

Telzey was in a spot, but she wasn't the type to howl about that. She got someone else to do that for her.

JAMES H. SCHMITZ
Illustrated by Kelly Freas

1

The last thing she remembered feeling was a horrid, raging, topsy-turvy confusion. Her mind seemed simultaneously ripped apart and squeezed to a pulp. She hadn't been able to begin to think. Then there'd been nothing.

Now there was something again. The confusion was gone. She found herself here, and thinking—

Lying on her back on some soft surface, dressed. There was light beyond her eyelids which she wasn't going to open just yet. The attack on Casmard's space yacht hadn't killed her, or injured her physically. What about the others?

Her mind screens opened cautiously.

Trigger was close by, probably in the same room, asleep. Sleeping comfortably. There were no immediate indications of Casmard, which wasn't surprising since she'd never tried to touch his mind before. She didn't start searching for him. If neither she nor Trigger had been harmed in the attack on the yacht, he should be all right, too, at the moment.

But there'd been a fourth person on the yacht—a man named Kewen, Casmard's navigator in the Husna Regatta. Telzey did want to know immediately about him.

She put out search thoughts designed to awaken a response in the subconscious levels of Kewen's mind if they touched it. Eventually, one of them did. Telzey followed it up, and eased herself very gently into that mind. Kewen also was placidly asleep. She studied his mental patterns carefully for a time, secured a number of controls on them. Before she was done, she was picking up occasional washes of faint thought from other sources. There were minds of psi type about, apparently unscreened, apparently non-telepathic.

That should be significant; in any case, it could produce immediate information. Finished with Kewen, Telzey waited for the next wisp of other-thought, touched it when it came, blended awareness with it, moved toward an unguarded psi mind and ghosted inquiringly around there.

She gained information—and what she learned increased her caution. She withdrew from the psi as imperceptibly as she'd approached.

Then at last, almost an hour after she'd first come awake, she opened her eyes.

* * *

There was diffused light glow on the ceiling, barely required here. Daylight coming through a large shuttered window on the right made a pattern of bright lines on the carpet. She was lying on a couch, and Trigger lay on a couch across the room from her, red-bronze hair spilling over her face. They were dressed in the clothes they'd worn on Casmard's yacht before the attack. Arranged along the floor in the center of the room was the luggage they'd had on the yacht.

Telzey gave Trigger's half-shielded mind a nudge, and Trigger woke up. She'd been close to awaking for some while. She lifted her head, looked over at Telzey, came up on an elbow and looked around. Her glance held on the row of luggage. She sat up, put a cautioning finger to her lips, got off the couch and went over to the luggage. She opened one of the suitcases.

Telzey joined her there. Trigger was unsealing a secret compartment in the suitcase. She brought out a cosmetics purse which she set aside, then a small bag which she opened. There were a number of rings in it. Trigger selected two, gave one to Telzey, put the other on her finger, returned the bag to the compartment, and closed that and the suitcase.

She put the cosmetics purse in her jacket pocket and watched Telzey very carefully fit on the second

ring.

"That on-and-off husband of mine," Trigger said then in a normal voice, "is a security gadget nut. He insists I carry what he calls the minimum line around with me when we're not together. Every so often it turns out to be a good idea. We're distorted and scrambled now, so I guess we can talk. What's happened?"

"I've found out a few things," Telzey said. "Better get your O.G. shield closed tight, and keep it tight."

"Done," said Trigger. "Psi stuff around, eh?"

Telzey nodded. "Quite a lot of it! I don't know what that means yet, but it could mean trouble. About what happened to us—somebody seems to have turned a stun beam on the yacht and knocked us out before they grappled and boarded."

"A rough beam that was!" Trigger said.

"What did it feel like to you?"

"Well . . . let's say as if my head turned into a drum half the size of the universe and somebody was pounding on it with clubs. But I'm all right now. Do you know who did it, where we are, and what's happened to the Askab and the navigator?"

"More or less, I do," Telzey said. "We're on Askanam, in the Balak of Tamandun—Casmard's balak. More specifically, we're in a section of a palace which belongs to the man who's been Regent of Tamandun in Casmard's absence. He was presumably responsible for the attack on the yacht."

"To have Casmard kidnapped?"

"Apparently. I'm pretty sure Casmard's somewhere in the palace, and I know Kewen is. We're here because we happened to be on the yacht with Casmard."

Trigger said, after a moment, "From what I've heard of Askanam politics, that doesn't look too good."

"I'm afraid it isn't good," Telzey agreed. "When we're missed, all anyone will know is that Casmard's yacht appears to have vanished in interstellar space with all aboard."

"How does the psi business fit in?"

"I don't know yet. There're a number of psis of assorted types not very far from us. Anywhere up to two dozen of them. One had an unguarded mind and I tapped it. But I discovered then that some of the others were screened telepaths. I could have been detected at any moment, so I pulled out before I got as much information as I wanted. I'm not sure why they're here. There was something about a Glory Day—a big annual holiday in Tamandun—coming up. Something else about arena games connected with Glory Day festivities." Telzey shook her head. "Those psis aren't Askanam people. At least, the one I was tapping isn't. She's a Federation citizen."

"They might be helpful then," Trigger suggested.

"They might. But I'd want to find out more about them before I let them know I'm also a Federation psi who's probably in a jam. And I'll have to be careful about that because of the telepaths."

Trigger nodded. "Sounds like you're right! You'd better stay our secret weapon for a while. Particularly—are the psis in the building, too?"

"No, I'm sure they're not in the building. They're close to us, but not that close."

"But there's a connection between them and Casmard's Regent?"

"I'm almost sure of that."

"Well—" Trigger shrugged. "Let's freshen up and change our clothes before we have visitors. What do you wear on Askanam in the palace of a Regent who might be thinking of featuring you in the upcoming arena games?"

"Something quietly conservative, I suppose," Telzey said.

"All right. Just so it goes with my purse." The cosmetics purse didn't contain cosmetics but Trigger's favorite gun, and was equipped with an instant ejection mechanism. Conceivably, it could act as their other secret weapon here. "The door on the left looks like it should open on a refresher—"

In certain confidential Overgovernment files, Askanam was listed among the Hub's experimental worlds. Officially, it was a world which retained a number of unusual privileges in return for acknowledging the Federation's basic authority and accepting a few balancing restrictions. Most of its surface was taken up by the balaks of the ruling Askabs, ranging in size from something not much larger than a township to great states with teeming populations. It was a colorful world of pomp and splendor, romance, violence, superstition and individualism. The traditionally warlike activities of the Askabs were limited by Federation regulations, which kept Askanam pretty much as it was though individual balaks not infrequently changed hands. Otherwise Federation law didn't extend to the balaks. Hub citizens applying for entry were advised that they were going into areas where they would receive no Federation protection.

Telzey was aware that the arrangement served several purposes for the Overgovernment. Askanam was populated largely by people who liked that kind of life, since nothing prevented them from leaving. They were attracted to it, in fact, from all over the Hub. Since they were a kind of people whose romantic notions could cause problems otherwise, the Overgovernment was glad to see them there. Askanam was one of its laboratories, and its population's ways were more closely studied than they knew.

For individuals, of course, that romantic setup could turn into a dangerous trap.

Telzey discovered an intercom while Trigger was freshening up, and after they were dressed again, they used it. They were connected with someone who said he was the Regent Toru's secretary, extended the Regent's welcome to the Askab Casmard's yacht guests, trusted they were well rested, and inquired whether they would be pleased to join the Askab and his cousin for breakfast.

They would, and were guided through a wing of the palace to a room where a table was set for four. The Askab Perial Casmard waited there, smiling and, to all appearances, at ease. Three other men were with him, and he introduced them. The Regent Toru, tall, bony and dark. Lord Ormota, with a bristling red beard, Servant of the Stone. Finally a young, strongly built man with a boyishly handsome face, who was Lord Vallain.

The Regent said, "I waited only to meet you and to express my regrets if any inconvenience has been caused you. I hope your visit to the Balak of Tamandun will be very pleasant otherwise. Political considerations made it necessary to bring you here, as the Askab will explain." He added to Casmard, "Your taste in guests is impeccable, dear cousin!" Then he bowed to Telzey and Trigger and left the room, accompanied by Lord Ormota.

They took their seats, and breakfast was served. When the waiters had left, Casmard said, "I regret deeply that you two are involved in this matter! We can speak freely, by the way. I'm using a distorter, and Toru, in any case, would have no interest in what we have to say. He's certain there's nothing we can do."

"Is it a very bad situation?" Trigger asked.

"Yes, quite bad!" Casmard hesitated, then shook his head. "I would be both insulting you and treating you unfairly by offering you false reassurances. The fact is then that Toru undoubtedly intends to have all four of us killed. He believes you're my women and that he can put additional pressure on me because of it."

"Pressure to do what?" asked Telzey.

"To renounce my right to the title of Askab of Tamandun, abdicate publicly in his favor. The reasoning is that my interests are no longer here. That's perfectly true, of course. It's been eight years since I last set foot on Askanam. For more than half my life, I've been a Federation citizen in all but legal fact. I've built up a personal fortune which makes me independent of the revenues of Tamandun. To act as the Balak's Askab in practice is something I'd find dull, indeed!"

Trigger said, "Then why not simply abdicate?"

"For two reasons," Casmard told her. "One is that, while I've intended to do it for some time, I also intended to wait another year and then make Vallain, who is my cousin as is Toru, my successor. He would have been of suitable age to become Askab then. He doesn't share my dislike for the role, and, as Askabs go, he would make a far better ruler for Tamandun than Toru. I still feel some slight responsibility

toward the Balak."

"Which is why I've joined you on Toru's death list," Vallain informed Telzey and Trigger. He didn't appear greatly disturbed by the fact. "Very many people would prefer me to the Regent."

* * *

"Well, and there you have my second reason," Casmard went on. "After my formal abdication has been obtained and announced and Toru has himself installed as Askab, he'll lose no time in terminating my existence. If any of you are still alive at that time, you'll die with me."

Trigger cleared her throat. "You mean he might kill us first?"

Perial Casmard looked distressed. "Unfortunately, that's quite possible. You three are in more immediate danger than I am. Since I've never given evidence of the blood-thirstiness which is supposed to distinguish a proper Askab, Toru feels that fear is a tool which can be used to influence me. He may decide to make object lessons of you."

"Casmard," said Vallain, "what difference does it really make? We can't get off the palace grounds. We can't get out a message. We're not even being watched. The Regent is so sure of us that he can afford to treat us as guests until we die. He'll become the Askab of Tamandun on Glory Day, and none of us will survive that day. Since it's inevitable, don't let it upset you."

"When's Glory Day?" Telzey asked.

Vallain looked at her. "Why, tomorrow! I thought you knew."

Telzey pushed her chair back, stood up.

"Trigger and I saw some beautiful gardens from a window on our way here," she said. "Since the Regent doesn't seem to mind, I think we'll walk around there and admire them a while." She smiled. "My appetite might be better a little later!"

Casmard said uneasily, "I believe you would be safer if you stayed with me."

"How much safer?" Telzey said.

Vallain laughed. "She's right, Cousin! Let them go. The gardens are beautiful, and so is the morning. Let them enjoy the time they have left." He added to Telzey and Trigger, "I would ask your permission to accompany you, but in view of the situation, there are some matters I should take care of. However, I'll show you down to the gardens."

Casmard stood up.

"Then be so good as to wait for them here a few minutes," he told Vallain. "There's something I'd like them to have."

He led the way from the room, turned presently into another one and shut the door after Telzey and Trigger had entered.

"All things may be the tools of politics," he remarked. "On Askanam, the superstitions of the people are a tool in general use by those who seek or hold power—and they themselves often aren't free of superstition. When I was a child, my father, the Askab, made me promise to keep certain small talismans he'd had our court adept fashion for me on my person at all times. They were to protect me from tricks of wizardry. I've kept them as souvenirs throughout the years—and now I want to give one to each of you, for somewhat the same reason my father had."

He took two star-shaped splinters of jewelry no larger than his thumbnail from a pocket, gave one to Telzey and the other to Trigger.

"Well, thanks very much, Casmard!" Trigger said. "They're certainly very beautiful." She hesitated. "Do you—"

Casmard said, "You're thinking of course, that the danger we're in is affecting my mind. However, I can assure you from personal knowledge that superstitions, on occasion, may cloak something quite real. I'm not speaking of technological fakery which is much employed here. You've heard of psis, of course. Sophisticated people in the Federation tend to believe that the various stories told about them are again mainly superstition. But having made a study of the subject, I've concluded that many of those stories have a foundation in fact. My parents' court adept, for example, while he professed to deal in magic and to control supernatural entities, evidently was a psi. And I'm sure that a considerable number of psis are active on Askanam to an extent they couldn't be elsewhere. The general belief in sorcery covers their

activities—is simply reinforced by them.

"I don't know whether Toru has an adept working for him at present. But it's possible. It's also possible that he feels it would be an effective move to have you two appear to be the victims of sorcery. Frankly, I have no way of knowing whether the talismans actually offer protection against psi forces—but, at least, they can do you no harm. So will you keep them on your persons as a favor to me? I feel we should take every possible precaution available at present."

He left them at the door to the breakfast room, and Vallain showed them the way down to the gardens and told them how to find him, or Casmard, later when they felt like it. A number of other buildings were visible on the palace grounds, and Telzey asked a few questions about them. Then Vallain excused himself pleasantly and went away.

* * *

"If I were Toru," Trigger remarked as they started off along a path, "I wouldn't trust our Lord Vallain without a guard."

Telzey nodded. "He's planning something. That's why he didn't want us to be around this morning. I'm not sure about Perial Casmard either. He's really a tough character."

"What are you planning?" Trigger asked.

"I want to locate that group of psis as soon as possible—they should be in one of the buildings on the grounds. If I can get close to them, I can start doing some precision scanning. It's not too likely they'd notice that. Until we know something about them, it's hard to figure out what we can do."

"The telepaths could spot you if you went to work directly on the Regent?"

"Well, they might. Especially with a number of them around. We don't know how the group would react to that." Telzey shook her head. "But Toru could be too tough a job anyway in the time we have left! He and that Servant of the Stone don't seem to have any illusions about Askanam adepts either—they've imported good solid Federation mind shields of a chemical type and are using them. We might get better results if I don't waste time trying to work through that stuff. At any rate, we have to find out how the psis fit in first."

"Do Casmard's talismans do anything?"

Telzey shrugged. "They could make someone who believes in them feel more secure, of course. But that's all they can do."

III

The palace grounds were very extensive and beautifully tended—a varied succession of terraced gardens, large and small. There wasn't a human being in sight anywhere. They followed curving paths in and out of tree groves, around artificial lakes, up and down terrace stairs of polished and tinted stone. Trigger inquired presently, "Are you working?"

Telzey shook her head. "Just waiting for some indication from the psis at the moment. So far there hasn't been a sign. What did you want to talk about?"

"Two things," said Trigger. "I had a notion about aircars—but it seems to me now that aircars aren't permitted in the balaks."

"That's right. No sort of powered flight is," Telzey said. "They use gliders in some places, and I remember Casmard saying a few Askabs have tried importing a flying animal that's big enough to carry a man. They're not very manageable though."

Trigger nodded. "That kills the notion! I doubt gliders or flying animals would do us much good if we could find them. But then, you know—I'm wondering why no one else seems to be in the gardens at present . . ."

"I've wondered a little about that too," Telzey acknowledged. She added, "Did you hear something a moment ago?"

Trigger glanced at her. "Just the general sort of creature sounds we've been hearing right along."

"This was a spitting noise."

Telzey broke off, and both of them came to a stop. They'd been approaching a stand of shade trees

and, about sixty feet away, an animal suddenly had come out from the trees on the path they were following.

It stood staring at them. It was a short-legged animal some twelve feet long, tawny on top and white below, with a snaky neck and sharp snout. The alert eyes were bright green. It was a beautiful creature and an extremely efficient-looking one.

Trigger said very softly, "It may not be dangerous, but we'd better not count on that. If we move slowly off to the left, away from it—"

The animal bared large white teeth and made the spitting noise Telzey had heard. This time it was quite audible. Then, in an instant, it was coming straight at them. It moved with amazing speed, short legs hurling it along the path like a projectile, head held high above the body. Trigger slapped the side of the cosmetics purse at her belt, and the gun it concealed seemed to leap simultaneously into her hand. She turned sideways, right arm stretched straight out.

The animal made a blaring sound as the green eyes vanished in momentary scarlet flashes of light. The long body knotted and twisted, rolled off the path. The sound ended abruptly. The animal went limp. Trigger lowered the gun, stood watching it a few seconds.

"Five head shots," she said quietly then. "That's a tough creature, Telzey! Any idea what it is?"

"Probably something they use in arenas." Telzey's breath was unsteady. "It certainly wasn't a garden pet!"

"No. And I suppose," Trigger said, "somebody was watching to see what would happen, and is still watching. We pretend we think it was an accident, eh?"

"We might as well. It wouldn't do much good to complain. They know about your gun now."

"Yes, that's too bad. It couldn't be helped."

They walked closer to the creature. From fifteen feet away, Trigger put another bolt into the center of its body. It didn't stir. They went up to it, looked at the blood-stained great teeth.

"At a guess," Trigger said, "the Regent wanted a couple of mangled bodies to shock Casmard with. Let's see if we can find out where it came from."

They followed the path in among the trees. A metal box stood there, open at one end, large enough to have contained the animal. There was no one in sight.

"They brought it up in a car and let it out when we were close enough," Telzey said. "If it had done the job, they would have knocked it out with stun guns and taken it away again. So it was Toru."

"You were thinking it might have been the psis?"

"It might have been. But if they were controlling it, it would have been moving about under its own power. And they—"

"What's that?" The gun was in Trigger's hand again.

"Psi stuff," Telzey said after a moment. "Don't do anything—it can't hurt us!"

Long green tentacles had lifted abruptly out of the earth, enclosing them and the metal box in a writhing ring. The tentacles looked material enough, and there were slapping, slithering sounds when they touched one another.

There came another sound. It might have been a sighing of the air, a stirring in the treetops above them. At the same time, it seemed to be a voice.

"Don't move!" it seemed to be saying. "Don't move at all! Stay exactly where you are until Dovari tells you what to do . . ."

Trigger moistened her lips. "All illusions, eh?"

"Uh-huh—illusions."

Someone knew they were here and was manipulating the visual and auditory centers of their brains. Very deftly, too! Telzey held her attention on the thought projections, drifted with them, reached the projecting mind.

Unscreened, unprotected mind, concentrated on what it was doing, expecting no trouble. She reflected, sent a measured jolt through it. Its awareness abruptly went dim; the illusions were gone.

Trigger was looking at her. "What did you do?"

"Knocked out the sender for a little while."

"And now?"

"I don't know. The psis have discovered us and are taking an interest in us. I've let them know I'm a psi who doesn't want to play games, but I didn't do their illusionist any real harm when I could have done it. Let's go on the way we were going. We'll see what they try next. Better keep that shield good and tight!"

"It's tight as it can get," Trigger assured her. She had no developed psi talents; but she'd been equipped by a psi mind with a shield which was flatly impenetrable when she wanted it that way. They seemed adequately covered for the moment.

* * *

They continued along the path they'd been following. Trigger remained silent, watching the area about them, hand never far from the gun purse. Another sudden onslaught by a loosed arena killer didn't seem too likely; but the palace grounds almost might have been designed to let danger lurk about unseen.

Telzey said presently, "They're probing at us now. Carefully, so far, but I'm picking up a few things."

She, too, was being careful. There were at least half a dozen screened telepathic minds involved here—perhaps a few more. They seemed experienced and skilled. The best they weren't, Telzey thought; they shouldn't have been quite so readily detectable—though it was possible, of course, that they didn't much care whether she detected them or not. There was one psi mind around, at any rate, from which she could catch no thought flickering at all, but only the faintest suggestion of a tight shield with a watchful awareness behind it, unnoticeable if she hadn't been fully alert for just such suggestions.

That mind seemed highly capable. She concentrated on it, ignoring the others more or less at the moment, prowled lightly about the shielding. Then, for an instant, she caught an impression of the personality it concealed. Her eyes flickered in surprise. That personality was no stranger! Here—on Askanam? But she knew she hadn't been mistaken.

She directed a thought at the shield, self-identification accompanying it. "Sams! Sams Larking!"

A moment's startled pause, then:

"Telzey! You're the one old Toru was trying to do in?"

"That's what it looks like." She gave him a mental picture of the short-legged animal. Quick thought flow returned. Confirmation—a short while ago, on the Regent's orders, a cheola from the arena pens had been transported to the palace grounds. One of the telepaths had been curious to see what Toru intended with the dangerous creature, and entered the mind of the vehicle's driver. When he reported that the cheola apparently had been killed by its intended victims, the group became interested.

"At that point, we didn't know there was a psi involved," Sams concluded. "Come on over and see us! They all want to meet you."

Telzey hesitated. The probing attempts of the others had stopped meanwhile. "Where are you?"

"You've been moving in the right direction. When you come into the open again, it's the building ahead and to your left. The Old Palace. We're the only ones quartered here at present. I'll meet you at the door. Toru doesn't have any other surprises prepared for you in the gardens, by the way. We've been checking, and will cover for you."

"All right."

Thought contact broke off. Telzey told Trigger what had happened. Trigger studied her face. "You don't seem delighted," she observed. "Isn't your acquaintance going to help us?"

"Well . . . I'm not at all sure. It might depend on why he and the others are here. Sams tends to look out for his own interests first."

"I see. So we stay on our toes and keep shields tight. . . ."

"I think we'd better."

IV

"I've been arranging this for a year," Sams Larking said. "Toru is stingy, but he knows he has to come up with the best in arena games on Glory Day—particularly on the Glory Day he plans to be announced as Tamandun's new Askab to the multitudes. I offered him the best the Hub could provide at a price that

delighted his shriveled soul. We've brought in the greatest consignment of fighters and performers, human and animal, in Tamandun's history! Hatzel"—he nodded at a chunky man with a round expressionless face on the other side of the big room—"will be sitting in the Regent's box with Toru, as Lord of the Games tomorrow. We've arranged the whole show. Toru keeps purring over the schedule. He feels he'll be the envy of Askanam."

Trigger said, "From what I've heard, more than half of the people you brought in for the arena should be dead before the games are over."

"Considerably less than half in this case," Sams told her. "We picked the best, as I mentioned. Local fighters aren't in their class!" He studied her a moment. "You disapprove? They all know the odds. They also know that the ones who survive the games will be heroes in Tamandun—wealthy heroes. Some will have a good chance of making it to the nobility. They know that more than one Askanam arena favorite wound up among the Askabs. They're playing for high stakes. I feel that's their business."

Telzey glanced around the room. Eighteen in all, half of them telepaths, the others an assortment of talents. In effective potential among non-psis it was an army. Dovari, the illusionist, had regained consciousness before they reached the building. She was a slender woman with a beautiful and, at present, thoroughly sullen face.

"What are you people playing for?" Telzey asked. "You can hardly be making a profit on your deal with the Regent."

Sams shook his head. "That's not what we're after. You've heard of the Stone of Wirolla?"

Telzey nodded. "Casmard's mentioned it. Some old war relic with supposedly magical qualities. They used to sacrifice people to it by cutting out their hearts."

"The Regent's revived that practice," Sams said. "It's a form of execution now, reserved for criminals of note and for special occasions. The Stone then indicates its satisfaction with both offering and occasion through supernatural manifestations in the Grand Arena. The manifestations have been on the feeble side—Toru's too miserly to have had equipment for anything really spectacular installed. But it's traditional. The people love it."

"And?" Telzey said.

"This Glory Day, the manifestations will be spectacular. We have the talent for it assembled in this room. I'm grateful you didn't do more than tap Dovari because she'll be responsible for much of it. But we aren't confining ourselves to illusions, by any means! It's going to be a terrible shock to Toru when he sees his miracle gadgets producing effects he knows they can't possibly produce—all in honor of the new Askab showing how highly the Stone of Wirolla approves of him! As it happens, that won't be Toru. At the end of Glory Day, I'll be Askab of Tamandun!"

He added, "And you see around you Tamandun's new top nobles—psi rulers of one of the wealthiest balaks of Askanam. You and Miss Argee are herewith invited to join their ranks! I've told the group of your ability, and they're ready to welcome you." He glanced at Dovari. "With the possible exception of our illusionist! However, she'll soon get over her irritation."

* * *

Telzey shook her head. "Sams, you're crazy!" She looked around the room. "All of you must be, to let him talk you into something like this."

Sams didn't lose his smile. "What makes you say that?"

"The Psychology Service, for one thing. You start playing around with psi stuff openly, they'll be here to investigate. You don't think they'll let you use it to control Tamandun, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Sams told her. "I checked out our Askanam maneuver with them. Anything too obvious that could be attributed to psi is out, of course. But there's no objection to goings-on that in Tamandun will have the flavor of the supernatural and at more sophisticated levels will be passed off as superstitious gullibility. We'll have to keep to our balak, but, with those restrictions, what we do here is our business."

"If they're letting you do it," Telzey said, "they've been letting other psis do it."

He nodded. "Oh, they have. I said I've been preparing this for some time. I've been around Askanam and I know that plenty of psis have established themselves in the culture here and are operating about as

freely as they like. But almost all of that's on a minor level. We'll be the first group that really gets things organized."

"You might have been the first to get shuffled out here as a group," Telzey said.

Sams's eyes narrowed slightly. "Meaning?"

"Isn't it obvious? The Federation exempts Askanam from normal restrictions because it's a simple way to keep a specific class of lunatics corralled. The experiment's worked out, so it's being continued. The Service evidently has expanded it to include irresponsible psi independents. Put them where whatever they do can't really add much to the general mess! I wouldn't feel flattered if they told me I could make Tamandun my playground but was to make sure I stayed there. What kind of playground is it? Being little gods among some of the silliest people in the Hub is going to bore you to death—or you're lunatics!"

"I have no liking," Dovari remarked, "for the girl's insults."

The man called Hatzel said, "There could be a difference of opinion about the opportunities waiting for us in Tamandun. But the point is, Sams, that you seem to be mistaken in believing Miss Amberdon would be interested in lending her talents to the group's goals."

"I still hope to be able to persuade her," Sams told him.

"Why not try it, Telzey? It may not be at all what you think. You can always pull out, of course, if you find you don't like the life."

"If I thought I might like it," Telzey said, "there'd still be the fact that Tamandun already has an Askab."

Hatzel said, "For the moment only. That's Toru's affair, not ours. As Lord of the Games, I'll be attending the Regent's ceremonial Glory Day dinner in the House of Wirolla tonight. So, I understand, will the Askab Casmard and his guests. Before the evening's over, Casmard will have abdicated formally. The vacancy will be filled at the end of Glory Day."

"Casmard's an old friend of my family," Telzey said. "If you're determined to set yourselves up in Tamandun, you could make an arrangement with him. He isn't much interested in remaining Askab. I'd see to it that he didn't remember afterwards there'd been psis involved in the matter."

Sams shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do that. It's too late for it. We're prepared to deal with Toru and the Servant of the Stone tomorrow. The manifestations we've scheduled will make it easy to do and we'll have enthusiastic public approval. But it needs exact timing. We've made Toru's plans for Casmard part of our plan. If Casmard were still alive and still Askab on Glory Day, everything would have to be revised. At best, we'd wind up with something less effective."

"Aside from not interfering ourselves," Hatzel added, "we must also, of course, make sure that no one else does—in any way! And while we know Miss Amberdon's a telepath, it hasn't yet been established what Miss Argee's special abilities are."

* * *

"I have no special psi abilities," Trigger said shortly.

"Now that," one of the other men remarked, "is an interesting lie. I've been attempting to probe that young woman's shield since she entered the room. I can vouch for the fact that it's an extraordinary psi structure—unanalyzable and of extreme resistive power."

Trigger shrugged. "Somebody else developed the shield for me. I couldn't have done it. Not that it makes any difference."

Sams smiled at her. "I agree! And I'm sure you both realize that we can't run the risk of letting you upset our plans. Once Glory Day's over, it doesn't matter what you do. We'll be glad to see you safely off Askanam then, assuming Toru's let you remain alive, which might seem rather doubtful if you won't join forces with us. Until that time, at any rate you will have to allow the group to control what you say and do. It's really the only safe way, isn't it?"

"Forget it, Sams!" Telzey said. "Our screens stay tight."

"Will they?" Sams said mildly. "I don't like to put pressure on you, but we still have too much work to get done today to waste more time over this. . . ."

The room went quiet. Then a wave of heat washed over Telzey. It ebbed, returned, and intensified.

Trigger gave her a quick, startled glance. Telzey shifted her shoulders.

"So you have a pyrotic with you," she remarked.

Sams smiled. "We have several. Their range is excellent! Even if we allowed you to leave this room and building—though we won't—you couldn't get away from the effect. You don't want your blood to start boiling, do you? Or find your hair and clothes catching fire—as a start?"

Trigger, sweat beginning to run down her face, looked at Telzey. "Do you know who's doing it?"

Telzey nodded across the room.

"The tall thin man two seats left of Dovari."

Trigger's hand went to her cosmetics purse, and the gun made its abrupt appearance.

She said to the thin man, "I won't kill you if this doesn't stop immediately. But I'll stun you so solidly you won't have begun to come awake by the end of Glory Day. And it'll be two weeks after that before your nerves stop jumping."

The heat faded away. The group sat staring at Trigger. She jerked, made a choked sound of surprise, looked down at her hand. The gun had vanished from it.

Sams and a few of the others were laughing. Sams said, "Neat enough, Hatzel! Ladies, let's stop this nonsense. Since you can't win, why not give up gracefully? Telzey, you at least are aware you can both be killed in an instant as you're sitting there."

Telzey nodded. "Oh, I do know that, Sams. But I haven't just been sitting here. I've found out Hatzel's shielded, and, of course, all you telepaths have your psi shields. But six of your most valuable people aren't shielded at all, and apparently couldn't operate if they were. Six psi minds—wide open! It would take an instant to kill us, and you can be quite sure that in that instant you'd lose those six. So I don't think you'll try it."

Sams stared at her. The others were silent a moment. Then one of the women said sharply, "Sams, she's bluffing! You said she's good, but between us all we certainly can block her as she strikes out. Then we can handle both of them as we wish."

Sams shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't care to count on it."

Dovari said in a strained voice, "Nor I! And I don't want to die while you're finding out whether you can, or can't, block her. Let them go, Sams! If they try to interfere, you can still deal with them in some other manner."

V

Trigger glanced back at the closed building door behind them. She looked both furious and relieved. "What do we do now?" she muttered.

"Keep walking," Telzey said. "Back to the Regent's palace. And we walk rather fast until we reach those trees ahead. I've still got my contacts back there. Some talk going on . . . Hatzel seems to be second in command to Sams. So he's a teleport—" She glanced at Trigger. "Too bad you lost your gun."

"That's not all I lost."

"Eh?"

"My underpants went with the gun."

"Well," Telzey said after a moment, "a minor demonstration, as Sams would say. A teleport at Hatzel's level is a very dangerous person. He didn't have to do that, of course. They were trying to make us feel helpless."

Trigger nodded. "And it worked just fine with me! I've never felt more helpless in my life." She looked over at Telzey. "Touch and go for a moment, wasn't it? I didn't think you were bluffing!"

"I wasn't. A bluff like that wouldn't have got past Sams."

"What makes them that kind of people?" Trigger said. "With everything they can do—"

"That's partly it. Most of that group are bored psis. They've used their abilities to make things too easy for themselves. It's stupid but some do it. Now they've run out of fun and are looking for something new—almost anything that seems new."

They'd reached the trees, were hurrying along a path leading through the grove. Trigger checked

suddenly, glanced down at the cosmetics purse. She slapped it. The gun popped into her hand.

"Well!" she said. "I felt the weight in the purse just now." She reached into the purse, pulled out a silky garment, shoved it into a pocket. "Briefs returned with the gun." She bit her lip. "Perhaps I should feel grateful. Somehow I don't!"

"Come on!" Telzey turned away, broke into a trot. "They did that to show you your gun doesn't impress them at all. But now you have it back, you might get a chance to express your lack of appreciation to Hatzel. We'll have to hurry!"

"What do you mean?"

"Can you set it to stun somebody for just a short time—a few minutes?"

"That's a bit tricky, but, yes, I can. Five minutes, say."

"Fine. Hatzel's been called to the palace to talk to the Regent. He'll be coming through the gardens on a scooter. If we get far enough ahead, we may be able to spot him and cut him off."

"All right. And I stun him. Then?"

"That's no telepath's shield he's using. It's a gadget. And if the gadget's the kind I think it is, I can open it and get to his mind before he comes around. Sams or somebody might realize what's happening, of course. That's a risk we'd better take. The quicker we get it over with, the less likely we are to be noticed."

They crouched presently at the edge of a terrace, winded and hot from the run, shrubbery about them. "He might still turn off on another route," Telzey remarked. "But it looks like he'll be coming by here now, doesn't it?"

Trigger nodded. "Seems to be heading this way."

"That break in the bushes is the place to take him. How far will we have to work down to it?"

"We won't. Right here is fine. He's just chugging along."

"That's a good fifty yards, Trigger," Telzey said doubtfully.

"And I'm a good fifty yards marksman. Some day I'll have to teach you how to use a gun."

"Perhaps you should. I never warmed up to guns. When I've had to use one, I just blasted away."

"What are your contacts doing?"

"Back to rehearsing their Glory Day surprises. They're not thinking about us at the moment. Sams might be, now and then. It's hard to be sure about him. But we should be able to get away with this."

* * *

Hatzel's scooter came chugging up shortly. Trigger touched the gun's firing stud, and Hatzel was sagging sideways off the scooter as the machine went out of sight behind bushes again. They worked their way hurriedly down to the path through the shrubs, found the scooter on its side, turning in slow circles. Trigger shut it off while Telzey went over to Hatzel who lay on his back a dozen yards away.

She knelt quickly beside him, lifted his head. Trigger joined her.

"Should be at the base of the skull, under a skin patch," Telzey said. "Here it is!"

She peeled off the tiny device, blinked absently at Hatzel's face. "Open psi mind—yes, I can do it." She was silent then.

Trigger glanced presently at her watch, said, "Four minutes plus gone, Telzey. He could start coming around any moment now. Shall I tap him again?"

"No, I've got him. He won't come around till I'm ready."

"I'll go plant the rock then," Trigger said.

She went a dozen yards back up the terrace where ornamental rockwork enclosed a flower bed, returned with a sizable rock which she placed on the path ten feet from where Hatzel was lying.

"I'd think it was a little peculiar I hadn't noticed that rock," she observed. "But I suppose you're taking care of that?"

"Yes. He'll wake up with a small headache from having banged his skull. He'll see the rock lying there and be irritated, but that will explain it, and he won't want to tell anyone he wasn't looking where he was going." Telzey replaced the shield which wasn't operative at the moment, smoothed in the skin patch, stood up and brushed sand from her knees. "Finished. Let's move!"

They restarted the scooter, left it lying on its side, pushing itself awkwardly about in the grass, went

quickly back up to the terrace and along it through the shrubbery, until they reached a grove of trees and came to another path.

Hatzel, still unconscious, reached into a pocket and switched his mind shield back on. He awoke then, sat up with a muttered curse, felt his head, looked around, saw the rock on the path and the struggling scooter in the grass. He nodded in annoyed comprehension, and got to his feet.

He couldn't be left unshielded because one of the telepaths would have been bound to notice it. Every five minutes, however, Hatzel now would switch the shield off for a moment, unaware of what he did. If there was reason to take him under active control, Telzey would make use of such a moment. They had a glimpse of him presently on the network of paths ahead of them, nearing the Regent's palace.

"Reacting just as he's supposed to, isn't he?" Trigger said.

Telzey nodded. "Uh-huh! It was a stupid accident, and that's all. He's got more important things to think about." She added, "I'd like to give Casmard some idea of what's going on, but there's no way I can keep them from looking into his mind or Vallain's, and anything we told him they'd soon know. We'll have to work out this side of it strictly by ourselves."

VI

As they were approaching the palace entrance by which they'd left, a tall, splendidly uniformed man emerged from it and came toward them.

He introduced himself as Colonel Euran, head of the Regent's Palace Guard. "It's come to my attention," he said, "that you weren't informed of a security regulation requiring guests to surrender personal weapons for the period of their visit in the palace. I thought I should correct the oversight, to save you possible embarrassment. It's merely a formality, of course—but do you happen to have weapons in your room or on your persons?"

Since they'd known their encounter with the cheola had been observed, they weren't surprised. Trigger took the cosmetics purse from her belt and handed it to him.

"There's a Denton inside," she said. "Take good care of it, Colonel. It's an old friend."

He bowed. "Indeed, I will."

Telzey said, "Could there be other regulations we don't know about?"

Colonel Euran smiled pleasantly. "It's no regulation. But the Regent Toru told me to suggest that you remain within the palace itself until he has the pleasure of meeting you again at dinner tonight. He's concerned about your safety."

"You mean the Regent's own gardens aren't safe?" Trigger asked.

"No, not always during the periods of arena games. There are subterranean levels here where beasts and criminals who've been condemned to the arena are kept. And it happens on occasion that some very dangerous creature eludes its keepers and appears unexpectedly in the palace grounds."

They thanked him for the warning, went inside. Following the directions given them by Vallain, they presently located the suite of Perial Casmard and announced themselves at the door. He opened it immediately.

"Come in! Come in!" he said, drawing them into the room and closing the door again. He looked at them, shook his head. "I'm very glad to see you," he said. "I wasn't at all sure you were still alive! Shortly after you'd left, Toru hinted in his pleasant manner that he had some particularly brutal end prepared for you. I went down to the gardens to find you, but no one could tell me where you'd gone."

They told him about the cheola. Telzey said, "We went on then and met some Federation people who've organized the Glory Day games for Toru this year. We thought we might be able to talk them into smuggling us out, but they weren't interested in getting involved in an intrigue against the Regent."

Casmard said he couldn't blame them too much. "If Toru found out about it, they might become more intimately involved in the games than any sensible man would wish to be."

"And we're confined to the palace now," Trigger said.

"That's good—since it probably means that Toru is planning no further immediate steps against you. But the situation remains extremely difficult. Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast," Telzey said, "and we didn't eat much then. Now that you've mentioned it, I notice I'm very hungry."

Casmard had lunch for them brought to the suite. He watched pensively while they ate, said at last, "There was an explosion a while ago on the Regent's living level. Not badly timed—he'd entered the level shortly before the device went off. However, only one of his guard dogs was killed. Toru escaped injury."

They looked at him expectantly. He shrugged. "Vallain's now confined to his quarters. Toru rarely acts hastily. He'll wait for the pre-Glory Day dinner in the House of Wirolla tonight before pursuing the matter."

When they'd finished lunch, he said, "I'm reasonably certain the Regent also will hold his hand now as far as you two are concerned. However, it would be best if you went to your room and stayed there, so as to bring yourselves as little as possible to his attention."

Telzey said, "You still don't see how we can get out of this?"

"Oh, I'm not entirely at the end of my resources," Casmard told her. "I shall meet the Regent again during the afternoon and may be able to persuade him to accept less drastic arrangements than the one he has in mind."

* * *

They left to go to their apartment. Trigger inquired reflectively, "You had the impression Casmard wanted us out of the way?"

"Yes, he does want us out of the way," Telzey said.

Trigger glanced at her. "Picked up things over lunch, huh?"

"Yes. Something about an elderly character in the palace who used to act as poisoner for Casmard's mother, and seems to have kept his hand in. Casmard's promised him a high spot in the nobility if he can get to Toru before dinner, and the old boy's game to try it."

Trigger shook her head. "Life expectancies would be awkward to calculate around here! Does Casmard think it will work?"

"Not really. He's getting desperate. If he did get rid of Toru, there'd still be a serious problem with the Servant of the Stone—Lord Ormota."

"How does he fit in?"

"After Toru, he's apparently the most powerful man in Tamandun. If Toru died, he'd have a great deal more power here in the Regent's palace than Casmard and Vallain combined could bring up. So he'd probably simply become the next Askab, with no other change in the proceedings."

"The Stone he's the Servant of is presumably the Stone of Wirolla, where they cut out people's hearts?"

"Yes."

"And the House of Wirolla, where they'll be holding the ceremonial dinner we're supposed to attend—that's where the Stone is?"

"Yes," Telzey said. "I got that from Hatzel. Big black hall. The Regent's table stands right across from the Stone."

"Should be a great dinner party for ghouls!" Trigger said after a moment.

"Well, it all seems part of their local religion or whatever you want to call it."

In a closet of their room they found games, provided for the entertainment of guests. They were unfamiliar and looked complicated enough to be interesting. They set up one designed for two players. It was cover—Telzey would be mentally active on other levels.

Hatzel's shield had been opening regularly on schedule. She'd caught the opening a few times, checked him out briefly. There was nothing of interest there at present. She'd dropped her contacts with the unprotected minds in Sams's group. They had no immediate value.

She spent a little time hunting around for traces of the navigator of Casmard's space yacht, located him finally and told Trigger, "Kewen's not in the palace any more. He's been transferred to the place they keep the criminals they'll start feeding into the arena games tomorrow. That's what's scheduled for him."

Trigger looked startled. "Does he know it?"

"He knows, but I sort of tranquilized him this morning after I picked him up. It isn't bothering him."

"It bothers me," Trigger said. "Of course, he might last longer than the rest of us, at that."

"Yes. And if we get out of it, we should be able to get him out."

A palace courier had announced himself discreetly at the door half an hour after they'd returned to their room, and handed them a formal invitation from the Regent. They would be sitting at his table during dinner in the House of Wirolla that night.

Telzey spent the remaining hours scanning the minds in the palace and its vicinity. There were many she could have entered without much trouble, but finding minds that would be useful in the present situation was more difficult. Colonel Euran of the Palace Guard had been a primary target but turned out to be as thoroughly mind-shielded as the Regent and the Servant of the Stone. Telzey wasn't too disappointed. Toru hardly would want someone in that position to be subject to hostile psychic influences.

She developed some selected contacts presently. There were others she would have preferred, but they couldn't be made available to her quickly enough.

Then it was time to prepare themselves to be taken to the House of Wirolla. It was one of the buildings on the Palace grounds, serving both as a personal palace for the Servant and as a temple for the Stone.

VII

The ceremonial hall in the House of Wirolla lived up to Trigger's expectation that it might have made a good place for the festivities of ghouls. Walls, ceiling and floor were of black stone. On the lower level, the only light was provided by torches flaring sullenly from the walls and along the tables, where the top rank of Tamandun's nobility and dignitaries dined tonight. It was separated from the upper level by a flight of low stairs, running the width of the hall.

On the upper level, there was light. The curved table of the Regent stood there by itself, the Regent's honor guests seated along the outer edge of the curve. The arrangement provided them with a good view of the Stone of Wirolla on the far side of the hall. The Stone was huge and seemed almost formless, while somehow suggesting a hunkered shape which could have been human as much as Wirollan. It was gray-green, and there was an indication of scales over parts of its surface. A thick hollowed projection near the lower end might represent a pair of cupped and waiting hands. Supposedly, the Stone had been in the Hub for some centuries, having been found on the destroyed flagship of a Wirollan war fleet. But the early part of its history was uncertain.

Nowadays, at any rate, it represented a deity, or demon, who periodically indicated an appetite for human sacrifices. Traditionally, it should indicate that appetite tonight. The circumstances didn't make for light-hearted dinner conversation, but most of those who sat along the curving table, Casmard and Vallain among them, hadn't seemed much affected. Hatzel, three seats from Telzey, ate in stolid silence. From the lower level came an indistinct sound of voices. Glory Day music washed through the air, incongruously bright and brisk.

Weapons weren't allowed in the hall. But guns pointed through concealed openings in the three walls of the upper level; and the Palace Guards who held them had every section of both levels under observation in scanners.

Three of those Palace Guards and their guns were now Telzey's. The Regent's guard dog, a great arena hound standing twelve feet back of its master's chair, was nearly hers. It was, at any rate, no longer the Regent's.

It wasn't till dinner drew near its end that tensions began to be noticeable. At last, Telzey became aware of a faint tremor in the stone floor under her feet, in the chair on which she sat. It continued only a moment; but when it stopped, all talk had ended and the music had faded away.

Now the tremor returned, grew stronger, swelled into an earthquake shuddering. Again it lasted only a few seconds. By then, no one near Telzey was stirring. She found herself holding her breath, released it. A third time it came, accompanied by a distant roaring sound, suggesting a blurred giant voice. As that stopped, a low black table was rising out of the floor before the Stone of Wirolla. Two gray-clothed men, gray masks covering their faces, came out from behind the Stone on either side and stopped at the ends of the table, ropes held in their hands.

* * *

Lord Ormota, Servant of the Stone, got to his feet and strode out in front of the Regent's table. He raised his arms, and his amplified voice sounded deeply through the hall.

"The Stone of Wirolla will take two hearts tonight!"

Ormota paused, bearded face turned up in an attitude of listening. The roaring sound came again; the black hall shook, and grew still. Ormota turned toward the Regent.

"Two traitors to Tamandun sit with the Regent Toru tonight, believing themselves unknown! The Stone of Wirolla will point them out and receive their hearts."

Two traitors? Vallain, whose face had paled at last, must be one. The other? Telzey had seen in Casmard's mind that while his poisoner had found no opportunity to practice his arts on the Regent, he'd at least aroused no suspicions. But perhaps Casmard was mistaken in that. Or perhaps—

Telzey's thoughts broke off. Out of the hollowed projection on the Stone a black object like a cane or wand floated up into sight. It lifted swiftly into the air, impelled by a mechanism which Ormota presumably controlled. It hung quivering for a moment in the center of the upper level of the hall. Then, emitting a high singing note, it drifted down toward the Regent's table, swinging left and right like a compass needle. No one moved at the table; but there was an expectant stirring on the lower level, as diners shifted about to have a better view at the instant the Stone's device would indicate the night's sacrifices.

It came closer, still swinging back and forth along the curve of the table. Then, the singing note surging shrilly upward, it halted, pointed at Hatzel.

Telzey felt the shock of utter surprise in Hatzel's mind, saw for an instant a look of incredulous consternation on Ormota's face.

The wand vanished.

There was a crystal shattering against the face of the Stone. Black shards clattered down into the hollow below. The Regent Toru staggered half up out of his chair, eyes and mouth grotesquely distended, made a groaning sound and went over backward with the chair. Ormota clutched his chest, looked for a moment as if he were trying to scream, collapsed in turn.

One of the gray-clothed men uttered a high-pitched yell of horror. His shaking hand pointed at the hollowed projection of the Stone.

Two human hearts thumped and thudded bloodily about in it. A din of screaming arose in the black hall.

* * *

"Your Askab showed such extraordinary presence of mind in taking charge of the situation that I'm convinced you're controlling him," Hatzel told Telzey and Trigger in hurried undertones. "However, that was, in fact, the best immediate way of handling this unexpected turn of events. Toru obviously intended treachery against our group. I had to make him and the Servant appear to be the Stone's intended sacrifices or allow myself to be butchered."

He added, "I'll have to let Larking know about this at once—but first I want to warn you. Your lives and those of Casmard and Vallain are no longer endangered, so be satisfied with that! Don't try to make use of what's happened to interfere with our plans. They remain essentially unchanged, though details must be modified now. Sams Larking, in other words, will still be the new Askab of Tamandun at the end of Glory Day. Casmard and you two will be seen to a Federation spaceport, and if you're wise you won't lose too much time then getting off the planet!"

A bleak smile touched his face.

"This should in fact improve our future position," he remarked. "The discovery that Toru's and

Ormota's bodies showed no outward sign of injury after the Stone had taken their hearts has made many new believers in the supernatural tonight." He turned away, concluding, "Remember what I've told you!" and walked off.

They looked after him. Unaware that he was doing it, Hatzel reached into a pocket and switched his mind shield back on. It would stay on now.

Trigger said thoughtfully, "No way those telepaths can find out you had him point the Stone's wand or whatever it was at himself?"

"No," Telzey said. "I released my controls on him just a moment ago. Sams is naturally suspicious, but if he looks over Hatzel's mind, it will seem everything happened exactly as Hatzel thinks it did."

VIII

The Glory Day games began. The Grand Arena's spectator sections were astir with rumors, curiosity, and interest. Word had spread of great and strange events in the House of Wirolla the night before—the Regent Toru and the Servant of the Stone had been revealed as traitors and slain by the Stone itself, and the long-absent Askab Perial Casmard again ruled Tamandun, supported unanimously by the nobility. The general expectation was that there would be omens and signs to make this year's Glory Day one to be long remembered.

Five sat in what previously had been the Regent's box—the Askab Casmard, Lord Vallain, Telzey, Trigger, and Hatzel, Lord of the Games. Casmard and Vallain were in an undisturbed state of mind. They were undisturbed because they knew that the occurrence in the House of Wirolla, horrifying—though very fortunate—as it had appeared at the time had been the work of a friendly psi. They knew it because the friendly psi had told each of them so mentally; and they'd compared notes. They didn't know who the psi was and had been instructed not to try to find out. They wouldn't. Casmard intended to announce his abdication in favor of Lord Vallain at the end of the day's games—

Sams Larking and his group were aware that Telzey was controlling Casmard and Vallain, but there was no reason for them to object. The two had needed support and guidance in a critical situation, and she was supporting and guiding them in a way which avoided problems for Sams. Hatzel, when he appeared in the arena box, had murmured to Telzey and Trigger, "Larking tells me you're cooperating nicely. That's fine! Let's be sure it stays that way." He'd smiled gently at them. He had no doubt it would stay that way. He'd demonstrated his potential for instant deadliness, if there'd been any question about it. And one of Sams's telepaths was remaining in good enough contact with Casmard and Vallain to catch any suspicious maneuvers Telzey might attempt through them. If she attempted any, Hatzel would be informed at once and was to take whatever steps seemed required. The group was playing for keeps and had made the fact clear.

There was another mind on which Telzey was keeping tabs—that of the yacht navigator. Kewen had been released from the arena pens to which he'd been transferred; and it occurred to Casmard then that a fine seat at the Glory Day games should compensate the poor fellow in part for his unnerving experiences. He wasn't far from the Askab's box. One of the telepaths had checked him and found Kewen had been in a state of shock and was coming gradually out of it, held under calming control by Telzey.

As far as the psi group was concerned, that took care of Telzey. She'd been neutralized. She mightn't like what they were doing, but it didn't matter. They each had their work to handle now, playing out rehearsed roles in the ascending series of thrills and marvels which would wind up with Sams Larking being roared into office as the new Askab by the people of Tamandun.

* * *

The opening events of the games were brisk and colorful enough, but still tame stuff by Tamandun's standards—mere preludes to what the day should bring. The crowds watched in tolerant appreciation for the most part, details of the action being shown in enlarging screens above each arena section.

Then what seemed to be happening in the arena was no longer what was shown to be happening in the screens. Dovari's illusions were putting in an appearance. The spectators realized it gradually, grew

still, fascinated—the Stone of Wirolla was manifesting in ways it hadn't manifested before! The illusions weren't disturbing in themselves. But uncanniness was touching that area of Tamandun.

Dovari was an excellent illusionist, Telzey thought. And now it seemed to be time. She gave Trigger the signal they'd agreed on. Trigger smiled in response, slipped a knockout pill into her mouth, swallowed it.

Ten seconds later, a shock of fright jolted through Kewen's drowsy complacency. And Kewen responded. Telzey erased her shielding screens in that instant, brought all personal psi activity to an abrupt stop.

Hatzel, sitting behind Casmard, jerked violently, and disappeared. Trigger slumped limply back in her seat, eyes closed. The illusions in the arena whirled in a wild, chaotically ugly turmoil.

Shock waves of alarm could almost be sensed rising from the spectator sections. Perial Casmard calmly switched on the amplifying system before him. His calm voice spoke throughout the Grand Arena, telling his subjects that what they were witnessing wasn't merely another manifestation but one which, by its very violence, must be regarded as an augury of an approaching great period in Tamandun's history . . .

It was a rehearsed speech, but Casmard didn't know it. And it was effective. There was no general panic.

"There's one type of psi," Telzey had told Trigger some hours before, "no other psi wants to run into. They call him the howler. A howler has just one talent—he can kick up such a hurricane of psi static that the abilities of any other psis in his range fly out of control and start working every which way. That's pretty horrible for those psis, especially for the ones with plenty of equipment. The more they can do, the more's gone suddenly wrong—and the harder they try to hang on to control, the worse the matter gets!"

"You and I got hit by a howler when Casmard's yacht was attacked. It was our navigator. Kewen didn't know he was doing it; he doesn't know he's a psi. But when he gets frightened, he howls. It's an unconscious defensive reaction with him. He was frightened then—and your shield began to batter itself with psi energy instead of repelling it. You felt as if your head were being pounded with clubs. I can't really say how I felt! I went crazy instantly in several different ways. Fortunately, it was just a few seconds before the stun beam they used knocked us and Kewen out—"

This time, Kewen was going to stay frightened for something like three minutes. That, Telzey thought, certainly should be enough. Then his fears would shut off automatically. She'd arranged for that.

Trigger would be unconscious meanwhile, oblivious to the fact that her shield was drawing torrents of hammering energy on itself. While Telzey, awake and unshielded, would have divorced herself from anything remotely resembling an ability to handle psi until the howler had gone out of action again.

IX

Some four hours after the official conclusion of Glory Day in Tamandun, Telzey and Trigger were sitting in a lounge of an Orado-bound liner. Sams Larking walked in, glanced around and came over to their table.

"Why, hello, Sams!" Telzey said. "We didn't know you were aboard."

"I know you didn't," Sams said. His eyes seemed slightly glazed. He sat down, ordered a drink through the table speaker, sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not in the best of condition," he said. "But I didn't feel I needed to be hospitalized. I came on just before takeoff, rather expecting to find you around somewhere."

"How are the rest of them doing?" Telzey asked. It had taken a while to locate the members of Sams's group individually and get them under sedation; but they'd all been rounded up at last and transferred to the Federation's base hospital on Askanam.

Sams shrugged. "They're not well people, but they'll recover. They're shipping out on a hospital boat tomorrow. None of them felt like hanging around Askanam any longer than they had to." He shook his head. "So you ran in a psi howler on us!"

Telzey lifted her eyebrows. "I did?"

"Since you two are in fine shape, yes. There aren't that many howlers around. It wasn't a coincidence that brought one to the Grand Arena, and set him off just as we were going into action. How long did he go on blasting?"

"Three minutes, more or less."

"It seemed a lifetime," Sams said darkly. "A hideous, insane lifetime!" His drink came; he emptied it, reordered. "Ah, now!" he said. "That's a little better. It was rougher on the special talents, you know. Dovari was still running waking nightmares when I left—and those are pretty badly singed pyrotics!"

"Hatzel and the other teleport should have got only a touch," Telzey said.

Sams nodded. "And that's what shook them up so completely. Only a touch—and Hatzel found he'd flipped himself halfway around Askanam! The other one didn't go quite that far, of course; but neither had done that kind of thing before, and neither wants to do it again. They can't remember how they did it. And they keep thinking of the various gruesome things that can happen to a teleport at the end of a blind flip—those two are very, very scared."

His second drink came. He took a swallow, set it down, smacked his lips. "Beginning to feel more like myself!" He gave them a brief grin.

Trigger said, "Are you going to try any more operations on Askanam?"

Sams shook his head.

"Too much bother. I'd have to build up a new gang. Besides, I decided Telzey was right—I'd get bored to death in a year playing games like that. Who's Askab in Tamandun now, by the way?"

"Vallain," Telzey said. "Casmard abdicated publicly in his favor at the end of Glory Day. A popular decision, apparently. Casmard doesn't intend to go back to Askanam again either."

"He's on board?"

"Uh-huh."

Trigger said, "He was telling us in confidence a short while ago that he and Vallain had personal proof there'd been a mysterious but well-intentioned psi involved in the downfall of Toru and Ormota and the various other strange Glory Day events. He said it was something that shouldn't be discussed, at the psi's special request."

"Well, there's been no significant breach of secrecy then," Sams said. "The Service might have got stuffy on that point." He reflected, grinned. "I was sure Toru and Ormota would be taken out one way or another after you two ambushed Hatzel in the gardens."

"You knew about that, eh?" Telzey said.

"Knowing you," said Sams, "I didn't expect you to pass up any opportunities. It wasn't a surprise."

"Why didn't you try to do something about it?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I figured I could spot you Hatzel and still win the game. And if you hadn't come up with the howler, I'd have done it."

Telzey smiled. "Perhaps you would, Sams—perhaps you would!"