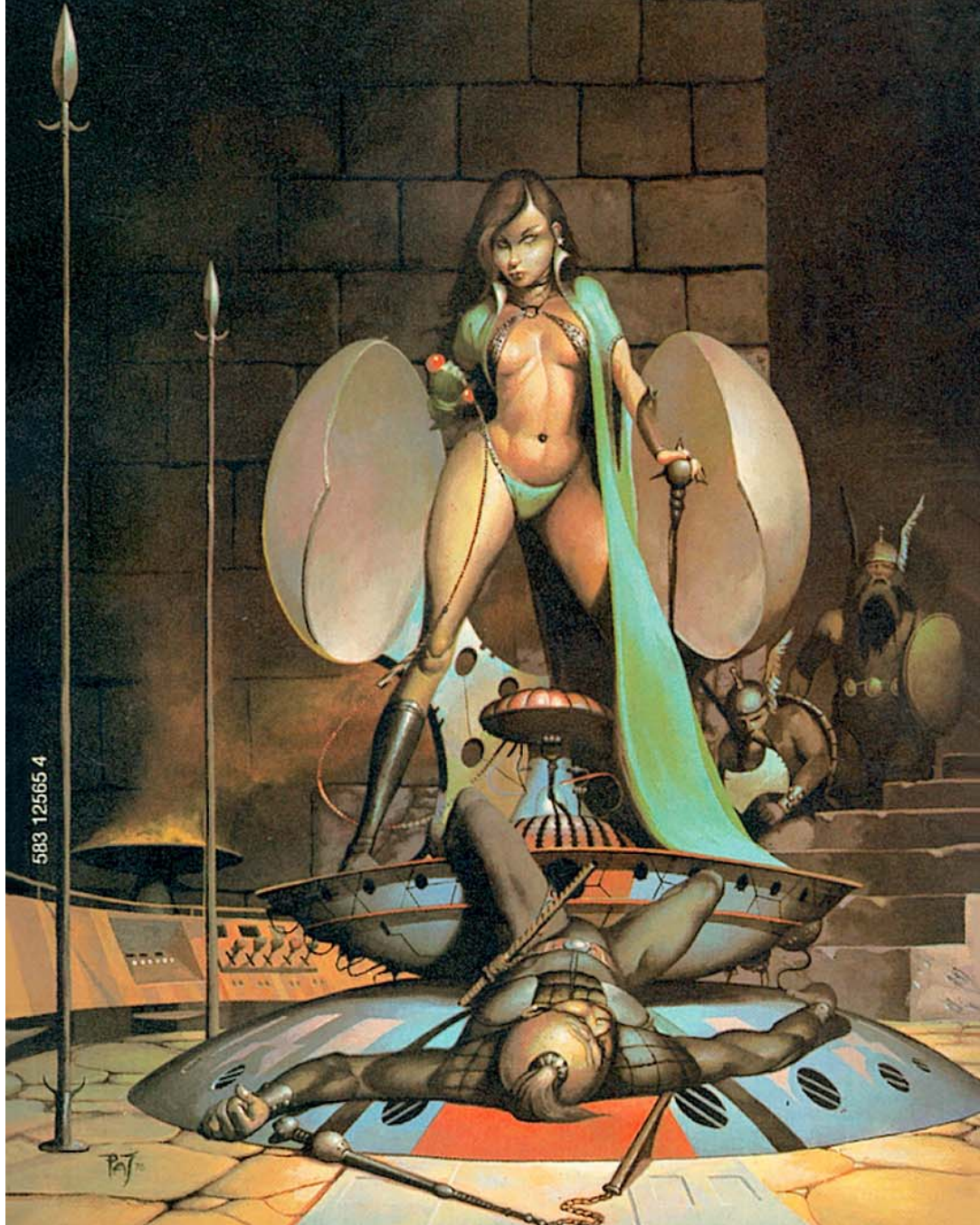


MAYFLOWER SCIENCE FANTASY

MICK FARREN

SYNAPTIC MANHUNT



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The total silence was only broken by the soft slow dripping of the water clock. The high, narrow room was lit by a solitary candle, and far corners of the dull stone walls were hidden in darkness. The room was bare and austere, but it had an atmosphere of absolute calm. There was no furniture apart from the iron stand that held the candle, the glass water clock on its wooden bench and a small raised dais in the very centre of the room. The dais was covered with a coarse-weave straw mat.

A figure sat on the dais. It was shrouded in a plain black robe, its legs were crossed and its hands lay in its lap with the fingers interlaced in a complicated pattern. Although the candle was placed directly in front of the figure, its head was sunk between the shoulders in such a way that the face was obscured by shadow. From the width of the shoulders, and the supple, powerful hands, which were clearly illuminated by the candle, it was obvious that the figure was that of a male.

The name of the male was Jeb Stuart Ho, although, right at that moment in time, Jeb Stuart Ho hardly existed. His pulse was down to the absolute minimum that would sustain life. His body temperature had reduced by half and his lungs hardly stirred. Except for his upright, crosslegged posture, the lay observer would have assumed him to be dead. But Jeb Stuart Ho was alive. The physical state that he was in was self-induced. He would, however, certainly die within a comparatively short time unless roused by some outside force. The art of terminal meditation was one that was slowly and painfully learned. Once the individual had reached that state there was no release from it except a sharp tap on the shoulder by another who was practised in the same skills.

Being so close to death and so dependent on outside help might have terrified any normal person. Jeb Stuart Ho was beyond terror. He knew nothing, although, at the same time, according to his philosophy, he knew everything. He was in a world that few people outside the temple ever visited. It was beyond the scope of language, beyond emotion and far past the reach of sight, taste, smell or touch.

A door at the far end of the room opened softly. Another man in a black robe entered and

walked silently towards Jeb Stuart Ho on sandalled feet. He halted in front of the seated figure, and almost ritualistically took a short polished stick of hard dark wood out of his sleeve. He paused for a moment, and then struck a swift, light blow on Jeb Stuart Ho's shoulder. He stepped back and waited.

At first, nothing happened, and then the still figure made a soft noise. Jeb Stuart Ho was drawing air into his lungs. At first it was tiny amounts and his body scarcely moved. Then his chest began gradually to rise and fall as he sucked in deeper breaths. Finally, he completely filled his lungs, and began to raise his head. The mind of Jeb Stuart Ho seemed to float upwards. First into a place where it was warm, then sound invaded the comfortable area, the sighing of his blood as it slowly began to circulate through his veins. The pulse of his heart started, up, softly and in wide-spaced intervals at first, but then quickening and getting louder. His sense of touch came alive. He could feel the pressure of his body on the coarse mat beneath him. He was aware of the texture of the robe that covered his body. He knew that his mouth was dry and that his stomach would shortly begin to demand food. He rose towards the light. He opened his eyes, and an image of the dim room rushed in with dazzling brilliance.

Jeb Stuart Ho silently regarded the man standing in front of him. He was slimmer and younger than Ho, little more than a boy. His face was smooth and expressionless. Jeb Stuart Ho matched this first rush of sensation, which came after the deep meditation, with his memory. The boy was Nah Duc West. His pupil, his servant in the temple and his lover.

No spoken greeting was necessary between the two men. Ho simply stretched out his hand and touched the younger man. Then he rose to his feet and walked purposefully out of the room. The young man followed him.

The door of the meditation room led out into a high-ceilinged corridor. It was made from the same dull black stone as the walls of the room. The corridor was illuminated by glowing spheres set in the walls at regular intervals.

They walked down the perfectly straight corridor for some minutes until they came to a pair of double doors, decorated with elaborate carvings and flanked by two more figures in black robes. They appeared to recognize Jeb Stuart Ho, and stepped back, pushing the doors open. Once again, there was a trace of ritual in their action. Beyond the carved doors was a huge, brightly lit circular room. It had a domed ceiling that glowed with the same steady light as the globes.

The room was a hive of activity. Along one section of the curved stone wall, a line of black-

robed figures sat on high stools, bent over desks and drawing tables that were littered with charts, graphs, columns of figures and computer printouts. Another long section of wall was taken up by a huge display screen where coloured lights and curved lines slowly shifted position. On a vast plan table in the centre of the room, more black-clothed figures moved transparent overlays with lines and points of colour drawn on them, similar to those on the display screen.

The most intense activity was centred round another section of the curved wall that took up nearly a third of the total circumference. The section was covered with a soft translucent ribbed material. The ribs ran vertically from the floor to the start of the domed ceiling. It bulged out slightly, and occasionally undulated. Behind the material there was a soft green glow that also moved and shifted. Some patches grew brighter, and others dimmed. The crowd of black robes that clustered round it were stroking the surface of the soft wall section with their hands. Their palms and fingertips moved in definite, precise patterns. Occasionally one of them would carefully insert a long fine silver needle into the material. The operations appeared to involve a high degree of skill.

The domed room was the heart of the entire temple. It was here that Jeb Stuart Ho's brothers carried on the eternal work. It was here that they monitored the progress of the various cultures that flourished in the sundered world that remained after the breakdown.

Over the centuries since the natural laws had ceased to be consistent and human life had clung to areas where artificial stasis could be generated, the brothers had worked single-mindedly on their never-ending task. They had observed and recorded the smallest event in the hundred thousand communities that survived in among the grey nothings. The most insignificant happening was plotted into their charts and included in their calculations. There was a saying among the brothers that even the fall of a sparrow was worthy of inclusion in their graphs, the graphs that charted the passage of past events and from which the brothers made their predictions for the future.

Jeb Stuart Ho had only been in the huge room four times before, but he fully understood the meaning of the coloured points and lines. Years of study in the seminary had equipped him to recognize and appreciate the meanings of the curves. The uphill struggle of the society seeking material progress, the plateau form of the stable culture, the clear straight lines of the stuff beam cities in the central ring, the elegant curve down to decadence. Jeb Stuart Ho could read the subtleties of history in the sudden variations of each curve. He could recognize the sudden

termination that meant that disruption had hit a unit of civilization.

Jeb Stuart Ho stood in the doorway of the domed room. Slowly and discreetly his eyes moved across its mysteries. His gaze stopped at the ribbed, undulating section of wall. It was the outside face of the beast. The living meditation that made the efforts of the brotherhood possible. He stared at it in reverence and awe. It was the whole centre and meaning of the temple. The bio-cybernetic mass of circuits and organic life was both master and servant. It computed the patterns from which the brothers made their predictions. It gave early warning of progressions that could become critical, and it ordered the brothers when and where to make their executive interventions.

To Jeb Stuart Ho it was the centre point of his existence. It was the permanence of the state that he could only achieve by terminal meditation. He admired the brothers who caressed the beast, the ones whose silver needles penetrated its transparent hide. He respected the skills with which they transferred information and instruction to and from the huge thinking unit.

He admired and respected them, but he didn't envy them. He had his own skills. He was, after all, an executive of the brotherhood. His training was just as awesome.

One of the black figures bent over the expanse of plan table straightened, detached itself from the group and approached Jeb Stuart Ho. The face above the black robe was that of a very old man. The skin was pink and soft like a baby's, terribly wrinkled and totally without hair. The eyes, however, had the look of purposeful calm that was common to all of the brothers.

The old man halted in front of Jeb Stuart Ho and bowed. Jeb Stuart Ho returned the bow.

'I have prepared, Teacher.'

The old man nodded gravely.

'And you are ready?'

His voice had none of the weakness or quaver that normally come with great age. Jeb Stuart Ho looked straight at the old man.

'I am ready, Teacher.'

The teacher raised in eyebrow and smiled gently.

'You are very certain for one who faces his first intervention.'

'All my training has led me to this point, and will carry me far beyond it.'

The teacher's eyes twinkled.

'So should you fail, the fault will lie in your training?'

Jeb Stuart Ho stood stiffly.

'I will not fail, Teacher.'

'You don't even know the details of the task that awaits you, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

'I will not fail.'

'As I said before, you are very confident.'

'An individual must not allow a false humility to cloud the knowledge of himself.'

'And you believe you have knowledge of your own readiness?'

'I know I am ready.'

'Suppose you were in error when you made this analysis of yourself?'

'If I was in error I would not be ready for the task.'

The teacher nodded.

'Then it must be the time for your instruction in the labours you have to perform.'

He took Jeb Stuart Ho by the arm, and led him back towards the carved doors.

'We will go to my chamber.'

The teacher led the way past the two impassive attendants, and back down the stone corridor. He halted before a door, opened it and ushered Jeb Stuart Ho inside. The room was similar to the one in which Jeb Stuart Ho had meditated. The water clock stood against the wall, the single candle burned in its holder. In this room, however, two raised daises stood side by side. Jeb Stuart Ho stood beside one of them until the teacher had seated himself. Then he too sat down, automatically crossing his legs and lacing his fingers in an attitude of meditation. There was a long pause while the teacher stared straight forward, apparently studying the water clock. Jeb Stuart Ho summoned energy to preserve his patience. Despite all his training he was still eager to learn about the task. At last the teacher spoke.

'We are required once again to intervene in the affairs of the world outside. Once again their pattern traces a path towards disaster.'

'I am eager to learn my part.'

The teacher continued to stare straight ahead.

'The loaf baked in eagerness will lie heavily in the pan. A wise man will not eat of it, lest he break his teeth.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed his head in submission. He knew he stood corrected. There was another long pause before the teacher spoke again. The water clock dripped softly.

'The task you are being set will not be simple. It can be a heavy load. Your back must be strong enough to bear it.'

This time, Jeb Stuart Ho said nothing. The teacher continued.

'The probability has almost reached maximum that large areas of the rim, and to a lesser extent the inner sectors, will disrupt.'

He paused, and again Jeb Stuart Ho said nothing.

'The result of this disruption will be twofold. A state of war will occur which will escalate unchecked until the antagonized will begin to destroy their opponents' stasis generators, and disrupt the territory they occupy. They will cause a so far uncalculated shift in the balance of our world. Taking into account the most favourable conditions for stasis, the resultant loss of existing inhabited space would be a minimum of 65.79 per cent.'

Jeb Stuart Ho began to feel the magnitude of the task he was being set. Doubt hovered in the corner of his mind, but he controlled his will and it faded. The teacher went on.

'The second danger that would result from this situation is that the release of energy from a certain level of warfare would be a considerable attraction to the disrupters. They would gravitate towards the source of energy by the shortest possible route. That would certainly involve many of them cutting through the normally undisturbed central sectors. In this event the space and, of course, population loss could be as high as 98.51 per cent.'

The information fell about Jeb Stuart Ho's shoulders like a heavy yoke. It was far worse than purely physical weight. He was used to those. In advanced combat training the body is often loaded to its very limit. This burden of responsibility would go far beyond that. He would have to be sure-footed and have strength in excess of anything he had experienced. His boast of being ready seemed empty and childish. Still he kept silent, and the teacher continued his instruction.

'All our calculations lead us to one conclusion. There is a single individual. The individual's future actions will be the seeds of this disaster. If they are allowed to germinate and grow, the flowers that eventually bloom will be terrible to look upon.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked straight ahead.

'It will be my task to pluck those flowers?'

'It will be your task to make sure that seeds never put forth shoots.'

'I must intervene and prevent the individual from taking such action as will precipitate disaster?'

The teacher looked at Jeb Stuart Ho for the first time.

'It is graver than that. The actions and their effect on this pattern are too complex. You must remove the individual.'

'I must kill, Teacher?'

'You must kill, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

There was a long silence. Jeb Stuart Ho looked down at his hands, and then straight ahead.

'Who is the subject?'

'A female, current age thirteen, technocrat upbringing. You will receive a data package as you depart.'

'May I ask one question? What gives us the right to calculate an individual must die?'

'Our calculations are accurate to the smallest margin.'

'So we take the responsibility of another's death?'

'That is a second question.'

'We are always right? Is there no room for doubt?'

'The superior man arrives at the river and crosses.'

'We are always right?'

'To the finest part of allowable error.'

They sat in silence for many minutes. The water clock dripped away the time. Jeb Stuart Ho finally rose, bowed to the teacher and left the room. He made his way down the maze of corridors to his own cell. Nah Duc West was waiting. He bowed as his master entered, and then looked up anxiously.

'The Teacher has instructed you in the task, master?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the young man and smiled.

'You are like the moth that bathes in die flame and wonders at its burning.'

'Yes, master.'

'The Teacher gave me his instructions.'

The pupil looked up eagerly.

'And am I to go with you, master?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'No, I go alone.'

'But master, for many months I have been your lover and pupil. We have shared our

knowledge and our bodies. Why do you now reject me? Why must you leave me behind?'

Jeb Stuart Ho put his hand gently on the pupil's shoulder.

'Your training must continue, Nah Duc West. Another will take my place. You are not being rejected. I have my task, you have yours. They no longer follow the same path and we must part. It is no reason for grief. We both continue. When travellers part at the crossroads they rejoice because their journey continues to its conclusion.'

Nah Duc West bowed his head in the face of this self-evident wisdom. Jeb Stuart Ho extended his hand and stroked his pupil's hair.

'We have not parted yet. You still have the task of preparing me for my journey.'

Nah Duc West looked at the floor.

'Yes, master.'

There were a few moments while the young man stood, not moving. Jeb Stuart Ho sat down crosslegged on his sleeping mat and looked at his pupil.

'Well, get on with it,'

Nah Duc West jerked into life.

'Yes, master.'

He went to the trunk in the corner of the room and opened it. First he took out a white cloth and spread it on the floor. Then piece by piece he laid out Jeb Stuart Ho's equipment. Carefully he stretched out the leather body suit. It was a one-piece black garment fastened down the front. It was reinforced by quilting and small silver plates over the vulnerable spots. It covered the entire body including the hands and feet. The striking edges of these were also strengthened by strips of metal, as were the knees and elbows.

The laying out of an executive's equipment was a serious ritual among the brothers. The sequence of items was very important. With true regard for tradition, Nah Duc West produced the wide leather belt with its attachments for the various accoutrements. Next came the weapons: the long double handed sword, the nanchuk: two short steel batons joined by a length of chain, the flat case of six matched throwing knives and the .90 magnum in its carry case that also held the ammunition and the extension barrel.

The pupil checked that each weapon was in working order, and free from dirt or rust. He knew if he failed in this, he'd be the subject of a different, more painful ritual. He carefully placed them in their correct positions beside the belt and the suit. The next items were equally important. The

portable stasis generator, the small black box that would prevent its wearer from being assimilated into the nothings, and the survival case that contained water and food concentrates. When these had been laid out, the pupil produced the final item from the chest. The thick, coarsely woven travelling cape was placed, folded, at the corner of the white cloth.

When all this was complete, Jeb Stuart Ho finally stood up. He undid his robe and let it fall to his feet. Nah Duc West looked lovingly at his master's thin but heavily muscled body for a moment, and then stooped to pick up the black leather suit. He helped him struggle into it and zipped up the front. Then he picked up the belt and strapped it around Jeb Stuart Ho's waist. Jeb Stuart Ho raised his hands as the pupil attached the generator, the survival kit and the gun case to his belt. The sword was hung from the straps on his back so the hilt was level with his right shoulder. The knives were buckled on to his left forearm, while the nanchuk was strapped to the other.

Before handing Jeb Stuart Ho the folded cloak, his pupil took a mirror from the trunk and held it in front of him. Jeb Stuart Ho regarded himself, and was pleased. His fighting suit and weapons were immaculate. His pale face looked back at him in a suitably calm, determined manner. His dark hair hung down straight, cut off at the shoulders in the accepted manner of the brotherhood. He would not disgrace them as an executive. In the outside world he must be the superior man of fable. Not that he was without advantage. His suit would protect him against all human attack below the level of blades or projectiles. Unarmed, he could defeat most men by the skill of his hands and feet. With his weapons he was as nearly invincible as any human could be.

From the very moment of conception, and, in fact, even before that moment, he had been tailored and trained to become a fighting machine. Only the disciplines of the brotherhood could enable him to use such power in an ethical manner. He was confident the disciplines would hold. He would sustain the honour of his teacher.

Jeb Stuart Ho took the cloak from his pupil and threw it around his shoulders, making sure that the hilt of his sword was still easily accessible. Then he leaned forward and gently kissed his pupil.

'Goodbye, Nah Duc West.'

'Goodbye, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

He walked quickly out of the room, and turned in the direction of the huge outer doors. When he reached them, the teacher was waiting for him.

'You go?'

'Yes, Teacher.'

The teacher handed him a small package wrapped in white silk.

'This contains all you need to know about the subject.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed.

'Yes, Teacher.'

The teacher returned his bow, and the great doors slid open with a faint hiss.

Jeb Stuart Ho stopped and looked back at the temple. Although he had been outside before on exercise, the first taste of the open never failed to excite him. He stared at it surrounded by the flat, featureless plain that was fixed in perfect stasis by its unfaltering generators. The temple itself filled him, with wonder. It was a huge, flat-sided pillar that seemed to reach halfway to the yellow sky. Its black surfaces were completely blank. The only break in the smooth stone was the huge doorway through which he had left. Even this was dwarfed by the enormous size of the building.

Jeb Stuart Ho turned away from it. He walked on across the even plain, towards the point where the power of the generators began to diminish and the regularity of the plain broke up into wild, jagged rock formations.

When he reached these, Jeb Stuart Ho was forced to climb and scramble. The rocks, as he got further from the generators' fields, began to change colour. The whiteness of the plain first turned to grey and brown and then, further out, exploded into a riot of purple and green. The sky too changed. It became more strident. Above the black building it had been a pale yellow, but over the wilderness of rocks it altered to a burnished gold.

Here and there, in the deep crevasses, pools of grey shifting nothing swirled and smoked. Jeb Stuart Ho's hand went to his belt and switched on his generator pack. A red pilot light glowed, and it came alive with a soft hum. He knew if he should accidentally slip into one of those grey pools without the generator protecting him, he would be spread three ways across another universe.

Here and there, spiky plants clung to cracks in the rocks. One in particular, with extravagant red blossoms, attracted him. He stopped and examined it. Then he stepped back and stood tense, just as they had taught him in the swordsman's class. His hands flashed to the sword hilt behind his left shoulder. The blade whistled. The topmost flower was detached from its stalk. It dropped to the rock, rolled and fell down into one of the grey pools. As it touched the nothings, it smoked for an instant and melted away.

Jeb Stuart Ho stood holding his sword and feeling a little foolish. He was ashamed that he

should have succumbed to using his hard-learned skills in such a childish display of bravado. It was unforgivable at a time when all his concentration should be directed to his task.

He decided it was time for him to study the data package. He unzipped the top of his body suit and removed the silk bundle. He squatted on a nearby rock, and carefully began to unwrap it. It contained a tri-di cube and a roll of parchment. Jeb Stuart Ho held up the cube and looked at it. In it was the image of a girl in her early teens. She had dark hair and a pale, petulant face. Her eyes were large and surrounded by dark makeup. Her mouth was coloured dark red and looked cruelly sensual. A loop action inside the cube made the image repeat the same sequence of expressions over and over again. First she stared out impassively at him, then slowly she smiled. Her lip curled, and the smile turned into a sneer. Finally the expression faded, only to start the cycle again. Jeb Stuart Ho turned the cube slowly round examining the girl's face from every angle. He wished that he had had more experience with women at the temple. The teachers, in their wisdom, encouraged the pupil executives to find love among their own sex.

He put down the cube, and turned his attention to the parchment. It was covered with computer print which he read carefully. There was a solemnity about the moment. He was reading about the person he was going to kill.

A.A. Catto.

Like her brother Waldo, she has remained at a static age for a considerable period.

Member of Directorate (technocrat ruling class) of Con-Lec, a corporation citadel culture in S class decay.

Petulant, wilful, vicious, with high, pain-related sexual appetite. Escorted by human male, reportedly named Reave.

Mistress/pet relationship.

No martial skills.

All training directed to sensory satisfaction.

IQ 197.

M-potential nil.

Psi-property nil.

Retention factor B +.

Subject's present location midsection city Litz (pop. 1,241,000 — Stuff contract pleasure city) where she moves in a sensation-seeking subgroup.

Class A subject. May surround herself with mercenary protection. Approach with caution.

Aim of intervention is death of subject.

Jeb Stuart Ho read the parchment twice and then folded it beside the cube. He wrapped both in the piece of silk and returned them to his suit. Then he stood up. He knew the first place he had to go. He once again began picking his way through the rocks.

As he went on, moving, all the time, away from the temple, the landscape continued to change. The rock formations began to fragment and break up. Where there had previously been bright colours they faded to a dull grey, not much darker than the pools of shifting nothings. In fact, pools was no longer an adequate description. They had enlarged and merged, so there were now wide expanses of emptiness. Here and there, the rocks jutted out of them, like ice floes on a frozen sea.

It was necessary for Jeb Stuart Ho to cross these expanses. Although his personal generator protected him from the fate of any unshielded matter that came in contact with the nothings, it was still an unnerving experience to step out into the strange, alien mist and suddenly find the solid foothold created by the generator.

On a particularly wide flat expanse of rock, he paused for a moment. He unhitched the supply case from his belt and took a sparing mouthful of water. He looked around, shielding his eyes, and searching for something on the far horizon. He knew that if he was to find the girl A.A. Catto he would have to start by looking for her in the city of Litz. In order to get there he would require a guide. There was a small group of humans who had the power to know where exactly they were in the strange shattered world that had remained after the breakdown. There were certain animals that appeared to have the same faculty. Jeb Stuart Ho knew he would need one of these if he was to make the journey to Litz without much excessive wandering.

If the faculty of location could have been bred or taught, the brotherhood would undoubtedly have produced their own guides. But it seemed to be a completely random gift. All they could do was to keep track of the movements of the various potential guides. Jeb Stuart Ho knew he had been lucky. There was one listed as being in a place on roughly the same plane as the temple. If his calculations had been correct, the shattered landscape he was crossing should be the area where the generator fields of the temple and the place he expected to find the guide failed to overlap completely.

He thought he saw something on the very horizon, but the air shimmered so much where the

nothings fought to absorb and destroy it, it was hard to tell. He walked on, and gradually he became positive that there was a tall, dark shape in the distance. After walking a little further it became apparent that the dark shape was a building of some sort. In some ways it was like the temple. It was obviously very tall, and dominated the surrounding landscape in much the same way as the temple. As far as Jeb Stuart Ho could see it didn't have the clean lines of the temple. Its outline seemed cluttered and fussy.

He knew very little about the place he was going to. The reference had only told him its name. It had said a guide was currently at Wainscot, and given some approximate directions. Jeb Stuart Ho quickened his pace. He could waste no time on the preparatory moves that were needed before he could fulfil his mission.

As he came nearer the dark building, the landscape began to stabilize. It was no more attractive, though, than the borders of the nothings. The rocks did not return to their earlier colours. On the outskirts of Wainscote they were black and shiny. Damp white mist lay in the lower hollows and streamed across the slippery surfaces. No flowers bloomed but here and there twisted, frightened trees clung to the crags. Jeb Stuart Ho saw a dark carrion bird perched on a branch. It eyed him speculatively, but did nothing.

As he drew nearer, he could make out more details of the building itself. To Jeb Stuart Ho's disciplined mind it appeared a mess. Its base was surrounded by buttresses and porticoes like the exposed roots of some ancient gnarled tree. The main body of the structure was like a stout trunk. It was studded with irregular rows of windows. Most were dark, but a few showed dim, flickering lights. It was topped by an uneven crown of turrets which completed the similarity to a blasted tree by jutting up like stunted branches.

There was an air of gothic gloom that seemed to extend from the house out to the surrounding landscape. The sky had become a deep blue. It gave out no light. That came from an artificial sun that hung brooding behind the turrets, a sullen bloated red. Jeb Stuart Ho involuntarily shuddered, and pulled his cloak more tightly round his shoulders.

Between the rocks he found a rough path that led directly to the house. As he came closer to it, the number of trees increased. More birds, like the one he'd seen earlier, flew high above him in a ragged line. Here and there beside the tracks were other, smaller buildings, cottages or huts. Jeb Stuart Ho peered into a couple of them, but they all seemed to be deserted, and in various stages of decay.

The path opened out as he came closer to the house. The nearer he came, the more he realized exactly how huge the building was. It towered above the surrounding landscape casting a vast, malevolent shadow. A wide area of bare ground littered with rubble and garbage led up to the front of the building. A flight of wide steps gave access to the massive front doors. Jeb Stuart Ho walked quickly across the open space and hurried up the steps. He stopped in front of the double doors. They appeared to have been designed to give access to a race of giants. One of them was slightly open. There was a space just wide enough for Jeb Stuart Ho to slip through. No light came from whatever lay immediately behind. He paused for a moment and ran his fingers over the copper tracery that covered the hard dark wood of the door. Then he slid through the gap, and silently entered Wainscote.

It took a few moments for his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. When they did he found that he was in a large hallway. It was deserted, and had the coldness of a place that is rarely used. The few pieces of furniture that were dotted about the flagged expanse of floor seemed like desolate wrecks. They were worn and broken. Garbage had collected in the corners, and the place smelled of damp.

Jeb Stuart Ho moved noiselessly across the hallway towards a wide, and probably once stately, staircase that curved round the far wall. A rapid scuttling sound made him freeze and look round. A pair of small armadillos, disturbed by the unexpected human presence, burrowed for shelter under a collapsed chaise longue. He smiled at their desperate efforts to get away from him. The animals who lived in the temple never displayed such fear and alarm. It was obvious that conditions at Wainscote were very different. He began carefully to climb the stairs. It looked as though the inhabitants of the house must live much further inside the building, and rarely visit the outer areas.

The top of the staircase opened out into a large gallery, which, like the hall below, showed the ravages of neglect. A rat peered out from behind a length of rotting curtain and fled squealing at the sight of the dark figure that had invaded its domain. More squeals and rustles came from inside the walls, as the news of the intruder circulated through the rat community.

A number of corridors led off the gallery. They were dim, bare and uninviting, each one identical to the next. Jeb Stuart Ho knew that he could only make a random choice. The middle one looked as though it might possibly lead more directly to the interior of the house. He started down it, still watchful for any sign of life.

Nothing happened for a long while. Jeb Stuart Ho walked patiently on, past occasional doorways that opened into more empty, deserted rooms. All he could do was follow the twists and turns of the corridor until it reached its ultimate destination. If it ended in a blind alley, he would simply go back and try one of the others. His information said that he would find his guide inside this building, and temple information was nearly always accurate.

After walking for some minutes, he came to a point where the corridor made a right-angle turn. Jeb Stuart Ho had become less careful. The unchanging corridor didn't seem very hostile. As he turned the corner he saw a dark figure coming towards him at the far end of the passage. His protective senses came to life, and he sprang lightly back, pressing himself against the wall. The figure did exactly the same thing. Slowly, Jeb Stuart Ho moved away from the wall. Again the other figure matched his own movements. He smiled as he realized that it must be an image of himself. The entire end of the corridor was one large mirror.

Then someone laughed. Jeb Stuart Ho spun round, his hands flashing to the hilt of his sword. A girl stood leaning in the doorway of one of the empty rooms. Her hair was very black and hung almost to her waist. It partially hid her small pale face, but Jeb Stuart Ho noticed that it was like that of a self-indulgent child, and only the dark shadows under her eyes gave away her real age. That and her body. Even in the long red satin dress it couldn't be mistaken for anything but that of a mature young woman. He lowered the sword. She laughed again.

'You look a little ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous?'

No one had ever called Jeb Stuart Ho ridiculous before.

'Jumping at your own reflection. Pulling out that sword.'

'I'm sorry. I was being careful, that's all.'

The girl moved towards him. He saw she had an ornamented goblet of some kind of white metal in her right hand. She raised it to her mouth and sipped from it. Her movements seemed very controlled and deliberate. She swayed a little as she walked. It was as though she was very drunk, but also very accustomed to it.

'Did you drift away from the party?'

'There is a party?'

'There's always a party. Everyone knows that. How is it that you don't know it?'

'I have only just arrived here.'

'You came from outside?'

'Yes, I came from outside.'

'You're not making it up?'

'What reason would I have for making up something like that?'

'Some people will do anything to draw attention to themselves.'

'I don't want attention.'

'Most people do.'

'Do you?'

The girl fiddled with, her drink.

'I suppose so. I'm no different to the rest.'

'Then why do you come to these empty rooms? There's no one to see you here.'

'They frighten me.'

'That would seem a reason to stay away from them.'

'I like to be frightened now and then. Don't you? Don't you enjoy a thrill of fear?'

Jeb Stuart Ho carefully put away his sword.

'I don't think so. I've never considered fear as a source of enjoyment.'

'It can be terribly exciting.'

There was a long pause while Jeb Stuart Ho considered this new concept. The girl took the chance to move up close to him.

'Are you going to rape me?'

Jeb Stuart Ho raised his eyebrows.

'What is rape?'

'You don't know what rape is?'

He shook his head.

'It's not a term I'm familiar with.'

'You're teasing me?'

'No.'

'You really don't know what rape means?'

'No.'

'It's when a man forces a woman to have sex with him against her will.'

'Why should he do that?'

The girl looked at him as though she was talking to an idiot.

'He enjoys it, of course. There's usually an element of brutality involved.'

'Why should anyone enjoy hurting another person?'

The girl shrugged.

'I don't know why exactly, but there's plenty who do.'

'Know why?'

'Enjoy hurting people. There's plenty of people who enjoy pain, for that matter.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I'm not sure I understand.'

The girl gestured towards the weapons hanging under his cloak.

'You look like you ought to. You could kill a lot of people with that stuff.'

'I'm trained to kill. It is my vocation. I am aware it may be necessary at times, but I don't enjoy the act.'

'Then why do it?'

'We all have to do things we don't enjoy.'

'I don't, why should I? I don't think I'm enjoying this conversation any more.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault. I don't enjoy many things for long. I get bored.'

'I thought you said you didn't do anything you don't enjoy.'

'That's right. I don't.'

'But . . .'

'There are times when I don't do anything. I frequently don't do anything. I think I'll go back to the party now. I'm bored with being out here.'

She looked up at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Do you want to go to the party?'

He shook his head.

'I have to find someone.'

'Who?'

'I have information that there is a guide somewhere in this place.'

The girl laughed. It was short, sharp and with a trace of a sneer.

'I should have guessed you'd be after him. There are always people coming from outside

looking for him. They usually want him to take them somewhere. You're wasting your time, you know. He never goes. He won't do it any more.'

'Why is that? Surely it is his gift? A man cannot turn his back on his gift.'

'He can. He finds it really easy. Ever since he got into sensory deprivation he's found it really easy.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's face formed itself into a look of grim patience.

'He will go this time.'

The Minstrel Boy could feel something and he didn't like it. Something was reaching into his cosy cocooned tank. Something touched him. He'd felt nothing for so long that it affected his nerves. He twisted away from it, and the pads over his eyes slipped. Light smashed into his head. The Minstrel Boy went rigid. Every response silently screamed. His legs kicked convulsively. The touch came again. It was more deliberate this time. It was a hand. It was reaching for the drip feed. It was trying to remove it from his arm.

Anger exploded inside the Minstrel Boy. It was intolerable. Someone was actually interfering with him, bringing him back to reality. His privacy was being invaded. His consciousness was being changed against his will. What gave anyone the right to mess with him like that?

In one violent move he surfaced. He sat up inside the coffin-shaped cubicle. It was the only thing in the high stone turret room. He tore the headphones from his ears. The amplified sound of his own circulation abruptly stopped.

'What the fuck . . . !'

The real world crashed in on him. He felt sick and dropped back on to the cushioned interior of the coffin. He tried it a little more gently this time. Carefully he opened his eyes again. The light still hurt, but it was bearable. He found that he could see. He didn't like what he saw.

A tall thin man in a black cloak was standing beside the black steel coffin. The clear plastic feeder tube was still in his hand. The Minstrel Boy sat up, slowly and carefully this time.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing? What makes you think you can walk in here and drag me down to your level?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked calmly at the Minstrel Boy.

'I have need of you.'

The Minstrel Boy's first response was to try to damage this stranger who had caused him so much pain. He checked the impulse when he saw the array of weapons hung around the man's body. Instead, he rested an arm on the side of the coffin and curled his lip.

'I suppose you think you can get me to go with you? I suppose you think you can threaten me with violence?'

Jeb Stuart Ho stared steadily at the Minstrel Boy.

'I could, but that isn't the way that I operate.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed harshly.

'That's not the way you operate? I'll tell you one thing, you won't get me to go anywhere any other way.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shrugged.

'I think you'll come with me in the end.'

'You think that? Is that what you think?'

'I'm confident that you'll guide me.'

'Confident, hey? So what makes you so fucking confident? I like this place. I don't have to move, I don't have to think. I'm quite happy here, in fact I love it. I don't see any way you could get me to leave here without holding a gun to my head.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I don't think that will be necessary.'

'You don't, hey? You don't think it'll be necessary?'

'I don't.'

'So what do you intend to do?'

'I thought that if I explained the nature of my task to you, you might become more willing to guide me.'

'Explain the nature of your task? You got to be crazy. Can't you understand that I'm just not interested? I've had it. I've had it with the travelling and the concentrating. Knowing where you are don't come easy. You have to work at it. There are times when it actually hurts. I don't need it. I don't give a fuck what high-minded mission you got. I don't want to know.'

Jeb Stuart Ho waited until the Minstrel Boy had finished, then he spoke very softly.

'I am from the temple. My task is an executive assignment.'

The Minstrel Boy sneered.

'Is that supposed to frighten me? Is that supposed to fill me with awe? It might have done, years ago, but now I just don't care. I'm never going travelling again. You'll have to find someone else.'

'You're the one I need.'

'I'm not the one you're going to get. I'm staying right here.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stroked his chin.

'You are a guest here. Perhaps your hosts would not be so anxious for you to stay here if they knew you had incurred the displeasure of the temple.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'For a temple executive you really don't know very much. You ought to do a bit more homework. The One who rules this place don't care whose displeasure He incurs. He don't care.'

'The temple is very powerful.'

'So the temple's powerful, He's not interested. He's not even interested that Wainscote is falling apart around Him. He just lies in His vault and soaks up energy from the fools at the party. If that ever stops, then maybe He'll wake and move out into the world. When that happens, even the temple won't be able to stop Him doing what He wants. He's invincible.'

'And you want to be just like Him.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'That's where you're wrong. I don't want anything, or, more to the point, I want nothing. I badly want nothing at all. You understand?'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'I understand, but it seems a very negative attitude.'

'That's right. That's exactly what it is. Negative. That's for me, Mister Executive.'

'So it would be no use outlining the importance of my task?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'No use at all, buddy. So you might as well move along, and let me go back to sleep.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked sadly at the Minstrel Boy.

'You're putting me in a very difficult position.'

'That's really too bad.'

'In the temple we strive to make every statement an absolute truth.'

'So?'

'On the other hand it is of paramount importance that a member of the brotherhood should not fail in an assigned task.'

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'I don't know what the fuck you're talking about.'

Jeb Stuart Ho sighed

'I'm attempting to explain the awkward position you have placed me in by your refusal to cooperate.'

The Minstrel Boy began to get annoyed.

'Can't I get it across to you that I don't want to know?'

Jeb Stuart Ho ignored him and went on.

'By your refusal to cooperate, you are forcing me to go back on a previous statement.'

'I should worry.'

'Perhaps you should.'

'Huh?'

'I said earlier that I would not use violence or threats of violence to force you to cooperate. Your attitude and the importance of my mission make it necessary to reverse that statement.'

'What do you mean?'

Jeb Stuart Ho slowly removed the .90 magnum from its holster.

'If you don't accompany me on my mission, I'll kill you.'

The Minstrel Boy's jaw dropped.

'You can't do that. It's illogical. The brotherhood can't go around behaving illogically.'

Jeb Stuart Ho trained the gun on the Minstrel Boy.

'That's true, but my analysis of the situation indicates that this is the only course. I think we have delayed long enough. You will get out of that coffin and put on your travelling clothes.'

'You've got to be kidding.'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a step forward and thrust the gun under the Minstrel Boy's chin.

'Move!'

The Minstrel Boy began to scramble out of the coffin. He pointed an accusing finger at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You are going to regret this, my man.'

He tentatively swung his legs over the side and placed his feet on the floor. He tried to stand but his legs buckled and he dropped to the flagstones. He looked up at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You're going to have to help me. I'm kind of weak. I haven't moved in quite a while.'

Jeb Stuart Ho lowered his gun and bent down, extending a hand to the Minstrel Boy. The Minstrel Boy grasped the offered hand, and then suddenly jerked and twisted. He pulled at Jeb Stuart Ho's arm. For a moment he swung off balance. The gun wavered. The Minstrel Boy

kicked at Ho's legs, but the executive turned on the balls of his feet, avoided the Minstrel Boy's thrashing legs, and aimed a precise blow with the edge of his own foot. It landed under the Minstrel Boy's jaw, and he rolled against the side of the black steel coffin, clutching his throat.

'What in hell did you do that for? You could have ruptured my windpipe.'

'The blow did exactly what it was supposed to do.'

'Huh?'

'It was a reminder. I sought to hurt you, but not cause any serious damage. If anything like that happens again I shall break one of the less vital bones in your body.'

'Okay, okay.'

'On any subsequent occasion I'll do an increasing amount of damage.'

'Sure, great, I give in. I'm coming with you.'

'Just so we understand each other. Nothing must stand in the way of my mission.'

The Minstrel Boy got unsteadily to his feet. He was still massaging his bruised throat.

'Okay, you've got a deal. I won't cause any more trouble.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stood erect and watchful.

'Then get dressed. We've wasted enough time already.'

The Minstrel Boy looked calculatingly at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'There is one thing.'

'What?'

'I figure I ought to get paid for this job.'

'You'll be amply rewarded.'

'How much?'

'I guarantee the temple won't turn down any reasonable request.'

'Okay, that's good enough.'

A small wash bowl was set in one corner of the bare stone room. Beside it was a simple wooden cupboard with a plain mirror set in the front of it. As the Minstrel Boy moved across the room, Jeb Stuart Ho noted that he was genuinely unsteady on his feet. He bent over the sink and splashed water on his face and neck.

'That deprivation sure leaves you feeling bad.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked bored.

'That would seem adequate reason not to engage in it.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'I might have known you'd say that.'

The Minstrel Boy opened the cupboard, and took out a plain white cotton shirt. When he'd put this on, he removed a pair of grey pinstripe trousers from a hanger, and climbed into them. Next he pulled on a pair of high-heeled black boots, and tucked his pants into them. He turned to the mirror and dragged a comb through his dark, curly hair. He stepped back and admired the reflection of his pale, pinched face for a couple of moments. Then he lifted a belt that held five matched throwing knives, and strapped it around his hips. Jeb Stuart Ho glanced at him questioningly.

'You don't carry a gun?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned and shook his head. He patted the knives.

'These will do me just fine. After all, I've got you to protect me, haven't I? You'd be lost without me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho remained silent. The Minstrel Boy laughed and took a black frock coat from the cupboard. He slipped it on and brushed himself down. He clipped a miniature generator to his belt, and then completed his outfit with a wide-brimmed black hat with a silver and turquoise band. With a swift practised motion he tipped the hat over his eyes, and grinned at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Okay, I'm ready. Where do you want to go?'

'The city of Litz . . .'

'Litz! I know Litz.'

'There will be a problem in getting there.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'No, no, it's a good distance, but there's no real problem in getting there.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked puzzled.

'Then why do you laugh?'

'Relief, I guess. Litz is, at least, halfway civilized. I began to think that you wanted to go to some weird place out in the fringes.'

'It might come to that in the end, but Litz will do for now. Shall we get started?'

The Minstrel Boy sat down on the edge of the coffin.

'Just hold on a minute. A trip to Litz isn't just a short stroll. We need to plan the thing out.'

'We can't walk?'

'No way. If we walked, I'd go insane before we were halfway there. We'll need lizards.'

It was Jeb Stuart Ho's turn to look puzzled.

'Lizards?'

'Sure, lizards. They'll get us there, and all I'll have to concentrate on is letting them know where we want to go. They'll find their way there without any help.'

'There are lizards in this place?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Sure, there's a bunch of them stabled in the lower levels. Nobody'll notice if we take a couple.'

Jeb Stuart Ho raised a dubious eyebrow.

'Will no one object if we remove something that is their property? Might they not become bitter about it?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'What if they do? We'll be long gone before that happens. In any case, I doubt if anyone will notice. Nobody hardly ever leaves here. I just hope someone's remembered to feed them recently. Lizards are okay, but they have a tendency to get mean when they're hungry.'

He pushed his shirt cuffs out from his jacket with a sharp hustler's gesture, and jerked his head for Jeb Stuart Ho to follow him. They left the bare room with its steel coffin, and started down the endless corridors of Wainscote. It was almost like a dress rehearsal for the coming adventure. Jeb Stuart Ho was already totally in the hands of the Minstrel Boy. The builders of Wainscote had employed no recognizable logic in its construction. He knew that he could easily wander for days before he found his way out. He carefully watched the Minstrel Boy's back for any sign of a trick. He didn't altogether like the situation, but he realized there was no other way.

They descended five flights of stone stairs. It was like dropping into the vaults of the earth. The ceilings became covered with trails of dark green slime that hung like stalactites. Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy had to duck their heads to avoid it brushing off on their clothes.

Jeb Stuart Ho noticed that as they went lower and lower, a smell somewhat like ammonia got stronger. At the bottom of the fifth set of stairs it became almost overpowering. Ho glanced at the Minstrel Boy.

'What causes this smell?'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'Lizards. They stink something cruel. Nobody ever cleans the pens.'

'Why not?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Jeb Stuart Ho impatiently.

'Why should they bother? Who gives a fuck? Like I said, nobody ever goes anywhere.'

'But they are living creatures.'

'So?'

Jeb Stuart Ho gave up. It was obvious that the Minstrel Boy's mind worked in a very different way to his. They reached the bottom of the last flight of steps. The smell became almost overpowering. Ho raised his cloak to cover his nose and mouth. The Minstrel Boy grinned at him.

'Bad, isn't it?'

They walked through a high stone arch and into the lizard stables of Wainscote. Jeb Stuart Ho looked along the row of stalls that housed the huge creatures. Despite his training to expect anything, he couldn't help being awed by the huge beasts. Their bodies alone were twice as high as a man, and their long necks extended to almost twice that again. As the two men approached them they shifted uneasily, and made deep bleating sounds. One of them swung its head round. It stared at Ho and the Minstrel Boy from dark moist eyes. Its thin reptilian tongue flicked in and out like a whip. Jeb Stuart Ho glanced at the Minstrel Boy.

'Are you sure you can control these beasts?'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'Sure. Nothing to it. Why? Are you nervous or something?'

'No, I was just wondering.'

'Don't worry. I know all about lizards.'

He walked over to one of the largest, a huge dark green monster, and slapped it hard on the rump.

'Lizards are no problem.'

He ducked under the heavy chain that closed off the end of the stall. He made a shrill whistling noise between his teeth. The animal inclined its head, and the Minstrel Boy began to scratch it vigorously on the nose.

'See? No trouble at all. We might as well get saddled up and start moving. There ain't nothing to hang around here for.'

He pointed to a row of saddles hanging from some short beams that jutted from the opposite wall.

'Bring over two saddles and two sets of harness, and I'll get a couple of these monsters hitched up to go.'

Jeb Stuart Ho walked over to the rack and picked up a heavy wooden saddle. The leather girth was attached to the seat with huge decorated silver studs. It must have once looked magnificent, but now it was filthy and covered in dust. He wiped off the worst of it and hefted the saddle over to where the Minstrel Boy was standing, still scratching the big lizard. He put it down, and went back for another one. The Minstrel Boy gestured towards the rack.

'We'll need two sets of harness as well.'

The harnesses consisted of a wide leather collar with a single long rein attached to it. Jeb Stuart Ho brought them over to the Minstrel Boy, who took one of them and buckled the collar round the neck of the big green lizard. He led it out of the stall and handed the rein to Ho.

'Hold this one, while I go and sort you out a mount.'

Jeb Stuart Ho gingerly grasped the lizard's rein. To his relief the creature showed no inclination to go anywhere. The Minstrel Boy sauntered down the row of stalls, inspecting the other animals. Finally he stopped in front of a smaller lizard, with a yellowish mottled hide. He attached a collar to it and led it towards where Jeb Stuart Ho was standing.

'This one should suit you. It's pretty docile and easy to handle.'

Ho and the lizard looked at each other distrustfully. Slowly Ho stretched out his hand and scratched its nose. The lizard bleated gratefully. The Minstrel Boy sniffed.

'Maybe we'll turn you into a lizard handler before this trip's over.'

Jeb Stuart Ho glanced at him sharply.

'I have more important objectives for this journey.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'We'd better get the saddles on, or we won't reach any kind of objective at all.'

The huge bulk of the creatures made putting the saddles on them an awkward business. A set of stone steps ran up one part of the stable wall. The Minstrel Boy led the first lizard over to them. He got Jeb Stuart Ho to hold it while he picked up one of the saddles, climbed the steps and tossed the saddle over the animal's back. After that, he had to scramble under its belly and buckle the girth. The whole process was repeated with the second lizard. When they were both

saddled, he walked to the far end of the stable and pulled open a pair of high double doors. Sunlight streamed into the dim room, and the lizards shuffled and blinked nervously. Beyond the doors, an inclined ramp led up to ground level.

The Minstrel Boy climbed up into the saddle of the big green lizard, and Jeb Stuart Ho hauled himself on to the smaller yellow one. He watched carefully as the Minstrel Boy dug his heels sharply into the monster's side. The lizard began to lumber forward towards the open doors. Jeb Stuart Ho tried the same thing with his own mount, and was surprised and pleased when it began following its big green brother.

As they climbed the ramp, Jeb Stuart Ho called out to the Minstrel Boy.

'Should we not close the door behind us?'

The Minstrel Boy turned and laughed.

'Why bother? With the doors open, the lizards will get restless and start trying to break out. It might force someone to do something about it.'

They reached the top of the ramp, and pointed their mounts away from Wainscote. Jeb Stuart Ho would have liked to gather more information about the place, but his mission was more pressing. He and the Minstrel Boy vigorously kicked their lizards, and the beasts broke into a ponderous, earth-shaking canter.

A.A. Catto stared sourly across the crowded room. The tables of the Venus Flytrap were each enclosed in their own plexiglass dome. If she dimmed the interior light she could see what was going on in the rest of the club; if she turned it up the rest of the club could see her. Right then, she had it set at medium. The other people in the place were reduced to dark murmuring shadows. She was just a dim shape to them inside the bubble. That was the way A.A. Catto wanted it. She didn't want to see anyone, and she didn't want to be on display.

A.A. Catto was beginning to hate the Venus Flytrap. She was beginning to hate the entire city of Litz. She was even beginning to hate herself. She looked down at her thirteen-year-old body encased in the brief metal foil dress. She was thoroughly sick of the thin arms and legs and half-formed breasts. The only thing that stopped her leaving off the growth retarder and letting it mature was the possibility that she might regret it afterwards. Once you allowed yourself to age there was no going back. You could halt your growth any time you liked, you could accelerate it if you wanted to. The one thing you couldn't do was reverse the process. A.A. Catto was sick of living in an age of such incomplete and half-arsed technology.

Way over on the other side of the club she could just make out Reave. His face was illuminated by the rainbow lamp above the four square table. He sat with his back to the curtain of black water that served as one wall of the club. She could see from the anxious, stupid look on his face that he was losing consistently. He was more interested in watching the tits of the topless dealer than in paying attention to his cards. She was beginning to get sick of Reave. She kept him,, she dressed him, chose all his clothes and all his makeup. He looked particularly cute tonight in his black silk suit and purple lipstick. If only he didn't always behave like a dummy. A.A. Catto expected, if not intelligence, at least some originality. All Reave seemed able to come up with was doglike devotion.

Her hand moved towards the silver ring on her left hand. It was inlaid with a complicated gold pattern. Reave wore a matching collar. The two pieces of jewellery were linked by an energy transfer. A.A. Catto only had to move the ring to push any experience from a soft tingle to unbearable pain straight into Reave's nervous system. She turned the ring a fraction in the

direction of pain. Reave jerked, dropped his cards, then looked in her direction and smiled. A.A. Catto's lower lip stuck out and her mouth turned down at the corners. He was so predictable. Even when she hurt him, he took it as a sign of affection. There were times when she felt like turning him loose to fend for himself.

Beside her in the bubble, one of the club's specially cloned entertainers was still going through his mildly obscene monologue. He wore a white suit, black shirt and an archaic white necktie. His right ear was pierced by a plain gold ring and his black hair was slicked back and shining. His face was framed by symmetrical sideburns. A.A. Catto assumed that some pretty, juvenile gangster from the motion picture era had been used as a model for his batch. The big thing in Litz right then was images from the days before break-up. A pale, almost albino girl drifted past the bubble. She wore high, polished boots and the black and red uniform of some ancient, long vanished political/military culture. A.A. Catto wondered if she ought to get an outfit like that. She turned to the clone and cut him off in mid sentence.

'Do you think I'd look nice dressed like her?'

He responded without even looking at the girl.

'You'd look cute in anything, babe.'

His accent and vocabulary were tailored to match his image. The only trouble with clones was that they were anxious to please to the point of paranoia. A.A. Catto sighed, and smiled sweetly.

'Hold out your hand.'

The clone did as he was told. A.A. Catto took the thin black cheroot out of her mouth and ground it out in his palm. The clone gasped, clutched his injured hand and then drew back his fist to hit her. A.A. Catto shook her head.

'Don't bother. I don't want to be beaten up. I'm bored with you. You're dismissed.'

The clone got to his feet, still nursing his hand. A.A. Catto grinned as he walked away in the direction of the availability point. They were so funny, programmed like robots but still human enough to suffer. Although they could get tedious, A.A. Catto thoroughly approved of clones. They were good to have around.

She stood up herself, left the bubble and moved quietly to where Reave was still losing at four square. Reave didn't notice her as she came up behind him. A.A. Catto twisted the ring hard into the pain register. Reave screamed, his back arched, and he toppled from his stool. The topless clone halted in mid-deal and waited, holding the pack of long rectangular cards in front of her

full breasts, to see what would happen. Clones weren't programmed to show emotion unless it was expected of them.

Reave lay on the carpeted floor, hunched in a foetal position. The other customers of the Venus Flytrap coolly acted as if nothing had happened. After about five seconds, A.A. Catto started to become impatient.

'Get up, damn you.'

Reave whimpered and slowly uncurled. A.A. Catto nudged him with her toe.

'I said get up.'

Painfully he climbed to his feet. He massaged the back of his neck and looked reproachfully at her.

'Why did you do that?'

A.A. Catto's lip curled.

'Because you're pathetic.'

'Pathetic?'

'You've lost a fortune tonight.'

Reave ran his fingers through his long straight hair.

'But it doesn't matter. We've got permanent, unlimited credit.'

A.A. Catto clenched her tiny fists.

'I know we've got unlimited credit. It's my credit.'

'So what's wrong?'

'You had to go and lose.'

Reave nodded towards the still motionless clone.

'It's very hard to win against clones. They're programmed to be almost unbeatable.'

'So why play?'

'It was something to do. You wouldn't talk to me.'

'Do you wonder that I don't talk to you?'

Reave looked round helplessly.

'I . . .'

'Oh, for god's sake, shut up. We're leaving.'

Reave turned and signalled to the dealer that he was giving up his place at the table. She smiled an automatic sexy smile.

'Thanks for the play, sir.'

Reave grinned back.

'That's okay.'

A.A. Catto scowled disgustedly.

'Do you have to be so grovelling polite to clones?'

Reave shrugged.

'It doesn't cost anything. I mean, they are still human.'

'You disgust me. You and your stupid ideas.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Do you always have to apologize?'

'I . . .'

A.A. Catto's hand moved to her ring. The colour drained out of Reave's face and he held up his hands.

'Please . . . not now. If you knock me out again it'll only slow us up getting away from here.'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'That's true. You know, Reave, now and again you show flashes of crude intelligence.'

Reave bit his lip and said nothing. It wasn't worth talking back to her when she was in this kind of mood. He followed her as she turned on her heel and swept out of the club. There had been a time when Reave might have made some kind of gesture behind her back, but now he didn't even bother. He simply clasped his hands behind him and walked a few paces to her rear.

As they approached the club's exit, the liveried doorman, resplendent in maroon and gold, snapped to attention and saluted.

'You require transportation, Miss Catto?'

A.A. Catto shook her head.

'I think I'll walk, but you better get me some guardians.'

She handed him her credit card, and he dropped it into the call box on his wrist.

'How many would you like, Miss Catto?'

'Three should be enough.'

The doorman punched out the guardians' code, and within seconds three clear-eyed, square-jawed clones swung into the foyer of the club in perfect step. They wore the one piece silver uniforms and red and blue helmets of the Litz Security Corporation. They halted in front of the

doorman. Each one was at least two metres tall. They towered over everyone else in the foyer. The centre one of the three saluted the doorman.

'Guardian unit reporting as requested. Which is the client?'

The doorman indicated A.A. Catto. The centre guardian turned and saluted again,

'How may we serve you, miss?'

'My companion and I have decided to walk home. We'd like you to escort us. I trust you're adequately equipped?'

The guardian touched the long nightstick and heavy-duty stun-gun at his belt. His companions were similarly armed.

'We are equipped for anything that might occur in the street.'

'We might as well proceed then.'

The centre guardian bowed and held the door open. The one on his left preceded Reave and A.A. Catto into the street. The one on his right brought up the rear. After the darkness of the club, the street was a blaze of glory. Although no daylight was built into the environment of Litz, and it was a city of perpetual night, its illuminations were magnificent to look upon. At street level each ground car was festooned with lights. The stores, theatres, fun palaces and brothels vied with each other in the size and splendour of constantly shifting, glowing, illuminated signs. Overhead, searchlights slashed across the sky, probing the darkness with their slim fingers.

Every window in the high buildings showed its own light, and the lighter than air craft that floated between the tall towers all carried their own spots and riding lights. Some were even floodlit from below.

A few people hung round the carpeted sidewalks outside the cabarets and casinos. Small groups of whores made the come-on outside the bordellos and nudie bars, but apart from them the streets were almost empty of pedestrians. A.A. Catto and Reave only passed a few isolated people, all escorted by tall clones from the various security services. Every so often a black-uniformed, two-man foot patrol from the Litz Department of Correction would stroll past. The LDCs weren't clones. They were normal men who enjoyed the dangerous and brutal work.

The streets of Litz may not have been safe for unprotected individuals on foot, but for ground cars it was a different matter. The huge shining vehicles streamed past in a continuous procession down the wide, ten lane thoroughfares. Their lights added to the general display of the endless Litz night.

A.A. Catto, Reave and their three guardians reached the first intersection. As they waited for the traffic control to change, the guardian who seemed to have the role of leader looked at her questioningly.

'Where do you wish to go, miss?'

'The Orchid House.'

A.A. Catto waved her hand towards the slim pyramid that stood a few blocks away, towering over the surrounding buildings. The guard looked at it and then back to the girl.

'If we took the main throughways it would be a longer walk, but there would be less possibility of incident.'

A.A. Catto grinned at him.

'Let's take the back streets, huh? I'm sure you boys can take care of any incident.'

The guardian bowed deferentially.

'As you wish, miss.'

Reave looked round dubiously, but didn't say anything. Despite the time he'd spent in Litz, he was still afraid of the menacing nighttime city.

They crossed the intersection and walked on down the throughway for another block. Then they turned off into a side street. It was like entering another world. The bright lights were left behind. Dull yellow street lights replaced the flashing reds, greens, blues and golds of the main streets. They had only walked along the mean back way for a few minutes when a group of figures loomed up in front of them. The three guardians spread out in front of A.A. Catto and Reave, their hands going to their long nightsticks.

Faint glimmers of light were reflected from the shoulders of the figures that clustered round the lamp standard. A.A. Catto felt a tingle of excitement run through her. They were one of the notorious juv gangs that roamed the back ways of the city, terrorizing anyone who strayed away from the bright lights.

The guardians ushered Reave and A.A. Catto out into the middle of the road. They spread out and formed a loose line between their charges and the juvs. As they came closer they could make out their distinctive outfits. The light had reflected from their shiny silver jackets. They were woven out of steel thread, with solid metal shoulders that rose into twin spikes on either side of the wearer's head. There was also another steel plate set between the shoulders, which bore the emblem of the wearer's gang. The outfit was completed by black tights with a decoratively

padded crutch and heavy black knee boots, and, of course, the haircut. The juv haircuts varied from month to month. Right then, they were favouring it close cropped at the sides and very long over the top and back, with an elaborately curled quiff hanging down over their foreheads.

As A.A. Catto and her companions came within a couple of metres of the juvs, she saw that there were eight of them. They all appeared to be between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The tallest of them pulled a telescope knife from a pouch on his wide, studded belt and snapped it open. The guardians' hands dropped to their stunners. The juv raised his hand, inspected his fingers. He jabbed at one offending nail, grinned wolfishly and flicked the knife shut.

With the three guardians keeping themselves between their charges and the gang, A.A. Catto and Reave walked slowly past. A couple of the youths made obscene gestures, but none of them seemed to fancy taking on the heavily armed guardians. Reave kept looking back until the darkness once again swallowed up the gang. He let out his breath in a noisy gasp.

'Thank Christ that's all over.'

A.A. Catto looked at him contemptuously.

'Were you frightened, then?'

Reave nodded.

'Damn right I was frightened.'

'The guardians would have looked after us.'

Reave looked doubtful.

'If they'd decided to jump us, any one of us could have got a knife in the gut.'

A.A. Catto pursed her lips.

'They wouldn't have jumped us. They knew the guardians would have burned them down.'

'From what I've heard that wouldn't deter them. They can be totally suicidal if they feel like it.'

A.A. Catto sneered.

'From what you've heard?'

Reave shrugged but said nothing. They walked on in silence. The rest of the journey was uneventful until, just a short distance from the towering bulk of the Orchid House, they passed the dirty grey lights of a backway greasy spoon. A ragged figure was huddled in the doorway. As the small group walked past, it suddenly twitched and leaped to its feet. It quickly dodged past the guardians and grabbed at A.A. Catto's arm.

'Please miss, let's use your credit card, just for a meal, please miss.'

The voice was high and vaguely female, but the figure was too filthy and tattered for anyone to say, for sure, even whether it was human. A.A. Catto tried to shake it off, but it clung on with grim determination.

'Please miss, just a meal, let's use your card.'

The guardians swung round and pulled out their nightsticks. As the first blow struck, the creature fell to the ground screaming. It jerked and twisted, covering its head with its thin arms and pulling its knees up to protect its stomach. The guardians continued beating on it with their clubs until it ceased to move. Each time a blow fell there was a dull squishing thud. A pool of blood slowly spread over the surface of the road. When the figure lay still, one of the guardians prodded it with his toe. Satisfied that there was no sign of life, he hung his nightstick back on his belt. His two companions did the same. From the doorway of the greasy spoon a group of more ragged figures watched silently. They continued to stare as A.A. Catto, Reave and the three guardians walked away.

It was only another block before they reached the through-way and the imposing entrance of the Orchid House. No more of the back area people bothered them. As the black glass doors of the Orchid House slid open, the guardians saluted, turned on their heels and marched away. A.A. Catto and Reave entered the foyer and the huge doors hissed shut behind them.

After the back ways, the Orchid House was an opulent paradise. The triangular floor was made from a single piece of polished marble. It was dominated by a huge fountain. The three walls, crossed by tier after tier of apartment balconies, sloped slightly inwards, and rose almost as far as the eye could see. They met at a point over a thousand metres above. Artificial sunlight streamed down from a huge white sphere set in the top of the pyramid. Cascades of flowers and climbing plants hung like long garlands from the balconies. They were a splash of wild colour against the white walls.

Reave followed A. A, Catto towards the lifts. These were black spheres that rose from the floor. At rest, they sat in hemispherical depressions at the side of the foyer. They moved in straight lines, parallel to the wall, without any visible support. Reave still hadn't figured out how they worked. A.A. Catto touched an illuminated stud on the side of the lift and a section of the side silently opened. She stepped inside and Reave did the same. The interior of the lift was lit by a soft red light. Muted music came from a hidden speaker. A.A. Catto pressed the control for the ninety-third floor. Reave ran his fingers through his hair.

'Sure is good to be back home.'

A.A. Catto's eyes narrowed. She looked sideways at Reave.

'Don't get too pleased too soon, honey.'

Reave turned and looked at her in surprise.

'What's wrong now?'

'You've been giving me a pain all evening.'

'Oh, come on.'

'Come on, nothing. You've pissed me off, and you're going to pay for it.'

'Please, isn't it a bit late in the day for more games?'

A.A. Catto held up her ring finger.

'No games, sweetie. You are going to suffer.'

Reave opened his mouth to speak. He thought better of it, and closed it again. If the fancy took her, A.A. Catto had enough dope in the apartment to keep her awake for days. The game could go on for ages. He felt sick to his stomach. The lift stopped at the ninety-third floor and Reave followed her out, fingering the collar round his neck.

Jeb Stuart Ho, despite his concentration, was beginning to lose all sense of time. He could no longer remember how long he and the Minstrel Boy had been out in the nothings. The lizard had settled down to a steady, bounding lope, exactly as though it was running on hard ground. The lizard seemed to have a very definite sense of purpose. That was the only reassuring thing about the whole situation.

Jeb Stuart Ho looked to his left. He could just about make out the Minstrel Boy against the strange glittering grey mist. The image of the man on the lizard kept shifting and breaking up. It was only when the two of them were very close together that he could see the Minstrel Boy and his mount clearly. At one point, the Minstrel Boy had drifted some distance away and vanished altogether. It was then that Jeb Stuart Ho had come close to panic. He hadn't experienced a feeling like that since he was a small child. The brotherhood discipline had kept him from going over the edge, but he'd been immeasurably relieved when the Minstrel Boy had finally flickered into view again.

Ho stretched out his hand. It was a signal to the Minstrel Boy that he wanted to say something. Unless they were actually touching, there was no point in speaking. The words became lost and jumbled in the howling silence of the bright greyness. The Minstrel Boy moved towards him and grasped his hand.

'What's the trouble, Killer?'

Jeb Stuart Ho disliked the nickname the Minstrel Boy was trying to saddle him with, but he didn't complain. There would be time enough for that when they reached somewhere tangible.

'Where are we now?'

'In the nothings.'

'I know that. What I meant was, will we get somewhere soon?'

Jeb Stuart Ho made himself act very patiently when talking to the Minstrel Boy. The Minstrel Boy grinned at him.

'Yeah . . . soon.'

'How soon?'

'Dunno. Time's pretty relative out here.'

'Relative to what?'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'Relative to just about anything that's going. That's why it's so hard to estimate.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was sure that he was deliberately trying to confuse him. He wasn't sure why.

'Are you sure you know where you are?'

'Sure I'm sure. I always know where I am. I'm famous for it.'

The Minstrel Boy let go of Jeb Stuart Ho's hand, and they drifted apart. The Minstrel Boy's image began to flicker as the space between them increased,

Despite all his training, the lack of time sense weighed heavily on Jeb Stuart Ho. Nothing had prepared him for being mounted on the galloping lizard, rushing headlong into seemingly eternal greyness. He closed his eyes and tried to put himself into an intermediate state of trance. At first it was impossible, but gradually he felt himself merging with the strange, shattered universe. It was the sound of a voice that eventually brought him back to the material world.

'Come on, Killer. Wake up, what's wrong with you?'

Jeb Stuart Ho opened his eyes. The Minstrel Boy was standing beside him, tugging at his leg.

'What's the matter with you, I thought your brain, had fused?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I was meditating.'

'No shit?'

Ho suddenly realized that he could hear the Minstrel Boy quite clearly without their actually touching. They were obviously out of the nothings. He looked around. They were standing on a huge, even expanse of grey rock. It was flat and featureless. The sky above was a lighter shade of grey, and the air was damp and cold. The lizards were moving about uncomfortably. Ho shivered, and pulled his cloak tight round his shoulders.

'Are we on the same level as Litz?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Somewhere on the way.'

'Where?'

'That's hard to say.'

'I thought you took pride in knowing where you are?'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'I don't take pride, I know.'

'Should a developed faculty not be a source of pride?'

'I know, that's all.'

Jeb Stuart Ho swung a leg over the lizard's back.

'As you wish.'

He slid to the ground.

'What is this place?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'It has no name. By rights it shouldn't be here. I can't see what keeps it stable.'

'Why did we stop here?'

'The lizards stopped. They don't seem happy.'

'What has happened to them?'

The Minstrel Boy took off his hat and ran his fingers through his curly hair.

'I don't know. Their minds seem to be closed. I can't get across at all.'

It was the first time Jeb Stuart Ho had seen the Minstrel Boy look genuinely worried. He hesitated before he spoke again.

'Should we not continue with caution and find out why the lizards have brought us to this place?'

The Minstrel Boy looked down at the ground.

'I'd just as soon turn back.'

'You know I can't do that.'

'Sure.'

Jeb Stuart Ho remounted his lizard. The Minstrel Boy reluctantly did the same. Before they started to move the Minstrel Boy looked across at Ho.

'I really don't like this. Just remember that.'

Ho looked grimly ahead.

'I'll remember.'

The Minstrel Boy dug his spurs hard into the lizard. It lurched away at a half-hearted waddle. Jeb Stuart Ho's mount trailed after it in the same lethargic manner. They continued their slow progress for over an hour. A strange, cone-shaped promontory appeared on the horizon. As they

gradually approached it, the lizards became increasingly restive and uneasy. They were awkward to handle, and kept trying to stray away from the Minstrel Boy's course.

About three hundred metres from the slope of the cone, the lizards stopped dead and refused to go any further. They stood still, shifting their weight from one foot to another and swinging their long necks from side to side. Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy both dismounted. Whatever was affecting the lizards was also affecting the two men. The Minstrel Boy had broken out in a cold sweat, and Jeb Stuart Ho felt an irrational fear trying to take hold of him. He exerted the maximum control on his mind and looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'There is something terribly wrong here.'

The Minstrel Boy had started to shake. His voice came out as a strangled croak.

'Let's get out of here.'

Jeb Stuart Ho gripped him by the shoulder.

'Relax, breathe slowly and deeply. A man may run from an external danger, but cannot run from fear in his mind.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. Sweat was still pouring off him. It was obvious he was trying to keep himself together, but when he spoke his voice was cracking on the verge of hysteria.

'Let's get the hell out of here! Now! I can't stand it.'

'Do not succumb to the fear. The fear of fear is the poison of the soul.'

'I . . . can't take it!'

The Minstrel Boy's voice was almost screaming. Jeb Stuart Ho took his face in both hands. He massaged the Minstrel Boy's neck.

'Think, be calm, use your intelligence. What is this thing?'

'I don't know. I can't think.'

'Where does it come from?'

The Minstrel Boy could no longer speak. He waved his hand in the direction of the cone. His legs began to give way and he clung to Jeb Stuart Ho. Ho gently pulled him back to his feet.

'We must go to the cone and make this thing cease.'

'No! No! No!'

The Minstrel Boy slipped into uncontrollable hysterics. Jeb Stuart Ho slapped him hard across the face, and he fell silent. Jeb Stuart Ho took him by the arm and, half supporting him, began to lead him towards the cone. They stumbled for about a hundred metres. The mind-wrenching fear

seemed to grow stronger. Then the Minstrel Boy groaned and sank to his knees.

'I can't go on.'

'The superior man faces his fear and in facing it overcomes his weakness.'

The Minstrel Boy fell on his side. He rolled over and pulled his knees up to his chest.

'I . . . can't . . . do . . . it!'

Jeb Stuart Ho knelt down beside the Minstrel Boy.

'If you don't strive to overcome it, it could kill you.'

'I don't care!'

The Minstrel Boy lay still with his eyes tightly closed and his face contorted. Jeb Stuart Ho stood up, and began walking up the side of the cone by himself. Each step became an inhuman effort. The fear had become a physical force. His legs were leaden. It was like wading in sand. He stumbled frequently. As he neared the top, it became almost more than he could bear. The sky glowed an evil, menacing red. The rock appeared to reflect it, and danced with flame. The force battered at him like a hurricane. Black hallucinations, flapping like murderous bats, swooped at the edge of his vision.

He reached the top. The force became absolute torture. It was pushing at him so hard that it seemed to be tearing the flesh from his bones. It screamed around him like monsters from some awful hell. In front of him, in the very summit of the cone, was a circular depression. Lying in it, on a bed of soft sand, were nine gold eggs. Each one was about half the height of a man. Jeb Stuart Ho knew immediately that they were the source of the power. His instinct was to destroy them. His hand went to his gun. It was like moving in slow motion. Inch by inch his fingers moved towards his belt. All the force seemed to be concentrated on his right arm. It was filled with a burning cold that gnawed at the bone and muscle. His fingers curled round the butt. That too was deathly cold. His fingers froze to it. As he slowly drew the gun from the holster, it felt as if the flesh of his hand was being ripped apart. He slowly raised the gun. Its weight seemed unbearable. The muscles in his arm felt like they were going to snap. Gradually the gun came in line with the clutch of eggs. He eased back the trigger. The scream around him rose in pitch. It felt as though his ears had started bleeding, maybe his very brain. The eggs seemed far away. His vision tunnelled. He desperately hauled on the trigger. It would hardly move. He began to black out, then, through it all, he heard the Minstrel Boy screaming.

'Don't! Don't! For god's sake don't do it! They're only trying to protect themselves.'

It suddenly all fell into place. Jeb Stuart Ho touched the half formed entities inside the gold shells. He felt the power of the scarcely developed minds. He felt their fear and their vulnerability. He was awed by what they might become. For an instant everything hung poised. The gun fell from his fingers. He sank, crosslegged, to the ground. He forced his mind to be calm. The beings' fear still washed over him, but it was no longer aimed directly at him. He gathered all his strength and slowly directed peace and gentleness. He meant them no harm. He projected that as hard as he could. Veins pumped in his forehead as he tried to thrust his way through the fear.

He reached them. His thoughts penetrated through to the beings in the eggs. They seized on his projections as something new and strange. They dragged it out of him with a greedy hunger. They were insatiable. He hung on to stop his mind being dragged from him. He begged them to stop, but their infant greed demanded more and more. Jeb Stuart Ho reached his final limit. His consciousness was drained away.

The world went black. His body toppled, and rolled down the side of the cone like a discarded puppet whose strings had been cut.

He woke up to find the Minstrel Boy wiping his face with a damp cloth. He grinned at Ho.

'Shit, Killer. I really thought you were dead for sure, this time.'

Jeb Stuart Ho raised his head.

'How long have I been here?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Maybe a couple of hours.'

'What happened?'

'Don't ask me. You were up there, you did it. One minute all hell was breaking loose, then suddenly it was beautiful, like the dawn coming up.'

Jeb Stuart Ho sat up. The landscape had completely changed. The ground was still grey rock, but it was broken up by clumps of green vegetation growing out of cracks in its surface. Tiny streams trickled into crystal clear pools. The sky was a deep even blue. It was as if the beings had taken apart his mind, and reshaped their environment according to what they found there. A little distance away, the lizards grazed happily on the vegetation.

Jeb Stuart Ho carefully stood up. He had expected his body to show some signs of strain after the ordeal. He was surprised to find there were none. He felt as though he had just woken from a

comfortable sleep. He looked at the cone. It radiated a glow of benign contentment. His gun was still lying at the foot of the slope, where it had come to rest after he had dropped it. He walked over and picked it up. As he touched the weapon, the sky seemed to darken. The lizards looked up in alarm. He quickly dropped it into its holster and things resumed their previous calm. The lizards returned to their chewing.

The Minstrel Boy walked over to where Jeb Stuart Ho was standing at the foot of the cone. He was grinning happily. His friendliness was almost unnatural. He put his arm round Ho's shoulders.

'Looks like it turned out okay.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'It would seem so.'

The Minstrel Boy looked up at the cone.

'I'm almost sorry to leave.'

'We have to leave.'

'I knew you'd say that.'

'We should start.'

The Minstrel Boy stared at the ground. He seemed reluctant to start back into the nothings.

'It's like I'm thinking we ought to leave some kind of mark on this place.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him in surprise.

'Why?'

'I dunno, just so we know we've been here.'

'Surely we know that without leaving our mark here?'

'Maybe we should give it a name or something?'

Jeb Stuart Ho gestured towards the top of the cone.

'They must have a name for this place.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Yeah, maybe. I dunno.'

He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a high-pitched whistle. The lizards looked up, and began lumbering slowly towards where the two men were standing. Ho and the Minstrel Boy each caught the reins of his own mount, and climbed into the saddle. They turned the lizards and rode slowly past the cone. Jeb Stuart Ho paused for a moment and stared hard at it, then he took

a deep breath and started after the Minstrel Boy.

A little grey-haired man in a quilted dressing gown tugged open the lift gate and padded across the frayed carpet of the Leader Hotel lobby, and up to the reception desk. He waited until the desk clerk looked up from his comic book and deigned to notice him.

'Yeah?'

The little man cleared his throat, and tugged the faded robe closer round his bony shoulders.

'Did my letter come?'

The desk clerk didn't even bother to look at the pigeonholes behind him.

'Nothing came.'

The little man remained where he was.

'Are you sure? Couldn't you check?'

The desk clerk put down his comic book and looked at the little man with cold patience.

'Nothing came, Arthur. Just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that and every day you've been here. Nothing ever comes for you, Arthur. Okay?'

Arthur cleared his throat again.

'I'll try tomorrow.'

The desk clerk turned over the page of his comic book.

'You do that.'

Arthur turned away and shuffled back to the lift. Billy Oblivion sprawled in the sagging armchair and watched the tiny drama without interest. It happened every day. Every day Arthur came down from his tiny room on the twenty-seventh floor to look for the letter that would change his life. Every day the letter failed to arrive. The lift door rattled shut and Arthur returned to the twenty-seventh floor. The desk clerk went back to his comic book, and Billy went on staring at the semi-erotic frieze that was slowly crumbling away from the dirty pink wall.

For most of its residents the Leader Hotel was the end of the line. A tall warren of tiny rooms and dim corridors that smelled of decay and urine. As long as you kept paying the rent you were wholly, totally free to overdose, drink yourself to death or simply grow numb. Billy hoped that none of those things would happen to him. He hoped that one day he'd manage to get out of the

place and into something better. Billy's hope didn't guarantee him any protection against those fates. Most people in the Leader Hotel hoped for something, but still it happened to them. The Leader Hotel was the last stop for the non-people, the ones who, for one reason or another, didn't have credit cards.

Billy Oblivion didn't have a credit card. He'd never had one. He'd wandered into Litz without one, found that the good life was closed to him, and wound up at the Leader. He'd been there ever since. Billy the pimp they called him now. That was on account of Darlene. Darlene had picked him up, and kept him ever since. Darlene made enough to keep them both surviving at the Leader, but never enough for them to get out. Darlene didn't have a credit card. It had been taken away for some unspecified crime. Darlene never went into the exact details.

Not having a credit card created problems for Darlene in her profession, and Darlene's problems automatically became Billy's problems. Not having a credit card meant that her tricks couldn't pay her by a straightforward credit transfer. She had to operate a kind of barter system. She fucked them, or did whatever else they wanted, and they slipped her some kind of small valuable. These she unloaded on the desk clerk, who credited them with enough to pay the rent and live. He, of course, only gave them a fraction of what the stuff was worth, and made sure they never got sufficiently ahead actually to get out of the hotel.

The previous night, however, Billy and Darlene had made more of a mess of things than usual. Darlene had had a reasonably good afternoon. She'd turned three tricks. Three tricks in an afternoon was good for her. It wasn't that Darlene was unattractive, but here was no way she could compete with the big legitimate brothels. They creamed off most of the custom that just wanted to get laid. Darlene had to make do with the ones who were funny for lowlife. She got the ones who liked to follow a good-looking non-person back to the Leader, the ones who got an extra kick that way.

The three tricks the previous afternoon had made Billy and Darlene a shade overconfident. They'd blown all their credit on a bottle of hotel booze and a package of funaids. Darlene had been certain that if she hit the street later that night, not that night and day made much difference in the permanent dark of the city, she could make the next day's room rent.

Of course, it had all been a fantasy. The booze and the pills had made sure that they'd become too fused to move from the bed until the house detective had come knocking with his regular morning call of pay up or quit. They didn't have the room rent, but the desk clerk and the house

detective had been very good about it. They'd let Billy sit around in the lobby until Darlene hustled up the rent. They hadn't even made them move their stuff out, just taken away the key.

Billy waited. It was kind of embarrassing but there was nothing else he could do. The lobby of the Leader Hotel was particularly depressing. It smelled of squalor and decay. The potted palms in the corner had long ago become brown, dry mummies, but no one had bothered to replace them or even throw them out. The carpet was worn into holes in a number of places. The ancient creaking lift only worked by a miracle, and there seemed to be no logical reason why the scarred and battered armchairs that stood dotted about in lonely groups hadn't fallen into shapeless ruin a long time ago. The high ceiling was marked with huge brown patches of damp.

Billy tried to distract himself by watching the vid that was mounted to the right of the reception desk. Its colour was blotchy and the 3D was alarmingly out of alignment. The only thing that could be said in its favour was that it worked at all. Not that he could see it all that clearly. His view was constantly interrupted by the swaying heads of three old winos who clustered around it as though it actually gave out heat. They were avidly watching one of the multiple hanging shows. Billy wondered how they managed to enjoy it so much. Everyone knew that the hanging shows were fixed.

After another hour, Billy's patience was finally rewarded. Darlene walked in with a fat little citizen in tow. He was just the type who always seemed to go for her. Pink with nervousness and excitement, he was sweating profusely into his pale blue one-piece suit. Dark stain had formed under his armpits. It was obvious that his dry-all-day anti-perspirant wasn't holding up under the strain.

Darlene was at least a head taller than the trick. Billy had to admit that she looked good. Her red dress scarcely covered her arse, leaving a flash of inviting thigh above her matching stockings and boots. The thin straps of her red suspenders added an extra touch of excitement. The red ensemble contrasted so nicely with her jet-black skin and close-cropped hair. There was no mistaking that Darlene was a good-looking broad. Billy was proud to have her. He loved that black skin, and he hoped she'd never make enough to get the colour change she was always bitching about.

Billy gave no sign of recognition as she stopped by the reception desk and turned pointedly towards the trick. It didn't do for a pimp to be too much in evidence while his woman was hustling. It tended to make the tricks nervous. Darlene winked at him from behind the fat man's

back, but Billy didn't respond. Then she went to work. She took the trick by the arm and steered him up to the reception desk.

'I guess you wouldn't mind giving my friend the desk clerk a little present, would you? He could get into trouble for letting me take you up to my room. You can use your credit card, honey. It's okay. It goes through the hotel.'

The little man looked apprehensively at the desk clerk.

'The payment won't be traced, will it?'

Darlene and the desk clerk both smiled reassuringly.

'Not a chance of that.'

The fat man reluctantly produced his credit card. The desk clerk dropped it into the hotel transfer unit. He dialled out the appropriate amount and handed it back. Billy sighed quietly as the desk clerk gave Darlene the room key. They were good for another day. She grinned at him and firmly propelled the fat man towards the lift.

'This way, honey. I know we're going to have a fantastic time. Just fantastic.'

The lift door rattled shut and they disappeared from sight. Billy stood up and brushed a bit of chair cover from his yellow satin suit. He straightened the diamante collar, brushed back his curly hair and strolled over to the desk.

'Did you clip him for enough so I can get a drink?'

The desk clerk grinned.

'He got clipped but good.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I did you a favour, kid. I kind of like you and your woman so I got two days' rent, a bit for me and a bit over. I figured you could use it after the state you got into last night.'

Billy didn't need to be reminded of the comedown he was going through. He did his best to look grateful.

'Give me a drink.'

The desk clerk reached under the counter and produced a bottle of schnapps and two glasses. He filled one and then cocked an eyebrow at Billy. Billy knew the ritual. He grinned.

'Go ahead, friend. Have one on me.'

He filled the second glass and downed it in one gulp. Billy took a little more time with his. He had to treat his head gently. It was in a bad way. The desk clerk was already smiling, looking for

a refill. Billy nodded, and the desk clerk took another shot. He was just angling for another when Lame Nancy hobbled in. She grinned at Billy.

'Found some credit then, stud?'

'What's it to you?'

'I like to see young people happy.'

Billy looked dubiously at Nancy. She was always showing up just after Darlene. Billy knew she was doing her best to try and get Darlene away from him. He wondered if she actually followed her about. Lame Nancy was a dyke who liked to keep her girls working. She had four set up in different rooms of the Leader. Her ambition seemed to be to make Darlene number five. Lame Nancy nodded towards the bottle of schnapps.

'Is there a drink in that for me?'

Billy's lip curled.

'Depends who's paying for it.'

Nancy sneered and patted Billy's cheek. 'I'll pay, sweet thing. Though I don't know what you're worried about. That little honey of yours is upstairs making you the price of a few drinks.'

'You got four, so I figure you can buy your own.'

Lame Nancy nodded towards the bottle. The desk clerk produced a third glass and poured Nancy a shot. She swallowed it in one gulp, and nodded for another. While she downed the second, Billy looked at her carefully. He knew that she'd probably take Darlene away if he gave her the chance. Lame Nancy looked striking and had a powerful personality. It radiated from her as she leaned against the bar in one of her favourite gunfighter poses. There was no denying that she was bizarre enough to attract Darlene. She gave an overall impression of being totally white. Her hair was white and cut into a shaggy crewcut, her skin had been done into an opalescent pearl finish. She wore a white body stocking, silver wedge-heeled sandals and a highly polished, stainless steel belt.

The whole outfit seemed designed to contrast sharply with the black callipers that supported her withered leg. Even these seemed to be designed for maximum shock. They were made from highly polished black steel, inlaid with an elaborate pattern of gold damascene. Lame Nancy cut a strange, impressive figure.

The lift door rattled back, and Billy switched his attention away from Nancy. The fat man hurried out of the lift, straight for the street door. He was still sweating, and avoided everyone's

eyes. Nancy laughed.

'Looks like your sweetie will be down with something for you soon, Billy dear.'

Billy didn't say anything. He knew he was being baited. Nancy's grin broadened.

'You ought to get that honey of yours to pull in a bit more of the goods. I know I would.'

Billy scowled.

'Keep out of my business, will you.'

Nancy laughed again.

'I intend to, sweet thing. There ain't enough in it for me.'

The lift rattled again. This time it was Darlene. Billy walked across the lobby to meet her. He wanted to head her off before she could join Nancy at the desk. He knew Nancy would try and get her drunk, and be dropping all kinds of broad hints about how much better a time Darlene would have with her rather than Billy. Billy didn't need that. He grinned at Darlene.

'Hi, how did it go?'

Darlene scowled.

'It went.'

'Did you get anything?'

Darlene fished between her breasts and came up with a small platinum pacifier.

'Enough.'

'Great.'

'That pig behind the desk will still short change us.'

'So 'what can we do?'

'What can you do? You're supposed to take care of business. I just do the work.'

Billy took hold of her arm.

'Don't get mad.'

'I ain't mad. I just don't need it.'

'Was it rough?'

Darlene's mouth curled into a sneer.

'Oh no, not rough, just another trick.'

'What happened?'

'You really want to know?'

'If it helps.'

'If it helps? Well, if it helps, he got me to squat on the floor of the shower while he pissed on me, and then I had to suck him off. Okay? Does that help? All for one lousy trinket. You know, sometimes I think you like to hear what I do with the tricks. Maybe you get a kick out of it.'

Darlene was working herself up into a frenzy. Billy wasn't sure whether to placate or punch her. While he was making up his mind, she started again.

'Maybe you'd like to have a go yourself. You fancy me squatting in front of you while you pissed over me?'

Billy shook his head.

'No, of course not.'

He wondered if he would enjoy it. He'd never thought about it before. He smiled at Darlene. The tirade had gone on long enough.

'Listen honey, we've got a bit of credit, why don't we get a bottle and go upstairs?'

Darlene didn't seem about to give in.

'You want to end up the same way we did today? I'm going out again to see what I can get.'

Before Billy could say anything, she had pulled away from him and was marching across the lobby, swaying her hips. She looked straight ahead, avoiding the stares of Nancy and the desk clerk. As she was about to flounce out into the street she almost collided with two men coming into the hotel.

'Why the fuck don't you look where you're going?'

One of the men stepped back and bowed slightly.

'I'm sorry.'

Darlene was going to start complaining, when she took a second look at them. One was a tall thin man, wrapped in a black cape. His straight hair hung to his shoulders, and the hilt of an evil-looking sword protruded from the cape. The other one was shorter and, if anything, thinner. A mass of black unruly curls were stuffed under a wide-brimmed hat. He wore a black frock coat and high boots. He had the same hard air of determination as his companion. Darlene ducked hastily out of the door. Her tantrum was completely forgotten. She didn't want to stick around and find out what the two strangers wanted.

Billy felt much the same way, only, to him, they weren't both strangers. He recognized the Minstrel Boy straight away. They'd been through a lot of trouble together, and most of the time Billy had wound up looking stupid. He could imagine the Minstrel Boy's sneers when he found

out that Billy had sunk to pimping in Litz. Billy stepped quickly back into the lift before the Minstrel Boy noticed him.

The Minstrel Boy and Jeb Stuart Ho walked up to the desk. Lame Nancy and the desk clerk both looked at them curiously. The winos went on staring at the Execution Hour.

The desk clerk put down his comic book as they approached.

'You want some rooms, gentlemen?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Not right now.'

It was the Minstrel Boy who was doing the talking. It had been his idea to make the Leader Hotel their first stop. They'd left the lizards in the pen at the edge of the nothings, and taken a ground cab into downtown Litz. In the past, the Minstrel Boy had found the Leader an ideal point at which to plug into the city's wealth of gossip and rumour. The desk clerk scowled at him.

'If you don't want rooms, what do you want?'

'Some information.'

'We sell room and board, we don't give out information. If you want information, watch the screen. Only don't do it here if you ain't rented no room.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled.

'Since when did information stop being worth something in Litz?'

The desk clerk looked sideways at him.

'You willing to pay?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. He turned to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You got your credit card?'

Ho put his hand under his cloak, and passed a card to the Minstrel Boy. The eyes of both Nancy and the desk clerk fastened on the black-edged brotherhood credit card as he placed it on the desk and grinned.

'Why don't you take whatever you think ten minutes of your conversation is worth?'

The desk clerk gingerly picked up the card. He seemed almost nervous of it. Nancy watched intently as he placed it in the transfer unit. He dialled out a modest sum. He looked up at the Minstrel Boy.

'Is that okay?'

'If that's what you think you're worth, then sure it's okay.'

The desk clerk handed the card back to the Minstrel Boy. He turned it over and then passed it to Jeb Stuart Ho. The desk clerk began to look nervous.

'What do you gentlemen want to know?'

Jeb Stuart Ho placed the tri-di of A.A. Catto in front of the desk clerk.

'Have you ever seen this woman?'

The desk clerk shook his head.

'She's never been in here.'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him sharply.

'You sure about that?'

'Never forget a face.'

'You ever hear of someone called A.A. Catto?'

'I heard the name.'

'What did you hear about her?'

'I heard people talk about her.'

'What did you hear?'

'Rich little bitch by all accounts. She came into town. Started doing the society circuit. The nightclubs, the best parties. The rumour was that she was kind of wild. Like, you know, vicious. Into pain, other people's pain. By all accounts she keeps herself looking like a young kid. That's about all I know.'

'Is she still in town?'

'As far as I know.'

'Do you know where she's living?'

'I heard she had an apartment at the Orchid House.'

'The Orchid House, where's that?'

'It's the big new apartment building. The big triangular one, right in the middle of downtown. You can't miss it.'

The Minstrel Boy turned to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I guess that's about it. All you have to do is get down there.'

The desk clerk laughed.

'It ain't as easy as that.'

The Minstrel Boy turned back to him.

'Why not?'

'You'll, never get inside the place. Not unless the lady wants to see you.'

'Why?'

'It's like a goddamn fortress. That's part of the service. Unless you've got a pass from a resident you'll never get past the security. There's a whole army of them.'

The desk clerk looked at him slyly.

'That's if the lady doesn't want to see you.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'The lady hasn't had a chance to get to know us yet.'

He thought for a minute.

'Suppose we took an apartment in the building?'

The desk clerk shook his head.

'Not a chance. There's a waiting list a mile long.'

'Can't you jump the list? I mean, if you've got the credit, surely anything's possible?'

'Not there it's not. Everyone who wants to move in there's got credit. You have to pay a fortune in bribes just to get on the list.'

'So we'd better make friends with the lady.'

The desk clerk grinned.

'That's the best way. Only the lady doesn't seem to be too friendly.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled.

'Maybe.'

He glanced at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'My friend here can be amazingly charming when he has to be.'

The desk clerk looked across at Jeb Stuart Ho, and then back to the Minstrel Boy.

'He doesn't say much.'

'That's part of his charm.'

There was a pause. The desk clerk looked down at the transfer unit, and then back up at the Minstrel Boy.

'There's nothing else you'd like to know?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'I think we've had our money's worth.'

He turned away, and looked at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I don't think we'll achieve much more here.'

'We know now where the woman lives.'

They walked towards the door and out into the street. Nancy watched them thoughtfully until they disappeared from sight.

As Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy emerged from the Leader Hotel, back into the glittering streets of Litz, the executive paused. He looked up and down the street. An airship drifted overhead about fifty metres up, following the line of the street. Lights shone out from the gondola. The sound of laughter and a ragtime piano drifted down. The Minstrel Boy looked up into the darkness and grinned.

'They sure know how to have parties in this town.'

Jeb Stuart Ho pursed his lips.

'They seem to know very little else.'

The Minstrel Boy shot him a sideways glance.

'You ought to check out a few, Killer. It'll be an education for you.'

Ho continued to look up and down the street.

'My education is a process that continues without the need to study such things as parties.'

'Hell, you ought to relax.'

'My task allows me no space to relax.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'There's no hope for you, man.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked confused.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand you. Hope can have no influence on probability.'

The airship drifted on down the street. The Minstrel Boy watched it go. Then he looked back at Ho.

"What's the matter with you, Killer? Why do you keep looking up and down the street like you were lost?"

'I was computing my next move until you began to talk about parties.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Do not be sorry. All information is of value. Unfortunately parties are not particularly relevant.'

'Was that a joke?'

'What?'

'Parties not being particularly relevant.'

'I fail to understand.'

The Minstrel Boy waved his hand in despair.

'Forget it. If you're stuck for a next move, why don't you pay me off?'

'I may need you again.'

'You may what?'

'I may need you again.'

'Shit! I got you to Litz. What more do you want? You don't need me to help you knock the chick off.'

'She might leave the city. I'd need you if that should happen.'

The Minstrel Boy began to get exasperated.

'Okay, okay, if that happens, come and see me. Maybe we can make a deal. I might even take the job. In the meantime, pay me off. I want to have a little fun. I ain't about to watch you hunt this chick all over town.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded thoughtfully.

'How would you like to be paid?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'The way I figured it, you've got this credit card. Right?'

'Right.'

'It's unlimited. Right?'

'Right.'

'All we have to do is go along to a bank and get them to issue me with a temporary card, so I can draw on your credit for a limited period, say a month. How does that suit you? That be okay?'

Jeb Stuart Ho made a slight bow.

'If that's what you want, I will do it.'

'Great.'

'There's one thing, though.'

The Minstrel Boy looked suspicious.

'What?'

'Where do we find a bank?'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'That's no problem.'

He waved his hand down the street.

'Walk in any direction. We'll soon find one. They need a lot of banks in Litz.'

'Are they open at night?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Sure they're open. They have to be. It's always night here.'

They started walking. It only took them two blocks before they found one. The First Exploitive Bank of Litz squatted smugly between a mass sex operation and a torture parlour. Its solid granite facade contrasted sharply with the glass and neon of its immediate neighbours. It seemed like a haven of conservative responsibility. As they mounted the steps that led up to the huge brass doors. Jeb Stuart Ho looked questioningly at the Minstrel Boy.

'Why do they need such places?'

'Banks?'

'Yes.'

'It gives them something to do. Them that like it.'

'Surely, in many places, Stuff credit is given free to all people?'

'They like to do things the hard way here.'

'It gives them power over their fellows.'

'That's the way they like it.'

'It seems hardly fair.'

'People who want things fair don't come here.'

Jeb Stuart Ho thought about it. They reached the top of the steps. The door was flanked by a squad of bank security guards armed with machine pistols and fragmentation bombs. As they walked inside, one of the guards stepped back on to a concealed foot switch, and a cluster of cameras, set high in the lofty ceiling, tracked their progress across the spacious marble interior. They joined the line in front of one of the cashiers' windows. The presence of the heavily armed Ho sent a ripple of alarm through the other customers. From various points around the bank, more armed guards watched him intently.

The line moved slowly towards the cashier's window. Finally it was Jeb Stuart Ho's turn. A

thin-lipped, middle-aged man in a black jacket and stiff wing collar stared nervously at him from behind the armoured glass.

'Can I help you?'

Jeb Stuart Ho smiled politely.

'I'd like to arrange a movement of credit.'

He indicated the Minstrel Boy.

'I'd Like my friend here to have a temporary credit card on my account.'

The clerk peered over the top of his rimless glasses.

'That kind of transaction is somewhat irregular.'

'Surely it is possible?'

'You'll have to wait.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed. The clerk climbed from his stool, but then turned back to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I'll need your card.'

Jeb Stuart Ho handed over the black-edged credit card. The clerk almost dropped it in fright, then collected himself and hurried away. Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy waited. They waited for five minutes. Jeb Stuart Ho closed his eyes. Five minutes became ten. The Minstrel Boy shifted from one foot to the other. After twelve minutes the clerk returned. He was accompanied by a more portly, more authoritarian version of himself. The portly one seemed determined not to be intimidated by the black-clad executive.

'Is this your card, sir?'

'Yes.'

'And you wish a temporary card issued to this . . . gentleman?'

He gestured towards the Minstrel Boy with a look of distaste. Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'That is correct.'

'You have to make a special appointment to transact that kind of business.'

'Why?'

'Because it is the normal procedure.'

'I see.'

There was a pause while the two men looked at each other. Finally the portly clerk gave in.

'If you go along to the window marked Special Appointments, you can make the arrangements.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed again. He and the Minstrel Boy moved along to the window marked Special Appointments. Behind it was a sour-faced woman with scraped-back grey hair. She wore a high-necked black dress with a cameo brooch at the throat. A pair of spectacles hung from her neck by a chain. She looked coldly at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Yes?'

Ho took a deep breath and repeated his request for the temporary card. The woman picked up his card and looked hard at it.

'Wait a moment.'

She disappeared. They waited for another seven minutes. A grossly fat little man in a black jacket and striped trousers bustled up to them. He held Jeb Stuart Ho's card in one hand, and thrust out the other in jovial greeting. Both hands were heavy with gold rings. He was sweating profusely despite the almost icy air conditioning. When he smiled he revealed a fortune in gold teeth.

'Mr Ho, so sorry to keep you waiting.'

Jeb Stuart Ho ignored his hand.

'It is Brother Ho.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'My title is Brother. Brother Ho.'

The fat man laughed nervously.

'I'm sorry, uh, Brother. I've never met one of you chaps before. I'm Axelrod. I'm the president of this bank. Perhaps you'd like to step into my office.'

'Will we achieve what we came here for?'

Axelrod beamed.

'Of course, old boy. Won't take but a moment.'

Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy followed him towards an imposing mahogany door with a frosted glass panel that carried the word President in gold letters. Once inside, Axelrod took up his position behind a huge desk. It seemed to make him look bigger. He pushed a silver box towards Ho.

'Cigar?'

'No, thank you.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'I'll take one.'

Axelrod waved towards the box with ill grace. The Minstrel Boy stuck a cigar in his mouth.

'Match?'

Axelrod scowled and picked up a silver table lighter shaped like a vulture, and hastily lit the Minstrel Boy's cigar. Then he turned back to Jeb Stuart Ho and beamed.

'This won't take but a moment.'

He dropped the card into a slot on the elaborate desk console, and punched a series of buttons with a flourish of starched shirt cuff. For two minutes they all watched the unit in silence, then it gave a beep, a light came on and two cards dropped, into a tray at the bottom. Axelrod picked up Jeb Stuart Ho's card and handed it to him with a smile.

'Your card, Brother Ho.'

He pushed the Minstrel Boy's card across the desk to him.

'And yours.'

'Thanks.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stood up and bowed. Axelrod showed them out. Slowly they walked across the steps. On the pavement the Minstrel Boy hesitated.

'So what are you going to do now?'

'I must complete my task.'

The Minstrel Boy looked round awkwardly.

'Well, uh, I'm off to have me some fun. I guess I'll see you around.'

'How will I find you if I have need of you?'

'The bank can trace me through the card.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed.

'I am grateful for your services.'

The Minstrel Boy winked.

'Think nothing of it, Killer.'

He turned and sauntered off down the block. Jeb Stuart Ho watched him until he turned the corner. Then he started off in the opposite direction.

His intention was to follow the distinctive lights of the Orchid House. He was certain there would be a way he could get inside and complete his mission. He hadn't walked more than a block and a half, however, when a huge ground car pulled up beside him. It was black with a

broad yellow stripe down the side. Its roof was festooned with chrome speakers, aerals and spotlights. Below the stripe were the letters LDC, the Litz Department of Correction. One of the front windows slid down and a helmeted and visored head leaned out.

'Hey you!'

Jeb Stuart Ho stopped and turned.

'Me?'

'Yeah, you. Come over here. We want to talk to you.'

'I don't have the time, I'm afraid.'

He started to walk on. There were muffled curses from inside the car. The nearside doors burst open, and four men boiled out. They wore black uniforms and pale blue helmets with dark visors. Their pants had a yellow stripe down the sides and were tucked into high black jackboots. Heavy recoilless pistols, nightsticks, gas and fragmentation bombs hung from their belts. On their helmets and shoulders were the insignia of the LDC.

The first one to reach Jeb Stuart Ho grabbed his arm, and tried to twist it up his back. Ho relaxed for an instant and then straightened his arm with a snap. The LDC man reeled with a scream.

'He's dislocated my goddamn shoulder.'

A second cop swung at Ho with a nightstick. His armoured forearm flashed up to meet it. The two met with a crack, and the stick shattered. The cop looked at the broken end in disbelief. He backed away a couple of paces. His two partners also stopped. The first one to attack Ho leaned against the wall groaning and clutching his shoulder. There was a moment of stillness. It seemed as though they were all waiting to see who would make the next move. Then the cop dropped the useless handle of the nightstick and reached for his gun. The gun cleared the holster, but before the cop could fire, Jeb Stuart Ho's sword was in his hand. It flashed at inhuman speed and completely severed the cop's right hand at the wrist. The gun, with the dead hand still clutching at it, fell to the pavement. The cop sank silently, staring at the bleeding stump with the blankness of total shock.

Things suddenly happened very fast. One cop leaped to help his companion. The other threw his nightstick at Ho's head. Ho caught it with his left hand and whirled, looking for the next attack. A sleep gas grenade burst at his feet. Ho dropped the nightstick, and whipped his cloak up to his face. He emptied his lungs in a single high-pitched gasp and held his breath. His trained

response was fast, but it didn't beat the gas. It was already being absorbed through the pores of his skin. The street faded to black and white. It became two dimensional and began to recede. The focus failed, and it went out altogether.

When it came on again Jeb Stuart Ho was staring at a bright white light set in a smooth white ceiling. He carefully turned his head and the waist of a rumpled brown suit moved into the centre of his field of vision.

'So you woke up?'

Jeb Stuart Ho focused his eyes.

'What place is this?'

'Department of Correction.'

The voice sounded as though it was used to giving orders and having them obeyed. It was a voice that enjoyed its power.

'May I sit up?'

'If you do, I'll blow you apart.'

'May I turn my head?'

'Sure. I don't see how you can do any harm by that. Help yourself. Just don't make any sudden moves. If you do, I'll kill you. That's a promise.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked round. The room was completely bare except for the concrete slab on which he was lying, and a simple collapsible chair in which the man was sitting. The man wore a creased brown suit, a white shirt and a wide necktie with a painting of a bound and naked woman on it. The tie was loosened and the top of his shirt was undone. He was sweating slightly. The man was of medium height, thickset and overweight. His face had the coarse bulldog look of a determined and methodical bully. The chewed end of a cigar was clenched between his teeth. Across his knees he cradled a wide-barrelled riot gun. When he caught Jeb Stuart Ho looking at him, he smiled grimly and patted the gun.

'I could cut you in half with this before you could reach me, however fast you are.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked down at himself. He still had his one-piece black suit, but everything else had been taken away. He swung his gaze back to the man in the chair.

'Do you know who I am?'

The man took the cigar out of his mouth.

'A big league hit man.'

'An executive of the brotherhood.'

The man's lip curled.

'Like I said, a big league hit man.'

'The brotherhood would not view my detention by your people favourably. What is your name?'

'I'm Bannion. Chief-Agent Bannion.'

'My mission is of the utmost priority, Chief-Agent Bannion.'

'You attacked four of my patrolmen.'

'Quite the opposite. I was defending myself from their unprovoked attack.'

'You casually lopped off one of their hands.'

'I'm sorry. The man was about to shoot me and I overreacted. I trust he has been taken care of?'

Bannion scowled.

'He's dead.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked surprised.

'Dead?'

'Dead.'

'But how? If he received prompt medical attention he should have recovered. It would even have been possible to replace the severed limb.'

Bannion stared at Ho grimly.

'The shock was too much for him. He shot himself. Left handed.'

Jeb Stuart Ho said nothing. There was a long silence. Bannion finally broke it.

'I think we've completed the decent silence.'

'How can you estimate a man's worth in silence?'

'I have a feeling you're just burning to tell me what bad news it will be if the brotherhood find out we ain't been treating you right.'

'The basic computations that support the city's gambling economy and even its basic stasis and life support all come from the brotherhood.'

'And it might just get cut off if they found we'd messed you up?'

'It's possible.'

'That's why my men aren't beating you to death right now.'

'You stopped them?'

'I stopped them.'

'And what will happen to me now?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'You're here to kill?'

'I'm here on an executive task.'

'You're here to kill?'

'Yes.'

Bannion sighed.

'That's more like it. Okay, who?'

'A woman who lives in this town.'

'Why?'

'If her course of action is not terminated, the eventual outcome could be a major disaster.'

'Is this woman a native of Litz?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'A visitor.'

Bannion took out another cigar and lit it.

'That's a relief. Having a human killing machine running round the city would be bad enough, but letting you kill born and bred citizens is out of the question. What's this woman's name?'

'A.A. Catto.'

Bannion stood up, walked over to the door and banged on it with his fist. After a moment, the door opened and a blue-helmeted head appeared.

'Yes, Chief?'

'Get me all we have on a female called A.A. Catto.'

The door closed again. Bannion returned to his chair. Jeb Stuart Ho raised his head slightly.

'Could I sit up now?'

Bannion's eyes narrowed.

'You sure you won't try and jump me?'

'I have no reason to attack you.'

'Okay, sit up, but keep your hands on the slab.'

Jeb Stuart Ho eased himself into a sitting position. He crossed his legs, and Bannion appeared

to relax. The door opened, and a uniformed patrolman came in carrying a red plastic folder. He handed it to Bannion, stared hard at Jeb Stuart Ho and then left. Bannion leafed through the file and then looked up at Ho.

'There seems to be no reason why you shouldn't kill her. We don't encourage the slaying of rich out-of-towners, but I suppose we have to go along with what the brotherhood wants. You'll have to make it legitimate, though.'

'Legitimate?'

'That's right.'

'How do I do that?'

'You file a claim.'

'A claim?'

Bannion looked at Jeb Stuart Ho as though he was talking to an idiot.

'An Assassin's Claim to Victim, form DY 7134/B. You fill it out. I approve it. We notify the security services. They withdraw any protection they might be renting to the victim and you go in and kill her. Normally the processing of a claim takes about six months.'

'Six months?'

'But in your case we'll do it immediately. Although you'll have to grease a few palms.'

'You mean bribes?'

Bannion grinned.

'A nasty word. Call it operating expenses, and a donation to the Widows' and Orphans' Fund.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shrugged.

'You have my credit card.'

Bannion stood up. He winked.

'That's right. We do.'

Lame Nancy paid off the cab, and walked up to the glass doors of the Orchid House. They slid back as she came within a couple of metres of them, and two armed guardians in purple suits and dark red helmets barred her way.

'You are a non-resident.'

It was more a statement than a question. They were obviously clones. Nancy could tell from the way they moved that they were clones. Nancy didn't really like dealing with clones. They were too straightforward. They didn't respond to the tricks and subtleties that worked on normal humans. Nancy took a deep breath and stared back at the faces behind the dark visors.

'I want to see Miss A.A. Catto.'

'Do you have a visitor's pass?'

Nancy shook her head.

'No.'

'Then it is not possible. You'll have to leave.'

'Can't you call her some way? It's very important.'

'Are you known to the lady?'

'No, but I have some particularly vital information for her.'

The clones appeared to consider the matter for a few moments. Then one of them punched out a combination of digits on his wrist communicator. The instrument's tiny screen flickered into life. By craning her neck and peering over the shoulder of one of the guardians, Nancy could just make out the dishevelled image of a young teenage girl. A small tinny voice came from the speaker.

'What?'

'It's the main entrance, Miss Catto. There's a person who claims to have information for you.'

'Does this person claim to know me?'

'No, Miss Catto.'

'I don't want to see anyone. No, wait. What's the person's name?'

The guardian glanced at Nancy.

'What's your name?'

'Just Nancy. That'll do.'

The guardian looked back into the communicator.

'She says her name's Nancy.'

'It's a woman?'

'Yes, Miss Catto.'

'Scan her for me.'

The guardian took a step back and pointed the communicator at Nancy. A.A. Catto's voice came from the speaker.

'I'll take a chance on her. Check her for weapons and send her on up.'

The screen died as A.A. Catto broke the connection. The guardian took a small cylindrical detector from his belt.

'The lady says you can go up.'

'I heard.'

'I've got to check you for weapons.'

'I heard that too.'

The guardian pointed the detector at her. A small light came on.

'I'm getting a positive reading.'

Nancy produced a small, pearl-handled needle gun from a hidden pocket. She handed it to the guardian.

'It'll be this.'

'What did you bring it for?'

'A girl has to protect herself.'

'You'll have to leave this with us for as long as you remain in the building.'

'You better hope I'm not attacked.'

'We will be able to defend you.'

'Have you clones developed a sense of humour?'

'I fail to understand.'

The guardian pointed the detector at her again. This time the light didn't come on.

'You're clear, you can go through.'

Lame Nancy bowed extravagantly. One of the guardians led her to the lift and explained how

to reach A.A. Catto's apartment. The next thing she knew the doors had closed and she was in a red, softly lit compartment that was rising quickly upwards. The interior was padded with soft cushions and music played. Suddenly Nancy wondered if she had taken on too much. She felt a long way out of her league. The feeling stayed with her when she reached A.A. Catto's door. It was overwhelming. The ride in the lift, the size of the place, the huge drop from the terrace and the cascading tiers of flowers, were so far removed from what she was used to. In the Leader Hotel she could throw her weight about and expect to get her own way. She looked at her reflection in the stainless steel apartment door. She pulled herself together. She could deal with these people. People were the same everywhere. She pressed the stud for attention. It was, after all, places like this that the tricks came from, and she could handle them easily.

'Yes?'

Nancy wasn't certain where the voice came from. There was obviously a speaker hidden somewhere round the door. She could see nothing specific to speak into.

'I've come to see A.A. Catto.'

She felt a little foolish talking to the blank door.

'Wait a minute.'

A small cylinder protruded over the door with what appeared to be a lens set in the end. Nancy realized that she was being scanned from inside. She stood perfectly still. The door slid silently back. Behind it was a small compact hallway with matt silver grey walls. A girl leaned against one of them, beside a wall panel with a small screen and a number of control studs. Nancy was surprised at just how young she was. The image in the guardian's communicator had looked like a teenager, but this girl was scarcely more than twelve or thirteen. Her hair was dishevelled. Her makeup was smudged. There were dark circles under her eyes, and when she pushed herself away from the wall she seemed a little unsteady.

'You must be Nancy.'

Her voice was slurred. She sounded as though she was out of her mind behind something.

'I'm Nancy.'

'You're an interesting-looking creature.'

'I'm not a creature, dear. I'm solid human.'

'You're deformed.'

Nancy's face went very tight.

'Who isn't?'

The girl giggled and smoothed down her silver dress.

'You have to forgive me. I'm loaded. What is it you want?'

'I want to see A.A. Catto.'

'That's me. I'm A.A. Catto. What do you want?'

'I've something to tell you. I think you might find it interesting.'

'I find you interesting already. That's a very interesting device you have round your leg.'

Nancy was getting tired of the girl's rambling.

'Are we going to stand here in the hallway for ever?'

A.A. Catto looked round and blinked.

'I was forgetting. I've been awake for a long time. You'd better come in.'

A.A. Catto led her into a large white room. The whiteness was overpowering. Walls, furniture and carpet were all the one colour. There was an immense effect of space, although the room wasn't quite as huge as it appeared. On one wall was a screen, about four metres across and inset three dimensional. It was an ample substitute for a window. The sound was turned off, and two men fought in eerie silence. They were naked except for plate armour that protected their heads, necks, shoulders and arms. They fought in the Heidelberg manner, neither giving ground, both swinging at each other with long heavy sabres. Blood ran down both their bodies. Nancy stood looking at it until A.A. Catto spoke.

'These shows can be very tedious.'

She turned and waved her arm vaguely around the room.

'You'll have to excuse the mess.'

Nancy looked round. Mess was exactly the right word. Chairs and lamps were overturned. Cigar ends had been ground into the carpet. Bottles littered the floor. Empty duramene ampoules had been crushed underfoot. A long low table made from a single block of marble was overflowing with more bottles and dirty glasses. A jar had been knocked over, and loose pills were strewn about. Some of them were decomposing in a pool of spilled booze.

Nancy heard a whimpering noise. It came from the corner of the room. There was a man huddled on the floor. His head was pressed to the wall. He was naked, and his hands were secured by two wide leather bracelets joined by a short length of chain. Near him, some straps and lengths of chain were tossed across a steel and leather butterfly chair. A.A. Catto giggled.

'Take no notice of him. He only does it to attract attention. I've just been exercising him. Why don't you sit down?'

Nancy settled herself in a nest of huge velvet cushions. Her leg in the callipers stuck out in front of her. A.A. Catto didn't seem to be able to take her eyes off it. Nancy felt something sticking in her. She tugged at it and produced a short, plaited leather whip. She held it up.

'You, uh, exercise him a lot?'

A.A. Catto nodded, and settled herself beside Nancy.

'He pisses me off a great deal.'

Nancy grinned.

'Men can do that.'

'Right.'

A.A. Catto reached out and touched the black steel calliper.

'This is an incredible thing.'

Nancy sat very still and said nothing. A.A. Catto smiled at her, and ran her index finger round the damascening on the steel.

'I don't like men. They can be very tiresome. Do you like men, uh, Nancy?'

'Not a lot.'

'I have a direct link with this one's nervous system. I can make him feel whatever I want.'

Nancy looked impressed.

'That must have been expensive.'

A.A. Catto was puzzled.

'Expensive? I've never thought about it.'

Her eyes went vacant. Nancy waited. After a few minutes they flashed back to life again.

'I've got to take something to keep me going.'

She scrambled to her feet, and rummaged about on the marble table.

'I can't find any duramene. You don't have any, do you?'

Nancy shook her head.

'I don't. We don't get a lot of it down our way.'

'Too bad.'

A.A. Catto picked up a handful of pills and inspected them.

'I suppose these will hold me together for a while.'

She put half a dozen of them in her mouth and took a swallow from the nearest glass. Then she returned to the cushions.

'What did you want to talk to me about?'

'I heard your name today.'

'That must have been nice.'

'It was at the Leader Hotel.'

'What's the Leader Hotel?'

'It's a broken down fire trap on the other side of town. I keep a string of girls there.'

'What do they do for you?'

'They work for me.'

'That seems very practical. Do you think I'm pretty?'

'Yes, very pretty.'

'Go on.'

Nancy was beginning to become used to the way A.A. Catto's mind jumped around. She went back to her story.

'Two men were looking for you.'

A.A. Catto laughed.

'Men are always looking for me.'

'One of them looked like an assassin. A professional.'

'You believe he might want to kill me?'

'It's possible.'

'Why would anyone want to kill me?'

Nancy shrugged.

'I don't know, but it sure seemed like this guy and his partner had a contract for you.'

She jerked her thumb towards the corner.

'Maybe he wants you dead?'

A.A. Catto looked at her in disbelief.

'He wouldn't dare, besides, he hasn't had the chance. He's been with me all the time. He doesn't leave my sight.'

'I really don't know. Maybe I was wrong. I just had this feeling.'

A.A. Catto ran her fingers down the calliper again.

'And you came to warn me. That was very sweet of you.'

'It was nothing.'

'I still can't understand why anyone should want to kill me. I'm beautiful. You do think I'm beautiful, don't you?'

'Sure, I think you're beautiful. I think you're very beautiful.'

'If I was one of your girls, would you make me work for you?'

Nancy flashed with horror at the problems this dopefiend could cause if she was a working hooker. She smiled quickly.

'Honey, if you were working for me, I'd keep you all to myself.'

'Kiss me, Nancy.'

Nancy leaned over and kissed A.A. Catto in a way that wouldn't commit her to anything. A.A. Catto's arms immediately snaked around her, and her tongue darted into Nancy's mouth. She seemed almost desperate. She clung to Nancy, kissing her face and licking her ear. Nancy quickly responded, partly enjoying it, partly wanting to do the thing right. After a few minutes A.A. Catto moved away. She quickly squirmed out of her silver dress, and stood up for Nancy to inspect her. All she had on were her silver boots. She spread her feet wide apart and put her hands on her hips.

'Do you like my body?'

Nancy stretched out a hand and stroked the inside of A.A. Catto's thigh.

'I think your body's wonderful.'

A.A. Catto crouched down beside Nancy, and touched one of her small hard breasts. She plucked at the white material of Nancy's one piece outfit.

'How do you take this off?'

'You can't take it off completely.'

Nancy unclipped her silver belt and let it fall back on the cushions. Then she pointed to a small mother-of-pearl stud at her neck and kissed A.A. Catto on the cheek.

'If you press that, the whole thing splits down the front.'

A.A. Catto extended a long thin finger and touched the stud. The suit split open down the entire length of Nancy's body. A.A. Catto began caressing her skin, and Nancy sighed deeply. She reached out, and began to fondle A.A. Catto's breasts. A.A. Catto traced a path with her fingers down Nancy's body from her collar bone to the white fuzz of her pubic hair. Then she

followed it with her tongue. As she found Nancy's clitoris, Nancy gave a groan of real pleasure and began to writhe her hips. A.A. Catto looked up from between Nancy's legs.

'Was that nice?'

Nancy sighed.

'Oh, really.'

A.A. Catto squirmed round until the gap between her own legs was presented to Nancy.

'Now do the same to me.'

For a long while the two women aroused and teased each other with their mouths and tongues. Each time the feeling became too strong one would clutch spasmodically at the other's legs. At last, A.A. Catto surfaced.

'This is very nice, but I'd like to get further.'

Nancy opened her eyes. There were beads of perspiration on her upper lip.

'What do you suggest?'

A.A. Catto grinned.

'I have some toys that might help us.'

Nancy ran her tongue up A.A. Catto's thigh.

'Why don't you find them?'

A.A. Catto jumped up with a laugh. She looked helplessly round the room.

'I know they're here somewhere. I saw them when I was torturing Reave.'

Nancy propped herself up on one elbow.

'Aren't you worried that someone might be trying to kill you?'

A.A. Catto paused from rummaging about in the litter that covered the room.

'I'll probably worry terribly when I start to come down, but right now I can't quite believe it. Anyway, it'd be very hard for anyone to get me here. We're surrounded by guards.'

Nancy sank back into the cushions as A.A. Catto went on searching. Things were working out very differently from the way she had expected. When she'd first thought of coming to the Orchid House it had been for a quick bribe. It seemed to have gone a lot further than that. Her deliberations were interrupted by a buzzing from the wall screen. On the screen, one of the swordsmen was, at last, delivering the finishing blows to the other. A.A. Catto moved over to it, and flicked the control to the communication channel. The huge head and shoulders of a guardian filled the screen. It completely dwarfed A.A. Catto. She took an involuntary step back.

'What do you want?'

'Miss Catto?'

'Yes.'

'I regret to inform you that our organization can no longer offer you protection of any form. This withdrawal of service applies to all guard and security organizations in the city.'

A.A. Catto looked at the screen in bewilderment.

'You mean I'm not protected?'

'That's correct.'

'And nobody will protect me?'

'That's right, Miss Catto.'

'For god's sake, why?'

'You are the subject of an Assassin's Claim to Victim.'

'What the hell's that?'

'In simple terms, a professional assassin has applied for permission to kill you, and permission has been granted.'

'But why?'

'I have no information on that.'

'Who is this assassin?'

'The claim was filed in the name of Jeb Stuart Ho. He described himself as an executive of the brotherhood.'

A.A. Catto looked round desperately.

'Isn't there anything you can do to help me?'

'Nothing, Miss Catto. All we are allowed to do is give you formal notification of the claim. I must terminate this conversation.'

A.A. Catto shook her head helplessly.

'I don't understand. What have I ever done to these people?'

'I have to terminate this conversation right now.'

The screen went blank. A.A. Catto felt terribly cold. She looked imploringly at Nancy.

'Did you hear that?'

'It's worse than I thought.'

'What can I do?'

'We'd better get out of here.'

'Where can I go?'

'You could come to the Leader. You might be safe there until we organized something. You got plenty of credit?'

'Unlimited. If they haven't taken that away.'

Nancy stood up and began fastening her suit.

'They can't take that away.'

'Thank god.'

Nancy began to organize. She was mentally kicking herself for becoming so involved. The only consolation was that there might be some rich pickings, in it. At least the assassin didn't have carte blanche to kill her.

'You'd better throw anything you need into a bag. Oh, and wake him up.'

She pointed at Reave.

'We've got to move fast. He may be on his way here right now.'

A.A. Catto hurried across to where Reave lay huddled, and kicked him. He whimpered and tried to push himself further into the corner.

'Please, I couldn't take any more.'

A.A. Catto snapped at him impatiently.

'Get up. This is important.'

Her voice softened.

'Please get up. I forgive you for now. There's someone coming to kill me. We've got to get out of here. Please, Reave. Get up and help me.'

Reave got painfully to his feet.

Billy Oblivion lay on his bed feeling better than he'd felt in weeks. Darlene had finally started to make a real effort, there was a bit of credit stacked up, and all was right with the world. The only thing that troubled him slightly was the way Darlene had gone so militantly to work. She seemed to be turning tricks every hour of the day she could. Billy couldn't figure out what had got into her, but while it lasted, he didn't try very hard.

Billy wasn't trying very hard at anything. After a handful of dormax and two-thirds of a bottle of tequila he didn't have a worry in the world. A couple of times he'd thought about getting up, going down to the desk and getting the desk clerk to reconnect the room screen. Even that seemed to be too much trouble when he looked at it from inside the pleasant haze of booze and sleeping pills. As long as they held, out, Billy could think of nothing more pleasant than to sprawl on the bed and examine the interesting cracks and patterns on the ceiling.

The building trembled slightly as the lift was set in motion. Billy grinned to himself. One day someone would step into the Leader Hotel's lift, push a button, and the whole building would fall down. Billy giggled, and took another shot of tequila. Somebody was flat picking an amplified guitar somewhere down the hall. Billy tapped his toe in time to it. It really seemed a pleasant way to pass the time.

The lift came to a halt at Billy's floor. Billy listened, he wondered if it might be Darlene. He held up the tequila bottle. There was only about an inch left. If it was her, she could go down to the desk for another one. A thought suddenly got through to him. She might have a trick with her. If she did, that would mean he'd have to get out of the room. He'd end up in the foyer feeding drinks to the goddamn desk clerk. That was the only trouble with Darlene's new attitude to work, it was a drag having to scoot in and out of the room all the time. Maybe if she kept on working the way she was, they could get two rooms, one for living in, and one for business.

A key rattled in the door. It was Darlene. Billy propped himself up on one elbow. The door opened. Darlene stood in the doorway. She was wearing her red working outfit. Billy grinned at her.

'You look good enough to eat.'

Darlene flounced across the room.

'I've had enough people eating at me. I feel like I was a meal.'

She pulled off her red boots and threw them across the room.

'Can't you do anything but lay about all day?'

Billy knew he really ought to get mad and hit her. Darlene was getting completely out of line. The trouble was that he just couldn't get it together. He let his head fall back on to the pillow.

'I really don't need this.'

Darlene was pulling off her stockings.

'You think I need it? You're just turning into a bum. There was a time when I used to feel good walking around for you. I didn't mind turning tricks, I thought we were going to get someplace.'

Billy groaned.

'How can we get anyplace? We're non-people. We don't have credit.'

'We ain't going to get anyplace if you keep getting too loaded to walk.'

Darlene pulled her red dress over her head, and carefully folded it over a chair. Billy focused on her. She looked really good. She was naked apart from the garter belt that still hung round her hips. Her black skin colour contrasted sharply with the thin strip of red. He patted the bed beside him.

'Honey, don't give me a hard time. Come on over here and relax.'

Darlene pulled open the door to the tiny shower. She turned on the water and took off the garter belt. Before she stepped inside she looked down at Billy.

'If you think I feel like fucking you after turning five tricks in as many hours, you better think again.'

The door of the shower banged behind her. Billy sighed, picked up the tequila bottle and swallowed about half of what was left. Things with Darlene were getting out of hand. He repeated the phrase to himself a few times. He liked the ring of it. His brain was too fuzzy for any kind of concentrated thought. When he was straight he'd work it out. One thing was sure. It couldn't go on like this. It was a determined kind of phrase. Billy liked it. He was still repeating it to himself when Darlene came out of the shower.

The flash of Darlene naked and dripping wet was the kind of thing that stopped Billy leaving her. He shook his head. That was the trouble with dormax. They made you horny, but left you incapable of making the effort to do anything about it. Darlene was busily towelling herself.

Billy raised his head.

'Are you going out again?'

'Maybe. I don't know yet.'

'You don't want to overdo it. Why don't you stay up here with me for a while?'

Darlene flung the towel on the floor.

'For Christ's sake don't start that again.'

'Start what again?'

'I told you before. I don't want to know right now. For one thing, I'm sore.'

Billy subsided again. Darlene pulled on a dirty housecoat.

'If you want something to do, you could go down to Nancy's. You might find yourself some work down there.'

'You been hanging round with Nancy? You know I don't like you getting in with her.'

'Afraid I might go to work for her?'

'No, it's just . . .'

'Listen, Billy. I don't care what you like. Nancy's useful. She knows what's happening. She passes on tips to me.'

Billy became sullen.

'I bet she does.'

'If you got yourself down there, you might pick up a fair bit of credit.'

'Why? What's happening?'

'I don't know for sure. She's getting a team of guys together for something. She asked if you could handle a gun.'

'What did you tell her?'

'I said I didn't know.'

'You know I can handle a gun.'

'You can't handle walking half the time.'

Billy struggled to sit up.

'Listen, you bitch. I killed a man in a shoot-out when I was on the road with Reave. Shit, we got involved in a whole fucking war.'

Darlene turned on the hot plate under the coffee pot.

'So you say.'

'Damn it, it's the truth.'

'Even if it is, there's no saying you could do it now. You've gone downhill ever since I met you.'

Billy scowled.

'I can do it.'

'Go do it then.'

'I will.'

Billy swung his legs over the side of the bed. His stomach lurched, and he had to sit still for a while. Darlene laughed.

'See the fearless gunman.'

'Shut the fuck up.'

Billy had another try at standing up. He stood in the middle of the room, swaying slightly.

'I need some duramene.'

Darlene snorted contemptuously.

'Since when could we ever afford duramene? You live in a dream world, Billy boy.'

Billy looked round helplessly.

'I need something.'

'We don't have anything.'

'Some funaids might help.'

Darlene shook her head.

'They'll just make you stupid.'

'I've got to get myself straight.'

'A shower and a lot of coffee would take care of you as well as anything else.'

Billy started to fumble with the fastenings on his shirt.

'Why do you always want me to do things the hard way?'

'I like to see you suffer.'

For the next hour Darlene filled Billy with black coffee, pushed him into alternately hot and cold showers and massaged the back of his neck. He was sick a couple of times, but by the end of the period he was zipped into his best suit and walking steadily, if a little stiffly, towards the lift.

He rode down to Nancy's floor and walked down the corridor. He paused for a moment in

front of her door, then stretched out his hand and knocked.

'Who is it?'

'Billy.'

'Hold on.'

There was the rattle of security bolts being shot back, and the door opened just wide enough for Nancy to peer out. It was still secured by a chain lock. She confirmed it was really Billy, and then shut it again. He heard the sound of the chain being removed. Before letting Billy in Nancy looked carefully up and down the corridor. Billy wondered what could be going on that merited so much caution.

The room was crowded with at least half the hoods who hung round the hotel. Billy nodded to a few of them. Most of them seemed to be armed, and everyone had the air of waiting for something. On the far side of the room, setting cross-legged on the bed, was a young girl in a metallic blue one-piece jump suit. Beside her was a man. Between them they produced a flash of violent recognition in Billy.

'Reave!'

'Billy!'

'How are you, my man?'

His one-time partner looked thinner and more haggard than when they had parted company in the city of Con-Lee, when Reave had stayed with A.A. Catto, and Billy had continued with his wanderings. Reave clutched at Billy's arm.

'It's good to see you.'

'You too, what's been happening?'

Reave frowned.

'We're in a bit of trouble.'

'You and A.A. Catto?'

'Yeah, there's . . .'

Before Reave could tell his story, Nancy interrupted him.

'Why don't you leave the reunion till later? It seems like everyone's here, so we might as well all hear the tale at once.'

There were murmurs of assent from the men grouped around the room. It seemed as if nobody really knew why Nancy had got them up there. She stood in the middle of the room and slowly

turned round.

'You'll be pleased to know that each of you has been left a day's credit at the front desk.'

There was general approval for this statement. Only one of the men didn't join in the loud reception. His name was Monk. He was a thickset individual. He wore a collarless striped shirt, a black waistcoat, and his face was half hidden by a light grey fedora. Under one armpit a heavy, vicious-looking needle gun hung in a patent Speed-Draw shoulder holster. He leaned forward in his seat and looked suspiciously at Nancy.

'What are we supposed to do for it?'

Nancy grinned.

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

Monk shook his head.

'I don't get it.'

'It's a token of goodwill. Look at it as a payment for coming here.'

'Seems to me that there's a lot of credit behind whatever this thing is you're cooking up.'

Nancy nodded.

'You can believe that.'

There was a chorus of questions. Nancy raised her hands and waited until they subsided.

'I'll get straight down to the reason I've got you all up here. I need to put a team together. This lady here . . .'

She pointed to the girl on the bed.

'Her name's A.A. Catto, and this team's being hired to protect her. There's a couple of guys in the city who are going to try a hit on her. We're going to stop them.'

Monk interrupted.

'Why can't she just hire a team of guardians? It sounds as though she can afford it.'

'They won't deal with her.'

Monk raised a slow eyebrow.

'There's only one reason I can think of why the guardians won't protect her.'

Nancy nodded.

'I ain't going to hide anything. There's a claim out on her.'

There was an immediate ripple of conversation. Monk seemed to be slipping into the role of spokesman for all the men present. He minutely examined his fingernails. There was a pause

while everyone waited to see what he would say. He sucked in his breath and looked up.

'That means that the guys who are after her are professionals.'

Nancy grinned.

'They looked that way.'

'You've seen them?'

'They came here yesterday asking a lot of questions.'

Billy looked up sharply, but said nothing. Monk went on voicing the men's queries.

'What did they look like?'

'One was tall and thin, dressed in black and carrying a bundle of hardware. The other was shorter. Seemed to be only carrying a set of knives.'

She picked up a bundle of papers and began to pass them round.

'I put the descriptions down on these fax-sheets'

There were a few moments of silence while everyone in the room studied the papers. Then Monk tapped his with his forefinger.

'It says here that the tall one's name is Jeb Stuart Ho.'

Nancy nodded.

'That's right.'

'Sounds to me like a brotherhood name.'

'Could be.'

'So you seriously expect us to try stopping a brotherhood killer?'

'I don't suggest we wait for them to come. I figure we should try and get them first.'

Monk shook his head.

'You got to be crazy.'

Nancy planted her hands on her hips and looked down at him.

'There's a credit card in it for the one who gets Ho, a card of his own.'

Everyone began to talk at once. A credit card meant reinstatement in full. It was the only kind of prize that might tempt anyone to tackle a professional assassin. Monk grinned.

'What do the others get?'

'A month's credit. That's for each man who joins us. There's nothing else to tell. Who's going to join us?'

The men all looked at each other. A couple shook their heads and sheepishly left. The

remainder stayed put. Monk stood up.

'Looks like you got your team. All we need is weapons.'

Nancy nodded towards a pile of gift-wrapped packages in the corner.

'We stopped at the gun store on the way up here. There's a half dozen riot guns, ammunition, some hand guns and grenades. We've got enough weapons.'

Monk grinned.

'You think of everything.'

Then Nancy got down to the final details. The team was split into two groups. One would stay at the Leader and guard A.A. Catto, the other would move out into the city and start circulating the description of Ho to the beggars, winos and hustlers. Once he'd been located they'd move in for the kill. Billy found himself drafted into the hotel group. He wasn't really concentrating on the planning. While it was going on he moved close to Reave, and spoke to him in a low voice.

'I know who the other guy is. Ho's partner.'

Reave looked at him in surprise.

'Who?'

'The Minstrel Boy.'

'You're kidding.'

'I'm not, I saw him when they came here looking for A.A. Catto.'

'Did he see you?'

Billy shook his head.

'I ducked into the lift. I didn't want him to see me. I guess I was ashamed or something.'

Reave said nothing. Billy looked at him urgently.

'What are we going to do?'

'We can't let him kill A.A. Catto.'

'But we can't let him be gunned down. He got us out of real trouble a couple of times.'

Reave ran his fingers through his hair.

'I don't know what we can do except wait and see. If we tell anyone now, it could put us in a real awkward position.'

Billy glanced at A.A. Catto.

'But you're with her. She won't let anything happen to you.'

Reave avoided his eyes.

'I wouldn't altogether count on that.'

Billy nodded unhappily.

'I guess we'll just have to wait and see.'

The Minstrel Boy was drunk. He wasn't quite at the point of falling over, but he was certainly having trouble getting up the steps of the Club 93. He leaned heavily on the girl beside him. Although he couldn't quite remember her name, he was happier than he'd been since Jeb Stuart Ho had rudely dragged him from his comfortable tank at Wainscote. It was his first day of living it up on Ho's credit, and he was making the most of it. He grinned at the girl.

'Think we should make it back to my hotel, honey?' The first thing the Minstrel Boy had done after he'd left Ho was to check into the Albert Speer. The Albert Speer was generally considered to be the best hotel in Litz. The girl looked up at him with a quick professional smile.

'I don't think you're capable of much else.'

The Minstrel Boy's grin widened.

'You'd be surprised what I'm capable of.'

'I'm surprised you're still capable of standing up.'

Still holding him steady, she signalled to the 93's doorman to get them a cab. While they were waiting for it, he took the opportunity to have a better look at her. The pick-up had been so fast he hadn't really had a chance to study her. She'd made a beeline for him almost immediately he staggered into the club and started tossing his credit about. She'd seemed okay in the dim light of the club, but up on the street, the blemishes were inclined to show.

In fact, she stood up to the examination very well. Her growth had been halted around fourteen or fifteen. She had the turned-up nose, large eyes and cute features of the most popular clone hostess model, although from the way she moved and talked, he knew she was a normal human. Her skin was done in a pleasant rainbow blend of light pastel shades. Her hair was a mass of waist-length, dark blue ringlets that matched her short tight tube dress and lace-up boots. The Minstrel Boy congratulated himself. He'd really done rather well for one so drunk.

The cab pulled up, and it took both the girl and the doorman to get him safely inside. If the Minstrel Boy hadn't suffered so much difficulty in negotiating himself into the back of the cab, he might have noticed the beggar who took one look at him, started, jumped up from his pitch on the kerb and hurried off down the street.

The cab ride took longer than originally intended. Halfway to the Albert Speer, the Minstrel Boy decided that he needed a bunch of duramene to burn off some of the alcohol in his brain, and he made the driver make a detour to a drugstore. Once they got there, he suffered an attack of paranoia and refused to get out of the cab. He'd convinced himself that if anyone saw him buying anything as expensive as duramene he was quite likely to be mugged as he walked back to the cab. After some haggling, the driver was persuaded to go.

They started back to the hotel once again, but after they'd only gone a couple of blocks he stopped the cab again. He'd decided he needed a shot to help himself get across the hotel foyer. As he fumbled the ampoule into the injection unit, the girl began to exhibit noticeable signs of impatience, but when he offered her a shot for herself, they quickly receded. By the time they reached the hotel they were laughing and talkative. The Minstrel Boy was hardly any more coherent, but the duramene had made him a good deal more mobile.

They stopped for a moment and stared up to the soaring baroque facade of black and red glass. The girl squeezed the Minstrel Boy's arm.

'You really like to live well, don't you?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned and nodded. He was still hoping he would find out her name without having to ask.

'You'd better believe it.'

They crossed the foyer, stepped into the lift, and rode up to the Minstrel Boy's thirty-seventh-floor suite without any difficulty. Immediately they were inside the girl grabbed the Minstrel Boy and kissed him very hard. She thrust the whole length of her body against him, squirming slightly and darting her tongue in and out of his mouth. When she suddenly released him, he took a step back and dropped into a chair.

'Unh.'

The girl looked down at him.

'What's the matter with you? Don't you like me?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'How should I know? I only met you a while ago, and ain't been able to see straight most of the time.'

The girl began to look angry.

'You don't take a lot of trouble to be charming.'

'That's true.'

'I expect you can't even remember my name.'

'That's true too.'

'You're goddamn impossible.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Impossible.'

The girl went red.

'Well fuck you, Jack.'

She turned on her heel and began heading for the door. The Minstrel Boy turned in his chair, and called after her.

'Hey!'

She turned in front of the door.

'What?'

'I'd really like to fuck you.'

The girl leaned back against the door and gave a half smile.

'You would, would you?'

'Sure.'

'Am I supposed to be flattered?'

'You could be, whatever turns you on. I could pay you if that's what you want.'

'I'm not a hooker.'

'So you're up here for kicks.'

'That's what I thought when I came here.'

'So come on over here and get some.'

'I'm not so sure. You really don't try very hard.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'What would you like me to do?'

'You could ask me my name.'

'Okay. What's your name?'

'Liza.'

'Liza, hey? Liza from Litz.'

'Don't be cute. Do something else.'

'What?'

'You choose. Think for yourself.'

The Minstrel Boy suddenly sat up in his chair. He grabbed the phone. The girl came and stood beside his chair looking puzzled.

'What are you doing?'

'You'll see. Hello, room service? Listen, send up a couple of bottles of champagne — how the hell should I know what kind? The best kind, and a couple of pounds of strawberries, right, oh — and a large cut glass bowl. Yeah, right.'

He hung up. Liza looked disappointed.

'Is that the best you can do? Just start drinking again?'

The Minstrel Boy smiled at her crookedly.

'Who said anything about drinking?'

'But I thought . . .'

'You want to use your imagination.'

He mimicked the girl's Litz accent. She looked annoyed.

'So what else can you do with champagne?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned broadly.

'First of all you take the glass bowl, you put the strawberries in it. Then you pour in the champagne, and mush it all together, until you've got this bowlful of expensive goo.'

'And what do you do with it?'

The Minstrel Boy's grin broadened.

'We take off our clothes, spread the mush all over each other's bodies, and then we lick it off again.'

Liza smiled.

'Sounds delicious, if messy.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'The hotel takes care of the mess.'

She began to drift round the room, looking at the things that the Minstrel Boy had left strewn about. Before getting drunk, he had been on a buying spree. She picked up a hand-carved guitar.

'Do you play this?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Uh-uh, I just drop them from great heights and watch them break.'

'You're a funny bastard.'

She picked up his belt of knives.

'What are these?'

A hard edge came into his voice.

'Put those down.'

Liza dropped them. She said nothing. She wandered around for a little while longer, and then walked slowly and slightly dramatically towards the Minstrel Boy. He sensed it might be the start of a display. He liked displays. He thought of himself as something of a connoisseur.

'I'm glad you can be obscene.'

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'Obscene?'

'The strawberries and champagne.'

'Aah.'

Liza put both her hands to the back of her neck.

'We could start being obscene right now.'

The dress undid itself and dropped to the floor. Liza stood in front of him, naked except for her boots.

'Do you like what you see?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Sure, love it.'

The girl looked a little put out. She squatted crosslegged at his feet.

'Aren't you going to take your clothes off?'

'In a moment.'

'What do I have to do?'

'Use your imagination.'

The girl slowly stretched out her legs on either side of the Minstrel Boy's feet. Slowly she lay back on the ground. The Minstrel Boy raised one of his boots and covered her pubic hair with it. He noticed that she had it dyed the same blue as the hair on her head. He moved his foot with a circular motion, gradually increasing the pressure. Liza gave a soft laugh.

'You've got an odd imagination.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an eyebrow.

'Who, me?'

He was just stretching out a hand to touch her when there was a knock on the door.

'Who is it?'

'Room service.'

He didn't bother to look round. He just went on teasing the girl with his foot. He ignored the sound of the door opening. Then hands grabbed him roughly round the neck.

'What the hell . . .?'

It all seemed to happen at once. The Minstrel Boy was struck hard across the face. The chair toppled over on its side and he fell with it. He saw three men standing over him. Liza screamed and jumped to her feet. One of the men grabbed her by the wrist. Another kicked at the Minstrel Boy. As he rolled over he saw a fourth man dragging an unconscious bellhop into the room. Liza went on screaming. The man holding her, a thickset individual in a grey fedora, slapped her hard across the face.

'Shut your mouth, honey.'

Liza continued to struggle.

'Take your goddamn hands off me.'

She found a heavy, vicious needle gun pressed beneath her chin. The man hissed at her from between clenched teeth.

'Make another sound and I'll rip your face off.'

Liza stood very still. One of the other men was systematically kicking the Minstrel Boy. He glanced at the one in the fedora.

'Do we kill him now, Monk?'

Monk shook his head.

'No, I want to see if he knows where his partner is. That's the one that scores the prize.'

The chair was set back on its feet. The Minstrel Boy was hauled into it. One of the men, a small sallow one with a livid scar on his cheek, ripped the cord out of the phone, The Minstrel Boy's arms were dragged back behind the chair, and his thumbs were tied together with a length of wire. Liza was also tied up. Another length of flex secured her wrists, and a third strapped her ankles together. Still naked, she was left in a corner as the four hoods directed all their attention towards the Minstrel Boy.

A sense of something almost like calm settled over him. There was nothing he could do except sit there and take it. All he could hope for was to come up with what they wanted as quickly as possible. That was the only way he could see to avoid getting hurt. He watched the four hoods as they gathered round him. The one called Monk leaned forward and breathed into his face.

'Okay, where's your partner?'

'What partner?'

Smash! The one called Monk punched him hard in the face. They all stood round and waited while his head cleared. Monk grinned down at him.

'Okay. Let's try it again. Where's your partner?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Smash! The Minstrel Boy was aware of a warm sensation, a trickle of blood running down from the side of his mouth. The telephone cord had cut off all feeling from his thumbs.

'Your partner?'

'Listen . . .'

Smash!

As the Minstrel Boy's senses came back to him, he decided to try another tack.

'If you told me what partner you were talking about, I might be able to help you.'

'Jeb Stuart Ho. You know Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'He's not my partner.'

Smash!

The Minstrel Boy's head reeled. There had to be some way out of this.

'He wasn't my partner.'

Monk drew back his fist. The Minstrel Boy thought quickly.

'He wasn't my partner. I was just working for him.'

Monk sneered.

'Working as what?'

'A guide.'

'A guide?'

The Minstrel Boy took a deep breath.

'I'm one of the ones who know where they are.'

The four men fell silent. Two of them took a step back. The legend of the guides seemed to stop them in their tracks. Monk was the first to recover.

'You worked for Jeb Stuart Ho?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded painfully.

'Sure.'

'And you guided him here?'

'Right.'

'So where is he?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'I just don't know.'

Monk turned savagely to his three sidekicks.

'Work him over for a while. He might remember something.'

The Minstrel Boy began to struggle as they moved towards him. His voice almost reached a scream.

'Hold it, hold it.'

Monk looked down at him. He motioned to the other two.

'Wait a bit. Maybe he's going to tell us something.'

The Minstrel Boy sagged in the chair.

'I don't know exactly where he is, but I might be able to find out.'

'How?'

'How do I know you won't kill me once I've found out what you want to know?'

Monk grinned.

'You don't.'

'So why should I do it for you?'

Monk gestured to the other three hoods. They started towards the Minstrel Boy. Monk held up his hand and they halted. His smile was ugly.

'You can do it the easy way, or you can do it the hard way. It's your choice.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'I've always preferred the easy way.'

'Okay. How do we find him?'

'Do I have to stay tied up?'

'How do we find him?'

'You don't find him.'

Monk drew back his fist. The Minstrel Boy went quickly on.

'I find him.'

Monk's eyes narrowed.

'What are you trying to pull?'

'I've got a credit card on his account. The bank will know the last location he used his card.'

'So where's the card?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'It's not as easy as that. They'll want to be able to identify me on a vision link before they give out the information. I'm the only one who can do it. You'll have to untie me, and clean me up a bit.'

The Minstrel Boy even managed a lopsided bruised grin.

'You'll even have to take me down to the lobby.'

He nodded towards the service phone with its ripped out handset.

'Your gorillas don't think ahead.'

Monk looked at the other three. They all said nothing for a while. Then he shrugged reluctantly.

'Maybe he's telling the truth.'

The one with the scar looked sideways at the Minstrel Boy.

'And maybe he's just playing for time. I figure we should work him over a bit more — just so we can be sure.'

'That's what you figure, Wormo?'

The hood with the scar nodded. Monk grabbed him by the front of his jacket.

'Leave the figuring to me, okay? When you start trying to figure, your nasty inclinations usually get in the way.'

He pushed him away.

'Now untie him, and take him into the bathroom and get him cleaned up.'

Wormo reluctantly did as he was told. When the Minstrel Boy emerged from the bathroom, Monk pointed the needle gun at his chest.

'We're going down to the lobby now.'

He snapped his fingers at Wormo.

'Give me that coat off the bed.'

Wormo picked up a fur coat off a chair. It was one that the Minstrel Boy had bought during his spending spree. Monk draped it over his arm so it hid the gun.

'This'll be pointed at your back all the time. If you try anything I'll cut you in half.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. They started towards the door. Wormo was the only one who hesitated. Monk half turned.

'What's your problem?'

'What about the girl and the bellhop?'

'Leave them. The cleaners'll find them.'

Wormo licked his lips.

'Can't I have them? The girl at least. I'll take care of her and catch up with you later.'

He looked at Monk expectantly.

Monk shrugged.

'Stay here and do what you want. You'll be finished with the job, that's all.'

Wormo looked disappointedly back at Liza, hesitated for a moment and then reluctantly followed the others. He spotted the Minstrel Boy's belt of knives. He picked them up.

'Can I take these?'

Monk nodded impatiently.

'Take what you want but grab it fast.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyes narrowed but he said nothing. With Monk right behind him he started walking towards the lift.

In one corner of the hotel foyer were a cluster of com-booths. The Minstrel Boy and his escort came out of the lift. Nobody seemed to pay them any attention. They crossed the foyer, threading their way between the flowering plants, glass tables and Bauhaus chairs. They attracted no interest at all. The Minstrel Boy looked round. He wondered what would happen if he tried to run. Monk was right behind him. He imagined the stream of steel needles slicing into his back. His skin crawled and he felt sick. He kept on walking.

The Minstrel Boy seated himself in one of the plastic blisters. Monk positioned himself in the entrance so he could see and hear everything. The gun under the coat was still pointed at him. The Minstrel Boy took the credit card from his pocket. He punched out the coordinates of the

bank. A stiff-collared clerk appeared on the screen.

'Can I help you?'

'I wish to know the location of Jeb Stuart Ho. I hold a temporary card on his account.'

'Place the card in the transmission slot and your hand on the scanner.'

The Minstrel Boy did as he was told and the screen clouded. Monk leaned over and hissed at him.

'What's going on? Is this some kind of double cross?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Just wait.'

The screen cleared and the card dropped from the receiver slot. The clerk smiled a thin smile.

'You're in luck, sir. Brother Ho has just paid for a meal at Fidel's Burgers on Authority Plaza.'

The screen went blank. The Minstrel Boy looked up at Monk.

'There's your man.'

Monk nodded grimly.

'That only leaves the question of what we do with you.'

Jeb Stuart Ho took one bite out of the Vegie-Wonder and put it down. The brotherhood were not meat eaters. He had passed Fidel's Regular, Super and the Triple Deck Scrumbo, and picked out the Vegie-Wonder. It was advertised in the menu as a 'non-meat vegetarian whole-food delight'. It was nasty. The so-called vegetables were sheets of recycled cellulose, die-stamped into crude leaf shapes and dyed a garish green. Jeb Stuart Ho suspected that the burgers were made of the same material, only dyed brown.

He pushed away his meal and looked through the plate glass front of Fidel's Burgers. He had walked through to Authority Plaza after going to the Orchid House. The guardians had told him A.A. Catto had left. He had been hungry, but the main reason he had come into the place was to attempt to think about his next move. Even this was denied him. Hard metallic music blared from speakers all over the hamburger joint, and jagged patterns of light danced on the walls. The other customers in the place seemed to be munching contentedly.

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head and took his credit card from the pay slot. He stood up and made his way out of Fidel's Burgers. The pavement was almost deserted. In the centre of the square was a particularly ugly fountain. Lit by searchlights, stylized heroic figures supported a huge marble bowl from which water cascaded over them. The only thing Jeb Stuart Ho could imagine it symbolized was blind stupidity. Apart from a few drunks who staggered round the statue's base, the centre of the square was equally quiet. It seemed an ideal place to stop and think.

He stepped off the kerb and dodged the ground traffic until he reached the central island. There he walked slowly towards the fountain. He stopped at its rim and stared down into the water. A.A. Catto had eluded him. He couldn't afford just to roam Litz and hope for another lead. That would undoubtedly give her time to leave the city altogether. There was even a chance that she had done that already. His best action might be to contact Bannion, to see if he had any information on her whereabouts. His other alternative might be to get hold of the Minstrel Boy and find out if he had any more contacts that could be valuable.

He let his eyes follow the patterns of ripples. He made his brain become calm and analytical. He forced it to calculate the possibilities that might stem from any single action. He was

completing the third level when a voice beside him interrupted the process.

'Got a drink, buddy?'

Jeb Stuart Ho was jerked into the material world.

'I'm sorry. I failed to hear you.'

A ragged, filthy drunk stood in front of him, swaying slightly and scratching his leg. He looked up at Jeb Stuart Ho and made an implausible attempt at a winning smile. He also raised his voice a little.

'I said, got a drink, buddy?'

Jeb Stuart Ho smiled compassionately at him, and stretched his hand out to the water.

'Drink of the fountain, my friend. There is plenty here for everyone.'

The drunk spat in disgust.

'Fucking wisearse.'

He staggered away, muttering indignantly. Jeb Stuart Ho watched him sadly. It seemed as though Litz was a place where logic hardly functioned. He wondered if it was a fault in the city's stability generators. He decided that his best immediate course of action should be to call Bannion. He looked around for a com-booth. There was one a little way on from Fidel's Burgers in the foyer of an Obscenery. There seemed to be a lull in the traffic. His attention was attracted by a black, low-slung ground car that screamed into the square, dodging other vehicles with almost suicidal high-speed swerves. It made a half circuit of the square, drifting on the corners, and then screeched to a halt in front of Fidel's Burgers. It only paused for a moment, and then gunned away again. Jeb Stuart Ho was just wondering if it was some kind of local pastime, when the interior of Fidel's was taken out by an impact bomb.

The blast lifted Jeb Stuart Ho clean off his feet, and blew him some metres across the square. When he had picked himself up and recovered from the shock, there were LDC patrol cars arriving, ploughing through the rubble that now littered the square in front of what had recently been a brightly lit burger joint. A Correction Department airship floated overhead, directing its searchlights down at the wrecked building. A pair of ornithopters fluttered close to the mass of its cigar-shaped gas bag. From inside the ruins, Jeb Stuart Ho could hear muffled screaming.

A thought struck Jeb Stuart Ho with almost physical force. One of the strongest possible reasons for someone bombing the burger joint was the fact that he might have been there. If he hadn't abandoned the meal he would have still been sitting inside. It was an obvious move on the

part of A.A. Catto to hire warriors, more likely brigands of some kind, to kill him before he killed her. It was a very logical action. He felt a tingle run through his muscles. It was now a battle, something which he could deal with.

A throng of sightseers were already pressing towards the ruins of Fidel's. They milled about and hampered the movements of the LDC. A fire truck, a medic unit and more patrol cars arrived. The disaster area was now packed with people, and luridly illuminated by the garish colours of the flashing warning lights. Jeb Stuart Ho pushed himself to the centre of the crowd to see if he could pick up any clue to the identity of the attackers. Even the patrolmen seemed to move out of the way of the tall, sinister, black-clad figure.

At the far side of the crowd, Jeb Stuart Ho spotted Bannion. He was still dressed in his rumpled brown suit. He appeared to be directing operations. He waved and gesticulated to the squad. Bodies were being carried out of the wreckage on stretchers. Jeb Stuart Ho made his way across to where Bannion stood.

'Chief-Agent Bannion.'

Bannion turned. When he saw Ho he scowled and took the cigar from between his teeth.

'What the hell are you doing here? Why don't you fuck off? I've got enough troubles without you showing up.'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a deep breath.

'I fear I may have inadvertently been responsible for this unfortunate occurrence.'

Bannion looked as though he was going to explode. He reached inside his coat and pulled out a snub-nosed .70 correction special. He waved it under Jeb Stuart Ho's nose.

'I've a good mind to kill you right now! Accidentally!'

He almost spat out the last word. Jeb Stuart Ho stood very still, staring impassively at the gun. Its short barrel was almost as wide as it was long. At last the chief-agent managed to control himself. His words were cold and deadly.

'Are you trying to tell me that you blew up Fidel's burger joint?'

Jeb Stuart Ho quickly shook his head.

'I didn't cause the explosion. That would have been neither logical nor ethical. I think I may well have been the intended victim.'

'You were in the place?'

'Minutes before the explosion. I left quickly because the food was so bad.'

Bannion's lip curled.

'That figures. Go on.'

'It is my deduction that whoever drove up and threw the bomb was hired by A.A. Catto to kill me.'

'Before you get to her?'

'That's correct. I think there will be other attempts.'

Bannion dropped his cigar and ground it out with his heel.

'You really are a prize, aren't you, brother? First you cause the death of one of my officers and now you seem to have started a mini-war. I knew I should never have let you go. I should have shot you when you were first brought in.'

Jeb Stuart Ho attempted to be totally reasonable.

'Perhaps you should attempt to cooperate with me.'

Bannion began to turn red again.

'Cooperate! With you!'

'The sooner I find A.A. Catto, the sooner I'm out of your city.'

Bannion's face tightened.

'Listen, sunshine. If I knew where the girl was, you'd be the last person I'd tell. I hope her boys get you real soon. Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind and blow you apart.'

'I . . .'

Bannion began waving the pistol again.

'Get!'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a last look at the mess of broken glass, twisted neon and shattered concrete. As he walked away, the vid crews began arriving. They came in all sizes, from single hand-held operators with scanners and backpacks to big, full-size mobiles that rode on their own cushion of air. Each company's crew vied with the others to get the tightest close-ups of death and mutilation. One portable operative was kneeling beside an arm that had been ripped off and flung out into the road. At close range he panned along it, recording every pore and every fleck of blood in loving 3D colour. Jeb Stuart Ho shuddered and walked away.

He kept on walking until he had covered the length of five blocks. The city of Litz was beginning to produce a taste in his mouth that was far worse than the Vegie-Wonder. He passed an alley that ran up the side of a Sex-O-Mat and something called Ye Olde Gunne Shoppe. A

furtive movement made him pause. Although it was only half seen, there was something about it that triggered a subconscious response. Without thinking, he threw himself flat on the sidewalk. At the same instant there was the flash and explosion of a riot gun. Jeb Stuart Ho heard the scream of the cloud of deadly metal particles pass about half a metre over his head.

Two more blasts came from the alley, but both were slightly above him. Jeb Stuart Ho swivelled on his stomach with his own gun braced in both hands. He let go two shots in the direction of the flashes. It seemed from their position that there was more than one gunman. More riot blasts screamed over his head, and Ho returned the fire.

There was a clatter of garbage cans, and two men broke cover and ran, weaving in a low crouch down the alley. Jeb Stuart Ho snapped off a shot, and one of them fell. He was about to fire again, but the second man vanished into the shadows.

Ho, still flat on the ground, moved sideways like a crab. He reached the cover of the Sex-O-Mat wall and cautiously stood up. Still holding his gun, he drew his sword left-handed. He moved slowly and carefully down the alley. He was tensed to shoot at the slightest movement. After about twelve paces he came upon the body of one of the assassins. There was an ugly hole in his chest, and he was quite dead. Jeb Stuart Ho felt a grim satisfaction at his marksmanship. He now only had one killer to deal with. He moved on along the alley, keeping a careful watch on the deep shadows.

There was a slight movement, and Ho sprang sideways like a cat as a riot gun went off. A handful of particles nicked the right arm of his suit. He landed fractionally off balance, and before he could fire, a figure leaped to its feet and started running back in the direction of the street. The man made an easy target against the streetlights. Jeb Stuart Ho was about to fire, but then he changed his mind. He wanted this one alive. He dropped his gun into its holster, switched his sword to his right hand, and went after him.

When he reached the pavement the man hesitated for a moment and then ran to his right. A second later, Jeb Stuart Ho turned the corner, and saw him duck inside the Sex-O-Mat. Jeb Stuart Ho followed. Inside the brightly lit doorway was a red velvet curtain. He swept it aside and found a turnstile. He didn't bother to fumble for his credit card. He jumped it. There was no sign of the man in the small anteroom. He went on into a red-lit corridor. On either side of it were red doors that led into two rows of cubicles. The man must have taken refuge in one of the cubicles. Jeb Stuart Ho started towards the first. A figure appeared from a small alcove.

'Hey you!'

Ho swung round with his sword in the ready position. It was a guardian. Probably the Sex-O-Mat bouncer. The clone seemed to ignore the pointed sword and kept on coming.

'You have entered without paying.'

Ho took a step back.

'Did a man come through here?'

The clone kept on moving towards him.

'You will either leave or pay.'

He produced a short club from his belt. Jeb Stuart Ho took another step back. He was struck by a sense of the absurd. Here he was, an expert swordsman, backing away from a man with a small billy club. He had no desire to kill the man, but he couldn't afford to lose the gunman. He deliberately lowered his sword. The guardian swung his club at his head. Jeb Stuart Ho's hand flashed up and blocked the blow. At the same time, the hilt of his sword flicked the clone behind the ears. He suddenly sagged to the floor. Jeb Stuart Ho stepped over him and started down the corridor.

Each door had a small tri-di cube set in the door, just below eye level. This gave the customer an idea of what particular attraction the cubicle contained. The first one showed a young girl lying down with her legs spread wide. She was caressing herself with a single repeating motion. The cubes were obviously run on a single short loop. On the second door a well-built girl in an outfit of leather and studs repeatedly cracked a long bullwhip, while the third showed a muscular young man flexing his biceps.

The fourth was blank. It looked as though it was filled with a kind of pink mist. Jeb Stuart Ho assumed that it was the sign that the cubicle was occupied. He took a pace back and then launched himself at the door. His foot hit the lock and it shattered. He pivoted so a riot gun blast from inside the cubicle wouldn't hit him. None came. He pushed the door. A girl was on all fours on the bed, a small fat man crouching over her. They both stared at Jeb Stuart Ho, wide-eyed with shock and fear. He muttered his apologies and closed the damaged door.

The next two had images in the cube. The third was occupied. He hit the door. This time he interrupted a loose-skinned middle-aged woman being thrashed by a handsome, golden-tanned young man. Again Ho made his excuses and shut the door.

At the third door Jeb Stuart Ho hesitated. All he seemed to be doing was progressively

breaking up the Sex-O-Mat and frightening the customers. The man should be in the place somewhere. He poised himself to hit the door. At the last moment he remembered to twist and avoid any blast inside the cubicle. A fraction of a second later his care was rewarded. A riot gun blast shattered the door frame.

Ho rolled into the room. A small man in dirty overalls was half standing, half kneeling on the bed. A frightened sex operative was huddled in the corner. Before the gunman could fire again, Ho stabbed his sword clean through his foot. The man screamed. Ho lashed out with his foot and knocked the riot gun out of his hands. The man attempted to drag the sword out of his foot, but Jeb Stuart Ho kept on holding the sword. The man gashed his hand and gave up the attempt. Ho flicked one of his knives forward into his hand from the sheath on his arm. He placed it gently under the man's chin.

'I wish to talk to you.'

'My foot! Take the goddamn sword out.'

'When you've told me what I want to know.'

'I ain't saying nothing.'

'But you are. You are making a great deal of noise. I need to know why you tried to kill me.'

'I can't tell you.'

'Why not?'

'They'll kill me.'

'Who will kill you?'

'I'm not saying.'

'I will kill you. It will be very slow and painful. I have no desire to do it, but I need the information you have very badly.'

The man looked desperate.

'If I talk I'll be killed.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him with great patience.

'If that is the truth, you must accept death, for if you don't talk, I am going to kill you.'

'Please . . .'

'I take it that A.A. Catto hired you.'

'I don't know any A.A. Catto.'

Jeb Stuart Ho twisted the sword a little. The man gasped and sweat stood out on his forehead.

'Listen . . . It was a girl that hired me. For fuck's sake take that thing out of my foot.'

'Where's the girl now?'

'I can't tell you.'

Jeb Stuart Ho put his face very close to that of the snan.

'It's just occurred to me that you might fear castration even more than death.'

The man gave a strangled shriek as Jeb Stuart Ho slowly moved his knife towards his genitals.

The tip touched the material of the man's overalls. Jeb Stuart Ho paused.

'For the last time, where is she?'

The eyes darted from side to side in terror. Finally he gave in.

'She's holed up at the Leader Hotel.'

Ho jerked the sword out of the man's foot. He fell back on the bed, groaning. Ho turned to the boy.

'Is there a back way out of here?'

He could already hear LDC sirens outside. He didn't want to run into Bannion so soon after the last time. The boy started to giggle hysterically. He slapped him across the face.

'Can I get out at the back?'

He pulled himself together.

'There's a fire exit at the far end of the corridor. It leads out into the alley.'

Jeb Stuart Ho let himself out. He ran down the alley, away from the patrolmen who were milling in front of the Sex-O-Mat. When he reached the next main street he flagged down a cab.

'Leader Hotel, and quickly.'

The com-screen buzzed in Nancy's room at the Leader. Reave answered it. The room had been turned into a virtual command post. In addition to A.A. Catto, Reave, Nancy and Billy, Monk and four other hoods including Wormo hung about waiting for news. The Minstrel Boy squatted in a corner with his hands tied. The air was thick with smoke and the smell of booze. As the screen came to life it brought the face of little Sammy into focus. He looked agitated.

'Lemme speak to Monk.'

Reave turned to Monk.

'It's Sammy, he wants to speak to you.'

Monk moved within range of the screen.

'What d'you want?'

'It's trouble, boss.'

'Trouble?'

'That killer. He's on the loose. It looks like he's heading your way.'

'What?'

'I just heard over the LDC radio net. I've got a buddy who works as a dispatcher. The bomb at Authority Square didn't get him. He'd already left the place. Mutt and Drucker made a play for him. He shot Drucker, and then chased Mutt into a Sex-O-Mat. It seems like he's wrecked the place and cut Mutt up pretty bad. I figure there can't be no way that Mutt didn't talk.'

Monk looked grim.

'So you think he's on his way here?'

Sammy nodded.

'He's got to be.'

Monk thought for a couple of seconds.

'How long ago did all this happen?'

'Five, maybe ten minutes.'

'Listen, you better get back over here.'

Sammy avoided Monk's eyes.

'Listen, Monk. No disrespect or anything, but I ain't coming anywhere near the place. I had it with this job. I'm through.'

Monk snarled.

'You're through alright.'

He hit the console with the edge of his hand and broke the connection.

'Chickenshit!'

He turned to Nancy and A.A. Catto.

'You hear that?'

They both nodded. Nancy looked round the room. Everyone had fallen silent.

'We have to get out of here.'

A.A. Catto turned to Monk.

'How do I get out of the city? I've got to find a place where he can't reach me.'

Monk looked blankly at the other hoods.

'Don't ask us, lady. We've never been out of the city in our lives.'

A.A. Catto looked round helplessly. Nobody seemed about to offer any kind of practical suggestion. Reave muttered something about calling a cab, and A.A. Catto hit him with the small riding crop that hung from her wrist. Even the blow seemed a little preoccupied. Finally the Minstrel Boy grinned.

'You could rent an airship.'

A.A. Catto gripped the crop firmly and advanced on him.

'Are you trying to be funny?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Am I in any position to be funny?'

He held up his bound hands.

'I'm perfectly serious. I'm good at getting people out of trouble. Ask Billy and Reave.'

A.A. Catto looked doubtful.

'Where do I get an airship from?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'Dirigible Rentals, Lighter Than Air Leasing. They're both good. You can get their coordinates from Information.'

A.A. Catto kicked him.

'You're trying to make a fool out of me.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged as best he could while tied up. Captivity seemed to be making him philosophical. A.A. Catto was about to kick him again when Reave called across from the com-screen.

'He's right. Both corporations exist.'

Reave had discreetly checked while A.A. Catto had been raging at the Minstrel Boy. She redirected her anger at him.

'Then get one, dummy.'

The Minstrel Boy sank back into the corner with a sigh while Reave went about his task. He ceased to wonder how he was going to get out of the situation. He was thankful for being alive from one moment to the next. He wondered if this minute at a time lifestyle was the basis of his new-found philosophy. Reave looked up from the screen.

'Dirigible Rentals can get a one hundred capacity here in fifteen minutes. It comes with a cinema and small intimate ballroom. The orchestra's extra.'

'Screw the orchestra. Can't they get it here any quicker?'

Reave shook his head.

'We're paying double for that.'

'Order it, then.'

'I can't.'

A.A. Catto went bright red.

'What do you mean you can't?'

'You have to. You're the client, it's your credit card.'

Reave stood up and A.A. Catto flung herself into the chair in front of the com-set. As she was arranging the airship hire, Nancy went over to where Monk was sitting staring bleakly into the mirror of her elaborate makeup table.

'How long do you figure it will be before Jeb Stuart Ho gets here?'

Monk toyed with one of Nancy's gilt hairbrushes.

'If he took a ground cab, and the traffic went his way, maybe ten minutes. Give or take a couple of minutes each way.'

A.A. Catto came across from the com-set. She'd gone white.

'But the airship won't be here for fifteen.'

Monk nodded.

'So it'll be too late.'

Monk nodded again. A.A. Catto bit her knuckles

'What can we do?'

Nobody answered. She looked at Nancy.

'There must be something. He's going to kill me.'

Nancy looked at Monk, and back to A.A. Catto.

'If Monk and his boys could hold him off for five minutes or more we could go up on the roof and wait for the ship to come. We can board it from there. It's not used, but there's still an old mooring tower from when this used to be a fancy hotel.'

Monk, who had listened to the whole conversation in sullen silence, suddenly slammed his fist into the top of the dressing table.

'No way!'

Nancy looked at him in surprise.

'No way what?'

'No way will we hold off this guy for you.'

Every eye in the room was on Monk. Reave walked over and stood beside him.

'Why not, Monk, what's wrong?'

The Minstrel Boy's voice came from the corner.

'I'll tell you why not.'

Reave turned towards him.

'Why?'

'For one, the man knows if you all jump on your airship, he ain't going to get paid, and for two, Jeb Stuart Ho is most likely to kill anyone who gets in his way.'

A.A. Catto suddenly exploded. She pushed past Reave, and started slashing at the Minstrel Boy with her riding crop.

'I'll kill you! You little creep! I've had enough! Nasty little punk! I'll . . .'

Reave grabbed her, pinning her arms to her sides so she couldn't reach her ring. Even as he was doing it he couldn't believe himself. He'd never been so brave.

'Come on. Calm down.'

A.A. Catto continued to struggle.

'If I'm going to die, I'm going to kill him first.'

The Minstrel Boy had curled up in a ball in the corner. He marvelled that he still hadn't died. Suddenly Nancy moved between him and A.A. Catto.

'There's no reason why anyone should die, least of all you.'

A.A. Catto stopped struggling,

'What do you mean?'

Nancy glanced at Monk.

'I'm sure Monk and the boys would hold off Ho if you offered them a credit card each.'

Monk suddenly looked interested.

'How do we get them?'

'A.A. Catto calls the bank and makes the arrangements. They could be transmitted to the desk clerk who could hold them until we're safely away.'

Nancy didn't neglect to make sure of her own place on the airship.

Monk hesitated. He tilted back his fedora and scratched his head. Then he looked at A.A. Catto.

'You agree to that?'

'Anything, anything.'

Monk nodded.

'Okay, do it, we're wasting time.'

Reave let go of A.A. Catto. While she began desperately to punch out coordinates, he began to direct his men.

'Huey and Jeff, you go down to the lobby. Stay hidden. When he comes in let him get past you, then shoot him in the back.'

The two hoods nodded. He turned to the other two.

'Wormo and Chang, us three will set ourselves up on the landing. If he gets past the other two, we'll be there to blast him in a cross fire whether he uses the lift or the stairs. Okay?'

The two men rather reluctantly agreed. He glanced at A.A. Catto.

'Is it fixed?'

She nodded.

'It's fixed.'

The hoods all trooped out. Everyone looked at Billy. Nancy scowled.

'What about him?'

A.A. Catto turned.

'What about him?'

Reave turned from collecting up the things they'd need.

'Can't he come with us?'

A.A. Catto looked petulant.

'Why?'

'He's my old partner. I can't leave him, he might be killed.'

'Why should I do you any favours, you hurt me just now?'

Reave almost grovelled.

'Please.'

'Oh, very well.'

Billy looked questioningly at Reave.

'What about Darlene? She's up in our room with a trick.'

'You'll have to leave her. There isn't time.'

Billy shrugged.

'Okay.'

The Minstrel Boy decided to push his luck.

'What about me?'

A.A. Catto regarded him coldly.

'What about you?'

'I could be useful. I'd know where you were. You're going to have to go through the nothings.

I could be amazingly useful.'

A.A. Catto shook her head.

'You're not going.'

'I could save you a lot of trouble.'

Reave looked uncertain.

'He could be right. After all he is a guide.'

A.A. Catto began to get angry again.

'I've already agreed to take one of your little friends. I'm not taking him. I don't trust him, and I don't like him.'

Reave didn't press the point. The four of them began to file out towards the lift. The Minstrel Boy had one last try.

'At least untie me.'

A.A. Catto almost spat at him from the doorway.

'Take your chances.'

The Minstrel Boy sagged back into his corner again. He heard the lift gates clang shut and the mechanism grind into action. Eventually he heard it stop as the lift reached the top floor. A few moments later, the sound of gunfire echoed up the lift shaft. It sounded as though it came from the lobby.

Jeb Stuart Ho came carefully through the door of the Leader Hotel. The lobby was silent and deserted. The screen flickered in one corner, but no one was watching it. The drunks had all left. Someone had even turned off the sound. Just inside the doorway, Ho stopped. He felt the air, almost like an animal. It seemed heavy with tension. He turned and walked quietly to the desk. The clerk seemed to have abandoned his usual position. Jeb Stuart Ho leaned over the desk and looked down. The clerk was crouching on the floor. He looked fearfully at Ho.

'I . . .'

'Why are you kneeling on the floor?'

The clerk half rose.

'I . . . I was looking for something. Something I dropped.'

'Did you find it?'

'Find what?'

'The thing you were looking for. The thing you dropped.'

'I . . . er . . . no. I didn't. It must be somewhere else.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'That seems very likely.'

He took two paces away from the desk in the direction of the lift. The clerk sank behind the desk again. Ho stopped and wondered from which direction the ambush that had evidently been arranged for him would come. The most likely tactic for the assassins would be to remain hidden until he was almost by the lift, and then shoot him in the back. He knew that he would have to take a chance on being right. He pulled out his gun and sword. Slowly he bent his knees until he was almost crouching.

With a snap he launched himself into the air. The leap took him most of the way across the lobby. He landed on his feet just in front of the lift gates. He spun round. Two men with guns appeared from behind the battered furniture, on each side of the room. Jeb Stuart Ho flung out his arm. The gun exploded and the sword flashed from his hand. One hood spun into the wall as the bullet smashed into his chest. The other toppled forward and fell on his knees, desperately

trying to pull the sword from his throat. As his gun hit the floor it went off. The shot carved a long furrow in the threadbare carpet.

With his arms still extended Jeb Stuart Ho slowly straightened up. The clerk emerged furtively from behind the desk. When he saw Jeb Stuart Ho and the two dead men, he turned even paler. Jeb Stuart Ho slowly let his arms drop. He walked to the man with the sword sticking out of his neck. Ho rolled the corpse over until it was lying on its back. He grasped the sword hilt with both hands, placed his foot on the body's chest, and tugged. He picked a tattered cushion out of one of the chairs and carefully wiped the blade. He dropped the cushion and looked at the desk clerk.

'Where is A.A. Catto?'

The desk clerk's mouth worked desperately, but no words came. Jeb Stuart Ho started to walk towards him.

'Where is A.A. Catto?'

The desk clerk found his voice.

'Up on the fifth floor, but there's more of them waiting for you.'

'I see.'

Jeb Stuart Ho turned and peered up the dark lift shaft. He would be a sitting duck if he used the lift. He saw that a set of emergency stairs ran round the outside of the shaft. He would be safer using them. As he started up the first flight he turned back, and smiled sardonically at the white-faced desk clerk.

'I hope you locate whatever you lost.'

He went up the first three floors very quickly, but as he approached the fourth he slowed down and took the stairs much more carefully. It would be foolish not to assume that another trap had been set for him. He stepped on to the fourth floor landing, ready to act at the slightest sound or movement. Nothing happened. Ho waited for a few moments and then moved silently towards the next set of steps. There would be men waiting at the top of the next flight.

There were eight steps in front of him. Then a right-angle turn and, if it was the same as the first four, another eight that led up to the fifth floor. Ho moved silently up to the turn, and stopped. Still nothing had happened. He looked up at the last eight steps. He took a firmer grip on his gun and sword. He put his foot on the first step. Nothing. He tried the second, the third and the fourth. Still there was no explosion of gunfire. Maybe the desk clerk had lied. Maybe there was no one lying in wait. Maybe A.A. Catto had fled the Leader Hotel altogether. He

touched the fifth step. He moved to the sixth. As he placed his foot silently on the seventh step, there was the roar of a riot gun. The blast smashed lumps of plaster out of the wall above his head. He somersaulted backwards down the eight steps and landed on his feet at the turn in the stairs. A hail of needles gouged into the wall where he'd been standing just a fraction of a second before.

Jeb Stuart Ho crouched on the stair. On his hands and knees he edged his way forward, a centimetre at a time. The needles and the riot blast meant there were at least two gunmen waiting for him. At the sixth step he paused. He unstrapped the nanchuk from his arm, held one end at arm's length, and quickly swung the other. It soared into the air, hit the far wall of the landing and clattered on the stone floor.

One riot blast hit the far wall, another smashed plaster from the wall beside the stairs, a burst of needles screamed, ricocheting through the steel cage of the lift shaft. Jeb Stuart Ho smiled grimly. There had to be three of them. The riot blasts were too close together and the angle of fire too great for them to have come from the same gun. For a fraction of a second one of the gunmen had emerged from cover to fire. It was one of the men with riot guns. He crouched in an open doorway. Jeb Stuart Ho could only see him when he leaned out to fire.

He waited patiently, crouching halfway up that last flight. Sure enough, a minute hardly passed before the man cautiously poked his head out and looked around. Jeb Stuart Ho snapped off a single shot. It smashed the man's forehead and pitched him back inside the room. There was another riot blast, and another burst of needles. Each hit an opposite side of the stairs. Jeb Stuart Ho remained very still and thought carefully.

At each end of the fifth floor landing, a corridor led away to the various rooms. From the way their shots were hitting the wall, he decided that the two men must be somewhere in the corridor, positioned at opposite ends of the landing, maintaining a crossfire on the head of the stairs. While he stayed where he was they couldn't hit him, but once he set foot on the landing, one at least would probably get a shot at him while he was dealing with the other. He couldn't afford to waste time. It seemed he would have to take a chance on their reactions being slower than his.

Jeb Stuart Ho took a step backwards. He tensed himself. He flashed up the stairs and hit the landing. He leaped and, curling himself into a ball, he crashed into the far wall. The riot gun exploded. The bulk of the charge missed him. A few particles ripped through the fabric of his suit. He could feel blood running down his arm. He fired at the man from a crouch. The impact

of the bullet flung him backwards down the corridor. He twitched a couple of times and lay still. Ho swung round to face the killer with the needle gun. He couldn't understand why he hadn't shot at him. As he raised his gun he saw why. The riot blast that had been meant for Jeb Stuart Ho had caught the man squarely in the chest. He must have stood up to take aim and been caught in his partner's fire. His body was almost cut in half. It lay in a rapidly spreading pool of blood. A grey fedora lay about a metre from the mutilated corpse.

Jeb Stuart Ho stood up cautiously. There were no more shots. It seemed as though there was nobody else lying in wait for him. He dropped his gun into its holster, and walked down the corridor. He still kept his sword in his hand. He stepped over the body, and looked inside the first room. It was empty. The door of the second was wide open. In one corner was a huddled figure. Its hands were tied behind its back. It looked up. Jeb Stuart Ho saw it was the Minstrel Boy. He lowered his sword. The Minstrel Boy grinned crookedly.

'I was wondering when you'd get here.'

Jeb Stuart Ho sheathed his sword and stood looking down at the Minstrel Boy. His face was grim.

'Where is A.A. Catto?'

'She's gone.'

'Gone? How?'

'She rented an airship. They left from the roof. They must have got well away by now.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's jaw muscles tightened, but otherwise he showed no sign of the anger and frustration that welled up inside him. The Minstrel Boy struggled to sit up.

'Aren't you going to untie me?'

Jeb Stuart Ho didn't move. A thought had just struck him. The Minstrel Boy's voice took on a querulous edge.

'Come on, Killer. Don't just stand there, untie me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stared hard at him.

'It must have been you who informed them where I was.'

The Minstrel Boy adopted a look of pained surprise.

'Who, me?'

'It could only have been you.'

'How would I know where you were?'

'You must have used your credit card. I can think of no other way.'

'You're crazy.'

'I could check with the bank.'

Jeb Stuart Ho moved towards the vid set. The Minstrel Boy sighed.

'Okay, okay. It was me. I found you through the bank.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked coldly at him.

'So you changed sides.'

'Does it look as though I changed sides? Would I be lying here tied up if I changed sides?'

'You told them where I was.'

'So? Who says I changed sides? Who says I was on your side in the first place? You forced me to guide you at gunpoint. That don't mean I owe you anything.'

'They threw a bomb into an eating house. A number of people were killed.'

The Minstrel Boy's mouth set in a stubborn line.

'So? What could I do? They beat me up. They would have killed me if I hadn't told, them. I never asked to get involved in your private wars, and no way am I responsible for any bystanders who get in the way. Now, are you going to untie me or not?'

Jeb Stuart Ho reluctantly pulled one of his knives from the sheath on his arm and sliced through the Minstrel Boy's bond. He stood up and began massaging the circulation back into his wrists. Ho put away his knife, and walked slowly out of the room. The Minstrel Boy paused for a moment, and then followed him. As he was about to start down the stairs, something on one of the bodies on the landing caught his eye. Around its waist was his knife belt. He walked over to the body, bent down and retrieved it. He strapped the belt round his own hips and followed Jeb Stuart Ho down to the lobby.

When they reached the ground floor, Chief-Agent Bannion and a squad of LDC patrolmen were waiting. Bannion stared at Jeb Stuart Ho with his hands clasped behind his back. The ever-present cigar was clamped between his teeth.

'You just can't stop, can you?'

Jeb Stuart Ho inclined his head.

'The trials that beset us are as numerous as the flowers that bloom.'

'I don't give a fuck what besets you, brother. It's the way you beset me that I care about. You are giving me ulcers.'

'A careful diet might correct that.'

Bannion began to turn crimson.

'Don't get wise with me, buster. There's two men dead here. The desk clerk says you killed them.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shrugged.

'Didn't he also tell you that they were trying to kill me?'

Bannion began to pace up and down. Finally he stopped in front of Ho. He thrust his face very close to Ho's.

'Your score so far is nine dead, including the five we pulled out of the burger joint.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him calmly.

'There are three more upstairs.'

Bannion looked as though he might haemorrhage.

'Divine Marquis give me patience. I suppose you're going to claim that was self-defence.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'That is correct.'

The Minstrel Boy began to edge towards the door. Bannion saw him out of the corner of his eye and swung round.

'You! You hold it right there!'

'Who, me?'

'Yes, you. You're mixed up in this somewhere.'

The Minstrel Boy became a picture of innocence.

'Not me, mister Chief-Agent, sir. I was just passing through.'

Bannion snarled. He looked ugly.

'Bullshit. You arrived in town with this maniac, and he paid you with a credit card. Right?'

'I was only a guide. He forced me to lead him here.'

'Okay then. You can just lead him away again. You're both being expelled from the city. If you're still here in one hour, my men will shoot you on sight.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's face became set.

'I have a task to complete.'

Bannion's eyes narrowed.

'I don't give a fuck about your mission, you're leaving town.'

Suddenly he seemed to relax. He half grinned.

'Anyway, A.A. Catto's gone.'

'Gone?'

'That's right, gone. Much as it hurts me to give you any assistance at all, she's left town. She's in a rented airship. It's passed the city limits and is heading for the nothings. So go. You hear me? Go!'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'I hear you.' Bannion pointed at the Minstrel Boy.

'And take him with you.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyebrows shot up.

'I ain't going with him. I'll leave town, but I ain't going with him.'

Bannion grabbed the lapels of his frock coat.

'Oh yes you are.'

'Why? Why have I got to go with him?'

'So you can lead him to A.A. Catto, and I can be sure he won't get lost and come back here. Okay?'

'I'm damned if it's okay. I don't mind leaving town. I've been thrown out of better towns than this, but him, I ain't no way going with him.'

Bannion tightened his grip on the Minstrel Boy's jacket.

'Oh yes you are.'

The Minstrel Boy tried to pull away.

'Listen, take your hands off me. You got it all wrong. Shit, I couldn't even help him if I wanted to. I can't track people through the nothings. It's just not possible.'

Bannion pushed the Minstrel Boy forcibly away. He staggered back across the lobby. He was fielded by two patrolmen who held him while Bannion sauntered towards him.

'You're a goddamn liar.'

The Minstrel Boy paled.

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean.'

The Minstrel Boy began to struggle.

'You can't do it. You can't do it to me.'

Bannion smiled nastily.

'I can. I'll do anything to make sure you two get out and stay out.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head desperately.

'You wouldn't do that.'

'I would.'

Jeb Stuart Ho interrupted. He looked puzzled.

'I don't understand. What are you two talking about?'

Bannion turned to Ho. His grin became meaner and wider.

'He can follow A.A. Catto anywhere.'

The Minstrel Boy's voice became hysterical.

'No I can't.'

One of the patrolmen twisted his arm, and the Minstrel Boy shut up. Bannion went on.

'Any guide can get a fix on a single individual, provided you keep him shot full of cyclatrol. It gives them some kind of overall vision. Don't ask me how it works, but it does.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stroked his chin. He looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'Is this true?'

Sweat had broken out on his forehead. He shook his head.

'No, no, it's all lies. Nothing like that . . . argh!'

One of the patrolmen had twisted his arm again. He subsided.

'Yes, it's true . . .'

His voice rose again.

'. . . But it could kill me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at Bannion questioningly.

'Is this true? Will the drug kill him?'

Bannion shrugged.

'It might. But it's not all that likely. He could go mad.'

Ho nodded.

'I suppose we'll have to take the chance.'

The Minstrel Boy began to struggle violently with the men holding him.

'No! No! You can't do this to me!'

Bannion swung round angrily.

'Shut him up.'

One of the patrolmen tapped the Minstrel Boy sharply across the back of the head with the butt of his nightstick. The Minstrel Boy slumped forward. Bannion turned back to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I'm taking you down to headquarters. I'll fix you up with transport for the nothings, supplies and the drugs for him.'

He jerked his thumb towards the Minstrel Boy who hung limply between the two patrolmen. Jeb Stuart Ho ran his fingers through his hair.

'There's no alternative choice?'

Bannion shook his head.

'You've got no choice at all. I'd still rather have you quietly shot.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed.

'I suppose I should thank you for this help with my task.'

Bannion's lip curled.

'Save it. It's going to cost the brotherhood a fortune.'

He signalled to the squad of patrolmen. They bundled Jeb Stuart Ho and the Minstrel Boy out of the hotel lobby, across the sidewalk and into the back of a patrolcar. Around them, the camera crews and sightseers were already starting to crowd round the entrance of the Leader Hotel.

A.A. Catto sat back in one of the small gilt chairs that were arranged round the edge of the airship's small ballroom. The entire place was furnished in gold and red plush. A cluster of small spotlights played on the dark mirror of the dance floor. On a small dais a string quartet played muted chamber music. A.A. Catto sighed. After the fear and tension of the last few hours she felt totally drained. Exhaustion made her avoid thinking about what she should do next.

Billy, Reave and Lane Nancy stood in the small observation platform that opened off the ballroom like a tiny terrace. It was totally enclosed in elaborately worked stained glass that threw patterns of colour over them as they stared down at the receding lights of the city beneath them. They all seemed to be avoiding looking at her. It was clear that they were waiting for her to make some kind of decision. She knew it was necessary, but somehow she just couldn't do it. She hated doing things out of necessity. She was able to act instantly on whim, but since this nightmare of crazy assassins had started her old life seemed to have vanished. It all seemed so unfair. She raised a limp hand, and a white-coated steward was instantly at her side.

'Yes, Miss Catto?'

'I want a drink.'

'We have a fully comprehensive bar.'

'Can you make me a Doric column?'

'I'm sure our bartender can make it. He holds a triple A proficiency rating.'

'He'd better do it right.'

'I'm sure he will, Miss Catto.'

She closed her eyes as he hurried away. She opened them moments later when she heard a discreet cough. She thought it was the waiter with her drink, but she found herself looking at the pale blue uniform and gold braid of the airship's captain. He stood at attention with his white peaked cap clutched under his arm. His face was set in an expression of competent neutrality.

'Miss Catto.'

A.A. Catto raised an eyebrow.

'What?'

'I still haven't had any details of your proposed flight.'

'So?'

'We've passed the city limits, and need to know what course you want me to set.'

A.A. Catto looked round the ballroom.

'I ordered a drink. It hasn't come yet.'

The captain glanced across the ballroom.

'I'm sure the steward will be along in a moment. Now about the course . . .'

A.A. Catto's temper flashed.

'Bugger the course. I want my drink.'

The captain compressed his lips slightly, and marched quickly across the ballroom. Billy, Reave and Nancy were by now standing at the top of the steps that led to the observation platform, watching the exchange. A few moments later the captain returned followed by a flustered-looking steward.

'Here is your drink, Miss Catto.'

The steward placed a tall crystal glass in front of A.A. Catto. Beneath a head of crushed ice, the liquid was pale pink. Halfway down it changed to red and finally in the bottom of the glass it was a deep purple. A.A. Catto picked it up and swirled it round once. The ice tinkled. She sipped it, and put it down.

'I suppose it will do.'

The steward bowed and scuttled away. The captain drew himself up to his full height. With his neatly trimmed beard and rigidly controlled paunch he was every inch the figure of tolerant authority. He cleared his throat.

'About the course, Miss Catto. I really must insist you make a decision.'

A.A. Catto looked at him with frank dislike. If there were three things she detested, they were authority figures, people who found it necessary to clear their throats before speaking and people who insisted she do things. She ran her finger round the rim of the glass. It made a faint singing sound.

'I think I want to go into the nothings.'

The captain's eyes widened.

'The nothings?'

'That's what I said.'

'It can't be done.'

A.A. Catto began to get impatient.

'I was under the impression that I had hired this craft, and that you would take it wherever I requested.'

'That's correct.'

'Well, I'm requesting you to take the damn thing into the nothings.'

The captain took a deep breath.

'That's absolutely out of the question. This ship isn't equipped for that kind of journey.'

'That's the kind of journey I wish to make.'

The captain spoke very slowly as though he was talking to a retarded child.

'If this ship enters the nothings it will disintegrate. It carries no generator of its own. It will be destroyed.'

A.A. Catto looked up at him.

'You carry a set of personal generators, don't you? Porta-pacs or something similar?'

The captain nodded.

'Yes, but that's beside the point. I'm not going to take my ship to certain destruction in the nothings. I hope I make myself clear.'

'You refuse?'

'Absolutely.'

A.A. Catto nodded. She slowly turned and looked at the group by the observation platform.

'Billy, could you come over here for a minute?'

Billy sauntered across the dance; floor. He glanced enquiringly at A.A. Catto.

'Trouble?'

A.A. Catto looked hard at the captain.

'Billy, do you have your gun with you?'

Billy nodded. He was a little confused. He pulled a .70 recoilless from under his coat.

'I got a gun.'

A.A. Catto relaxed in her chair.

'Would you point it at the captain?'

Billy shrugged and did as he was asked. The captain put on his cap and came to formal attention.

'You realize that by this act of violence you have voided your hiring contract and I have no alternative but to return to the bridge and order this ship to return to the company's docking mast.'

A.A. Catto laughed.

'God, you're pompous.'

'I can only repeat . . .'

'Shut up and listen. If you don't immediately take this contraption into the nothings, Billy will shoot you. 'Won't you, Billy?'

Billy swallowed.

'Um . . . yes.'

The captain remained at attention.

'I'll do no such thing.'

A.A. Catto looked at Billy.

'Shoot him.'

Billy looked at A.A. Catto, at the captain and then down at the gun. He tried to think of a way out. There didn't seem to be one. He pulled the trigger. The captain was knocked across the dance floor. He died without a sound. The string quartet stopped playing, but started again, rather uncoordinatedly, when Billy turned in their direction.

A.A. Catto briskly stood up. She beckoned to Nancy and Reave.

'I think we'd better go to the bridge and take control of this machine. It would seem you can't get anywhere leaving things to other people.'

They left the ballroom and started down one of the companionways that traversed the length of the airship's gondola. As they walked, Billy fell into step beside A.A. Catto.

'Do you think this is such a good idea?'

'Is what such a good idea?'

'Shooting the captain and pushing the ship into the nothings?'

'You shot the captain.'

Billy looked down at the deck.

'Yes, I suppose I did.'

'Damn right you did. You're as responsible as anyone.'

Billy felt a little sick. Any ideas of morality seemed to be slipping away. He glanced sideways

at A.A. Catto.

'But what about this going into the nothings? I've fallen into the nothings with just a porta-pac. It's no fun. You don't have any control over where you finish up.'

'But you finish up somewhere.'

'Yes.'

'Well then.'

'I still don't like it. We could land in a lot of trouble, and there's nothing we can do about it.'

'Do you have a better idea?'

'No.'

'Could I be in any more trouble than I was in in Litz?'

Billy shook his head.

'I suppose not.'

'Then there's nothing really to discuss, is there?'

Billy didn't say anything more. He followed A.A. Catto up the steel steps that led to the bridge. He slid back the steel door and they stepped into the airship's control room. The front of the bridge was a single sheet of plexiglass. The rest of the walls were covered with various control monitors. Three officers in blue uniforms were grouped round an illuminated chart table. Behind them, staring fixedly through the plexiglass windshield, was a steersman in a white sailor suit. His hands gripped the big polished wheel that controlled the rudder, and beside him were the levers that set the angle of climb or descent. The officers looked up sharply as A.A. Catto and her four companions came through the door. One of them, who from the amount of gold braid on his uniform seemed to be second in command after the captain, moved to head them off.

'I'm sorry. Clients are not permitted on the bridge. It's a company rule.'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'I'm afraid company rules no longer apply. I've just had your captain shot.'

The officer stopped dead.

'You did what?'

A.A. Catto continued to smile at him.

'I had the captain shot, and I'm taking this ship into the nothings.'

The two other officers joined the first one.

'That's impossible. You'll destroy it.'

A.A. Catto stopped smiling.

'I tried to explain to your captain. I intend going into the nothings, and no one's going to stop me. Can you understand?'

She turned to Billy.

'Show them your gun.'

Billy pulled out his gun again. The three officers took a step back. The first one raised his hand.

'Don't shoot.'

Billy continued to point the gun at him. A.A. Catto looked him straight in the eye.

'Are you going to do what you're told?'

The officers stood together by the chart table. The senior one licked his lips.

'I assume you're taking over the ship by force.'

A.A. Catto clapped her hands together. It was an oddly childish gesture.

'At last we're getting through. Now, will you instruct the driver, or whatever he is, to take us into the nothings?'

'You realize this is an act of piracy?'

A.A. Catto shrugged.

'Call it what you like, only do it.'

The officer muttered for a moment with his two companions and then turned back to A.A. Catto.

'I've gone on record as registering my strongest protest against your criminal acts. Beyond that I'll follow your instructions.'

'Then set a course for the nothings.'

The officer bent over the table and consulted a chart. A.A. Catto waited tensely. Finally he straightened up and looked at the man behind the wheel.

'Steer one zero seven.'

'One zero seven, sir.'

'Steady as she goes.'

'Aye, sir.'

The first officer looked sourly back at A.A. Catto.

'Will that be all?'

A.A. Catto thought for a moment.

'We'll need porta-pacs when we hit the nothings.'

The officer scowled.

'They're in the wall locker.'

He indicated with his hand. Nancy opened the locker. Inside was a rack of small individual stasis generators. She took out four and handed them round. They slung them over their shoulders. There seemed to be nothing else to do until the airship hit the nothings. After all the high drama, the whole thing slipped into an anticlimactic trough. It became very quiet on the bridge. The officers went about their routine tasks, doing their best to ignore the four hijackers. The steersman stared resolutely ahead. Billy began to feel a little foolish as he stood there holding his gun. Finally, A.A. Catto could stand it no longer. She caught the eye of the first officer.

'Could you get a steward up here?'

He reddened a little.

'A steward?'

A.A. Catto nodded.

'That's right, a steward. My friends and I would like some drinks, and maybe a snack of some kind.'

The first officer began to inflate with indignation.

'Am I to understand that you want to turn my bridge into some sort of cafeteria?'

'Yes. Why not? We're going to wreck it shortly, so I don't see how a little change in your routine would matter.'

The first officer grabbed a hand mike off the chart table as though he was going to hit A.A. Catto with it, then he checked himself and bellowed into it.

'Get a steward to the bridge. On the double.'

The drinks, when they came, didn't really help too much.

A.A. Catto, Billy, Reave and Nancy formed their own four-person cocktail party, which, if anything, made them feel even more self-conscious. The crew of the airship went on pointedly ignoring them.

The presence of A.A. Catto and the others couldn't be ignored for ever. A thin strip of blue-grey light appeared on the horizon. It looked like a strange cold dawn. In fact, it was the

nothings. Gradually it rolled nearer. It was like a growing wall of sparkling cloud. The airship drifted closer and closer. The first officer straightened up and faced A.A. Catto.

'Are you sure you won't call off this madness?'

A.A. Catto tapped her fingernails on the porta-pac. She switched it on. The others did the same.

'There's no other way. Keep going, or Billy here will shoot you.'

Billy tightened his grip on the gun. His stomach started to knot. He hated the nothings and the things they did to his mind. The steersman turned to the first officer.

'We'll hit the nothings any minute, sir.'

The first officer looked as though he was about to panic. He moved towards A.A. Catto.

'Won't you let me change course before we're all disrupted?'

Billy stepped between them and levelled his gun at the first officer's chest.

'Hold it right there.'

The officer halted. There were dark patches of sweat under the armpits of his uniform.

'At least let me issue the crew with porta-pacs and give the order to abandon ship.'

Billy looked at A.A. Catto.

'It can't do any harm.'

A.A. Catto thought for a moment.

'Yes, yes. Give the order, but don't attempt to alter course.'

The officer swung round to the steersman.

'Lock on present heading, break out a porta-pac and prepare to abandon ship.'

The steersman saluted and hurried to the locker that held the personal stasis generators. He clipped one to his belt and stood waiting. The officers began to do the same. The first officer picked up the hand mike.

'Attention all crew. Now hear this. This is an emergency. I repeat, this is an emergency. We are entering the nothings. All crew will break out porta-pacs and prepare to abandon ship. Good luck to you all.'

He repeated the message and then clipped a generator to his own belt. He came to attention, and A.A. Catto giggled. The wall of sparkling, shifting light was almost upon them. Suddenly Billy turned to the other three.

'It might be a good idea if we held on to each other. That way, we have a chance of coming out

of the nothings in the same place.'

Nancy's face grew tight.

'If we come out.'

They linked hands. Above them, the front of the gas bag smoked and began to vanish as it nosed its way into the nothings. The plexiglass vanished as its fabric was scattered into time and space. The front half of the cabin vanished. The wall of mist reached the four of them clinging together. Concepts like up and down melted away. They were swallowed in the shifting grey and roaring silence. They seemed to be falling in all directions at once.

They injected the Minstrel Boy with the maximum dose of cyclatrol. Afterwards his eyes glazed over and he began to scream. He screamed non-stop for two hours. They had to shut him in a sub-basement cell until he stopped. Bannion wouldn't let him leave the LDC building until he'd calmed down. Bannion was very sensitive about accusations of police brutality. In the meantime he and Jeb Stuart Ho concluded a deal whereby Chief-Agent Bannion on behalf of the Litz Department of Correction would sell the brotherhood a lightweight armoured car that would enable Jeb Stuart Ho to pursue A.A. Catto. The Litz Department of Correction charged a grossly inflated price, which Jeb Stuart Ho paid after a polite period of ritual haggling.

When the Minstrel Boy finally became quiet, two patrolmen brought him up from the depths of the lock-ups. They had to support him on either side. His movements were uncoordinated, his eyes were vacant and his mouth hung open, Jeb Stuart Ho was alarmed at his condition.

'How can he lead me anywhere like that?'

Bannion smiled and tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger.

'He'll do what you want.'

'Yes. Are you sure?'

'Sure I'm sure. You'll see.'

Bannion ordered the car brought round to the front of the building. He and Jeb Stuart Ho went out to inspect it. It was a squat, ugly, square-sided machine. It had long armoured engine housing, and a small three-seat cab. The windscreen and side windows were mere slits of toughened glass, and the whole vehicle was covered in dull grey, bullet-proof steel. It was supported on six balloon-tyred wheels, four at the rear and two at the front. Bannion opened the passenger door.

'Get in.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was confused.

'Surely I will have to drive the machine?'

'Just get in.'

Jeb Stuart Ho got in. Bannion signalled to the patrolmen who were holding the Minstrel Boy

just inside the building. They hurried down the steps. Bannion opened the driver's door. They pushed the Minstrel Boy inside and strapped him in. He hung there with his mouth half open. Bannion poked his head in the window beside Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Okay. Tell him what you want.'

Ho looked dubiously at the slack-jawed Minstrel Boy.

'Will he understand?'

'Just tell him.'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a deep breath.

'We have to pursue and catch A.A. Catto.'

The Minstrel Boy didn't respond. Bannion grinned at Ho.

'Tell him to drive.'

Jeb Stuart Ho felt a little ridiculous. He couldn't imagine what kind of obscure joke Bannion was attempting to involve him in. He raised his voice a little,

'You will start the car and drive.'

Like a man in a dream, the Minstrel Boy placed his hands on the wheel. Bannion withdrew his head. The Minstrel Boy put on the power. The engine came to life. The Minstrel Boy dumped it into gear with a crash. The car lurched forward. They swerved drunkenly away from the kerb. Bannion laughed. They began to pick up speed. Bannion yelled after them.

'Don't come back.'

The drive through the traffic of downtown Litz was like a drawn-out suicide bid. A dozen times Jeb Stuart Ho could see no way out of a fatal collision, but at the very last minute the Minstrel Boy somehow managed to avoid disaster. As they had begun to move, his jaws had clamped together and he appeared to stare fixedly along the length of the bonnet. Jeb Stuart Ho wasn't certain whether he could actually see, or whether he was steering the car by some other sense produced by the cyclatrol. On a comparatively clear stretch of road, Jeb Stuart Ho looked in the glove compartment to check that the little black case of refills of the drug was still there. It was.

When Bannion had given it to him, he'd told Jeb Stuart Ho to give the Minstrel Boy a shot every twelve hours. He hadn't told him how long the Minstrel Boy would survive under those conditions.

At last, to Jeb Stuart Ho's relief, they emerged from the city traffic and swung on to one of the

wide straight roads that radiated out from Litz to the edge of the nothings. There was almost no traffic, apart from the occasional wheelfreak's truck that flashed past, blazing with lights. Ho felt that he could relax a little. The Minstrel Boy had manoeuvred the car into the middle of the highway. He held it there with one limp hand.

Jeb Stuart Ho looked carefully at the Minstrel Boy. It was hard to know, apart from the tightly clenched jaws, whether he was really conscious. Even with all his training, Ho found it difficult to visualize what was going on in his mind. Ho was taken by surprise when the Minstrel Boy made a sudden move. His hand flashed down to a part of the control panel between the seats. Harsh metallic music blared from a set of speakers fitted in the back of the cab. In the confined space it made Jeb Stuart Ho's head ring. He shouted to the Minstrel Boy.

'Does it have to be so loud?'

The Minstrel Boy gave no indication that he had heard him. He continued to stare blankly through the windshield. Jeb Stuart Ho stretched out a hand to adjust the volume control. Without warning the Minstrel Boy slapped his hand away. He didn't take his eyes off the road. Jeb Stuart Ho said nothing and settled back to endure it.

They were reaching the limits of the Litz generators. Circular holes filled with grey nothing started to appear in the road in front of them. The Minstrel Boy pressed the control that activated the car's own stasis generator. He made no attempt to avoid any of the holes, but continued to hold the car steady in the very centre of the road, at just under maximum speed. The car began to bump and lurch as though its own stasis field was unable to produce an approximation of a flat surface beneath the car, but only the reading on the speedometer and the constant bucking and lurching gave any indication that they were moving at all. The razor-sharp music pounded on, and Jeb Stuart Ho began to perform the preliminary exercises to close down his mind. The Minstrel Boy's face still showed no sign of life.

In many ways, this trip through the nothings was very similar to the lizard ride they had made to Litz. Ho's sense of time quickly began to ebb away. He had to keep glancing at the dashboard to grasp some kind of orientation. The chronometer was little help. In many ways it increased his confusion. Sometimes the digits would flip over at a rate that made it unreadable. Other times a single figure would hang for what seemed like hours. Similar things happened to the music. It would alternately hammer frenetically and then lurch sideways in howling cadences. He was sorely tempted to seek refuge in an intermediate trance, but the constant sight of the transformed

Minstrel Boy beside him kept him firmly in the material world inside the car.

It was around the point when the chronometer was telling him that they'd been in the nothings for just over four hours that things started to appear. First it was the white dog with black nose and ears. It jerked its paw at them in a hitch-hiking gesture, and then, through the rear window, Jeb Stuart Ho could see it cursing them from the distance after the Minstrel Boy had failed to stop. Next came the billboards, huge illuminated signs that appeared to stand on nothing. Floodlights blazed down on them, making it impossible to miss the slogans in strange, unreadable, alien script. Jeb Stuart Ho wondered if they were real objects or hallucinations. He was at a loss to tell. There was too much about the nothings that he didn't know.

After seven hours they hit the road. It just appeared out of the shifting greyness, exactly under their wheels. It was a dark blue colour, and ran dead straight for as far as the eye could see. Tiny red and green marker lights lined its outer edges. Beyond them was the absolute shimmering grey. Jeb Stuart Ho held on to his mind with meticulous care. The awful music wailed on, punctuated by wrenching cast iron power chords. Nothing else moved on the road, and it seemed to have no end.

The chronometer claimed they were nine and three quarter hours out of Litz. Jeb Stuart Ho was just wondering if it was safe to give the Minstrel Boy another shot of cyclatrol, when he began to slow the car. He pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. In a strange kind of way, it seeped to Ho that the Minstrel Boy was cooperating with the plan. He reached into the glove compartment and took out the black case. He fitted a refill into the injector, pushed up the Minstrel Boy's sleeve and pressed the release. There was a faint hiss as the cyclatrol was forced through the pores of his skin. This time he only screamed for thirty-five minute.

When he calmed down, he seemed to need no instructions. He started the engine, made the same violent gear change and continued on down the road.

The lines of lights flashed past in a continuous stream. The road was absolutely smooth. The Minstrel Boy kept the car rock steady in the middle of the road. Jeb Stuart Ho avoided looking out of the narrow window. Despite all his training, the grey shimmer of the nothings made him uneasy. It disturbed the sense of order that was so much a part of his life in the brotherhood.

Jeb Stuart Ho felt closer to the edge of his control than he had ever been during all his years of rigorous instruction. The blue road was so smooth that there was no sense of movement at all. Time seemed to stop. The lights formed themselves into solid strips of red and green. The silent

staring presence of the Minstrel Boy, and the clanging music combined with all the other factors to push Jeb Stuart Ho towards a wild, twisting part of his mind that he had never experienced before. It took all his powers of discipline to resist plunging into that chaos.

Just as he was beginning to feel that his strength was about to give out, something appeared ahead. It was far down the road, but it was coming towards them, and it instantly restored the concepts of time and space. At first it was only a tiny point of light in the extreme distance, but Jeb Stuart Ho felt himself filled with an immediate sense of relief.

They came out of the nothings in midair. It was as though the falling sensation that had been wrenching at Billy's stomach ever since the airship had disintegrated, was all channelled in a single direction. In a moment of panic he thought he was going to fall to his death. Then the ground rushed up and knocked the breath out of him. The drop had been less than four metres. He landed awkwardly, on hard stony ground. One of his knees twisted under him. As he tried to stand, it hurt like hell. He sank to his knees cursing.

On the second attempt, Billy managed to stay on his feet. He looked around to see where he had landed. The bare hillside wasn't terribly impressive. It fell away at a steep angle. The bare earth was sparsely covered here and there with patches of bracken and short wiry grass. There were wide expanses of bare rock.

Billy couldn't see very far. Everything but the immediate piece of sloping ground that he had landed on was shrouded in damp, clinging fog. His city boy, pimp clothes were totally unsuited for both the terrain and climate. Already the thin, sparkling material felt cold and clammy. He cursed again, and hugged his jacket tighter round his shoulders. It seemed that he had fallen into some very dismal place.

He wondered what had happened to the others. They had all been together in the nothings, but he had lost them when they'd dropped into the reality of the bleak hillside. According to everything Billy had experienced, they should have all emerged at the same point. He wondered if they might be on another part of the same hillside, hidden by the fog. He strained his eyes to penetrate the drifting grey blanket, but he still could see nothing.

He shivered and stamped his feet. If he didn't do something fairly fast he would die of pneumonia. He wondered if he should go and look for them, or stay in the same place and let them find him. It was a problem. He couldn't be absolutely sure that they had all landed near to the same spot. He was still wondering what to do, when he saw a familiar figure limping through the mist. Billy called out.

'Hey! Hey, Reave! Over here.'

The figure turned and started coming towards him. Reave was noticeably favouring one foot,

as though his ankle was giving him pain. Silly hurried to meet him.

'Are you okay?'

'I came out of the nothings some way above the ground. I didn't land too good. I guess I twisted my ankle.'

'It ain't broken or nothing?'

Reave shook his head.

'No, but it hurts. You seen anything of the others?'

'Not a sign.'

'Any idea where we are?'

Billy shrugged.

'How the fuck should I know?'

'We could have picked a better place.'

Billy scowled.

'So who picked it?'

They both stood in silence for a while, each waiting for the other to suggest something. Finally Reave shivered.

'Do you figure we should build a fire or something?'

Billy looked at him contemptuously, and waved his hand at the scanty, dripping wet vegetation.

'With what?'

Reave sniffed.

'It was just an idea.'

'Some idea.'

'You think of something better?'

Billy sighed.

'Okay, okay. Just wait a while. Something'll turn up.'

Reave looked dubious.

'You reckon? It looks like we really . . . aargh!'

He clamped his hand to his neck. His face contorted with pain. Billy looked at him in alarm.

'What's wrong?'

'It's this goddamn collar. A.A. Catto must be trying to find us.'

'Do you think she's nearby?'

Reave nodded.

'She must be. The link doesn't work over a really long distance.'

'Maybe she'd hear us if we started yelling.'

'It's worth a try. It might stop her using her ring on me.'

Billy and Reave both began to shout at the top of their voices. After a while they stopped to listen. Nothing happened. The fog seemed to muffle out all sound. They tried again. When they paused a second time, Billy thought he heard faint shouts. They began to yell as loud as they could. They at least had the consolation that the activity was keeping them warm. They paused for a third time. Billy was sure he could hear faint sounds. He turned to Reave.

'You hear that?'

'What?'

'I thought I heard voices.'

Reave listened.

'I don't hear nothing.'

Billy craned forward.

'Yeah. Listen. There it is again. I'm sure it must be the others.'

He started yelling at the top of his lungs.

'Hey, hey, over here.'

Even Reave could hear the answering shouts. After a few minutes of yelling they saw two figures begin to emerge from the mist. It was A.A. Catto and Nancy. They both looked cold and wet. Nancy was limping badly and A.A. Catto supported her on one arm. Their thin, revealing city clothes were obviously no protection against the vicious climate. Reave fingered his collar nervously. A.A. Catto looked as though she was in an evil temper. She walked slowly up to the two men.

'Where in hell are we?'

Billy and Reave looked at each other. Billy shrugged.

'Don't have a clue.'

A.A. Catto scowled and said nothing. Nancy hugged her arms to her chest and shivered.

'We got to get out of this goddamn place before we freeze to death.'

Billy nodded.

'That's for sure.'

Reave squatted down and rubbed at his damaged ankle.

'So where do we go?'

A.A. Catto looked down at him in contempt.

'Can't you ever think for yourself?'

'I don't see you coming up with too many ideas.'

A.A. Catto's eyes blazed.

'Don't talk to me like that!'

She twisted her ring savagely. Reave screamed and fell on his side kicking. Nancy grabbed her by the shoulders, but A.A. Catto pushed her roughly away. Nancy stumbled and fell over Reave. Billy grabbed A.A. Catto by this wrist and held on to her while she struggled and hit at him.

'Hold it, damn you. Just take it easy.'

'Take your hands off me, or I'll kill you.'

'You ain't killing anyone. Calm down now. We're all in this together. Fighting ain't going to help us.'

A.A. Catto relaxed into sullen silence. Billy let go of her. He helped Nancy to her feet.

'Okay, let's try and get organized. We got to get out of here.'

Nancy tried unavailingly to brush the mud stains from her damp jump suit.

'Did we manage to save anything useful from the airship?'

Billy patted his jacket.

'I seem to have lost my gun in the fall.'

A.A. Catto sneered.

'Typical.'

Billy turned on her.

'What have you got?'

'My credit card.'

Billy looked at the ground.

'I don't think that's going to be a whole lot of use in this place.'

Nancy grinned.

'I've got my gun.'

Reave climbed to his feet.

'I've got mine too, and a gravity knife.'

Billy looked round.

'How about food?'

'Nothing.'

A.A. Catto grimaced.

'I suppose nobody has any drugs?'

Everyone shook his head. A.A. Catto pouted sullenly.

'You all realize I'm going to start coming down in a while?'

Nancy raised an eyebrow.

'What do you expect?'

Billy quickly intervened before another fight erupted.

'We ought to decide which way we're going to go.'

Nancy shrugged.

'I figure it's either up or down.'

'Down ought to be warmer.'

'Down it is then.'

A.A. Catto shivered.

'Can we get moving?'

Billy hesitated. A.A. Catto looked at him in exasperation.

'I think I can hear something.'

'Rubbish, I can't hear a thing.'

She started to walk down the hillside. Billy didn't move.

'I'm sure I can hear something. It's a kind of hum. Really high pitched, almost beyond the range of hearing. It's hard to be sure but I think whatever's causing it is coming nearer.'

Nancy nodded.

'I can hear it too.'

A.A. Catto stopped and planted her hands on her hips.

'Are we moving or aren't we?'

Before anyone could respond, her question was answered by a reedy mechanical voice.

'You-will-stay-exactly-as-you-are!'

Three grey steel spheres floated out of the mist. They were about a third of a metre in

diameter, and hung some two metres above the ground. A dull black disc was set in the side of each one. The disc moved as the sphere slowly rotated. It was as though the disc was some kind of sensor device and the spheres were scanning the four humans. The surprise at their sudden appearance was so great that nobody moved or spoke. Billy felt as though all his willpower was being drained away.

One of the spheres moved silently away from the other two. It circled A.A. Catto and began gently to shepherd her back towards her companions. She too seemed to have been drained of all will to resist.

Once the spheres had the humans herded together in one tight group, they surrounded them in a triangle formation. The black discs stared implacably down at the four people. Nobody spoke or moved. The voice came again.

'It-is-necessary-that-we-search-you.'

Billy couldn't tell whether it came from one single sphere, or all three. A small circular slot opened in the base of each sphere and a steel tentacle snaked out of it. The tentacles extended towards the humans and moved slowly over their bodies, as though inspecting them. Billy stood horrified as the cold steel probe slid into his pockets and under his clothes. Then they began removing things from the group. They took Billy's timepiece, his cigar lighter and small tri-di cube of a couple screwing that he kept as a good luck charm. They took Nancy's and Reave's guns and an electronic doorkey from A.A. Catto. They took everyone's portable generator. They also took off her ring, and removed Reave's collar. He had always thought it was permanently locked, but at a single touch from one of the sphere's tentacles, it just fell open. The various objects were placed carefully together on the ground. The voice came again.

'These-objects-are-proscribed-in-this-area. It-is-necessary-to-remove-and-destroy-them.'

One of the spheres emitted a thin beam of bright blue light from a point on its underside. It played over the objects on the ground. After a few seconds, they smoked and vanished. The spheres formed themselves into their original formation and silently drifted away into the mist. Billy slowly turned to the other three. His face had gone slack.

'Did that really happen?'

Nancy nodded.

'I think so.'

A.A. Catto looked round helplessly.

'Why did they take all our things? We had little enough to start with. Now we've got nothing.'

Billy frowned.

'They didn't take our clothes.'

Reave fished in his pocket and pulled out his gravity knife.

'They missed this.'

He snapped it open. When he came to close it, however, the mechanism no longer worked. He scratched the back of his neck.

'This place is too fucking weird. I . . .'

He suddenly received the impact of what the spheres' removal of his collar meant. A.A. Catto no longer had any physical control over him. He shot her a single intense glance. She pretended not to notice, and spoke quickly to Billy.

'Have you ever seen anything like them before?'

Billy shook his head.

'Never.'

He thought for a moment.

'It seems like they took away anything to do with technology, all mechanical things. They left our clothes and Reave's knife, but the mechanism on that doesn't work. I wonder if . . .'

Nancy cut him short.

'Could you do your wondering when we get some place that's warm?'

A.A. Catto joined in.

'Let's go somewhere. I'm dying of cold.'

Billy nodded and, without another word, started down the slope. His face was set and thoughtful. Suddenly he stopped and bent down. He fished something from a tuft of grass and held it up.

'Whatever those things were they didn't get this.'

'What is it?'

'A gun, it looks like my gun.'

He held up a compact .70 recoilless.

'It must have dropped here after we fell through the nothings.'

A.A. Catto looked grimly pleased.

'At least we're armed.'

Billy nodded, and carefully tucked the gun into the holster under his coat. They carried on down the hillside.

The going wasn't hard. The ground was even and downhill, but the cold became the exhausting factor. Even while they maintained a brisk pace, the freezing damp cut through their thin clothes and seeped into their bones. A.A. Catto's teeth began to chatter uncontrollably. She massaged her bare arms and looked desperately at Billy.

'I c-can't take m-much more of this.'

Billy did his best to be reassuring. He too was half frozen.

'We got to come out of this in the end. It cant go on for ever.'

A.A. Catto pursed her now blue lips.

'Anything's possible.'

Reave flashed her a wry grin.

'If it don't stop, it'll be the end of us.'

A.A. Catto gave him a long hard look, but said nothing. They went on walking. Billy was thankful for the downhill slope. It did at least prove they weren't going round in circles. Apart from that single fact, they could easily have been back at the point they started from. Nothing appeared to change.

Billy was about to give up hope when, abruptly, they came out of it. The transition was so sudden, it took them totally by surprise. One moment they were trudging through the same thick mist, then for a few paces it thinned and suddenly they were out in the sunshine. The sky above their heads was a clear blue, and the air smelled sweet and clean. All four of them stopped and just drank it in. A.A. Catto raised her chilled arms to the sun.

'Oh god. It feels so good.'

She turned and hugged Nancy, and they sank down on the short springy turf kissing each other enthusiastically. Billy looked at Reave, and they both shrugged. They turned their attention to their surroundings. Behind them was the wall of cloud completely concealing the upper slopes. In front of them, however, the view was breathtaking. Below them was a wide green valley. It was watered by a slow meandering river. A number of small tributary streams sparkled in the sun, Billy grinned at Reave.

'This really don't look too bad.'

Reave nodded.

'Sure looks good to me. Look at those trees, all that grass.

I could get behind laying up here for a while.'

He peered intently into the distance, and pointed down the valley.

'What do you think that is?'

Billy shaded his eyes and stared in the same direction.

'It looks like a building of some kind.'

Billy could just make out a black structure, beside the river, far down the valley. It seemed to have a broad base and then narrow off towards the top. It was surrounded by patchwork squares of different-coloured vegetation. Billy assumed that they were cultivated fields. Reave turned to Billy.

'Do you suppose we ought to head for that place?'

Billy nodded.

'I don't see anywhere else that looks inhabited.'

'It looks real big, that place.'

'And a long way away.'

Billy walked over to where the girls were lying entwined on the grass.

'Come on, you two. I think we've found civilization.'

A.A. Catto disengaged herself from Nancy.

'Civilization?'

'There's some kind of big building down in the valley.'

A.A. Catto propped herself up on one elbow.

'Is it nice?'

Billy shrugged.

'It don't look hostile. It's a long walk, though.'

A.A. Catto scowled.

'I thought there'd be something wrong with it.'

'It's a nice day for a walk.'

'I'm getting sick of this place.'

Billy grinned down at her.

'We might as well get moving.'

'We have to walk?'

Billy nodded.

'We have to walk.'

A.A. Catto smiled sweetly at him.

'I had an idea. Why don't you and Reave walk to this place? Then when you get there you could send out some transport for Nancy and me.'

'I didn't see too much that looked like transport.'

A.A. Catto sat up.

'Where is this place?'

Billy pointed out the building in the distance.

'There.'

'You don't expect me to walk that distance? You're crazy.'

'You can stay here.'

A.A. Catto beamed.

'And you'll send someone to fetch us?'

'I doubt it.'

A.A. Catto's expression turned venomous.

'One day I'll get the chance to really make you suffer, you little punk.'

'I'll do my best to avoid it.'

A.A. Catto climbed grudgingly to her feet. Nancy did the same. They started down the hillside towards the river. A.A. Catto sulked at first, but the walk proved to be no hardship. Very soon she and Nancy were walking along together chattering and giggling. Billy and Reave were slightly in front, deep in their own thoughts. They had been going for about ten minutes. A.A. Catto and Nancy had dropped some way behind. Suddenly Nancy yelled out.

'Look!'

There was such a note of urgency in her voice that the two men spun round. Nancy was pointing frantically up the hill. A small troop of horsemen were galloping across the hillside just below the cloudbank. Billy couldn't make out too many details of the riders. The horses were tall and black. The men carried long slender lances. The only obvious thing was that they didn't look hospitable. He beckoned quickly to the others.

'Quickly, crouch down. They don't seem to have seen us.'

They all flattened themselves on the grass. Not even A.A. Catto made a protest. They lay

perfectly still. The horsemen carried on in the same direction. Billy whispered to Reave.

'I think they're going to go past without seeing us.'

Reave's face was grim.

'I sure hope so. They don't look over-friendly.'

Suddenly the leading rider pulled his horse to a stop. The others halted beside him. For a few moments they milled about. Then they began to fan out. They came down the hillside at a steady trot, directly towards where the four were lying. Billy pushed himself up into a crouch.

'They've seen us! Run! Spread out!'

They all broke from cover. The riders kicked their horses and came on at a gallop. Billy began running for all he was worth. He forgot about the gun under his coat. The thunder of hooves was close behind him. The riders let out high, bloodcurdling shrieks. Billy's heart began to pound and his breath came in short, laboured gasps. The time in Litz had destroyed his physical condition. His body cringed at the thought of one of the long thin lances stabbing into it.

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw one of the horsemen close behind him. He swung round and changed direction. He caught a glimpse of a dark-skinned face beneath a strange winged helmet. Then the rider thundered past. Billy began panting back up the hill. Another rider crossed to intercept him. They were dressed in cloaks of some kind of fur, and black armour made from small interlocking plates. They looked sinister and deadly. Billy tried dodging again, but the second rider was too quick for him. He wheeled his horse and came after him. Billy saw that he was swinging two weights on the end of a long thong. Billy turned again and went on running desperately. He caught sight of another rider about to run down Nancy. The one who was chasing Billy suddenly let go of the device of weights and thongs. At that moment Billy remembered the gun, but it was too late. The thing caught him just above the knees. The thongs coiled tightly around his legs. Billy fell heavily. His head hit a rock and black oblivion rushed in and grabbed him.

The light that Jeb Stuart Ho had seen at the end of the road turned out, as they came closer, not to be one but several. They shone from the windows of a large building that stood on a small island of bare ground, beside the road, with the nothings all round it. It had the same ramshackle, disorganized style of architecture as the house at Wainscote where Ho had first found the Minstrel Boy, but instead of looking grim and menacing, this place seemed friendly and inviting.

In front of the building was a wide forecourt. It was crowded with a very mixed assortment of vehicles. A line of saddled lizards were tied to a rail. Sleek ground cars were parked next to broken-down horse-drawn wagons. A huge, ornately painted truck towered over a collection of weird, custom-built motorcycles. The access to this parking lot was through a high, curving arch of neon lights. Above the arch a huge sign turned slowly. It carried the legend THE INN. This garish entrance contrasted strangely with the funky, uneven style of the building.

As they came up to the Inn, Jeb Stuart Ho wondered if the Minstrel Boy was going to stop or drive straight by. Ho looked at him questioningly, but the Minstrel Boy continued to stare fixedly straight ahead. Jeb Stuart Ho assumed that there was going to be no stop, and settled back in his seat. Then, at the last minute, the Minstrel Boy spun the wheel and the car swung off the road with a shriek of tyres.

They passed under the glowing arch, and crossed the forecourt. The Minstrel Boy parked the car beside a land yacht. The strange vehicle had huge, spun-gold photon sails, and a wooden body covered in elaborate and somewhat obscene carvings. The Minstrel Boy cut the car's engine, and slumped forward across the wheel. Jeb Stuart Ho wondered if he should help the Minstrel Boy out of the car, or leave him and go into the Inn on his own. He tapped the Minstrel Boy on the shoulder.

'Do you want to come inside with me?'

The Minstrel Boy didn't answer. He responded like a zombie, sitting up and slowly moving his hand to the door handle. Jeb Stuart Ho quickly climbed out of the car and hurried round to the Minstrel Boy's side. He helped him through the door, and steadied him while he tried to stand.

In his trancelike state, the Minstrel Boy had a good deal of difficulty walking. Jeb Stuart Ho

supported him as they made their way to the entrance of the Inn. As they passed the line of tethered lizards, the beasts snorted and stamped their feet in agitation. The Minstrel Boy seemed to have a strange, unsettling effect on them.

The interior of the Inn, and the people who crowded the noisy, smoky, low-ceilinged room, were as mixed as the outside architecture. A long bar of dark, stained oak ran down one side of the main room. A gang of bartenders scurried backwards and forwards behind it serving drinks to the demanding throng. In a corner a string band occupied a small stage and tried to make themselves heard above the general din. In a cleared space among the tables a hunchbacked juggler with a small black and white dog performed for tips and drinks. Across on the other side of the room, in a section of floor that was lower than the rest, two men sat on small stools, hunched over a huge black and white marble board, a full two metres across, playing checkers with counters the size of plates. A small crowd sat silently watching them, occasionally exchanging low-voiced side bets as the game progressed.

At one end of the room was a granite fireplace where two great logs blazed with a comforting glow. The corner of the fireplace and the wall of the room created a patch of shadow. In it were two tables. One was empty and the other occupied only by a solitary old man who nodded over a beer mug. It seemed a place where one could sit without attracting attention. Jeb Stuart Ho steered the Minstrel Boy towards the spot. He didn't want anyone paying too close attention to his condition.

Once they were seated, Jeb Stuart Ho had a chance to look at the other people in the main room of the Inn. There were representatives of almost every culture that was crowded on to the remains of the shattered world. There were nomad bike-riders and wheelfreaks with their loud laughter, leather suits and long, greased hair. There were puritan merchants jealous of the glances that the other travellers gave their veiled and hooded wives. Hard-eyed brigands with gaudy clothes, huge brass rings through their ears, and wicked knives stuck in their belts crouched in conspiratorial groups. Away from the rest of the crowd five nuns ate in silence. They had the shaved heads and purple robes of the grim sisterhood who ruled the city of Sade. Sophisticated women in the scanty synthetics that were high fashion in the tech-cities rubbed shoulders with ragged bums, travelling hookers, medicine men and gamblers in the traditional frock coats and fancy vests. There were even a few of the strange, almost alien creatures from the outer fringes, with their tinted skin, abnormal bodies and outlandish clothes. Of A.A. Catto

and her companions, however, there was no sign.

Servants of both sexes moved in and out of the throng, serving meals and drinks, laughing with the customers and generally making themselves available. They seemed to combine the roles of waiter, host and prostitute. One of them, a girl with large breasts and long slim legs, moved towards Jeb Stuart Ho's table.

'What can I get you, friend?'

'I'd like a meal of fresh vegetables and a bottle of pure water.'

The waitress looked at him strangely. She seemed about to say something, but changed her mind. She nodded towards the Minstrel Boy.

'How about him? Does he want anything?'

'You could bring him some brandy.'

The waitress nodded, and then smiled sideways at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You wouldn't maybe like a little, uh, companionship, perhaps?'

Jeb Stuart Ho hesitated. He had had no sexual contact with either man or woman since he had left the temple. The prospect seemed wholly inviting. Both the men and the women were extremely pleasing. There was his task, though. He was sure the brotherhood and his teachers would expect him to remain celibate until it was complete. He sighed and shook his head.

'Regretfully, I think not.'

The girl shrugged.

'Suit yourself.'

She went away, and after a short while came back with the order. As she leaned over to place it on the table, Jeb Stuart Ho was treated to an uninterrupted view of her breasts. He felt a stab of remorse at his decision to remain temporarily celibate. After she'd moved on, he pushed the brandy glass in front of the Minstrel Boy.

'Here, I ordered a drink for you.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyes were glazed. He appeared to hear and see nothing. It was as though he was in some other place. Jeb Stuart Ho started as a wheezing chuckle came from behind him.

'He'll not drink anything.'

Jeb Stuart Ho turned round carefully, and found the old man was grinning at him crookedly. He was a strange figure. The top of his head was bald, but long white hair cascaded down his back. His beard was of equal length. His face was lined and weatherbeaten, and the long

shapeless robe that he wore had been washed, bleached, patched and darned until it was a uniform off-white. The most compelling thing about him, however, was his eyes. They were small and black and peered out from behind bushy eyebrows like those of a lizard, a lizard whose sense of humour was the only thing that saved it from being a venomous cynic. He picked up a stout polished staff, almost as tall as himself, from where it was leaning against the wall, and moved to Jeb Stuart Ho's table.

'He'll not touch the brandy, or anything else, until he pulls out of what you've done to him.'

Jeb Stuart Ho tensed. He arranged himself in his chair so he could instantly move in any direction. He looked evenly at the old man.

'You know what's been done to him?'

The old man's mouth twisted into a sneer.

'I've a pretty fair idea. You've filled him up with cyclatrol or some such gunk, and there's no point in you sitting there like a cat ready to jump. I'll not harm you. Much as I might like to. The only thing I'm wondering is why you did it. I'm wondering what you're after.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was taken aback at the amount of information the old man seemed to have. He did his best to maintain his composure.

'You seem to know a lot about my affairs.'

'I just watch and figure. Right now I'm figuring what you're up to.'

Jeb Stuart Ho smiled a deceptively sweet smile. He was aware that he might have to kill the prattling old man if he began to endanger his mission.

'And what do you figure I'm up to, old man?'

'I figure you're hunting someone. That's about the only thing that'll bring you black murdering vultures out of your damn temple. I figure you're out for a hit, and you've filled the poor boy here with cyclatrol to get a fix on your victim.'

'Your talk could be dangerous, old man.'

The old man nodded towards the Minstrel Boy.

'When I was his age, I might have been afraid of you, but now I'm too old. Even he seeks a temporary death in oblivion every opportunity he gets. Maybe life's the only thing to be afraid of these days.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was definitely ill at ease. He glanced at the Minstrel Boy, and then back at the old man.

'You know him?'

The old man laughed.

'The Minstrel Boy. Aye, you could say our paths have crossed.'

'Who are you?'

'They call me the Wanderer.'

'And what do you do, Wanderer?'

'I wander round from place to place. I watch and figure.'

'And you know where you are?'

'Don't get any ideas.'

'But you do know where you are?'

The Wanderer sighed.

'Aye, I do, but not as good as a lizard, and not as good as him.'

He nodded towards the Minstrel Boy.

'I was never as good as him. Perhaps that's why I lived so long.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was about to ask another question, when the Minstrel Boy twitched. His eyes focused, and his mouth opened.

'Quahal.'

His voice was a hoarse croak.

'Quahal.'

Jeb Stuart Ho grasped his arm.

'Quahal.'

'What?'

The Minstrel Boy didn't answer. His eyes glazed over again. He became rigid. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the Wanderer.

'What did he say?'

The Wanderer's eye twinkled.

'He said Quahal.'

'What is Quahal?'

'Don't they teach you anything inside your precious temple?'

Jeb Stuart Ho's face darkened.

'What is Quahal?'

'It's a place. I figure your quarry must have fetched up there. Is it a man or a woman?'

'What difference does it make?'

The Wanderer laughed.

'In Quahal it makes a difference.'

'Why? What is this place?'

'You want to know about Quahal, do you?'

'I'd be grateful for any information you could give me.'

'Grateful, even? Well, I suppose I can't do no harm, except of course to help you kill this poor soul.'

'She only has to die to save many more lives.'

'Says you.'

'The brotherhood's projections have a very low factor of error.'

The Wanderer grunted.

'That's as maybe. It's too much like men playing god for me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho grew impatient.

'Will you tell me about Quahal?'

The Wanderer nodded.

'Aye, I'll tell. If you promise to keep quiet, and not interrupt.'

Jeb Stuart Ho smiled.

'You have my word.'

'Your word, even. Right, then. I'll tell you the story of Quahal. Like most things, it started back in the days when things broke up. That was just after Stuff Central got going, and we were supposed to have reached Utopia, although not many people like to connect those two facts any more. Anyhow, the nothings came, and the disruptors began to break up the land, and you couldn't trust gravity or nothing any more. People began grabbing anything they could hang on to, stabilize and live on. Everyone had a different idea about why things had gone so wrong. There was this particular brother and sister called Alamada and Joachim Hesse. They decided all the trouble was due to technology and the only way to live was in a primitive, natural world. As their home started to melt away, they got Stuff Central to set one up for them. They had a huge great stasis generator installed, stabilized a stretch of place, had it landscaped, a nice misty, wild mountain and a fertile river valley, and moved in. You'll notice, incidentally, that they weren't

averse to a bit of technology creating and maintaining this Garden of Eden. At my age, I really ought to stop expecting people to be consistent. Anyway, they had some plants and animals beamed in, and then people. The people were specially DNA tailored to suit Alamada's and Joachim's fantasies, and programmed to do exactly what was expected of them. Everything was set up. They called the place Quahal and settled down to the simple life.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked puzzled.

'Why Quahal?'

The Wanderer became annoyed.

'How should I know? That's what they called it. Maybe they got it out of a book. I don't know. You promised not to interrupt.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Okay. Don't do it again. Right?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Okay. Well, Alamada and Joachim didn't exactly want the same things. For a start, Joachim was gay and Alamada was a hetero sadist, so they didn't quite see eye to eye. The long and short of it was that Joachim lived down in the valley doing a kind of Aztec number with a lot of specially bred young men. He was the high priest. He had a ziggurat, the whole number, all these lads worshipping him. He was happy as a pig in shit. He had them ritually sacrificed when they got too old, and kept them totally celibate except as far as he was concerned.'

The Wanderer looked at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Aren't you guys from the brotherhood celibate?'

'Only when it serves our purpose.'

The Wanderer looked dubious.

'I never did see what purpose could be served by not screwing. Are you sure you ain't the product of someone's fantasy?'

'I . . .'

'Don't answer. I'll go on with the story. Obviously Alamada wasn't going to go for Joachim's set-up. She made herself a home up the mountain with a team of rough, horny, horse-riding tribesmen. She was their, I dunno, witch queen or something. They all balled her, and fought with each other and were generally rough and disagreeable, so she was happy too. The Stuff beam brought in all the things they needed, including replacement people, and everything was

neat. Except for one thing. You know what that was?'

'No.'

'Joachim and Alamada weren't immortal. They grew old and in the end they died. They even got round that, in a way, though.'

'How?'

'They had everything about them fed into the Stuff Central computer. When they passed away, these replacements showed up. They've showed up about every ten years ever since. In the case of Joachim it was a short ritual. The new Joachim would come out of the Stuff receiver, and the old one would straight away get sacrificed. In Alamada's case it was a little rougher. The Stuff receiver was in the ziggurat, down in the valley. When a new Alamada arrived she'd climb the mountain and have to fight the old one. The winner would be queen. I figure that's about it, as far as Quahal's concerned.'

The Wanderer thought for a minute.

'Oh yeah, one thing I forgot. The globes.'

'The globes?'

'Another of Alamada's and Joachim's little concessions to technology. They're a kind of cybernetic watchdogs. They prowl the place. If anyone turns up out of the nothings they remove everything more advanced than a slingshot. If anyone resists they fuse him.'

He looked hard at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I suppose you'll be of there?'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded.

'I should leave straight away.'

'You could easily find that the lady you're after has been offed by the current Alamada.'

'I would have to go and make sure.'

The Wanderer grinned crookedly.

'Duty?'

'What else is there?'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'Don't ask me to tell you.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry about it.'

There was a pause. Jeb Stuart Ho and the Wanderer sat silent with the rigid Minstrel Boy between them. Then the Wanderer looked sideways at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You wouldn't have any objection to me coming, along with you?'

'To Quahal?'

'Yeah. I've got nothing better to do, and I do know about the place.'

Jeb Stuart Ho became suspicious.

'Why do you want to come? You didn't make the place sound very pleasant.'

'Like I said, I don't have anything better to do. After all, you don't think an old man like me can harm you in any way?'

Ho nodded doubtfully.

'I don't.'

The Wanderer grinned.

'So I can ride with you?'

'I suppose so.'

The Wanderer gestured at the Minstrel Boy.

'We'd better get him out to the car then.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's head jerked round.

'How did you know we came in a ground car?'

The Wanderer grinned.

'Like I said, I don't miss very much.'

They pulled the Minstrel Boy to his feet, and headed for the door.

Billy woke up. He immediately wished that he hadn't. He hurt all over. The slightest movement sent pain stabbing up from the back of his neck. He tried opening his eyes. Wherever he was, the light was dim. Billy was grateful for that. He was aware of something moving. Billy turned his head. He found himself looking at Reave.

'Where are we?'

'You've come round, then? We were beginning to think you'd gone and died.'

'I wish I had.'

'You feel bad?'

'Bad? I feel like I've been beaten up about a dozen times. Where the hell are we?'

Reave rubbed his nose.

'I ain't really sure.'

Billy struggled into a sitting position. He looked around. He seemed to be in some kind of hut. The floor was bare earth and the wall was built from dry stone. There was a single circular wall that curved inwards in a kind of beehive shape to become an almost conical roof. In the centre of it was a small hole. It was the only source of light and ventilation. A heavy wooden door was the only exit from the hut. Billy moved painfully towards it, but Reave waved him away.

'There's no point in trying the door. It's bolted on the outside.'

Billy sat down again. He noticed the hut was completely bare. There was no furniture, nothing. It was also very cold. He shivered and looked at Reave.

'What in hell is this place?'

Reave shrugged.

'Like I said, I ain't really sure.'

Billy began to get impatient. It seemed as though Reave was being deliberately unhelpful.

'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing. I'm just frozen, starved, and I figure we're liable to get killed any time now. I don't see much to get enthusiastic about.'

Billy frowned, and ran his fingers through his hair.

'What happened? The last thing I remember was being chased by those guys on horses.'

'They caught us.'

'Then what?'

'They slung us over their saddles and rode up into the mist. You were out cold. It seemed like we rode for hours, all through that fog. Eventually we wound up here.'

'What's here?'

'A village of some sort. Just a collection of beehive-shaped stone huts in the fog. I didn't get too much of a chance to look at the place. They threw you and me in here, and that was it.'

'You've been here ever since?'

'Yeah.'

'What happened to A.A. Catto and Nancy?'

'The horsemen took them to some other part of the village.'

'You figure they're being raped?'

Reave shrugged.

'Who can tell? I don't think they are, somehow. The horsemen seemed to treat them with some kind of respect.'

Billy massaged his bruises.

'Pity they didn't give us some.'

Reave scowled, and said nothing. Billy sat thinking. After a while he looked up.

'Do you reckon we could escape?'

Reave slapped the solid stone wall.

'I don't see how.'

'Maybe when they come to feed us?'

Reave shook his head sourly.

'They ain't showed no sign of feeding us yet.'

Billy slumped back against the wall and thought again. Suddenly he sat bolt upright.

'Hey!'

Reave looked up without too much interest.

'What?'

Billy stuck a hand inside his jacket.

'They left me with my gun.'

'You're kidding.'

'No, look!'

Billy pulled it out. Reave looked at it in amazement.

'Shit!'

'How could they have missed it?'

Reave shook his head.

'Beats me. They took my knife away.'

Billy looked at the gun thoughtfully.

'Maybe they don't know what it is. If those globes destroy all the technology that turns up here, those horsemen may never have seen a gun.'

Reave nodded.

'You got a point there.'

'It gives us a better chance of getting away.'

'We'll have to wait till someone comes and opens the door.'

'When they do, we can blow them away.'

'So all we have to do is wait.'

'Right.'

They waited. They had no way of calculating the passing of time, but it seemed like a very long wait. A couple of times Billy became quite convinced that they had been locked up in the stone hut and forgotten. Eventually, however, there came the sound of someone pulling back the outside bolts. Billy tensed. He moved to beside the door. He flattened himself against the wall, tightly gripping the butt of the gun. The door opened. Billy raised his weapon. A figure stepped into the hut. Billy's finger eased back on the trigger. Then he stopped. The figure was A.A. Catto. Nancy followed her into the hut, then two of the horsemen. Billy quickly stuffed the gun under his jacket. A.A. Catto turned, and saw him pressed against the wall.

'What do you think you're doing?'

Billy wiped a hand over his face.

'Nothing.'

A.A. Catto raised an eyebrow, but made no remark. Reave scrambled to his feet.

'Are you two all right?'

A.A. Catto nodded.

'For the moment.'

Billy glanced at the two horsemen standing in the doorway of the hut.

'Are we still prisoners?'

A.A. Catto examined her fingernails, and picked at one where the paintjob was chipped.

'Not exactly.'

'We can go?'

'No, We can't actually leave this place.'

'What's going on then?'

A.A. Catto avoided looking at Billy.

'It's sort of complicated.'

Billy pursed his lips.

'I might have known it wouldn't be simple. Are you going to tell us about it?'

A.A. Catto took a deep breath.

'Well . . . it's like this. There aren't any women in this tribe. It's all men.'

Billy looked amazed.

'No women?'

'Well, there is one. She's sort of queen witch. The Alamada, they call her. It seems that the only other women who come here are challengers for her title. There's a sort of ritual fight, and the one who wins gets to rule the place.'

Billy's expression became even more incredulous.

'You mean they thought you were a challenger?'

'Yes.'

'I suppose you put them straight about you not being a challenger, and how we all just came here by accident.'

'Well . . . no.'

'Why the hell not?'

'I was worried that they might kill us.'

Billy slowly shook his head, as though to clear it.

'You mean you're going to go along with this fight?'

'I can't see any way out.'

'I suppose you can take a dive as soon as is honourably possible. Then we can all leave?'

'No.'

'No?'

'It's a fight to the death.'

Billy's jaw dropped.

'To the death?'

'To the death.'

'You mean you're risking getting killed to save the rest of us?'

A.A. Catto looked at him as though he was mad.

'No, of course not. If I lose, they'll kill you straight away. I told them that you were my personal slaves.'

'Personal slaves?'

'That's right, so you'd better come up with an idea.'

Billy shook his head in disbelief.

'What the hell have you got us into?'

A.A. Catto looked at him disdainfully.

'I'm sure you'll think of something.'

'How long do we have before the fight?'

A.A. Catto avoided Billy's eyes.

'Not very long.'

She gestured towards the two horsemen.

'These people have come to take us all to another hut. Then we have to prepare for the fight.'

The horsemen began to show signs of impatience. They motioned to A.A. Catto. She walked out of the hut. The others followed. The two horsemen led the four of them through the village. It was a cold, bleak place. A collection of grey stone beehive-shaped huts with thin trails of mist drifting between them. Billy noticed that behind the huts was a wooden fenced corral that contained a fairly large herd of all, mean-looking horses. At one end of the village was a hut much larger than any of the others. It was constructed from three of the dry stone beehive shapes run together. It had a tall timber roof. In front of it was a cleared space. At one side of the space was a fire pit lined with flat slabs of stone. At the moment it was only filled with smouldering embers, but it was obvious that it regularly held a huge fire.

At first Billy thought that the two horsemen were taking him to the big building, but at the last

minute, they turned off and went towards a smaller one next to it.

During the walk through the village, Billy had a chance closely to examine the horsemen, The two who were acting as their escort were uncannily alike. Billy began to suspect that they might be clones or something similar. They had olive complexions, high cheekbones, prominent noses and deep-set dark eyes. They looked proud, savage and arrogant. The long, straight black hair was heavily greased, and scraped back and secured at the nape of the neck with an ornamental clasp. They wore tunics of heavy fur. Round their waists were wide studded belts. From them hung a wide-bladed knife, and a long thin two-handed sword. Their legs were covered in crude trousers of some coarse material, held together by thongs that criss-crossed from their sandalled feet to just above the knee. The arms were protected by a flexible armour made from small leaf-shaped metal plates that extended right down to the backs of their hands.

The hut they were taken to was much bigger than the one Billy and Reave had been locked up in. It was also a lot more comfortable. The stone walls were hung with roughly woven tapestries. There were rushes strewn on the floor. Warmth came from a small brazier and there were even a rough carved table, three stools and a straight-backed chair. A.A. Catto dropped into the chair, and looked up at Billy.

'So, have you thought of something?'

Billy glanced round at the two horsemen who stood silently by the door.

'Do they understand what we're saying?'

A.A. Catto nodded.

'They use the same language, but I think there's quite a few words they don't use or understand. They don't talk much, though. They use a lot of signs and gestures.'

Billy moved round until he was standing behind A.A. Catto. He watched the faces of the two horsemen, and spoke slowly and carefully.

'I still have my seventy calibre. They didn't take it away from me.'

'You mean you've got a . . . !'

'Don't say it!'

'Sorry.'

The horsemen gave no flicker of interest. Billy leaned forward.

'Okay. I'm going to take a chance now. I'm going to take the thing out and put it on the table. I'm pretty sure they won't know what it is.'

Billy moved slowly round to the table. He casually took the gun out from under his coat, and placed it on the table. Neither of the horsemen moved. A.A. Catto let out her breath with a sigh.

'It worked. You were right.'

Billy nodded.

'Right. You're going to prepare for the fight. You're going to go through with it. Just hang in there as long as you can. Immediately you get into trouble, I'll shoot the queen. After that, we play it by ear. Okay?'

Before A.A. Catto could reply, the door opened and another two horsemen came into the hut. One carried a bundle wrapped in red cloth, and the other a small iron pot. They placed them on the table. Neither appeared to take any particular notice of the gun. One of them unwrapped the contents of the cloth. There was a wide leaf-bladed knife, a set of the strange armour to cover one arm, and a small round shield, slightly larger than a plate. The armour was silver rather than black. The horsemen pointed at A.A. Catto.

'You prepare. Soon it is time.'

A.A. Catto looked round questioningly. The horseman gestured for her to stand. A.A. Catto stood. The horseman moved close to her and tugged at the top of her dress. Nothing happened. He tugged again. A.A. Catto realized he wanted her to take off the dress. She released the fastening. It fell open, and dropped to the floor. A.A. Catto was naked except for her boots. The horseman pointed to them. A.A. Catto stooped down and took them off. None of the horsemen showed any reaction to her nudity.

The one who brought in the bundle stepped away from A.A. Catto, and the one who had carried in the iron pot moved forward. He placed the pot on the table and positioned A.A. Catto so she was standing with her feet apart and her arms raised. Then he turned and dipped both hands into the pot. It was filled with a warm, sweet-smelling, oily paste. He began slowly and carefully to rub the substance all over A.A. Catto's body, not missing any part. At first, A.A. Catto's face registered surprise, but the surprise quickly turned to pleasure. She gave a short, low moan. For a moment the horseman stopped massaging and looked at her blankly, then he went on with his work. Nancy caught A.A. Catto's eye.

'Does that stuff do anything?'

'It deadens the nerves, I think. It's kind of nice.'

When the horseman had finished he moved away and let the first one fit the piece of armour

on to A.A. Catto's left arm. Then he picked up the knife and shield, and with a ritualistic gesture presented them to her. A.A. Catto swung the knife a little to test its weight. The horsemen motioned that it was time for them to move. A curious procession formed up. In the front were the two horsemen who had prepared A.A. Catto for the fight, then A.A. Catto herself. Behind her were Billy, Reave and Nancy, and finally, bringing up the rear, were the two original horsemen who had guarded them all the time they had been in the village. As Billy left the hut, he casually picked up the gun and held it loosely by his side. None of the horsemen appeared to notice.

They left the hut, and came out into the open space in front of the big hut. The fire had been piled high with huge timbers, and blazed furiously. Flames leaped from the pit, and a lot of the fog had been burned away. A.A. Catto's oiled body glistened in the light. The open space was surrounded on three sides by squares of horsemen. There must have been fifty in all. They stood in straight, unwavering lines. Unlike the men escorting A.A. Catto and her companions, these men wore conical helmets with batwings of flat black metal projecting from the top. The helmets gave them a sinister appearance, which was heightened by two curved side pieces that protected their cheeks, and a third piece that projected downwards to cover the nose. They all carried the long slender lances, which served to complete the whole effect of menace.

The open side of the square faced the big hut. As A.A. Catto approached the line of men, they stepped aside to let her through. Then the ranks closed. Billy, Reave, Nancy and the four horsemen attending them were left to stand behind the ranks, peering over their shoulders.

A.A. Catto stood in the middle of the open space. The fire crackled and roared beside her. It was a strange experience to stand naked apart from her protected arm in front of all these men who looked on so impassively. She stood in front of the big hut and waited. She didn't feel anything like as frightened as she had expected to be. She wondered if the stuff they'd rubbed into her body had some kind of narcotic effect.

There was no sign of the woman she was expected to fight. Then the door of the hut swung open. Two helmeted horsemen came out and positioned themselves on either side of the door. Then a figure, who was unmistakably the Alamada, followed them out. It was A.A. Catto's first glimpse of her opponent, and she didn't like what she saw.

The ground car emerged from the nothings. Jeb Stuart Ho relaxed back in his seat. He was profoundly relieved. Travelling through the nothings still intensely disturbed him. When he returned to the temple, he would have to discuss the matter with his teacher and meditate on the answers. That was if he ever did return to the temple. Right at that time it seemed an impossible distance away. He turned and looked out of the side window. They were in one of the broken areas that formed the transition between the nothings and a stabilized area. Small sections of bare earth began to form around them, though there were still huge holes of shifting grey punched through it.

The holes grew progressively smaller, and finally vanished altogether. The solid stable land was complete. The car was bouncing through a lush green meadow. Beside them flowed a wide, clear river. In the distance was a tall, mist-covered mountain. Jeb Stuart Ho glanced back at the Wanderer who sat in the rear seat.

'Is this place Quahal?'

The Wanderer nodded.

'I figure so. Particularly from the state of him.'

The Wanderer nodded to the Minstrel Boy sitting in the driving seat. Jeb Stuart Ho looked round at him. The Minstrel Boy had changed. He was still staring straight ahead and tightly gripping the wheel, but his face had turned green and sweat was pouring off him. His lips were moving soundlessly, as though he was trying to say something. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the Wanderer.

'Should I give him another shot?'

'Not unless you want to kill him.'

'I don't understand.'

'We've arrived, you fool. There's nothing more he can do for you.'

As though in silent confirmation, the Minstrel Boy slowed the car to a stop. He cut the engine. It was suddenly very quiet. The only sound was a breeze that moved through the grass. The Minstrel Boy slowly toppled over. His head slammed forward on to the wheel. The Wanderer

leaned forward and grasped his shoulder. He shook him gently. The Minstrel Boy didn't move. The Wanderer looked quickly at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Feel for his pulse! He may be dead!'

'Why should he be dead?'

'Don't ask questions. Just do it.'

Jeb Stuart Ho placed his fingertips on the Minstrel Boy's neck.

'There's a pulse, but it's very faint.'

'Get him out of the car and lay him down on the grass.'

Jeb Stuart Ho did as he was told. The Wanderer stooped over the Minstrel Boy and loosened his shirt. He put his ear to his chest. He listened for a few moments, and then straightened up.

'As far as I can tell, he'll live.'

'What's happened to him?'

'You've got a lot of gall.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand.'

'With all your fucking training you don't understand. You've just about killed the poor bastard.'

'I have? How?'

The Wanderer clapped a hand to his bald head.

'How? How? You fill him up with cyclatrol, you keep him driving through the nothings for fuck knows how long and then you wonder why he almost dies when he starts to come down. You're impossible, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

Ho stood in silence for a long while. He was becoming acutely aware that despite all the years at the temple, there were many things that he still needed to learn. Suddenly a thought struck him. He looked hard at the Wanderer.

'How did you know my name? I didn't tell it to you.'

The Wanderer grinned and tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger.

'There's a lot I know.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded solemnly.

'I'm beginning to realize that.'

He walked slowly away from the car. The doubts were becoming serious. There was so much that he didn't understand. He stood staring at the river. He took a grip on himself. He shouldn't be

thinking this way. He only had one purpose in this place. He had to complete his task. He had to kill A.A. Catto. He walked quickly back to the Wanderer and the still unconscious Minstrel Boy. The Wanderer looked up at him and grinned.

'Itchy to get on with the killing, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'Sometimes I think you can read my thoughts.'

'You don't think a poor old man like me could do anything like that, do you?'

'The fox does not lead the hunter straight to his lair, neither does the little rabbit . . .'

The Wanderer quickly interrupted him.

'Don't give me that fortune cookie stuff. It's something I've always hated about your bunch.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I doubt that it's your fault.'

'I'm anxious to get on with my task.'

The Wanderer nodded.

'So I see.'

He nodded towards the Minstrel Boy.

'What about this poor boy?'

There was an awkward pause as the Wanderer got to his feet.

'You weren't thinking of leaving him here?'

'You wouldn't consider looking after him?'

'Have you considered that he might not want to stay in this place?'

'He has the ground car.'

'Not for long, he hasn't.'

'What do you mean?'

The Wanderer grinned.

'That's something else you've forgotten.'

'What?'

'The globes.'

'The cybernetic guards that destroy machines?'

'Right.'

'They'll destroy the car?'

'Of course they will.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked round.

'They haven't come yet.'

'They will, and when they do, don't try and resist. They're quite liable to fry all three of us.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stared out across the river. Sure enough, just as the Wanderer had predicted, five objects were floating towards them. They hung in the air a short distance above the surface of the water. As they came nearer, he could see that they were smooth grey steel with a black disc set in the side nearest to him.

The globes swept across the meadow towards them. They emitted a high-pitched hum. The Wanderer moved close to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Remember, don't try anything. Just go along with what they want. If you don't, they'll wipe us all out.'

The globes moved round until they'd surrounded the car and the three men.

'You-will-stay-exactly-as-you-are!'

Neither Ho nor the Wanderer replied. Jeb Stuart Ho was aware the spheres were somehow draining off his willpower. He tried to analyse how they were doing this. It was something he had no experience of. The effort proved to much for him, and he found himself standing blankly.

'It-is-necessary-that-we-search-you.'

The tentacles curled out from the base of the globes, and their tips ran over the Wanderer's and Jeb Stuart Ho's bodies. They took away Ho's gun and his stasis generator. They left him with the rest of his weapons and equipment. They found nothing on the Wanderer, and turned their attention to the Minstrel Boy.

'Has-this-one-ceased-to-live?'

The Wanderer shook his head dully.

'He's still alive, but he's unconscious.'

The globes made no comment. They just ran their tentacles over the Minstrel Boy's inert body. They took his stasis generator, and a couple of trinkets from his pocket. They placed them on top of the car, along with the things they'd taken from Jeb Stuart Ho.

'These-objects-are-proscribed-in-this-area. The-vehicle-is-proscribed-in-this-area. It-is-necessary-that-we-destroy-them.'

The globes rose and floated above the car. Thin beams of bright blue light stabbed down from their bases, and played over the car. Jeb Stuart Ho retreated from the heat that was generated as

the car smoked and melted. When it was reduced to a twisted, blackened hulk, the globes silently retreated back across the river and vanished. Jeb Stuart Ho slowly shook his head.

'I have never seen machines like that before.'

The Wanderer nodded.

'It's amazing what you can get from Stuff Central.'

They both stood looking at the charred wreck. The Wanderer grinned.

'Looks like we're walking from here on in.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was about to answer when the Minstrel Boy made a noise. Both men turned and looked at him. He was weakly trying to sit up. His face was still very pale. Jeb Stuart Ho dropped on one knee beside him.

'Are you all right?'

'No. I feel half dead. My head hurts.'

Jeb Stuart Ho avoided the Minstrel Boy's eyes.

'I suppose you blame me for it.'

The Minstrel Boy struggled into a sitting position. Anger seemed to give him strength.

'Who the hell do you expect me to blame? You're the fucker that's responsible.'

He caught sight of the Wanderer.

'You! What the fuck are you doing here?'

The Wanderer grinned.

'I just came along for the ride.'

The Minstrel Boy groaned, and looked around.

'Where are we, anyway?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him in surprise.

'You mean you don't know? You brought us here.'

'You don't expect me to remember any of that, do you?'

'We're in Quahal.'

The Minstrel Boy collapsed back on the grass.

'Quahal! Oh no, I don't believe it.'

'You don't like it?'

'Of course I don't like it. It's a hideous, unbelievable place.'

He sat up again, and noticed the wreckage of the car for the first time.

'I suppose the globes did that.'

The Wanderer nodded.

'That's right.'

'So we can't get out of here.'

'Not until someone comes up with something.'

The Minstrel Boy looked bitterly at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Why did I ever get involved with you?'

'You had no choice.'

'You can say that again.'

The Minstrel Boy continued to sit on the grass. The Wanderer seemed content to stand patiently and say nothing. Jeb Stuart Ho began to feel that his time was being wasted. He looked from one to the other.

'We ought really to begin to move on.'

The Wanderer said nothing. The Minstrel Boy savagely ripped up a clump of grass.

'I ain't going nowhere else with you.'

Jeb Stuart Ho attempted to be reasonable.

'You can't remain here for the rest of time.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced up with a sneer.

'Can't I? You just watch me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho continued to be reasonable.

'Surely if you come with us, at least to the nearest habitation, you may find the means to get out of this area.'

The Minstrel Boy sat in stubborn silence. The Wanderer decided it was time to intervene.

'He's right, you know. You might as well come as far as the ziggurat.'

The Minstrel Boy glared at him.

'Who asked you?'

'I'm only telling you the truth.'

The Minstrel Boy paused for a moment, then climbed slowly to his feet.

'Okay, okay, I'll come that far with you, but one thing's got to be clear, right?'

'What's that?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded towards Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I ain't going to get involved in any more of his deals. I don't want him anywhere near me.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the ground.

'I'm sorry you feel that way.'

'Don't even talk about it.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked helplessly at the Wanderer. He shrugged and slowly turned and started walking away. Ho, and finally the Minstrel Boy, followed him. They walked along parallel to the river. All the men maintained a certain distance between each other. Nobody spoke. Every so often, they would pass the ruined, burned-out hulk of another vehicle that had been destroyed by the globes. There was no sign of any people.

There was no great hardship involved in walking to the ziggurat. The river lowlands had been designed as a natural near-paradise. Once they'd left the last of the wrecks behind, the countryside was almost idyllic. Butterflies and small birds flitted above the long, lush, gently waving grass. The river moved calmly along beside them, reflecting the bright sunlight and the deep blue, cloudless sky. Even the distant view of the blue-grey, mist-shrouded mountain was almost too good to be true.

After a while, they could see the ziggurat further down the river. Even from some distance away there was no mistaking its vast size and complexity. Although it was roughly pyramid-shaped, it was a mass of ramps, stairs, stepped walls and flat roofs at different levels. Here and there, the even blackness of the stone was broken up by a small patch of green where plants were being grown on a section of roof. There were also flashes of silver where a stream of water ran down a complicated system of channels from a fountain high up near the summit of the structure.

As they came nearer to the ziggurat, the meadow land gave way to a system of small, square, cultivated fields, divided by hedges and irrigation ditches. They crossed a path that appeared to lead straight towards the massive building, and turned on to it. Men were working in some of the fields. They all seemed to have a similar build and very uniform features. They all wore the same kind of one-piece faded blue robe, and their heads were either shaved or totally bald. Each time Jeb Stuart Ho and his two companions passed one of the men, they looked up, smiled, and then went back to their work. It reminded Jeb Stuart Ho of his time at the brotherhood temple and, despite his carefully programmed sense of caution, he felt himself filled with a strong sensation of wellbeing.

The others seemed to pick up some of the same atmosphere. Despite the early bad feeling they

moved closer together, and the Minstrel Boy even took off his jacket and tossed it across his shoulder. Jeb Stuart Ho had never seen him look so relaxed.

They started meeting more of the local people. They passed them on the path, wheeling barrows, carrying bundles or simply moving from one field to another with forks or hoes over their shoulders. None of them spoke to the travellers, but they all flashed them the happy instant smile. Jeb Stuart Ho wasn't too surprised at the extreme similarity between all the men, this was common in many closed communities. The brotherhood all looked very much alike, although not to the extent of the men of Quahal. What puzzled him was that they all appeared to be roughly the same age. There were no children, no youths and no old men. Everyone he had seen appeared to be between twenty and thirty.

They reached the foot of the ziggurat. There was nothing that could be described as a main entrance. There were at least four arched doorways in the wall nearest to them, plus half a dozen small square openings, also two ramps, and three sets of steps. Jeb Stuart Ho looked round at the Wanderer.

'Do you have any idea where we should go?'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'No idea.'

He turned to the Minstrel Boy.

'Would you know?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him, hesitated, and then shook his head.

'I don't know nothing.'

They walked round to the next side of the square base. Here again they were confronted with another choice of stairs and entrances. Jeb Stuart Ho looked round helplessly. The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'You could always go inside and just wander about.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked hard at him.

'I hardly think that would be suitable behaviour.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. Jeb Stuart Ho approached a man who was walking past with a bundle tied to his back.

'Excuse me, friend, but would you tell me where I might find someone in authority?'

The man smiled at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'There is no authority except the blessed one.'

The man walked on. The Minstrel Boy burst out laughing and staggered round in small circles. Jeb Stuart Ho looked perplexed. He tried again. He went up to a blue-robed figure pushing a wheelbarrow.

'Where might I find the blessed one?'

The barrow pusher smiled.

'The blessed one is with all of us, my brother.'

The Minstrel Boy reeled over and slapped Jeb Stuart Ho on the back.

'They're worse than you are.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stared at him in surprise.

'I don't know what you mean.'

The Minstrel Boy was almost helpless with laughter.

'No, of course you don't.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked round in confusion. He wondered how he could convey what he wanted. He stretched out and caught hold of a passing blue robe.

'Can you help me, please?'

The wearer turned and smiled.

'In what way, my brother?'

'We are travellers from outside Quahal. We would like shelter, food and some particular information.'

'You are travellers?'

'That's correct.'

The blue-robed young man frowned.

'I have never encountered travellers before. Perhaps if you could wait here while I go and seek guidance on the matter . . .'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded. The young man hurried away. They waited. The black stone threw back the heat of the sun. The blue-robed figures came and went all round them. They paused and smiled, but otherwise paid no attention to the three strangers. Jeb Stuart Ho stared up at the vast building. He had never seen anything so impressive. It towered above him, an irregular but harmonious blend of stairs, rectangular vertical walls, sloping ramps and huge inset slabs of relief carving, soaring to the eventual peak hundreds of metres in the air.

The Minstrel Boy didn't share his enthusiasm. He stuck his thumbs in his belt and kicked at the paving stones.

'I got a feeling I ain't going to like this place.'

The Wanderer grinned at him.

'You could always try the mountain.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned ruefully.

'I think I'll stick with this one, for now.'

Two men in yellow robes appeared at the head of the nearest flight of stairs. They were older than the ones in blue, and looked as though they were enjoying a tanned, healthy middle age. Each time one of the younger men passed them, they acknowledged his formal, bowed-head salute. They hurried down the steps and walked quickly up to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'You are the travellers?'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed stiffly from the waist.

'We are.'

'The blessed Joachim is considering granting you an audience. We can offer you food and other minimal comforts until he has reached his decision. If you will follow us.'

The two yellow-robed individuals turned smartly and walked briskly back towards the steps. The three travellers followed them. The Minstrel Boy glanced sideways at the Wanderer.

'What do you think they mean by minimal comforts?'

'Doubtless we'll find out soon enough.'

The Alamada was at least a head taller than A.A. Catto. She also looked a good deal heavier. She was muscular and full-bodied, with ample breasts and thighs. She walked out of the big hut with swaggering arrogance. She was naked, except for the same armour over her left arm that A.A. Catto wore. She carried the same flat, leaf-shaped knife and a small round shield.

She walked forward until she was a couple of metres from A.A. Catto. She held the knife almost casually in her left hand. She halted and smiled at A.A. Catto. Her lips were very full and sensual. Her nose was small and slightly flattened. It contrasted with her eyes, which were large and dark. Her face seemed to radiate a dark, very cruel kind of sexuality. She tossed her head, shaking her mane of straight black hair. It hung almost to her waist.

'I'm going to kill you.'

A.A. Catto couldn't help admiring the woman. She smiled back, and shook her head.

'I don't think so.'

The Alamada raised her knife, and began slowly to circle A.A. Catto. Her body was tense, like a hunting animal. It was oiled like A.A. Catto's, and as she moved the muscles rippled beneath the skin. A.A. Catto lifted her own knife, and dropped into a crouch. She backed away slowly and cautiously. The Alamada's lips drew back into something between a grin and a snarl. Her teeth flashed in the firelight.

'I'm going to kill you for sure.'

'No, you're not.'

The two women continued to circle each other. The Alamada attempted to edge closer.

'You're not like the others. You're not the way you're supposed to be.'

'I'm different.'

'You're small.'

'That's a puzzle for you to solve.'

'It's your disadvantage.'

'Maybe.'

The witch queen went on trying to get closer to A.A. Catto, and A.A. Catto in her turn went on

keeping the distance between them. From behind the lines of horsemen who ringed the space where the fight was taking place, Billy watched tensely. He held his gun down by his side. The butt was damp and slippery where his palms were sweating.

The Alamada stopped circling A.A. Catto. She crouched absolutely still for an instant. Then, with a shout she leaped forward and slashed at A.A. Catto with a wide, backhanded blow. A.A. Catto twisted and jumped back. The edge of the blade missed her stomach by a matter of centimetres. For the first time A.A. Catto realized what she was involved in. Something inside her went cold. If Billy didn't go along with the plan, she would die.

The Alamada spun on her heel and swung a chopping overarm blow towards A.A. Catto's neck. Desperately she threw up the shield, and just managed to catch the blow. It jarred her arm right up to the shoulder. There was a stabbing pain, and her arm went numb. The shield fell to her side. She jumped back, holding the sword in front of her. The Alamada laughed.

'Are you going to die without a fight?'

'I'm not going to die.'

'Oh yes you are, and slowly too, if you don't put up a fight.'

She swung at A.A. Catto. The knife just touched the skin of her left breast. A thin line of blood appeared. A.A. Catto lunged at the woman. She missed hopelessly. The Alamada lowered her shield and laughed at A.A. Catto.

'You'll have to do better than that.'

She spread her arms.

'Come on, little woman, try again. Try to kill me if you can.'

Blind rage boiled up inside A.A. Catto. She slashed wildly at her. The Alamada twisted her body and the blow went wild. A.A. Catto slashed again. The Alamada jumped back, and she missed again. Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes. She swung at the witch queen again and again, Each time she moved out of the way. A.A. Catto found that she couldn't touch her. The Alamada kept on laughing and taunting her.

'Come on, woman. Can't you do better than that?'

She jabbed at A.A. Catto with the point of her knife. It scarcely touched her shoulder, and left a small wound that oozed blood. A.A. Catto began to get scared. Was Billy going to let her die? There was no way that she could deal with this woman on her own. The Alamada jabbed at her again. Another small wound, this time just above her right breast. A.A. Catto looked round

desperately to see if she could see Billy. While her eyes were off the Alamada, she slashed at her again. This time the cut was deeper, and began to bleed quite profusely. A.A. Catto knew she was being slowly cut to pieces.

She made a final, desperate effort to stop the Alamada. She put all her weight behind a single knife thrust straight between the Alamada's breasts. For a fraction of a second A.A. Catto thought she had succeeded. Then the Alamada whipped up her shield and turned the blow. A.A. Catto completely lost her balance. As she staggered forward, the Alamada kicked her feet away from under her. A.A. Catto sprawled face forward in the dirt. The knife went flying. She rolled over and tried to sit up, but before she could, the Alamada rammed her foot into her throat and pushed her back down. A.A. Catto found herself staring up at the Alamada's bush of curly black pubic hair. She tried to wriggle away, but the woman was too strong for her.

'I'm going to kill you now.'

For the first time in her life, A, A. Catto was sick with fear. At the same time, hatred burned inside her for Billy, and the way he'd doublecrossed her. The witch queen raised her knife high above her head. A.A. Catto shut her eyes. It was obviously all over. Then the shot came, and the Alamada's body fell limply on top of her. She eased the weight off her and sat up. She expected to see Billy struggling with a squad of horsemen, but none of them seemed to have moved. She rolled the body completely off her. A large section of the skull had been blown away by the .70 calibre slug.

A.A. Catto stood up. She deliberately bent down and picked up one of the knives. She started hacking at the body. Her control seemed to snap. Her onslaught became almost sexual in its hysteria. She carved huge gashes in the witch queen's lifeless body. Her breath came in short sharp gasps. Then, abruptly, the frenzy ran out. She looked disgustedly at the mutilation she had caused. She let the knife fall and turned away. She pulled herself together and, with all the dignity she could muster while she was naked and covered in blood, she walked towards the big hut. The two helmeted horsemen, who stood flanking the door, escorted her inside.

Billy waited to see if anything would happen. He'd fired almost over the shoulders of the line of horsemen, but not one of them had shown any sign of noticing it. Reave and Nancy stood a little way away from him, presumably ready to run if the horsemen did anything to Billy. A.A. Catto vanished inside the big hut, and it seemed as though any chance of retribution had passed. Billy dropped the gun into his pocket, and let some of the tension drain out of his muscles. It had

been a terrible strain waiting to fire the shot. There had been a point when he had almost not done it. The vision of himself being impaled on the long thin spears of the horsemen had nearly been too strong.

The question now, as far as Billy could see, was what to do next. He assumed that since the Alamada was dead, A.A. Catto had become the next queen. The horsemen appeared to accept that she had defeated her in a fair fight. The lines of helmeted horsemen who had formed the square began to file into the big hut. Once they were all inside, the horsemen without helmets, who had remained behind the ranks of helmeted figures, picked up the Alamada's body and dumped it unceremoniously in the fire pit. After this chore was done, they too went inside the big hut. This just left Billy, Reave and Nancy standing in the open space. The smoke from the fire wafted past them. It was heavy with the acrid smell of burned flesh. Billy hurried across to the other two.

'Do you think we should go inside?'

Nancy looked round the village. There was no sign of life.

'Everyone else seems to be in there.'

Reave thoughtfully stroked his chin.

'I suppose A.A. Catto's queen now?'

It looks that way.'

A kind of toneless singing came from the big hut. Reave pursed his lips.

'I'm not so sure I want to be one of her subjects.'

Billy grinned sourly.

'You should know.'

Nancy rubbed her hands together.

'We can't stand here for ever.'

'That's true.'

'So, do we go inside?'

'It's that or steal some horses and split.'

Nancy glanced pointedly down at her thin catsuit.

'I don't think I'm exactly dressed for another trip in the fog.'

'So we go inside?'

Billy nodded.

'We go inside.'

It was hot and crowded inside the big hut. The building was arranged like a figure eight with an extra loop added to the bottom. It was basically three circular connecting rooms, laid out in a straight line. The biggest of these was the centre one. It was thronged with horsemen. At one end was a raised dais, and on it was a combination throne, couch and bed, made from dark carved wood. In the middle of a heap of multicoloured cushions lay A.A. Catto. Her armour had been removed, but she was still naked. Two horsemen knelt beside her. They appeared to be treating her wounds with some kind of ointment that they took from a stone jar. A third horseman stooped beside her whispering urgently. A.A. Catto gave him her undivided attention. It seemed to Billy that he was instructing her about either the ritual or her duties. A horseman stood on either side of the dais, rigidly holding a spear.

Behind the dais was the entrance to one of the other, smaller rooms. Billy was later to find it was the queen's private quarters. It was screened by a large hanging tapestry that depicted some kind of stylized hunting scene. Immediately in front of the dais, almost in the middle of the room, was another stone fire pit. A pile of logs crackled merrily, and the carcass of some large animal turned on a spit. Fat dripped off it, and fell hissing into the fire. The smoke escaped through a small hole in the roof. At least, that was the theory. A good percentage of it just hung in the air. The combination of roast meat and wood smoke gave the place a comforting, if crude, smell.

On the other side of the fire was a low curved table. Behind it sat a line of horsemen on low stools. They had removed their helmets and placed them on the table in front of them. Their spears were stacked in racks along the wall. Behind them sat more horsemen on rows of benches. They cradled their helmets in their laps. They all sang and beat time with their hands, either on table or helmets. It was a strange, guttural dirge with no recognizable words or harmonic structure.

The possession of a helmet seemed to be a crucial badge of rank in the clan. Billy noticed that the ones who had them sat staring at A.A. Catto, singing and clapping. The ones who didn't scurried backwards and forwards, to and from the third room, which was a kind of storeroom or scullery, serving the others with some sort of fermented drink. It seemed that if you had a helmet you were part of the hunter warrior class, if not, you were a servant. Billy assumed that that was why the horsemen had so readily accepted the idea that Billy, Reave and Nancy were A.A.

Catto's personal slave.

Every eye in the place was fixed on A.A. Catto. Nobody took the slightest notice of either Billy, Reave or Nancy as they stood quietly at the back of the main room. There was an air of expectancy. Billy couldn't believe that they were simply waiting for the meat to cook, or that they could be that enraptured with A.A. Catto's skinny body. The only explanation he could think of was that, presently, some kind of ceremony would take place.

He waited for a while, but very soon started to get bored. He glanced at Reave.

'Do you think anybody would take exception if we got ourselves a drink?'

Reave looked blank.

'How should I know?'

'You want to try it?'

'Hell, why not?'

Nancy looked up from where she was squatting on the floor.

'You want to get me one?'

Billy pulled a face.

'I suppose so.'

He and Reave moved quietly into the small room. A line of stone pitchers seemed to contain the booze, or whatever it was. Billy took two earthenware mugs off a shelf and filled them from one of the pitchers. None of the serving men who came and went took any notice of them. They returned to where Nancy was sitting. Billy handed her a mug. She looked at the contents doubtfully.

'What is it?'

'Who knows?'

'Are you going to drink it?'

'Sure. Just watch me.'

Billy took a hearty swig, and immediately regretted it. The liquid tasted vaguely poisonous and burned his mouth. When he swallowed some, however, it produced a pleasant euphoric glow inside him. The next time he sipped it sparingly. He found himself quickly getting used to it. Neither Nancy nor Reave had touched theirs. They looked at him questioningly.

'Is it okay?'

'It's bad, but it's not that bad.'

They drank in silence. Billy sank down and squatted on his haunches. He stared at the smoke-blackened beams of the ceiling. He became aware that he was feeling decidedly horny. He wondered if it was something in the drink. There was also the fact that he hadn't been within reach of a woman since he had left Darlene back at the Leader Hotel. It seemed like that was part of another age. He took another sip from his mug and glanced covertly at Nancy.

'Uh, Nancy.'

'Yeah?'

Billy smiled with all the charm he could muster.

'What say you and me find ourselves a dark corner, huh?'

Nancy looked at Billy as though he was mad.

'What the hell for?'

'Uh . . . I was feeling horny, and was just wondering if maybe you and me might . . .'

'You and me?'

'Why not?'

Nancy's lip curled.

'Forget it!'

Billy looked glum.

'I was only thinking.'

'Yeah, well, forget it.'

Billy slumped back into his own thoughts. He had just started to develop the idea that Quahal was one of the most tedious bummers that he had ever come across, when things began to happen up on the dais. The first thing Billy noticed was that the singing stopped. An expectant silence fell over the room. Billy stood up to see what was happening. A.A. Catto was standing on the dais with her arms extended. Two of the horsemen who had been attending her came from behind the tapestry screen. They carried a fur trimmed purple robe. A.A. Catto lowered her arms, and they placed the robe over her shoulders. It hung open so most of her body was still on view. The attendants backed away. A slow measured chant started.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . .'

The horsemen beat time, a heavy ponderous beat. The first horseman at the table stood up and walked slowly towards the dais, keeping in step with the chant.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . .'

He reached A.A. Catto and stopped. The chant stopped too. The horseman slowly sank to his knees. The silence was loaded with tension. The horseman leaned forward, and placed his mouth between A.A. Catto's legs. She stiffened. Her eyebrows shot up, then she half smiled and moved her weight so it was bearing down on the horseman's face. Her hips undulated a little. Reave glanced at Billy.

'She'll be loving every minute of this. I don't think she could have devised a better coronation herself.'

The horseman bowed, touching his head on the ground at A.A. Catto's feet. Then he stood up, and went slowly back to his seat. The chant began again. The second horseman in line stood up and slowly advanced to the dais. Just like the one before, he dropped to his knees, went down on A.A. Catto for the statutory period, bowed and returned to his place. The chant started up again.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . . Hommm . . .'

The third one at the table began moving up for his turn.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . . Hommm . . .'

And after him, the fourth and the fifth. One after the other, working from the fire outwards, the horsemen paid their unique tribute to their new queen. Billy looked at Reave in amazement.

'Is she going to go through the entire clan?'

Reave grimaced.

'She's capable of it. Make no mistake about that.'

Billy shook his head in disbelief. The horsemen continued to make their pilgrimage up to the dais. By the time A.A. Catto had worked her way through a third of the men with helmets, she was sweating, her eyes were closed and her legs were beginning to tremble. She was having great difficulty maintaining her formal and dignified cool.

The chant kept on going, and the horsemen kept on coming. At the halfway point, A.A. Catto grabbed the current supplicant by the hair, and let herself fall back on to the cushions, pulling him down with her. From then on she received homage from her subjects in a supine position. Occasionally she would languidly raise a thin white leg in the air. Billy wondered if it signified ecstasy, or was just her way of acknowledging the presence of the rest of the tribe.

The last of the helmeted horsemen backed away from the dais. Billy assumed that the ceremony was all over, but the chant started again, and one of the serving men began the slow march to A.A. Catto's throne. Billy grinned at Reave.

'She is going through the whole tribe.'

Reave nodded. He didn't look in the least surprised. As far as he was concerned, nothing about A.A. Catto could surprise him. The ones without helmets did their bit, and for a moment it seemed as though the ritual was over. Then to Billy's and Reave's astonishment the chant started again. Billy's face dropped in disbelief. Nancy had started walking slowly down the crowded room in strict time to the chant.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . . Hommm . . . !'

She reached the dais, bowed her head and sank to her knees. As Nancy disappeared into the pile of cushions, Billy swung round to Reave.

'Are we supposed to go up there?'

'It's beginning to look like it. Why? Don't you fancy the idea?'

Billy grimaced.

'Not a great deal.'

Reave grinned.

'I thought you liked eating pussy?'

'Yeah, but . . . !'

'But what?'

'It's kind of public, and anyway, I've got a feeling that she'd look at it as some kind of, I don't know, a moral victory, she'd think she was humiliating me. You know what I mean?'

Reave grinned.

'Sure, I know what you mean. She's a great one for humiliating. I don't see how you're going to get out of it.'

Billy twitched uncomfortably.

'Me neither.'

Nancy seemed to stay in the cushions for a very long time. It was certainly longer than any of the horsemen. Finally she reappeared. She walked back up the room, with a serene smile on her face. The chant began once more. Reave grunted, stood up, and started walking towards the throne. Nancy slumped down next to Billy.

'Waiting till last, huh?'

Billy scowled.

'I can't see no way out of it.'

Nancy raised an eyebrow.

'I thought you said you were feeling horny?'

'Not for that.'

Nancy smiled coyly.

'It was really quite nice.'

'Is that so?'

Reave didn't spend anything like as long with A.A. Catto as Nancy had. Before Billy was anything like ready, he had to get reluctantly to his feet and fall into step with the chant.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . . Hommm.'

Billy walked like a man going to his execution.

'Hommm . . . Hommm . . . Hommm . . . !'

It seemed an immense distance to the dais. He finally reached it. A.A. Catto lay with her eyes closed. He stood looking down at her for a while. Her eyes opened. Her voice was a vibrant purr.

'Kneel down, Billy.'

Billy pressed his lips together and dropped awkwardly to his knees.

'Now pay me my dues as queen, Billy.'

Billy closed his eyes and slowly lowered his mouth to A.A. Catto's damp and somewhat swollen cunt. A.A. Catto smiled happily.

'I'm sure you're going to be a very respectful subject.'

'I suppose I could stand this for a while.'

The Minstrel Boy sprawled in his chair, staring at the light reflected in his glass of wine. He was feeling comfortable for the first time since he'd been abducted from the Albert Speer Hotel. The Wanderer sat across the table from him grinning.

'You're going to have to stand it until you find some way out of here.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded ruefully.

'I know that. I was trying to forget it.'

The yellow-robed priests had led the three travellers to a suite of rooms deep inside the ziggurat, and left them there to wait until the blessed Joachim felt like seeing them. They hadn't locked the door, but the three were effectively prisoners. They all knew that it would be impossible to find their way out through the maze of stairs and corridors that made up the interior of the huge building.

The suite consisted of a fairly large main room, and three small cells that led off it. It was plain but comfortable. The walls were smooth black stone, and the main room was furnished with a square table and four chairs. They were made of some light-coloured wood, decorated with geometric inlays. Each of the cells contained a narrow sleeping pallet. There were no windows in the place, but ample light was provided by a mass of candles in a roughly triangular-shaped fixture that hung from the ceiling.

Shortly after the priests had left, two of the blue-robed lower orders, who seemed to do most of the manual work, turned up with refreshments in the form of a bowl of fruit, a tray of flat biscuit-like pastries, a large jug of wine and glasses. They placed them on the table, and withdrew without a word.

Jeb Stuart Ho took to the place immediately. He ate a little fruit, drank half a glass of wine and withdrew to his cell to meditate, leaving the Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer to linger over the remainder of the jug. The Minstrel Boy drained his glass, and refilled it.

'I'd like this place a whole lot better if there were a few chicks about.'

The Wanderer's eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

'You won't find any here.'

'Don't I know it.'

'You'll maybe find a way to get round the problem.'

'Huh?'

'I said you might find a way to get round the problem.'

'I heard what you said. I was just wondering what exactly you meant by it.'

The Wanderer grinned broadly.

'I figure you'll find out.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'You keep making remarks like that. You're getting too goddamn mysterious.'

'What other pleasures have I got left?'

The Minstrel Boy pushed the jug across the table towards him.

'You could get drunk. It'd make you a bit more tolerable.'

The Wanderer refilled his glass.

'I won't argue with you. Did I ever tell you about the time I was down in Port Judas and met this sportin' gal down on her luck?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'No, but no doubt you're going to.'

The Minstrel Boy went on drinking while the Wanderer launched into a long, ponderous and occasionally obscene story. It went on and on, and the Minstrel Boy quickly lost track of it. The Wanderer was just winding up for the punch line when there was a soft rapping on the door. The Minstrel Boy's hand went instinctively to his knife belt.

'What do you think that is?'

The rapping came again. The Wanderer shrugged.

'All we can do is find out. I don't think there's any call for alarm.'

He raised his voice.

'Come in.'

The door opened and three men came in. Men was a fairly loose description. They had the bald heads and general appearance of the boys in blue, but that was where the similarity ended. Their figures were slim, almost feminine and they moved with a strange exaggerated daintiness. They wore pink robes of what looked like watered silk, and their eyes were shadowed with some

land of blue makeup. The Minstrel Boy suspected that their overlong eyelashes were probably false. When they spoke their voices were soft and high-pitched.

'We are sent by the blessed one to ensure that all your needs are taken care of.'

The Wanderer raised an eyebrow.

'We're doing pretty good.'

'We are sent to offer you any additional pleasure you might desire.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced up from his drink.

'Desire?'

He looked carefully up and down each of the three in turn.

'Just what kind of pleasure did you have in mind?'

The middle one of the three smiled sweetly.

'Those joyful pleasures of the body bestowed and sanctified by the blessed one, that our flesh might celebrate his glory.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'Celebrate his glory, hey?'

'We are at your disposal.'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'You can leave me out. I'm too old for that sort of thing.'

The Minstrel Boy rose slowly from his chair.

'I don't see the harm in celebrating a bit of glory.'

The Wanderer laughed.

'I thought it was a woman you were so desperate for?'

The Minstrel Boy patted the priest's bottom.

'Like you said, I'll find a way round the problem.'

He turned to the pink-robed priest.

'Does the blessed one sanctify an old-fashioned blow job?'

'I'm not familiar with the term, but I'd be happy to accept your instruction.'

'Good, good, let's go off into my little room, and do some instructing. You might as well bring one of your buddies, seeing as how grandpappy here doesn't want to know.'

He poured himself another glass of wine and led the two priests off to one of the empty cells. That left the Wanderer alone with the remaining one. The priest waved a slim white hand in the

direction of Jeb Stuart Ho's still figure.

'Will your friend have any desire for my services?'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'I doubt it. He's too busy meditating, and besides, I think he swore off sex for the duration.'

The priest looked exaggeratedly sad.

'That is a great pity.'

The Wanderer nodded sympathetically.

'It sure is. Best you should run along back where you came from.'

The priest bowed, and left without a word. The sounds of revelry began to come from the Minstrel Boy's cell. It seemed as though the priests were quick to pick up on the instruction. The Wanderer sighed and glanced through the open doorway. The pallet had become a mass of naked, entwined bodies. He sighed deeply and relaxed back in his chair.

Billy woke up with a start. He discovered that Nancy had been shaking him. He also discovered that he had a headache and an evil taste in his mouth.

'What happened?'

'You passed out.'

'When?'

'Last night, after the ceremony, you drank yourself stupid on the local poison and collapsed. We left you here.'

Billy focused his eyes, and looked around. He was still in the large room of the queen's hut. It was deserted now. The fire had burned down to grey embers and the air was cold and damp. Billy struggled to sit up. Each time he moved he found new parts of him that hurt. 'Where's Reave?'

'The two of you were given a hut down at the end of the village. He went there. You refused. You wanted to be buddies with the horsemen.'

'What happened?'

'They ignored you. You clowned about for a bit and passed out.'

Billy shook his head to clear it.

'I don't remember any of that.'

'I'm not surprised, the amount you were drinking.'

Billy got painfully to his feet and staggered out to the scullery. He found a cask of water. A dipper hung drank a little, and sluiced more over his head. Nancy who was still standing in the big room.

'Is it morning?'

'Yeah.'

'They have day and night here?'

'Every day.'

Billy came back out of the scullery.

'What's A.A. Catto doing?'

'She wants to see you.'

Billy grimaced.

'Can't she wait? I'm not up to coping with her yet.'

Nancy glanced meaningfully at him.

'I wouldn't keep her waiting.'

'Why not?'

'She is queen now.'

'Shit! She's only queen because I shot the last one.'

'I wouldn't remind her of that.'

'Isn't this getting a bit out of hand?'

Nancy began to look uncomfortable.

'I'd keep my voice down if I were you.'

She gestured to the tapestry behind the throne.

'She's only just behind there.'

'Are you trying to tell me something?'

'I don't know. She's gone a bit funny, after getting to be queen, and the ceremony and all.'

'It's gone to her head?'

'And some.'

Billy's face became determined.

'I'm going in there to sort out all this queen business.'

Nancy quickly put a hand on his arm.

'Wait. Wait just a minute and listen to what I have to say, will you?'

'Okay. You've got my undivided.'

Nancy hesitated, as though summoning up her courage.

'We've never got on too well, have we?'

Billy shook his head.

'No, not really.'

'I feel bad talking to you like this, but there's no one else.'

'So talk.'

'I'm worried.'

'About A.A. Catto?'

'She's gone very strange.'

'How?'

'She had one of the horsemen in there all night. She was torturing him.'

'So? She did that to Reave all the time.'

'I think she probably killed him. She was right over the edge.'

I mean, I've seen a few things. I don't shock easy, but this started to do me in. I couldn't take it.'

'You were in there with her?'

Nancy looked at the floor.

'Yeah.'

'Helping her?'

'With a couple more to keep me amused.'

'Didn't they object to what she was doing to their mate? They're big strong lads.'

Nancy shook her head.

'They can't.'

'Can't?'

'She can do what she likes with them. They're programmed to do exactly what the queen wants. She could slaughter the lot of them. They wouldn't stop her.'

Billy smiled grimly.

'If she did that, she'd have no more to play with.'

'She could send for another lot from the valley.'

'From the valley?'

'I've found out a lot about this place. There's a stuff receiver down in the valley, in the ziggurat, that big building we saw.'

Billy glanced over his shoulder at the entrance to A.A. Catto's room. He lowered his voice.

'Does she know this?'

Nancy nodded.

'Sure, she told me.'

Billy's face was very serious.

'What else did you learn?'

'Plenty. You know those helmets? They're like a badge of rank, a pecking order. It starts from

the ones sitting at the table, right down to the ones without helmets, servants to the rest.'

Billy nodded.

'I kind of figured that.'

'They change round once a month, the order or something.'

'Once a month?'

'Right.'

'How the hell do they figure months?'

Nancy grinned, despite her concern.

'They calculate it on the queen's menstrual cycle.'

Billy laughed.

'A.A. Catto's going to confuse them. She doesn't have any, according to Reave. She never allowed herself to reach puberty.'

'She's going to now. She doesn't have any retarding drugs. She's growing with a vengeance.'

Billy looked thoughtful.

'I imagine that's affecting her mind.'

'Probably.'

'I suppose she could always get more from the stuff receiver.'

'That and a whole lot . . . !'

Before Nancy could finish, there was a petulant shout from behind the tapestry.

'Nancy!'

Nancy spun round, looking a little pale.

'Yes!'

'Have you woken up Billy yet?'

'Yes!'

'Then get him in here.'

Nancy looked urgently at Billy.

'You'd better get in there. Don't keep her waiting.'

Billy sighed and hurried across the room. He pulled back the tapestry and stepped through into the queen's private lair. The sight of it was quite a surprise. Most of the floor space was taken up by the largest bed Billy had ever seen. It was piled high with cushions, pillows and rich furs. Two poles supported a tentlike overhead canopy. The walls were hung with mirrors and lavish

embroideries. There were a number of chests and cupboards. The contents were scattered on the floor, as though A.A. Catto had been going through them in some kind of exploratory frenzy. There were candles everywhere, and a brazier of hot coals stood in an alcove, heating the room and filling the air with the heavy sweet smell of incense.

All this was much as Billy had expected. The real shock to his system waited for him in a clear space of floor opposite the bed. A thick heavy post, about half as tall again as a man, and carved into a stylized phallic shape, was set firmly in the stone flags. The horribly mutilated body of a man hung from it in chains. A helmeted guard stood beside him gripping his spear, like a statue, and staring straight ahead. A rack containing a comprehensive range of torture implements was on the wall nearby. Many of them had quite obviously been used very recently.

A.A. Catto was fully dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed. She wore a feminine version of the horsemen's outfit, wide silk trousers bound up with thongs, a tunic of soft white fur and silver armour covering her arms. The clothes seemed to fit very well, considering the Alamadas had been much larger women. She gestured imperiously at Billy.

'I want to talk to you.'

'I . . .'

Billy's head and stomach were still reeling from the sight of the figure on the post. A.A. Catto glanced casually at her victim.

'It bothers you, does it?'

She snapped her fingers at the guard.

'Fetch some people to remove that thing.'

The guard swiftly obeyed and left the room. Moments later he returned with two of the helmetless servants. They removed the body from the post and dragged it unceremoniously from the room. A.A. Catto turned her attention back to Billy.

'Now can we talk?'

Billy wiped beads of sweat from his forehead.

'I suppose so.'

'You're a terrible weakling.'

Billy shrugged.

'If you say so.'

A.A. Catto stood up very slowly. 'I don't like your attitude.' She began to pace up and down.

'I'll be charitable, however. You may well be having trouble adjusting to the new situation.' Billy was still confused. 'The new situation?'

'The situation of my being queen. I have absolute power here. I can do anything. Anything at all.'

Billy had never seen her quite like this. The weight of the gun in his pocket was reassuring, but he still chose his words with great care.

'May I ask what you intend to do?'

A.A. Catto smiled nastily at him.

'That's more what I expect.'

She resumed her pacing.

'I do not share the previous rulers' enthusiasm for this dreary primitivism. I have discovered that there is a stuff receiver in that building we saw in the valley. I intend to use the receiver to obtain a supply of the modern necessities. Do you understand?'

Billy nodded.

'I think so. What about the globes, though, won't they destroy everything directly it arrives down the beam?'

'They can be deactivated from the same point.'

'Aren't there people in the valley?'

A.A. Catto halted.

'Yes, why?'

Billy avoided looking directly at her.

'Won't they be liable to object to what you want to do?'

A.A. Catto looked surprised.

'Does that matter?'

'If they decided to resist your plan.'

'They won't.'

'Why not?'

A.A. Catto looked at Billy as though he was simple-minded.

'Because I've decided to destroy them.'

Billy's mouth dropped open.

'Destroy them?'

A.A. Catto's voice became very brisk and matter of fact.

'It's the only solution. It stops them causing trouble, and, in any case, they're no use to me, no use at all. They are also reputed to have very unpleasant ideas and habits. I think it's best if they were liquidated before we do anything else.'

Billy's mind reeled. He could see exactly why Nancy had been so disturbed. A.A. Catto was obviously quite out of control. He looked at her guardedly.

'You'll send your horsemen into the valley?'

'I'll lead them.'

'And kill all the people there?'

'Of course.'

Billy looked at the floor. He couldn't think exactly what to say. A.A. Catto looked at him impatiently.

'What's the matter with you?'

Billy looked round helplessly.

'I was just wondering why you were telling me all this.'

'You will be coming with us.'

Billy's eyebrows shot up.

'Me?'

'You have proved quite resourceful in the past. I will keep you as an adviser as long as you prove useful.'

Billy closed his eyes for an instant. It was almost too much to take in. He wished that he was back at the Leader Hotel, or in Pleasant Gap, or almost anywhere.

'When do we ride for the valley?'

'Later today. My horsemen are making ready, isn't it exciting?'

Billy looked at the backs of his hands.

'I suppose so.'

A.A. Catto smiled sympathetically at him.

'I expect it's all a little overwhelming right now. You'll enjoy it, once the killing starts.'

The build-up to an audience with the blessed Joachim was a planned performance. Jeb Stuart Ho, the Wanderer and the Minstrel Boy had been kept waiting for a couple of hours. They had been fed, given drinks, and, in the case of the Minstrel Boy, entertained soundly by two pink-robed devotees. When all these preliminaries were complete, an escort of yellow-robed priests arrived at their suite of rooms.

'The blessed one has decided, in his wisdom, that you will be allowed an audience. We have come to escort you to his wondrous presence.'

There were six of them. The Minstrel Boy wondered if it was a guard of honour, or simply a guard. They moved out into the corridor, and the priests formed up around them. Three in front, and three behind. They started walking. It seemed to the Wanderer that it was another stage in the whole process. They seemed to walk for miles along the echoing corridors of black stone. The turns and right angles soon destroyed the travellers' sense of direction inside the building. The only thing they knew for sure was that they were consistently going up from one level to another. They finally arrived at the foot of a flight of wide, imposing stairs. As far as Jeb Stuart Ho could calculate they were very near the apex of the building.

At the head of the stairs there were a pair of polished steel doors. An emblem of a strange impossible bird was worked in dramatic relief on the metal. The small procession started up the stairs. As they reached the halfway mark, the doors began to swing slowly open. They reached the threshold of the blessed Joachim's inner sanctum. The priests fell to their knees and touched their foreheads on the floor. Jeb Stuart Ho inclined his head slightly, but the Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer just stood and looked around.

The room was lavish. It was long and narrow, almost like a giant corridor with a high vaulted ceiling. The black stone walls had been polished to the smoothness of glass and flowing designs of weird composite animals were inlaid in them in white metal. Odd wing-shaped devices hung from the ceiling supporting hundreds of candles. Their polished steel facets reflected the light on to the mirrored walls. There seemed to be tiny points of light everywhere they looked. Two long lines of silent yellow-robed priests formed an avenue all the way down the room. At the end of

the avenue was another flight of steps. They were covered with a white, thick-piled carpet. A flock of the pink-robed acolytes were arranged decoratively around the foot of them. At the top of the steps was a throne made of the same black stone as the walls. It was piled deep in white cushions. Behind it was a huge peacock fan of hammered steel. The blessed Joachim sat among the cushions.

The three travellers couldn't see the blessed one too well from the far end of the room. The Minstrel Boy looked down at the priests. They still had their foreheads pressed against the floor. He turned to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Are we going to stand here for ever, or are we going to walk up there and get ourselves an audience?'

'I suppose we should speak to him.'

He glanced at the Wanderer.

'What do you think?'

The Wanderer shrugged.

'Shit, let's go up there.'

They stepped over the kneeling priests, and began slowly towards the throne. There was a strange tension growing in the room. Three hard-bitten warriors had marched into a world of flimsy fantasy. The contrast created a charge in the air. Even Jeb Stuart Ho swaggered a little as they walked between the rows of priests.

They came closer to the throne. They started to be able to make out the features of the blessed Joachim. He sat among the cushions like a flabby buddha. He was fat to the point of obesity, with pale pink baby-like flesh. He was totally bald. His features were soft and indistinct, as though they were scarcely formed. His eyes were small, and of a pale watery blue.

'Are you the thtwangerth?'

He also lisped. The Minstrel Boy suppressed a grin. The giant production for this fat, lisping, overgrown child. He could hardly believe it. Jeb Stuart Ho, however, seemed to take the whole thing a little more seriously. He bowed formally.

'I am Jeb Stuart Ho, an executive of the brotherhood.'

The blessed Joachim nodded gravely.

'The bwotherhood, I thee.'

He waved a limp, pudgy hand towards the Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer.

'And who are the two?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned and nodded with uncouth friendliness.

'People call me the Minstrel Boy and him . . .'

He jerked his thumb at the Wanderer.

'They call him the Wanderer.'

'The Minstrel Boy, the Wanderer. What kind of names are these?'

The Minstrel Boy put his foot on the second step and rested his elbow on his knee. He seemed set on acting out a kind of country boy charade for the fat little pseudo-deity.

'Well, blessed Joachim, sir. I don't rightly know what kind of names those are, but they're the only ones we got.'

The blessed Joachim took some time to digest this information. He gestured to the nearest of the pink-robed devout. The man quickly scampered to his side and began mopping his bald head with a piece of silk.

'What do you people want here? There is no place for the wanderer.'

The Minstrel Boy's grin broadened.

'Well, blessed Joachim, sir. I'll tell you. Him, that one . . .'

He nodded at Jeb Stuart Ho.

' . . . he came here looking for a woman, and me and the other one, we're just looking for a way out.'

Joachim looked scandalized.

'A woman? A way out?'

'That's all.'

'There are no women here, and there is no way to leave Quahal.'

The idea flitted through the Wanderer's mind that maybe the reason the place was called Quahal was that the name could be pronounced correctly even with a lisp. He was about to speak, when Jeb Stuart Ho moved forward.

'If I might explain . . .'

The blessed Joachim was beginning to look petulant.

'Please do. I do not like what I've heard so far

'I am here on a mission of vital importance for the brotherhood. I am searching for one particular woman. The men with me have helped me track her to Quahal. We know the woman is

somewhere in Quahal. It is my desire to find her, and theirs to return to where they came from.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at Jeb Stuart Ho and grinned at Joachim.

'He talks really concise and pretty, don't he?'

The blessed Joachim was silent. As Jeb Stuart Ho had been speaking, he'd appeared to sink down into his cushions. He sat staring at the executive in his black fighting suit and his array of weapons. He seemed almost to slip into a trance, but at the last moment he pulled out of it, and spoke.

'Thewe are no women in thith part of Quahal.'

Jeb Stuart Ho spread his hands.

'Then I must go to the mountain and find her.'

'If she went to the mountain she ith almotht thertainly dead. My thithter Alamada will have killed her.'

'I must still go and look for sure.'

Joachim beckoned to one of the yellow-robed priests, who approached the throne with lowered eyes. He and the blessed one muttered together for a while, and then he returned to his place in the line. Joachim turned his attention back to Jeb Stuart Ho.

'I have thome information that might help you. I keep the dwelling of my thithter under conthtant obthervation. She hath thome dithguthting habith. It would appear that a woman hath awived at the village, and a fight hath taken not know if it wath my thithter or the woman you theek who pwevailed.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded. At last it seemed as though the end of his quest was in sight. He did his best to conceal his eagerness.

'If that is the case, I must go there at once.'

The blessed Joachim showed signs of relief.

'Go. I will pwovide you with a guide. You have my blething.'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed, and turned on his heel. A priest joined him. Their exit from the room proved to be a little absurd. It appeared that the priests were forbidden to turn their backs on the blessed one. Ho observed no such niceties. He strode quickly towards the steel doors with the priest attempting to keep up with him walking backwards in a half crouch.

When Jeb Stuart Ho had gone, a pink-robed acolyte once more mopped Joachim's head with a silken cloth. The Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer looked at each other, and then at him.

'What about us?'

Joachim remained silent for almost a minute. Finally he shook his head.

'The way in which you can leave Quahal.'

The Minstrel Boy exploded.

'That's bullshit!'

'I beg your pardon.'

'With respect, that's bullshit.'

'I fail to understand.'

The Wanderer stepped in.

'There is a power receiver in the ziggurat. It would be very simple to order transport and stasis generators for us.'

As the Wanderer spoke, the entire room became noticeably agitated. Joachim made weak nervous gestures.

'No! No! The thing do not exist!'

The Wanderer began to get angry.

'Don't be ridiculous. Of course they do. There's got to be a giant system of generators keeping the whole of Quahal stable.'

Joachim's voice rose to a high-pitched shriek.

'The way in which you can leave Quahal.'

The Wanderer shrugged.

'Suit yourself. You've still got to make up your mind what to do with us.'

'You will go back to your quarters. I will consider the problem.'

The Minstrel Boy pushed back his coat, and planted his hands on his hips. His belt of knives was in full view of the blessed Joachim.

'Don't take too long about it, will you?'

Before they moved out for the attack on the valley, A.A. Catto insisted on reviewing her troops like a warrior queen in an ancient movie. It was an uncomfortable performance as far as Billy, Reave and Nancy were concerned. By the late morning, the mountain mist had turned to a heavy drizzle and the ground around the village was rapidly being churned to mud under the horses' hooves. Billy sat uncomfortably on a large black horse. He had never ridden a horse before, and the experience unnerved him. The damp was slowly soaking into the heavy fur poncho that was wrapped around him. Under it he still wore the pimp suit from Litz. He could have changed into the same garb as the horsemen wore, but he was reluctant to go that native. He felt it identified him too strongly as A.A. Catto's subject and property.

Reave had had no such reservations. He sat beside Billy arrayed exactly like any of the horsemen, except that he didn't carry one of the long slender spears. Nancy had also changed to the native garb. A.A. Catto had given her second pick on the ex-queen's wardrobe.

The three of them sat on their mounts facing a line of fifty or more horsemen. In the space between, A.A. Catto trotted her horse up and down, haranguing her army in what Billy supposed she thought was a suitably regal and inspiring manner.

The horsemen sat very still, gripping their spears, in a perfect line. Billy wondered what they thought about the changes that A.A. Catto had made in their lives. Billy looked down the line. Their impassive faces were almost totally hidden, as well hidden as their minds. Billy had had a number of theories about the horsemen. The first had been that they were chronically stupid. But their physical coordination and prowess with weapons and horses seemed to negate that idea. Billy had wondered, from the way they rarely spoke, and used gestures to convey quite complex ideas, if they might be low level telepaths. Currently Billy entertained the idea that they could be highly intelligent, but with that intelligence totally strait jacketed by conditioning and genetic tailoring. It was the best theory so far, but he was by no means certain about it.

A.A. Catto at long last completed her address to her loyal troops. Billy had managed to avoid hearing most of the monologue. As the horsemen formed themselves into a column of two, Billy wondered idly if she had managed to work in anything about her having the body of a frail and

feeble woman, but the heart and stomach of a man. He knew it wasn't beyond her.

The column started out of the village and down the mountainside. Four horsemen preceded it, then came A.A. Catto and Nancy riding side by side. Behind them rode Billy and Reave, followed by the remainder of the force. Billy had no clue how the horsemen found their way in the thick fog, but the column seemed to wind down the slope in such a positive manner that he didn't doubt they were going in the right direction.

Despite the foul weather A.A. Catto and Nancy chattered together all through the ride. Billy and Reave, on the other hand, rode in damp sullen silence. The situation seemed to have escalated to such a point that there was nothing left for them to say.

They finally broke out of the mist into the sunshine at the base of the slope. The ziggurat was in front of them in the valley. The column halted. A.A. Catto raised her hand and the ranks divided, each horseman peeling off neatly in turn until they formed a single line abreast. They sat silently for a while. Billy gazed down at the ziggurat. He could see tiny figures moving backwards and forwards on the various levels of the building and working in the fields. It was hard to believe that within the next few minutes they were to be slaughtered.

A.A. Catto leaned across and muttered something to the horseman next to her. He made a series of signals with his left hand. Except for Nancy, Billy, Reave, A.A. Catto and three horsemen on either side of them, the whole line began to move forward at a slow even walk. After about a hundred metres, another signal was given, and the line of horsemen accelerated to a trot. When they'd covered the same distance again, they broke into a controlled canter. They lowered their spears.

When the line was a matter of some two hundred metres from the ziggurat, a wild cry went up and they broke into a gallop. They thundered towards the huge black structure. Some of the blue-robed priests saw them, and began to run for the safety of the building.

The line split in two. Half the force wheeled round and swept across the fields, riding down the workers as they went. The remainder raced towards the ziggurat. When they were only a few metres from the walls, they abruptly lowered their spears and dug the tips into the ground. Their forward momentum jerked the horsemen from their saddles. Almost as one they soared into the air, holding their spears like pole vaulters. They landed lightly on the first tier of the ziggurat, dropped their spears and pulled out their knives. They moved forward in a rush and fell on Joachim's followers, hacking and slaying like machines. Billy glanced round at Reave.

'Did you see that manoeuvre?'

Reave nodded.

'I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself.'

A.A. Catto turned to the others.

'It's time we moved down there.'

Billy scowled.

'Don't want to miss being in for the kill?'

A.A. Catto ignored him, kicked her horse and went down the slope at a swift canter. Nancy and the horsemen kept pace with her, while Billy and Reave trailed behind.

By the time they reached the ziggurat, the workers in the fields had either been killed or chased inside the building. The majority of horsemen had also moved inside, although a few still stalked Joachim's men on the outside upper levels. A.A. Catto halted in front of the building and looked round, surveying the carnage. She dismounted and walked towards the nearest set of steps. Billy quickly rode up beside her.

'Are you really going to kill everyone?'

She looked up at him in surprise.

'Of course. That was the point of the whole operation.'

'Couldn't you call it off and let the survivors go? They can't cause you any trouble. They aren't even offering your horsemen any resistance.'

A.A. Catto stared at Billy with contempt.

'Don't be ridiculous. They have to be exterminated.'

'Why?'

A.A. Catto didn't bother to answer him. She began to climb the steps to the first level. Billy yelled after her.

'You're insane! You hear me? You're crazy!'

A.A. Catto continued to walk up the stairs. She pretended not to hear him. Reave reined in beside Billy.

'You won't achieve anything by yelling at her.'

'There's got to be some way to get her to stop this whole thing.'

Reave shook his head with an air of finality.

'There's no way.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I lived with her for all that time, didn't I? She sees herself as some kind of female Attila and nothing we can do will change it. It'll probably get worse before she finds a new game.'

'How can you be so calm about it?'

'It ain't me that she wants to exterminate.'

'So what do we do?'

Reave started to dismount.

'Just keep out of sight and hope she doesn't turn against us.'

Billy sighed and swung himself to the ground.

'I suppose you're right.'

They began to climb the steps up to the upper levels. They had to pick their way between the sprawled, lifeless bodies of Joachim's followers. The sound of screaming drifted down from above them. It seemed as though the survivors were retreating to the top of the ziggurat.

Billy and Reave continued to climb slowly. Occasionally they'd see a few of the blue-robed priests pursued by knife-wielding horsemen across one of the ornamental terraces.

Bodies floated in the pools formed by the artificial stream that cascaded down the ziggurat from level to level. They went on cautiously climbing, doing their best to avoid the killing.

They were about two thirds of the way up the building, and standing at the foot of a long ramp that traversed two levels. The screams had died down a little. Suddenly two figures appeared at the top of the ramp, and started desperately running down it. They weren't like the other followers of Joachim. One was an old man in a kind of white smock. The other was a thin figure in a black frock coat and wide brimmed hat.

Four horsemen appeared at the top of the ramp. They had knives in their hands and were obviously chasing the two figures. One of the horsemen took one of a set of weighted thongs from his belt. Without breaking step he swung it, and let go. The device curled round the old man's legs. He fell, and rolled helplessly down the ramp. His companion stopped and turned. His hand flashed to his belt, whipped something out, and threw it. One of the horsemen clutched at his throat and fell. He too rolled down the ramp. Recognition dawned on Billy. He spun round and grabbed Reave by the arm.

'It's the Minstrel Boy!'

The Minstrel Boy was bending over the older man, tugging at the thongs that were wound

round his legs. The horsemen were racing down the ramp towards him. Billy started running up to head them off. Reave reluctantly followed him. Billy had gone only a couple of paces when he realized that the horsemen would reach the Minstrel Boy before him. He threw the fur cape off his shoulders and pulled out his gun. One of the horsemen was in the act of swinging his knife at the Minstrel Boy. Billy fired. The horseman tottered backwards, and plunged over the side of the ramp.

Billy fired twice more and the other two fell to the ground. One rolled almost the length of the ramp before coming to rest at Reave's feet. Billy hurried across to where the Minstrel Boy was helping the old man to his feet.

'Are you all right?'

The Minstrel Boy dusted himself down.

'Yeah, but we gotta get the fuck out of here. These crazy barbarians are killing everyone.'

Billy scratched his ear.

'I think you'll be all right with us.'

The Minstrel Boy was on his knees pulling his throwing knife out of the horseman's throat. He looked up incredulously at Billy.

'You mean you're with these people?'

'Kind of.'

The Minstrel Boy stuck the knife back in his belt.

'Why, for chrissakes?'

'It's A.A. Catto. She's taken over this whole tribe. She's gone a little mad.'

The Minstrel Boy pushed back his hat.

'Godzilla motherfucker!'

Before Billy could explain any further, A.A. Catto herself appeared at the top of the ramp.

'What's going on here? I heard shots.'

She saw the dead horsemen and hurried down the ramp, followed by Nancy and an escort of horsemen. Her face was dark with anger.

'Who killed my men?'

She jabbed her finger at Billy.

'Did you do this?'

'I had to.'

'What do you mean, you had to?'

Billy pointed to the Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer.

'These people are my friends. Your men were going to kill them. I had to stop them.'

'So you shot them.'

'There was no alternative.'

A.A. Catto swung round to face the Minstrel Boy.

'Don't I know you?'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'You ought to. You had me tied up in your hotel room for long enough.'

A.A. Catto's eyes narrowed.

'Of course. You're the one. You were with him. The one that was trying to murder me.'

She turned to her escort.

'Kill him.'

The guards moved towards the Minstrel Boy. He backed away holding up his hands.

'Wait a goddamn minute, will you! You'll find out you're making a big mistake if you kill me.'

A.A. Catto looked dubious, but motioned to the horsemen to stop.

'What mistake?'

'I'm here, so doesn't it occur to you that Jeb Stuart Ho might be here as well?'

A.A. Catto looked a little alarmed.

'The assassin? He's here? Where is he?'

'Guarantee you'll let me and my buddy here live, and I'll tell you.'

A.A. Catto almost spat at him.

'Guarantee nothing. Tell me, or I'll have it tortured out of you.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at the Wanderer and then gave in.

'He's here all right. He's gone up the mountain, looking for you.'

A.A. Catto nodded.

'That's all I need to know. Now I can have you killed.'

The Minstrel Boy talked very fast.

'It'd still be a mistake.'

'You think so?'

'Sure, after all, we know Ho. We could help you get him.'

A.A. Catto wasn't impressed.

'I'll send a squad of my horsemen after him. They'll be quite able to deal with him. Your help won't be needed.'

'We've got a lot of other talents. I mean, you'll probably want to switch off the globes and get the stuff receiver working. The Wanderer here, him and me can handle them kind of things.'

A.A. Catto turned to the Wanderer.

'Is this true?'

'What we don't know about stuff receivers ain't worth knowing.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled ingratiatingly.

'I can be pretty useful in my own way. Didn't I get you that airship back in Litz?'

A.A. Catto still looked doubtful. Then she made up her mind.

'I'll let you live until my men come back with the assassin's body. Then I'll decide what to do with you.'

The Minstrel Boy let out a sigh of relief.

'We're right grateful to you, ma'am.'

A.A. Catto started to walk away, giving instructions for the hunting of Jeb Stuart Ho. Abruptly she stopped and looked back at Billy.

'I'm holding you responsible for these friends of yours. Whatever their fate is, you'll share it.'

She turned and walked away with her men.

The blue-robed priest made his way carefully up the mist-shrouded mountainside with Jeb Stuart Ho close behind him. They threaded their way between the outcrops of rocks and stunted bushes. A primitive hunter's instinct was getting a grip on Jeb Stuart Ho. Now he was so close to his quarry he could feel a dangerous excitement building up inside him. He was impatient to complete his task. His hand went to the hilt of his sword and caressed it briefly. He found himself imagining the swift blow that would dispatch A.A. Catto. He was surprised at the vividness of the vision.

The priest halted and peered into the mist. Jeb Stuart Ho moved up and crouched beside him.

'Are we near the village?'

'We are very close. I am surprised we do not hear any sounds of life.'

They moved cautiously forward, halting every few metres. There was absolute silence under the blanket of fog. The priest started to become uneasy.

'I pray I haven't made some error. We should be right at the village, and yet we hear nothing.'

They went on creeping across the damp landscape. The dark shape of some kind of building loomed out of the mist. Jeb Stuart Ho touched the young priest's arm.

'This surely must be part of the village.'

The priest nodded.

'It is, but I cannot understand the silence.'

Jeb Stuart Ho drew his sword.

'You wait here. I'll go in and investigate.'

'You do not want me to come with you?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'There may be fighting. You must wait here. I'll need you to guide me back to the ziggurat.'

The priest sank down on to the damp grass, and Jeb Stuart

Ho moved cautiously forward. With his sword gripped tightly in his hand, he approached the first hut. There was still no sound or movement. He located the door. It was made of solid wood, and closed. He pressed his ear to it. Nothing. He took a step back. At least, in this place he didn't

have to worry about lasers or projectile weapons. He launched himself at the door. It burst open. He dropped into a crouch as he hit the middle of the hut, and turned on the balls of his feet, his sword stuck straight out in front of him.

There was nobody in the hut. It contained two narrow beds, a chest, a couple of crude wall hangings, but no people. He moved on to the next one, and found that that too was deserted. He broke into hut after hut, but they were all empty. In a larger building that dominated the village he discovered the last, faintly warm embers of a log fire. This finally convinced him. The inhabitants of the village had all, for some reason, left. If A.A. Catto was still alive she had apparently been taken with them. Jeb Stuart Ho hurried back to where the priest was waiting for him.

'They have all gone.'

The priest nodded.

'I discovered the same fact.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him in surprise.

'You did?'

'I scouted a little, while you were in the village. I found the fresh tracks of many horses, leading away from here.'

The priest led Jeb Stuart Ho to the line of tracks. They could hardly be missed. The ground was soft and muddy, and had been churned up by dozens of sets of hooves. They formed an unmistakable trail down the mountainside. Jeb Stuart Ho and the priest walked beside it in silence for a long time. The priest seemed more and more thoughtful. Finally Jeb Stuart Ho pressed him as to what was wrong.

'Is something troubling you?'

'I am puzzled.'

'By what?'

'I could be mistaken, but they appear to be leading in the direction of the ziggurat.'

'Why should the whole village come down from the mountain?'

The priest looked troubled.

'That is the mystery. It has never happened before.'

'You believe something is wrong?'

'I don't know. The horsemen are wild and violent. They would not be happy in the valley.'

However, we will soon be out of the fog and we will be able to see more clearly.'

As the priest predicted they very soon emerged from the oppressive fog and out on to the clear lower slopes. The sky was reddening into a perfectly programmed sunset. The ziggurat cast a long shadow across the valley. It was a scene of peace and tranquillity. The priest stopped for a moment, and stared carefully at his home. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him questioningly.

'Is all well?'

The priest continued to stare at the ziggurat.

'I think so, although there is a certain lack of movement.'

'Maybe they have all gone inside. Could it be that the horsemen have requested some kind of meeting?'

The priest frowned.

'I cannot tell. It is beyond my knowledge. They have never before left the mountain.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the ground in front of them.

'Their tracks certainly lead to the ziggurat.'

The priest nodded.

'That is what makes it so strange.'

'All we can do is go there and find out. The man who learns is the man who seeks knowledge. The successful hunter is not the one who waits for his quarry to pay him a visit.'

The priest looked at him in confusion.

'I'm sorry, I do not understand.'

'It is merely a saying.'

They started to walk down the slope. They had not gone very far when a group of mounted figures detached themselves from the shadow of the building and began coming up the slope towards them. Jeb Stuart Ho stopped. As the horsemen drew nearer, he saw that they wore rudimentary armour and carried long lances. His hand went instinctively to the hilt of his sword. The priest, however, didn't share his caution. He smiled at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Now maybe we will find out what has come to pass.'

Before Ho could stop him, the young man was hurrying down the mountainside to meet the group of riders. He ran towards them waving his arms. For a moment Jeb Stuart Ho thought that his suspicions had been unfounded. He was about to follow the priest when the leading rider lowered his spear and neatly skewered the unfortunate priest. As his dying scream faded away,

Jeb Stuart Ho whipped out his sword and fell into a defensive crouch.

The horsemen made high-pitched eerie cries and came at him. There were seven of them in all. He knew that despite his almost certainly superior fighting skills he would be hard pressed to overcome seven mounted warriors. One was some way ahead of the others. He came straight at Ho, crouched over his lance. Ho saw an advantage in that the rider apparently expected no resistance. Ho dropped his sword and stood very still. The tip of the lance, with the full weight of man and beast behind it, came straight at his chest. At the last minute, he turned from the hips. The lance missed him by a hand's breadth. He grasped the weapon with both hands and jerked with all his strength. The rider tumbled from his saddle. Before he could get to his feet Jeb Stuart Ho kicked him hard between the eyes, driving the bridge of his nose up into his skull. The man died without a sound, and Ho turned to face the next of his attackers.

Two of them came at him side by side, with a third slightly behind. Ho dropped to the ground so the lances went over his head, then he snapped back up again as the horses thundered past on either side of him. He grasped each man's nearest foot and pushed upwards, effectively unseating them. The third one was almost on him. Jeb Stuart Ho launched himself into space. His outstretched foot caught the man under the armpit, and they hit the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Ho was the first on his feet, and he quickly dispatched the man by stamping down hard on his throat.

The two he had unseated were now dancing towards him with drawn knives. The three more who were still on their horses had overshot, and were wheeling round for another attack. Jeb Stuart Ho was some distance from where his sword lay, and he began edging towards it. One of the men he'd thrown to the ground sprung at him in a balletic leap, swinging his long knife in a wide arc. Ho twisted sideways and the knife missed his face by the merest fraction. He caught the horseman off balance and jerked his wrist downwards, at the same time bringing up his knee under the man's arm. There was a sharp crack as the arm broke. The horseman screamed and staggered away.

One of the mounted warriors swung a set of weighted thongs at Ho. Ho caught one of the weights with his left hand, and hurled them at the nearest attacker on foot. The thongs wrapped themselves around his chest, pinning his knife arm to his side. Jeb Stuart Ho seized his own sword and slashed at the pinnioned horseman's neck.

That left three still coming at him, and they were all mounted. They thundered down on him in

a tight group. Three lances were directed at him. Jeb Stuart Ho dropped into a crouch, and jumped. His feet struck the middle rider in the chest, and as he hit the ground Ho stabbed the point of his sword up under the man's chin. That left two.

They swung round, jumped from their horses and hit the ground running. Their knives were in their hands. Jeb Stuart Ho shook one of his own knives free from the sheath on his arm, and threw it underarm at one of the horsemen. It struck him just below the right eye. The handle stuck out through the eye hole of his helmet.

It was just one on one. The last horseman slashed at Jeb Stuart Ho with his heavy leaf-bladed knife. Ho parried and backed off a step. The horseman pressed home his attack. Ho continued to duck and parry. He thrust at the horseman but his blow was turned to the side. The horseman was good, but he had little chance against the long, two-handed sword. Ho made the point dance in a lightning triple manoeuvre, and the knife flew from the horseman's hand. The rider stood still and resigned as Jeb Stuart Ho ran his sword into his chest.

Ho put his foot on the horseman's body and wrenched out the sword. He looked round for the surviving attacker whose arm he had broken. It was rapidly getting dark. The man was some distance away, limping quickly towards the ziggurat. Jeb Stuart Ho wiped his sword and carefully put it away. He let his arms fall limply at his side and squatted down on his haunches. He allowed the tension of the fight to drain out of him. If nothing else, it had demonstrated where he would find A.A. Catto, even if it had cost six lives to do it. Ho sat and stared at the huge black building and pondered his next move.

'Seven of you? He defeated seven of you? Single-handed?'

A.A. Catto looked as though she was going to burst. The single horseman who had escaped from the fight with Jeb Stuart Ho stood rigidly in front of what had once been the blessed Joachim's throne. A.A. Catto now sat bolt upright amid the white cushions. The carpet at her feet was stained with blood. The horseman's broken arm dangled useless at his side. His face was impassive.

'You realize that this means the assassin is still loose. It means that I'm still in danger. This is intolerable.'

Nancy moved to A.A. Catto's side.

'He won't be able to get at you here, surrounded by your own army.'

A.A. Catto's jaw muscles clenched spasmodically.

'He took out seven of them, didn't he? And anyway, while he's alive how can I relax? How can I find any sort of peace while he's running around looking for ways to kill me?'

'You could send out more men to get him.'

A.A. Catto shook her head.

'That's not good enough. He can fight the horsemen. I've got to find a way so I can be sure. He's got to be killed.'

A.A. Catto slumped back into the cushions of the throne. She lay hunched up, preoccupied and deep in thought. Nancy nervously examined her fingernails. A.A. Catto looked as though she was building up for some sort of outburst. Ever since the taking of the ziggurat her bouts of hysterical temper had been getting more and more violent. Abruptly she sat up and gestured imperiously at her escort.

'Fetch Billy Oblivion and his so-called friends.'

Nancy looked at her in surprise.

'What do you want them for?'

'They claimed they could help me when they were begging me to let them live. Now's the time for them to prove it. If they can come up with a way to get the assassin they can live. If they can't

then I'll have them killed.'

Three of the escort marched smartly out of the throne room. The survivor of the fight still stood stiffly in front of the throne. He had turned very pale, and was swaying slightly. Nancy touched A.A. Catto gently on the arm. She pointed to the injured man.

'What are we going to do about him?'

'What do you mean, do about him?'

'Shouldn't he have treatment or something?'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'But he's obviously in pain.'

A.A. Catto looked at Nancy in surprise.

'He's no more use to me.'

She waved to the escort again.

'Take him out and kill him.'

Nancy didn't say anything as the wounded horseman walked stiffly away surrounded by three of the escort. She noted that 'kill' seemed to be A.A. Catto's favourite word of the moment. Nancy didn't want to take any chances. A.A. Catto sat tapping her fingernails until Billy, Reave, the Minstrel Boy and the Wanderer were brought in.

The Minstrel Boy looked round carefully as they were marched down the long throne room. The place was crowded with horsemen. They smelled strongly of sweat and leather. A lot of the fittings had been smashed, and most of the candles had been extinguished except for one set that threw light down on the throne. They reached the foot of the steps and halted. A.A. Catto stared at them for a long time without speaking. Billy began to think that, somehow, her eyes were becoming more and more like those of a poisonous snake. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

'You sent for us?'

'The assassin is still alive.'

Billy glanced round at the others. They all tried to avoid his eyes. He turned back to A.A. Catto.

'What exactly are we supposed to do about it? He could take on all four of us with one hand.'

'I want you to devise a foolproof method of getting rid of him. You told me how skilled and talented your little friends are. Now is the time to put it to the test.'

The Minstrel Boy moved up beside Billy.

'What happens if we can't come up with a scheme to kill him?'

A.A. Catto smiled sweetly at him.

'Then you lied to me when you were pleading for your life. I shall have to have you killed, all of you.'

Billy's jaw dropped.

'All of us? Me and Reave as well?'

'Of course. You vouched for these people.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed grimly.

'Looks like we're all in the same boat.'

'What do we do about it?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Don't ask me. Those hoods in Litz couldn't stop him and neither could this bunch. I don't honestly see what we can do.'

Reave scowled.

'The only thing that could stop Ho would be a few more like him.'

The Minstrel Boy suddenly grinned. He looked as though the light had dawned.

'That's the answer.'

'What is?'

'Get some more like him, and let them take him out.'

Billy looked doubtful.

'How the fuck do we get more like him? Send out to the brotherhood?'

The Minstrel Boy shot the Wanderer a sideways glance.

'We could get them from Stuff Central.'

The Wanderer raised a bushy eyebrow.

'You won't find any brotherhood executives in the stuff catalogue. The best you can get from that would be a De Luxe All Purpose Trooper, and a squad of them would be just as useless as the horsemen.'

'You could get a custom job.'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'You'd need specifications.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned pointedly at him.

'We could get them.'

'Detailed specs?'

We could get them, couldn't we, old man?' The Wanderer held up his hand and quickly shook his head.

'No. No way. I'm not going to do it.'

The Minstrel Boy stared hard at him.

'You're going to have to, otherwise the lady's going to butcher the lot of us.'

'I don't like it.'

'You don't have to like it. You just have to do it'

Billy looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

'What are you two talking about?'

'Getting us some more like Ho to deal with him.'

'How do you do that?'

'We get Stuff Central to do a custom job from our specifications.'

'How do we get those?'

'The old man can get them, can't you, old man?'

The Wanderer didn't answer. The Minstrel Boy moved closer to him.

'You can, can't you, old man?'

The Wanderer looked at the ground. He hesitated and then spoke reluctantly.

'I can do it. I can form a mind link with Ho, and all the information can be fed out of my brain into the request console of the stuff receiver. Once the data's in the pattern bank we can have as many replicas of Jeb Stuart Ho as we want. Only they'll be programmed to do exactly what they're told.'

A look of relief came over Billy's face.

'We're out of trouble then?'

The Wanderer nodded wearily.

'Yeah, we're out of trouble.'

'What's wrong?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned nastily.

'The old man's not too keen on the mind link bit.'

The Wanderer growled at him.

'Just get off my back, will you. I said I'd do it.'

The Minstrel Boy didn't stop.

'The mind link doesn't go away once it's started. If Jeb Stuart Ho dies, the Wanderer will experience it too. It could hurt.'

The Wanderer grunted.

'It will hurt.'

A.A. Catto interrupted any further discussion.

'What are you all talking about?'

The Minstrel Boy turned to face her.

'We've come up with the answer. We'll need to use the stuff receiver. Have your men found it yet?'

'They've located it.'

'We might as well get on with it, then.'

A.A. Catto became suspicious.

'Are you sure this isn't some kind of trick?'

'Of course it ain't no trick.'

'How can I be sure of that?'

The Minstrel Boy began to get exasperated.

'You can't be sure. You'll have to trust us. It's our lives that are on the line. You think we're going to deliberately fuck up?'

'I still don't like it.'

'You got a better idea?'

A.A. Catto's face flushed dangerously.

'Your manners aren't all they could be.'

The Minstrel Boy had the sense to backpedal.

'Okay, I'm sorry, but there's no other way.'

A.A. Catto thought for a moment. She directed her attention to Billy.

'Have you still got your gun?'

Billy looked round nervously.

'Yeah . . . I've got it.'

'Give it to me.'

Billy hesitated. A.A. Catto held out her hand.

'Give it to me.'

Reluctantly Billy handed it over. A.A. Catto checked that it was loaded, and then pointed it at the four of them.

'I'll take you to the receiver room and you can start work. I'll be watching you all the time. If I see anything I don't like, I'll shoot. You understand?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'We understand.'

A.A. Catto descended from the late Joachim's throne and led them through a small door at the side of the hall. It was like stepping into another age. The room was filled with gleaming technology. The Minstrel Boy gazed round with what almost amounted to awe.

'Goddamn! Civilization. I thought I'd never see it again.'

The Wanderer went sullenly to the control console.

'Let's get to it.'

The Minstrel Boy immediately assumed control. He took off his coat and tossed it in a corner.

'First thing we got to do is deactivate the globes.'

The Wanderer sat down in the chair in front of the console. He searched the board for the unit that controlled the globes.

'Got it.'

'Can you ground them?'

'I think so.'

The Wanderer punched a sequence of buttons. A number of coloured lights went out.

'The globes are dead.'

A.A. Catto stood in the doorway, covering them with the gun. The Minstrel Boy moved up beside the Wanderer, partly to get a better view and partly to put as much of the old man as he could between himself and A.A. Catto. When it came to his own safety, the Minstrel Boy had no scruples.

'The next thing we have to do is to order up a direct data helmet.'

The Wanderer inspected the board.

'That won't be so easy. There's a selector block hooked into this rig.'

'Can you switch it off?'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'Negative. There's a lock on it.'

'I'll have to short it out.'

The Minstrel Boy pulled out one of his knives, and squatted on the floor. He prised open one of the inspection panels in the front of the console. He was just about to put his hand inside when A.A. Catto took a step forward.

'What are you doing?'

The Minstrel Boy found himself looking down the barrel of her gun. He straightened up.

'There's a block on the controls that stops anyone ordering things that didn't fit in with Joachim's and Alamada's ideas of the simple life. If we want anything but nuts, berries and new horsemen, I have to fix some kind of bypass. Okay? Can I go on with what I'm doing?'

A.A. Catto still looked doubtful.

'Are you sure you know what you are doing?'

The Minstrel Boy became impatient.

'Listen, lady, I've been hot-wiring receivers since I was a little kid. Just let me get on with it.'

A. A, Catto backed away, and the Minstrel Boy crawled half inside the console. After a couple of minutes he emerged grinning.

'That should do it. Order up that helmet.'

The Wanderer stabbed at the buttons. Rows of lights flickered into life. There was a faint hum from the cage that actually received the ordered goods. After about a minute, the cage flickered briefly with cold light and a white plastic hemisphere appeared. A number of coiled leads were attached to it, and an instruction booklet lay beside it on the floor of the cage. Billy reached in and lifted it out. A.A. Catto looked at the helmet questioningly.

'What is that thing?'

'It's a direct data helmet. It's a device that enables the old man to relay the specifications on Ho without having to verbalize them and then translate them into a selection sequence.'

He fitted the helmet on to the Wanderer's head, although he left the leads unattached and dangling. He slapped the old man on the shoulder.

'Okay buddy. Find our man.'

The Wanderer sighed and shut his eyes. The Minstrel Boy motioned to Billy and Reave.

'You two better hold his arms down on the chair. He's liable to thrash about a bit while he's making contact.'

Billy and Reave did as they were instructed. The Wanderer began to twitch slightly, and sweat stood out on his forehead. The twitching gradually built up until his body was racked by violent convulsive jerks. Billy and Reave had to use all their strength to hold him down. Suddenly his muscles seemed to lock in one huge spasm. His back arched and sweat poured down his face. Then it passed. The Wanderer collapsed back in the chair. His mouth opened and closed. He licked his lips.

'I've got him.'

His voice was a strained croak. The Minstrel Boy grabbed the ends of the helmet leads and banged them into input sockets on the control board.

'Feed the data, old man.'

The lights on the console began to blink rapidly.

The Minstrel Boy picked up his coat.

'We should have something down the beam quite soon.'

Billy and Reave stepped away from the Wanderer. He was quite passive now. Billy glanced at the Minstrel Boy.

'Won't Ho notice the mind link?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'He'll probably feel a bit strange, but the odds are that he won't realize what's happening.'

'How long do we have to wait before the first of the replicas comes through?'

'Shouldn't take Stuff Central more than a few minutes to tailor up the first one.'

The Minstrel Boy removed the helmet from the Wanderer. The old man seemed totally drained. If it hadn't been for his shallow breathing, Billy would have assumed he was dead.

They waited. The waiting was almost intolerable. Billy was constantly aware of A.A. Catto standing in the doorway holding the gun. He wondered if she'd keep her bargain and let them live once she had what she wanted. She was just as likely to kill them all.

For a while it seemed as though nothing was going to happen, then the cage glowed and Jeb Stuart Ho materialized inside it. The likeness was so complete that Billy and Reave started to back away. A.A. Catto raised her gun. Only the Minstrel Boy held his ground. He turned to A.A. Catto and laughed.

'Come and talk to your new subject.'

He turned to the Ho replica.

'Are you willing to accept our orders?'

The Ho replica bowed.

'Of course. That is my programming.'

'There you are, Miss Catto. He's all yours.'

The Minstrel Boy moved to the console.

'How many of these do you want to start with?'

'Six should be enough. But leave the selection set up. I will certainly want more.'

The Minstrel Boy punched more buttons, and more Ho replicas began to arrive down the stuff beam in quick succession. Billy noticed that they carried all Jeb Stuart Ho's equipment including the pistol and porta-pac. A.A. Catto was like a child with a new toy. She ran her hands over the fabric of their black fighting suits.

'They're lovely.'

She seemed to have forgotten all about her threats to kill the four men. She moved from one Ho replica to the next with an expression of delight. While her attention was diverted, the Wanderer opened his eyes, and rose slowly from the chair. He moved silently towards the door and quickly slipped away. A.A. Catto didn't seem to notice his absence. She beamed at the six Ho replicas.

'All we have to do now is send them after the assassin. He doesn't have a chance against six exact copies of himself.'

Jeb Stuart Ho slowly rose from his crouching position on the hillside above the ziggurat. For a while a strange sickness had gripped him, but it seemed to have passed. It disturbed him in so far as he could find no logical reason for it. He flexed his cramped muscles. He had wasted enough time. He must start for the ziggurat and complete his task. He could see no way apart from going directly to the ziggurat, finding A.A. Catto and killing her. There was no room for subtleties.

It was dark, and therefore the approach to the ziggurat would be comparatively simple. Once inside, his main problem would be to avoid the horsemen. He knew that they wouldn't be able to stop him, but if he was forced to fight with a number of them, he could be delayed for long enough to give A.A. Catto time to flee. That was what had happened in Litz, and he didn't intend it to happen here.

He started down the slope towards the black building. He moved slowly and carefully, making no sound. He stopped every now and then to listen for the noise of any patrol that might be moving around. He had only gone about halfway when he saw lights emerge from one of the ground-level entrances and start to move up the hillside. Jeb Stuart Ho sank down on to the grass and watched them come towards him. After a while, he could make out details. There were six men, in form-fitting black suits. They carried burning torches and appeared to be searching the ground for something.

Jeb Stuart Ho held his position and let the six men come nearer. As he was able to see them more clearly he could scarcely believe his eyes. In front of him were six of his brother executives in black fighting suits and carrying full equipment. He couldn't understand how they had arrived in Quahal, or how they had managed to keep the guns and porta-pacs that hung from their belts. They were a mysterious but welcome sight. Seven of the brotherhood would have no trouble dispatching A.A. Catto. He hesitated for a fraction of a second, and then stood up.

'My brothers?'

The torches were instantly extinguished. Jeb Stuart Ho was surprised. It wasn't the reaction he had expected.

'My brothers. It is Jeb Stuart Ho.'

There was silence, then a whisper floated across the hillside. It was very clear.

'That is him. That is the subject.'

A shot rang out, and a bullet hummed close to Jeb Stuart Ho. Someone had obviously fired in the direction of the sound of his voice. He started backing away. His mind whirled. He couldn't understand it. Who were these people? Could A.A. Catto have enlisted the aid of some kind of renegades from the brotherhood? Did such people exist? In the dim skyshine he could see the six figures fanning out and moving up towards him. He quickly retreated.

The sky over the mountain was growing lighter, as though an artificial moon was about to rise. Jeb Stuart Ho knew that if that happened he would present an easy target. He knew that if these men had similar fighting skills to his, he couldn't survive a direct confrontation.

The mist seemed to be his best bet. Once inside its concealing folds he could evade these hunters, or even, if he was lucky, pick them off one by one in sneak attacks. He turned on his heel and started to run. Another shot buzzed over his head. He fell into the unique pattern of yogic running that had been perfected by the teachers of the brotherhood. It enabled him to move at speeds far in excess of anything ordinary untrained humans were capable of.

A thin crescent of moon edged over the mountain. Jeb Stuart Ho glanced back as he ran. The pursuers were behind him, but they seemed to be keeping pace. They obviously had the same training. He reached the edge of the layer of mist and plunged into it. He saw an outcrop of rocks and ran towards them. It seemed an ideal vantage point to watch for the arrival of his hunters. He threw himself down behind the rocks, controlled his breathing, and lay still. He watched and waited.

The six came cautiously through the mist with swords and pistols in their hands. Five went straight past him, some distance to his right, and were swallowed up by the mist. The sixth was moving in a direction that would bring him right by the rocks where Jeb Stuart Ho lay. He silently drew his sword, and pressed himself flat on the ground. The man was just on the other side of the rocks. Jeb Stuart Ho waited for the right moment. His adversary came round the rocks. Jeb Stuart Ho struck. The sword went up through the man's stomach and into his lung. He died without a sound.

The body had fallen face down. Jeb Stuart Ho bent over it to remove the porta-pac and the gun. He rolled it over. Even in the darkness there could be no mistake. He found himself looking at his own face. The shock was immense. For a moment his mind was jolted off balance. Then he

got a grip on himself. Somehow, A.A. Catto had managed to duplicate him. He knew it was possible, but he didn't know how it had been accomplished. He examined the corpse's arm. There was even a wound exactly like the one he'd received in the Leader Hotel. He realized that he was fighting six identical versions of himself.

An idea struck him. The very fact that he and his hunters were identical gave him a chance to outwit them, and complete his mission. He quickly stripped the body of its gun, its porta-pac and its nanchuk. He replaced the throwing knives that he had lost. When he had a full complement of equipment, he stood up. It would now be impossible for anyone to tell whether he was the real Jeb Stuart Ho that was being hunted, or one of the Ho replicas who were doing the hunting. He walked swiftly into the mist, looking for the other duplicates.

He didn't have to search for long. He'd only been walking for a short while when he heard voices. He moved towards them. Three of the Ho replicas had gathered together and were debating their next move like novices on a training exercise. As Jeb Stuart Ho walked out of the mist, they swung round and trained their guns on him. Then they saw his own gun and porta-pac, and they relaxed. Jeb Stuart Ho looked from one to the other.

'You have failed to find him?'

He had to fight to control his voice. Being face to face with three of himself was still a powerful shock. The replicas shook their heads.

'He has obviously gone to ground in the mist.'

'It is the logical answer.'

'Should we spread our search?'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a chance.

'We could return to the ziggurat, and resume our search at daybreak. Our task would be made easy if we had horsemen to act as beaters.'

None of the three seemed to find anything wrong with his suggestion. Jeb Stuart Ho knew it was sound. He also knew that the replicas' thought patterns were exactly like his. If they went back to the ziggurat they would almost certainly report to A.A. Catto. That would give him the chance to kill her. He looked around for comment on his suggestion.

'We should wait for the other two to find us. Then we can decide.'

'One of them may already have completed the task.'

Ho nodded.

'That is possible.'

Another replica appeared out of the mist.

'Have you found Ho?'

The replica shook his head.

'He must have moved further up the mountain.'

'We were debating whether to return to the ziggurat or spread the search.'

'We decided to wait until we were all assembled.'

The newcomer nodded.

'There is only one of us to come.'

They stood in silence. The wait, however, wasn't all that long. After only a few minutes, the sixth Ho replica appeared out of the mist. He was dragging a black-clad body behind him. Jeb Stuart Ho's stomach turned over. He had been counting on the Ho replicas not finding the body. From now on, he would have to improvise. He quickly made the first move.

'You've killed him.'

The replica shook his head.

'I didn't kill him. I just found the body.'

'Then who did kill him?'

The replicas all looked at each other. Jeb Stuart Ho knew that they were all thinking in the same way, and that they'd quickly come to the same conclusion.

'Nobody here admits to killing him?'

'How did he die?'

'He was killed by a single sword thrust.'

'If none of us claims to have killed him, perhaps he committed suicide.'

'That seems unlikely.'

'We must assume that he is one of us, and not the subject. He must have been killed by Ho.'

'Then one of the six of us is Ho.'

The six men looked carefully at each other. Jeb Stuart Ho voiced what they were all thinking.

'We have no way of telling which of us is the subject.'

'We cannot now return to the ziggurat under any circumstances. If we did that, it would give the one which is Ho the ideal opportunity to complete his own task and kill A.A. Catto. We cannot take that risk.'

'So what is the answer to our problem?'

The answer came to Jeb Stuart Ho in an ugly flash. The six men were standing in a rough circle. The man standing opposite Ho put it into words.

'The only effective way in which we can be certain to discharge our task is to . . . !'

He hesitated. The others joined in with his final words.

' . . . destroy each other.'

As the words were spoken there was a flurry of movement. Jeb Stuart Ho made his last possible move. He threw himself flat on the ground. Simultaneously there was a crash of gunfire. He looked up, surprised to be still alive. Four of the replicas lay dead. The man standing opposite him, however, was slowly getting to his feet. Jeb Stuart Ho sprang up,

'We have both survived.'

'We both decided to duck instead of fire.'

The two men faced each other. Their hands hovered over their holstered guns.

'Why is it we didn't think like the others?'

'There is bound to be some variation in our thinking.'

'That's true.'

The replica looked hard at Ho.

'The probability is that one of us is the subject. One of us is Ho.'

Ho watched the replica's gun hand carefully. It was uncanny, facing and trying to outwit himself. He wasn't even sure if it was possible.

'It could be that neither of us is Ho.'

'Less probable, though.'

'Is it?'

The replica nodded.

'The majority would wipe each other out, as we have seen. The subject would seek to preserve himself, if at all possible, in order to complete his task.'

Ho anticipated the next proposition.

'One of the six might realize this and also attempt to preserve himself to prevent the subject escaping in this way.'

Ho smiled grimly.

'Then you are the subject.'

'I know I am not the subject.'

Their hands moved to their guns almost as one. The two .90 magnums exploded together. Jeb Stuart Ho felt the big bullet rip into him. The replica spun round and fell face downwards. Ho tottered backwards, swayed for a few moments, and crumpled to the ground.

A.A. Catto was celebrating. There had been an unbearable tension after gunfire had been heard at the ziggurat. A party of horsemen had been sent out to investigate. To Billy and the others, waiting for the horsemen to return was like being on the rack. Before the gunfire had been reported things had been difficult, but A.A. Catto had been preoccupied with ordering up dozens more Ho replicas and watching them troop out of the receiver.

Once the horsemen had been dispatched, she had returned to the throne, and sat drumming her nails on one of the arms. Billy knew that if they'd returned with an adverse report, A.A. Catto would undoubtedly have him, Reave and the Minstrel Boy killed. The Wanderer had wisely vanished.

The news had been good, however. The horsemen had found seven black-clad bodies on the hillside. Jeb Stuart Ho was dead. A.A. Catto was off the hook. She hugged Nancy, and the party began.

It was the strangest celebration Billy had ever seen. A.A. Catto went mad on the stuff receiver. A vast range of drinks, drugs, delicacies and entertainment poured from the receiver room. She ordered dancers, jugglers, dwarfs, plus the full range of exotic sexual types that could be found in the catalogue. She had also ordered a hundred or more extra Ho replicas. She seemed to be busily building herself an army. Once things had been arranged the way she wanted, A.A. Catto withdrew to her throne, from where she could survey the strange mixture of wild horsemen, black-clad assassins and spangled freaks.

A.A. Catto had, somewhere along the line, divested herself of her clothes. She sprawled naked across the cushions of the throne. Nancy sat at her feet, leaning against one of A.A. Catto's legs, absently caressing the inside of her knee. Nancy was totally out on duramene. A tiny tattooed hermaphrodite perched on one of the arms of the throne, massaging A.A. Catto's body. A pink chubby little boy in a toga and gold laurel wreath stood on the other side of the throne with a fistful of pressure injectors clutched in his fat hand. He'd bang a dose into her outstretched arm every time she snapped her fingers.

The effect of the sudden intake of stimulants and depressives on the horsemen and Ho replicas

was the most startling feature of the whole event. Most were in a state of physical shock. Their systems were totally unused to such massive abuse, but A.A. Catto insisted that they all did what she did.

It affected them in a lot of different ways, as the drugs fought with their programming. A lot of the Ho substitutes who'd been filled with duramene and other uppers, simply became rigid and stood at muscle-cracking attention, like statues scattered round the room. Others, who had had a preponderance of downers, were slumped on the floor unconscious. Some had gone into comas and a few sat crosslegged and recited incomprehensible mathematic progressions.

The horsemen were more of a problem. For some reason, they seemed to have particularly homed in on the booze and downers. Many had collapsed, but the remainder blundered about shaking their heads. Now and then one of them would chop down one of the glittering pleasure mutants with an off-hand knife blow. Now and then, one of them would stumble into a Ho replica and try to start a fight. The Ho replica invariably cut down the horseman with an air of precise fastidiousness.

The various freaks, although programmed to participate in some bizarre entertainments, were unable to handle the situation. They were confused and terrified. A few cracked. A dwarf rushed at the legs of a bunch of horsemen and started beating at them with his tiny fists. He was rapidly kicked to death for his impudence. The majority, however, simply clustered together in groups, moving round the throne room like panicky sheep, trying to avoid the violence. The floor was rapidly becoming littered with bodies, and slippery with blood.

Billy, Reave and the Minstrel Boy stayed firmly in a quiet corner between the throne and the receiver room. They were out of danger, for the moment, as far as A. A. Catto was concerned. They still had the problem of avoiding mutilation at the hands of her out-of-control warriors. This required so much concentration that even the Minstrel Boy left the vast selection of stimulants, for the most part, alone.

Somewhere in A.A. Catto's whirling brain an idea hatched. She sat up, pushed the hermaphrodite out of the way and shook Nancy by the shoulder.

'Nancy!'

Nancy opened one eye.

'Huh?'

'Nancy, it's come to me.'

Nancy blinked.

'What?'

'It's come to me, the whole purpose of my life,'

'No shit?'

A.A. Catto pouted.

'Don't talk to me like that. It's unkind.'

Nancy sat up quickly.

'I'm sorry, what's this that's come to you?'

A look of bliss came over A.A. Catto's face.

'I'm going to rule everything. It's my destiny.'

Nancy shook her head to clear it.

'Huh?'

A.A. Catto wasn't pleased that Nancy didn't immediately join in her enthusiasm.

'I'm going to rule everything.'

'You're going to rule everything?'

'Quahal is only a start. I am destined for much greater glory.'

Nancy nodded.

'Yeah, glory.'

'I have new men that I invented.'

Nancy glanced up at her in surprise.

'I was under the impression that the Wanderer, if anybody, invented them.'

A.A. Catto swayed a little as she waved away the suggestion.

'That's beside the point. They're mine, and with them I can conquer everything.'

She started to wax eloquent. Her voice rose a little and her eyes turned upwards.

'Imagine, just imagine. My warriors suddenly pouring out of the nothings. Swooping down on defenceless towns and cities. Overrunning them and enslaving the population. Can you picture it, Nancy, the power and grandeur of it, our choice of everything we wanted? We could have anything. That's why they wanted to kill me. They were afraid. They suspected what I was going to do before I even knew it myself. They didn't manage it, though. They failed. They can't destroy me. I'm destined to succeed. It'll be a jihad, a crusade, a holy war to the greater glory of me!'

At the end of the speech A.A. Catto's voice had risen to something near a shriek. Nancy looked at her in wonder and awe.

'I'll say one thing for you. You don't fuck around.'

Billy, who had caught part of the outburst, slid up close to the Minstrel Boy and nudged him.

'We got to get the hell out of here.'

'Don't I know it.'

'I mean now.'

'How?'

Billy looked around.

'We could nick a couple of porta-pacs from unconscious Ho replicas, and just walk away.'

'Walk through the nothings?'

'I've done it before.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Not here, you haven't.'

'It's not possible?'

'This isn't the inner ring. You can trot off into the nothings there and be sure of landing somewhere while you're still sane. Out here you can't. If we tried walking from Quahal, I'd go mad even if you wouldn't.'

'So what do we do? We can't take delivery of a ground car in a place the size of the receiver room.'

The Minstrel Boy thought about it.

'We could probably get something smaller.'

'Yeah? What?'

'Air scooters.'

'Air scooters?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'Yeah. Air scooters. Listen, you and Reave gather up three porta-pacs and come to the receiver room. I'll go there now and make the order.'

Billy and Reave moved cautiously to the nearest unconscious Ho replicas, and unclipped three porta-pacs from their belts. They also took the guns from their holsters. Then they headed for the receiver room doing their best to look unconcerned.

When they got there, the room was empty apart from the Minstrel Boy sitting at the control board. Two of the air scooters had arrived, and as they watched a third one materialized in the cage. The air scooters were shaped like an egg that had been sliced in half lengthways. The flat side rested on the ground. When the engine was cut in, the machine floated on a cushion of air some fifteen centimetres thick. It moved by two propulsion vents at the back, and was braked by a similar vent on the front. A saddle and control bars were mounted on top. The Minstrel Boy had chosen models finished in red metal-flake. He had not had time to order any accessories, although the catalogue did contain a whole range. The Minstrel Boy threw his leg over the first one and turned the power unit to idle. The scooter rose on its air cushion. He gestured to the other two to get on their machines.

'Here's what we do. I'll go through the door first. We take it nice and slow. Sashay around, and knock over a few freaks. We'll clown it up. A.A. Catto will think it's some kind of joke. Keep edging towards the door, then, at a signal from me, open the scooters right up, and go. We should take them by surprise. Okay?'

Billy and Reave nodded. The Minstrel Boy turned the twist grip on the control bars very gently and edged his way through the door. He waltzed out on to the dance floor. Billy and Reave did the same. A.A. Catto looked up from her conversation with Nancy. She laughed and clapped her hands as Billy spun his machine round and bowled over a whole group of freaks. They gradually made their way down the hall. When they were about halfway to the doors, the Minstrel Boy looked round and yelled.

'Now!'

He twisted the powerfeed wide open, and sped towards the door. Billy and Reave followed him. As they raced away, A.A. Catto's expression changed from delight to fury. She sprang to her feet, knocking over the child who'd been feeding her drugs.

'Stop them.'

The Minstrel Boy slammed into the doors and they burst open. Billy and Reave sped through behind him. They hit the stairs and fought to control the scooters as they careened down the uneven surface. All three of them reached the bottom still upright and they hummed down the corridor. Some of the Ho replicas arrived at the head of the stairs and started shooting. Bullets screamed off the black stone walls of the corridor, then they made a right-angle turn and were temporarily out of danger.

They kept going at full speed, flashing along corridors and bucketing dangerously down flights of steps. The interior of the ziggurat appeared to be deserted, and they met no opposition. They eventually emerged on to one of the lower external levels. A grey dawn was creeping over the horizon. Further along the level, a long steep ramp led down all the way to the ground. They headed for it. There was still no sign of pursuit. Billy grinned back at Reave, who was slightly behind him.

'Looks like we got away.'

Reave gave Billy the thumbs-up sign. The Minstrel Boy turned down the ramp. Billy and Reave followed him. They were almost at the bottom of the ramp when a squad of Ho replicas came storming out of one of the ground-level entrances. They raced towards the foot of the ramp. The Minstrel Boy got there before they did. He spun his scooter round and raced away in the opposite direction.

Billy and Reave hit the end of the ramp at the same time as the Ho replicas. They were going too fast to be stopped. The Ho replicas leaped out of the way as the two scooters ploughed through them. Billy and Reave gave their machines full power and attempted to catch up with the Minstrel Boy.

The Ho replicas were instantly back on their feet. They pulled out their guns and started firing after the three escapers. A heavy .90 calibre slug smashed into the back fairing of Billy's scooter. He struggled to stop the machine turning over. As soon as he'd regained control, Billy glanced back to see if Reave was all right. He was just in time to see Reave's scooter spinning riderless towards the fields. Reave was sprawled on the path. Billy braked hard. A bullet hummed over his head. The Minstrel Boy swung round and yelled.

'Keep going!'

'But Reave . . .'

'He's dead. Get the hell out before you are too.'

Billy took a last look at Reave. The Minstrel Boy was right, the body lay quite still. Another bullet slammed into the body of the scooter. Billy twisted the power control wide open and took off after the Minstrel Boy. The Ho replicas came after them at an incredible high-speed run. The Minstrel Boy waved frantically towards the river.

'Hit the water, we'll be able to move faster.'

They swerved across the fields and headed straight for the river. Bullets threw up chunks of

earth beside them. They bumped down the bank, and hit the water in a shower of spray. The scooters quickly picked up speed on the smooth surface of the slow-moving river. The speedometer on Billy's machine went clear off the end of the scale. Each time either of them hit a patch of ripples the two scooters bounced into the air.

At last they got out of range of the Ho replicas and their guns. Ahead of them, the river started to break up into patches of grey nothing. Billy put a hand to his belt and turned on the porta-pac. The Minstrel Boy did the same. He turned and grinned at Billy.

'We did it! We got away!'

Billy nodded wearily.

'Yeah . . . we got away.'

Jeb Stuart Ho moved from oblivion to a world of pain. He groaned. He had never imagined that dying would take so much effort. The whole of his side felt as if it was on fire. He seemed to be suffering from hallucinations. He had the sensation of someone mopping the sweat from his forehead. The illusion was strangely comforting. He prepared himself for the end, then a voice spoke beside him.

'You've come round, then?'

Jeb Stuart Ho tried to raise his head but the pain proved too much for him. He tried to speak, but all that came was a groan. The voice spoke again.

'You're hurting. I'll give you a shot. You'll feel better in a while.'

The hallucination was very strange. Ho imagined something pressing against his arm. There was a soft hissing sound. The pain began to diminish. A feeling of euphoria spread through his body. He wondered if it was the approach of death. He tried to open his eyes for the last time. He found himself looking into the bearded face of the Wanderer.

'Why are you part of this dream?'

The Wanderer smiled sadly.

'This is no dream. You're alive.'

'I will die soon.'

'You won't. You're in bad shape, but I've filled you up with all the drugs I could steal from the ziggurat. I've patched up the bullet wound as best I can. I figure you'll pull through okay. There is one thing though, we're going to have to get out of here. A.A. Catto thinks you're dead right now, but we ought to move along before she finds out.'

Jeb Stuart Ho attempted to sit up. The pain had gone but he felt sick and dizzy.

'I can't leave while I still live.'

'Your task?'

'That's correct.'

'I'd forget it if I were you. The events you were sent out to prevent have happened. Whatever you were supposed to stop is rolling. It's in motion. Taking out A.A. Catto won't make much

difference now. You've failed.'

'You seem to know a great deal about my task.'

'I've been in mind link with you.'

Is that how the replicas were produced?'

The Wanderer nodded.

'That's right.'

He avoided Jeb Stuart Ho's eyes. There was a long pause. Finally the Wanderer coughed and began to talk very quickly.

'Listen, I'll give you another shot, and you'll probably be able to move. We've got to get out of here before A.A. Catto thinks of having the bodies picked up. I'll give you the shot, okay?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I cannot leave.'

'Why the fuck not?'

'I have failed in my task.'

'So?'

'I must now die. I cannot return to the temple with the burden of failure.'

'You're maybe going to have to.'

'I don't understand.'

The Wanderer took a deep breath.

'You failed, right?'

'Yes.'

'So whatever A.A. Catto's disastrous effect on the universe proves to be, it's already underway.'

'That seems logical.'

'And the brotherhood will have revised all their schemes for dealing with her.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's face became set.

'The fact remains that I have failed in my task. I see no alternative but to commit myself to a ritual death.'

The Wanderer smiled.

'You can't do that. If you did it would actually compound your failure to the brotherhood.'

'I do not follow the reasoning behind that.'

The Wanderer started to show signs of strain.

'We both agree that since you didn't take out A.A. Catto in time to stop the progression being set in motion that will end in disaster, the brotherhood will have to take even more positive measures to combat her.'

Jeb Stuart Ho nodded sadly.

'I am responsible for that, and therefore my only course of action is to atone by committing myself to the death ritual. I don't see how I can delay any longer.'

Jeb Stuart Ho struggled into a sitting position. He weakly tugged his sword from its sheath and laid it in front of him. He looked up at the Wanderer.

'I would appreciate it if you would leave me. I must do this on my own.'

The Wanderer stood up and folded his arms.

'But you can't do it. Not even by your own ethic.'

Jeb Stuart Ho began to become impatient.

'Why not?'

'Because if the brotherhood are to fight A.A. Catto, they need you.'

'I don't see why.'

'Because, of the whole order, you have more hard information about A.A. Catto than anyone else. It is your duty to return with that information.'

Jeb Stuart Ho thought it over.

'I can find no flaws in the argument.'

'There aren't any.'

He looked down at his sword.

'I am not free to put myself to death.'

He seemed almost disappointed. The Wanderer knelt down and gave him another shot.

'Put your sword away and try to stand. We have to get away.'

Jeb Stuart Ho got painfully to his feet. He stood swaying. The Wanderer put his arm round him and supported his weight. Slowly they began to move, limping away into the too perfect, artificial dawn of Quahal.

IN THE SEX-CITY OF THE FUTURE - A COMPUTER-GUIDED KILLER

In his spartan cell, brother Jeb Stuart Ho comes out of terminal meditation. Quietly he straps on his sword, flexes the hands that deal death. The Brotherhood's computer has predicted, and he must carry out its orders. Ho's mission will take him out into the sick, post-cataclysmic world, to the pleasure-city of Litz, with its Sex-O-Mats, its Torture-Parlours, its genetically-bred whores, where Billy and Reave, the DNA Cowboys, have found their private hells. It is in Litz that he must find a woman with the artificially-arrested body-growth of a thirteen-year-old girl and the mind of a sadistic megalomaniac – and kill her before she can drag the human race to final destruction.

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