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Zenya

#11 in the Dumarest series

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Chapter One

She was tall, with a mass of golden hair raised and crested in an aureole above her head. Thick strands ran from her temples, cut and shaped into upcurving points which accentuated the high bones and slight concavity of her cheeks. Her jaw was round, with a determined hardness, and her lips were full, the lower pouting in betraying sensuosity. Her eyes were deep-set, glowing amber, wide-spaced beneath arching brows, their upward slant giving her the appearance of a watchful cat.

She had, Dumarest realized, been studying him with unusual interest.

Slowly he turned the page of the ancient volume lying before him on the reading desk, not looking at the crabbed text beneath its transparent coating, but concentrating on the girl.

She wore a dress of luminous gold, rich fabric falling from throat to knee, cinctured at the waist, and tight against the contours of her body. Her arms were bare, coiled bracelets in the

design of serpents rising from wrists to elbows, gems bright against the precious metal. Her fingers were long, tapering, devoid of rings, the nails painted to match her dress. Her skin was a lustrous bronze.

She was young, obviously wealthy, and completely out of place. Such a woman would not haunt the musty confines of the Archives of Paiyar. Her type would be found at the stadium, at fashion shows, at parties, at the auctions where debtors were sold into bondage, at the market where merchants offered jewels and rare fabrics, perfumes from a dozen worlds, unguents, and titivating lotions. Not even the lowest of courtesans would waste her time in such a place.

Dumarest turned another page. The volume was the log of some old vessel, boring in its listing of minutiae, devoid of the information he sought. He closed it, added it to a pile of others, and took the entire heap to a desk where a woman checked them against a card.

Smiling, she said, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"I'm sorry." Her voice held genuine regret. I'm afraid they are the oldest logs we possess. There is another, that of the *Merle*—a trading vessel which touched on several worlds. It is of interest because the ship encountered an electronic storm which threw it far from its designated path. Perhaps...?"

"Thank you, but no." Dumarest returned the smile. "What I am looking for is something much earlier. A log made at the time when navigational tables were not as they are now. Or a set of tables as used before the present system became established. Apparently you have nothing like that."

"No," she admitted reluctantly, "we haven't. But would such tables exist? I know little about spacial navigation, but surely the tables used now are the same as they have always been?"

"Perhaps, but I was hoping..." Dumarest broke off, shrugging. "Well, it doesn't matter. It was a thin hope at best."

But one which had to be investigated. Old logs read and records searched, as he had done before on too many worlds. Books, microfilms, all examined and crosschecked, to be finally discarded as valueless to his search. And yet, somewhere, had to be the answer.

The woman said, "I have no wish to be curious, but if you could tell me just what it is you are looking for, I might be able to help."

"A place. A world," said Dumarest. He added bleakly, "You would call it a legend."

"Legendary worlds?" She frowned, thinking. "I'm sure that we have something in that field. A volume compiled by an old scholar. His name is...?" The frown deepened. "Sazy... Dazym Negaso! That's the one! He spent a lifetime correlating old myths. I'm sure the book would contain the information you are looking for. I could find it if you would care to wait."

"No, thank you."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"No," he said again. "I've read the book. It was interesting, but of no real value. A collection of rumor and wild speculation."

And another hope gone, but he was used to that.

"That will be all, then?"

Dumarest nodded, and as the woman busied herself assessing the charge, turned to examine the gallery. At one of the tables a thin-faced man scowled as he made copious notes. At another a matron snuffled as she searched through a pile of recent publications. A young couple whispered from behind the shelter of reproductions of rare and valuable Sha' Tung art. An old man dozed in a remote corner. The girl in the golden dress was nowhere to be seen.

Her absence was disturbing. Dumarest did not like to be an object of interest, especially on a world that could contain hated

enemies. It was, he decided, time to be moving on.

"Will you be back tomorrow?" The attendant was hopeful. Old though she was, she could still dream, and the tall man had touched something within her. It wasn't just his clothes—the tunic high about the throat and falling to mid-thigh, the pants, and high boots, all in somber gray. Rather it was the hard lines of his face, which spoke of privation, the haunting something in his eyes, the mouth which, she guessed, could so easily become cruel. This man, she knew, had traveled, had seen other worlds, other suns, and something of what he had experienced rode with him. So she added, almost pleadingly, "I could take another look at the file. Maybe there is something which has been overlooked. A scrap of information which could be of value."

Caution dictated a lie. "I'll be back," he said. "But don't bother looking for anything just yet. I'll think about it and let you know." He counted out money, the cost of the charge. Casually he added, "There was a girl here a short while ago. Tall, blond, wearing a golden dress. Did you see her?"

For a moment she hesitated, and then said curtly, "Yes, I saw her."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Her name, no. I've never seen her before. But she belongs to the Aihult. She wore serpents," she explained. "It is their device."

"A powerful house?"

"One of the most powerful on Paiyar." She glanced down at the symbol she wore on her blouse, the interlocked rings of the civil authority, and Dumarest could sense her resentment. Like himself, she lacked the protection of house, guild, or clan, but at least she did belong to an organization. She was not wholly alone.

He said, "Did she ask about me? The books I asked for?"

"No. She merely came in and watched you." The attendant thinned her lips. "I didn't see her leave."

* * *

She was waiting outside in a long, musty corridor thick with shadows, the odor of wood merging with that of dust and hanging like a miasma in the air. Without preamble she took his arm, the scent of her perfume strong in his nostrils, replacing the odor of ancient things with that of summer blooms. The aureole of her hair came a little below his eyes.

She said, "I am Aihult Zenya Yamaipan. You are Earl Dumarest. My grandfather wants to talk to you."

"Do I want to talk to him?"

"Does that really matter?" Her eyes were cool, faintly mocking. Her voice was a rich contralto, each word clearly enunciated. "When the master calls, the servant obeys; and in this world, my friend, I assure you, Aihult Chan Parect is very much a master. Shall we go?"

Dumarest resisted the tug at his arm. Flatly he said, "Let us get one thing clear. Your grandfather is not my master, and I am not his servant. Also, I have more important things to do."

"Nothing is as important as talking to my grandfather."

"That is a matter of opinion."

"Yours or his?" Abruptly she laughed, mellow echoes ringing from the paneled walls, the low ceiling. "You know, there isn't a person on Paiyar who wouldn't fall over themselves to answer such a directive. To be summoned to talk to the head of the house of Aihult! They would run barefoot over broken glass to be there on time. And yet you refuse! Refuse!"

Dryly he said, "You find that amusing?"

"Incredible, rather, but refreshing. I like a man who knows his own mind and who doesn't jump because he is told to do just that. Tell me, have you ever fought in the stadium?"

He said formally, "Why do you ask that, my lady?"

"Friends call me Zenya. Are you a friend?"

"That rather depends on you, my lady."

"Zenya. Have you?" She didn't wait for his answer. "Of course you have, it's obvious. Do you know how I can tell? You have the look of someone who has faced the necessity of having to win or die. The way you walk, the way you look—I've seen it before."

"In your other friends?"

"Some." She met his eyes, her stare direct. As she faced him, head tilted, he could see the smooth column of her throat the tiny pulse beneath the skin. "Would you fight for me if I asked you to? One bout, naked blades, to the death?"

"No."

"Just like that, Earl? No qualification, just a flat refusal?"

"That's right."

"Why not, Earl? Afraid?"

He said flatly, "Of dying, yes. Who isn't?"

The full lips pouted like those of a spoiled child. And that's what she was, he thought. Rich and spoiled, and, perhaps, jaded. On the surface, at least, but there could be more, far less apparent. Why had she sought him out? Why was she apparently alone? The rich and pampered daughter of a powerful house did not seek out strangers, and it was incredible that she should be unattended. There would be guards somewhere, men within call, force ready to be used in case of need.

And force directed by whom? Dumarest had the uneasy feeling that he was within the jaws of a closing trap.

"You disappoint me, Earl," she whispered. "You shouldn't have said that. A fighter never admits to being afraid of anything, even death. And I don't think you meant it. Tell me the real reason why you wouldn't fight for me."

"You talk like a child," he said harshly. "Fighting isn't a game. That's real blood you see in the ring. Real wounds and real pain. For you it might be the thrill of a moment, but for those taking part, it's a matter of life or death. It's ugly, vile and..."

He broke off, remembering. The crowd, the ring of avid faces, the roar as they anticipated blood. The stink of sweat and fear, the savagery, primitive emotion unleashed, yelling men and shrieking women, and, always, the chance that this time he would not be able to walk away. So many little things could do it. A slip, a momentary indecision, an accident, a snapped blade, the running out of luck, anything.

She said softly, "Yes, Earl? And...?"

"Nothing." He recognized the expression in her eyes, the look of an emotional vampire eager to feed on tales of blood and violence. He had seen it before, too often, on the faces staring down from the expensive seats, those who thronged the dressing rooms, finding in sweat and wounds an aphrodisiac for jaded appetites. Some fighters were tempted to cater to such women. Those who did failed to live long.

"Please, Earl!"

Flatly he said, "Somehow, my lady, we seem to have left the subject. If you will excuse me?"

She caught up to him as he strode down the corridor, slim fingers digging into his arm.

"My grandfather?"

"I'm sure that he will survive without the pleasure of my company."

"Perhaps, but will I?"

He paused and turned to look into the slanted amber of her eyes. "You must have many friends, my lady. And I am sure that you must know many who would be willing to fight for you. Fight... and cater to your requirements in other ways. You will

understand why I have no intention of joining their number."

"Did I ask you to do that?" She laughed and shook her head. "A test, Earl. For an hour I watched you in the gallery and wondered what kind of man you were. You were so intent on those moldering old books, and yet the last thing you seem to be is a scholar. And you misunderstood me. I can live without you, yes. My grandfather will survive without your company, agreed. But should I return without you, he will not be amused. In fact, he will be very annoyed. The Aihult are not gentle with those who fail. Need I say more?"

"No, my lady, but—"

"Zenya," she interrupted. "Don't be so formal. My name, to you, is Zenya."

"But, Zenya, that is your problem, not mine."

"You're hard," she said. "The hardest and most stubborn man I've ever met. Why won't you come and talk to Chan Parect?"

"Why should I?"

"To extend a little courtesy to an old man."

Dumarest shrugged. "I don't know him. I owe him nothing. And I see no need to cater to a rich man's whim. Also, as I told you, I have other things to do."

"Such as?"

He moved on, not answering, passing through an anteroom and into the street. Outside, it was late afternoon, the sun a crimson haze in the sky, eye-bright after the gloom of the archives. The city was alive with pedestrians, wheeled traffic gliding silently in the roads, rafts drifting overhead like wingless birds.

And everywhere—on buildings, cars, tunics, the windows of shops, the jewelry of women—blazed the symbols of the great houses of Paiyar. The serpent, orb, square, cone, lion, bird,

star—a score of devices that advertised the ownership and allegiance of all.

At his side the girl said quietly, "Paiyar is an unusual world, Earl. A stranger doesn't really stand much of a chance. He doesn't belong. Did you know that my grandfather is one of the richest and most powerful men on the planet?"

Dumarest nodded, waiting.

"I want you to talk to him, Earl. If you won't do it because you have been summoned, then do it for money. Five hundred cran—the cost of a Low passage. You see? I translate it into terms you can understand. Five hundred. Yours for a little conversation."

"You can get a cab here," said Dumarest. "Or perhaps you have your own transport waiting. Good-bye, my lady."

"Wait!" Her voice was sharp, a little desperate. "Don't go. Not yet. There is something else you should understand."

"And that is?"

"I was sent to get you, Earl. Just that, and no more, but I'm not stupid, and I've a pretty good idea why my grandfather wants to talk to you. You'd be a fool not to listen to what he has to say. Maybe he's got the answer to what you have been looking for. What you have been searching the Archives to find out."

He said slowly, "And that is?"

"I think you know, Earl." She smiled, confident in her victory. "Shall we go now?"

* * *

A raft carried them over the city, riding high above massive fortresses of stone, a grim reminder of the time when life on Paiyar had been hard and death lurked on every side. The jungles had been tamed now, the natural predators destroyed, but always there were potential enemies. Men who wore a

different symbol, houses touchy of their honor and pride.

The citadel of Aihult rested on a low hill, twisting serpents carved in the solid granite, a pair gracing the portals. Above the lintel the stone was fused, blotched in an irregular pattern, fragments of silica catching the crimson sunlight and shimmering like rubies.

"A laser," said the girl casually. "It happened before I was born. A difference of opinion with the Zham—they wear a skull. Fifty men died on both sides before it was resolved. Their tower still bears the scar of our weapons."

Inside it was cool, the air scented with brine, a sea smell both clean and refreshing. Guards were not apparent, but slots could have held weapons and watchful eyes. Attendants, neat in tunics blazoned with serpents, guided them to an upper chamber.

"Zenya!" A man stepped forward as they entered. His eyes glanced at Dumarest, then returned to the girl. "My congratulations! Your success has won me a thousand cran."

"Lisa?"

"Who else? She was certain that your charms would fail and you would return alone. I was as certain that you would not. What man could resist you? Chan Parect chose well." To Dumarest he said, "You will take wine while you wait?"

"Wait? For how long?"

"For as long as is necessary." The man had a smooth face and the girl's slanting eyes. A brother, perhaps, or a relative, certainly a member of the Aihult. He wore fine silks, and his hands were heavy with rings. Casually he added, "An hour, a day, what does it matter?"

Quickly the girl said, "Zavor, pour the wine, and don't talk such rubbish."

"Rubbish?" He shrugged and handed Dumarest a goblet of crystal, finely cut and with tiny gems embedded in the glass. The

wine was a deep blue and held the scent of burning wood. "My dear, you know as well as I that our honored grandparent has a dual appreciation of time. His summons must be answered immediately; his attention is another matter." Lifting his own goblet, he added, "To the serpent."

The girl responded, "May it swallow all."

A ritual toast, thought Dumarest, waiting unto the others drank before sipping the wine. It chilled lips and tongue, ran like fire down his throat, to expand in sudden warmth in his stomach.

As he lowered his glass, Zavor said, "I was at the stadium today. Haitcel really put on a splendid performance. Fifteen couples and five teams of seven aside. The teams weren't much, scum sold for fodder, cheap material off the block, and promised a clean slate if they won. I suppose about eight of them managed to survive, but the couples! Zenya, you should have seen them! Haitcel had a novel idea. He staked one foot to the ground so they couldn't run, and armed them with twenty-inch blades. It was good, clean, fast action all the time. I won a couple of thousand on a fighter from the Banarah province. He was clever. He didn't mess about, but put everything into the telling blow." He laughed. "After all, if a man hasn't got a hand to hold a knife, he can't be any real challenge, can he? And that's what he did. Lopped off the hand and then aimed at the throat. Two cuts and finish!" He made a chopping motion with the stiffened edge of his palm. "A joy to watch an expert. You agree, Earl?"

Dumarest sipped his wine, not answering.

"Earl doesn't like fighting," said the girl.

"No?" Zavor narrowed his eyes. "A pity. We could have had a bout while waiting. Practice blades, of course, and no real chance of getting hurt. But I suppose, to a coward, even that is a terrifying prospect."

The girl said, "Be careful, Zavor!"

"Of what?" He drank more of his wine. "Since when have the

Aihult had to watch their words? A man is what he is. Some can stand the sight of blood, and others cannot. But this world was not tamed by weaklings, and our society has no place for strangers who come to sneer. A man can fight and lose and still command respect. How can we respect a man who refuses to fight at all?"

Dumarest set down his goblet and stared around the chamber, conscious of watching eyes. He could see nothing, but scanners could be relaying the scene elsewhere, and there would be guards; of that he was certain. As certain as the fact that he was being baited for some reason. Zavor wasn't drunk, the wine wasn't responsible for his taunts, nor for his previous lies. No manager of a stadium would stage such spectacles as he had described, if only because it was too wasteful, too expensive, and offered too little sport.

And the girl, too—why had she been so insistent that he was a fighter?

How was it they knew so much about him?

He said, "My lord, my lady, with your permission, I wish to leave."

"Permission denied." Zavor was curt, his tone that he would have used toward a serf. The girl was more gentle.

"You can't go yet, Earl. Not until you have spoken to Chan Parect."

Again he tested the jaws of the trap which now he was convinced held him close. "I have changed my mind. I am not interested in anything he may have to say. In any case, I have no intention of waiting here to be baited by a fool."

"A fool?" Zavor stepped forward, his voice a feral purr. "You would hardly call my sister that, so the insult must be directed at myself. A strange word from a guest. A stranger one still when spoken by a coward. Perhaps I should have you taught a lesson."

"As you say," said Dumarest flatly. "I am a guest. As such, I

have an obligation. I recognize it if you do not."

"You compound the insult!"

"I did not expect to be faced with a tavern brawl in the citadel of the house of Aihult."

The girl said sharply, "Zavor! Don't!"

He was beyond any warning, suffused with a rage that Dumarest realized verged on the maniacal. He stepped back as the young man advanced, noting the stance, the hands extended, the palms stiffened, the fingers clamped together to form spears. A man trained in unarmed combat ready to use feet and hands against his opponent. A devotee of the ring, with, perhaps, a private box at the stadium.

Dumarest tensed as he retreated. The man was dangerous, not because of his skill, but because of the house to which he belonged. To kill him would be to commit suicide. To injure him in body or in pride would be to invite the attention of assassins—men who would strike him down and leave him maimed, crippled, blinded perhaps, if not dead.

And yet, somehow, he had to be stopped.

Dumarest dodged as he lunged, dodged again as a foot swept toward his side, the tips of fingers stabbing at his eyes. He blocked a chop with his left arm, another with his right, twisted to avoid a knee thrust at his groin, backed as Zavor moved to the attack. For a moment the room was filled with the flurry of motion, the sound of harsh breathing, as the young man did his best to break the defense.

"Fight!" he panted. "Fight, you coward! Fight!"

A masochist desiring pain? Dumarest didn't think so. The man was more a sadist confident of his prowess, the skill he imagined he possessed that had been tested on serfs terrified to hurt their master. Serfs and others like himself, scions of great houses, fighting for pleasure, not profit, and always careful to avoid the danger of serious injury.

He attacked again, stooping, rising to kick, to chop, the top of his head aimed at Dumarest's face. He met only wind, and stood, baffled.

"Enough!" said the girl. "Zavor! That's enough!"

From the open door a thin, acid voice said, "No, my dear. I don't think it is." Aihult Chan Parect stepped into the chamber.

Chapter Two

He did not seem old. A grandfather, perhaps, but he carried himself upright, and his shoulders bulked solid beneath his tunic. His hair was grizzled, cut short over a rounded skull, deep lines scoring his face from nose to mouth. Thick brows sheltered slanted eyes, the whites flecked with motes of brown. His hands were broad, the fingers thick and strong.

To the girl he said, "Introduce me to our guest."

As Zenya obeyed, Dumarest looked at the rest of the party. Chan Parect was not alone. At his side a woman stood, tall, regal, in a gown of ebony velvet cinctured with a golden serpent. The paleness of her skin accentuated the rich darkness of her hair. Her face was elfin, the chin sharply pointed, the eyes oval, enigmatic.

"Lisa Conenda," said Zenya. She did not bother to mention the rest, the three guards who waited like shadows behind the pair. "My aunt."

"My lady." Dumarest inclined his head. "My lord."

"At least he is polite." Her voice was deep, almost mannish. "Who would have thought that a common fighter would have such delicacy? Zavor, you seemed heated. You should remember to stay cool."

"As did our guest." Parect's thin voice held amusement. "You

could learn something from him, boy. In battle, a cool head wins."

"What battle?" Zavor scowled. "He refused to fight. The coward ran from each attack."

"Coward, boy?"

"What else would you call him? What other name can you give to a man who refuses to fight?"

"A cautious one, perhaps." The thin voice was musing. "A clever one, even. Are you willing to bet on your skill? Five thousand that he bests you within five minutes. First blood, naked blades, in the gymnasium. Now!"

Zavor sucked in his breath, his eyes cruel. "If he will accept."

"He will." Parect's voice was bland. "Am I right, Earl? You will accommodate an old man, I am sure. If you win, the money will be yours."

"And if I lose?"

A smile was the only answer, but Dumarest knew what it was. Death, despite the conditions of the bout. Zavor would not stop at a scratch; he would aim to kill, and he would enjoy what he did. And Dumarest knew that he had no choice in the matter. The baiting, the bout, the entire thing had been arranged, and he could guess why. In this society a man was reckoned by his fighting skill—a relic of the old days, perhaps, when the warrior class was dominant and only the strong could hope to survive. A tradition which had continued despite the lack of necessity.

But why should he be tested? What reason could there be?

Lisa said dispassionately, "The man is afraid. Why continue this farce? Let him go."

"He isn't afraid!" Zenya was quick to come to his defense. "I watched him. He... well, he isn't afraid."

"Your concern is touching, my dear," purred the other woman. "But then, we can all guess why. Your eccentricities are common knowledge, and I will admit, the man has appeal. It would be a pity to see that face disfigured, noseless, eyeless, slashed to the bone. Perhaps Zavor will see to it."

"We waste time," snapped Chan Parect. "Zenya, lead the way."

The gymnasium was what Dumarest had expected, a roped ring, the floor roughened to provide a good grip for naked feet, chairs set on a surrounding platform, bright lights above. He stripped to shorts, revealing the hard whiteness of his skin, the thin trace of scar tissue on chest and back and shoulders, cicatrices of old wounds. As an attendant came forward bearing a tray on which rested a pair of knives, he shook his head.

"I'd prefer to use my own."

Parect held out his hand. "Let me see it."

Dumarest lifted it from his clothing, a nine-inch blade of razor-sharp steel, the back curved, edged, merging into a needle point. The hilt was worn, the guard scarred.

Lisa said, "That isn't a practice blade."

"This is not a practice, my dear Zavor! You object?"

The blade was an inch shorter than the ones the attendant had offered. An advantage he couldn't ignore.

"Let him use it if he wants." Zavor hefted his own blade. "How long must I be kept waiting?"

He was keen, too eager to commence, used to the compliance of his usual partners. He should have waited, studying his opponent, looking for the little telltale signs which could mean the difference between victory and defeat. The stance, the position of the feet, the hands, the way in which the knife was held. An amateur, thought Dumarest. A dilettante. A man who had never learned the hard way with the sting of wounds to teach him caution. But, even so, he was skilled.

The blades met, parted, met again as they circled, wary, feet poised to jump forward or back, left to right. Zavor held his left hand extended, a foolish thing to do in any first-blood combat, where a scratch should, technically, end the bout. Dumarest held his own far back, his body turned, the knife held like a sword. In any other situation the bout would now be over, his blade reaching its mark, but he had his own reasons for delay. To win too quickly would not be wise.

And yet to wait would be to invite the one thing no fighter could avoid—the unknown, which would spell defeat.

The blade lunged toward him in a vicious upward slash toward the stomach, withdrew a trifle, and darted toward his face. A clever feint, but he had expected it. As the blade rose, he stepped forward, apparently stumbled, and cut a thin line over the other's chest.

"Finish!" Zenya's voice rose loud and clear. "The bout is over. Earl has won!"

Zavor snarled, blinded with rage. As Dumarest turned, lowering his knife, he lunged forward, point aimed at the kidneys.

Zenya cried out as Dumarest spun, instinct overriding his calculated caution. His left hand dropped to grip the other's wrist with a meaty slap, fingers clamping like iron as they halted the blade. His own knife rose, light splintering from the edge and point, bright on the surface as it poised over the staring eyes, the contorted features.

"No!" Sweat dewed Zavor's face as he anticipated what was to come. "Please, no! Dear God, no!"

For a moment Dumarest paused, his face cruel; then, turning the knife, he slammed the pommel hard against the bridge of the other's nose.

* * *

"You should have killed him." Aihult Chan Parect selected a

comfit from a box and chewed thoughtfully as he lounged in his chair behind a wide desk. "Instead you turned the knife. Why?"

"He is your grandson, my lord."

"And that is reason enough?"

"While I am a... guest in your house, yes."

"A wise man. I can appreciate that. But you are more than wise, Earl. Never have I seen anyone move so fast. You could have ended the bout at the first exchange. You could have beaten him in the chamber, yet you did not. Wisdom... or caution?" Parect selected another comfit, a nut coated with sugar and dotted with seeds. "Well, Zavor has a broken nose, two black eyes, and, we hope, a lesson easily learned. But he will not quickly forget what you did. Your plans?"

"To leave on the next available ship," said Dumarest. He added pointedly, "The money you promised will buy a High passage."

"Yes, the money. I had not forgotten." Parect leaned back, his eyes shadowed. Facing him, Dumarest could only wait.

It seemed he had been waiting a long time. He had bathed and dressed and then been escorted to this chamber, where, after a while, the old man had joined him. Waiting, He had looked around at the shelf of old books, the maps barely legible, star charts depicting far regions of the galaxy.

"You are wondering why I sent for you." Parect broke the silence. "It was well done, as I think you will agree. A young girl, alone, what danger could she represent? And a promise, deliberately vague, but one designed to catch a very certain type of man. One who is looking for something. A man who, even though he sensed danger, would take the risk in order to learn something of value." He paused, then added deliberately, "A man named Earl Dumarest. A traveler."

"So?"

"I had to be certain, Earl. Your reputation had preceded you."

A fighter, a man with incredibly fast reflexes —how else to prove it than by forcing you into combat? Zavor was eager to undertake the task; now, perhaps, he regrets his impetuosity. And I will admit, until the last, I had doubts. Your speed resolved them."

"The archives," said Dumarest. "The woman said that Zenya had made no inquiries."

"They were made long ago. A standing order that I should be notified when anyone showed an interest in the ancient records. Some wine?" As he poured, Parect added casually, "How close are you to finding what you are looking for?"

"Does it matter?"

"To you I think it does. In fact, I am sure of it. A planet?"

"Yes." Dumarest looked at his wine, red and thick as blood. "Earth."

"Earth?" Parect frowned, then shrugged. "An odd name for a world. You might as well call it dirt or soil or ground."

"It has another name," said Dumarest. "Terra. Have you heard of it?"

"I think... one moment," Parect rose and moved to a shelf, returning with a thick volume. "I believe that Dazym Negaso mentions it in his book. If I—"

"I have read the book," interrupted Dumarest. "It contains nothing of value."

"You have read a book supposedly written by Dazym Negaso," corrected the old man. "I have seen it, and as you say, it is valueless. But this is an earlier edition, and surprisingly rare. Let me see, now..." He riffled the pages. "Terra," he read. "A legendary world which is held by some, particularly the cult known as the Original People, to be the birthplace of mankind. An obvious impossibility when the divergences of race together with the number of inhabited worlds is considered. The most

likely reason for the name is to be found in a portion of the creed maintained by the Original People. Quote 'From Terra they fled in pain and despair.' Unquote. It is clear that 'Terra' should read 'terror,' in which case, no mystery remains."

Dumarest said, "What does he say about Earth?"

Reading, Parect said, "Earth. A generic name for planets which held mythical paradises. A region unknown and supposedly representing an ideal. Heaven, as an abstract concept, falls into the same category. The legend of a Utopian world is present throughout the galaxy, and, while the name changes, the concept is the same. See Jackpot, Bonanza, El Dorado, Gusher, and Garden."

"He is wrong," said Dumarest. "Earth exists. I know. I was born there."

"Born there?" Parect frowned. "But surely, in that case, it would be simple to find your way back. The coordinates—"

"Are lost." Dumarest looked at his hand. It was clamped tight around the goblet, the knuckles white with strain. To talk might be to say too much, but, always, was the chance that this man, once convinced, might remember some clue, a scrap of information to add to the rest, so painfully acquired.

"Earth is no paradise," he continued bleakly. "It is an old world torn and scarred by ancient wars. Life is hard there. I was a boy when I left, half-starved, frightened, stowing away on a ship. The captain was more than kind. He should have evicted me; instead, he let me work my passage. He was old and had no son, and for a time we traveled together. Then he died."

Leaving him alone to drift from world to world, always heading deeper into the galaxy where the suns were close and planets thick. A region in which the very name of Earth had become a legend and its whereabouts totally lost.

"And so you travel," said Parect quietly. "Looking, always searching, examining old records, asking questions, following clues that lead to what? Failure, as they must. Tell me, in all your

travels, have you ever met anyone from your home world?"

"No."

"Nor anyone who has ever heard of it?" He took Dumarest's silence for assent. "Once I knew a man who held a dream. He was convinced that, somewhere, was to be found a secret so vast that its possession would make him the master of the universe. He was a rich man, but beggared himself looking for it. He followed a dozen leads, undertook a score of expeditions. He died on a barren world on the very edge of the galaxy, and now even his grave is lost. He was my cousin."

"So?"

"If an intelligent man can cling to fantasy, then why not a boy? A lonely, scared, frightened boy who, somewhere, picked up a name and by some means associated it with his home world. All of us tend to enhance our station. A pauper will dream he is a baron and invent lies to bolster his illusion. After a while they cease to be lies, to him at least. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Too well, and Dumarest wondered at his motive. To convince him that what he knew to be real was, in fact, a fantasy? Or did he have some subtle reason not obviously apparent? Chan Parect was a devious man, working in unobtrusive ways to gain his own ends. A skilled manipulator of men, applying pressure here to cause a desired result there, or seeming to move to the left when in reality edging toward the right. But Dumarest was in no mood for games.

He said, "My lord, you owe me five thousand cran. As a man of honor, you will wish to pay it. Give me the money and allow me to leave."

"Leave, Earl? And where will you go? To another world to follow a fruitless search?"

To a dozen if it was necessary, riding High when he could, Low when he couldn't. Money would buy comfort and the magic of quicktime, the drug which slowed the metabolism and turned

hours into minutes, months into days. Five thousand cran would buy a High passage. A tenth of that sum would buy a Low, riding in a casket meant for the transportation of animals, doped, frozen, ninety-percent dead, risking the fifteen-percent death rate for the sake of cheap travel. He had done it before, and he could do it again.

Slowly Chan Parect poured more wine. Lifting his goblet, talking to it rather than to his guest, he said, "There is no need for you to leave. Work with the house of Aihult, and you can live in comfort for the rest of your life."

"Are you offering me employment?"

"Let us say, rather, an opportunity. What did you think of Zenya?"

The change of subject was disturbing. Dumarest said cautiously, "She seems a pleasant girl."

"She is warped, as is Lisa Conenda, Zavor, all the younger members of my house. Inbreeding—need I say more? The original stock weakened and spoiled by luxury and subtle mutations. When I die there will be a scramble to fill my seat. It is what the Zham are waiting for. The Zham, the Deai, the Leruk, a dozen clans. There will be war, and it is one we shall not win. You appreciate the problem?"

"Change is the way of life, my lord."

"Spoken from the viewpoint of a man who does not care. Who might even think it is a good thing that the tree which has sheltered this world for so long be cut down to make room for lesser growths." Parect gulped at his wine. "You will understand that I have different feelings on the matter. To me it is a personal thing. I intend to make it yours."

Dumarest said flatly, "Intend?"

The sound of a gong echoed the question, soft tones rising to fade against walls and expensive hangings. Aihult Chan Parect set down his goblet. "Dinner," he said. "Good food should not

wait on the meaning of a word. I hope you have a good appetite."

* * *

There was fish, meat, game of a dozen kinds, served on fragile plates and accompanied by a score of vegetables, a choice of sweets and compotes, attended by relevant wines. Servants glided like shadows, clearing, changing plates, deft as they replenished glasses.

Parect dominated the assembly. He sat at the head of the board, Lisa to his left, Zenya to his right, his thin, acid voice cutting through the blur of conversation. A dozen others filled the table, all young, all bearing the facial characteristics of the Aihult. At the foot of the board sat a man at whom Dumarest stared with interest.

He had not expected to see a monk of the Church of Universal Brotherhood in this place.

Brother Eland was old, his face gaunt with privation, looking, in his brown homespun robe, a little like a sparrow among birds of paradise. He sat quietly, eating in small mouthfuls, chewing long before he swallowed. Physically he was insignificant, a mouse of a man lacking bulk and muscle, but Dumarest knew that the small body contained more courage than the average man could guess. And the eyes betrayed him. Wide, bright, glowing with intelligence and determination. And something else. A thing called faith.

Dumarest said quietly, "The monk. Is he resident here?"

"Brother Eland?" At his side Zenya emptied her glass and watched as it was immediately refilled. "No. He arrived a couple of hours ago. While you waited for grandfather. Our people found him on the field."

"And intend... what?"

"Nothing." She laughed, teeth white between the parted fullness of her lips. "Just to feed him and listen to him talk. Grandfather is probably amusing himself."

Dumarest doubted it, but made no comment, concentrating instead on the food, choosing items rich in protein and low in bulk.

"You eat well, Earl," said Zenya, "I wish I could eat like that. Really enjoy my food, I mean."

"You could," he said. "If you wanted to."

"How?"

"Starve for a week," he said bluntly. "Get out into the fields and work. Take a Low passage—you'd be hungry enough then."

Again she laughed, reaching for her wine. Like the others, she had merely picked at her food; the assortment of dishes was for titivation, not sustenance. "You amuse me, Earl. I like that. Did grandfather talk to you?"

"A little."

"Did he..." She broke off. "Never mind. It can wait."

From the head of the table Parect said, "And now, brother, tell us why you came to Paiyar."

The monk set down his fork. "To work, brother, what else? With your permission we would like to set up a church. A small place where those who are in distress could gain ease. We would require very little—a patch of ground outside the gate would serve."

"We?"

"Brother Wen is with me. He waits at the field with our possessions."

The portable church and the benediction light beneath which suppliants were hypnotized, given subjective penance, and then the bread of forgiveness. The wafer of concentrates which alone drew many to the church. But the monks did not object; they regarded it as a fair exchange.

Parect said, "Let me get this straight. You intend to do... what? Feed the poor? Nurse the sick?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then you have no place here. We have no poor and no sick. There is no poverty on Paiyar."

"If that is so, my lord, this is a most fortunate world."

"A logical one. Have you seen a beggar in the city? No, and you never will. Here people are not permitted to beg. They are taken, fed, washed, clothed, healed if they are sick, and then put to work. The Leruk arrange it. Each month they hold an auction. Those who need labor know where to go."

"And if a man is too ill to work, my lord?"

"How can he be that? If he can move, sit upright, move a hand or foot, then he can work. If not, then he dies. A bad investment, perhaps, but it happens." Parect dismissed the subject with a curt gesture. "What else do you offer?"

Hope, understanding, tolerance, a simple creed, which, if accepted, would bring the millennium. *There, but for the grace of God, go I.* The concept that no man was alone, that all belong to the *Corpus Humanite*, that all shared the divine spark, and that, if they could only treat others as they would wish to be treated themselves, all problems would be solved.

Zenya giggled as she listened. "Earl, the man must be insane! Do you realize what he is saying? All men must be treated as equal; but that is absurd. It's obvious they aren't. Why, if I was to follow his teaching, I would dress the hair of my maid instead of taking a whip to her when she fumbled."

"Do you like to be whipped?"

"Of course not, Earl."

Flatly he said, "Neither does she. Think of it the next time you beat her. Imagine the lash tearing your own flesh. Better still,

each time you strike her, have her strike you."

It was a waste of time, and he knew it, as surely must Brother Eland. Some things could not be taught, because they could never be learned. The proud and arrogant would never admit they were anything less than superior. Their position blinded them to reality, but not to potential danger.

Parect said harshly, "Enough! Your teaching would ruin the structure of this world. Every serf would think himself equal to his master. Your creed holds the seed of rebellion."

"Not so, brother, it—"

"Do you dare to argue with me?" Anger suffused the lined face, sent the thin voice soaring high, shrill. "Do you?"

Dumarest felt Zenya's fingers dig into his arm, heard her whisper, breathless, afraid. "Dear God, don't let it happen again. Don't let him get into one of his rages!"

He realized the table had fallen silent, that each face bore the stamp of trepidation, realized too what should have been apparent before. Aihult Chan Parect was insane.

Chapter Three

The room was a cell. Despite the comfort, the softness of the couch, the tapestries, the items of price set on low tables, the sea-scented air, it was as much a cell as the citadel was a prison. A trap into which he had walked willingly, lured by a promise. And yet, Dumarest knew, he'd had no choice. The Aihult owned the field; guards would have been waiting to take him by force if necessary; following the girl had given him only the pretense of freedom.

Restlessly he paced the room. The window was an unbroken pane of thick crystal, unbarred but proof against the impact of missiles. Beyond it, as far as he could determine, the wall fell

sheer to an inner courtyard. The roof, perhaps, might house a raft, but if so, it would be guarded. As everything in the citadel was guarded. As even this room to which he had been led after the meal must be watched by the order of Aihult Chan Parect.

He heard the click of a latch and stood, not turning, watching the reflection as Lisa Conenda entered the room and approached him, feet silent on the carpeted floor.

"You are dreaming, Earl," she said in her deep, almost mannish voice. "Of what, I wonder? The stars? The empty spaces between them? A woman you once had?"

She still wore the ebony gown, the elfin lines of her face accentuated with skillfully applied cosmetics. Her perfume was of musk and incense, heady, pungent. The fingers which she rested on his arm were long, the nails shaped into needle points.

"I understand that you are interested in old legends," she continued softly. "And there is one which you must surely know. A creature which spins a web and offers enticing invitations. It would be amusing, would it not, if the guest so invited should turn the tables and, instead of providing the meal, feasted instead?"

He said quietly, "Meaning what, my lady?"

"A thought, Earl, little more. Shall we pursue it?" The long fingers closed on his arm, her voice a bare whisper in his ear. "The house of Aihult is decadent. You have seen Zenya, Zavor, the others. Soon there will be a vacuum of power in which a strong, ruthless, and imaginative man could do well. All he would need would be a little help— some guidance and the support of one who has a legitimate claim to the chair that will soon be empty." The fingers tightened even more. "Are you ambitious, Earl?"

He said nothing, looking through the window. Others faced him from across the courtyard, some bright with illumination, shadows moving, blurred, oddly shaped by perspective and translucent hangings. Above, the stars shone bright against the sky, colorful motes winking against skeins and curtains of

shimmering luminescence. Hot suns ringed with circling worlds.

"Earth," she said, her voice ironic. "Is that the sum total of your ambition, Earl? To find a dream world, a myth? Do you look at the stars and wonder if it could circle that one... or that one? So many stars, Earl. So many worlds. And even if you found it, what then?"

A question he would face when it came; for now, the search was enough. Turning, he faced her, catching her expression, a little surprised at what he saw. Not the mockery he had anticipated, but something else. Yearning, perhaps, bitterness.

"Do you think that others have never dreamed, Earl? As a child I longed to be adult so that I, too, could give orders and have them obeyed. I had a weakness for a fruit compote, chilled, iced, laced with cream. It was a special treat, and I swore that, when I grew big, I would eat it every day. Well, I am big now, and can get as much of the stuff as I want. And now, of course, I don't want it."

The compote and other things, he thought. Men, perhaps, power, fine gowns, with rich fabrics. Childish longings which turned to dust when attained. And now more ambitions, not childish this time, and far less innocuous. A game in which the loser would pay with life itself.

A game?

He looked into her eyes, seeing them change, veiled to hide innermost thoughts. A spoiled, decadent woman seeking amusement at the expense of a stranger? It was possible, the tempting bait dangled, rewards offered, plans made, and then, without warning, the abrupt end. And Chan Parect would not be kind to rebels.

But it was a game which two could play.

He said, "Tell me more, my lady. What would I hope to gain if..."

Her arms lifted, to close around his neck. The softness of her

body pressed tight against his chest, warm flesh, succulent, yielding. The touch of her cheek against his own was scented velvet, as, straining upward, she whispered in his ear.

"Be careful, my darling. In this place, walls have ears. You want to know what you could gain? Myself and what I could bring. A position second only to my own. A seat at my side in Council, estates to rule, men to command. Under our guidance, the serpent would swallow all. The Zham, Elbe, Leruk—all would be ours, their men our serfs, their women our slaves. And our son, Earl. The child of our bodies. To him we would give an entire world as his heritage."

He sensed her tension, too intense to be contrived, and remembered her hands, the nails now resting lightly against the back of his neck. Remembered too the family to which she belonged, the contamination that was apparent and that the old man had betrayed.

Carefully he said, "My lady, you offer too much."

"There is no limit to the aspirations of an ambitious man."

"Aspirations, perhaps, but execution? How will all this be achieved?"

He felt her relax, confident that he had been won. Casually he lifted his hands, gripped her own, and lowered them to her side. With his cheek still pressed to her own he whispered, "We must talk again. In a safe place without attendants. If you could obtain the use of a raft...?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes. In the woods, where there will be none to spy. Earl, my darling, how long have I waited for a man like you. A real man who will give me the strength I need."

"The raft," he said again. "When?"

"Soon. I promise. Soon."

He stepped back a little, releasing her hands, knowing he had done all that was possible for the moment. If she would provide

the raft, it could go to the field as easily as anywhere else, and with luck, a ship might be waiting, escape possible before guards could prevent it. A thin chance, but, he thought grimly, better than none.

Wine stood on a table. As she poured and returned with filled glasses, he said casually, "My lady, do you know why I am being kept here?"

"As a guest, Earl, what else?" Smiling, she handed him a goblet. "And now let us drink to us, to the future, and to a happy life."

Raising the glass, he touched his lips to the wine, making a pretense of drinking. Beyond the woman stood the window, and he looked at it, seeing a pane on the opposite side of the courtyard suddenly become bright with a ruby glow. Against it a shadow moved, a tall, cowed figure turning, vanishing as draperies were pulled.

Frowning, he said, "Is the monk also a guest?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't you know?"

"Does it matter?" She was uninterested. "Who can tell what motivates the mind of Chan Parect? Maybe he intends to amuse himself further with the man. And he was amusing, was he not? How can anyone spend their lives dedicated to the service of others? To live unwillingly in such poverty? And those he claims to help, what do they really think of him? Do they laugh behind his back? I think they must. The insane are always objects of mirth."

"Of pity, my lady."

"Pity?" She frowned. "That is a form of weakness, Earl. I do not think you are weak."

"There is strength in compassion."

"So I have been told." She shrugged, setting down her goblet. "As an intellectual exercise, the concept is intriguing, but in the real world, it can be fatal. A fact of which you must be aware. Only a fool spares the life of an enemy."

"True," he admitted, "but first define what you mean by an enemy."

"If they are not with us, they are against us."

"Which must include a lot of people," he said dryly. "Does Aihult Chan Parect operate on that principle?"

"Naturally, Earl. What else?"

There were other ways, and far less dangerous than the one that led to inevitable paranoia. Delusions of grandeur coupled with a persecution complex that led to a total inability to trust a living soul. The reason for Parect's subtle behavior, his deviousness. The cause of his sudden, maniacal rage at the very hint of a threat to his ordered world. And other things, each small, but all adding to the inescapable conclusion.

Had he sent the woman to him?

It was possible, and Dumarest had considered it from the first. The blatant suggestion that he should take power, a willing tool to be used in a game of violence, to be tested and trapped, perhaps, revealed for a potential assassin. And yet the woman had held her own motivations, using the order for her own ends, as devious in her own way as her master. A prison, thought Dumarest, not just of walls of stone and watchful guards, but a mental conditioning which held everyone in a mesh of conflicting emotions.

A deliberate state induced by Chan Parect to ensure his own safety. When none could trust another, rebellion was impossible.

"Earl!" Lisa Conenda moved toward him, purposeful, her breasts rising prominently beneath the thin fabric of her gown. "Earl!"

Another test? A man in passion was careless of his tongue, and ambition, once aroused, demanded an outlet. Or was she merely succumbing to the emotion he had sensed, the intensity of natural passion? In this place of madness who could be sure?

He said quietly, "I think it best that you leave now, my lady."

"What?" She stared her disbelief.

"I am being cautious. It would not be wise for us to be so intimate."

"You are concerned with my reputation?" Her laughter was deep, rich, genuine. "Have no fears, Earl. We shall not be disturbed. And I have no jealous lover and no husband who might call you to account. And if they should exist and show hostility, what then? You could take care of them, of that I am sure."

"Even so..." He broke off as sounds came from beyond the door. A girl's voice, the deeper tones of a man. In three strides he had reached the panel and jerked it open. Zenya Yamaipan stood outside.

She was not alone. A guard stood beside her, tall, neat in his serpent-blazoned tunic, a dagger at his waist and a staff in his hands. He said plaintively, "My lady, please understand. My orders—"

"To hell with your orders!" She glared at him, head thrown back, red patches on her cheeks, dusty beneath the bronze of her skin. "How dare you bar my way? Me, a blood noble of the Aihult! How dare you!"

Dumarest said sharply, "Don't blame the man for obeying his orders. Why are you here?"

"To see you, Earl." She turned to face him, her anger evaporating. "I must talk to you. That monk, the one who came to dinner, he wants to see you."

* * *

Brother Eland sat in a small room Just within the main gate, a bleak place more like a cell than anything else, a place, Dumarest guessed, where uninvited visitors were housed until a decision had been made as to their disposition. He rose as they entered, staggering a little and leaning his weight against a wall.

To the girl he said, "My lady, you are most kind."

Dumarest caught the thin arm, forced the monk back to his seat. "What is wrong, brother? Are you hurt?"

"Bruised, but the ache will pass."

"What happened?"

"I ate here, as you know and also, as you heard, was refused a place at the field. On my return, I found desolation. Brother Wen had been attacked by men wearing the symbol of a grasping hand. Others waited."

"The Leruk," Zenya whispered.

"They had questioned Brother Wen as to his standing, and accused him of having no place in this society. He had no money and belonged to no clan." The thin hand touched the homespun robe. "They refused to accept this as a sign of our allegiance. They had destroyed all we possessed, and then they beat me with staves. And then they left me."

An old man, without resources or known friends, hurt and alone. Dumarest drew in his breath.

"Why?"

"The Leruk," said the girl, as if that explained everything. "It is their task. Beggars are not allowed; you heard my grandfather talking. Without money, what else could the monk be?"

Without looking at her, Dumarest said, "What will happen to him?"

"He will be sold at auction. If he has skills, he will get a good

price. If not, then he will end as a worker in the fields or in a factory." She added wonderingly, "I can't understand why they let this man go free. Logically, they should have taken him also."

Dumarest could guess why they hadn't. To the monk he said, "You asked for me, brother. How can I help?"

"You are a traveler, brother, and known to the church. As I said, all we possessed has been destroyed. The church is nothing, poles and thin coverings, easily replaced, but the benediction light is another matter. That we cannot replace. If you would carry word to another world, we would be grateful. Just relay the message to any monk you may happen to meet. Tell him what has happened here; he will do the rest."

Using the hybeam radio concealed in every benediction light to pass on the word. Dumarest knew of the secret, knew too of the close-knit mesh of communications binding all monks together and to the great seminary on Hope, the heart and center of the Universal Brotherhood.

"Please, brother!"

The monk sagged a little. One or more ribs, if not broken, had been cracked, and it was painful to breathe. His stomach throbbed and his kidneys burned from the impact of savage blows. Bruises mottled his skin, and it was hard to stand. A harsh world, he thought, but he was used to harshness, as he was accustomed to deprivation. Even the pain he suffered was not new; he had known pain before, as he had known other things. Disappointment, abuse, scorn, indifference—all these things were an integral part of the life he had chosen. But the church must not be allowed to wither on Paiyar. Not if an appeal could save it. And no monk could afford the luxury of pride.

"Please, brother," he said again. "I realize that you cannot help Brother Wen. He will be sold, and he will do what he can. As I will, should I be taken in turn."

Dumarest said, "Zenya. How can they be helped?"

"What do you mean, Earl?"

"This is a world of clans. How large must a clan be before it is recognized? Ten men? Five? Two? How many?"

"I don't know." She looked baffled. "I've never thought about it. Everyone wants to join an existing house, not set up on their own. Even those who work for the civil authority are always eager to change."

"We studied the customs of this world before coming here," said the monk. "There are no regulations as to what constitutes a clan. However, any group must be self-supporting and strong enough to resist aggression." He added bleakly, "Also, by definition, a clan is a group of more than one person. At this moment I am alone."

"But not for long," said Dumarest. "Zenya, how much would Brother Wen fetch on the block?"

"Not much, I would think. A monk can't be of high value."

An error Dumarest hoped others would make. Every monk was trained in medical skill and the basic necessities of survival. They could take a desert and cause it to bloom, use a cunning balance of ecology to change hostile environments, teach a dozen crafts.

He said, "Zenya, you owe me five hundred cran, your grandfather five thousand. I want it."

"I haven't got it, Earl."

"You have jewelry. Get it. Sign a witnessed deposition that you freely give it to the monk, Brother Eland. Hurry!"

She was stubborn. "No, Earl. I can give you the five hundred, and that's all. Chan Parect owes you the rest."

"And he will pay it." His eyes met hers, cold, hard. "If he doesn't, I will. I ask you for a loan, no more. The jewelry can be redeemed. Now, do as I say."

As she left he said to the monk, "You will take the money and

buy your companion. And then, if you've any sense at all, you'll get off Paiyar as fast as you can. If the girl is right there will be enough left for Low passage, or maybe a captain will let you ride High for the sake of charity."

"Thank you, brother."

"There's one other thing. Are there any other monks on this world?"

"None. Brother Wen and I were alone."

"I see." Dumarest turned as the girl entered the room. She carried a signed paper and had stripped the serpents from both arms.

"Take these to the shop of Kren Sulimer," she said. "You'll find it close to the field—a small place with the symbol of a sword. Don't sell them. Borrow ten thousand and leave the pledge at the gate. Don't fail to do this."

Brother Eland said quietly, "My lady, you have my word."

"I've arranged for an escort to accompany you, and our doctor will attend to your injuries."

"Thank you, my lady."

"For what? I've done nothing." Zenya shrugged, divorcing herself from the incident. To Dumarest she said, "The debt is yours, Earl. You realize that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then we can leave now." She shivered, looking at the bleak walls. "I've done as you asked. Now amuse me."

* * *

Amusement was the sharing of wine, the playing of a game, dice rattling, falling, counters moved to an intricate pattern. A game he could play but had never enjoyed. And there had been

conversation, innuendos, hints of knowledge he should have, motivations he should have understood. It had been a relief to get away.

Back in his room he killed the lights and sat before the window. The air held the scent of Lisa's perfume, the memory of her body, as if she were still present, waiting, demanding. Beyond the window the wall opposite was mostly dark, the pane he remembered a glimmer of starlight. Above, the stars wheeled in their courses as he sat silent, watchful.

Something pressed against the door.

It was a small sound, barely heard, metal moving as the knob was turned. Lisa Conenda returning for more intrigue, to seal the bargain in the only way she knew? Zenya, perhaps, restless and bored and eager for novelty?

Dumarest rose and stood against the wall to the side of the window, away from the betraying rectangle of light. The door swung open, light from the passage haloing the shape in the opening. It was not that of a woman. As it moved into the room, glimmers shone from a naked blade held in the right hand.

Dumarest moved, stepping silently along the wall, memory serving to dodge obstacles as he eased toward the door. He saw the man step toward the bed, the grunt of surprise at finding it empty, then he had lunged forward, slamming the panel and snapping on the lights.

Zavor glared at him from purpled eyes, the slick sheen of a transparent bandage covering his nose and forehead.

"You!" He sucked in his breath. "You should have been asleep, satiated with the passion of my dear aunt, but perhaps it's better this way." He lifted the knife. "You were lucky once. It won't happen again."

"We fought," said Dumarest coldly. "I won. What are you complaining about?"

"You marred me. Made me a mock before the others."

"I let you live."

"And I should be grateful for that?" Zavor lifted his left hand and touched his bruised face, letting it fall again quickly to his side. "Do you know what I intended? Had you been asleep, I would have smashed in your face with this." He gestured with the knife, the heavy pommel. "Then I would have cut it to the bone and left you a thing of horror. I saw them smile when you defeated me with that cunning trick. Chan Parect was most amused. I wonder if he will smile when next he sees you?"

Dumarest said flatly, "He's insane. Are you?"

"Me? Insane?" Zavor's laugh was a titter. "Now, why should you say that? Because I have pride and want revenge? Because I have reason to hate a stranger who made me look a fool? A common fighter who belongs in the arena like the animal he is?"

"You're hurt," said Dumarest. "You should be resting under slowtime. Do it now, and by morning you will be as before."

"A brave man should not run from the pain of wounds."

"A brave man doesn't come creeping into a room to wreak vengeance."

"Are you calling me a coward?"

Dumarest sighed. The man had been drinking, or worse. The eyes were too bright in their purpled sockets, his tones too high. Drugs to kill pain and to speed his metabolism, others to give him courage or to numb his fears. And yet he was not wholly a fool. He had waited until it was late; had his victim been asleep, it would have taken only one quick blow. And he was a scion of the house, an accident of birth which had served to save him once and was doing so again.

He said again, "Answer me, you scum! Are you calling me a coward?"

"I'm calling you a fool. Get out of here before you get hurt."

"A challenge? Will you use that knife in your boot?" Zavor edged forward. "Then reach for it. Drop your hand. Do it, damn you! Do it now!"

He was too confident, which meant that he was better armed than it appeared. A laser, perhaps, or a missile weapon held in or carried close to the left hand, which he kept at his side.

Dumarest said, "You want to kill me, but you don't want to suffer because of it. If you can claim self-defense, you might be believed. Do you consider your grandfather to be such a fool?"

Zavor smiled, a distortion of his mouth devoid of humor. "My insane grandfather will believe that you are an assassin that I confronted and killed to save his precious hide. And you don't have to reach for that knife. I can place it in your hand when you are dead."

"Get out of here!"

Dumarest stepped forward, watching the knife, the left arm, alert for the tiny movements that would herald explosive action. The knife would be used, thrown perhaps as the left hand rose, a diversion to gain a clear field for whatever weapon Zavor carried at his side. And it would be done soon. He was giving the man no chance. He would have to act or retreat.

"Back!" Zavor sprang to the bed, stood wide-legged on the mattress. He sprang again, right hand lifting, the knife a spinning blur as it left his hand.

Dumarest ducked, saw it pass harmlessly overhead, watched as the left hand rose with the expected weapon. A laser adjusted for continuous fire, venting its full charge in a ruby-guided beam of searing destruction, which swept like a scythe toward him.

Flame burst from the carpet, the wall, touching his shoulder, burning the plastic from the protective metal mesh beneath, passing, to hit the door, another wall. Zavor was too eager, using the laser like a cane to slash as a boy would cut air with a stick, moving too fast for careful aim. As he swept the beam backward, Dumarest acted.

There was no time to think; his hand dropped to his boot, rose with his knife, hand and arm sweeping back as the beam moved toward his face, muscles like springs sending the steel forward, to arc through the air, to end at one of the eyes, the hilt jarring against the bone of cheek and forehead.

Zavor fell, twisting, the laser falling, still active, to hit and roll off the edge of the bed and explode in a gush of blasting energy which filled the room with smoke and flame.

Dumarest turned as it fell, catching the blast on his back, feeling the burn of heat, the stench of charred hair as he lunged toward the door. It opened before he reached it, and he saw the startled face of a guard, a staff lifted, aimed, a gout of flame.

Something smashed against the side of his head, and he fell into an endless darkness.

Chapter Four

It was cold, with a thin wind blowing from the north over scrub and barren rock, biting savagely at his near-naked body, the bite reflected by the hunger gnawing at his stomach. High above, against a swollen moon, a shape wheeled, circling, wide wings soundless in the air. The sling was of plaited leather, the pouch made supple by endless chewing, the stone it contained carefully selected as to weight, shape, and size. He rose, the sling circling, whining a little as it cut the air, thong flying as he released the stone at precisely the right moment. Above, the bird jerked and fell, wings fluttering, a mournful cry marking its passage. He caught it as it fell, wringing its neck, sending sharp teeth to bite into skin and sinew to the flesh beneath.

The blood warmed him, the meat filled his stomach, and he stared upward, triumphant. Food was life, and now he would live until it was time to kill again. And kill... and kill... and kill.

The moon splintered into fragments, which became a face.

"I am Dr. Leon Glosarah. Head physician to the house of Aihult. How do you feel?"

Dumarest stared, not answering.

The voice sharpened. "What is your name?"

"Earth," said Dumarest. He had been dreaming of his childhood. "Earth... No. My name is Dumarest. Earl Dumarest."

"Good." The man sounded relieved. He was of middle age, his skin smooth, a mesh of tiny lines at the corners of his slanted eyes. "Count my fingers." He held up a hand. "How many do you see?"

"Three."

"What is the last thing you remember?"

"A man," said Dumarest slowly. "A guard, I think. He aimed a staff at me. There was fire, and something hit my head. A bullet?"

"A low-velocity missile which hit you. Just above the right ear. It shattered the bone and impacted the mastoid process. You were rendered immediately unconscious. Tell me again, how many fingers?"

"Two."

"Look to your left. To your right. Raise your eyes. Move the right foot. The left. Lift both arms and flex your fingers. Good. You seem to be in perfect condition."

"Was there any doubt?"

The doctor shrugged. "In cases of head injury, it is always hard to be certain. Fortunately, there was no brain damage. You were burned a little on the back and shoulders, but the protective clothing you wore saved you from extensive injury. The shattered bone has been repaired and the mastoid healed. You have been under slowtime, intravenous feeding and have

had regular massage. Please stand up now."

Dumarest sat upright and felt a momentary nausea. He waited until it had passed, then threw his legs over the edge of the bed and stood upright. His body, he noticed, was thin, the fat vanished, leaving only hard skin and muscle.

"How long?"

"Under slowtime? Thirty hours. That's about fifty days actual." The doctor added, "Healing time, naturally. Can you walk?"

Dumarest stepped across the room. It was pastel green, windowless, the door set with a judas grille. Aside from hunger he felt normal. A high-protein diet coupled with exercise, and he would be as good as before. It was hard to realize that almost two months of his life had been spent in the cot, his metabolism speeded so that he had lived forty times the normal rate. A long time for wounds to heal when aided by hormone activators.

"There was no hurry," said the doctor when he mentioned it. "Chan Parect ordered a complete recovery, and I thought it advisable to taper off the drugs. Your clothes have been repaired. There is basic in that container. Please dress and eat." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "We haven't much time."

"Time for what?"

"You will see. Now, please do as I say."

Fresh gray plastic covered the protective mesh, and the basic was as he remembered. A thick liquid laced with vitamins, tart with citric acid, almost solid protein. Standard fare on spaceships, where a cup would supply enough energy for a day. He drank a pint, slowly, ignoring the growing agitation of the doctor. He wanted to be in condition for anything which might come, and an empty stomach was a poor ally.

"Are you ready?" The doctor moved toward the door, not waiting for an answer. "Open," he said through the grille, and then added, to Dumarest, "The men outside will take you to

where you are to go."

There were eight of them, unarmed but strong, more than a match for anyone just risen from a sickbed. They led him down passages and up stairs to a room he remembered. A chamber graced with old books and faded maps. From behind his desk Aihult Chan Parect gestured toward a chair.

"Sit, Earl. Relax. You are well, I hope?"

"Thank you, yes."

"A most distressing incident Zavor was a fool and has paid for his folly. The guard, too, the one who shot you, he has been disciplined."

Dumarest said dryly, "For almost missing?"

"For shooting at all. He claimed that his thumb tensed on the button—you know how it is. Fire, a man lying dead, another he thought was about to attack. Even so, he made a mistake and has paid for it. Debts, as I am sure you will agree, must be paid."

"Yes," said Dumarest. "Debts must be paid. The five thousand cran you owe me, for example. And then there is the question of damages. An attack on my life by your grandson. As the head of the house you are naturally responsible for the actions of your people." He added formally, "I am sure you will admit that, my lord."

Chan Parect laughed, the sound rising thin in the chamber, and Dumarest felt the prickling of caution. The man was not normal; never must he forget that. His grandson had been killed, and no matter what his personal feelings as head of the house, his duty was plain. To avenge the death and maintain his honor. Instead, he laughed; it was an ugly sound.

"You amuse me, Earl. I find it most entertaining to talk with you. You sit there with the blood of my grandson on your hands and you talk of moneys owing for the inconvenience. You do not deny killing him?"

"No, but I did not cause his death."

"You blame your knife?" From a drawer Chan Parect produced it. The blade was bright, the hilt free of blood. "It was a shrewd throw. The steel was buried in his brain. You could have wounded; instead, you killed, why?"

"I was given no choice."

"Instinct, perhaps?"

"I had no choice," repeated Dumarest. "And, with respect, my lord, his death was predetermined."

"Fate, Earl? You believe in destiny?"

"In fact Had he been given slowtime, he would not have brooded over his injuries. And the weapon he carried, the laser. Someone had adjusted it for continuous fire. He dropped it and it exploded. A laser would not do that."

"It did."

"Because it was meant to," said Dumarest harshly. "Whoever adjusted it made certain that it would. A fuse set to the trigger to activate the entire charge after a lapse of time. Even had he killed me, Zavor would still have died. Murdered by someone in this citadel."

For a long moment Chan Parect sat without speaking, toying with the knife, his eyes veiled. Then he reached for wine and poured and sat sipping until the glass was empty.

"Murdered," he said at last. "By whom? Lisa Conenda?"

"I don't know."

"But you don't deny the possibility?"

"No."

"I warned you of her and the others. They are all the same. Warped, twisted, mad with ambition. Did she ask you to kill me

and to share her seat of power?" Chan Parect leaned forward a little, his eyes intent. "Did she do that?"

"Yes, my lord." It was a time to tread carefully, to be polite. And it was obvious the man knew what had happened in the room. How else could he have known that the knife had been thrown? Monitors, perhaps, or a reported conversation.

"Of course. She would. And you were clever in your answers, Earl. You did not agree, yet you did not refuse her. Instead, you were ambiguous. The trait of a cautious man. Some wine?"

The goblet was of crystal, carved and hued with the tints of a rainbow. The wine held the taste of mint.

"The last time we spoke in this room, I told you of a problem," said Chan Parect. "I also said something else. You remember what it was?"

"You intended to make it mine also."

"You have a good memory. If you had the choice, whom would you marry, Lisa or Zenya? You can be frank."

Dumarest pondered, trying to follow the abrupt shift in conversation, wondering what devious path the man now trod. Wondering too why he was here at all. A question yet to be answered.

"Zenya is the younger," mused Parect. "A little more vivacious, but perhaps the more tiring because of that. Lisa is older, and so more mature. And, as we both know, she has ambition. You wonder why I mention the subject? I will be plain. The house needs new blood. You could provide it. Work with me, do as I say, and you will be rewarded. One of the women as your wife. An estate. The right to wear the serpent. Comfort and a degree of command. All this can be yours if you will willingly do as I say."

"And that is, my lord?"

"I spoke to you of a man who held a dream and who begged

himself looking for it. I said that he died on some lonely world. I lied, in part if not in all. I did know such a man—he is my son. He has beggared himself in the terms we use. But he is not dead. I want you to find him and bring him back to where he belongs."

Dumarest sipped at his wine. Another lie? More deviousness? But why should there be need of lies, and what could deviousness hope to gain?

He said quietly, "Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Then why not just send for him? Tell him of your need?"

"The obvious, Earl, is not always the answer. For example, take yourself. You have a dream of finding a mythical world. You claim to have been there. I know little of such matters, but one thing to me is obvious. What you have seen you always remember. There are men skilled in probing into the deepest recesses of the brain. Submit to them, and who knows what they could find? The coordinates, perhaps? The reading of the instruments on the ship in which you left? A fragment of conversation overheard but not understood because of your youth? The monk who was here could, perhaps, have done it. Yet you are not a member of the church. Beneath their benediction light you could find what you seek. And yet you will not sit beneath it."

Because if he did, he would be instilled with the conditioning imposed by the monks. The command never to kill. It was a handicap Dumarest could not afford.

"I have wondered why, Earl," continued Chan Parect softly. "And I have thought of a reason. Perhaps you carry something else held deep within your mind. Or something not so deep. It doesn't matter. A secret you dare not divulge. You cannot do the one because you fear the other. And so the obvious no longer applies." He poured himself more wine. "My son refuses to answer my summons. He must be taken by force. That requires a very special type of man."

Dumarest said dryly, "One interested in ancient records?"

"In part, yes. Salek has a similar interest. I do not believe in the existence of this planet you call Earth. And neither do I believe in other myths. It was one of the reasons we quarreled and why he left. For years he searched for something he hoped to find. These books,"—he gestured at the walls, the faded maps—"are a part of his collection. There was a legend which intrigued him. Earth, perhaps? I will be honest with you, I cannot be certain. But I do know that he desperately wanted to find the Original People. I think that, perhaps, he found them."

And perhaps not. The whole fabrication could be another lie designed to force him into a particular course of action. Yet it was a chance he could not ignore. And if Chan Parect had a hidden motivation, Dumarest could not guess what it was.

He said, "You just want me to go and bring back your son, my lord. Is that it?"

"On the face of it, a simple matter, Earl, but I will not delude you, it will not be easy. You forget who he is and why he is needed. I am surrounded by enemies who will kill me if they can, and those same enemies will kill my son if allowed the opportunity. And there are other things." Chan Parect paused, his lips moving as if he spoke to himself, the words too secret to be uttered. "I can trust no one," he blurted. "No one!"

"My lord!"

"Hold! Do not move! There are guards watching, and they will kill you if you stir!" Convulsively Chan Parect gripped the knife, locked in the grip of an intense fear. With his free hand he delved into a drawer and produced a vial of tablets. Swallowing two, he sat, waiting, sweat beading his forehead, tiny rivulets running down the graven lines.

Dumarest sat, watching a man at war with himself, sensing the explosive emotion barely held in check. A wrong word, a sudden gesture, and he would bring about his own death. And the paradox baffled him. Chan Parect was unable to trust anyone, yet he was willing to allow a stranger to fetch his son.

The thing made no sense, and then, suddenly, it did.

* * *

From behind the desk, Chan Parect sighed, seeming to relax, the muscles of his face sagging, so that he looked suddenly old. It lasted a moment, and then he was himself again, still old, but with the craggy strength of a tree, a weathered mountain. He said abruptly, "You seem disturbed, Earl."

"With reason, my lord."

"You fear me? You should. As I told you, I intend to make this a personal matter as far as you are concerned. In fact, I leave you no choice but to do as I ask. You see, I am plain."

Dumarest doubted if he could ever be that. Quietly he said, "As a matter of interest, what would you do should I refuse?"

"Nothing." Chan Parect was bland. "Of course, there is the matter of the debt you mentioned. Ten thousand cran, which you gave to the monks. And there is the question of payment for the treatment you received. Even when deducting the sum which Zenya and I owe you, there is a residue of fifty thousand cran. Need I remind you of what will happen if you cannot pay?"

Sold into bondage at the public auction. Doomed to spend the rest of his life in abject slavery. With the Aihult owning the field, there could be no escape.

A neat plan, cunningly devised, bearing the stamp of an elaborate madness. Zenya, of course, had been primed and given permission to pledge her jewelry. The monks had deliberately been attacked in order to force his hand. But how had the man known he would be generous? And the guard who had shot him—had he also followed orders?

Chan Parect shrugged as he asked the question. "Does it matter, Earl? The thing is over and done with. A mistake, I assure you, but a fortunate one, as it turned out."

Too fortunate. And how had the guards known when to

arrive? Zavor had made no sound, no cry for help, yet they must have been waiting. Monitors, perhaps, but there must have been anticipation. And who had adjusted the laser?

Who had wanted him dead?

No, not dead, thought Dumarest. The beam had seared but not killed. Whoever had adjusted it had seen to that. And if that someone had known of his protective clothing, it would have been a fair gamble that even though hurt, he would have survived. Had the whole plan been designed simply to get him into debt, or was there another, deeper reason?

Chan Parect reached again for his wine. "Let us leave unpleasant matters, Earl. I have made you a part of my design, and you will not refuse to obey. You cannot. You have no choice."

Dumarest said harshly, "There is always a choice, my lord."

"There is an unpleasant alternative, I agree. Shall we discuss it?" Chan Parect paused, looking at the goblet, the rainbow hues. "I do not believe in fate, but at times it seems as if destiny shapes our ends. Or call it pure coincidence, the end is the same. Of all the worlds you could have landed on, you chose to reach Paiyar. A lucky accident, Earl, for you and me. Have you never wondered how I knew your name? Why the order was placed at the archives? The reason is obvious when you think about it. You were expected."

Dumarest had no need to answer by whom; he knew. The Cyclan, of course; it could be nothing else. A similar order must have been placed at every library, museum, and archive on every world in this sector. Traps baited and set for him to make an appearance. His movements predicted from fragments of information painstakingly gathered and extrapolated with the skill of which each cyber was a master. All they had to do was to make arrangements, to wait and then to reach out their hand. And, once it closed around him, it would never let go.

"You spoke of luck, my lord," he said tightly. "Yours and mine."

"Yes." Chan Parect was bland, a man confident in his supremacy. "Luck that you chose to come here, that I was immediately notified, that you followed Zenya. A simple girl—who would note such an incident? To those outside, you simply vanished. And more luck," he added. "The greatest of all. The fact that I needed such a man as you appeared to be. A hard man, desperate, ruthless, skilled in evasion, trained to kill."

The unknown, thought Dumarest. The one factor no cyber could wholly control, and which made it impossible for them ever to predict with a hundred percent probability. The tortuous workings of an insane mind that had negated their plan.

But the Cyclan was not easily deluded. Dumarest thought of the silhouette he had seen, the cowed figure bathed in ruby light.

"Tell me, my lord, have you a cyber in the citadel?"

"One came; he has gone."

"And he said?"

"Little. To be frank, Earl, I have no love for those who wear the scarlet robe. They are too much like machines, unfeeling, always calculating, manipulating, offering advice, but advice which benefits their organization, not those whom they pretend to serve." Chan Parect sipped at his wine. "I was, however, a little intrigued at the value they set on you. Their services offered free for ten years if I should deliver you into their charge."

And cheap at the price if they could obtain the secret he had been given, the one stolen from their secret laboratory by a man now long dead. Dumarest leaned back, remembering a mane of flame-red hair, a woman who had loved him and who had given him her dying gift. Kalin— he would never forget her.

And the Cyclan would never cease trying to regain the secret, the correct sequence of the fifteen molecular units which comprised the affinity twin. A chain of biological fragments which would give them the universe. Reversing the end of the chain would cause it to become either subjective or dominant.

Inject the dominant part into the cortex, the subjective into a host, and complete unity was achieved. The dominant factor would see, feel, sense, and experience everything applying to the host. He would have a new body, with all that implied. A temptation no aging ruler could resist, a bribe no woman could refuse.

And with a cyber mind dominating a ruling host, the Cyclan would rule the galaxy within a lifetime.

"The cyber," said Dumarest. "He will come again?"

"Perhaps." Chan Parect was casual. "What does it matter if he does? Obey me, and you have nothing to fear."

The blind arrogance of a tiny despot unable to comprehend the power he defied. The Cyclan stretched throughout the galaxy; cybers wherever influence was to be obtained. And, all unknowingly, he had missed the greatest opportunity he would ever know. Renewed life itself, his old body resting while his mind dominated that of a young and virile man.

Luck, thought Dumarest. He had walked into a trap and been saved despite his own lack of caution. Luck that had saved him so often before. How long would it last?

He said formally, "I am willing to serve you, my lord. Where is your son?"

"On Chard."

The name meant nothing, a world among countless others, but it would need a ship to get there and a means of escape from Paiyar.

"And when will I be able to leave?"

"A ship is waiting at the field—the arrangements were made while you were under treatment."

Dumarest relaxed a little. At least there would be no delay, no time for his host to change his mind or the Cyclan to offer a

higher bribe.

He said, "There is no point in waiting. I would like to leave at once."

"You are eager, Earl, and I am glad. Natural enough, when you think of the alternative. I do not think the Cyclan would be gentle with you, should you fall into their hands. Now, you are quite clear as to your duty? You are to find Salek and bring him to me."

"I understand."

"Yes." Chan Parect picked up the knife and turned the blade, so that it caught and reflected the light. "I am sure that you do. As you understand the penalties and rewards. Find and deliver my son, and you could learn where Earth is to be found. If not, a wife and all that I have mentioned. You see, I am fair, and you will not blame me for having taken a small precaution. An insurance in case your natural desire for escape should be stronger than your given word. If you fail me in any way, I shall inform the Cyclan exactly where you are to be found. You understand?"

Dumarest nodded, unworried. He had run before, and could do so again if the necessity arose.

"Zenya will accompany you."

"That is not necessary."

"That is for me to decide." Chan Parect set down the knife, point toward his guest, and leaned forward over the desk. "And there is one other thing, Earl," he said blandly. "Something was done to you while you were under treatment. A little device which I am sure you will appreciate. Should you break your word, or try to run or disobey me in any way, it will be activated. And then, no matter how you hide, the Cyclan will be able to find you. You will signal your presence like a star in the sky."

Chapter Five

Chard was at war.

The officer who came aboard as soon as they landed was young, brilliant in a gaudy uniform, arrogant with the consciousness of power. He made no attempt to hide his disgust at the state of the vessel.

"It stinks," he snapped. "Only beasts would ride in such filth."

Dumarest was inclined to agree. The *Topheir* was far from being a luxury vessel. It was small, battered, the plating worn and grimed with dirt. Little more than a hold fitted with cramped quarters and driven by engines unusually powerful for a vessel of its size. A scavenger of the spaceways, a hit-and-run ship used to carry suspicious cargoes, slaves, contraband, illegal imports to restricted worlds. A rover, fast, ideal for the job.

Aihult Chan Parect had chosen well.

Captain Branchard matched his command. A squat, powerful man with a ruff of beard and hands which could bend iron bars. Scowling, he said, "Look, pretty boy, what's this all about?"

"Routine port examination. I am Lieutenant Hein, and I advise you to be civil. Your manifest?"

"Two passengers," snapped Branchard. "Some items of cargo, furs, tanned hides, perfume, ingots of rare metals." He made no effort to produce papers.

"Crew?"

"Myself, an engineer, a navigator."

Hein frowned. "Is that all? No handler? No steward?"

"This is a free trader. We go where there are cargoes to be taken. The larger the crew, the smaller the share. Now, look, if you want to play at soldiers, do it somewhere else. I've work to

get on with."

He was being unwise. For a moment the officer stared at him and then said coldly, "For your information, we are in a state of war. There is every possibility that this ship will be commandeered. Until a decision is made, you had best remember your position."

"Commandeered?" Branchard glared his anger. "Stolen, you mean. Listen, you young fool, start anything like that, and before you know it, this planet will be avoided as if it had the plague. No ships will land and none return. If you hope to maintain contact with other worlds, you'd best forget all about throwing your weight in the wrong direction."

He was compounding his indiscretion. Dumarest said quickly, "Captain, I think you misunderstood. The lieutenant did not exactly mean that he would take over your ship. He means that you might be asked to fetch a specific cargo."

"I meant what I said," Hein snapped. "Who are you?"

"This is Lord Dumarest, who is traveling with his lady, Zenya." Branchard spoke before Dumarest could answer. "From Samalle," he added meaningfully. "One of the Warrior Worlds."

A facile lie, but a convenient one. The officer was impressed, but even so he could not restrain his curiosity.

"From Samalle? In such a vessel?"

Dumarest was curt. "How long have you been a soldier?"

Hein reddened. "Not long, my lord, but—"

"Surely long enough to have learned that comfort is not a part of the military creed. This vessel took us where we wanted to go—that is the end of it. Have you men with you?"

"Five, sir. They wait outside."

"And what use would they be to you out there if this was an

enemy ship?" Dumarest gave him no time to answer. "You are armed, I see, but your holster is fastened. You stand too close when questioning a subject. There is dirt on your sleeve. If a man is not proud of his uniform, he cannot be proud of his service. Now, straighten, call your men, have them search the ship."

"Sir!" The lieutenant snapped a salute.

"And be courteous with my lady."

"Is she in the cabin, sir? She will not be disturbed."

"Thank you, lieutenant."

Branchard chuckled as the young man moved away. "You did it well, Earl. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you'd been born on Samalle. You had the tone, the stance, everything. That young fool didn't know what had hit him."

"Why the lie?"

"Why not?" Branchard was cynical. "You didn't want me to tell the truth, and anyway, it could come in useful. I've been through this before. A small war starts, and uniforms rule the roost, young fools like that lieutenant strutting like cockerels and ruining trade. It would be a help to have a friend in a high place. A lord of Samalle, for example. That officer will talk and word will get around. Men trained on the Warrior Worlds are in demand at a time like this, and if you can keep the woman quiet, you could ride the crest. If you want to, that is. If you intend to stay."

"I'm staying."

"Well, that's your business." Branchard hesitated, then said bluntly, "I'm not a fool, Earl, and I can smell when something isn't right I got paid for carrying the pair of you, and no questions asked or answered, but we get on, and I'll put it plain. You and the girl aren't close. If you want to cut free, now's your chance. Ride along with us. An equal share in all we make—you know the system."

"Do I?"

"You know it. You've ridden ships before, and not as just a passenger. A free trader once, am I right? This isn't charity; you would be useful, and you can stay as long as you wish. A month, a year, quit anytime you like."

Dumarest said, "Thank you." And meant it.

"Think it over. The offers open until we leave."

A perfect escape, and one which Dumarest would have taken, had things been normal. The random movements of a free trader negated even the predictive skill of the Cyclan. He had dodged them by such a method before, and would again if it hadn't been for the machinations of Aihult Chan Parect. There could be no thought of escape until he had rid himself of the thing which had been planted within his body.

* * *

Zenya had dressed with care, a clinging gown of scarlet edged with gold, the sleeves long, the skirt full. Gems winked in her hair, and precious metal made a delicate filigree around her throat. Against his somber grayness the colors were accentuated in brilliant contrast. She blinked as he told her of the captain's lie,

"A lady of Samalle? I've never heard of the place, Earl."

"Then don't talk about it. Just remember that it is one of the Warrior Worlds, dedicated to military training, a supplier of mercenaries. If you are questioned, be vague. If they insist on answers, mention security and refer them to me. On no account go into detail. You follow me, you do as I order, that is all you need to say."

She looked down at her gown. "Should I change?"

"No."

"This is hardly a uniform, Earl. Would your lady be so feminine?"

Patiently he said, "You are not a member of any armed force or service. Your prime function is to amuse and entertain."

"You, Earl? As if I were a courtesan?"

"As if you were the selected lady of a high-ranking military officer. A noble of a military caste. You have pride, discretion, and are faithful to your position. Try any games, and you could ruin us both. Smile at no one but me. Talk to no one if you can avoid it. Go nowhere unattended and never be alone with a man other than myself."

Smiling, she said, "That means we have to act as if we are married, Earl. Really married. I'm going to like that."

"I have a job to do, Zenya."

"But do you have to be so remote? All during the voyage you've avoided me. At times you treated me as if I were your enemy. Why, Earl? What have I done?"

Was she innocent, or ingenious? It was impossible to tell. He said emotionlessly, "I've had a lot on my mind, Zenya. If you are ready, let us go."

A car waited at the foot of the ramp. As they descended, Lieutenant Hein snapped to attention, his men following suit. His salute was crisp.

"My lord, I have been in contact with my superiors. They ask you and your lady to be their guests. The car will take you to the Kesh Tower." He added self-consciously, "It is the finest hotel in the city."

Zenya said, "That is most kind."

"It is a pleasure, my lady." Hein's eyes searched her face, dropped to the contours of her body, rose again as he became aware of Dumarest's attention. "You have baggage, my lord?"

"We are traveling light," said Dumarest dryly. "A force moves faster when it lives off the land. Who is your ranking officer?"

"Major Leem, sir."

"Of the field operations, yes. And his?"

"Colonel Paran."

"I hope to have the pleasure of meeting him," said Dumarest. "When I do, I shall commend your courtesy. Now, if you will take my lady's bag?"

It was small, holding only her gowns, jewelry, and cosmetics. The lieutenant placed it in the car, ushered them into the rear compartment, saluted again as it drove away.

At his side Zenya said, "That was a nice man, Earl."

His hand dropped to her knee, squeezed it in warning. "A potentially fine officer," he said curtly. "He needs polishing, but the material is there. Be silent now and allow me to examine the city."

It was as he had expected, a sprawl of low houses dominated by a few high towers, laced with streets and avenues. Zenya was entranced; she clung to his arm as they glided onward, her eyes wide at each new sight, the lines of marching men, the banners, the throng of pedestrians wearing a variety of clothing. Uniforms were everywhere, young men flushed with martial fever strutting along the sidewalks, girls at their sides, reveling in newfound importance.

Photographers waited outside the hotel, lenses aimed, shutters snapping, a portable TV camera following them as they left the car and entered the foyer. Publicity Dumarest could have done without, but dared not avoid. The lie invented by Branchard had spread faster than he had expected, yet the arrival of a reputed master of military prowess would be a thing to catch the interest of a world at war.

Within the foyer, others waited. A man came forward, recorder in hand. "My lord, have you come to Chard to aid our war effort?"

"How soon do you think victory will be ours, sir?"

"Are you here as a participant or as an observer?"

"My lady, if you will smile, please?"

A deep voice rose above the babble. "Gentlemen! This is no way to treat our guest. You will all be given the opportunity of asking your questions at a later date. In the meantime, military necessity must take precedence over your desire for news."

A tall man moved forward, grizzled hair short beneath a uniform cap, the insignia of high command bright on the collar of his tunic. The hand he extended was broad, backed with a fine down of russet hair.

"I am Colonel Paran. Welcome to Chard, sir. We are pleased to meet you and your lady."

His grip was firm. As Dumarest released the hand he said, "You are efficient, colonel. We have barely left the field."

"We do our best, sir. And it would be impolite not to extend a personal welcome to a master of military acumen. Professional courtesy, in these times more than any other, must be observed." He glanced to where aides had ushered the newsmen to the sides of the foyer. "Now, of course, you wish to refresh yourselves. All has been arranged. A suite to accommodate you, food if you are hungry." He paused, then added, "I understand the ship on which you arrived was not of the best."

"It served."

"To bring you to Chard?"

"It landed here." Dumarest met the shrewd eyes. "Another vessel could take me to where I have a commission waiting."

"You are engaged?"

"A preliminary survey... but that would not interest you."

"I understand." Paran hesitated. "I would appreciate the

opportunity of a conference. A casual discussion with myself and a few others. If that would be possible... "

"Certainly." Dumarest glanced to where Zenya stood preening herself. "Shall we say in an hour?"

* * *

The suite was luxurious, broad windows giving a clear view of the city, the furnishings all of white and amber. Zenya roved through it, her musical voice rising, fading as she passed from room to room.

"Earl, this is delightful. Scented waters in the shower, a sunken tub, carpets everywhere. Such a change after that dreadful ship."

He stood looking at the walls, the ceiling, making no comment.

"Earl?" She came toward him, painted nails glistening beneath the hem of her skirt, the long, supple lines of her thighs prominent at every step. "My dear aunt should be with us. She would be green with envy. We have nothing like this on—"

Her voice broke as he pressed his lips to her own.

"Earl?" Her voice was muffled. She pushed against him, and then her arms rose to tighten about his neck. Beneath the fabric of her gown her body was a soft and living flame. "Earl! Oh, my darling! My darling!"

He buried his face in the mane of her hair, found her ear, and whispered harshly, "Watch what you say, you fool! This place is full of electronic devices."

He felt her stiffen, the warmth of her sudden anger. As her hands fell from his neck, to press against his chest, he added, "We are being watched. Every word we say is being recorded. Why else do you think they gave us this suite?"

In return she whispered, "Is that why you kissed me? Just to stop my mouth?"

A woman scorned was a dangerous adversary. Outraged pride would blind her to the peril of released emotion.

"No," he said. "That wasn't the entire reason. You are a beautiful woman, and you know it."

"Just as long as you know it, Earl." Her voice was a purr. "And there can be no harm in this, can there? This and other things. After all, I am supposed to be your wife."

A position she wanted to take and one he could not safely deny. Another trap, but one into which any man would be eager to enter. The bait of her softness, her beauty, the promise Chan Parect had made. A fair exchange, perhaps, for the endless search for a forgotten world.

"Earl?"

Releasing her, he stepped back, his voice casual. "Later, my dear. First we must bathe and refresh ourselves. Our guests will be here shortly."

Like a born actress she fitted into her assumed part.

"You must not forget the commission, darling."

"True, but there is no hurry. We could spend a few days here, and possibly learn something of interest. The war cannot be old, or we would have heard about it." Dumarest moved to a window and stood looking down at the city. "No antiaerial defenses," he mused. "Of course, there could be lasers on the roof, but if so, they would be vulnerable to attack. Well, it is no problem of ours."

"True." She stretched, lifting her arms, throwing back her head, so that the coils of her hair hung loosely down her back. "I must see about replenishing my wardrobe. We left in such a hurry that I had hardly time to pack a thing. I wonder if they have new fashions here? Military worlds produce some odd combinations. Will it be possible to go shopping, do you think?"

"I imagine so."

"Later, after your conference?"

"We'll see."

"And will you help me pick some gowns, darling? You have such good taste when it comes to fashion. I am sure my aunt would think so. Of course, I had better not buy too many."

"At one time, no," he agreed. The conversation was banal, but safe. They would hardly be expected to wait in silence, and after a hard journey, a release of passion would be normal.

But Zenya was not satisfied with a kiss.

"We had better bathe now, Earl. Will you help me, please?"

"I'll just take a shower."

"We'll both take one." She looked at him, her eyes alight, lips swollen with anticipation, and he remembered the archives on Paiyar, the expression he had recognized. Desire, yes, but more than that. A touch of cruelty, of innate sadism, his inability to refuse accentuating her enjoyment. "Now, Earl."

"A moment. I will join you."

"We have little time."

"I know, so don't waste any."

She was naked when he reached the bathroom, the gown a pool of scarlet on the decorated tiles, jewelry thrown aside in careless haste. Stripping, he followed her into the shower, turned the water on full, the blasting roar from the high-intensity spray drowning his words from any listening ear.

"Don't forget that we are being watched."

"Does it matter, darling?" The wetness of her body was like oiled silk as she pressed against him. "We are married, remember?"

"Married, but not a show."

"You are too delicate." Her arms wound around him. "I don't care if an entire world is watching. I love you, Earl. I want you. Damn you, can't you see that? I want you!"

And then there was only the water, the pungent scent of perfume, the impact of her body, and an infinity of expanding softness.

Chapter Six

Seated at the head of the table, Colonel Paran said with military punctiliousness, "The situation facing us is one peculiar to this planet. Unless it is resolved, it will destroy our financial structure; therefore it is imperative that all operations be conducted on a basis of minimum destruction. It would be interesting, Earl, to learn if you have come across a similar situation, and the means you devised to conclude it."

Dumarest leaned back in his chair, not answering, studying instead the others at the board. Colonel Paran had not come alone. With him were two others, both men of middle age, uncomfortable in their uniforms of maroon and gray. Colonel Oaken was plump, with a worried frown ingrained between his eyes. Colonel Stone was thin, harassed.

He said, "You don't answer. May I ask why?"

"Before I could even begin to answer, I would need far more information. There is no one sure formula for winning a war. If there was, the worlds I represent would have no purposeful existence."

Paran caught the hint. "Of course, as a mercenary you cannot be expected to give advice without recompense. That has been considered. You will not find us ungenerous." His eyes drifted to his companions. "That is agreed, gentlemen?"

"Well, I'm not too sure about that." Oaken was cautious. "It

depends on the value of the advice. Words come cheap when that is all that is supplied."

"Then it seems that this conference is at an end." Dumarest rose. "Thank you, gentlemen. There is no point in wasting further time."

"A moment." Paran waited until he regained his seat. "Earl, I will be frank with you. Chard is unused to war. We have uniforms, bands, some weapons, and eager volunteers, but that is about all. The thing came on us so quickly that we had little warning, and less time to prepare. Let me put you into the picture. Our main crop, the one on which our economy depends, is lofios—a plant which provides fruit, fiber, and rare oils for the making of perfumes and unguents. We also have a native form of life, manlike and, as some suggest, the descendants of an early wave of settlement."

"The Ayutha," rumbled Oaken. "Savages."

"Not exactly," protested Stone. "Primitive, perhaps, or so we always thought. Barbaric, even, but not savage."

"After what they've done?"

"Gentlemen!" Paran slammed his hand on the table. "This is no time for personal opinions. We are faced with facts. Let us deal with them."

"Homand," rumbled Oaken. "Maysown. They are facts enough."

"Villages which have been destroyed," explained Paran. Of the three, he was the only one with pretense to the rank he bore; the others, Dumarest guessed, were merchants, given high rank to win their support and salve their pride. "Let me illustrate."

He unrolled a map that he had brought with him, spreading it on the table as his finger tapped at a variety of places.

"Our main planting area stretched from here, about twenty miles from the city, up to the hills and beyond. There are

essential minerals in the soil which promote rapid growth, and though we are planting to the south and closer to the town, so far we have had little success. The first attack was here." His finger moved, halted, tapping. "A small community, which was utterly destroyed."

"How?"

"What?"

"How was it destroyed?" repeated Dumarest. "With lasers, gas, what?"

"We think with a form of nerve gas coupled with impact weapons. The bodies bore wounds consistent with those caused by clubs and edged steel. To continue, an expedition was sent to retaliate, and a village of the Ayutha destroyed. Some crops were fired, and other attacks made. They are escalating—the details are unimportant at this time. The point is that if the destruction continues, Chard faces ruin."

"Which is exactly what those savages want," stormed Oaken. "They know we depend on the crop—how best to hurt us than by destroying it!"

Dumarest said, "Don't they need it too?"

"They did," admitted Paran. "A lot of them are employed on the farms. They work, send money back to their villages, that sort of thing. In fact, we had a perfect working relationship with them. If it hadn't been for the evidence, I would never have thought them responsible."

"Who else could it be?" snapped Oaken. "I tell you, the only way we're going to solve this problem is by wiping them out. Every last damn one of them!"

"Then who will work the fields?" Stone was practical. "Their labor comes cheap; use other, and we'll price ourselves out of business."

"They want our world," insisted Oaken. "They think they own

it. They're trying to kick us off the planet." He scowled. "We've got to kill them, clear them out."

"How? Arm every man and turn him loose to hunt them down? You know what the hills are like. Can you imagine what it would cost in money and lives? Just remember what happened to the last volunteer force we sent in."

"They destroyed a village."

"The first one, yes, but the second?" Stone shrugged. "They got themselves wiped out to a man."

Colonel Paran sighed. "That is old history, gentlemen. We have to think of the future." To Dumarest he said, "You realize the complexity of the situation?"

Greed coupled with hate and fear, an old, familiar combination. The human desire to have the cake and eat it at the same time. As yet, this war seemed to be no more than a few raiding parties driven by some unguessed motive. No wonder he had seen no antiaerial defenses—savages would hardly own aircraft.

But then, savages wouldn't use nerve gas, either—if it had really been used.

He said, "What is their political organization?"

"A loose federation of tribes governed by elders," said Paran. "We have tried to aid them, of course. Social workers have lived among them." He added bitterly, "I assume they are all dead now."

"Well?" Oaken was impatient. "You have heard what Paran has told you. How can we end this war without ruining ourselves at the same time?"

"There are only three ways to end any war," said Dumarest coldly. "This information will cost you nothing. You can win, you can lose, or you can negotiate. In many cases, it is better to lose; an early surrender will, at least, save lives and property. There is

no logic in continuing to fight against a force which you cannot defeat."

Stone frowned. "A strange philosophy from one from the Warrior Worlds."

"A realistic one. I am a mercenary; war is my trade. You are in business, I take it? Then you know the futility of selling goods below their cost of manufacture. In war there comes a point where the object to be attained simply is not worth the effort expended. That naturally, is a variable."

"Let us not talk of losing," said Paran.

"I mentioned it only to clarify the situation," said Dumarest. "To win, at times, is also unwise. With sufficient force it is possible to defeat any enemy, but if the force used is too great, what have you won? Corpses and desolation. In my experience, it is always better to negotiate."

"With killers? Murdering savages?" Oaken slammed his hand on the table. "Never!"

Dumarest shrugged. "That is for you to decide, gentlemen. However, as you should know, the use of force tends to escalate. First the use of limited weapons, then ones that are more powerful, then the ultimate in destruction. If that is your choice, I suggest you skip the intermediate steps. Radioactive dusts scattered over the areas in which the enemy is to be found will destroy them without loss of life on your own side. The mothers of your soldiers, at least, will be grateful."

"Radioactives?" Oaken stared his horror. "But they will destroy the crops! Ruin the soil for a generation to come!"

"Yes."

"And that is your expert advice?"

"I have given you no advice. I have merely mentioned possibilities." Dumarest rose, ending the conference. "You seem unable to make up your minds, gentlemen. My trade, as I have

said, is war. As yet I have received no offer for my services."

Colonel Paran said quickly, "You would consider an engagement?"

Oaken was more direct. "How much?"

"That," said Dumarest, "I will consider when I have examined the ground."

* * *

The raft rode high, the pilot nervous, the two-man escort tense as they leaned over the edge to either side, laser rifles at the ready. In the body of the boxlike compartment behind the controls, Ven Taykor gestured to the hills.

"There," he said. "Right in among them, that's where you'll find their council house."

Dumarest followed his pointing arm, seeing nothing but the loom of hills slashed with crevasses, thick with shielding vegetation.

"Have you seen it?"

"Once, when I was a boy. Too long ago now." The guide was weathered, lined with age. His clothing, of thick weave, was patched, his high boots worn, torn on one of the uppers. "My dad took me. There was a festival of some kind. They made me a member of a tribe." He spat over the edge of the raft. "I guess that's why I'm alive now." He added thoughtfully, "I never expected trouble from the Ayutha. No one did. God alone knows what set them off."

Beside them, Captain Louk said, "Have you seen enough, sir?"

"Of the hills, yes." Dumarest looked below. "Can we drop a little?"

"It may not be advisable." The captain was young, conscious that his rank was diminished by his scant command, but the raft

was small, and numbers had been sacrificed to light and speed. "They could be watching us from below," he explained. "If they are armed, we could be in trouble."

"Drop," ordered Dumarest. "And tell your men to keep alert."

He leaned over the edge as the ground rose toward them. On either side, as far as the eye could see, ranked plants made a mat of vegetation, scored by thin lines of paths nearly invisible in the fading light. The lofios grew ten feet tall, bushy fronds springing from a central bole, branches that now bore succulent fruits, blooms, enigmatic pods. Bad country for men trained in cities unaccustomed to moving in silence. Perfect cover for guerrillas.

"Mutated stock," said Taykor. "It took almost a century to perfect it. No seasons to speak of in this part of Chard, and the plants bear fruit, bloom, and pollen all at the same time. No insects, either, so they have those pods, see?" He pointed. "They are self-fertilizing. The pods explode and release the pollen, which lands on the blooms to conceive the fruit. I'm no farmer, but I know what it's about."

Without turning, Dumarest said, "What are you, aside from a guide?"

"Hunter, trapper, prospector. Mostly I'm up in the hills. There are some good pelts to be won up there. I was trading in the city when the trouble started. The quicker it's over the sooner I'll be back where I belong."

"What do you think of the Ayutha?"

"Simple people, but not stupid, if you know what I mean. They have their own way, and it isn't city living. They don't put much value on goods and possessions. They aren't lazy, but they don't like being forced to work. Come to think of it, who does?"

"Do they have initiation rites?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't know. I've been in contact with them in a casual way most of my life, but that's about all. Why do you ask?"

Rites could change. If murder was now the needed proof of manhood, it could provide the answer—or a part of it, at least.

"Have the farmers been pressing them? Taking their land, for example?"

"No. There would be no point. Lofios doesn't grow everywhere, and that's all the farmers are interested in. Anyway, they need the labor the Ayutha can supply. There's a lot of weeding and collecting to be done, and machines are too expensive. And no one yet has designed a machine to extract the natural oil. If we land, I'll show you what I mean."

"Later." Dumarest straightened and turned to the officer. "Take me to the first place to be attacked."

"Homand?"

"If that's what it's called, that's the place I want."

It was small, a collection of neat houses backed by warehouses and sheds holding equipment for processing the crop. A school, store, something which would have been a church. A forge and meeting house, a typical backwoods village. A place where children could grow safe in the knowledge they were loved, where old men could sit and dream of past achievements. There would be festivals and occasional trips to the city. Transient merchants would drop from the sky in silent rafts. Life there must have been an easy thing.

Now it was gone. The place was deserted, the houses empty, shattered glass ugly in the streets, black timbers standing gaunt against the sky where a house had burned, doors scarred with the impact of savage blows.

Dumarest said, "Tell me what happened."

"We can't be sure. A message was received in the city—a garbled thing barely making sense. Something about monsters. When we got here—"

"We?"

"A party from the city. I was among them. Before I became a soldier, I was a field supervisor on duty at the reception center."

"Good. Continue."

"When we got here, everything was a shambles. The Ayutha must have hit all over the place at the same time. Men were lying cut and bleeding, women ripped open, children torn apart, babies with their heads smashed against doorposts. That building was on fire. Those savage swine didn't leave a thing."

"You are talking of the Ayutha?"

"What else?"

Dumarest said flatly, "I am not interested at this time in your opinions. Did any resident of this place say they were responsible? Think now, did they?"

"The few that were still alive were dazed, dying. They muttered something about monsters, about being attacked."

"But did not, specifically, mention the Ayutha?" Dumarest continued at the reluctant nod. "Then we have no actual proof that they were responsible for what happened here. Was much damage caused to the equipment? No? Was anything taken? No? Then apparently some force of which we can't be certain attacked and killed for no apparent reason. Do you agree?"

"Does a savage need a reason to kill?"

"Yes. His reason might not be immediately apparent, but it is always present. Hunger, hate, fear, the conviction that he cannot become a man unless he does, a stranger who must be disposed of—always there is a reason. How long did it take you to get here after you received the message?"

"A few hours. We had to find rafts, gather and arm men."

"And there were no survivors?"

"None, not even a baby. Damn it, whose side are you on? If

you'd seen what I did. The blood, the mess, heard them screaming..." The officer caught himself, forced a measure of control into his voice. "I'm sorry, but it hit me hard. There was a girl I knew... I wish I hadn't found her."

Dumarest said, "Let's look around."

* * *

It was dark when he returned, the city bright with flecks of light from street lanterns, windows, drifting rafts, and moving cars. A busy, bustling place, a violent contrast to the village he had left, the place where a community had died. Zenya was absent, and he looked at the things she had left. The golden dress, the serpents that had graced her arms, a litter of cosmetics. Quickly, careless of who might be watching, he searched them all, letting the fabric slide through his fingers, taking care over the jewelry, the pots of unguents, paints, and powders.

He found nothing. If the girl carried a device to activate what was within his body, it must be buried within her flesh. He had checked on the ship; what he did now was for confirmation. And it was highly possible that she didn't carry the trigger at all.

Aihult Chan Parect, he remembered, trusted no one.

The phone rang. On the screen Colonel Paran looked anxious. "I heard you were back, Earl. Have you arrived at a decision?"

"Not yet. I must correlate my findings."

"Later, then?"

"Later."

A bottle of wine stood on a table, and he poured a glass, sitting facing the window with it in his hand. He felt tired, uneasy. There were too many problems and too few solutions. Parect's threat, the false position he was in, the girl. Even now she could be babbling, betraying him, and to a people at war, such a betrayal could have unpleasant consequences.

He leaned back, sipping the wine, recalling what he had seen. The dusty streets littered with debris, the empty houses, the pathetic remains of dolls, toys, a wooden animal on rockers, a carefully embroidered shawl ugly with stains of blood. And marks on doors, walls, the sills of windows. Even the toys had been crushed, cut, hammered with savage violence. And there had been other marks, bullet holes, the seared patches of laser burns. Some of the farmers would have owned guns, less the more expensive lasers. All would have possessed knives, machetes for cutting the crop, axes, hammers. They had been found, and all of them had been used.

He shrugged, impatient, emptying the glass in a single swallow. The war was not his problem; he had conducted the examination simply to maintain his assumed character. His immediate need was to find the son of Chan Parect. To finish his assignment before the threat made could be put into effect. And that would not be easy. Why would a lord of Samalle be interested in such a man?

He wouldn't, but perhaps Branchard would. A free trader could drift around, ask questions, make contacts, and use bribes, all with relative impunity. And he would be a willing ally if the price was right.

Dumarest rose, and without looking at the phone, moved toward the door. Outside, the corridor was empty but for a pair of men standing with exaggerated casualness. Guards? Men set to watch his movements? One of them came forward, recorder in hand.

"My lord, a few words for the media? We are all interested in what you have to say."

"The situation, while serious, must not be inflated beyond its real proportions," said Dumarest. "There is danger and a threat of escalation, but nothing which cannot be handled without undue interference with normal life. While brave men are willing to fight, Chard has nothing to fear."

Empty words, but what they wanted. One said, "Will you be taking an active part in the struggle?"

"That depends on your military authorities."

"But you are willing?"

"Again, that depends. Now, if you will excuse me?"

He wandered a random mile before using a phone. Twenty minutes later he phoned again. Branchard was waiting.

He blinked as he listened. "Sure, Earl, I can do it. Have you got anything I can work with aside from a name?"

"A photograph and physical details—Lammarre System. I'll send you a copy. The money—"

"Can wait. Give me a little time."

The suite was still empty when he returned. He drank more wine and studied the details he had sent to Branchard. The face was younger than it would be now, but the physical details would never change. If Salek had ever received medical treatment on this world, or had fallen into the hands of the police, even if he had ever volunteered to give blood, he would be recorded. And there were other checks; the captain would know them all.

The phone rang. A man's face, smooth, bland. "The Lady Zenya?"

"She is not available. Who are you? What do you want?"

"Zerm Trish, my lord. A creative photographer. I am attached to the house of Jarl, the most exclusive fashion establishment on Chard. I wondered if your lady would condescend to pose for me in a variety of creations, which, of course, would remain her property."

Dumarest said harshly, "The wife of a lord of Samalle does not cheapen herself. Do not call again."

From behind him Zenya said, "A pity, Earl. They have some wonderful gowns, and all terribly expensive." She had entered the suite while he had been on the phone.

Quickly she added, "But of course, the suggestion was unthinkable. At home he would never have dared to make it."

"Where have you been?"

"Shopping." She spun, blue fabric rising like a sapphire mist, sparkles of brilliant crystal accentuating the hue. "Do you like it, darling? Susal Paran guided me. The colonel's wife. She is really a most charming woman, and terribly worried about her husband. She kept asking me what it was like to be the wife of a warrior. How I felt when you were away, that kind of thing." She smiled. "I think she wanted to ask more intimate details but was too restrained. You know, how we acted after a long absence, how we felt when together again."

"And you told her?"

"That it is hell to be apart, and heaven to be together. The truth, Earl. Why should I lie?"

Colonel Paran saved the necessity of an answer. On the screen his face was drawn, anxious.

"I'm at a meeting of the Council, Earl. They need your decision before deciding on a course of action. I hope that you agree to accept the commission, because I don't like the alternative. The vote is to ask the Cyclan for help if you refuse. The feeling is that a cyber could advise us of what needs to be done."

"You object?"

"Yes, and I'll tell you why. A cyber predicts; he tells you what is the most likely outcome of any action, but he doesn't tell you what action to take. That means wasted time, and I've the feeling that we haven't any to waste. What we need is a man skilled in the art of war, someone who can train men and use what force we have to best advantage. I liked what you said at the conference—you knew what you were talking about. The choice is yours, of course, but I hope you agree. If not, the Cyclan will be asked to help."

Dumarest said, "I agree."

Chapter Seven

Inspection was at dawn. A sleepy guard snapped to belated attention as Dumarest, accompanied by Captain Louk, approached the operations room. Inside, Colonel Paran, red-eyed from fatigue, stood before a table littered with maps. A scatter of lesser officers stood beside charts, communications equipment, a large contour map dotted with colored pins. From time to time one of them made adjustments, bringing the field of operations up to date.

"Earl!" Paran reached for coffee, which an aide was distributing. "Want some?"

Dumarest shook his head. "Trouble?"

"We got hit again last night Sonel, a small village far to the west. The usual thing—we received a garbled message, and by the time we got there, it was all over. A shambles." Turning, he called to an officer. "Any fresh news on Sonel?"

"No, colonel. The team found nothing they hadn't reported. A complete wipe-out." The officer was young, his tone bitter. "Sir, I'd like to request a transfer to active duty in the field."

Paran hesitated. "We need you here, Fran."

"Even so, sir—"

"Later."

For a moment it seemed as if the young man would argue; then, scowling, he returned to his duties. Dumarest studied him; the facial resemblance was unmistakable. He said, "Your son?"

"My only child. Susal couldn't..." Paran broke off, rubbing at

his eyes. "That doesn't matter. Every young man is eager to get into the field and face the enemy, but someone has to handle operations. Fran is good at his job. Moving him would mean a double set of training—him for the field and another to take his place."

And here in operations, he was as safe as any soldier could hope to be in time of war. A natural assumption, which others would make, but Dumarest doubted if the colonel had even thought of it. His wife, perhaps, but he was too dedicated to seek personal advantage from his rank and position.

"The attack," said Dumarest. "How many of the Ayutha were killed?"

"None."

"None at all?" Dumarest frowned. "Don't you think that is strange?"

"I should have said that none were found," corrected Paran. "If any were killed, they must have been removed before we got there." He gestured toward the table. "Let me show you how we are handling the situation. The green dots are mobile rafts; the yellow, field detachments; the red, places which have been attacked. We didn't have much time to organize, but I don't think we've done too badly. Working on the assumption that all attacks emanate from the hills, we have thrown a line of observers and mobile forces in an arc reaching from here to here." His finger tapped at portions of the map. "What do you think about it?"

Before Dumarest could lean over the table, a civilian entered the room and came toward him. Deftly he took a series of measurements, departing as quietly as he came. "For your uniform," explained Paran. "Your rank will be that of marshal, your pay equal to my own, two years' pay as initial bonus—it has already been placed to your credit. Your suite, of course, will be provided by the state, and all other expenses similarly met."

"My powers?"

"Advisory as regards operations. Almost unlimited in the field. We need to end this thing, and quickly. Do that, and no one will argue about what steps you may take."

Dumarest studied the map spread on the table. The rafts were strung in a thin line, and the field detachments were based, as far as he could see, more on a precise mathematical pattern than on the varying needs of the terrain.

"Your basic assumption is at fault," he commented. "Sonel does not lie within easy attacking distance from the hills; therefore, we must assume that an attack can come at any time from any direction. I would suggest that half the rafts be fitted with infrared detectors in order to spot the advance of any large body of men. They should ride high and maintain constant observation. The field detachments are of little use based as they are. They would be of more use placed in the actual villages. A strong body of well-armed men will maintain the morale of the farmers and provide a defensive force against any attack."

"True," admitted Paran. "But then how to protect the crops?"

"You can't, so forget it."

"But—"

"The lofios is important to you," said Dumarest patiently. "I haven't forgotten that. But to protect the crop would mean a fantastic number of men, and even then you would have no assurance of success. Let me clarify. In any war it is essential to determine the objective; once that is done, the next step is to decide the tolerable cost in both men and material. A defensive war is always a long one. In this case, the equation consists of three variables at least; to protect the crops, to protect the villages, to remove the threat posed by the attacks. You can't do them all."

"No," admitted Paran. "I realize that."

"Remove the threat, and you will have no need to worry about the rest," said Dumarest. "That can only be done by making contact with the enemy."

"Destroying them? But—"

"Contacting them," interrupted Dumarest. "I am aware of the situation. That means an expeditionary force must be sent into the hills."

"We tried that," said Paran grimly. "Twice. The second force didn't come back."

"Which means the next must be better trained. I shall need volunteers."

"Sir!" Fran Paran had been listening. He stepped forward, his salute crisp. "With respect, sir, I would like to accompany you."

Dumarest heard Paran's sharp intake of breath. "No Fran! I can't permit it!"

"Sir?"

Dumarest said bluntly, "What were you before you became an officer? A student?"

"I trained in electronics, but—"

"Have you ever killed a man? Fought for your life?" Unfair, perhaps; few men on a civilized world had done either of those things. Sharply Dumarest added, "Have you traveled the country? Seen the Ayutha?"

Frowning, the young man said, "I don't understand. I am willing to go. Isn't that enough?"

"Far from it. You realize that if I take you, I could be risking my life on your obedience? That others may die because you misjudge, or simply because you are ignorant? War isn't a game conducted with neat, clear-cut rules. There is no glory, and little honor. You'll be tired and hungry and afraid most of the time. You could be killed. And, frankly, I can't see that you would be an asset. Here you are doing a good job; out in the field you would be simply a man with a gun. I want more than that."

"You'll get more! Damnit! Must I stay here at a desk just because my father..." Fran broke off, controlling himself. More quietly he said, "You'll need communications equipment and someone who knows about such things. I am an expert in the field."

Knowledge and eagerness, two assets for any task, and Dumarest hesitated, conscious of Colonel Paran, the delicate situation. He was in no position to make enemies.

And then the colonel said flatly, "All right, Fran. I won't stand in your way. If Earl is willing to take you, I'll arrange for your replacement."

"Sir!" The salute was a model copied from a book. "Thank you, sir. When do I start?"

Dumarest glanced at Captain Louk, who had remained silent during the exchange. "Is there a place we can use for intensive training?"

"Yes, marshal. The Lambda warehouse."

* * *

It was a big, rambling structure still redolent of the goods it had once held, the sacks of lofios blooms, the precious oils. Open ground flanked it, now filled with marching men, uniforms bright in the prenoon sunlight. A hoarse-voiced officer yelled commands, sending them through routine motions, turning, wheeling, keeping step. His salute was casual, the gesture of a man who knew his business to those who, in his estimation, didn't.

Captain Louk said, "Lieutenant Thomile, Marshal Dumarest."

Thomile grinned, jerking his thumb at the marching men. "New intake," he explained. "Raw, as yet, but they'll improve." His eyes studied Dumarest. "I've heard about you, marshal. From Samalle, right? What do you think of the men?"

Dumarest said harshly, "When talking to me, you stand at

attention. You address me as 'sir.' As for your question, the men look like yourself, dirty, lax, more of a mob than a disciplined unit. How long have you been training them?"

"Eight days."

"What?"

"Eight days... sir."

"In my experience, you should have reached this point at the end of the first day. Basic maneuvering is used only to instill obedience to orders and to achieve an esprit de corps. I don't want a machine, I want men who can move and fight and think for themselves. Soldiers, not automatons. Now, get out there, lieutenant, and get to work. Real work. Move!"

As they moved toward the open doors of the warehouse, Louk said, "You were hard on him, marshal. Thomile's a good man."

"Too good to be allowed to fall into bad habits," agreed Dumarest. "And while we're on the subject, I noticed too many soldiers in the streets. They should be at camp, training, not displaying their new uniforms to admiring females. See to it."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't agree?"

"Well, sir, they are young, and it's natural to show off a little. Also it helps recruiting, and—"

"You think I'm acting like a thick-headed martinet, right?" Dumarest shrugged, as the other made no comment. "As you heard me tell Fran Paran, war isn't a game. Each of those men may have to risk his life and the only thing they will have between living and dying is the training given to them. A good officer hates waste, the waste of his men most of all, and if he is careless of lives, then he is unfitted to hold command. If I appear hard, it is with reason."

He glanced toward the field, where Thomile's voice could be

heard. It was different now, harsher, more savage, and beneath its lash the men had straightened, moved with grim purpose instead of casual indifference.

"Take my compliments to the lieutenant. Ask him to select a group of men from those he has trained. They are to be tough, skilled, clever, and obedient. He won't find many, but have him send those he picks to the warehouse."

"Sir!"

"You have an intensive training program already under way?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Raougat is in command."

He stood at the back of the vast building surrounded by a circle of men stripped to shorts and shoes. He was of medium height, well-muscled, his torso scarred from old wounds. He moved like a cat, poised on the balls of his feet, and watching him, Dumarest was reminded of a fighter, a skilled professional who had earned his living in the arena.

Raougat was talking, his voice like a purr, echoing softly from the beams overhead.

"Now, listen and pay attention. I'm going to show you how to take care of an enemy guard. You there!" He pointed. "You get up here. Stand in front of me, back toward me, looking ahead."

From a seat he took a length of rope about a yard long, wrapping each end around his hands and leaving a loop of about eighteen inches. Approaching the back of the waiting soldier, he threw the loop over the man's head, and as it came level with his throat, lifted his right knee and ground it against the back as he jerked. Coughing, the soldier doubled, retching, rubbing at his neck.

"I was gentle," purred Raougat. "A trifle more force, and he would be dead now. It never fails."

Dumarest said loudly, "Like hell it doesn't."

"You doubt me?" The captain smiled as Dumarest stepped forward. "And you are...?" The smile widened as Dumarest introduced himself. "Ah, our famous marshal. The man dedicated to war. Perhaps you are willing to show me how I am at fault?"

There was no humor in the smile, and less in the soft purr of the voice, and looking at his eyes, Dumarest knew that, this time, there would be no control of the force used, that given the chance, the man would willingly snap his spine and rupture his throat.

"You want to demonstrate on me?" Dumarest said quietly. "Is that what you are asking?"

"With respect, sir, if you are willing. Of course, we will all understand if you are not."

"Commence."

Dumarest turned, waiting. He sensed rather than heard the soft pad of feet, the blur as the rope dropped before his eyes. The man had used his right knee, and he spun to the left as it rose, left arm slashing sideways to catch the thigh, to knock it away, sending Raougat falling hopelessly off-balance. The rope jerked at the back of his neck, and Dumarest followed it, ignoring it as his right hand lifted with his knife, the point halting as it touched the skin of the captain's throat.

For a moment they lay staring into each other's eyes, and then Dumarest said gently, "I have proved my point, I think?"

"A knife—"

"A guard would be armed. And a knife is unessential." Dropping it, Dumarest rested the tips of his fingers beneath the other's eyes. "I could have blinded you." The hand lifted, the fingers clamped to form a blunt spear, falling to rest on the point of the throat beneath the ear. "Or killed you. You see, I had a choice."

"Fast," whispered Raougat. "You were too fast. I have never

seen anyone move as quickly. And now?"

"You work," replied Dumarest as quietly. "Doing what you love—teaching men how to kill. But from now on, you will do it without tricks and without sadistic demonstrations of your skill. If not, we will meet again. You understand me?"

"Too well." Raougat, his dignity and position saved, essayed a grin. "But, my lord, should you ever grow tired of the work you do, the stadiums are always waiting. In a year, less, you could be a champion on any of a dozen worlds."

Rising, Dumarest said to the watching men, "That was a lesson. Never make a simple action complex. Never make the mistake of underestimating your opponent. If you want to kill a guard, do it like this." His hand lifted, swept down, the stiffened edge halting at the base of Raougat's spine. "Use the barrel of your rifle, the butt, anything heavy and sharp. And never be gentle. You want to kill him, not bruise him. Hit hard enough, and he will drop like a sliced tree. Now, get dressed, quickly!" A soldier said, "For exercise?"

"You are soldiers. You don't go into action half-naked. Your enemy may be armored. To be of value, training must be realistic. Now, move!"

To Raougat he said, "How are they as regards killing potential?"

"Weak." The captain saw the bleak expression in Dumarest's eyes and added hastily, "I have tried to correct it, sir, but it isn't easy. They are the product of a soft environment. They talk, but when it comes to the time to act, who knows?"

"You should know," snapped Dumarest. "That is what you are paid for."

"True, but they are volunteers, the sons of rich families for the most part." Raougat shrugged. "I can take a man and turn him into a beast, given time. If the basic ingredients are there, it is simple. But if they are not, then it is hard. And I am not dealing with one man, but several."

And there would be more. Dumarest turned as Thomile came into the warehouse ahead of a score of men, Fran Paran among them. Saluting, the lieutenant said, "The men, as ordered, marshal. The best I could find."

"Which means?"

"Exactly that, sir. A couple of troublemakers, they like to argue, some would-be heroes, the rest bored with routine and eager for action." He paused, then added casually, "With respect, sir, I would like to see how you handle them."

A check, but that was to be expected. Wherever he went men would be watching, eager to learn and as eager to criticize. And Dumarest knew that should he make a single slip, his pretense would be questioned. As a supposed lord of Samalle there was nothing about war that he should not know.

To Captain Louk, who had accompanied Thomile and his men, he said, "I shall need rafts for transportation. And weapons firing a low-velocity missile. Pneumatic guns would do, if you can get them. Something to sting, but not kill or incapacitate."

Frowning, Louk said, "Would low-caliber target rifles do? We could reduce the charge and so lower the velocity."

"Yes. See to it immediately." As the captain moved away, Dumarest added, "And we shall need the services of a medical team. Make sure they are fully equipped."

Thomile, curious, said, "Your orders, sir?"

"Get the men outside. All of them. Have them move at the double. I want them hot, tired, thirsty, and worn before those rafts get here. Let them carry the heaviest packs you have. Move!"

At his side Raougat said, his voice a feral purr, "My congratulations, marshal. A hard medicine, but an effective one."

"You understand?"

"Of course. How often have I trained men for the arena in exactly that fashion? The best way, sir, and when time is short, the only way. Let us hope that certain outraged parents will not be screaming for your blood when they learn what you have done to their precious offspring. To have them hunt each other, to shoot at each other, to learn by actual pain to hide, to aim straight, to hate. A neat plan." He squinted up at the sun. Already it was a furnace in the heavens, gilding the dust rising from the impact of running feet, beading faces with sweat, darkening uniforms with perspiration. "A hot day, marshal." His chuckle was a whisper of sadistic anticipation. "A hot day, for them, in more ways than one."

* * *

The medic rinsed his hands and said with a weary finality, "That's the last one, marshal. If you've any bright ideas for tomorrow, perhaps you'll let me know. I'm not fond of surprises."

"You object?"

"I'm a doctor. What else would you expect me to do, cheer?"

"You are an officer in the medical corps," corrected Dumarest. "If you don't like picking pellets out of barely hurt men, how are you going to handle real casualties?"

"I've done it before."

"Accidents, yes. Stitching up a knife slash, maybe, but I'm talking about men with their intestines hanging out, limbs torn from their bodies, faces roasted in laser beams. You think that what happened today was bad? It was nothing, an essential part of military training. How else can you teach men to dodge and stay under cover? Those who got hit learned the price of being careless."

"One man blinded in his left eye," said the doctor savagely. "One shot in the groin—and he hasn't been married a month. Two others practically riddled, and one of them with a slug almost touching his heart. A dozen more with minor wounds, twenty others in pain, most of the rest suffering from

dehydration and heat exhaustion. A hell of a way to train men!"

He was disrespectful, forgetting rank and the deference due to higher command, outraged and unable to retain his opinions to himself. A dangerous man to have in any military force.

Dumarest crossed the space between them in three long strides, reached out, and caught the front of the green smock the man wore, lifted his right hand, and deliberately slapped the rotund cheek.

"Listen," he grated. "I am a marshal of the army of Chard. You are under military law. You could be facing a court-martial for those remarks, and I mean a drumhead trial here and now with death as the penalty, should you be found guilty. You doubt my power to do it?"

"You can't—I have my rights!"

"You have no rights," snapped Dumarest. "You yielded them all when you put on that uniform. What's bothering you, doctor? You want the glamor without the responsibility? The right to command without the duty to obey? Those men you treated wanted to be soldiers. I've shown them what it means to face an enemy, and did it by taking away the real danger. That eye can be replaced, the groin will heal, not one of them will suffer more than a little inconvenience, and under slowtime they will be ready to march in a day. You know the alternative. That force which got itself massacred taught you that. And you know what we're up against—or have you remained blind to what was found in the villages?"

"You're hard," whispered the doctor, rubbing at the welts on his face. "By God, you're hard."

"But truthful."

"Yes, I guess you are. It's Just that..." The doctor broke off, kicking at the leg of his field table. "Damn it, why do fools make war out to be wonderful?"

"Because they are fools," said Dumarest bitterly. "Because

they never have to fight. They prate of glory and heroism and ignore the death and dirt and wounds. No sane man or culture wants a war."

The doctor blinked. "You say that? A lord of Samalle?"

Dumarest stepped to the door of the tent. Outside, it was dark, the night blazing with stars, relatively cool after the heat of the day. Without looking at the other man, he said, "You think I should glorify war because it is my profession? You are a doctor, a surgeon, do you then love pain and operations?"

"The things aren't the same. I work to heal."

"And so do I. What can be worse than a badly fought war? With skill I try to limit the destruction, but if you think that any soldier loves war, you are mistaken." Without changing his tone, Dumarest added, "You have the necessary equipment to conduct a deep bodily survey?"

"What?" The doctor looked baffled. "I don't understand."

"I have reason to suspect that I may have a foreign object buried somewhere in my person." Dumarest turned and faced the man. "With action imminent, I want to make certain that I am fit. Will you please examine me and report on what you find."

A chance, but one which had to be taken now that he had the opportunity. Chan Parect had spoken of a device, a radio capsule perhaps, something implanted which could be triggered into activity. As yet he had found nothing remotely resembling a trigger, not among Zenya's clothing, nor any scar tissue where it could have been implanted in her body. He had searched carefully, running his fingers over every inch of her body as she lay quivering beneath what she thought was his sensuous embrace. Now it was time to examine himself.

He lay nude as the doctor busied himself with his instruments, talking as he worked.

"Has there been any pain? It would help to localize the potential site. Were you wounded? Your head? I see. Well, let's

take a look." A long silence; then, "Nothing there that I can see, marshal. Elsewhere, perhaps? Would it be metallic? A fragment from a bomb, a bullet? There is such a diversity of weapons. Well, we shall see."

And then, finally, "Nothing, my lord."

"Are you certain?"

"I have made a thorough examination. There is nothing metallic."

"It needn't be metallic."

"Even so, there would be traces. A foreign object cannot be simply inserted into the tissue without some distortion of the surrounding fibers, and there would be a difference in density. My instruments would have revealed any such divergence. You may rest assured, marshal. There is nothing implanted within your flesh."

"I see." Dumarest sat, brooding. "Could there be a possibility that..."

He broke off as Fran Paran burst into the tent. The youth was wild-eyed, panting. He said, "For God's sake, Earl, marshal, Lord Dumarest—"

"Control yourself, lieutenant! Report!" The man, Dumarest remembered, had been placed in charge of the communications equipment.

"Sir!" He saluted and said, his voice strained against imposed control, "A message from the city, sir. Verital is under attack!"

Chapter Eight

There was time for thought on the journey. Sitting, hunched

in the body of the raft, Dumarest thought of Aihult Chan Parect and his madness. His deviousness and his threat. All were real enough, and he had been even more cunning than suspected. Dumarest had imagined that a radio beacon had been implanted while he had lain helpless beneath the ministrations of his doctor. A device, booby-trapped, maybe, but a thing which could be safely removed with care and skill. Yet it seemed that the obvious had not been employed. A bluff? It was barely possible, but Dumarest doubted it. Chan Parect had been more clever than he had guessed.

"Sir?" Fran Paran was at his side, earphones on his head, a communicator in his hand. "A recording of the initial message, sir. Do you want to hear it?"

The voice was strained, incredulous.

"Monsters! Things all around. Killing, screaming, everywhere. Help. Send help. This is Verital calling. Verital. For God's sake, come quickly! It's horrible! Ghastly! We haven't got a chance. Hurry! Hurry! Devils from hell, spawn of the underworld, help! Help!"

The rest was distortion, a mouthing of frenzied words, screams, the sound of smashing timbers.

Dumarest played it again, a third time, learning nothing new. A man, almost incoherent, pleading for help from the city, raving about monsters and things of nightmare.

To the lieutenant he said, "Contact the city. Find out if there is anything new."

In the earphones Colonel Paran's voice sounded as if he were speaking through layers of cotton. "Nothing since the message, Earl. I've ordered two units to rendezvous with you at map reference 0136-2784. That's a mile from the southern edge of the village."

"Is there anything closer?"

"A detachment was based twenty miles to the west. We can't

establish contact." The voice hardened a little. "Natural enough if the devils attacked them first."

"Not natural," said Dumarest. "They should have been alert. Guards would have given the alarm. Have you a raft in the vicinity?"

"Yes."

"I assume it has flares. They must remain aloft, drop flares, and see what they can. If the detachment appears to have been attacked, they must wait until daylight before landing. If not, let them land, take as many men aboard as they can, and throw a line directly north of the village—about ten miles north." In the glow of a light, Dumarest studied a map. "That is in a direct line to the hills."

"You hope to catch who did it?"

"If possible, yes."

"Should I send in more men? Withdraw detachments from the villages?"

"No. The damage has been done now. There's no point in leaving other villages undefended. Just send out a general red alert to all forces and have them keep a man on constant radio watch. I want a running commentary, and if anything should happen, let me know at once."

"I hope you get them," said Paran. "By God, I really hope that. Susal was born in Verital."

And perhaps his son would die there. Time alone would tell.

Lights marked the rendezvous, bright points drifting against the fading stars, rimming the outlines of the rafts which waited high in the sky. Below, it was totally dark, the massed lofios plants seeming to absorb all light, so that the ground was an infinity of distance, a trick of perspective which vanished as one of the rafts dropped a flare.

Dumarest watched it fall, to burst into eye-bright luminescence, leaves springing into life beneath the glare, betraying their presence if the riding lights hadn't done it already. Another followed it, a third, as excited men searched for anticipated prey. From one of the rafts a laser sent a ruby beam to impact on a plant, fire rising, edged with smoke, from the tip of a frond.

"Stop that!" Dumarest shouted above the rising babble from the rafts. "Cease all fire! No more flares. Fall into line and remain silent!"

"I saw one!" The voice was young, hysterical. "I saw one of the devils. There!"

Again the laser fired, fresh flame rising from another plant, this time far to the left.

"He's right!" Another voice, equally young, just as high. "There! See!"

He owned a rifle, and echoes rolled as he fired, amplified by the lofios, increased as others joined in. Within seconds the body of the raft was a mass of winking points and ruby beams as men leaned over the edge shooting at imagined shapes on the ground.

To Fran Paran Dumarest snapped, "Get the number of that raft. I want the name of every man in it. The officers too. The damned fools should be able to maintain order better than this."

"They're volunteers, sir," said the lieutenant. "A group from one of the villages."

"It makes no difference. Establish contact and order them to stay well clear. Have them patrol to the east— and don't forget to record those names." To the pilot Dumarest said, "Head for the village. Fast."

Already they had lost the element of surprise and given any waiting enemy the choice of retreat or setting up an ambush. If the enemy were still at the village, it had taken time to cover distance. As the raft swept forward, it dropped until it was

almost brushing the plants beneath. They vanished, edging a clearing, a barely visible cluster of houses, limp figures lying in the streets. "Flares," ordered Dumarest.

He turned as they fell, looking at the scene clearly revealed, every detail painted in the stark, white glare. Beside him a man was suddenly sick, vomiting over the edge of the raft.

Another cursed with monotonous repetition. "God, look at it! God, look at it!"

Dumarest said, "Contact the other raft. Have them remain aloft and drop flares as needed. We shall land at the northern edge of the village. Two men to stay with the raft, four others to spread in line facing north. Fire at anything that comes toward you. Remember that, toward you. Lieutenant, you are in charge. The rest follow me. Open order, and no firing unless I give the order." He added grimly, "I'll kill any man who disobeys."

* * *

Once, on a distant world, he had seen an ancient painting in a dusty museum depicting, so the curator had said, an impression of hell. It had been a scene of torment, bodies lying, disfigured, faces contorted, blood and devastation all around. The artist could have taken Verital for his model.

Dumarest studied it from where he crouched behind the cover of a building. The wide main street was a shambles. The air reeked of blood. A man sprawled, stomach slashed open, intestines in a blue-red mass of coils, a rifle frozen in his hand. Close by, a woman, knife in hand, showed a hole between her eyes, the back of her head a soggy mass rimmed with lank hair. Two others lay in a carmine pool, hacked to bloody fragments. A child lacked limbs, another had been seared to crackling, a third, a baby, lay with a crushed skull beneath a red smear on the corner of a building. And there were others. Too many others.

From one side a man said sickly, "The bloody swine! Savages! Only animals could have done a thing like this!"

Another said, "Let's get them!"

He rose from where he had been crouching, rifle in hands, almost staggering as he moved down the street. Dumarest watched him go, willing to accept the proffered bait. If any enemy should still be in the village, the easy target might draw his fire.

The man was lucky; none came. Dumarest waited, then moved from behind his cover.

"Search," he ordered. "House to house. Be careful."

He kicked open the door of the building behind which he had crouched. The interior was dark. Cautiously he felt along the wall, found a switch, turned it. No light came, and he crept forward, tense, nostrils flaring with remembered smells. His foot hit something soft, and he jumped back, eyes narrowed, cursing the darkness. The window was shuttered, and he threw them wide, light from the flares illuminating the room.

A woman stared at him with wide, dead eyes. The ax in her hand was stained, her hand, the entire arm to the shoulder. The man beside her lay face-down, the back of his head crushed and oozing brains. Dumarest stooped over the woman. She was young, nubile, her body firm. The blood coating her was not her own, and as far as he could see, she was uninjured.

Uninjured, but dead, her flesh barely cool.

Upstairs a baby lay in a cot. Dumarest took one glance and turned away. A pet, a small animal, lay against the wall, fur matted with blood, fangs bared in a final defiance. The claws held strips of skin and particles of flesh. The rest of the house was empty.

Back in the street, he called for three men and went in search of the power supply. It was housed at the far end of the village, a compact atomic pile together with generators and rectifiers. In it someone had run berserk, chopping wires, hacking at cables, paying the price in released energy, which had seared him to a crisp. Motes of soot hung in the air, which stank of char.

One of the men said, "Hell, we'll never be able to fix this in a

hurry."

"How long?"

"At least three hours, sir. It will be dawn by then."

Dumarest nodded, arriving at a decision. "Get back into the street. Find something to make a fire, several if you can. Get the doors and windows open. If there is anyone still alive, I want to be informed at once. Move!"

As they emerged into the street, a man came running toward him. He halted, saluted, said, "Report from the lieutenant, sir. The raft above is almost out of flares. Your orders?"

"I'll give them personally. You help these men." At the raft Dumarest snapped, "Tell them to ride high, drop what flares they have left, then land to take on those we are carrying. Where is the other raft, the one sent to the east?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "Still there, as far as I know, sir. I can't establish contact."

"Damn them!" Anger darkened Dumarest's face. "Keep trying. I want them to head north and land to form a line ten miles ahead facing the village. If..." He broke off, listening.

"Sir?"

"Be quiet!"

It came again, the distant blast of shots, a thin screaming. The pilot of the raft said, "They've found something! Goddamnit, they've found the enemy!"

That or another outburst of hysteria which turned shadows into menacing figures; yet there was always the chance they were fighting living things. Dumarest sprang into the raft, snapping orders.

"Lieutenant, contact the other raft and have them follow us. Pilot, up and head toward that noise. The rest of you stay here

and hold the village."

Lightened, the raft almost shot into the sky, leveling, the air gusting as it drove toward the sound of battle. Ahead, the darkness was broken by a dull glow, smoldering plants sending up thick columns of smoke from a base of flame. Details sprang into life as flares dropped from the sides of the vehicle, men crouching, firing, their raft lying to one side, shielded by smoke drifting beneath the impact of a gust of wind. They faced southwest, toward the village.

"They've got them," said Fran Paran. His voice was tense with eagerness. "Trapped the swine on their way back to the hills. If we land, we can catch them between us."

"And face the fire of our own troops," reminded Dumarest. He glanced to where the other raft, laden with men, moved toward them. "Have them land to the west of the action, drop half their men, then move on to the east. Open order and reserve fire until they recognize their targets."

A basic maneuver when fighting in darkness against an unknown enemy. Properly conducted, it would face them with a wide semicircle, which could move in to surround them with a ring of steel. A trap that could not fail—if the men remained cool, if they obeyed orders, if they retained their fire and didn't shoot each other down.

As the raft passed them, the lieutenant said, "And us, sir?"

"We'll stay aloft, dropping flares and maintaining observation." Dumarest thinned his lips as he recognized the other's expression. "You don't like it, lieutenant?"

"I'd rather be down there killing the swine who did that horror to the village."

"Instead of which you'll have to let others do the killing while you tell them where to shoot."

Leaning over the edge of the raft, Dumarest studied the scene below. The fire was erratic, seemingly unanswered, rifles and

lasers blasting in all directions. Above the shots rose the sound of shouting, a wild screaming, a hideous cacophony of bestial noise. And then, suddenly, the raft was the target of concentrated fire.

The pilot reared, crying out, falling as bullets tore at his chest, a laser beam searing into his side. The raft tilted, the engine ruined, the anti-grav conductors ripped and inactive. Dumarest caught Fran Paran as he almost went over the side, throwing him to the floor of the raft, holding him as the vehicle crashed. The vegetation saved them, cushioning the impact, and they landed heavily, to roll on the soft dirt.

"They got us!" The lieutenant staggered to his feet. Blood trickled from a shallow gash at the side of his head. "Where's my rifle? They must be close. Where the hell is my rifle?"

"We were shot down by our own men," said Dumarest. He watched as the other found his weapon, his eyes cautious. "What do you intend to do?"

"Get in there and join the fight. What else?"

"It might help to know what we're up against," said Dumarest dryly. He coughed as a gust of wind threw an eddy of smoke over the place where they stood. "We don't want to kill our own men, and we certainly don't want to be shot in error. They almost got us once. We might not be as lucky the next time."

"They wouldn't do that."

"They did. I was watching. The fire came from directly below." Dumarest coughed again, his lungs constricting, his eyes watering so that the figure of the officer blurred and took on distorted lines in the dying light of the flare. And there was something else, a sweet, sickly odor riding on the breeze, bringing an overwhelming tension, a sharp appreciation of impending danger. "We'd better get away from here."

"Run, you mean?"

"We were shot down. If the enemy are close, they would have seen us fall. They know we would carry arms and ammunition.

Take the lead, lieutenant. Head for the east."

"The action is toward the north."

"And the other raft is over to the east." Anger sharpened Dumarest's voice. "This isn't a one-man operation, lieutenant. And we've no place for heroes. Just obey orders and stop arguing if you want to avoid a court-martial. Now, move!"

Fran Paran said tightly, "You can go to hell, marshal. I'm here to fight, and that's just what I intend, to do. Run if you want, but I'm no coward. Those swine are going to pay for what they've done, and I'm going to see they do it. And neither you nor anyone else is going to stop me."

He stood, very young, very defiant, breathing deeply of the smoke-laden air. And then, abruptly, he screamed.

It was a harsh sound, wordless, a noise torn from a distorted throat, powered by fear and hate and blind ferocity. Dumarest was moving as the first note cut the air. He had sensed the tension, seen the beginning of the grimace, the rifle lifting, aiming directly toward his chest. As the officer fired, he threw himself to one side, ducking low as a second bullet cut the air where his head had been. Before the muzzle could lower, he was rising beneath it, slamming his shoulder hard against the barrel, throwing it upward, to spout missiles at the sky. His right hand lifted, the fingers clenched, the hard mass of bone and sinew slamming at the unprotected jaw.

He caught the man as he fell, fighting a sudden nausea, a flashing of his vision, the sickness which filled his stomach. Dropping the limp shape, Dumarest staggered to one side, doubled, retching. Around him the plants seemed to move, to grow arms and legs and grinning faces, crimson cowls framing heads like skulls, the snarling mask of a fighter moving in for the kill, other shapes, all menacing, all horrible.

It lasted for a few moments and then passed, leaving him weak and drenched with sweat. Turning, he looked at the officer. Even though unconscious, he twitched on the ground, arms reaching, fingers scrabbling, booted feet churning the soil.

Dumarest reached him, slashing at the bright uniform with his knife, cutting strips of fabric to bind the hands and feet. The rifle lay to one side, and he picked it up and moved like a shadow into the vegetation. Beneath the fronds it was totally dark; the flares had died, and the fading starlight couldn't penetrate the broad leaves and wide-spread branches. The wind had ceased, the smoke rising straight, black against the bright stars.

The air was silent; the shooting had stopped, the screams and shouts and bestial noises. There was nothing aside from the darkness, the rising smoke, the faint tang of burned explosives. Dropping flat, Dumarest rested his ear against the soil, finding no vibration of moving feet. If the enemy had been close, they had gone, or were more still and silent than any humans he had ever known.

The lieutenant was conscious when he returned. He lifted his hands. "Why this?"

"Don't you remember?"

"We were talking. You said something about finding the other raft. Then I was on the dirt tied up like a beast for slaughter. What happened?"

Dumarest said, "How do you feel?"

"Sick. My head aches and my jaw..." The bound hands lifted, rubbed. "It hurts. Did I fall or something? But, if so, why am I tied?"

"You tried to kill me. You would have done so if I hadn't knocked you out."

The lieutenant blinked. "Kill you? But, sir, that's impossible."

"I wish it were," said Dumarest. With his knife he cut the lashings. "Get up. Search the raft. If you find a communicator, try to contact the other raft. Have it come over and pick us up." He added grimly, "If you see a weapon, don't touch it. If you do, I will kill you."

The officer commanding the other raft was a squat, middle-aged man with a dull, phlegmatic nature. A born soldier who loved to live by the book. As the raft landed, he jumped out, saluting.

"Lieutenant Hamshard reporting, sir. As ordered, I dropped half my men to the west of the action and continued to the east. Those first dropped reported they were establishing contact."

"And?"

"One message, and then silence, sir. My guess is they ran into friendly fire, returned it, and then got wiped out. The others, under my command, remained in position."

"No contact established?"

"No, sir."

"Why not!"

"To be frank, sir, it seemed that all hell had broken loose. I didn't want to throw my men away if the enemy had overwhelmed the position; still less did I want them to get shot by our own men. I held them back until I could get information from a scout. He didn't come back. I was about to mount another reconnaissance when your message was received. I pulled out, and my men with me." He jerked his head to where they waited in the raft. "Was the action in order, sir?"

"Yes, captain."

Hamshard frowned. "A mistake, sir. I am a lieutenant."

"As from this moment, you are a captain. A battlefield promotion. Lieutenant Paran, make a note and inform headquarters of my decision." Dumarest looked at the sky. "How long until dawn?"

"Less than an hour, sir. Orders?"

"Get up and stay up until full light. We can do nothing in the

dark. If the enemy were here, they are gone. If they weren't, there is little we can do but wait."

Hamshard said shrewdly, "Sir, do you think the action we spotted, the shooting and noise, was the result of hysteria? That they were firing at the air and at each other?"

"You think it possible, captain?"

"Well, sir, they were a pretty high-strung bunch. If they thought they saw something, landed, got confused with shadows, and then my men coming toward them—yes, sir, I think it possible."

"Well." said Dumarest, "We'll soon find out."

Chapter Nine

"Gas!" Colonel Paran thinned his lips, his eyes hard. "Are you sure, Earl? There can be no mistake?"

Dumarest shook his head, leaning back in his chair as he fought the numbing weight of fatigue. From across the table around which sat the council of war a man said, "Examination of the bodies supports the marshal's theory. The toxic substances used must have been of short duration; no residue was found, but I fail to see how any other cause could have achieved the same result."

Lem Vandet, a hard-faced, sharp-eyed man who spoke with determined precision. A chemical scientist before he had donned the uniform and insignia of a major.

Colonel Oaken said, "Can you be certain of that? Without definite proof?"

"We must work on the basis of available evidence, colonel. As the marshal pointed out, the clues were there all along. The

villages without any Ayutha bodies—they couldn't have made a physical attack without suffering some casualties. Examination of the weapons used also proves that they were used against each other—blood and tissue samples leave no doubt. And the initial messages, which are all the same. Clear evidence of some form of hallucination that distorted reality so that the villagers imagined they were being attacked by monsters. In fact, they were the victims of their own minds."

From where he had sat in brooding silence, Colonel Stone said, "The Ayutha are primitive. The manufacture of nerve gas requires a relatively high technology. They lack both the knowledge and the means."

"As far as we are aware," admitted Vandet. "But they could buy what they cannot make."

Dumarest watched their faces as they realized the implication of the comment. It was frightening. A band of marauding primitives was one thing; armed with nerve gas, they were something else, and if they had a source of supply, the economy of Chard was doomed.

He said, "This is speculation. We have no proof that the Ayutha are involved. But I am fairly certain that the nerve gas is derived from lofios oil. I assume that it would be relatively easy for an unscrupulous man to contact them and to buy oil direct. But why should they have wanted gas in the first place? That implies not only a savage hate but a calculated plan. Is it possible that you have commercial rivals who would gain by creating discord?"

Oaken shook his head. He wasted no time now in bluster; the plump lines of his face had settled into determined hardness. He was not a fool, thought Dumarest, watching him. Neither he nor Stone. Merchants, perhaps, rich men both, but never fools.

"We've thought of that," said Stone. "Lofios oil is rare and cannot be synthesized, so we own the entire supply. To destroy it would benefit no one—not even the Ayutha. That's what makes this whole thing so incredible. Now we have no choice but to send strong punitive expeditions into the hills, find their supplies

of gas if possible, destroy what we can in order to teach them a lesson."

"No."

Oaken frowned. "Marshal?"

"You don't put out a fire by throwing oil into the flames. You tried it once, and the second time achieved a total loss of all your men. As I explained at the beginning, wars of this nature tend to escalate. There will be no punitive expeditions."

"You mean we must do nothing?"

"I didn't say that. As yet no real attempt has been made to contact the Ayutha. Until an attempt has been tried, it would be stupid to waste men and aggravate the situation. We could create havoc, perhaps, but it would take only one man with one container of gas to destroy a village."

Colonel Paran said, "The marshal has a point, gentlemen. The attacks are escalating. Two other villages destroyed since Verital." To Dumarest he explained, "The word came while you were in the field. They were far to the west, and there was nothing you could have done."

"I should have been informed." A map lay on the table and Dumarest studied it, noting the positions of the red dots, widely spaced, villages destroyed at apparent random. Primitive savagery might account for it, but why should they have passed villages close to the hills to attack others much farther away?

"I want a computer analysis made of these attacks," he said. "The times, the distances, the weather conditions, everything. Colonel Paran, I asked for rafts equipped with infrared detectors to maintain constant patrol. Did they spot anything?"

"No, but that isn't conclusive. The lofios holds warmth and baffles the scanners."

"I was thinking of much closer to the hills."

"Still nothing."

Which meant little; any attacking force could have remained under cover, living on carried stores and moving under the protection of the leaves.

"Is there nothing we can do, marshal?" Stone was anxious. "Aside from punitive expeditions and constant surveillance, I can't see how we are going to resolve this conflict."

"Three things," said Dumarest. "Major Vandet, from your examination, would you say the gas was one which had to be inhaled?"

"Yes. There are no marks of burning on the skin, and in any case, that would assume sprays were used. From your own experience, I would say that it is a relatively simple vapor—natural enough if we remember their limited sources of manufacture." He added, "Unless, of course, they are actually buying more sophisticated material."

"We can discount that," said Colonel Paran. "Every ship reaching this planet is checked and cargoes verified. The gas they use must be locally produced."

"Then respirators and air tanks would give total protection," said Dumarest. "See to their manufacture. Every man in the field must be equipped, and half of them must wear the masks at all times. The second thing—in order to protect the villages, all lofios plants to the extent of a mile must be cut down."

"Destroyed?" The merchant in Oaken forced the objection. "Do you realize just how many plants that is? Marshal, we can't do it!"

"Thirty villages," said Stone. "Three hundred square miles. The economy would never stand it."

Colonel Paran said shrewdly, "You're thinking of cover, Earl? It makes sense, but would a mile be necessary?"

"To give complete protection, yes."

"I see. And the third thing?"

"To make contact with the Ayutha." Dumarest rose from the table. "I will see to it as soon as I have enough men properly trained. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me?"

* * *

He heard the sound of water as he entered the suite and Zenya's voice raised in song. It was a cheerful air such as might be sung at a celebration, the words casual, hinting of love and fulfillment and eternal bliss. A dream, as all such songs were.

"Earl?" She had heard the sound of the opening door, perhaps the heavy tread of his feet. She came from the bathroom, rubbing her hair with a fluffy towel, the long lines of her body barely covered by the material. "Darling!" Her eyes mirrored the shock in her voice. "You look dreadful—so tired. Some wine?"

"Later."

"After when, darling?" She saw the drawn look on his face and ceased her romantic byplay. "A hard time?"

Times were always hard when dead men lay thick, broken bodies like discarded toys on the soft dirt. And there had been more than men—women, children, babies, even pets.

"Yes," he said flatly. "A hard time."

"But it's over, and you've come back to me, and now you're safe." She looked at the package he carried. "A present?"

Without answering, he set the parcel on a table, ripped it open, and activated the mechanism it contained. An electronic baffle to nullify any watching device—high rank had certain conveniences.

"Your uniform came," she said. "I've hung it up in the wardrobe. Are you going to wear it? It would be nice for us to go out and eat somewhere and have everyone looking at us and know that you are the marshal and I am your lady. Susal—the colonel's wife—took me to a place last night for dinner. The food

was fabulous, and they had a wonderful troupe of dancers. The best I've seen since we left Samalle. Earl..." She frowned. "You aren't listening."

He said flatly, "Just what instructions did Chan Parect give you before we left Paiyar?"

"Earl?" She stared at him, eyes wide. "Earl, you told me not to mention things like that."

"You can talk now. This will baffle any listening ears." He gestured at the mechanism softly humming on the table. "Did he tell you why we came here?"

"Of course. To find his son, Salek."

"And what else?" He resisted the impulse to reach out and shake her. "What would you have done, for example, had I shipped out?"

"I'd have gone with you."

"And if I'd left you behind?"

A veil seemed to fall over the amber of her eyes, making her suddenly appear older, more subtle, a little evil. A mask to hide nothing, perhaps, or to hide a secret she had no intention of telling. And yet, it was something he had to know.

"Earl!" She recoiled as she saw his face, the cruel set of his mouth. "Earl, don't look at me like that!"

"You were given orders," he said tightly. "I want to know what they were."

"Why bother, darling?" Her smile was soft, wanton. "You'll find Salek, and we'll all go home, and then we'll live happily until we die. You see, it's all so simple. There is no need for you to worry at all."

A man to find, who could be anywhere; a threat hanging over him, should he fail; a war to win before his pretense was

discovered. And she said that he had nothing to worry about.

A child would have spoken like that, but Zenya was no child. With savage answer he threw the flat of his hand against her cheek.

"Damn you, woman! Tell me!"

"Earl!" She recoiled, eyes wide with shock, one hand lifted to the red welts on the bronze of her skin. "You hit me! You hit me!"

"I'll kill you if you don't answer!"

He meant it; the need of survival overrode all gentler instincts, and his determination showed on his face, in his eyes, his voice. She recognized it, accepted it, found a warped pleasure in surrendering to his mastery.

"I was to send a message to the Cyclan telling them where you had been and where you were going if possible. And I was to send another to grandfather telling him that you had failed. That I had failed."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Earl. That is all."

It was too simple, too open for the devious mind of Aihult Chan Parect, and yet he had no evidence that she spoke other than the truth. Had the old man gambled on the bait of her body and the promise of later fortune being enough to hold him? Thinking it enough when coupled with a bluff?

Wine stood on a table, and he helped himself, ignoring the girl, standing with eyes narrowed before the window. Rafts passed in the night outside, lights brilliant against the stars, each vehicle loaded with uniformed men. Fresh detachments for the field, forces accumulating for the inevitable attack, should all else fail. And other rafts, big cargo carriers, grim as they transported their loads of dead.

From behind him Zenya said softly, "Earl?"

She had dressed in a gown of clinging golden fabric, gems bright in the mane of her hair, head held high, the marks of his fingers carried proudly like a badge.

He said, "Tell me about Salek Parect."

"You should bathe, Earl, and change. It will refresh you, and I want to see you in uniform."

"Tell me about the man I'm looking for."

"I never saw him, Earl. He left Paiyar before I was born. From what others have told me, he was a dreamer, always reading old books and studying ancient scrolls. He had a theory that men had left the right way—whatever that is supposed to mean. Cant we forget him, Earl?"

"I have to find him."

"I know, but later. You have been away a long time, and I missed you." She came forward a little, perfume wafting before her, arms lifted in invitation. "I missed you so very much."

He said, "I need to bathe and change."

* * *

They ate in a place gilded with glowing light, rainbows chasing each other on the walls, the ceiling a mass of drifting smoke shot with glimmers of random brightness. Music came from a living orchestra, martial tunes and exotic rhythms, the throb of drums merging with the wail of pipes, flutes soaring, strings quivering the air. Tall hostesses moved softly on naked feet, their ankles adorned with tiny bells which chimed as they glided between the tables. The food was a succession of dishes, spiced, plain, meats and fish and compotes of fruit, delicacies composed of crushed nuts blended with a dozen different flavors.

Uniforms were everywhere, officers entertaining their women, faces flushed, voices a little too loud, peacocks strutting and enjoying their hour of glory. Volunteers all, paying for their uniforms, their arms, looking on the war as a great adventure.

"Earl," whispered Zenya, "I'm so proud of you. You make these others look like inexperienced boys."

Dumarest made no comment, sipping wine that tasted of honey and mint, icy cold to the mouth, warming as it slid past his throat. He felt tired and wished that he was back in the suite, but it was to be expected that he would entertain his lady.

"Sir?" A middle-aged man stood before him, the insignia of a major bright on his collar. "With respect, marshal, the captain and I are having a little argument, which perhaps you would be good enough to resolve." He gestured to the table he had left, the man and the two women watching. "With your permission?"

He was more than a little drunk; it was easier to agree than argue.

"What is it, major?"

"It has to do with weapons, sir. I advocate lasers, but the captain states that a rifle is as effective, in trained hands. Your opinion?"

"The captain is right."

"But surely, sir, a laser, especially when set for continuous fire, can be more destructive?"

"True, major, but a man can be killed only once. A bullet will do it as well as anything else. If the object of war was simple destruction, we would all be armed with missile launchers."

"But, sir, surely—"

"That will be all, major."

Dumarest sipped again at his wine. The music had fallen to a repetitive beat, bass notes seeming to vibrate the very air, pulsing like the sound of a giant heart. A dancer spun onto the floor, whirling, veils lifting to reveal milky flesh, hair an ebony cloud around the painted face. Another joined her, glistening black, a third as red as flame. Trained liveness merged, parted,

met again in a combination of limbs, so that for a moment the three bodies seemed one, to part, to join again in the age-old invitation of all women to all men.

"Beautiful," whispered Zenya. "How could any man resist them? Could you, Earl? If I wasn't here? If they came to you?"

They were marionettes, toys, painted dolls dedicated to their art. He turned from them, busy with his wine.

"Have you ever known a woman like that, Earl? An artiste? You must have. Did she love you? Did you love her? Earl, answer me, I want to know."

He said, "Zenya, do you know what love really is?"

"Tell me, darling."

"It isn't the game you play. For you it is all pleasure, fun, excitement. But real love isn't like that. There is pain in it, and sacrifice, and yearning, and something, perhaps, which you have never known. A caring for another person. A tenderness... I can't put it into words. If you feel it, you know it."

"As you have done, Earl?" She frowned as he made no answer. "Earl?"

She looked at his hand, tight around his wineglass, the set look on his face, the eyes misted with memories. Jealous, she said, "Earl, I'm bored. Let's get out of here."

Branchard was waiting when they returned to the suite. He straightened from where he leaned against a wall, face splitting into a grin as he saw the uniform. Formally he said, "My lord, may I have the pleasure of a few moments of your time?"

The words were for the benefit of the honor guard standing stiffly beside the door. Maintaining the pretense,

Dumarest snapped, "This is irregular, but, as you are here..."

Inside, Branchard glanced around, saw the electronic baffle,

and relaxed.

"I tried to get word to you, Earl, but you didn't ring back, so I had to take a chance and come myself." He nodded at Zenya. "The girl took the message."

"What message?" She frowned. "A man rang a few times asking for you to call back. A news service, I understood. Naturally you wouldn't want to be bothered."

"You should have told me," said Dumarest mildly. The delay wasn't important. "Any luck?"

"Some, but you may not like it. The name didn't help, but names can be changed, and the man you're looking for is known here as Amil Kulov."

"You're sure?"

"There's no doubt about it, Earl. The Lammarre details match to the last decimal point. He had an infection shortly after landing and was treated in the city hospital. He also worked for a time in a chemical factory, doing spot checks on sprays and fungicides, and he's on record in their medical section. The thing is, he isn't in the city."

Dumarest frowned. "Where, then? At one of the villages?"

"Not even that. He's one of these crazy guys, you know, always trying to help those who don't really want him to interfere but are too polite to say so. The last known of him was that he was living in the hills among the Ayutha." Branchard poured himself some wine, emptied half the glass in a single swallow. "Nice stuff, Earl. They seem to be treating you well."

"Stick to the point, captain."

"That is it, Earl. You might as well forget the man. The odds are that he's dead by now. Everyone I spoke to reckons that all the social workers who interested themselves in the primitives got the chop when the trouble started. One thing is for sure—if you go looking for him, you'll head smack into trouble."

Nothing was simple. Dumarest said, "Thank you, captain. I'll send money to you at the field."

Chapter Ten

From the head of the column Ven Taykor said, "I've never been a gambling man, Earl, but if I were I'd take odds that none of us will get back alive." His voice was muffled, distorted by the diaphragm of his respirator. "If I were with the Ayutha, I could pick us off one by one and never need to show myself at all."

A gamble impossible to avoid. Pausing, Dumarest glanced back at the column of men. They had been marching since dawn from where the rafts had dropped them, following Taykor as he led them toward the hills. They were tired, hot, and irritable, and showed it. Hand-picked, but poorly trained; there had been no time for that.

He said, "You're a pessimist, Ven. All we want to do is to make contact."

"Let's hope that we don't do it the hard way." Taykor reached up to scratch his face, swore as his fingers met the mask. "Do we have to wear these damn things all the time?"

There was no wind; the leaves of the lofios all around were still, swollen pods taut beneath the sun. They had worn the respirators continuously, field training to get accustomed to the equipment, but the capacity of the tanks was limited.

"We'll take a break," decided Dumarest. "Captain Corm, set guards. Respirators to be worn, no firing on any account unless I order. Lieutenant Paran, report."

He listened as the other relayed details of the situation.

Rafts, heavily armed, riding high at the edge of the hills, men tense to shoot at anything that moved below. More rafts, deeper

in, scanning with electronic sensors.

"A party has been spotted moving toward the west, sir. About thirty men, as far as can be determined." His voice hardened. "They could have been responsible for the recent attacks."

"Any other signs of movement?"

"No, sir. That party, sir, do you wish it destroyed?"

"No." Dumarest's voice was harsh. "My orders are plain—no firing for any reason unless I give the command. Any man disobeying will be shot. Our objective is to contact the Ayutha. If we start shooting, they will run."

Run and attack in turn, and the column he commanded was too vulnerable for his liking. As they settled, one of the men complained, "A hell of a thing. Why couldn't we have used rafts to drop us right in the hills? All this walking seems crazy to me."

His companion, more logical, said, "Use your head, man. Suppose you were one of the Ayutha. You could see a raft coming for miles, right? You'd see it land and armed men get out, and then what? I'll tell you, you'd run and get help and set up an ambush. The marshal knows what he's doing."

A blind confidence that Dumarest hoped would be justified. Squatting, crouched over a map, he studied the terrain. They were close to the foothills, where a shallow gully wound into the higher regions, heading, so Ven Taykor had said, to one of the Ayutha settlements. It would be deserted now; even primitives would not have remained massed together to offer an easy target, but equally so, they would have remained scattered in the vicinity. If he could reach the area without being attacked, if they were a little curious and held their fire, if the men behind him would control their nervous tension, it was possible that his mission could be a success.

He said, "Ven, come over here."

Taykor made no reply. Looking up, Dumarest saw him standing beside one of the lofios plants. He had dropped his

respirator and was digging with his thumbnails into one of the blooms. He turned, grinning, oil gleaming on his thumbs.

"Here, Earl, come and smell what this is all about."

The scent was incredible. It rose from the oil, catching at the senses, filling the mind with sensations of warm suns and sultry days, of fields of flowers and silken skin. A gourmet would have found in it the succulence of favorite foods, a lover the impact of his woman's flesh. For a moment he stood, confused with a variety of impressions; then Ven Taykor dropped his hands, wiping them on his faded tunic.

"It gets you, doesn't it? I've known men to become so hooked on the stuff they spend their lives among the lofios just collecting, smelling, drifting into a private world all of their own. Not many, but it happens." He added grimly, "You find them sometimes. Mostly bones. With fruit all around, they sit and starve to death."

"A narcotic?"

"No. It isn't habit forming in the sense that it creates a dependency. It's just that a few men like it so much they haven't the will to leave it alone. Mostly you build a tolerance toward it. The marketed stuff, of course, is diluted and refined." Taykor reached up and jerked a fruit from its branch. "Try it, it's good."

The fruit was round, the size of a clenched hand, the rind easily peeled from the juicy pulp beneath. Dumarest lifted his mask and buried his teeth in the flesh. It held a cool, refreshing tang, tart and yet sweet, devoid of seeds.

He said, "How do the plants propagate?"

"By cuttings. They are all from one original hybrid. Even so, the blooms still need pollinating." Taykor lifted his hand and rested it on one of the swollen pods. "See?"

As he rapped it, the pod opened in a gush of golden grains, tiny motes rising, to drift high into the air, a smokelike cloud which hung over the guide as if a mist.

Dumarest snapped, "Be careful!"

"Why?" Taykor frowned. "They're harmless, Earl. The dust is only pollen. It might sting your eyes if you stood too close, and maybe make you sneeze, but that's all." He reached out to gather more fruit. "You'd better let the men eat while they have the chance. From now on the going gets rough."

Eat and recharge the air tanks and get ready for the next stage of the journey. Dumarest moved softly around the camp, watching the shadows beneath the plants to either side. He saw nothing, but that meant little. Their progress had been not as silent as he wished; a stray Ayutha could have spotted them, be even now keeping watch. But if so, there was nothing he could do.

Two hours later they saw the skull.

It was the fleshless head of some beast mounted on a short stick, facing them with fanged jaws. Ven Taykor looked at it, hand rising to his mask in conditioned reflex as he tried to scratch his jaw.

"Well, now," he said. "This is something new. I've never seen anything like it before."

Dumarest looked to either side. The lofios had given way to scrub, matted vegetation covering torn ground. A few of the plants stood in sheltered places, thin and with dulled leaves, ragged beneath the sun, their roots driving deep for the specialized minerals they required. Spined vines pressed against them, yellow flowers bright among the thorns, red berries hanging in clusters beneath orange leaves.

He looked again at the skull. It was old, the bone yellowed, fretted, patches of lichen clinging to the underside of the jaw like scales of dried blood.

A warning. It could be nothing else. *Stop! Come no farther! Go back—or else!*

To Ven Taykor he said, "How much longer before we reach the

settlement?"

"A few hours." The guide was uneasy. "That's if they let us get anywhere near it. If they want to stop us, it would be easy. The ground ahead is full of crevasses—a perfect spot for an ambush."

"Can we bypass it?"

"I'm not sure." Taykor scratched at his mask. "One man could do it easy, but not if he's a target. A file of men would be conspicuous every step of the way. If you want my advice, Earl, you'll call it a day. Radio up a raft and get out of here."

"I won't do that."

"No," said Taykor. "I didn't think you would. But if the Ayutha are gunning for us, you'll wish you had." He glanced up at the sky, where tiny motes drifted, almost lost in the distance. Watching rafts containing enough power to wash the area with destruction. "Maybe you should bring them in close—just in case."

"No. Is there any sign of peace the Ayutha recognize? If a stranger comes up to others, what does he do?" He said sharply, as Taykor hesitated, "What did you do when meeting them? Hold out your hands? What?"

"I didn't do anything special. Just walked in slow and quiet and normal. They didn't bother me, and I didn't bother them. They didn't used to be warlike then, remember. Things have changed." Taykor shook his head, baffled. "I just don't know, Earl. From here on, anything can happen."

A quiet, primitive people suddenly turning to violence, old customs revived, perhaps, memories of other days when life had been hard and only the strong could hope to survive. How would such a people react to the presence of armed men? He could guess, but the chance had to be taken.

"Take the lead," he said to the guide. "Walk with your hands empty and in full view. If you see anyone watching, do nothing. Captain!" Dumarest turned to Conn. "Single file, rifles slung,

hands exposed. You understand?"

The captain was a tough farmer who had lost his family during the first attack. Scowling, he said, "I don't like it, marshal. You're turning us into sitting targets. If the Ayutha attack, well all be wiped out."

"You heard my orders, captain!"

For a moment the man hesitated, on the brink of disobedience; then he shrugged. "Yes, sir, but God help you if you've made a mistake."

"A threat, captain?" Dumarest didn't pursue the matter. "Never mind. Have the men maintain constant observation. One to look ahead, the two behind him to left and right alternately. Anything seen to be reported immediately. Right, Taykor? On your way!"

The gully narrowed, widened into a shallow valley, the walls lifting, to close again as they climbed upward. The vegetation grew thicker, thorns tearing at clothing, rubble underfoot making progress difficult. Aside from the rasp of boots and the sound of harsh breathing, there was no sound. The column seemed to be moving into an infinity of emptiness, nothing but the hot sun above, the encroaching scrub, the rocks beneath. An hour later they found a second skull, human this time, and the men skirted it, eyes wary, hands gripping their slung rifles. A crest rose, gave way to a narrow declivity, the ground rising beyond to a steeper gradient.

They found a hut, deserted, a small garden unkempt, plants choked with weeds. Another that had been burned, gray ash thick on the stone. Two more, roofs sagging, doors open, to reveal naked interiors. The embers of a fire over which stood a tripod of thin metal struts. Dumarest touched them, felt the dead ashes and found them warm. Word of their coming had preceded them; whoever had lived here had taken their possessions and run.

A man said sharply, "Over there! See?"

His rifle lifted, aiming. Dumarest reached him and slammed down the weapon. "No firing! You heard my order!"

"I was just—"

"You don't need a gun to point What did you see?"

"Something over on that ridge. It's watching us. There!"

Dumarest followed the pointing hand and saw nothing but a tree, stunted, branches like arms, a patch of lighter coloring that, to a nervous man, could have looked like a face.

"There's nothing there. Don't be so quick with that gun the next time. Lieutenant!"

"Sir?"

"Any further reports on movement within this area?"

There were three. Heat-radiating masses, which could have been men, moving invisibly in the vegetation, coming from the north and east.

"We could have rafts track them, sir," suggested the officer. "So that if they start anything they wouldn't have the chance to get away."

"If you were of the Ayutha and saw rafts heading in, what would you think? That we were bait to set a trap, maybe?" Dumarest shrugged. "We're here to contact them, not kill them." To the guide he said, "All right, Ven, lead on."

An hour later they were attacked.

It happened as the guide topped a rise, standing for a moment silhouetted against the sky, passing on into the valley beyond. Captain Conn followed him, his rifle, despite orders, clenched in his hands. Dumarest saw him pause, the gun lifting, aiming, firing as he shouted.

"Captain! No!"

The flat report of the shot rolled from the flanking hills, repeated as the captain fired again. Ven Taykor appeared, running back over the rise, hands lifted, face contorted behind his mask.

"Earl! We're surrounded! That crazy fool—"?

Captain Conn dissolved into a pillar of flame.

It happened almost too fast to see. One moment he was standing firing; the next, something had touched him and turned him into a living torch, Dumarest snatched at his rifle, lifted it, fired, sending a bullet into the shrieking mass. As the captain fell in merciful death, he yelled, "Scatter! Down! Stay under cover! No firing!"

He caught the guide as he passed and threw him down as something cut the air with a vicious hiss. Together they rolled to the side of the boulder, crouching as more arrows splintered against the stone. To one side a man rose, firing, turning, to fall with a shaft of wood penetrating his chest. Shots blasted, hysterical fingers jammed against triggers, firing at the air, the trees, the rocks all around. More flame burst around diem, ugly patches edged with smoke, filling the air with tiny motes of swirling soot.

"Flame bombs," gasped Taykor. "They'll burn us alive!"

Ten yards behind, broken stone formed a rough circle, slabs and fissures giving protection. Dumarest sprang to his feet and raced toward it, shouting orders over the din.

"Retreat! Form defensive positions. Stop firing. Stop firing, damn you!"

A man snarled as he tumbled over the rocks. "You killed the captain. One of your own men. Whose damn side are you on?"

"Would you have left him to roast?" Taykor tried to spit, remembered his mask, tore it free with a savage gesture. "The fool started all this. If he hadn't fired, we could have made contact. They were waiting for us."

"He still killed the captain."

There had been nothing else to do. Conn had been seared, blinded, already dying; it had been an act of mercy to save him further agony. Dumarest glanced around the crude fort. The stone gave protection only while they hugged the rocks; once they left it, they would be exposed to hidden snipers. Behind them, three men lay where they had fallen. As he watched, another gulped, threw up his hands, and fell backward, a hole between his eyes, blood gushing from the back of his shattered skull.

"They've got us," said Taykor grimly. "All they have to do is wait. Once we start to move, well be helpless." He lifted his head, squinting. "They must have been following us all along. They're out there now, hidden, waiting until we show ourselves."

Lieutenant Paran came crawling toward where they crouched. His face was taut, strained, his eyes a little wild.

"The rafts," he said. "Let me call them in."

Dumarest was cold. "To do what?"

"Burn the area. Send those devils running so they can land and take us aloft."

"Abort the mission, you mean? Lieutenant, we came here to do a job. We'll leave when it's done or when I decide that it is impossible to do. Report on the casualties."

The snap of his tone restored military obedience. The officer blinked, then said flatly, "Five dead, sir, including the captain. Four injured, two seriously."

It could have been a lot worse, and Dumarest wondered why it hadn't been. A disciplined force could have almost eliminated them at the first attack, but arrows had been used, not the rifles they must possess, flame bombs instead of the lasers they must have captured.

He said, "Thank you, lieutenant Tell the men to hold their fire."

Have some take care of the wounded—all to remain alert and under cover."

"He's young," said Taykor as he inched away. "But he'll learn—maybe."

Dumarest ignored the implication. "Those Ayutha you saw waiting for us. Were they in plain sight?"

"A score of them at least!"

"Armed?"

"I didn't see any weapons, but I didn't have much time to look." Taykor raised his mask and spat. "That damned fool cut loose too soon. I guess he was thinking of his family, but he should have waited. They must have had men watching from under cover."

"Never mind that." Dumarest had no patience for listening to the obvious. "The Ayutha were in plain sight, you say. No weapons visible that you could see. That means they were ready to meet us." He frowned. Conn was dead, the damage done. The problem now was to lessen the danger of the situation.

He raised his head over the edge of the rock and looked around. The trail they had followed was deserted aside from the bodies they had left. The ridge ahead was naked against the sky, but the flame bombs must have been fired from launchers, and they could bathe the ring of stone with fire at any moment. He wondered why it hadn't already been done.

"Lieutenant, you have a spare communicator. Let me have it."

As he handed it over, the officer said, "What do you intend to do, sir?"

"The only thing there is to do. The thing we came here for." Dumarest rose, standing clear against the sky. "I'm going to talk to the Ayutha."

Chapter Eleven

It was like walking through a nest of sleeping, venomous serpents, knowing that the slightest touch, the smallest noise, would waken them and cost him his life. Above, the sun beat down with eye-stinging brilliance, the vegetation seeming to rustle from the impact of invisible shapes. Dumarest moved steadily from the circle of stone, the communicator at his belt, both hands raised and empty, in the universal sign of peace.

An arrow splintered on the ground five feet to his left. He ignored it, moving steadily toward the ridge. Another shattered on the rocks to his right, a third stood quivering in the ground directly ahead. A warning not to proceed? A test to see if he would break and run for cover while behind him the men opened fire? Or perhaps it was a simple means to determine his courage; primitive peoples had their own ways of arriving at a decision.

The body of Captain Corm lay a crusted mass of charred flesh. He had thrown away his rifle when the missile hit, and it lay to one side against a bush clear in the sunlight. A tempting object for an unarmed man surrounded by enemies, but Dumarest made no move toward it. To touch it would be to abort his mission, to invite the flame bombs that must be aimed at him to leave their launchers. And there was no one close to give him a merciful death should they strike.

He reached the top of the ridge, halted, hands lifted as he called down to where the Ayutha had been waiting.

"I come in peace. I am Earl Dumarest, marshal of Chard. I come to talk."

Nothing. Not a leaf stirred, no shape appeared, and yet he sensed the presence of watching eyes.

"I come in peace," he said again. "I am alone, unarmed, as you can see. If you wish to kill me, do it now."

On the ridge he had a slender chance of being able to duck, to

turn and run back to the circle of stones, the waiting, armed men. A thin chance, but below the crest of the ridge he would have none at all. For a long moment he waited, and then, deliberately, strode on down the slope.

The Ayutha were waiting.

They appeared like silent ghosts, rising from the ground, bushes moving to become men, figures stepping from behind sheltering rocks. Dumarest halted, studying them. They were human, and yet each carried a subtle distortion of a familiar shape. Tall, their shoulders were a little too narrow, the heads elongated, the arms longer than he would have expected, the chests pronounced, as if the lungs within had a greater capacity than his own. The faces, too, carried an alien stamp. The lips were wide, down-curved, the noses beaked, the eyes buried under a ridge of prominent bone. Their hair was long, silver among the black, the tresses braided with colored fibers. They wore pants and an open tunic, sandals, wide belts hung with pouches. All carried weapons—slings, bows, clubs, spears, rifles, and a few lasers. He could see no signs of missile launchers or other more sophisticated devices, and was glad of it. They would be there, but only fools would display their full strength to an enemy they intended to leave alive.

Dumarest said loudly, "I have come to talk and all can hear what I have to say. But is there one among you who can talk for the rest?"

A voice said, "Why did you come among us?"

"I have told you." Dumarest turned, looking at the speaker. He was old, his face seamed with tiny lines, hair bright with silver. An elder, possibly, or a wise man, a councilor perhaps—he knew too little about their social structure. "I came to meet you. To talk."

"Yet, when we waited for you, death came to two of our number."

"Against my order."

"Do your men not obey you?"

"Do yours?" Dumarest looked at the men pressing all around. "If one of your people does what he should not do, what then? Is he made to leave your company? Is punishment taken? Does he face the penalty of your law?" Words, he thought, and perhaps words without meaning to those who listened. They could have a different code, mores other than what he knew, customs that did not recognize the duties more civilized men placed upon themselves. He said, "The man killed against my order. Because of that, I killed him in turn."

A voice in the background said, "That is true. I saw it done."

"The one responsible was dying." Another voice, doubtful.

"Even so, he was slain."

A babble arose, soft voices whispering, as if a wind had passed over the assembly, stilling as the elder raised his hand.

"Why did the man fire? What had we done to harm him?"

"His family died in an outbreak of violence. He blamed you. Among my people the desire for revenge is very strong."

"And would killing us restore his family?"

"No."

"Did he know that?"

"He knew it."

"Then why did he seek to kill?"

"Because he was a man," said Dumarest harshly. "A man suffering pain and hurt from his loss and wanting to give to those he thought responsible the same pain and hurt he had known. You have worked among us, you know how we are. And you too have killed. What drove you to take innocent lives?"

"Innocent?" The elder made a gesture, one hand lifting,

fingers extended, thumb pointed downward. "They came against us with fire and steel and killed without warning. And you, you came to talk, you say. Do you need guns to make conversation?"

"For defense... and I have no gun."

Again the babble rose, men speaking, not raising their voices, arriving at a conclusion by a means Dumarest could guess at but not really know. Telepathy, perhaps, vocalized thoughts resolving, meeting, transmitted to their spokesman. As it died the man said, "According to the habits of your people, you display great courage. Why are you here?"

"To end the war."

"That too is our wish. It is not good for our people to bear instruments designed to kill those of our own kind. It hurts them. But it is a thing I cannot alone decide. There are others—you must meet them, talk with them, let them judge you in our manner. You are willing?"

"Yes," said Dumarest. "Let's waste no more time."

* * *

It was dawn when he returned, the stars paling, fading motes in the light of the rising sun. A sentry called out as he approached the circle of stones, his voice high, brittle with tension.

"Halt! Who—"

"Marshal Dumarest."

"Earl?" Ven Taykor rose at the sentry's side, knocking down the aimed rifle. "You're back! I was beginning to get worried. Half the men thought you'd been roasted and eaten, the rest that you'd sold us out. How did it go?"

"Fair enough." Dumarest added, "Ven, have you ever known any of the Ayutha to lie?"

"No."

"Never? Not even in small things?"

"They've never lied to me, and not to anyone else as far as I know. They just don't bother. They simply tell the truth, and to hell with the consequences."

Natural enough if they were telepathic, even if the talent were rudimentary. Lies would be too easily discovered and serve no useful purpose. The very concept of falsehood would be alien to a race that exposed its innermost thoughts.

As Dumarest entered the circle, Lieutenant Paran sprang to his feet. He had been sleeping, his face still drawn with the lines of fatigue.

"Any luck, sir?"

"Some. We can get out of here alive, at least. Send for a raft to pick us up. Just the vehicle and pilot, no troops. How are the injured?"

"Comfortable, but one man is pretty bad. I doubt if he'd make it if we had to carry him." The officer busied himself with his communicator. "Anything else, sir?"

"Get me headquarters."

Captain Louk appeared on the tiny screen. He looked harassed. "Marshal! Thank God you've made contact. We've had a hell of a night."

"Report."

"Two more villages were hit." He gave the map references. "A total wipe-out. The field detachments close by got there while it was happening. They were unaffected, but there was nothing they could do. Colonel Paran's out there now." He added, "It's bad, marshal. Damned bad. Those villages were close, and if the Ayutha is stepping up the attack—"

"Were any signs of the Ayutha found?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. If they're using gas, and they must be, we wouldn't—"

"Have men search every inch of the area for at least a mile around each village," interrupted Dumarest sharply.
"Concentrate on the ground. If a living enemy attacked, there must be traces."

"Sir?"

"Find trackers, men accustomed to hunting game. Damn it, captain, use your head. I want a full report when I return. In the meantime, no offensive action is to be taken against the Ayutha of any kind. Do you understand me? I have arranged a truce."

The captain hesitated, then said, "There was a Council meeting last night, sir. The decision was to launch punitive expeditions at noon."

"Cancel those instructions."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, captain. Use the men to form a thick line around the base of the hills. If you have body-capacitance detectors, use them; if not, cut a clear path through the lofios. Halt and hold for questioning any Ayutha you may find. You understand? I don't want them shot, simply held. That's an order, captain. The success of the truce depends on your cooperation."

"Yes, sir. The Council?"

"I will report on my return."

As Dumarest broke the connection, the young officer said dubiously, "Will they keep it, sir? The truce, I mean. Those two villages—"

"Were affected last night. The truce runs from this dawn. You'd better notify all units as to the success of this mission."

"Yes, sir, but your plan? It will need a lot of men."

"They can be found." From the streets, the restaurants, those sporting uniforms and those still waiting to join the forces. Arms wouldn't be necessary; all he wanted was for men to watch. A living line of witnesses, so as to prove a point. "Check the men, lieutenant. Have them put by their arms. We won't be attacked, but I want to take no chances."

At his side Ven Taykor said, "I wish I'd gone with you, Earl."

"One was enough."

"I guess so." The guide sucked in his cheeks. "Did you reach one of their councils?"

"I saw a lot of old men. If that is a council, then I saw it. Is their word good?"

"You mean can they speak for the rest?" Taykor nodded. "I would say they could, but how can I be sure now? That attack, that was something I've never seen before, and that flame they used. How did they get weapons like that? They're primitive; to make such things you need a knowledge of chemicals, a factory of sorts." He shook his head, thinking; then, after a moment he said quietly, "What was it like, Earl? Tough?"

Dumarest leaned back against the stone, not answering, remembering the journey he had made, the twists and turns, the cavern into which he had been ushered. There had been fires and torches and things of painstaking fabrication; mats woven from fine materials, seeds linked into patterns, bones carved into delicate shapes, wooden artifacts, and items of fretted stone.

It had been full of the Ayutha, all male; he had not seen a single woman or child.

They had sat around him, asking questions, talking softly among themselves, conferring, remaining silent for long periods of time. And all the time he had concentrated on the single-minded desire that the conflict should end, that there should be peace.

"You were lucky," said Taykor. "No, not lucky, you had guts. Maybe someone else should have tried it. If they had, those villages might be normal now instead of filled with dead. Well, it can't be helped, but the way I see it, things will never be the same again. I used to feel safe in the hills—they were just like home. Now, I guess, if ever I rove them again, I'll keep looking behind me."

"You'll forget," said Dumarest. "This whole thing could be a mistake."

"Maybe." Taykor didn't sound too sure. "If so, it's one hell of a mistake to have made." He squinted up into the sky, grunting with satisfaction. "Here comes the raft."

It was empty, as ordered, the pilot scared. He licked his lips as they loaded the dead, the crusted remains of Captain Conn. As they lifted he said, "I've got a message for you, marshal. A member of your family has arrived on Chard. She's waiting for you at home."

"She?"

"Yes, sir. The Lady Lisa Conenda."

* * *

She was all in black and silver, shimmering mesh hugging the contours of her body, ebony belting her waist, more on the tips of her fingers, the toes of her feet naked in delicate sandals. She came toward him as he closed the door, smiling, teeth gleaming between her parted lips. Cosmetics accentuated the elfin planes of her face, the enigmatic look of her eyes.

"Surprised, Earl?"

"Where is Zenya?"

Shrugging, she said, "Does it matter? Shopping, making love to one of those young men in uniform, telling more than she should to those who would be your enemy—who can tell what the young fool is doing?"

"Try again."

"Sensitive, Earl? I don't know where she is, but we both know what she is like. Did you expect her to remain faithful? If so, you were a fool." Turning, she glanced around the suite. "So comfortable," she murmured. "So snug. Have you enjoyed the honeymoon? She bringing you the arts learned in countless engagements, and you... What did you bring to her? The domination she needs? The mastery she had never known?"

He said flatly, "Stop talking like a jealous woman. Why are you here?"

"Where else should I be... partner? Or have you forgotten what you promised?"

"We are no longer on Paiyar."

"True, and perhaps you didn't mean what you said there, but in one thing I was right. You are clever and hard and meant to command." Nearing him, she lifted her hands, touched his uniform, the insignia of his rank. "A marshal of Chard—everyone is talking about you. What would they say, I wonder, if they knew the truth? That you aren't a lord of Samalle, but a common traveler sent to perform a task. An opportunist wearing false colors. Tell me, Earl, what would they say?"

"Tell them," he said curtly, "and find out."

He was hot and grimed, and fatigue gritted his eyes. Ignoring the woman, he went into the bathroom, stripped, and showered.

Over the rush of water he heard the signal of the phone, the woman answering, her voice indistinguishable. When, dressed, he returned to where she stood, she said, "Zenya called. She seemed startled to hear me. We had quite a nice chat."

Like dogs snarling over a bone or cats stalking, ready to claw and tear.

"How did you get here, Lisa?"

"By ship, how else?" She crossed to where wine stood on a table and poured two glasses. "A fast vessel chartered by Aihult Chan Parect. I think he was a little concerned at my grief when you had departed." Handing him one of the glasses and lifting her own, she said, "To your health, Earl. And to our future."

Without touching the wine, he said, "The truth, Lisa. I'm in no mood for games."

"Have you found the man you were sent to find?"

"No."

"But you will?"

"If he is still alive, perhaps." He added, "Is that why you were sent after me? To make certain that I did not forget?"

"You will not forget, Earl," she said. "You dare not."

Was she carrying the trigger, the means to activate the device that he had been told had been planted in his body to radiate his whereabouts to the Cyclan? It was more than possible, a second string to Parect's bow, a path his devious mind would have taken, trusting no one, setting one against the other, using the very jealousy of the women to ensure success.

And yet, no device had been found. How did they intend to bend him to their will?

Brooding, he stared into his glass. Parect must have known that he would have himself checked and that nothing would be found. Either the man had command of a science unusual for the society in which he lived, or there was something he hadn't revealed. It could even be a naked bluff; if necessary, he would take the chance.

"Earl, how close are you to finding him?"

"Salek?" He shrugged. "All I know is that he is among the people with whom the residents of this planet are at war. The chances are that he is dead."

"Or will die?"

He caught the subtle undertones, the barely concealed hint, and remembered how she had once stood against him, the ambition she possessed.

"You could forget him, Earl," she whispered. "Chan Parect is old and will soon be dead. Suppose you didn't find the man, or found him too late? Who would question what you said? And then, later, when the old man is dead, have you forgotten what I promised?"

"Forget it, Lisa."

"Forget?" Anger suffused her face, turning it ugly. "Has that young fool wound you around her finger? Are you so besotted that you can see no further than a pillow supporting your head? Are you in love with her? Tell me, Earl! Are you in love with her?"

She was shaken, her composure ruined, and any woman in the height of passion would forget her caution. A little more pressure and he would learn what he had to know.

"Yes," he said. "I love her."

She screamed a word.

It was formless, a combination of sounds complex and unknown, long, echoing. Dumarest felt as if something had exploded within his skull. Turning, he reached for the phone, picking it up, saying to the face on the screen, "This is Earl Dumarest. Connect me to the Cyclan."

"Sir?" The face frowned, wondering.

"This is Earl Dumarest. Connect me to the Cyclan." Dumarest heard the words, saw the face, the indecision turning to acquiescence. Again he said, this is Earl Dumarest. Connect me to the Cyclan." He could say nothing else.

A hand entered his vision, the nails shining with their coat of glistening black varnish, the needle points reflecting tiny

splinters of light. A voice whispered a word in his ear, and suddenly he was free again.

"Forget that," he snapped. "Cancel the order."

"As you wish, sir." The face on the screen relaxed. "It was an unusual request, but—"

"Forget it." Dumarest found he was sweating. "A mistake."

"Of course, marshal."

The screen died, and he turned to face the woman, her triumphant smile. "There is no cyber here on Chard, Earl. At least, not yet. But should you insist, the Cyclan will be contacted. And should you run, no matter where you go, that compulsion to call them will always be present. You see, my darling, just how helpless you are?"

Chapter Twelve

A saw whined, the note falling as the edge hit the bole, rising as the powered teeth ripped through the mass of fiber. A lofios fell, pollen rising in a cloud, to cover the heads and faces of masked men. They gripped it, dragged it to the center of the narrow clearing, fired it with the concentrated beams of lasers. Thick smoke rose unwavering into the windless air.

Smoke that ran in an unbroken line in a wide arc around the foot of the hills.

Turning from the screen, Colonel Oaken said bitterly, "Destruction. Savage, wanton destruction. Why did you order this, marshal? Are you trying to ruin us?"

"No, to protect you."

"By slashing down the lofios? Captain Louk had obeyed your

order to form a line."

"It was unsatisfactory." Dumarest strode across the operations room to where the big contour map stood marked with colored points and lines. One, amber, ran in a short curve before another, blue, which told of the progress they were now making. "Look. If you were an enemy trying to get past, you could do it without trouble. The captain concentrated his forces facing the valleys, but no enemy would take the obvious route. My way is the best, a complete line twenty yards wide, giving clear vision to men and an open field for instruments."

"Rafts would have sufficed."

"No. They would have had to ride too high and maybe miss what we are looking for. Even so, rafts will also be used for general scan." Dumarest turned, impatient. "I know my trade, colonel. This line must be maintained; the truce depends on it."

"The truce." From where he sat at the table, Colonel Stone shook his head. "I'm not belittling what you did, marshal, but how can you be sure they will keep their word? Even while you were in the hills, two villages were destroyed, some of your own men killed. I hate to admit it, but I think that Colonel Oaken has a point. The Ayutha have changed. They have become savage. You should not have canceled our order for the punitive expeditions. A strong reprisal is the best deterrent."

"It is also the best method of creating antagonism."

"Marshal?"

"I warned you about this at the beginning," said Dumarest. "All wars tend to escalate. You hit them, and they will want to hit you. Then you hit them again, harder this time, and get the same in return. If that is the kind of war you want to fight, I want none of it. I find no pleasure in seeing a world tear itself apart."

Colonel Paran said quietly, "We gave the marshal full responsibility while in the field, gentlemen. In any case, the attacks were made before the truce. Also, the destruction is not as bad as it seems; the lofios can be regrown. I suggest we hear

his motives before we condemn him."

"Am I on trial?"

"No, marshal, the word was badly chosen."

Perhaps, but it carried the tone of the Council, the criticisms they were eager to make. To Captain Louk Dumarest said, "Disperse the men, as I ordered. Individuals set at twenty-yard intervals, regular watches of two hours on, two off. Set monitoring posts behind the line with scanners aimed toward the hills. No firing; that is essential. In fact, you had better disarm the men on watch."

"Disarm them?" Lome sounded dubious. "Is that wise, sir? They won't like it, and if the Ayutha should attack at night—"

"Guns won't save them," interrupted Dumarest curtly. "But some trigger-happy fool could break the truce. The rafts can be armed in case of emergency, but if anyone opens fire without waiting for orders, he will be court-martialed and shot. I mean that, captain."

Louk swallowed, thinking of Corm, the way he had died. Rumor had exaggerated the incident, forgetting the mercy of the shot, concentrating instead on the captain's disobedience. "Yes, sir."

"And see that my orders are obeyed as given." Dumarest's voice matched the anger on his face. "I want no further compromises. That line should be finished by now, would have been if you hadn't dallied." To a junior officer he said, "What is the weather report?"

"Some cloud, with a high possibility of rain, sir."

"Wind?"

"None, and the air should remain steady."

"You expect the rain when?"

"At nightfall, sir. It should be widespread over the entire lofios area."

"Good." To the waiting colonels Dumarest said, "Now, gentlemen, I am at your service."

They sat at a table in a room paneled with softly grained wood, wine standing beside maps, glasses of water, jugs of ice. Comforts for a heated day. But the comfort was illusory, the meeting more of an inquisition than Dumarest would have liked.

"About Captain Corm," said Stone. "I know his father. He is disturbed by the reports. Did you actually kill him?"

"I shot him to save him pain."

"Couldn't he have been saved?"

"He was burning. We were under attack. Men would have died to bring him to shelter, and we would have saved nothing but a corpse." Dumarest shrugged. "That is a detail. The truce is more important. As I told you, the agreement is that they will not harm any of our people. In return, I gave a similar promise. I believe they will keep their word. I intend to make certain that we do."

"The line," said Paran. "A barrier?"

"A test." Dumarest riffled the papers before him, found the one he wanted. "I ordered Captain Louk to send men to search the ground around those villages that were destroyed. The latest ones. This is their finding. Nowhere could they find any sign that the ground had been disturbed other than by our own people." He looked at their blank faces. "Don't you realize what this means?"

"The Ayutha are savages," said Oaken. "They wouldn't leave tracks."

"We are assuming they are using gas. If so, it must be transported in containers of some kind. Unless they approached actually within the villages, those containers must have been

launched by some apparatus. We had men alert, on guard—did they report seeing any of the Ayutha?"

"No," said Paran. "I made a point of questioning each man. They were masked, of course; that is why they survived, but..." He broke off, frowning.

"The Ayutha are close enough to humans—in fact, are human—be to affected by the same gases that we are. They don't have the technology to make respirators. If they released gas, they must have done it from a distance, or some of them would have been affected." Dumarest looked around the table. "No one has ever reported seeing any of the Ayutha at any place which has been attacked," he said deliberately. "No signs were found of any launching apparatus when I searched for them. As far as I can determine, there is only one logical answer. The Ayutha aren't responsible for this trouble at all."

He leaned back, waiting for the explosion, the burst of unthinking protestation, inevitable from men who had firmly made up their minds.

Oaken said, "Are you out of your mind, marshal? Are you telling us that none of this has happened?"

"I'm saying that as far as I know, the Ayutha aren't responsible."

"That's ridiculous!" Oaken scowled. "Just what kind of a deal did you make up in the hills? Did they brainwash you or something?"

Paran said, "Careful, colonel."

"What for? In case he treats me like he did the captain? You heard what he said. All those people, men, women, children, and he says that those savages aren't behind it. They have to be!"

Stone, less explosive, more shrewd, said, "What are you saying, marshal?"

"You heard what I said, colonel." Dumarest glanced at Oaken.

"Some of you may not want to hear it—it could be interesting to find out why. In most wars, some people usually manage to make a profit. A war needs an enemy; the Ayutha are convenient. Maybe they have to stay the enemy until certain deals are completed."

"I know what you mean, Earl," said Paran grimly. "But, take it from me, nothing like that is going on here."

"As far as you know, colonel," reminded Dumarest. He didn't press the matter; it had served to shock them, to gain their attention. "Look at the evidence. Not one of the original messages says anything about the Ayutha; all they rave about is monsters. Well, we know why: the gas had affected their minds. Add to that the fact that no traces of launching apparatus have been found, that no Ayutha dead were discovered, that when I spoke to them they denied they had ever attacked a village, that monitoring rafts discovered no trace of any moving body of men in the area under attack, and I think we have a very good reason for assuming their innocence."

"Assuming?"

"We can't be positive without more proof," admitted Dumarest. "That is why I ordered the construction of the line. No one can pass it without being seen. I've had men and rafts search the lofios area, and no trace of the Ayutha has been discovered. Now, if another village is destroyed, what must we assume?"

"I see your point," said Stone. "If they weren't in the area, then they couldn't have done it."

"They could." Oaken was definite. "They are cunning; they could leave the hills to the north and swing in a circle past the ends of the line. Damn it, marshal, you don't need me to tell you that."

"Outside the lofios the ground is pretty open," said Dumarest patiently. "Rafts will spot any movement." He reached for another paper. "This is the computer findings on the attacks. When you look at the map, they seem absolutely random, but that doesn't make sense if directed by a force operating from the

hills. Men can travel on foot only so far in a day. Equipment would be heavy, and the danger of discovery enhanced the farther they penetrated. Yet villages close to the hills were missed and others, much more distant, attacked."

Oaken scowled. "So?"

"You're convinced the Ayutha are the enemy. I'm trying to show you that they needn't be. For example, if I wanted to ruin the economy of Chard, I could work from the city, delivering stores, maybe, cases containing gas and timed charges. Any chemist could make such things. If that was the case, then the random pattern makes sense."

Another shock, but now they were not so quick to protest. He had shaken their iron confidence, shown them that what seemed to be obvious was not always the correct answer. As they sat, brooding, he filled a glass with water, added ice, sat with the frosted container in his hand.

Oaken said, "You put up a good argument, marshal, but it isn't good enough. You say the Ayutha can't be responsible; I say they are. No civilized man would spread nerve gas among harmless people. They told you they hadn't done it, and you believed them. Why? How can the ones you spoke to know everything that's going on?"

"That's right," said Stone. "And they've changed. You saw that for yourself. The flame bombs they used—how would primitives have made them without help? And if they had help to make those things, they could have had more." He added pointedly, "You must have thought of that."

"Yes," said Dumarest.

"And guessed who could be responsible?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Those damned social workers!" Oaken slammed his fist on the table. "Of course! We assumed they had been killed, but suppose they hadn't? Some of them were clever and skilled with

their hands. They could have been taken prisoner, forced to teach the Ayutha to make gas, other things. There's your answer, marshal. I say to hell with the truce. Let's go in now and end this thing once and for all."

Dumarest said, "You can't. You daren't."

The phone rang before anyone could answer. It was Zenya. She said quickly, "Earl, I'm sorry, but I have to talk to you. It's Lisa, she—"

"I am in conference."

"I know." The face was stubborn, the tone to match. "The operator told me, but this can't wait. She said that you wanted me to—"

He sensed the coming indiscretion and snapped, "I told you that I was in conference. Naturally your aunt will stay in our suite for the duration of her visit. Entertain her. Urgent business will prevent my seeing either of you for a while."

"Please, Earl. I need you."

He said harshly, "And so does the war. My place is in the field. I suggest, my lady, that you remember yours."

And remember too the listening ears, the watchful eyes, the indiscretions and the jealousy which could ruin his pretense. Lisa had been goading her—that was obvious; and like a child, she had sought his help and reassurance. Well, let them fight if they wished; he would stay away from both until one problem, at least, had been solved.

Oaken said, "What did you mean, marshal? We can't go in. We daren't."

"Think about it." Dumarest looked at his glass. The ice had dissolved; the water was cold, refreshing. "As you pointed out and as I know to my cost, they have flame-bomb launchers. Small, perhaps, but they can be made larger, the bombs also. Go into the hills, and they will scatter. You will need thousands of

men to comb every nook and cranny, and at least a quarter of those men will die. You doubt it?" He looked from Stone to Oaken, seeing their faces, merchants who believed that a large enough number of men would ensure certain victory. "If I worked for the Ayutha and not for you, I could maintain this conflict until you were bled white. Every soldier you sent would bring me arms and ammunition. Rafts could be shot down from the sky. Unless you used radioactives, I would turn those hills into a citadel. I would lose, eventually, but only because of the limited number of my men. But I assure you, it would take years."

Dumarest refilled his glass, conscious of thirst, the tension caused by fatigue and mounting strain.

He continued, "The Ayutha are telepathic A rudimentary talent, perhaps, but enough to give them a close-knit network of communications equal to if not better than our own. And you forget how vulnerable you are. Destroy the lofios, and you have lost the war. With more powerful launchers and larger bombs, they could do just that. Fire is the best friend of the guerrilla. One man can destroy a city by its means. The Ayutha have thousands." He ended, "I suggest you do it my way, gentlemen. It might not be as spectacular, but believe me, in the long run it will be far cheaper."

Colonel Paran said, "Earl, do you trust the Ayutha?"

"I think they have a genuine desire to end this conflict, yes."

"Why?"

"Because they are afraid," said Dumarest bluntly. "Because they are basically gentle. Because they are human."

And because they were telepathic and knew the danger inherent in the carrying of weapons. The arrogance, aggressiveness, insensitivity, and contempt the power to kill gave a man unless consciously controlled. He had seen the results of military castes on a dozen worlds, and all had followed a path that led to the inevitable destruction of all that was kind and gentle. When respect became equated with force, only brutality

could hope to survive.

Chapter Thirteen

Someone had lit a fire, a small thing of burning twigs, spluttering a little as it rested in a shallow dip at the edge of the line. It glowed, a patch of brightness in the night, a thing built more for comfort than anything else. Smoke rose from it, a thin plume breaking as it reached the height of the lofios, to ripple in a delicate fan.

From beside it a corporal rose, saluting. "Sir!"

"Anything to report?"

"No, sir."—the soldier leaned forward, squinting—"marshal. Not a thing. Everything as silent as a grave."

The association disturbed him. He added, "That is, sir, a—"

"'Boy creeping up on a girl hoping to kiss her unawares,'" said Dumarest. "I understand, corporal." He glanced at the fire; the ashes were too red, too bright. "Better bank that."

"Kill it, sir!"

"No." There would be other fires, and orders could be enforced only so far. "Just cover the embers so you won't lose your night vision. I want sharp eyes when you go on watch. Worried, soldier?"

"I'd be happier with a rifle, sir."

"You're covered, so don't worry. Just remember that there's a promotion for the man who spots any of the Ayutha and keeps his head. I hope you win it, corporal. You'd make a fine officer."

Bribery, but everything helped. As Dumarest passed on down

the line, Captain Hamshard, at his side, said, "Do you think anything will happen, sir?"

"Such as?"

"Well... another attack."

" 'Incident' would be a better word, captain, but I know what you mean. The answer is no. I don't think the Ayutha will attack."

"The truce seems to be working, sir." Hamshard returned the salute of a man barely visible as he stood at the edge of the line. "No trouble last night, none at all yesterday, everything quiet so far. Let's hope that it will last."

Last night had come the promised rain; the day had been windless, but now the weather was changing. Dumarest remembered the thin column of smoke, breaking as it reached higher levels. He looked up at the sky, saw cloud and hoped for more rain.

He said, "Continue down the line, captain. Make sure that every man remains alert. If you need me, I'll be in the command post."

It was a tent set well back from the line, men busy at communicators as they received reports from the monitoring posts. Portable lamps threw a dull glow, softly crimson, light designed to retain the visual purple. As Dumarest entered, Lieutenant Paran rose from a field desk.

"Movement spotted in the foothills, sector nine, sir." He rested a finger on a map. "A small party, by the look of it, approaching the line."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir, just the one party."

"Maintain observation," said Dumarest. "What is the weather situation to the south?"

"Dry. Wind rising."

"Send a general alert. All guards in the area to remain fully masked. Villagers to be confined to their homes, masked if possible, separated if not."

The lieutenant frowned. "You expect trouble, sir?"

"I am trying to anticipate all possibilities. If anything should happen, we need to be prepared. Contact the monitoring raft and find out how close that party is now."

They were within a mile of the line, heading directly toward it. Dumarest said, "Have the raft drop a flare. Use loud-hailers to establish contact. Tell them to use the communicator I gave them to speak to me direct." Waiting, he paced the floor, studying maps, frowning as he read the report of rising winds. The party had chosen a bad time to make their approach.

"Sir!" The lieutenant turned from his desk. "I think we have something."

The face on the screen was that of an elder; Dumarest couldn't remember having seen him before. He was squinting as if trying to send thoughts as well as words over the instrument. A dull glow illuminated the oddly distorted face, giving it the appearance of a brooding idol.

He said, "We have conferred and would talk with you. There are those among us who are uneasy at what is happening. Are we animals to be caged in the hills?"

"The line is for your own protection," said Dumarest. "It will be maintained until we are truly at peace."

"We have never been other than that. It was your people who attacked our village. When they came again, we defended ourselves. All this was told to you—we thought you understood."

"I did. I do."

"Now you have forces facing us, armed men in the skies. One

among us has said that you prepare to exterminate us. That you will attack and burn and kill and destroy while we respect the truce. Is this so?"

"No."

"Then you will dissolve the line. You will take your men from the skies. You will trust us as we trust you. If not, we too will ready our forces. The one who lives among us has told us what we must do."

Dumarest said harshly, "Who is this man?"

"A teacher. A friend."

"Who will destroy you if you listen to him." Behind him Dumarest heard the lieutenant's soft whisper. "More movement reported, sir. Two strong parties at sectors three and fifteen."

Both places consisted of broken ground, easy to defend, hard to attack, even from the air. They could be equipped with launchers, large flame bombs. If used, fire would bathe unarmed men and lofios alike.

To the face on the screen Dumarest said, "Retreat. Go back and find this man who has advised you. Bring him to the line. You will not be hurt; you have my word for that, but I must see him and talk to him." He added, "And warn your people. If anyone should strike against us, the truce will be over. From then on it will be a war of extermination."

He turned as the screen died and met the lieutenant's eyes, saw the grim expression. "A traitor," said the young man. "Someone who advises them, who has taught them to make arms, gas even. He won't want peace, sir. He wants to ruin us."

"Maybe."

"Can you still be in doubt?" Lieutenant Paran clenched his hands, gripping an imaginary rifle, shooting, killing, destroying the threat to his world. "You heard what he said."

"Yes," said Dumarest. "Recall the rafts from over the hills."

"Sir?"

"Have them withdraw to beyond the line. Put every man available on watch. I want to make certain that none of the Ayutha get past."

Paran frowned. "You expect trouble, sir?"

"A soldier always expects trouble, lieutenant. By doing that, he manages to stay alive. But the best way to avoid it is to make sure that it doesn't happen."

"Sir?"

Dumarest made no answer, stepping out of the tent and staring up at the sky. Cloud swirled over the stars, driven by a mounting wind, blowing strongly from the south. There was nothing to do now but wait.

* * *

At a village far to the south, on the edge of the lofios area, a man rose and stretched and yawned with a gaping of his mouth which revealed the strong white teeth set in his jaws. Bran Leekquan had had a hard day. Everything lately was hard, and now with the two boys off somewhere playing at soldiers, the Ayutha nowhere to be seen, the work was piling up.

From a rocker his wife said, "Tired, Bran?"

"Beat," he admitted. "I guess I'm not as young as I was, Lorna."

"Neither of us is."

That was the truth, and he stood staring at her for a minute, remembering the young girl she had once been, the strength which had enabled him to work all through the day and kept him busy half through the night. Well, times changed, and a wise man accepted it. And there was comfort in maturity, or at least there had been until the trouble; with ambition dulled a little

and the farm ticking over, there had been time to relax and to enjoy the long summer evenings with others who had grown old at his side.

As he yawned again, a heavy hand pounded at his door. Beyond stood a masked, uniformed figure.

"Red alert," he said without preamble. "Wear masks if you have them. Stay apart if you haven't. Orders from the marshal."

Bran frowned. "Stay apart? What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Separate rooms, locked doors, no contact."

"Is an attack expected?" Lorna, worried, joined her man at the door. "I thought we had a truce."

"We have," the uniformed man admitted.

"Then what's this all about?" Bran was irritable. "The army has the Ayutha cooped up in the hills. You boys have made sure there are none of them around. So what have we got to be afraid of?"

The man was a stranger. Casually he shrugged. "Don't ask me, I'm just the messenger around here. You've heard the order." He moved off, to pound at another door.

"Crazy." Bran stared after him, scowling. "No sense to it at all. That's the trouble with these military types, they just like to see people jump when they give their commands. Well, to hell with him, the marshal too. It's my life, and I'm living it as I damned well please. Come on, Lorna, let's get to bed."

She hesitated, "Well, Bran, maybe—"

"Well take the gun," he said. "Put it by the door. If any of those savages attack, well be ready for them." He yawned again. "Come on, honey, you know I can't sleep alone."

He woke, restless, irritable, to rear upright in the bed,

conscious of something wrong. Habit had left the window open, the curtains torn by the rising wind. Outside, he heard the sound of a shout, the sudden blast of a gun. Rising, he crossed to the window and looked outside. It was dark, cloud scudding over the stars, shadows appearing to vanish again in the fitful light. As he thrust out his head, he caught the scent of something sweet, sickly.

"Bran?"

He breathed again, wind brushing past his face, the scent stronger now. Turning, he cried out, a voice rising as he saw what crouched on the bed. A thing, dripping slime, a mass of vileness fringed with tentacles, beaked, glowing-eyed, horrible. It stirred as he darted toward the door, keening, appendages reaching toward the bedside table. Ceramics splintered around him as he snatched at the laser he had set against the wall, sharp fragments slashing his face, his hands. The keening rose to a shriek as he spun, the weapon leveling, the wordless cry rising to a scream as his finger pressed the release.

Smoke rose from the impact of the beam, thick, heavy with the stench of char. He fired again, a third time, spearing the horror on shafts of searing destruction, gloating as liquids gushed from gaping holes. Beneath it the bed sent up fingers of brightness, the covers catching, adding their heat to that of the laser. Twitching, the creature fell, sprawled in a growing nest of fire.

Tearing open the door, he raced downstairs and into the street, firing at moving shadows, a hopping, toadlike monstrosity, a thing like a flapping blanket. Something shrieked and rushed at him with extended claws.

He burned it down, heard the blast of a rifle, and felt the smash of the bullet which sent him to the ground. He rolled, firing at a looming shape, seeing it fall as the rifle fired again. The slug broke his arm, passed through into his chest, tearing at his lungs so that he lay drowning in his own blood.

Dimly he saw the figure come closer, reach toward him as, one-handed, he fired the laser for the last time.

"Lorna," he whispered as the thing fell. "Lorna!"

* * *

On tight beam, scrambled, Colonel Paran relayed the news. "It's happened, Earl. Another attack. The truce is broken."

"No."

"How can you say that?" Paran looked baffled. "I tell you I've seen it. Fifteen men and women dead. Five soldiers—"

"How did they die? The soldiers, I mean?"

"Shot down by the civilians." Paran was bitter. "They had to fire back in turn in order to defend themselves. If the fools had only obeyed orders..." He shrugged. "Well, Earl, there it is. We have no choice now but to go in and finish it."

"You aren't thinking, colonel," snapped Dumarest. "The Ayutha aren't responsible; they couldn't have been. We've got them sealed in the hills. Not one of them has passed the line since the truce. That village was way to the south. Even one man on foot would have taken a couple of days to get there; more would have taken longer. And the local patrols had scouted the entire area. Damn it," he added, as the colonel looked dubious, "why do you think I ordered this line to be established in the first place? I wanted to prove something. Well, I've done it. None of the Ayutha had a hand in what's happened."

"I'd like to believe that, Earl."

"You can."

"But what's the alternative? Is someone working with them, using them?"

"Maybe. I intend to find out. Certainly someone is advising them. My guess is that it's one of the social workers, but I could be wrong." Dumarest glanced around the command tent, seeing the hard, tense faces, sensing the grim determination, the desire for revenge. Natural enough, but misplaced and dangerous. He added, "Play this down, colonel. No hysterical publicity. The last

thing we want now is to break the truce."

"If it hasn't already been broken."

"It hasn't, not by the Ayutha, but it might be to someone's interest to insist they are responsible. Make sure that doesn't happen. In fact, the best thing you can do is to maintain a silence about the whole incident. As soon as you persuade the Council, I'll detach men from the line to fell the lofios, as I suggested."

"Clear them away for a space of a mile around each village." Paran shrugged. "I remember, Earl, but they'd never agree."

"If it had been done, those people would be alive now," snapped Dumarest. "If you won't do that, then evacuate the villages." As the screen died, he said to the lieutenant, "Have three rafts move forward to check on whether that party is returning. Have they made contact?"

"No, sir."

"Get those rafts off, and keep trying. Find Captain Hamshard and have him report to me personally. I'll be at monitor post sixteen."

It was a short tower fitted with a platform and staffed by three young officers and five rankers. The officers each took turns at using the light-amplifying scanner and the radar detector; the rankers stood on guard by the compact bulk of a missile launcher aimed at the hills.

Dumarest busied himself with the instruments, checking positions on the map in the light of a dully glowing lamp. A low mound rose a few hundred yards toward the hills beyond the edge of the line. Men behind it would be invisible, but easily placed for a quick attack. To either side ran a narrow gully, merging somewhere up and back, flattening to shallow declivities at the foot of the mound. It was a good place for a meeting, one he had chosen from earlier studies.

As Captain Hamshard appeared, saluting, he said, "I want you

to take charge here, captain. This entire sector. This launcher is to be zeroed in on the crest and rear of that mound. Use liquid flame. If necessary, I want you to throw up a barrier nothing living can pass."

"You expect action, sir?"

"Not the kind most of the men are hoping for, captain. Just call it insurance. Contact the posts to either side and have them zero their launchers to the gullies at either side of the mound. Similar loads and instructions."

Hamshard nodded, understanding. "I get it, sir. You want to throw down a three-sided box to contain anything on that mound."

"That's right," said Dumarest. "But remember, captain, to contain, not to destroy. You'd better send out a party of men to light a fire on the mound. I don't want those who are coming to lose their way."

"The Ayutha, sir?"

"Yes, bringing with them, I hope, their friend."

"Do you think they will come?"

"Yes," said Dumarest grimly. "They will come."

Chapter Fourteen

The hours dragged. The fire died, was replenished, died again to a smoldering bank of embers that threw little light and less heat. Standing beside it, Dumarest threw fresh fuel on the glow, tiny flames springing up to illuminate his face, the brightness of his insignia. From the communicator at his belt came the soft voice of Lieutenant Paran.

"Party spotted, sir. Heading in from the northeast, and close."

"How close?"

"Less than a mile, sir."

Too close; they should have been spotted earlier. Either the men were careless or the Ayutha more cunning than he had guessed. Men, traveling alone, could have used the terrain to baffle the electronic devices.

Captain Hamshard was hooked into the circuit. He said, "About a dozen, sir. I've launchers from posts thirteen and twenty following them."

"Unnecessary, captain. They've come to talk, not fight."

Summoned by repeated commands to explain the violation of the truce, threatened with reprisals if they did not attend with their mysterious teacher. Unfair, perhaps, but when had war ever been fair? War and other things, conflicts between men and women, between an arrogant, insane ruler and the pawn he hoped to command.

Dumarest kicked at the fire.

There had been time to think while waiting. The post-hypnotic command which Lisa had triggered had, in a sense, negated itself. Dead, she could not give the key word. Apart, he wouldn't hear it. As a threat, it was limited, something to be used, perhaps, if all else failed, but her uncontrollable jealousy had caused her to reveal too much. And if she repeated the word, and he could record it, any expert psychologist would be able to wipe the command from his subconscious.

He wondered if Zenya, also, had been entrusted with the key sound. Or if she had been given another. And yet Chan Parect would have trusted neither too much. There must be something else; the man was too devious to have been so obvious.

Dumarest kicked again at the fire.

"How close now, lieutenant?"

"Two hundred yards, sir. Approaching now directly from the north. I can't be too sure about their number, there seem to be more now than before."

"Anything else?"

"Two large groups to either side of the mound and about a quarter of a mile back."

"Thank you, lieutenant. Captain, have launchers zeroed on both groups. Designation alpha and beta. No firing unless I give the order."

"Yes, sir. Should I have rafts standing by?"

From his tone Dumarest guessed that Hamshard had already given the order. "One raft, captain, eight men, armed. Pick steady types." He looked toward the crest of the mound. "Here they come."

They arrived like shadows, feet silent on the ground, tall shapes limned by the firelight, bright points winking from flaked stone, metal, brittle glass. Arrows and spears, crude, but effective at short range. And he guessed there would be other things aimed at him from the shielding darkness.

An old man, the communicator in his hand, lifted it and said, "We heard. We came."

"Your friend?"

"He waits."

Dumarest said harshly, "That isn't good enough. I asked for him to be brought here. Where is he, and where are the others like him? Those of my people who worked and lived among you?"

"They are safe." The old man paused, and then, as Dumarest made no comment, added, "We have kept them so. If you again attack us, they will die."

Hostages. Dumarest had expected it; the Ayutha were learning fast.

"Many have died," he said. "If you don't want to follow them, you will do exactly as I say. That man—where is he?"

"We made no attack."

"Can you prove that? Words aren't enough. If you are sincere in your desire for peace, you will give me the one you call a friend." His voice hardened. "Understand me. Obey or die. I want that man."

"You threaten? You? Alone? One man against many?"

Dumarest said sharply, "Captain! Alpha, aim over, one shot, fire!"

Something rustled through the air, to fall far back in the hills. Flame rose, the roar of the explosion following, echoing, rolling like thunder. The face of the elder convulsed.

"You attack us! You kill us!"

"Not yet—that was a warning."

From where he stood beside the elder a man lifted a spear, drew back his arm, froze as he met Dumarest's eyes.

"You've got sense," said Dumarest. "You might be able to kill me, but if you attack, every man here will die. Those waiting in the hills will die. Every last one of your people will be eliminated. Is one man worth the entire race of the Ayutha?"

"You mean it!" The elder's face was bleak. "Your mind is full of hate."

"Not hate—not for you."

"But our friend?"

"Is not of the Ayutha. If I kill him, I will not be breaking the truce. But unless you take me to him now, the truce will be over."

Dumarest met the other's eyes. "You have ten seconds to decide."

* * *

Dawn was breaking when they arrived, the raft dropping, to hover over torn ground, a sheer slope marked by a narrow trail leading to the dark mouth of a cave. Captain Hamshard had accompanied the raft. Leaning over the edge, he said, "There could be men posted, sir. I'd best deploy our forces."

The elder who had ridden with them said, "They will not harm you."

Perhaps, but in war men could change loyalties and primitives followed their own inclinations. The man could have dedicated followers, willing to kill for him, to die while doing it. Dumarest waited as the raft lowered, lifted, moved on, to lower again, men jumping out and taking up positions. Their guns could cover the entire area outside the cave. Within, it was another matter.

As they neared the dark opening, the captain said, "Sir, let me go in first. Against the light you'd be a clear target."

"And you wouldn't be?" Dumarest smiled. "Well go in together, captain. Fast, and moving one to either side. I don't have to tell you that we want whoever is in there alive."

Dumarest halted as they reached the opening, looking up at the low ridge of stone above, eyes searching for traps and snares. He saw nothing, and with a quick movement dived inside, resting his back against the wall, eyes narrowed as he stared into the gloom. Facing him, the captain began to edge forward, pistol in hand.

From a niche twenty feet down stepped one of the Ayutha.

He was young, tall, dressed in a shapeless garment of dull gray, a squat tube held in his hands, the butt against his shoulder. Dumarest yelled, fired, moving as he pressed the trigger. The bullet hit one of the arms, spinning the figure, which turned to face him. From the mouth of the tube shot something

that smoked.

Dumarest dived, hitting the floor as flame burst behind him, firing as he fell, the roar of his shots blending with those fired by the captain. Rising, he ran forward, past the crumpled figure, shadows reaching ahead from the light of the flame blazing against the wall.

"One!" gasped Hamshard. "There could be more!"

He fired at a shadow, fired again, a scream echoing the shot. Something hummed an inch from his head, to rasp against the stone, not fire this time, but a sliver of steel, a bolt fired from a crossbow. It was followed by the ruby beam of a captured laser. It struck high, lowered, seared the rock where the captain had stood as Dumarest slammed into him and threw him to the floor. Rolling free, he triggered his pistol, sending bullets to whine in savage ricochets. A man screamed, another died as he ran toward him, a third spun, dropping a rifle, blood gushing from an open mouth.

Dumarest dropped the empty pistol, lunged forward, and snatched up the rifle, firing as he rose, sending bullets whining down the cavern to where it turned at the far end.

In the following silence he looked around at the captain, climbing stiffly to his feet, a thread of blood running down one cheek, the dying light of the thrown bomb, the dead sprawled on the floor.

Young, too eager, too quick to shoot, and too impatient to aim. The fault of all green troops if they were not frozen with fear.

He said, "Captain, how badly are you hurt?"

"Just a scratch, sir." Hamshard lifted a hand, dabbed at his temple, wiped away the blood on his cheek. "Do you think there are more of them?"

"I doubt it. One, perhaps, but no more guards." Dumarest hefted the rifle. "Let's go and get him."

The turn of the cavern was filled with light, a cold, bluish glow illuminating a wide expanse beyond. Wooden tables bore a litter of apparatus; a crude lathe stood to one side, retorts, containers of glass and plastic, tubes of metal, drums of chemicals, scales. Dumarest looked at a crude laboratory and manufacturing plant.

"This is where they made the flame bombs," said Hamshard. His voice was taut, ugly. "And maybe other things. But they couldn't have done it alone. Someone had to teach them—the damned swine!"

"He wasn't responsible for the villages, captain."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"I'm sure." Dumarest moved cautiously down the area, eyes searching the shadows beneath the tables, behind the heaps of sacks and bales. Cylinders held the familiar shape of missiles, squat tubes similar to the one the guard had used as their launchers. He paused, examining a larger object, seeing the vents at the rear.

"Self-propelled," snapped Hamshard. "That thing could reach for miles."

"He didn't start this war," said Dumarest sharply. "So don't get carried away when you see him. Remember, I want him alive."

Alive and unhurt and able to travel. Dumarest had no doubt as to who it must be.

A door stood at the end of the area. He opened it, saw a narrow passage running beyond, and led the way down a gentle slope illuminated with softly glowing crimson bulbs. A second door stood at the end. It was thick, heavily padded, reluctant to move. He tugged it open, to reveal the chamber beyond. A small place, snug, the walls covered with plaited mats of local manufacture, a shelf of books, a projector, wafers of condensed information, a revolving globe which threw swaths of kaleidoscopic light, reds, blues, greens, yellows, merging, rippling like rainbows.

On a narrow cot a man lay supine.

He wore a robe knotted with a cord around the waist, the cowl raised to shield an emaciated face, both hands lying on his stomach, the fingers wasted, skin tight over prominent bone. In the ruby light streaming through the open door he looked corpselike, horribly familiar.

Dumarest stared at him, the face, the rifle lifting in his hands, aiming, his finger closing on the trigger.

Captain Hamshard smashed the barrel upward as he fired.

"Sir! For God's sake!"

Dumarest spun, dropping the rifle, hand lifted, palm stiffened to strike. He saw the startled face, the thread of dried blood on the cheek, and turned, staring at the figure on the bed. It had risen, legs drawn back, face ghastly beneath the cowl. The revolving globe threw a swath of emerald over the bed, turning the robe from crimson into a dull brown. A supporting strut stood beneath a shelf. Dumarest gripped it with both hands.

Harshly he said, "Get him away from me. Keep him clear."

"Sir?"

"Do it!"

Beneath his hands Dumarest felt the wood yield and tear.

* * *

The tisane was hot, pungent, dried herbs yielding their oils and flavors to form a tart, refreshing brew. Unarmed, seated at the far side of the table with his back against a wall, Dumarest watched as the captain set a cup before him.

He was dubious. "I don't know if you should drink this, sir."

"It isn't poisoned."

"Maybe not." The captain wasn't convinced. "I don't think I

should have stopped you, sir. But you did say that you wanted him alive."

"You did right." Dumarest leaned back, feeling the quiver of his muscles, the aftermath of strain. The urge to kill had gone now, but the tension remained, joining the ache in his temples. It had faded a little as the tisane had been made, but the liquid shook as he lifted the cup to his lips.

To the cowed figure he said, "You are known as Amil Kulov." It wasn't a question. "Before that your name was Salek Parect. The son of Aihult Chan Parect."

"Yes."

"Why did you help the Ayutha?"

"Someone had to." Salek put down his cup and rested his arms across his chest. He sat on the edge of the cot at the full distance of the room. Within the cowl his face was drawn, bone prominent on his cheeks beneath the upward-slanting eyes. "Could you ever begin to understand? They are unspoiled, innocent. When first attacked they didn't know what to do. They were numbed, incapable of resistance, children faced with something they couldn't understand. That attack was brutal, savage, a vicious, wanton, unthinking crime. So I helped them as best I could."

"With weapons," said Dumarest. "Advice. Flame bombs and launchers. What other things did you have in mind?"

"Does it matter now? The truce—"

"You are not a part of it. In any case, your guards broke it."

"They were young," said Salek quietly. "And foolish. I told them not to resist, but they obviously refused to listen. I would have stopped them had I known, but I was tired, working beyond my strength. And I didn't think that you would come so soon."

Closed in his room, lost in exhausted sleep, he would not have heard the shots and screams. Dumarest studied him sipping the

tisane. An idealist, and dangerous, as all such men were. Single-minded in his pursuit of what he considered to be right. And the technical knowledge he possessed gave him more power than others of his kind.

Hamshard said, "The men, sir?"

"Have them remain outside. If any of the Ayutha try to enter, warn them away. If they insist, then shoot them down."

"Like dogs," said Salek bitterly. "Is that what you think of them? Animals to be destroyed."

"No. How long have you lived among them?"

"Over ten years now. A long time. Long enough for me to appreciate what they have to offer, what they can teach. Mental peace, tolerance, understanding, an affinity one to each other. And they have a history, tales handed down from generation to generation, a legend of an old time, when things were not as they are now. Perhaps I should explain that I am interested in ancient myths."

"Yes," said Dumarest. "I know. Your father told me."

"My father!" Something, hate or contempt, twisted the emaciated features. "How could he ever begin to understand? His mind is closed to new concepts. To him only the house of the serpent is important. The welfare of the Aihult. He could never admit that Paiyar is only one small world among billions, and that there have been others against whom we are as children."

"Legends," said Dumarest.

"But each one holding a kernel of truth. I have spent my life trying to find those truths. Here, on Chard, I have found something, a clue. The Ayutha know more than is guessed, more perhaps than they realize. A race which came to this world eons ago. From where? And how did they travel?"

And why hadn't they progressed? Dumarest could guess the answer to that. Once, perhaps, their telepathic ability had been

stronger than it was now, and that trait was no friend to a race struggling to survive. The price was too high. Violence had no place when all fear and terror was shared, when a beast which could provide food was allowed to run free, an enemy avoided instead of being destroyed.

The Ayutha were not a growing, viable culture but a decaying one. An off-shoot of the human race, something tried by nature and found unsuitable, to be discarded by a more efficient form. They had fled into the hills, avoiding contact with aggressive types, dreaming, perhaps, around their fires, of vanished glories. Tales to amuse children, props for a vanished pride.

He said, "You can't help them, Salek. You must know that. In order to survive, they must change. No culture can remain isolated when others are so close."

"Their traditions—"

"Are distorted memories. You gave them weapons and taught them how to kill. Can you realize the price they must pay? Their guilt could destroy them. They could go insane."

"No!"

"Remember your guards. Young men eager to kill. Trying to kill without logic or reason. You turned them into beasts, to die like animals. The best thing you and the others like you can do is to leave them alone."

"To be exploited," said Salek bitterly. "To be used as simple, mindless workers in the fields. An old, proud race reduced to the status of beggars."

"They wouldn't be the first," said Dumarest. "And they won't be the last. Among races, like men, only the strong have the right to survive. But it won't be like that here. The farmers need them, and now that the war is over, arrangements can be made. Land grants given them so they can retain possession of the hills. Their children can be given schooling, taught trades, ways to use their talents. They can work if they wish, or sit and dream if they prefer. But you will not be among them."

"Revenge?"

"A precaution. The Chardians have no reason to trust you, and they would never allow you to remain. In any case, you have other duties. Your father needs you."

Salek frowned. "You mentioned him before," he murmured. "But how do you know him? Did he send you to find me?"

"Yes."

"And you are taking me to him?"

Dumarest looked at his hands. The tremors had stopped, his head now free of the nagging ache. It was, he thought, now safe to move.

"I'm taking you back to the city. There are people you know there." Rising, he called, "Captain!"

"Sir?" Hamshard appeared at the doorway of the passage.

"I'm putting this man in your charge. Take him to my suite in the city and allow him to take with him anything he wants. Before you leave, have the men destroy everything in the cavern. The weapons, the tools, the chemicals, everything."

"Yes, sir. And you?"

Dumarest said flatly, "I am going to finish what has to be done."

Chapter Fifteen

The line had held seven thousand men, and he used them all, rafts going to each village, men dropping, busy with saws, with lasers, axes, anything that could cut and fell. Fire bloomed around each village, sparks flying from burning plants eating a

wide clearing around the buildings. The men were mostly from the woodlands to the south, clerks from the city, workers who had no immediate interest in the lofios, sharing only the crumbs from the rich growers' table. Some of the officers were less eager.

"Marshal!" A major, red-faced, irate. "You can't do this! The Council—"

Dumarest snapped, "Lieutenant, place this man under close arrest. He is subversive to the state."

A captain, less polite, "Damnit, you want to ruin us all? You crazy fool, you can't—"

He joined the major, a dozen others, all fuming, helpless to resist. Dumarest had ended the war, and the men were grateful. More, they liked his style, his manner. And the loyalty of the men, as Dumarest knew, was the real basis of power for any commander.

Riding high, he watched the growing clearings, the thickening columns of smoke.

"Sir!" From the body of the raft Lieutenant Paran looked up from his communicator. His face was strained, torn with indecision. He felt that he should be doing something to halt the destruction, but didn't know what. "Colonel Stone, sir."

"Let him wait."

The next call was from Colonel Paran.

"What's going on, Earl?" His face was lined, eyes pouched with fatigue. "We've been getting reports about you burning the lofios. I can't hold the Council back much longer. They're assembling weapons and men to put you under arrest."

"They can try."

"They will try, Earl. You've hit them where it hurts. Raougat has found a bunch of men who will do anything for pay." His control broke a little. "Damnit, man! The last thing we want is a

civil war!"

"You won't get it." Dumarest studied the terrain below. The firebreaks had been cut, and the lofios was well ablaze; nothing now could prevent what he had started. "All right, colonel, I'm coming in."

It was dark when he arrived, and they were waiting in the light of standards set before the Lambda warehouse, Stone, Oaken, the smiling face of Captain Raougat flanked by a score of armed men. Others stood behind Colonel Paran, more disciplined, equally well armed. At their head Lieutenant Thomile scowled at the other group. As Dumarest dropped from the raft, he snapped to attention, saluting.

Dumarest returned the salute, then turned to stare at Raougat. For a moment their eyes met, and then the captain lifted his arm.

"Marshal!"

"Your men are badly dressed," said Dumarest coldly. "Have them straighten their line. An honor guard should have respect. They are soldiers, not scum."

Raougat stared at the tall figure, the uniform stained with char and blood, the hard, cruel set of the mouth. When next he saluted, his movement was brisk.

"Yes, sir! As you order!"

Of the colonels, Paran was the first to speak. He stepped forward, hand extended. "Marshal, my congratulations on your success. As I was telling the Council, you must have a good explanation for what you've done."

"Yes, colonel."

"By God, it had better be a good one!" Oaken, face flushed with rage, stood with hands clenched, trembling. "Is this the arrangement you made with the Ayutha? That you would ruin us in return for their cooperation?"

"Treason," said Stone. He sounded dazed. "Three hundred square miles of lofios destroyed, not counting the plants you felled to make the line. Why, marshal? Why?"

"To end the war."

"But you'd done that. The Ayutha—"

"Had nothing to do with what happened to the villages," snapped Dumarest impatiently. "I thought that would have been obvious by now. The line proved it. Nothing living could pass without my knowing it, and yet there still was trouble."

Stone said slowly, "Then someone else? Sabotage?"

"No, the lofios itself." Dumarest turned toward the raft. "Lieutenant!"

Fran Paran dropped the rifle he had been holding and lifted a sack. Jumping from the raft, he moved forward, to stand at Dumarest's side.

"The clue was there all along," said Dumarest. "But you couldn't see it. You were too close. When the trouble started, you naturally thought of the Ayutha, and from then on blamed everything on them. But the real cause was much closer to hand, in the plants you grow and harvest for profit."

Oaken sucked in his breath. "You're lying," he said. "Trying to justify what you've done. You have no proof!"

"How many more dead do you need before facing reality? Two more villages? Three? The city itself?" Dumarest reached for the sack. "The lofios is a mutated hybrid. You have lived with it so long that you can't even begin to imagine that it could be anything else but harmless. But plants change. They mutate. In this case, the mutation has resulted in a subtle alteration of the pollen. A freak—it couldn't happen again perhaps for a million years—but once was enough. Now, some of the pollen isn't harmless. It contains a hallucinogenic of a particularly horrible nature. It affects the brain, turns people insane, makes them kill, and then causes them to die in turn. You have seen the effects."

Paran said shrewdly, "Some of the pollen, Earl?"

"Perhaps one plant out of ten. I don't know; your scientists can determine that. But some, certainly, there can be no doubt. All the evidence points to it; the villages destroyed without trace of an external enemy, that raft that landed and the men who fought each other—they must have broken open dangerous pods. I caught a scent of it myself, sweet, sickly, and I felt its effects." Dumarest glanced at Lieutenant Paran standing at his side. "I felt it and saw what it could do. We were lucky, breathing only a trace, but even that was enough to have killed us both. Now you know why I ordered clearings to be made around every village. The protection isn't enough, but with masks, working without them only when there is no wind, it should serve." He added bitterly, "I asked you to do that before. You refused. How many men, women, and children have died because of that refusal?"

Too many, but they were not wholly to blame. Old habits die hard, and when bolstered by greed, rarely die at all. The clearings had been made and the warning given; he could do no more.

Oaken said, "I don't believe it. It's a trick of some kind. Maybe he got paid to ruin our economy and invented this story to cover himself."

Stone added, "But proof? We still have no proof."

Ignoring the insult, Dumarest said, "I checked all the weather reports. There had been wind each time a village was affected. And if you want more proof still..."

From the sack he took a lofios pod. It was ripe, the membrane taut. He said, "I've twenty others in the sack. They could all be harmless, but the odds are against it. If not, they will prove what I say beyond any possibility of argument."

He, Fran Paran, and the men Thomile commanded were all equipped with masks. Dumarest raised his own, waited until the others had followed suit. The wind was blowing from behind them, toward where Raougat stood with Oaken and Stone before his men. Raising the pod, Dumarest threw it hard to the ground.

It burst, releasing a fine cloud of misty particles, immediately caught by the wind, to swirl in a fine dust about their faces.

"Marshal! For God's sake!" Oaken sneezed, flapping his hands, dabbing at his eyes. "What the devil are you doing?"

Dumarest lifted another pod.

"No!" Raougat sprang to one side, hand snatching at his pun. "Don't do it! You'll kill us all!"

Lieutenant Thomile rapped, "Drop that gun, captain! Drop it!"

His own pistol was lifted, the rifles of his men a steady line. As Raougat's pistol hit the ground he said, "Carry on, marshal."

Dumarest looked at Oaken, at Stone. "You seem afraid, gentlemen. And yet why should you be? If you are so certain that I am wrong, then the pods must be harmless."

"No," said Stone. "No more. Please."

"Colonel Oaken?"

"Put the damned thing away!"

"You are convinced, then?" Dumarest dropped the pod into the bag. "You had better be," he said grimly. "The mutation is spreading. I don't know how you're going to handle it, but you'd better do it soon. Before a strong wind rises from the hills and blows over the lofios toward the city." Jerking tight the neck of the sack, he handed it to Colonel Paran. "Here," he said. "Your enemy."

* * *

The water was hot, scented, refreshing to his skin. Dumarest felt the beat of it wash away the grime and ease his muscles. Dried, he looked at the rumpled uniform, then turned to his own clothes. Tall, in neutral gray, he left the bathroom and met Zenya's incredulous stare.

"Earl! Why have you changed?"

"The war is over."

"But surely they won't..." She broke off, regretting his altered status, the loss of his reflected glory. As the lady of the marshal of Chard she had been feted, spoiled wherever she went. With swift recovery she said, "Well, darling, it doesn't matter. At least back home you won't be in danger every minute. We are going back home, Earl?"

"Yes, Zenya, I'll be leaving Chard."

Too engrossed with her own concerns, she didn't recognize the ambiguity. "You've done wonders, Earl. Not only have you stopped this stupid war, but you found Salek. Grandfather will be pleased, and you know what he promised. Us, together, on our own estate. Earl, we'll be so happy!"

For a while, he thought, until the novelty wore off and her own restless compulsion drove her to seek fresh titivation. And then, in order to retain his pride, he would have to fight and kill—that or beat her into submissive obedience. Two things which, for him, held no attraction.

A wanton, he thought, looking at her. Amoral, warped by the society in which she lived, the inbreeding which had accentuated weakness. A bitch in every sense of the word, yet beautiful, as all such women were.

Wine stood on a table, and she poured him a glass, resplendent as she turned, shimmering all in gold. Smiling, she handed it to him, waited as he sipped.

"We should go out, darling. For the last time, in your uniform, so that everyone can see the man who saved them."

"Perhaps."

"And you can tell me exactly what happened in the cavern. When you and Captain Hamshard shot down those savages. He told me about it when he arrived with Salek."

"Salek." Dumarest set down the glass. "Where is he?"

"In the other room. With Lisa... Earl!" she cried out as he sprang to his feet and ran toward the door. "Earl, what..."

They were together, sitting very close on a couch, the man still wearing his coarse robe, the cowl thrown back to reveal the gaunt structure of his skull. Beside him the woman looked a thing of legendary evil, shimmering black accentuating the whiteness of her face, her neck, ebony-tipped nails reaching like claws, to hover an inch from the sunken cheek of her prey.

"Lisa!" Dumarest dropped his hand, lifted it with the knife, light splintering from the edge, the needle point. "Drop your hand! Drop it!"

"Or what, Earl?" She turned to face him, the hand not moving, the sharpened tips of her nails like tiny spears. "Will you throw that knife? Kill me, perhaps? Do you honestly believe you could move fast enough?"

"Do you think I couldn't?"

A gamble with her life as the stake, but one she couldn't win. It would take time to reach, to press, to break the skin, and already Salek, warned by some instinct, was moving from her side.

"What is wrong?" he said. "What is happening?"

"She intends to kill you."

"Lisa? But why? How?"

"Look at her hands," snapped Dumarest. "Those nails carry poison. And she intended to kill you, because your father wants you dead."

From behind him Zenya said, "Earl, that's ridiculous!"

"You heard the child?" Lisa leaned back on the couch, smiling, confident of her power. "You were employed to find him. To

return him to Paiyar. Has the war turned your mind so that you have forgotten why you were sent to Chard?"

"I was not employed, I was forced, and I do not like to be driven."

"Have you any choice?" Lisa's voice was a feral purr as she spoke directly at him, ignoring the others. "Do you want me to say that word again? Have you forgotten that also? Driven?" Her laughter was thin, brittle. "Yes, you have been driven, and will continue to be so. Like a beast on a rein. My beast."

Zenya whispered, "Kill her, Earl. Kill her!"

He fought the temptation, lowering the knife, so that it hung loose at his side. She was a woman, they were on a civilized world, the death that closed her mouth would bring a kindred penalty.

To Salek he said, "Have you never wondered why I tried to kill you when first we met?"

The slanted eyes narrowed, thoughtful. "I thought that perhaps... I was wearing this robe, the light was red, for a moment you could have mistaken me for a cyber. Lisa..."

"Told you how much I love them?"

"Yes. She said that you feared and hated them. It would be natural for you to have wanted to kill one."

A facile tale that would have satisfied a mind dulled by years of close proximity to innocence. Dumarest said, "And all the time she was telling you this, she was moving closer, a warmly intimate relation talking over old times and, perhaps, making plans. Don't you realize that you are the greatest obstacle to her ambition? Did she ask you to marry her?"

Salek flushed. "I will never marry. I told her that."

"And so she decided to eliminate you. To obey her master's orders. Why, Lisa? Does he know you so well, that you have no

mind of your own? Was it necessary to kill?"

"Be careful, Earl!"

Beside him Zenya whispered again, "Kill her, Earl. Kill her!"

Mad, he thought, the entire family insane. Chan Parect didn't want his son returned alive. That would have presented a threat to his authority—the one thing he could never tolerate. And yet the man had been living, and might one day return. How simple to find a tool to dispose of the inconvenience. A complex plan, but when has simplicity ever appealed to a deranged mind? And, almost, it had worked. If it hadn't been for Hamshard, his own savage struggle against the ingrained command, Salek would be dead by now.

Lisa said urgently, "Earl, nothing has been lost. Salek can vanish, Zenya also. Together we can return to Paiyar. The old man cannot last long, and when he dies, we shall rule."

"No."

She cried out, the same sound as she had made before, and again he felt what seemed to be a dull explosion within his skull. But minor now, and he made no move toward the phone. The trigger hadn't worked; a one-shot command, perhaps, an overlay of the deeper compulsion, an ironic jest of Chan Parect, or perhaps it had been negated by the hallucinogen he had inhaled, his own struggle in the cavern.

He said quietly, "It doesn't work, Lisa. You can't rule me now."

Zenya laughed.

It was as if she had lashed the woman across the face. The elfin features grew haggard, ugly, the eyes blazing with maniacal rage. Like a spring, she rose from the couch and lunged forward, hands extended, nails catching the light, reaching for his eyes.

His left arm swept upward, slamming beneath the wrists, lifting the poisoned fingers. As they rose, he felt the knife snatched from his hand, heard the blow, saw Lisa's sudden look

of shocked disbelief, the unmistakable filming of her eyes.

"Earl," she whispered. "Earl..."

He caught her as she fell, blood running from her mouth as he rested her on the floor.

Zenya laughed again, high, shrill. She stood with the knife in her hand, ugly stains on her arm, the front of her dress. Her eyes blazed, alight, insane. "I did it! I killed the bitch! Now we can be together!"

* * *

The cell was like others he had known, a barred window showing the lights of the field, the glow of the sky. More bars ran from roof to floor, enclosing a cot, toilet facilities, a square of faded carpet. From where he sat with his back against a wall, Dumarest could see a portion of the corridor and the foot of a barred door at its end. From beyond it came little sounds, the scrape of a chair, the coughing of the jailer, the thud of heavy boots.

More footsteps joined the others, softer, pausing as the door opened, halting again at the cell. As the door clanked open, Colonel Paran stepped inside.

"I know you didn't do it," he said, dropping to the edge of the cot. "Salek told me, the girl too."

"What will happen to her?"

"Nothing. She will be put on the first ship leaving for Paiyar. That is the least we can do for the lady of the marshal of Chard."

"Paiyar? You know?"

"From almost the first, Earl. Before I donned this," — Paran touched his uniform— "I was chief of police. I held that position for fifteen years. Long enough to have established certain habits, among them one of checking every important detail. And, to be honest, your lady was a little indiscreet."

A danger impossible to avoid, but why had the pretense been allowed to continue?

Paran shrugged at the question. "You seemed to know what you were doing, Earl. And you helped my boy. After that, I didn't give a damn who or what you were, just as long as you could resolve the mess." He looked bleakly at the cell. "I'm sorry about this, but the formalities had to be observed. You understand?"

"And now?"

"That's what I want to talk about, Earl. For me, you could stay as marshal for as long as you like. The men are with you, the officers too. The pods have been tested, and what you said is true. A hell of a mess, but it has to be faced. I doubt if Chard will ever be the same again."

"That needn't be a bad idea," said Dumarest. "You had a tight economic society here, and they are always vulnerable. Fire, storm, disease—anything can happen. What are your own plans now?"

"I'm not sure. The army—"

"Should be kept. You need a counterbalance to the influence of the growers."

A counterbalance and a force to oppose the vested interests, which discounted human life in the search for gain. Dumarest said, "The Ayutha need to be protected and their rights safeguarded. Salek could advise you on that if you decide to let him stay."

"I'll think about it, Earl, but that can come later. You're more important. Oaken and Stone don't like you. Raougat has sworn to kill you. You can handle him, I know, but he isn't alone. You made him look small, and he can't forget that. That business with the pods..." Paran shook his head. "You took a hell of a chance."

"Not really," said Dumarest. "They all came from the oldest plants I could find."

"A bluff? Well, if so, it worked. No one thinks of blaming the Ayutha now. In fact, everyone wants to help them." He paused, then added, "As I want to help you, Earl. Chard owes you a hell of a lot. As I said, you can stay, but there's something you had better know. The Council has called on the Cyclan to help them in the emergency."

And the first thing they would do would be to demand him as a part of their price. Dumarest said, "It doesn't matter. They would have known I was here anyway. The Cyclan aren't fools. They would have known I landed on Paiyar and predicted where I would arrive. You know how they operate."

"I know." Paran drew a deep breath. "I think we're going to need that army. Something to face up to the growers and the red swine they've employed. I've lived through something like this before, on Elchan... Well, that doesn't matter now. You're leaving, then?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would. I've had the money owing you put into oils and loaded on the *Topheir*. I've had it held until you made a decision. It'll leave when you're ready." Paran rose. "There's not much else to say, Earl, aside from thanking you for what you've done." He held out his hand in an old-fashioned gesture. His grip was hard. "There's someone else outside who wants to see you."

It was Salek. He came from a circle of light, to stand thin and a little forlorn in his robe. "You've heard about Zenya?"

Dumarest nodded.

"She loves you, Earl. She killed just to save you. She will wait for you on Paiyar—she asked me to tell you that."

"She'll wait a long time," said Dumarest. "I'm not going back to that world, and if you've any sense, neither will you, until your father is dead."

"Earl!" Salek hesitated. "There's something else. When Lisa was talking, she mentioned your interest in ancient things. That

world you are looking for? Earth?"

Dumarest remembered what Chan Parect had said— that if he found Salek, he would find the answer to his search. A lie, he had thought, another bribe to add to the rest, yet there was always the thin chance that, for once, the old man had told the truth.

"You know where it is?"

"No, not exactly, that is..." Salek broke off, making a helpless gesture. "I can't be sure," he complained. "But there are names. Sirius, Polaris, Alpha Centaurus, Procyon. Polaris was reputed to be the one star that didn't move. I'm not helping you much, but there's something more. A suspicion, but I think—in fact, I'm almost certain—that the Cyclan knows just where the planet is to be found."

The one group he couldn't question.

"Does it help, Earl?"

"Yes," said Dumarest. "It helps."

Then he turned and walked across the field to where the *Topheir* was waiting, Branchard standing at the foot of the ramp, grinning a welcome.

"Glad you could make it, Earl. Now, let's get on our way."

Up and out on a series of random journeys impossible to predict, to move on to where the stars hung thin against the sky and ancient names were remembered. To the one world he was searching for and, one day, would find.