by ear and it wasn't going to last long. I could move faster, in my coverall, than they could in robes. But they were not stupid. They probably believed I was wounded, as I'd taken pains to announce, but they wouldn't follow me forever.

At the next corridor, still in the dim twilight of Lekki light that diffused into the Sol light area, I keyed open a doorway and slipped inside. It was a crewmen's room, crowded with personal effects and sleeping pads. It took me a moment to find something I could use. It was an ornamental *polnang* stick, used to bat a ball around a circular court. The glossy, slick wood was also a good focus point for meditation, but that wasn't what I intended.

I keyed open the door and waited. The soft rustle of cloth came nearer. I performed readying exercises I had learned half a century ago, designed to step up my blood flow, tighten muscles, tune my senses. It is important to short-circuit the conscious mind and let automatic reactions and instinct take over; thinking is too slow.

An arm appeared, then a head. They were walking together, the man nearest me a step behind.

I hit him behind the ear with everything I had. He made no sound but I couldn't have heard it anyway. I

followed through with my step and kicked out, foreleg clenching, body twisting to left, power out. My heel caught the second priest over the kidneys and he slammed into the wall.

Stick moving around, clench right arm at impact. Shift eyes to first priest, who was still falling. Step back, lift right foot backwards, shifting weight, catch his throat from the front.

There was a rattling cough. Not enough to kill. Not quite.

Second man was falling, sliding down the wall. Unconscious.

I snatched at the handguns, both laser pistols on nearly full charge. Both men were still breathing, the first one raggedly. I dragged one back into the cabin where I'd found the stick and dumped him. I used my master key to shut down the intercom to this room so he couldn't contact anyone else, and crossed the hall to open another cabin.

I opened the door and my nose wrinkled. The stench was sharp and bitter, and before I could close the door I saw the smashed furniture and twisted clothes piled into mounds in the corners. Men had burrowed into them and been dragged out, I knew. This cabin had held the Plague victims before we seized the *Fariiken*.

I couldn't leave the priest in that. I dragged him to the next cabin by his heels and sealed him in with a dead intercom. With a bit of ingenuity he could activate it when he woke, but that would be quite a while. The intercom would reach the bridge, but probably Gharma was elsewhere now, finishing up the business that Majumbdahr's death had started. Or perhaps he was with the Master. Gharma wasn't the one I wanted, anyway. The Master held the reins. He had done something to Gharma, I was sure, and something to me as well.

I found Rhandra lying quietly in the hallway as I'd told her. She tensed as I approached and then relaxed when I called her name. I told her briefly about the priests. She looked at me vaguely, not focusing on my face, and I had to remind myself that she couldn't see in what appeared to me to be ordinary light. I gave her one of the handguns and then took it back, realizing that she didn't know how to use it.

"What do we do now, Ling?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "All this is invigorating but I still haven't learned anything. I could try for the bridge, or we could go see the Master, providing we could reach him. If those priests of his are all armed I imagine they'll be protecting him."

"Armed priests. It seems strange."

"An understatement. No, we need some advantage."

"Don't you have one? The lights, I mean?"

"Yes, it's all right for me. But we can't stay in these hallways forever. Once Gharma understands what I'm doing he can easily find ultraviolet lamps and bring them in."

"That would take time."

"Um." I tried to think. "Apparently most of the ship knows nothing of this, or the Master doesn't have them under his thumb the way the priests were. Otherwise C deck would be swarming with Lengen trying to—" What? Kill us? Even now it was hard to believe. Then I remembered Majumbdahr.

"We can't sit here," Rhandra said. "Can we go after them?"

"Carry it to them, then?" I said. "Aggressive girl. But you're right. I know the ship and I know what it can do, where everything is. Gharma hasn't had time to learn that and he knows it."

"If he rallies the others—"

"We can't give him time." I sat down next to her in the corridor, feeling suddenly a touch of fatigue. "The Master can sway the crew."

"He may be doing that now."

"Unless he and Gharma are simply waiting. They may be giving the priests time to dispose of our bodies before reporting back."

"Good," she said. "That gives us an advantage if they don't expect us."

"Ah. Ferocious fighter, you are. But we'll need more than this. We're outnumbered."

"There are only a few more priests," she said, looking at me with the face of sweet reason.

"I'm afraid I'm not that much of a hero," I said. "I don't shoot that well and I know you don't. It's not enough to just point one of these"—I hefted a handgun gingerly—"and let go. If you miss, your target might not give you a chance to try again."

Like most people, Rhandra thought a gun entitled her to privileges, such as always winning a shoot-out. There were three priests left, plus Gharma and the Master. I had not lived this long by walking into situations that ran five to two against me.

"Can't we use the lights again?" she said.

"I don't—wait. The Sol phosphors are still underneath the Veden phosphors that were sprayed over them. If we could take them off I could see by that light and no one else could."

"Do they come off?"

"Only if you burn them. I could do it with a fan laser."

"We haven't got one. These are just—"

"Bolt impulsers, right. But the machine shop on D deck would have one. They emit a broad heating beam, but they're heavy and operate from power outlets in the wall."

"Isn't there a portable one?"

"Well, yes," I said grudgingly. "But it's even heavier. Look, I don't think it'll work. We need something else."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. I had just about beaten her down. I didn't want her to make suggestions or try to budge me into action. And I knew why.

I didn't want to accept what was happening. I was casting around for answers but none came. I wasn't focusing on the present, just throwing in stopgaps.

That was just what Gharma and the Master would want me to do. Sit and wait.

And the conditioning was almost working. My mind jittered aside whenever Rhandra made a suggestion,

to find a way out of it.

"The lights," I said carefully. Focus downward to body center. Think clearly. Still the mind...

"The lights. Yes. I should have thought—"

"What?" Rhandra said.

I got up. "Come on. I have to check."

We moved toward the harsh violet. I stopped at the next intersection with an orthogonal corridor and pointed upward. "Can you see those? The small circular splotches." She strained and squinted and nodded. "Those are emergency phosphors. They're running lights that go on when central power fails. There is a separate power source for each deck."

She grinned. "Let's cut the power to C deck, then they couldn't find us in all these cabins."

Now it was my turn to be hardnosed, "No. We can't go on the defensive. If they wanted to they could seal C deck from the bridge and pump the air out."

"But those two priests are here—"

"I don't think that sort of thing matters anymore."

"Oh."

"We'll cut the power, though. To B deck."

"Won't they be guarding B deck?"

"Too many ramps. Come along." I started to move back into the Sol light. It was much easier on my eyes. "We're going to work our way over to another ramp and go up that way."

"How are we going to stop the power when—"

"There are separate centers for each deck. I have the captain's coded key that will let me into B deck's. There are tools in the cabinet and I can use those. I don't think Gharma even knows about it unless he's studied the ship inventory."

"Do you think—"

"Quiet." Rhandra was a country girl and she had a tendency to babble when she was unsettled, like most people. If she kept it up the priests would find us with no trouble at all.

In the Sol light section I noticed Rhandra gradually veered away from me and bumped into the wall. The Coriolis force due to the revolving ship's life cylinder threw off normal walking, but the mind corrected if you could see you weren't walking in a straight line. Rhandra couldn't.

I switched back to contact filters when we reached the last corridor before the violet phosphors. We hurried through the open space before the next upramp and I charged up it, ready for anyone who blocked the way. No one did. The crew was either on the bridge or securing the coldsleep vaults and none had been summoned down to block the ramps. It confirmed my suspicion that the Master had few conspirators with him.

I checked my timepiece. It had been only minutes since I attacked the priests.

We dashed from the shelter of the ramp, by an automatic lift and into a side corridor. I got my bearings and tried to remember where the power cabinet was. Time, time. Everything depended on taking Gharna before he could get help.

I found it, a bulging green color-coded hemisphere, down a short passageway. It clicked open easily, revealing a tangle of power lines, microswitches, connectors, alternate circuit elements, and other things I couldn't identify. The color-coded lines simplified things, though. Routine shipboard elements were red. (The fact that the most prevalent form of color blindness is the inability to distinguish green and red has never penetrated far enough to change the convention.)

I detached a softhead hammer from its wall mount, motioned Rhandra out of the way and smashed three connector switches in rapid succession. Nothing happened. I cut some printed circuitry the same way, then a few things at random.

The lights around us faded, pulsed once, and died. A rattling alarm spoke near the hemisphere's lock. I shut it off.

B deck has more opulently padded decks to reduce random ship noise, and curved corridors to break the spatial monotony. This made it easier to approach the Master's suite of rooms, because no one could spot us from a distance. It worked both ways, of course; Rhandra and I had to move carefully and stay close to the walls.

Overhead on the bridge I knew a technician was trying to figure out why the B deck phosphors should fail just now, when every hand was needed elsewhere. My plan—what there was of it—rested on the hope that he would decide to look into it a little later when there was time. The wait would not be long, but there was a chance it would be enough.

I saw the first priest two intersections away from the Master's suite. He was standing with half his back in view around a corner, his arms raised as though talking into a wall mounted ship's intercom. As I watched he slammed the receiver down and felt his way a few feet down the corridor before stopping. He had just found that the usual intercom system ran on the same power source as the phosphors and wouldn't work either. And, being untrained, he didn't know that an emergency intercom station was mounted in a recessed panel near every emergency Sol phosphor.

We cut to the right and circled around him. Rhandra was as helpless as the priests in this light—she said she could see no more than twenty feet even when we were directly under a Sol phosphor—but I couldn't leave her behind. If a roving gang like those two priests found her I wasn't sure she would have the resolution to shoot first. After all, she was a girl from the farmlands and she didn't know how to shoot either. I saw three other priests as I circled around. They had taken up positions roughly equidistant from the Master's suite and they effectively blocked all paths to it.

But they had made a simple tactical error. They were spread out to cover all approaches and that left them widely separated. The distance between men wasn't very much—perhaps fifty yards at most—but in the sound-proofing of B deck that was enough. They had had to form the net in near-darkness on the spur of the moment; given time they would probably correct it.

I described the situation to Rhandra and gave her one of the handguns with a few instructions about its use. "What're we going to do?" she said.

"You're going to follow me at a few paces behind. If the Veden phosphors suddenly go back on you'll have to drag me out of sight because I won't be able to see a thing. It might take too long to get the contact filters back in."

I paused. Gharma might have sent a man to the bridge, letting him feel his way out of B deck, with word to bring flares or anything else that would supply Veden illumination. In that case aid might come any second.

But if Gharma was afraid or cautious he might well keep all his men with him for protection. He could wait me out that way with little risk to himself.

Which had he done? There was no way to know.

"Look," I said, "I've got another idea. I'll lead you to almost within sight of one of the priests. Then I'll double around and come at him from another corridor. When you make a noise I'll rush him. Give me time to get into position."

"What sort of noise?"

"Just a few words. A question. Ask him why the lights are out. He'll probably think you're just wandering around in the dark."

"I am."

"You're not as badly off as they are. At least you know what's happening." We edged along the passageway for a moment until I could just make out a priest around the curve. "Here I go. Give me one minute. Count it off in your head."

I worked my way around to the other corridor. I crept forward until I had a clear view of the priest and stopped. It was an unnerving experience to stand in what seemed to be easy laser shot of an armed man and still have to force yourself closer. Several times he looked directly at me and I froze, but his gaze drifted on without stopping. It was impossible for me to tell just how far he could see in what to him was very dim light. The human eye has a large range of frequency sensitivity and the changes made in native Vedens narrowed this range, but not in precisely the same way with each patient.

He stood underneath one of the emergency Sol phosphors. I inched forward with the handgun pointed at him. A thousand years ago I had sat in a restaurant with Majumbdahr and talked of reverence for life, vegetarianism, and respect for all living creatures. Now the next moment would decide—whether I had to kill a man simply because he blocked my way.

Rhandra's voice, when it came, was very faint. "Why are—"

That was all I listened to. I lunged ahead, trying to muffle my footfalls, and ducked low to present a smaller target. The priest was turning, his pistol coming up, eyes shifting uneasily as he tried to locate the voice.

At the last moment he did. The pistol leveled as he squinted down the V-and-blade sight. His right forefinger began to clench.

I hit him with a boot heel in the shoulder. It was a high kick I hadn't tried in years but it worked well enough to stagger him to the side and prevent the pistol from going off.

As my right foot returned to the deck I followed the weight shift through with a short chop to his neck. He was turning away from me, perhaps to ward off the blow that had already landed.

I twisted and caught his solar plexus with my left elbow. That did it. The breath whooshed out of him and his fingers loosened around the pistol. I moved in, butted him aside and snatched at the pistol just as he released it. Weapons have been known to fire when they are dropped and it had suddenly occurred to

me that a laser beam could be seen quite well in this darkness even by Veden eyes.

When I had the gun I let his weight sag against me and lowered him to the floor. I was just standing up when something brushed me from behind.

I grabbed at it. My hand closed on soft cloth.

"Oh!" Rhandra cried.

I didn't say anything. Browbeating her for leaving her place would be useless and at any rate there was no time. I was busy listening for sounds of movement from any direction. If one of the other priests had heard anything he would call out to check if his colleague was still there. Or perhaps not; if he had any sense he would come to see himself, preferably with help along in case it was needed.

Nothing. No movement. Only the hollow sigh of air circulation systems.

I dragged the priest to the nearest cabin, unlocked it and threw him inside. I found Rhandra still standing where I'd touched her, and took her by the hand. "Still got the pistol? Good. Stay behind me," I said. "We're going into the Master's suite."

I found the doorway easily and keyed myself in without a sound. Rhandra slipped in and closed the door. We stood in the darkness, listening. A dim emergency phosphor was located halfway up the wall in the next room but the alcove we were in shielded us from it.

There was a low murmur of whispered conversation. When my eyes had adjusted to the lower level of illumination I could make out Gharma, sitting zazen position, upright and rigid, faced slightly away from me toward his left. A beaded curtain between us swayed and rattled softly in air currents that bore the sweet tang of incense.

Gharma's face was strained and tight. He had not moved since I had seen him, but now he nodded slowly and murmured a reply. The Master was not in sight but he was probably in his usual place off to my right, hidden by the jut of the wall.

Then something happened. Gharma turned and looked directly at me. Had he heard our breathing? Or did the Master sense us and make a sign?

"Gateway," Gharma said. His voice was high and nervous.

It was obviously an identification code. Returning guards would have to signal their identity before being admitted.

That was when I made my mistake. The impulse to say something as a reply, and perhaps stall, overrode the knowledge that there could only be one outcome to this.

"Ah—" I said.

Gharma's eyes widened and he reached for something at his side. I realized suddenly that I still had not adjusted to the idea of fighting him. But I did not make the same mistake twice. I acted.

He rolled to the right and brought his hand around toward me. I fired twice, very fast, and dove through the curtain without waiting to see the effect.

Gharma raised his hand with a laser pistol in it and a light winked at me. I fired again and in the same instant felt a searing lance bury itself in my calf.

Gharma sprawled, arms akimbo, and then suddenly went limp. A red haze licked around my eyes and I saw twisting yellow worms of shock began to ebb away but the pain increased. I didn't look at my leg.

Rhandra had not moved. For once she was following orders. I looked up and saw the Master gazing at me quietly from ten feet away. Something about him made the pain lessen.

"Lights told me," he said in his deep bass. "Knew the priests had not won when"—he gestured slowly at the dead Veden phosphors on the wall—"failed."

"The priests outside will not be of any help to you," I said. "No one can penetrate the door to this suite with a hand weapon."

"True. You would know these things." He looked at me steadily, unblinking. His eyes were adapted somehow to Veden light, so the room must have appeared nearly totally black to him. "Not given to us to deal in such matters."

"You seem to have done well enough." I struggled up, flinching at a stab of fire in my leg, and sat. "Why did you have Majumbdahr killed that way—strung up, slaughtered?"

"Disciple Gharma... did it as he liked. He had a way all his own. He said it was ancient Hindic ritual death suitable for even..."

"Even one of low caste?" I guessed. The Master nodded. "Gharma. He never rid himself of the idea that his station meant everything."

"Felt Majumbdahr... unfit... for leader," the Master said. His gaze had drifted slightly away from mine, indicating that he was nearly blind in this light. "A low person."

"Did you not encourage this view?" I said.

The Master simply looked at me. I went on.

"So when Majumbdahr found what you had in store for Veden, you allowed Gharma to kill him."

"Gharma had his own will," the Master said rapidly.

"A will to destroy a Fleet Wing?"

Again he said nothing.

"Why was it done?"

The Master waved a hand airily. "Know little of those things. Weapons, per—"

"What weapons? Missiles? Beam projectors?"

"Fusion triggers. We have... few. Lack still to make them." He stared evenly at me, eyes focused intently, peering down from some spiritual fastness.

"Fusion triggers are useful only against planets," I said flatly. His staring, probing eyes made me uneasy, but I could not look away. After a pause he nodded, as though dismissing the subject.

"Saturation bombing? Is that what you plan next, once Fleet defenses axe down? A few months more of the Plague will do that, I think."

Again he nodded, never taking his eyes from me.

"You would do *that*?"

"It is our right."

"Right...?"

"We made you," his voice boomed. "My ancestors altered the primate genes. Made hunters, learners, from fruit eaters. Formed your social structure. Hormones. Cellular structure. Mating ritual. Family grouping. All bear our imprint."

"No..."

"True. You would have been told—"

"For *what*? Why?"

He sighed suddenly and looked very much older. "An image. A vision of ourselves. I do not know. My ancestors made your race. Lies to us to right the errors."

"Errors? The Empire, you mean?" I blinked to clear my head.

"That. More."

The Master and I seemed frozen in space, lanced together through our eyes as the universe spun away.

"Was it wrong, then, for us to seek community?" I said meekly.

"You have no community. None true to spirit. From beginning, in the ape tribes, you inherited need for others of your kind around you. Protect."

"Yes, that is why we need—"

He cut me off with an abrupt chopping motion with his hand. "To survive you had to learn, change. Find better club. Develop knife. Fire. Innovation is private activity. Ancestors put that in, too. The tribe spirit cannot cleanse it from you. You are at war with your own creativity."

"That is what drives us. A tension."

"Yes, it is," the Master said. He sat reflecting for a moment. His voice came from somewhere far away.

"It lets you grow somehow. Is something like what we wanted. More... ambition? But less isolation than we have. You call us hermits, I think."

"It doesn't matter anymore. You are old, Master. Your race spun us out this way, but the ones who planned it are dead. We belong to ourselves now."

"No."

"Let us go."

"No." The muscles in his face clenched. The expression looked almost human, but for a band of flesh that stretched taut where his nose would have been. "No. We are overlords."

"We can do—"

"No. You cannot. Your Empire is rotted. In your minds is no equilibrium. No rest."

His words came from far away, Soft and light. I was lifting. Rising.

"On new planet we can work with you again. Change the genes. Alter. Prun. Build different consciousness. In the vaults we carry enough humans for pool of breeding stock."

"No... I..." My voice stretched away as though I could see it, long and thin.

"We save you." He moved. Slowly, slowly. My jaw was solid, heavy. A small square of metal appeared in the Master's hand. His thumb traced across it with infinite deliberation. Low hum of—

"Stop!" Rhandra cried.

Sharp crack of laser. Bright orange flash before my eyes. I began to turn from the Master to—*The Master*.

He toppled over onto his side, falling stiffly, surprise frozen in his depthless eyes. There was a wet red wound in his barrel chest.

"Ling? Ling?"

Rhandra brushed through the bead curtain and put the hand laser on the floor.

"I thought... I thought he was doing it again," she said. "The sound of his voice, it was cold and impersonal. He hated you, Ling. He hated all of us."

"Yes," I said. I was so heavy, so thick...

"I had to shoot, you were slipping away. I fired at the sound of his voice." Her voice had a pleading note to it.

I listened but I didn't care. Rhandra swirled around me and I was fixed, pinned. My mind ground as though sand were in it and I could think of nothing else.

The Master was dead.

He had been blind and could not see Rhandra, did not know she was in the room. He had not focused on her. And...

The Master was dead.

Idly, I remembered the device the Master had held in his palm. It was a control for the process that dipped subtle fingers into a man's mind and tipped him over into a suggestible controlled state.

When we had time it would be interesting to study the polytonal inducers, subliminal flicker screens and other systems I had found in the walls of the Master's suite. It was not clear just how they functioned together. Perhaps men could not readily understand such a thing; it was rooted in a knowledge of us only our creators had possessed.

Whatever it was, surely it had been used on the men who had helped us load Jive skimmer on the off-islands. Their shuttle had not appeared and I knew it wasn't going to; the Quarn who controlled them would regard them as disposable. No trouble would be taken to get humans off the doomed, ruined Earth unless absolutely necessary.

And that fact, once I understood it, told me what was in the coldsleep vaults.

Not men. Quarn. Probably a fair percentage of the bodies were men and women. Perhaps there were even children. The new world the Quarn had planned for us would need a genetic base for the Quarn's hobby of breeding new races, after all.

But most of them had to be Quarn. There were at least a thousand bodies and not that many humans would be needed to prevent inbred characteristics from spreading and becoming dominant; probably fifty would do it, as a minimum.

Despite the Master's assurances, Quarn infiltrators must have been working on Earth. Otherwise things wouldn't have fallen into rubble so quickly. Now the Empire was surely on its last legs; the Quarn would have to be taken off Earth.

I was sure that was what our coldsleep vaults contained. Quarn spies who had spread the Plague, and their Lengen followers.

"Have you completed the course calculation yet?" I asked over the intercom. A technician's voice came back, affirmative.

The bridge around me was deserted. I had no senior officers now and the standard computation just finished had taken the entire staff better than twenty minutes. The technicians were working at the limits of their knowledge, without the organization a bridge officer would impose on them. But if I checked every step we could get out of Earth orbit and into the Jump without detection. The stress tensor around Earth was logged into every Fleet ship's computer, so the danger in Jumping this close to a planetary mass was minimized. It was still there, a slight uncertainty that could kill us all, but it had to be faced.

Rhandra settled into the couch next to me. It had been only minutes since I had seen her last but it felt like a day. And how long since the Master had died? An hour?

I refused to think of it. The priests would never have let me live. I had wounded three and killed one in the darkness outside the Master's suite, and taken a burn in the side. Two men dead, and the Master. The Master. I knew I would pay for that horror with sleepless nights. But for now I put it from my mind.

I shifted position and winced. Local anesthesia damped the stabbing bright tongues of pain that laced up my leg and into my ribs, but not totally. I was positioned so that none of the staff further down the bridge could see the brown-red patches of blood that stained my coverall.

I noticed Rhandra looking at me. I smiled. "You've accounted for all ship's personnel?"

"Yes, all the men are here on the bridge. Women and children are strapped in awaiting departure. Many asked what was happening but I told them nothing," she said. "No one prowling the corridors?"

"No, unless they are hiding now."

"Good. Then there probably were no more who knew the Master's plans, or they would have mobilized to find me when the Veden phosphors cut out."

With Gharma and the Master dead, and the wounded priests unwilling to talk, there was no way of telling what the Master had planned or what secret tasks he had assigned to anyone in the crew. Possibly the rest of the Lengen in the *Fariiken* were as ignorant of the true nature of the Master as I, but it would take us time to be sure.

I had been staring at the winking green monitor studs of my console. A twinge from my leg brought me

out of my lethargy. I punched in some instructions and checked our course once more.

"You don't need to do that again, Ling," Rhandra said to me. "Let yourself relax. You are free now. The Master and the Sabal Game and Fleet are all gone and don't matter."

"I know," I said, and my voice was very tired. "But some of those things the Master said are true, you know. I don't really know what I want. Maybe we never have, we humans. Each try we made was a trial solution, some lasted longer, like the Empire, but they all fell. Perhaps that is our fate."

"Uncertainty is natural," Rhandra said.

"Uncertainty is the burden of being a man," I said. I looked out at the mottled pink blues of Earth on the screen above me. My mind was aswirl, a pinched cavern of frightened dreams.

Yes, there wasn't anything left. Just me and Rhandra and the ruin of more lives than I cared to count. Plus the crew, I remembered, who had bargained away their past for a future now dead.

I punched a command sequence button and then switched over to intercom. "Execute course previously logged," I said.

The ship hummed into life as we started toward our Jump point. It had taken only a few minutes to make the change in our Jump course. I punched the alterations directly into the central computer without routing them through one of the technician consoles for verification, because the alternative course I plotted was into free space, far from any star.

And most important, the new destination was beyond the boundaries of the Empire, out into the vast somber emptiness.

The chances of finding a habitable planet before we fused all our reaction mass were good. In the *Fariiken's* permanent log were all the probe reports and astronomical data of centuries; the Empire had never had the time to check all the thousands of opportunities that beckoned in those dry catalogs of facts and numbers. If we went far enough, we would be safe, and with luck I could find a world that was at least livable, perhaps even comfortable.

Acceleration tugged at me and brought a protesting wrench of pain from my side as we moved out of the sheltering convoy of ramscoops. I was sweating freely and my lips had the salty tang of blood and perspiration on them. Shock from the wounds, I supposed, and more.

Gnarled storm currents lay upon the land below us and cold lightning played among solemn black clouds. I had said goodbye to many tilings of late, but Earth was the hardest of them all.

Fleet Central would pick us up soon, but not in time. If they knew where we were right now there might be time to lock onto the *Fariiken* with a beam.

So there was some risk, but I had decided to take it.

I thumbed on the intercom again. "Give me transmission on emergency channel," I said. In a moment a green *Clear* sign near my left hand lit.

"*Fariiken* to Fleet Central," I said, simultaneously punching the *Fariiken* identification codes into the sideband signal that would accompany my voice transmission. I wanted to be absolutely sure they believed this.

"*Fariiken! You are ordered—*"

I clicked off the receiver.

"You'll get this just once. Do not, repeat, *do not* send any Fleet Wings to the Lekki-Jagen system. It is a Quarn trap. Dispatch a Jump probe and you'll see what I mean."

I glanced at Rhandra. She was trying to watch me and her console at the same time. The seconds were ticking away for the Jump I had programmed.

"You don't deserve it," I said to the console's sound pickup, "but I'm chancing that you won't burn us out of the sky before I'm finished talking.

"This is Ling Sanjen speaking, late of Fleet Control. I'm serving notice on you, Fleet, and that damned Empire. We're even—I've got your ship, and if you aren't too stupid you'll save a Fleet Wing or two.

"So that's it. Do what you can about the Quarn. Maybe you'll survive yet. If you do my grandchildren may run into you sometime. Watch out if they do, though—you won't understand them. They are going to be like me."

I switched off. The bridge had heard it all and heads were turned to watch me all down the line. No one spoke. A few clutched at their robes, shocked, looking rheumatic and respectable. I could deal with them later.

They would make an interesting lot of colonists, these. It would take time to accustom them to hardship. After that, perhaps it would be time to take a few Quarn from the coldsleep vaults. I was not so proud that I thought they had nothing to teach, or I nothing to learn.

Cool and beautiful, Earth slipped away underneath us. In a few seconds we would leave her forever for the black night between the stars.

"Time," Rhandra said softly.

I closed the Jump circuits myself. A chill whisper rushed through the ship. I took the controls. An electric blue shock came for a flicker of a second and then we were through, drifting free.

Strange stars blazed in the distance. Below us a ragged dust cloud blotted out whatever lay beyond.

I took us down, into darkness.