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Master of the Stars by Robert Hoskins

CHAPTER 1

The creak of ancient hinges shattered the quiet of the dungeon, bringing the restlessness of the dozen prisoners who were not sleeping to an instant halt. Wayne Case was one of those trying to pass the long hours in a fitful doze. He blinked, shifting position at the disturbance, and nearly rolled off the narrow wooden bench that was his pallet.

"Hoya! Fool!"

Case floundered for balance, the toe of his boot striking a Centauran where the base of the broad skull nestled in muscle-swathed shoulders. The man almost unfolded his legs as he reached up to shove back at the Terran—and instantly Case was ready for combat, sleep forgotten, slipping into first-strike position.

But the Centauran looked away, returned to contemplating the knots in the snarled length of twine in his fingers.

Case relaxed, the sudden tension draining from his body as the alien picked carefully at one of the knots. He had been working on the same piece for the seven full days that Case had been a cell mate.

The hinges stopped shrieking as the roof grate dropped with a metallic crash to the stone floor of the level above. Illumination from a lowered glow-bulb exploded into the cell, the brightness overwhelming the feeble light that came from the three pitch-soaked torches burning low in their brackets. The ceiling above was barred with lighter streaks of shadow as a bit of sunlight found its way through the ventilation slits high in the wall.

The prisoners were blinded by the harsh new light, the comforting shadows of their twilight world banished in the actinic glare. Some covered their eyes with their hands while others attempted to escape the fury by rolling beneath benches, burying their faces in their arms. Bright light was a stranger here, familiar to none of them since their imprisonment.

"Earthman Case!"

The voice of the warder was guttural, almost destroying the sense of his words, but Case recognized his own name. He let his fingers separate, and blinked, discounting the red and green afterimages that were superimposed against the retinæ of his eyes.

"Earthman!"

A strong curse followed the second cry, and there was a clatter as armor-shielded bodies shifted above the hole, brushing together. Now Case saw the rope ladder dangling into the cell, quivering as though kicked by an angry foot. He looked around at his fellow captives, most of them brawny mercenaries— Centaurans, like the fellow he had kicked, their skins burned so deep a red that they were almost black away from the natural light of the sun.

All the prisoners were awake now, their eyes on him, although they remained mute. He crossed eyes with one and then two others, his glances returned with the anger that had greeted his first appearance. His Terran origins had been instantly recognized— and instantly hated. His body still bore the bruising aches of the three fights he had been forced into during his first forty-eight hours as a prisoner of the Garond.

There was one other Non-Centauran in the dungeon—a man as tall as Case's own two meters, although so lean that he seemed to be carrying little flesh at all on his skeleton. And he was from Case's own home system—but the men of the Jovian moons hated those of Earth perhaps more bitterly than they did any of the hundred other man-settled systems yet discovered. The mother world placed an unjust burden on its children who were forced to travel the stars, and the hatreds held almost everywhere had indeed been well earned, the lesson of enmity indoctrinated over two centuries of callous treatment by those from Earth.

The slender candlebearer sat tall on his bench in the darkest corner of

the dungeon, an almost palpable wall keeping the Centaurans clear of him. As little as the mercenaries would have to do with Case, they at least did not begrudge their respect for his prowess. But the Earthman's unmistakable heritage ensured that the Jovian would not give him even as little as did the others—and would shun Case as though he were a bearer of the worst plague.

"Earthman!"

The Garond warder was angry now, bending over the hole in the ceiling. The glowbulb danced on its tether as he shook it, chasing the shadows from every corner—and for an instant the candlebearer was caught in the bright wash of light, eyes glowing yellow. Bony fingers clutched against his knee—and then the light swung in the opposite direction, covering the Jovian in shadow again as Case reached for the ladder.

The warder saw him but still sputtered angrily as Case leaned his weight into the first rung. The Terran towered a third of a meter over the Centaurans, although his solid body seemed almost as ephemeral as that of the Jovian in comparison to their thick tree-trunk shapes. The ladder hung only inches above the sewer trough that ran diagonally across the dungeon, sagging even lower as the rope took his full weight. For a moment he swung free, coming close to two of the Centaurans, who jumped away. Then he was climbing toward the opening in the ceiling, seven meters above. When he reached it, he was forced to pull himself through the timbered square without help from his jailers. He sprawled on the stone floor—then rolled quickly to miss a surly kick as one of the guards decided to pay him for the warder's anger.

"Pig!"

The curse probably meant something else again, for there was no relationship between the languages of this bywater planet and the master tongues of Earth. But the meaning was clear enough as the coarse leather boot grazed his ribs, stealing skin. Case rubbed his side as the ladder was quickly hauled out of the opening and the grate once more slammed shut. Then he rose to his knees, to stand as two long iron bolts were slid into place across the grate, locking it in place.

The guards moved quickly to surround Case, six of them armored in molded-leather carapaces and armed with blunt iron rods as tall as their

own height. Strange short swords, edged on one side only and curving downward like the blade of a scythe, hung down their backs. None of them were taller than the Terran's shoulder.

The glowbulb had been extinguished, the cord fastened to a hook on the wall, but the light level here was almost day-normal from the primitive electric incandescents that were strung on an exposed wire stapled to the ceiling of the ancient place.

The warder snarled something and Case was cuffed from behind, the guards forming a square as officious orders continued to burst from the little superior. One touched Case in the small of the back with his rod, twisting the iron painfully into the Terran's tensed musculature and forcing him into stumbling movement. The natives quickly moved into a half-run, trotting him along the length of the corridor, the rods ready to jab out in anger if his longer legs failed to adjust to the stride of the Garond.

Case staggered more than once, restraining himself from reaching out to strike at his tormentors, his own anger coloring his vision. Then he found the right pace, awkward though it was to his own natural movements. He shortened his steps to avoid running over the heels of the guard before him, his face burning under the humiliation of the run, thankful that there was no audience.

They came to a flight of steps carved from the living rock of the ancient cliff-city and started up without hesitation. Even in his concentration, Case was aware of the ancient weight of the rock city pressing down on him. They climbed quickly; by the time a hundred steps had passed beneath his feet the Terran was breathing harshly, feeling a series of sharp pains in his side. But the natives seemed to have no need to pause for breath or rest: even the paunchy warder easily kept the pace. The Terran forced himself to stay with them, refusing to show weakness before these scornful men of another sun.

A tight vise was closing about his lungs, his eyes clouding with a red haze shot through with starfire before they at last reached the head of the stairs. Case almost lost his balance as his lead foot suddenly came down six inches too far. His arms flailed, but he caught himself and saw that they had come out into another of the ubiquitous corridors, very like the one they had just left below.

For the next fifteen minutes the Garond warder urged his men through a series of corridors and sudden switchbacks, Case was certain that many of the turns were taken only to double back on the preceding route. After a time he was convinced that they had already come this way once, although there was nothing to distinguish one passage from another. The plastered walls were the same slightly damp green as the others, the floor paved with stones so ancient that in many places they were worn through and broken.

"Heya!" He stole a glance at the warder, found a simple phrase in his limited knowledge of the language. "Where are we going?"

He was ignored, but it was easier going now that they kept to this level. He guessed they were trying to exhaust him—but they did not know of the years devoted to rigorous training that had been the only life Case had known... until six months ago.

Six months that seemed more than a lifetime.

If the Garond thought to drive Case to collapse, they were to be disappointed. Now they came to another flight of stairs, broader than before, ornamented with ancient statuary worn from its original form by the touch of how many millions of hands over how many thousands of years; Case recognized a few of the god-shapes.

They climbed no more than one level this time, and when they came out on the landing they were in a distinctly different area of the city for the first time. The Garond guard passed the end of a broad esplanade that stood open to the canyon world outside—outside, and below. Carved arches gave glimpses of blue sky and even an occasional cloud shape, although the prisoner was kept back from the balcony visible on the other side of the arches. But he received the impression of towering cliffs in the distance as they once more moved along. Once he spotted a great cleft that must be the guarded opening that led from the canyon to the great plain.

Case tried to judge the distance they had come, and guessed that the dungeons were just below the level of the canyon floor. Else they would not have been able to receive daylight through the ventilation slits. He tried to remember his single sight of the hidden city as his captors brought him in, the night lights flickering along the highest levels. He remembered two broad strokes of light across the face of the cliff, challenging the early night that covered the depths of the canyon while the sun was still more

than an hour in the sky.

He had been given no chance to visit the higher levels on that occasion; the guards dragged him off to the dungeons without any sort of hearing or interrogation.

There was greatly increased native traffic on this level, little of it soldiers; from the brighter costumes, he guessed that most of those passing were civilians. Hope rose; this must be the district capital.

The Garond guards stopped suddenly; a hand caught his elbow, steel-hard fingers digging in cruelly, rather than giving a verbal order. Case winced and tried to yank free, wanting to smash at the smirk on the guard's face.

Then he was twisted around and stood looking up at a pair of tall leather-bound doors of native blue-wood, the grain deeply etched and pitted with ancient wormholes. The doors were a full four meters tall, although together no more than a meter and a half wide. To Case, they seemed like bound merchant's staffs, ready to strike out at those who might pass too close.

The warder pulled a short scroll from his wide sleeve now, then held his forearm up straight to let the sleeve fall back, revealing an incongruous Terran chronometer on his hairy wrist. Case nearly exploded with laughter, the unexpected gesture a relief to the tension that had been cloaking him. Instantly one of the guards prodded with his iron rod, digging sharply into Case's ribs as the warder stared at him with a pained expression. Case winced at the stab of pain, and effectively masked his continuing amusement as he watched the warder counting off the seconds until the exact instant of the appointment. The Terran wondered what terrible thing would happen should they be a moment early.

Then the Garond reached forward to tug open the great doors that were more than twice as tall as himself, and for the first time since leaving the dungeons, the protective square opened. A rod probed Case's ribs again, but he was expecting it this time. He moved forward before the point could strike, into the revealed office beyond the great doors. Trying to watch the man with the tormenting rod, he did not see one of the leaders move his foot just far enough to intercept his own; despite himself, he stumbled without dignity into his audience.

In the corridor, Case would have cracked his knee; but here the floor was carpeted elegantly. The warder moved up to offer his paper to the man who sat behind the ornately carved desk. A signature was scribbled on the receipt and the warder retreated, never taking his eyes from the face of his superior until he could at last close the great doors again and make his escape.

"Terran Case."

Case picked himself up carefully, studying the native as the other stood up. He was tall for a Garond, although still ten centimeters shorter than the Terran. But his general build was closer to that of a man from Earth than to the people of this planet; even his features were more delicately carved. His complexion was the dark-tanned color of Garond, but he might well have been a native of Earth.

Or share a common ancestry...

But that was impossible; the races of the hundred starworlds could not interbreed. There might indeed be a common ancestry—but it was one fifty or a hundred thousand years in the past. Adaptation to planetary needs had separated the various strains of Man completely. A Centauran was as much a human as any man of Earth, but unions of the different branches always proved barren.

Or so it had been announced...

There were rumors, of course, of forced crossbreeding; when one form found reason to hate another, there were always rumors of miscegenation, of trespass, of defilement. But it had been half a century since the last revolt of a starworld, and the rumors seemed to date from such a time as well.

"Are you Garond?"

The question was out, bald; the man on the far side of the desk smiled.

"Yes, I was born on this planet. In childhood I had my problems, trying to convince the peasants that I was not an Earthman. It was quite a trial to my good parents, simple folk and good civil servants that they were. Fortunately, I was co-opted into government at an early-enough age to escape the burden of my appearance. I can assure you, Terran, that I am

not a changeling."

If he were sport, then it must cast far back indeed—how many thousands of generations had it been since this area lost contact with the rest of the human galaxy? It was legend that all of the human worlds had once welded the stars into one great empire, but legend only; there was no physical evidence of a once-great galactic civilization, no artifacts of lost civilizations. Only the coincidence that men were to be found on every suitable world.

Every world had its myths and legends, though: ancient mysteries that could be easiest explained by presuming a common origin, a common heritage. Even without other proof, scientists agreed that at some point in prehistory a race of men had traveled from star to star. The idea that the Creator could have chosen the same form to be dominant on every world could not overcome the fact of otherwise unrelated fauna on those same worlds.

"I am Galden."

The native's voice was soft, mellifluous, unlike the normal harshness of his fellow planetarians. He spoke the Terran *lingua franca*, which, in the recent centuries of Earth domination of the other worlds, had become the universal language of trade and diplomacy. But there was a strange accentuation to his words even if there was no trace of accent, and that in itself was proof that he was of a world other than Earth.

Case let his eyes move from Galden, flicking his gaze around the confines of the room. It was much smaller than the great doors would seem to warrant, but the wall behind the desk was paneled and perhaps not the original. Another, more prosaic, door was cut through it, although closed now; and there was yet another in the short wall to the Terran's left.

But if the dimensions were less than he might have expected, the furnishings were as rich as might be desired by any high-born citizen of Earth itself, and the man who called himself Galden was dressed as fashionably as the men of the central worlds. The desk and a set of scroll shelves to its right were ornately carved from the same dark wood, and the ceiling was enameled with a mural of ancient battle scenes. Soft hangings in each corner seemed to deaden the sound level in the room, adding to the feeling of richness.

"Sit, please."

Galden indicated a chair that only appeared to be as ancient as the other furnishings. Even as he seated himself it fitted to Case's shape, and for the first time in the week since his capture he found it possible to relax his body. His hand dropped to the side of the chair and found a control that started a gentle massage. A soft sound of animal pleasure half-formed in his throat. For a second he allowed his eyes to close, then quickly opened them to watch the other.

"You are thirsty?"

Galden turned to a sideboard, pouring from a pitcher into a metal tumbler, and in that instant Case tensed, hands pressing against the arms of the chair. The furniture in turn stirred beneath him, waiting for him to make some sort of move.

But Galden was turning again, bringing the tumbler to him, and Case forced himself to relax again, willed his heart to slow its sudden mad pace. The chair's tension eased as well as he accepted the tumbler, feeling the chill of the liquid transmitted through the metal. He looked down into sparkling bubbles, a few popping into his nostrils. Not recognizing it, he tasted and found a sharp tang that was not at all unpleasant. The drink moved smoothly down his throat, soothing the churning acids, and pleasure coursed through his system. The tension seemed to drain away.

He yawned, wiping his mouth, feeling the stubble of a week's growth of beard rasping his hand. In the same instant he became aware of his own strong odor, not having had the chance to wash during his week in the dungeon. He felt shame, his tongue licking across cracked lips, and even though he was certain that the drink was drugged, he sipped again.

"You are comfortable?"

It was a question again, Galden sitting on the edge of the desk now, one leg dangling. The native's hands moved together in his lap, the fingers twining. Case saw the blue-stoned ring on the one hand, the veined gem seeming to ripple with the force of life itself. He could not take his eyes away from it.

Case sighed, his finger moving to his forehead, touching the place where the scar had been; it was taking shape again beneath the graft, the

skin rough-surfaced, flaking now. Soon enough the outline would be plain, although the rabid coloring would not show itself for weeks yet.

Galden smiled, and Case knew that he was a gentle person, friendly. He was the first possible friend that Case had found on this terrible planet. The Terran's head was lolling back against the chair, his eyes staring up at the central figure in one of the panels on the ceiling—a bearded man who bore an impossibly long sword as colored clouds swirled about his majestic form.

"Why have you come to Garond, Wayne Case?"

Galden was beside him, although Case had not seen him move. The native touched his shoulder, pressing lightly in sign of his friendship. He seemed to exude confidence, demand confidence in return, and Case opened his lips to speak to his friend. What harm could come from telling this man the truth.

"I... I had to..."

"Had to do what?"

Galden's fingertip found the place where the forehead had been grafted, traced the outline of the covered letter.

"I am your friend, Case. You can tell me why you left Earth—why you had to leave Earth. You do want to go home again, don't you?"

He was persistent, commanding; it would be easy to do as Galden wanted.

"Tell me, Case—tell me why Earth forced you to leave, to run for the stars." His finger touched the mark on the forehead again.

"Tell me why they branded you coward..."

CHAPTER 2

"*Hai!* 'Ware danger!"

The traditional cry of the death watchers cut across the hot June air, the signal for the two men in the chalk circle to move into battle stance.

Wayne Case circled the Asian warily, calloused soles of his bare feet constantly checking purchase against the close-cropped grass, his expression carefully neutral. The other was grinning broadly, almost happy to be at the moment of combat. Each held hands out at waist level, waiting for the Games Master to drop his baton.

The colorful pennants surmounting the stadium walls in honor of tomorrow's games stood out straight in the stiff breeze, but only a breath dipped into the bowl to carry away the nervous perspiration from Case's forehead. In this match he was the taller by a full head and had fifteen centimeters in reach— but he knew his advantages were nullified by the other's speed and skills, having watched him in training.

"Hai!"

Adrenaline poured into their bloodstreams as the Master dragged out the tension. He moved with the two in the circle, watching to be sure that neither gained an unfair advantage—and then his rod swept down and he moved quickly back from the combat zone. The combatants were free of restraint.

They circled for another half-minute, weaponless, although in other circles across the arena other pairs were armed with many of the ancient weapons of defense and offense—only the projectile weapons were missing: no slings, no bows, no catapults or guns. The games measured the strength of the individual; an opponent must be struck down by the player's own hand.

The smaller man made, the first move; he rushed toward Case, kicking up toward his groin—but Case moved aside, left arm chopping down in the same instant, only to be anticipated and captured by the other.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

The small cry of joy escaped the Asian as he exerted pressure on the arm that he was forcing stiff. Then he brought up his knee, ready to break the arm branch across it—

But Case threw his weight forward, reaching with his free hand over the Asian's head to bear down on the broad shoulders, his foot kicking out at the same instant to knock the other off balance. The slighter man rode with him, flipping over completely,, riding over the arm that he had

pinned—but caught himself on the balls of his feet and his hands, twisting away to return quickly to first position.

"Good throw!" He grinned.

Case nodded a formal five millimeters, but wasted no breath on congratulating him for the recovery. It was his position to charge now, and he went forward, shoulder lowered to catch the other in midriff. The other anticipated him and started to kick up at Case's unprotected belly—then realized the true intent and twisted away, so close that Case's fingers brushed the side of his ankle.

Each man sucked flat breath through his teeth, shallow gasping that dragged the most oxygen from the air, hyperventilating the blood and increasing the level of awareness. It was as though Case could see with his exposed skin as clearly as with his eyes, his bare chest slick now with sweat.

"One minute!"

The time call came from the Master, warning that free time was slipping by quickly. After three minutes points would be deducted no matter which man won.

The Asian checked and saw that he was still well inside the thirty-foot circle marked against the grass. Case followed the tiny eye movement automatically, even turning his head a bit—which was what the other had been waiting for.

He charged, kicking up again, his foot catching Case squarely in the gut. Case started to twist away as he realized his mistake, but it was too late to avoid the full force of the blow. He was knocked sprawling, the smaller man diving on to him, ready to capture an arm and twist it back so that his knee could fall across the throat.

But Case was not in the position expected. Even as he fell he rolled, so that the Asian landed on his back. The smaller man immediately wrapped his forearm around Case's neck, but Case was forcing himself up, standing against the weight of the other. The cords of his arms were taut as he battled the pressure, his breath rattling in his throat and red fire burning across his eyes.

The Asian wrapped his feet around Case's middle, trying to dig his heels into the sensitive groin, and for an instant Case thought that he was going to black out. He tottered precariously—then threw himself forward as though trying to shake the other loose. Then he reversed directly, throwing himself into the air and twisting.

The other realized belatedly what was happening and tried to loosen his hold. But Case had his forearm now, and they were crashing to the grass, the big man on top. Breath was knocked from the smaller man as Case broke the grip about his throat and rolled free. His knee landed heavily on the other's gut as his hand made ready to chop down.

"Good kill!"

The Master was inside the circle again, moving to touch Case's shoulder with his baton. Case relaxed; a second later he stood, to stare down at his vanquished opponent, his face blank of emotion. Then he reached down to offer his hand.

The Asian pulled himself lightly to his feet, the grin back on his face. "It was a good kill—I really thought I could take you. You're faster than you look."

"Freestyle is my best."

Case made no attempt to be modest; he knew that he was good. He should be good, for he had been training toward this day for what seemed like his entire life. In the circle there was room only for truth—and there was no truth in false modesty.

Today, of course it was practice: the final practice.

Tomorrow it would be real.

"I am Takoa," said the other, suddenly extending both hands. "May the next time we meet be in friendship. I would be your friend."

Case stared, surprised, and for a moment hesitated. Then his hands went out and they clasped wrists in the formal salute of games players.

"The honor is mine—friend. I am Case."

It was an intensely personal thing to give another your name; those who had sworn to the games effectively shut out the rest of the world. The Asian had been the first to ask his friendship since childhood.

"At the moment of truth may our backs be together."

Takoa broke away then, to head toward the players' ramp at the far side of the arena. Case watched his retreating back, moved by a new, strange, emotion.

Friendship.

For the past month he had shared barracks with Takoa and the fifty other young men who had come here for their first try at a listing. There was easy camaraderie among the young, for their training was similar and they were all healthy of mind and body. But friendship was something more, something rare.

How to make friends among those you might have to meet in combat? Might have to kill?

Players could not choose their opponents; the matches were made by the Masters.

Most of the first listers who come to this provincial center were like Case himself, from the smaller towns of the district. They came seeking one of the very few opportunities for advancement in this highly regimented world, a chance to rise above their fellows—to become a Citizen. Every human on Earth was guaranteed a life of minimal comfort, of course: a measured existence, measured calories, measured amusements. And the vast majority was content to be tied for life to the same building, the same village, the same dreary, dull tasteless existence that was broken only by physical urgings that might well send them as easily to the community bathroom as to bed.

But there were a few who wanted more, and for them there were the annual lotteries in which one in a thousand million might be yanked from a village cell to Citizen status. Even the dullest watched the panoply of the ceremony in fascination as another entertainment.

The more intelligent among them could look farther, hoping to spot in their allotted offspring, talent, God's blessing of some useful sort. The

government was always looking for talent, always testing the children—although none of the parents could have recognized its presence in any event.

To become a player, however, a child need not be talented. It was necessary only to devote your entire life to a regimen of physical training. Any boy could choose such a path, and almost every village floor knew of some youngster who had gone off to try the lists. Some of them even knew one who had become a Champion.

Wayne Case spent his childhood years in the crèche of his village, for his mother died bearing him and of course his father rejected him. Perhaps when he was very small he had known friends among his fellow orphans, but a counsellor had seen potential in him, and from that moment he was sealed to the idea of becoming a player.

Six months ago, reaching physical maturity, he had registered his intent. The village health technician passed him and he was sent to a training center, to learn the skills of combat, both armed and unarmed. A month ago he had come here to this arena closest to home, along with a dozen other young men from his training center. There had been ten times that number when training started, but most of them were only strong, unable to learn the techniques of battle.

Here they joined with hopefuls from several other centers, to have their numbers trimmed further. Three days ago Case had won his place on tomorrow's list.

A lifetime of rigorous training had brought him to this moment... but now that it was here, Case was strangely troubled. He stared toward the ramp where Takoa had disappeared, thoughts that had never before come to him churning in his brain.

Could a man kill a friend?

What would it be like... to die?

"Good kill!"

The contest in the circle nearest Case was ending as did almost all such matches between trident and knife: the latter was down, tangled in his opponent's net, the deadly center tine of the trident pressing against his

throat. Case shivered; he was conversant with all of the weapons of combat, but the trident was the one he most feared to face. It would happen if he progressed in the lists, for a player must face all possible opponents to win his way to the top. But the player who faced the trident with knife and short sword must be very much faster than his opponent.

For the moment all of the practice circles were empty, although a dozen players were limbering up. The sudden harsh cry of a calliope cut the air, and through the farthest exit Case saw the colorful stripings of the carnival being set up in preparation for tomorrow. This center hosted games three times a year: in spring, summer and autumn; each was occasion for a holiday.

The arena could seat perhaps 50,000, but those who could not crowd in had no fear of missing the excitement. There would be full teevee coverage over the entire district, to the smallest community building.

"Case!"

He stopped at his name and turned in surprise to see that the Master who had referred his match with Takoa was waving to him. Except for the ritual of the circle, Masters did not usually address themselves to the first listers.

A man stood with the white-haired Master, a swarthy individual whose skin was burned the peculiar shade that marked him as a constant star traveler. Case stared in open curiosity; perhaps the starman was a sponsor, looking for likely winners to dress up his social life.

"You did well today, Case." The Master was affable. "The colonel was impressed."

"I am honored." He bowed his head the socially correct distance in deference to the starman's rank. The man was studying him with unabashed interest.

"You fight well."

There was a strange accent to the voice coming from square lips that did not seem to move in the square face; a peculiar rasp underlay the tone, as though the language of Earth had been learned from school tapes rather than from constant experience.

"A player must fight well if he would win," said Case. The precept was one of the prime commandments of the arena.

"Is winning then so important?"

Case was shocked; the question was without sense. What other reason was there for entering the lists, if not to win?

"The Masters think you have ability," said the starman. "With a bit of luck you could go a long way—perhaps all the way to the World Games. Of course, a talented man makes his own luck—but you seem to have talent for the games. However, there is never a draw in the circle. For every winner there must be a loser. Are you prepared to accept that fate?"

"I cannot foretell the future, lord."

"Ummm. There are few who claim that ability— and most of them charlatans. Although I once knew a candlebearer... but of no moment. The Games Masters appreciate your capabilities, Case—and others, as well. You seek honor in the circle of chance, but I know a man who may be able to offer you the rewards of championship without the years of effort."

"Do you wish to sponsor me, lord?"

"Not I." He laughed, and held up one hand. "I have no need for a pet, thank you. But I know someone who might offer sponsorship... if he is sufficiently entertained."

Entertainment: the word was stranger to Case. Only a Citizen could consider the concept of amusing distraction. The programming that filled so many hours of the day for the populace—even the games themselves—were not entertainment: they were necessity.

"I will do my best," said Case. "Tomorrow."

"Ah, but my friend does not wish to wait," said the starman. "He wants to see you tonight—at his house. He is giving a small entertainment, and you are invited."

Case looked at the Master, but his face was carefully blanked. His gaze rested on something across the arena, as though he had not heard the words of the starman. The idea of sponsorship by a Citizen was nothing

new—but it was one of the prizes of winning. A successful player was posted to no more than three or four lists during a year. Most of the time waiting was spent in training, of course—but there was always plenty of time for play.

Play: that thought was also strange. Case was a player, but since childhood there had never been a moment of time to spend in sheer pleasure. His life had been dedicated to strenuous exercise, to running hard, to mastering the potential of his own body; but it was never for pleasure.

Yet from the beginning he had been aware that there would come pleasure, enjoyment, the rewards of winning out over his competition. Case knew that success would bring him leisure; but now he had to learn what leisure was.

"You will come," said the starman. "I'll send a car."

CHAPTER 3

The room was spartan, yet rich; soft lighting hinted at strange colors in the shifting smoke of the walls, which were translucent slices of solid vegetation taken from giant plants on a world at the edge of Earth's sphere of influence.

There were only two in the room: the owner of the house was tall, slender, almost ascetic. He crossed his legs as he leaned back against a sofa framed in ancient wood, studying the starman.

"An untrained boy, Randel?"

"Untrained to the duties of civil or military service, perhaps. He has potential, Calidor, I assure you. And I suspect latent talent as well. I have suggested formally that player candidates be checked after the time when drone children are usually passed over. In any event, he is well enough trained to receive the highest commendation of the training Masters."

"But this is not a game."

"It may, however, be our only chance."

"May be—I and my fellow senators would want assurances that the scheme you propose holds probable success. It is too much to risk on a slender hope."

The starman's bulk seemed strangely out of place in this room, even though most of the furnishings were alien to Earth and thus seemed fitting to his position as one who had spent most of his life beneath other suns. But his manner was as polished as that of his host. He had been pacing; now he dropped into a chair, leaning forward.

"Consider the enemy, Calidor—we know *nothing* of him, it, them. Only that he exists. We know nothing of his home world, his numbers—we don't even know for sure his final intent. Does he wish to supplant Earth as the most powerful planet among the hundred systems? Does he intend to attack Earth itself? We don't know! All we have is evidence of activity on half a dozen of the most backward worlds, and that comes to us late and secondhand."

"You do believe Earth is threatened, however?"

"Yes. There is no solid evidence, but the computers at Government Center suggest that the evidence indicates an imperial design."

"Still, the enemy's operations have been limited."

"To this point—which may or may not indicate probable weakness. We can be sure that waiting will permit him to gain in strength."

He leaned back. "Earth is hated, Calidor—you who have never been offworld cannot know how much hatred there is for us. Any one of the star-worlds could offer fertile soil for a campaign against us. If they band together, forgetting old enmities, we could well find ourselves on the losing side."

"It has been a century since the rebellion, when Earth's agents were cast off the colony worlds."

"They are colonies no longer," said Randel, grimly. "And their hatred for us may never die."

"But we are all humans," said the senator. "After all, we do share common heritage."

"Hatred can become instinctive; there are areas on Earth itself that still remember sectional and racial conflicts of a thousand years ago. Why don't we maintain contact with the Closed Worlds?"

Calidor shuddered. "The spider planets. But they are completely alien to us."

"The starworlds consider us alien, usurpers. And Earth is still ruled by the same political system that created the colony system in the first place. I tell you, Calidor, that we have no choice in this matter; it is too late for that. We must act, and we must always remember that the enemy has the advantage— he knows who we are, where we are. The one thing that he does not know is our awareness of his existence."

"What can this would-be gladiator do?"

"Find the enemy."

"How, when our intelligence services cannot?"

"It is difficult to operate covertly on the star-worlds: they take our money and laugh at us, serve as double agents against us. We must offer someone sympathetic—someone that they will trust despite their intense hatred for Earth. Someone who has reason to hate as strong as their own."

"And this Case fits such a role?"

"He can—he will."

"But... from what you say he is a man of honor."

"Then," said the starman, "we must convince him that to serve us is to serve honorably."

"No matter what the truth."

"No matter."

Night was just claiming the city when Case came out of the barracks, a slight breeze warm to the skin. He unsealed his jacket, let it hang open.

The arena was close to the center of the city, the area immediately around it, commercial. Warehouses bulked large against the night, cutting

off the early moon as he hurried along the street. Ahead, perhaps a mile away, were the first residential towers, dark against the night sky except for the spaced red warning beacons that guided air traffic. Below the level of audibility was the constant presence of the robot-city, operating the life systems of the million or more humans in the tower environs. But for Case, the streets were empty. There was not another human about in the district.

Despite the warmth of the evening, Case shivered. The emptiness of the streets weighed on him; even though he had formed no close attachments to others, he was used to the presence of other bodies about him, sharing the communal services, at home sleeping in the bachelor barracks with him. The occasions in his life when he had been completely alone were rare, and then fleeting.

He glanced back at the arena; a student of classical history would have recognized the form of the structure as copied from an ancient amphitheater. His eye quickly picked up the presence of the pennants atop the battlements, moving gently in the night breeze, black squares and triangles. Phlegm caught in his throat and he spat against the street.

Then he rounded a corner and saw the robotcab waiting, as the starman had promised. He approached it cautiously; like the street, it was silent and dark. The idea of a vehicle reserved for an individual was alien, a privilege of citizenship; even when he had come from home to this district he had used the belt-ways and elevators of public transportation along with hundreds of others.

The cab sensed his presence while he was still a dozen paces away; the interior lights came on, and the door opened as he approached. He held back for the space of three breaths before he could bring himself to enter, and then sat on the very edge of the seat. Then he gasped as the safety belt reached out for him, moving around him to pull him back into the cushions.

Nothing happened for twenty seconds; then the door closed, and a light glowed on the upholstered dash. There was a sudden surge of acceleration upward as the cab recognized that there was no competing traffic, and then they were airborne.

Case closed his eyes as the cab cut across the bulk of the city, moving toward a low range of mountains to the west. Now there was almost no

sensation of movement; but the one time that Case opened his eyes, it was to see the moon impossibly below the level of the cab window.

He closed them again, and a soft moan escaped his lips. His hands clutched the edge of the cushion until his knuckles showed white. The flight time seemed interminable, although in truth it lasted less than twenty minutes. He kept his eyes shut until he felt the gentle touch of landing, the cab continuing to roll for half a minute before movement finally ceased. Then the belt released him and he felt a cool breeze as the door opened.

Case blinked: to his left lay the darkness of the night, but to his right a blaze of artificial lighting banished the stars from the surrounding sky.

He looked at the house; it must be a house, although there was nothing like it in his experience. The actual life-style of the upper classes was never shown on the public channels, lest the drones become envious of what they could never have. There was the impression of shapes scattered about a vast lawn, and then he saw that someone was coming down broad steps from a pillared porch. He sat transfixed until the human servant approached the cab.

"Mr. Case? The senator and Colonel Randel are waiting."

Another new experience; it was the first time that Case had ever been addressed formally, for that was another mark of high status. He climbed slowly out of the cab, unable to resist looking up at the several levels of the house as it mounted through the light blaze toward the dark sky.

There were half a dozen steps to the porch. Case hung back, letting the other lead him; and then they were through those overwhelming doors and into an entrance hall that seemed all marble and mirrors. Two ancient statues flanked the interior of the entrance, one male and one female; the white forms were reflected back dozens of times in a marching rank that seemed to lead into infinity.

Music flooded from an archway opening into a mirrored ballroom; the floor was crowded, the people dressed in the brightest colors of status.

And now a woman came out. She walked forward with her hand extended.

"You are the player." Her voice was cool, liquid; it chilled him, sent a spasm running the length of his spine. "My husband did not lie when he said that you were handsome."

Case stared, transfixed; at last his fingers came up in instinct, touched her hand. She laughed then, the slight movement of her head turning the color of her hair from a dusky red to a rich gold. Holding his fingers, she led him down the few steps to the hallway, then toward the ballroom.

"You dance, of course."

"No!"

But she was already turning to him, taking his other hand, holding it high.

"Oh, but it's easy. Just follow the music and watch what I do."

It seemed that all of the people around them had formed off in couples and triads, although there was no apparent structure to the dance. They moved as they chose, most of them taking advantage of natural eddies in the current to sweep close to the newcomer, appraising him with painted eyes, sardonic smiles frozen on their faces. They pressed close to Case, touched him with elbow and hip, reached out to caress him, until, ashamed, he permitted the woman to lead him into a simple pattern of steps. He was awkward and knew it; but she trilled laughter as she led him through the thick of the crowd, at last breaking from the dance as they came to the far wall where a serving bar was maintained by a staff of human servants.

"See? It's easy," she said, releasing him from the music but not from her fingers. "You'll learn quickly. Now you must have a drink."

"No." This time he was firm; the night before a game was not the time to indulge in intoxicants, even if he were experienced in their use. He shook his head, and this time she accepted his refusal, taking a frosted goblet for herself that sparkled back fire from its dappling of rime.

"Artur says this will be your first game," she said. "I know you will be a winner—I can always tell, just by looking into the eyes."

His face flamed, but he did not know how to escape. She led him along

the length of the ballroom, chattering about inconsequential matters that might as well have been in a foreign tongue for his ability to understand. But always her hand trapped his fingers, pressed tight against his flesh. He was fully aware of her as a woman, as he had never been aware of the females of his village.

"Ah, Muryel!" The expression on her face changed, for a fleeting instant petulant, as she looked to the newcomer. "You've captured my prize, but you must release him. I need him now."

She pouted, then turned to throw her arms around Case's neck. He was much the taller, but against his will he was pulled down until her lips pressed against his cheek, brushed across his own.

"You will win tomorrow, I know it. Come to me then, and we will continue our discussion... in private."

The tall man smiled as he reached to catch Case's arm, the youth nearly tripping over his own feet as he was rescued from his host's wife.

"This way, gladiator."

They moved toward a blank wall, but a mirror opened before them and they passed through into a smaller place. But Case was overwhelmed, inundated with the sensory impressions already taken; he saw nothing but a blaze of reflected color as he followed the tall man. They were in an elevator, and then moving down a corridor; then they were in the meeting room.

The starman was standing, turned away from the entrance; he did not turn around until Case had seated himself at the senator's direction.

"So." He had been studying Case for nearly a minute before he spoke. "You would be a Citizen."

It was not a question, but Case felt it necessary to say something. "Yes."

"Why?"

He blinked, staring up at the starman; the question had taken him completely by surprise.

Why indeed?

"A Citizen... is respected, has high privileges."

"Which you would share. You have just been in the company of some seventy Citizens, downstairs. Do you want to be like them?"

The swirling crowd in the ballroom—he could not remember any of their faces. Not even the woman who had danced with him, kissed him. There was only the impression of blazing colors enveloping them, seeming to carry them along—the bright colors, and the laughter that had followed the music as he was swept across the room.

Had the laughter been directed toward himself?

He was tongue-tied in the face of so many totally new experiences. At last he shrugged, folded his arms together. He looked down so that he would not have to face the starman's eyes.

"You are unfair to the boy," said the senator. "He is confused, perhaps even frightened."

"Frightened?—a man who would be a player?"

"No!" Case leaned forward, half rose from the chair. "I am not frightened!"

Now Randel took a chair. "Then your goal is still the same—to become a Champion and thereby a Citizen."

"Yes. Of course!"

"I asked this afternoon if you were prepared to face the possibility of not winning—of losing. You did not give me a proper answer then, so I ask you again: are you prepared to fail in the games?"

Case slumped in the chair, eyes dropping to his lap. He studied his hands a moment before looking up again, meeting the starman's gaze.

"I... don't know. I have never considered failing—I have always known that I would win."

"I should warn you, Wayne Case, not to aspire to what you have seen

tonight—our host is one of the elite of Earth, one of those who rule the planet. Most Citizens live at a level less flamboyant. Even if you were to be the greatest of all Champions, you could never win to his position. However, you will not win tomorrow."

Case stared, not understanding, as the starman continued to speak softly yet firmly.

"Tomorrow, Wayne Case, you will lose. You *must* lose."

CHAPTER 4

Martial music blared from the public speakers as the fifty new players gathered together beneath the entrance ramp. They were dressed only in sandals and briefs, the rest of their bodies naked and glistening with oil. Although the morning breezes were cool, most of them were perspiring in nervous anticipation; their hearts beat unnaturally fast, pumping adrenalin into their bloodstreams, each hoping that he would win the highest score and the honor of meeting a Champion in the final match.

There was a sudden flurry of excitement as the door at the back of the gathering room opened, and the Champion made his first appearance. He was dressed as the others, with only the gold-fringed white cloak of honor to set him off from them. His eyes passed casually over the fifty, and he smiled, revealing the too-even bright line of a repaired inner jaw.

"Fight well today, children. I want a strong battle."

It was an insult calculated to sting; he was no more than three years older than the oldest of the fifty, although well-marked by the dozen games he had contested. Hatred for his insolence burned from nearly all of them.

"He is too proud."

Case wheeled, to see Takoa behind him. The oriental made an obscene gesture toward the posturing champion.

"Many of us could take him," said Takoa.

"No." Case shook his head. "He earned his points. It will take a strong battle to dislodge him."

"Perhaps," Takoa turned away, shadow-boxed several steps. "I hope I have the chance to try him."

Case did not reply; his thoughts were only tangentially on the coming conflict. He was still faced with the image of Randel speaking his damning words.

You will lose.

He had argued, but they would not listen; at last they made it plain he had no choice in the matter. They offered the promise of citizenship as reward for doing as they demanded.

"But—I may be strong enough to win!"

"That would be foolish," said Randel. *"Defy us, and you will be dishonored forever."*

But they would not say why.

The five Masters who would judge today came into the gathering room. The first matches had already been posted, the fifty split into twenty-five pairs. Five new circles had been painted in the arena, the practice rings rubbed away; the players would meet five matches at a time in the first round.

It would not be enough merely to win; the number of points scored determined those who would proceed to the next level. Of the twenty-five first round winners, the five lowest scores would be dropped.

The others would pair off again, once more meeting in contests held five at a time. Of the ten second-round winners, only the six highest scorers would go on to the semi-finals. Of those three, the two highest scorers would face each other for the final honor of challenging the Champion.

Every one of the fifty expected to win.

Forty-nine of them were wrong.

If anything the frustration was even stronger in Case's breast now as he visualized having the starman's throat beneath the edge of his hand. There

would be no hesitation before the killing stroke...

The music changed, became triumphant; one of the Masters signaled, and the new players formed two ranks of twenty-five, The Masters before them, the Champion first of all. They marched into the arena, the Champion and Masters moving into the center of the field as the ranks split to march in opposite directions around the great circle. Their right hands were clenched against their hearts in salute as they acknowledged the roar of the crowd.

The ranks met again, passed each other to complete the circle, then moved out to form again behind the Masters. The crowd continued to cheer, until the Champion came off the field to take his place in the box of honor. Then the forty who would fight in the later ranks came off, found benches beneath the stands. It was time.

Case was in the third rank, but the preliminary positions meant little. He could have left the arena, returned to the gathering area or the dressing rooms, but it was as though the forty who waited must share in the noise of the people, breathe the same air as those meeting first in the circles.

Takoa was in the first rank; again the Asian had drawn freestyle. The match was more even this time, for his opponent was of his own size and speed. Case watched him, hoping he would win. But his wish for the man who had called himself friend was tempered by the hope that he would not have to meet the smaller man later. Let Takoa win enough points to move with honor to the next arena, the next level of competition—but not enough to bring him to the final match of this day.

Takoa and his opponent circled warily, but the other was too anxious; he rushed too soon, struck out with all of his strength against a target who was not there. Takoa moved nimbly aside, caught an arm, flipped the man once. The other braced for a roll, came up in another rush. When he dived to tackle the Asian leaped high, legs spread wide enough for his outstretched hands to touch his toes.

He came down on the other, scissoring to capture an arm. There was the struggle of brute effort as the man tried to break free, face contorted, the one hand pushing against the grass. But Takoa was in position to capture the free hand; he found purchase and flipped his man as he opened his legs again, the other landing heavily. Before he could arch up,

roll free, Takoa had him captured again, his free hand ready to chop down against the exposed throat.

"Good kill!"

The cry was lost in the roar of the crowd as the Master touched his baton between the players, signalling the first contest ended. It had taken less than fifty seconds; there would be bonus points for Takoa.

The Asian was wreathed with smiles as he came off the field, followed a moment later by another winner; soon enough all five contests had been decided. There was a pause as groundsman came out to scatter moisture absorbent over the circles so those of the next round would not face the added danger of their predecessors' sweat. Then the second rank took the circles, bowed formally as those with accoutrements accepted them from assistants. Then the Masters gave their warning cries and the five batons dropped as one.

The clash of steel filled the advancing morning air now, for none of this rank was unarmed. There was the smell of death in the air, the stink of human fear; the crowd roared with approval as a spike-studded ball tore through a shield, the chain wrapping around the forearm of the shield's owner, forcing him to give way. Then he found strength, pressed back with his weight and with his sword until his opponent gave way in turn.

The cries of the crowd seemed to grow hoarser, although it was still early. The smell of blood filled their nostrils, exciting them. They urged the players on, begging someone to die, the rasp in their voices an animal growl of pleasure.

The roar swelled; a man was down, battered, the streaks of his blood spilling over his back to stain the grass. The other held ready to strike—but the Master was there, the baton dropping between them.

"Good kill!"

"... *kill!*" echoed the crowd, the last word reverberating away to escape from the open shell of the arena.

Case found that he was sweating heavily and picked up a towel to wipe his face. He blinked, rubbing his eyes with a forefinger, and then a shadow passed over the arena. He looked up to see a flight of birds passing high

overhead. They were no more than tiny black dots, and he wondered if it was an omen.

Blood spilled a second time; a careless swordsman saw his arm open to the bone. He stumbled to his knees in disbelief, dropping his weapon to clutch at the wound. There was a growl of anger at his failure to carry through to the end of the battle. There would be no points for him, even though he had fought valiantly to this moment. But neither would all of the points go to the victor, for the fight had carried on well beyond the free-time limit.

"Ahhhhhh!" Takoa chewed his lip. "He struck to kill."

"He struck to win," said Case quietly. "All of the blades are sharp this time."

A moment later the second rank was done, and once more the circles were swept clean—this time with more care, for there was blood in three of them. And then it was time for the next rank.

Case stood, still sweating heavily, and wiped his hands against the cloth of his briefs. The sun was a bright disk in the sky, hurting his vision and causing spots to move across the surface of his eyes.

A black man entered the circle with him, a giant who turned to face the crowd, his briefs scarlet against the ebony of his skin. The muscles were corded beneath the skin, moving in sinuous ripples. There was great strength there, and Case knew that he had the advantage of reach as well.

They saluted, breathing long deep breaths to store oxygen against the coming trial. Case's own covering was a pale blue that was already stained with the oil that coated his body. They stepped back, appraising each other.

" 'Ware danger!"

The Master raised his baton as Case regretted not paying more attention to this man during the month of trials; this was their first meeting. The players stood with their hands at waist level as they waited to begin the contest to see which was strongest, most deadly in the use of nothing more than his legs and feet. A touch with the hands would be a fault, points taken away. The shift to this ancient art was difficult, and

Case concentrated on keeping the differences in the forefront of his thoughts.

They waited; why the delay? He stole a glance from the corner of his eye, saw that two men were being bound together by the right forearms. The strappings were tested, the combatants given a knife in their right hands. They squared off against each other.

The batons dropped as one, the Masters moving back. The black hissed through his teeth, hunching forward now and moving in a tiny circle. Six feet of space lay between them as they made the first tentative probes, but it would be crossed quickly, disappear instantly, when the attack was made.

Case forced himself to relax, conscious that the seconds were passing and this contest must be done quickly to score the maximum number of points. The starman and the senator might have ordained that he would end this day losing, but he wanted to taste as much glory as he could first.

He feinted, slamming out with his foot against the tree trunk of his opponent's leg. The man laughed, dancing back, and then it was his turn.

His leg shot up suddenly, perfectly straight, his foot tensed into a striking weapon that came so close Case felt its breeze across his midriff. The black turned completely away—and suddenly dropped both hands to the ground, his feet kicking out backward.

Case was not there; he had anticipated, moved back out of danger. Now he rushed forward, kicked up with his own right foot before the other had a chance to get his feet on the ground again. The flat of his foot caught the other in the rib cage, a solid *thunk* of meat against bones. He fancied he could hear the crack of a rib breaking as the man went over.

But the other rolled, came over with his arms wrapped around his knees, bounded to a four-point position, toes and fingertips touching the ground.

Case did not give him time to achieve balance. He rushed again, twisting first right and then left, his left foot kicking out hard against the thigh. The shock of pain made the other grunt as he tried to recover, but Case was shoving now, pressing on him, kicking into midriff so that he must hunch over to protect his solar plexus.

The black moved back half a step, started to the side, but Case was with him, following, anticipating. His left foot shot out, hooking between the other's legs and pulling them even farther apart, and then he pirouetted, catching himself on the balls of his feet, kicking back with all of his strength.

But he had miscalculated. He barely caught his opponent's knee, drawing a yelp of pain. The man was rushing him now, striking out—but his reaction time was off, dulled by the punishment he had taken. He missed completely, and Case moved in, foot slamming forward against the thigh again, then shoving up once more against the belly.

His opponent staggered, moved back as Case pressed relentlessly. His feet were striking almost too fast to see, drawing a low moan of sudden pain. Once more a high slam, and this time he caught the other square in the chest, drove him back almost to the edge of the circle—and then the opponent's foot slipped and he went down, the back of his head slamming against the grass; his arm fell across the circle, costing him points.

Case moved, but somehow the man found the strength to roll free, to take the slamming kick on the meat of his shoulder. One foot shot out against Case's shin, sent pain dancing across his eyes. But the black was staggering now, shaking his head to clear the sweat from his eyes. He moved forward again, dazed, his hands held up in defense—another fault of the rules.

Case moved in from the side, still working as quickly as he could and conscious of the fleeting seconds. Once more he hooked with his foot to knock the other off-balance. Instinctively the other rolled in a somersault and came up standing—one foot athwart the line of the circle. Case moved after him, ready to kick out again—

But the Master was between them, baton dropping and flicking out to touch each in turn.

"Good kill!"

Takoa was waiting with a towel when Case came back to the bench. His wide grin showed his teeth.

"Seventy-one seconds—but the black triple-faulted! You have all of the points!"

Case nodded his understanding, but did not speak. He wiped his face and accepted an energizing refresher from a human attendant, then sat down on the bench. There was only one contest still being tested: the two who were bound together.

They were of a size, one with black hair, the other with golden red curls that made it easy to tell them apart as they twisted and moved together. But it was obvious the black-haired one was the stronger, the redhead tiring. There were three deep scratches across the redhead's chest, and blood oozed from the ends of them; the only mark on the other was a tiny streak on the forearm.

Suddenly the black-haired man shifted his weight, pulling down; the redhead, yanked from balance, slipped to one knee. The other twisted up against his attempts to regain balance, his knife jabbing against the redhead's throat. Blood spurted rapidly, and as quickly as that it was over.

The Master dropped his baton and attendants hurried out to cut them free and attend to the gushing arterial wound. The blood was stanching; the player waved the litter away. But when the redhead came off the field, holding to the bandage at his throat, his chest was coated completely with his own blood.

"He fought well," said Takoa. "He has earned his points even if he did not win."

Case kept silent.

CHAPTER 5

The circles were being repainted on the grass of the arena for the second round of contests. Case was in the first rank this time, which for him was to be a battle of staves. From the practice month he knew that he and his opponent were evenly matched, although they had not tried each other in this fashion.

They came forward to the armorer to select their instruments. The hard ash staves were two meters long and nearly seven centimeters thick, polished along the lengths; the ends were rounded into balls to remove splinters. They marched together to the circle, faced off, waiting for the baton to drop. Case was tingling, but he felt no weakness.

His hands grasped the staff about sixty centimeters apart, held it out horizontally before him. There was the cry from the Master and the baton dropped; his opponent stepped in, striking with all of his power to test Case's strength. The crack of wood resounded across the arena as staff met staff, the players pressing each other, neither willing to give a millimeter. Their feet were planted flat, spread just wide enough to provide strength to their stance.

Time was passing quickly. A minute was gone before Case saw an opening. The end of his staff cut low as he twisted to one side, slipped the end between the other's ankles. His opponent countered the blow to save himself from serious damage, but the move carried him off-balance, brought him too far forward. Case caught the upper length of the other's staff, and kicked between the legs again.

Wood cracked painfully against ankle, and the other man staggered. Case pressed the attack, his staff ringing bell clear now as he rained blows until at last the sheer force of his onslaught made the other give way, move back a pace.

"Ayahhhhhhhh!"

It was the first cry to escape Case's lips this day— but now he sensed triumph. He pressed again, and the other saw that he had come dangerously close to the edge of the circle. He swung, trying to drive below the force of Case's blows, but miscalculated; the end of Case's staff struck his temple, dropping him instantly.

"Good kill!"

The baton dropped and Case moved back, grinning now with the sheer joy of success. An attendant came to take his staff, a litter came out to remove the fallen player as Case returned once more to the bench.

The day began sharp and clear, the sky cloudless, the air smelling fresh and sweet. But now the arena was filled with the dust of battle, contest blending into contest. The men who won lost track of everything about them, could think only of the battle yet to come, the muscles arching and stinging.

When the scores of the second rank were posted, Case stood as leader, a dozen points above the next. Takoa just barely made sixth, by less than a

handful of points. High score was matched against second high, ensuring that Case would not have to meet his friend this time either.

There was a fifteen-minute pause this time as a third set of circles was painted against the grass, a fresh battleground for those who had won thus far.

Then the summons came, and Case drew broadsword and shield.

The iron shield weighed heavily on his arm as he stepped into the circle, but he saw that his opponent was tiring. The other constantly shifted the balance of his weapon as he waited for the contest to begin.

Case felt only an exhilaration now, moving easily on the balls of his feet. He sensed the crowd's attention on him, on this match, despite the other two contests taking place at the same moment.

Was the crowd on his side? Did they want him to win? Or did they sense that the starman had marked Case, knew that he must lose the final match?

"*Hai!* 'Ware danger!"

Case was ready for the contest—the easiest match of the day, it seemed; he had the advantage of weight and reach on the other. But he was mistaken. The other player was small, but wily, skilled in both the sword and in the use of psychological tricks.

Case pressed the attack—but every time he struck out, the other was not there. The small man sidestepped, moved out of danger and into a position where he could easily counter the blow, press his own attack. And now the grass was growing slick with the sweat and oil that came from their bodies each time one slipped to a knee, rolled away from a stroke.

Case blinked sweat out of his eyes and his foot slipped; he felt the slash of the other's sword dangerously close, and brought his shield up just in time. He was being pressed hard, felt the strain in his aching arms. His sword was almost too heavy to lift, and now the other man's sword was ready to thrust through his guard, run home...

The other blinked, muscles in his arm tensed for the killing strike. He stared into Case's eyes, a puzzled expression on his face. A shoulder

twitched, and for an instant the point of his sword lowered, the shield dropped.

Case gathered his strength, struck out to take advantage of the other's lapse. The shield moved up, but too late; Case drew blood, only a nick, but now he was pressing back. He found his own balance, drove relentlessly as he forced the other man to give way, moving him across the circle almost as he had moved the staff man.

Swords flashed against the nooning sun, ringing against each other, thudding against leather shields. But it was clear that Case now had the upper hand. His opponent tried to counter, to parry, but suddenly he slipped on wetness, fell to one knee. Case rained blows on his shield, and then he was born backward, the point of Case's sword slipping through his guard to press against his throat.

"Good kill!"

But there was no sweetness in this victory. Case knew that he had not won honorably. The change in the other man came too suddenly to be the result of battle; Case was sure he had been drugged.

The final match of the morning was an anticlimax: poisoned épées in a classic fencing match. There was no button on the points as in practice, no padded suit or face mask. A scratch with the poisoned tip would mean intense pain. But players lived constantly with pain.

To win, Case would have to strike deep, penetrate far enough to draw arterial blood and send the poison flushing through enough of the system to paralyze the opponent's striking arm.

Takoa had won his third match, but stood last in the scoring. The Asian was disappointed and pleased at the same time.

"I have won—I am a player!" he said happily.

"You deserved to win," said Case.

"I wish that I could meet the Champion—but there will be other champions, other arenas. I can only grow stronger! But I know you will win today!"

He clasped Case's wrists. "Nothing will stop you!"

Nothing that Takoa would understand.

The players were given twenty minutes to rest, and then it was time to face the salute once again, wait for the Master's call, watch for the drop of the baton. The other drew first blood, crying triumph as he traced a line across Case's arm. The stinging followed almost instantly, a burning that made him bite his lip.

Try for the heart, always the heart.

The lessons of the training center came back as Case recalled the words of the instructor. For a sure kill the heart was always best. Jab forward, thrust up against the chest, press deep into the blood muscles.

The points flickered into invisibility as they worked against each other. They were well-matched, neither stronger, holding against each other as they drew upon their reserves.

Then Case pulled back from the counter, pulled free. The other was caught by the suddenness of the move, and now Case was inside his guard, hooking the cups together, pulling down with all of his strength. The other's sword came sliding out of his fingers, exposing him completely.

And that easily it was done.

Now there was only the Champion to face. Now he would lose...

There would be an hour of rest before the meeting between Case and the Champion, an hour for the crowd to waste with the carnival. Even before the players had left the field, a troop of clowns moved in.

Case showered with the others, took fifteen minutes in the whirlpool to help ease the tension from his body. Then he gave himself up to the robot massage table, nearly drifting into sleep while the others dressed. They would not leave, though—not until they saw the outcome of the final match. And there was excitement as they watched Case, for they smelled the possibility of success. It was rare that a Champion was defeated by a new player—but it could happen. They hoped that it would happen.

The time passed quickly. One attendant brought fresh garb to Case;

another offered a final drink of energizer. The crowd was back in its seats, and now the wash of sound came through even the closed doors of the dressing area.

Suddenly the Champion was there, come from his private quarters. He stopped beside Case, met his gaze.

"You fought well. Better than I expected."

Case nodded. "I shall continue to fight."

"I hope so." The arrogance showed in the flared nostrils. "I've not had a proper challenge this season."

He was gone, sure of himself, secure in his position. Case stared after him, wondering if the Champion had ever known defeat. The mark of power, of greatness, was apparent in the way he carried himself, in his very appearance. It would be no disgrace to lose to such a man...

The music changed, the calliope dying; the speakers came to life in the gathering area, the martial strains once more pounding out to pulse the crowd back into its state of awareness. It was time to go out, to meet the final test.

But depression was squeezing his gut into a tight knot. Suddenly he did not want to go into the arena. But the others were there, handling him, pushing him, until he was at the edge of the field again.

He was first, of course; the Champion would wait for the challenger to take his position. There was only the single circle this time, painted in the exact center of the field. It was a long walk to reach it, the noise of the crowd moving with him as he paced beneath the sun that was now at its zenith. He had left his sandals at the ramp, and the grass was hot beneath his feet.

At the circle he stopped, not crossing the line, and turned to wait.

The roar of the crowd crescendoed as the Champion appeared, their emotions peaking. He turned to accept their approval. It took more than a minute to complete his pivot and face the center of the arena once more. Then the white cloak was dropping, the sandals coming from his feet.

He began the walk out to the circle, the music intensifying with each step, until at last he was within arm's reach of Case. They saluted, the measure of pseudo-comradeship held only a moment, and then the Champion broke away. Together they stepped into the circle.

For a moment they were alone in the ten-meter ring, the arena and the crowd banished from their thoughts. It had not been like this before for Case, and he understood that this was what it meant to be Champion—that this accolade was all for the other. And then the Master was there, attendants behind him, bearing the tools of this final test. Case recognized their burden.

Trident and net.

Sword and dagger.

He swallowed, a shiver touching his spine, his sweat cold against his flesh. Of all challenges, this was the one that he feared most.

The Champion seemed to smell the fear in Case, and smiled.

"Are you afraid?"

"Only a fool never knows fear," said Case, softly.

"Choose then!" He indicated the choice of weapons. "Take whichever gives you the most confidence. I want you strong! It gives me no honor to defeat a weakling!"

"I am not a weakling!"

"Choose!"

Case stared at the net—the net that could entangle, trapping the victim in an unmovable position so that no number of blades could free him from the stroke of the trident. In practice, he had seen a hundred men downed, had felt the knotted cords against his own legs and arms. Not once had the man with the blades managed to overcome the net.

He started to reach... and hesitated. The Champion had taunted him into reaching for an advantage. For the moment he forgot that the starman had ordained the outcome of this battle, his fingers halfway to

the weaponry.

He touched the blades.

The Champion laughed softly and accepted the net, wrapping it quickly around his left arm, testing the position to make sure that it was ready to fly free at the cast. Then he took the trident as Case balanced the blades in his hands, dagger in the left, short sword in the right.

And then they were ready.

The two men moved into the circle, assumed position, Case's toes digging into the grass. They were two paces apart, within reach of the striking weapon held in each right hand.

The Master moved into the circle and stood there a moment as the crowd noise rose again, peaked, held steady in an excess of frenzy. The fifty thousand voices were eager, smelling the tension—smelling the possibility of death in this climactic moment.

You will lose, Wayne Case.

You will lose!

The crowd sound was ugly now, and he shivered. It was as though they were being orchestrated to unusual demands. He felt their hatred.

His anger intensified. The starman demanded that he throw away his birthright, his lifetime of struggle. His only chance in this life was to rise to the player ranks—to play to the best of his ability. If he was good enough to win, then he had a right to the glory!

He would fight for what was his!

Watching the Master out of the corner of his eye Case stared at the Champion. The baton moved...

He struck out, moving quickly, knowing as the steel slashed before him that he was going to try to win this match no matter what the starman had demanded. His sword slipped beneath the Champion's guard, moved up under the hand that was holding the trident. He thrust straight for an instant, and then cut down in a slashing side stroke. The blade bit into

human meat, laid open a track that cut down to the hip, the flesh parting redly to expose the gray of intestines before blood could ooze into the wound.

Case froze, stared.

The Champion had not moved, stood now in first position, trident raised high, net wrapped around his other arm and ready to make the first cast. His eyes were wide in shock, staring in disbelief—and now his gaze moved down, his head tilting to see what had been done to him. The blood was filling the wound now, spilling out as a low moan escaped the Champion's lips. His body was moving forward, his knees bending, falling toward Case, the trident slipping from lax fingers.

Case stared.

The baton was still held in the Master's hand, still high, although a few inches lower than the first position. But it had not dropped.

The signal to start the contest had not been given...

For a moment the tableau in the center of the arena remained frozen—and then the crowd went insane. Fury rose from them like steam from a boiling kettle, spilled over, rolled through the aisles to lap down to the next level of benches. A scream rang out from fifty thousand throats.

Case stared at the Master, and understood: the baton had been deliberately lowered those few inches to trick him.

Suddenly there were others, attendants and medics and players, milling in a mass that threatened the downed Champion. A litter appeared and careful hands lifted the man onto the stretcher; then they were moving quickly from the field, bearing their burden from the sight of the people.

Now all of the Masters were around Case; someone plucked the sword from his hand, someone else reached for the dagger. For a moment he fought to keep the weapon, then a fist slammed against his head. Stunned, he could struggle no more.

A cry was coming from the stands, washing over the men on the field. Low and ugly, it was a single word, repeated over and over as though it were the beat of the crowd-heart.

"Coward!"

"Coward!"

"COWARD!"

It did not stop, would not stop. Their feet were stamping now, shaking the concrete beneath the benches, the vibration felt ominously across the stadium. They were clapping as well, hands slamming together in a farce of applause.

"Coward!"

"Brand him!"

It was a new cry, quickly taken up.

"Brand him!"

"Mark him!"

"Burn him!"

Hands reached for Case, touched him, pulled his arms behind his back. Something cold touched his wrists—shackles. The steel bonds were not to prevent him from running: there were a hundred people about him now, preventing any thought of escape.

"Coward! Burn him!"

"Coward!"

Suddenly the cries of the crowd stopped; in their place rose a great sigh. Suddenly those nearest Case were moving away from him, opening a gap to let him see.

He stared, not understanding. Attendants were wheeling something heavy and massive. At first he thought it was a giant cross, held upright. Then it was wheeled around into position, dropped to where the two broad crossbars supported each other, and he saw that it was an X-Frame, taller by a meter than a standing man. A brace was wheeled into position behind the frame and locked into place, and now the X stood on its own in the center of the field.

"Coward!"

Case trembled, and suddenly a fist hit him in the back, forcing him to stagger toward the framework. As he came closer, he saw that there was a ledge across the bottom, a step. The shackles were removed, two strong arms grabbing each of his, and they turned him roughly, slammed him back so that one heel cracked painfully against the step. Then they forced him to mount. Now they were raising his arms, locking his wrists into shackles high on the frame. A moment later his ankles were pulled apart and treated the same.

There was sharp pain in Case's legs now, in the sockets of his hips. He sagged forward with a moan.

"Mark him!"

A cart was wheeled out, brought to the framework, two attendants forcing air through hand bellows into the glowing coals of the fire. It flamed red, brightened toward white.

A white-haired man stepped out of the press: a doctor. It was easy to see that this man was a Citizen in the way that he carried himself. He was the only Citizen on the field at this moment.

Had he been waiting all this time?

He was carrying something, and Case recognized the iron shaft. He moaned again in despair, watching the brand as it was thrust into the coals. He did not have to see the shape at the end of the rod.

It was a letter C.

"Coward!"

Someone made a sick sound, and Case realized that it was himself. Now the crowd was quieting, waiting anxiously for the climax of the ceremony. The doctor came close and looked up into Case's face.

The Masters were forming in ranks before Case, the doctor standing aside now. There were others behind them—the attendants; the players. He saw almost all of his fellows...

Saw Takoa.

Their eyes met, the Asian's forehead wrinkled in pain. The little man turned away, moving back into the crowd until he disappeared. Case wanted to cry out, call to him that it was a trick, but it was too late.

A Master stood forward. "Wayne Case."

It was the one who had tricked him. He licked his lips, and for an instant Case thought that he was regretting what he had done. But the thought passed as the Master began to speak against him.

"You have debased the honor of this day, struck cravenly at a man who was to meet you in a test of courage. You have mocked us, shamed your fellow players, angered these people, dishonored this place. You have insulted the good people of this district and they cry out for vengeance."

He drew breath, picked up the brand, the letter smoldering. "Do you recognize this?"

Case touched his tongue to his lip, found both unbearably dry. He tried to speak, found his throat choked with phlegm. At last he managed to nod.

"You are coward!" The Master spoke angrily now. "You are rank with the foulness of the beast of the wilderness, and you shall be cast among him! It is the judgment of the people that you be branded with the mark of your crime, and that you be banished from the provenance of civilized men!"

He moved back, thrust the brand into the fire again as the attendants worked their bellows. Case knew the terrible thing that the starman had done to him.

Banishment...

He was to be cast out, thrust even from the ranks of the drones, forced into the world without means of support. There would be no place for him in any village, in any community. He could not draw upon the basic sustenance ration: not for food, not for shelter, not for anything. From this moment he must exist upon his own resources.

If he could.

He found the strength to straighten himself against the frame that held him. Where was the starman now? Was he proud of this day's work?

Someone stepped up beside him to slip a leather band about his head, and two others grabbed the strings that hung down from it, yanked on them so that his chin was forced down to slam against his chest. The doctor held the brand now, ready to reach up.

Case promised himself that he would not scream.

He lied...

CHAPTER 6

It was night when Case regained consciousness, his head hurting terribly. The backs of his hands were wet from recent rain, and there was a puddle beneath him. The ache seemed to cut through his skull, although when he reached up with one finger to probe the edge of the pain he found that someone had placed an invisible bandage there.

And then he remembered.

"Case?"

He was startled by the soft call of his name; he moved, his head cracking a protruberance, intensifying the pain. He moaned, unable to keep still, as a torch bobbed into view. It flashed over a pile of what appeared to be discarded crates, then touched Case.

"Are you all right?"

Case held up his hand to ward off the light, tried to peer beyond it.

"Tako?"

The Asian lowered the light, dropped the bundle in his hand to a crate. Case managed to stand, although there was almost no strength in his legs.

"How did you find me?"

"I bribed one of the attendants—we aren't more than a mile from the arena. I brought you clothing, some food."

Case realized then that he was wearing only his briefs. The evening was warm, but he was glad to be able to dress himself. There was underclothing, and he quickly stripped off the sodden briefs, wadded them, threw them into the darkness. He donned what Takoa had brought, pulled on soft boots, but the fit was not quite right. These were not from his own locker.

"Where are my own things?"

"Carried away," said Takoa. "The Masters swept them out before I could get back to the dormitory. I bought these from someone close to your size."

"Did he know they were for me?"

"He may have suspected, but he said nothing."

"Thank you," said Case, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. He sealed the shirt and was suddenly dizzy; he grabbed the edge of the nearest box.

"You're ill," said Takoa, worried.

"I'll call for a medic." He laughed harshly, forced himself to stand without support. "You're breaking the decree. If the Masters find out, you'll be punished."

"You are my friend."

It was said softly, and when Case tried to look into Takoa's face he could read nothing. But he remembered the strong feel of the other's fingers against his wrists.

"No matter what I have done?"

There was the barest hesitation, and then Takoa said, "I will do what I can, although it will be little. I have what money I could gather—you'll need more, but this will get you to the undercity. Find lodging for a few days."

The undercity.

Case knew of the world that was supposed to exist beneath the hives of

the city; the legends were told everywhere, used to scare small children. But he knew of no one who had visited there.

Where else was there for him to hide?

The attendants had brought him to the nearest edge of the city, dumped him at the rim of civilized existence. The distances beneath the night belonged to the farms, vast tracts of growing land, inhabited only by the gardening and harvesting machinery. It was no place for a man alone.

"They say that everything is available in the undercity," said Takoa. "Even medical help... for a price."

"How do I get the price?"

"I don't know. But there must be ways."

The Asian was nervous now, anxious to be away from here. Case leaned against the wall of the building, gathering strength. He rolled his head to clear his thoughts, ignoring the constant ache that centered near the front of his skull.

"I must get back," said Takoa. "We are being sent to other districts, those who won high enough scores—some of us will leave tonight."

The Masters were moving fast. Case wanted to stop the other from leaving, wanted to explain what the Masters had done to him. But Takoa was placing the torch on the crate as a final gift, turning to leave.

"Wait—"

But he was gone, did not look back even though he must have heard the final cry. Case stared into the darkness, a knot of regret tightening his middle.

There was the sudden spatter of rain, the droplets of water cold against his exposed skin. He turned his face up to the darkness, welcoming the cooling water as it touched his features, came close to the edge of the wound. Then the shower stopped, as suddenly as it had begun.

He sighed, turned to examine the remainder of Takoa's gifts. The torch revealed food, sandwiches, highly compressed protein and sugar tablets;

but he was not hungry. A flask proved to contain water, and he sipped, rinsing the taste of his unconscious sleep from his mouth. His tongue seemed furry, his teeth still tasting bad when he capped the flask.

Everything had been rolled in a weather cape, and as he shook it out now he found that it was hooded. Now he cast the cloak over his shoulders, pulling the hood over his head.

Was it enough to mask his face?

Was the brand hidden?

He could not tell, although the cloth seemed loose and fell over his forehead. He wished his hair was long, but players wore it short for safety. The test would come when he met someone.

The other gifts were stowed quickly in pockets before he looked at the darkened sky, trying to guess the time; there was no watch among the items. He used the torch to pick his way along the pavement that bordered the rear of the warehouse—it was not an alley, for to his right were open fields. They were black masses now, shadows threatening even more in their uncertainty.

He found an opening between two buildings and followed it to a street that seemed familiar, dimly lit by distant light standards. He rounded the corner and saw in the distance the bulk of the arena; it was here that the robotcab had waited for him.

There was no cab now, nor other traffic. He turned, saw the towers of the residential city in the distance, and moved in that direction.

An hour later Case was beneath the surface and in the world of robots. The corridors here were broad and too-brightly lighted. The glare hurt his eyes as he dodged out of the path of a wheeled vehicle. As yet he had seen no humans since he had found the way down from the street ten minutes earlier.

Ahead, a robot turned into an archway; when Case reached it, he found a circular ramp leading down. Wherever the undercity was located, it must be deep; he began to trot down the ramp.

At various places along the wall there were electronic signs, meant only

for robot scanners. At what he judged to be fifteen meters below the entrance, another archway opened into a great room that was far too broad to be considered a corridor. There were thick stanchions scattered about, metal and concrete supports for the city towers above, and plenty of room for traffic to pass among them. But again there was no sign of human life.

He followed the ramp down another level, met another opening. The room here was chopped up more, the stanchions thicker, and now robot traffic was growing heavier. But it wasn't until he reached the fourth level down that he found a distinct change. The corridor here was closer to what he had known in his village, although shaped differently. The ceiling seemed to be the base of a great pipe, and the steady throb of pumps worked, moving water and other fluids across the base of the city.

Now the light level was softened, comfortable again. Case moved out into the corridor—and immediately shrank back into the archway as a party of three men turned a distant corner and came in his direction. He moved partway up the ramp again until he could just see the edge of the opening. A moment later two of the men passed, neither bothering to glance in his direction.

He waited until the sound of their steps faded before moving out again. The corridor seemed deserted and he debated following the pair. Then he decided to move away from them and wrapped the cape tightly about his shoulders, hunching his head down into his neck as his pace quickened.

There were corridors opening in many directions now, most of them dimly lit, some curving in odd ways. But Case kept to the main tube, passing the branches with no more than a sidewise glance.

He felt the club descending before he heard the movement of disturbed air, and wheeled, ducking to his left. There came a grunt from the attacker as the length of iron glanced off Case's upper arm, numbing his right side with the pain.

Case stumbled to one knee, cracking it against the pavement; then he rolled away, the pain scattering the cloud that was trying to cover his thoughts. He recovered, staggering, right arm hanging uselessly. But he turned with his left fist clubbed to swing out at the man who rushed him and connected with the ambusher's ear, knocking him sideways.

He heard the sound of distant running steps and cursed himself for a fool; it was obviously a trap set by the trio. The man was getting to his feet now, but the weapon was well beyond his reach. He watched Case warily, hand reaching into his tunic—but before he could bring out another weapon, Case was on him, kicking out. The sole of his boot caught the other in the chest, knocked him sprawling against the wall, and then Case scooped up the iron club, looking about for a place to stand against the reinforcements.

The man moaned, blood trickling from his nostrils. His fingers scrabbled at the pavement, but he was unable to do more than open his eyes, staring at Case. And now the runners were no more than seconds away.

Case flexed the fingers of his right hand; movement was returning, although his arm seemed cold. He shifted the club to his other hand, finding a better balance as the footsteps pounded to a stop.

He drew in a shallow breath, held it as long as he could, then let it out slowly over clenched teeth. He heard the soft sounds of cautious movement, gauged that the nearest man was just around the corner. He brought his left arm across his chest, tried to guess when the other would appear.

"Hai!"

The scream tore from his lips as he leaped from the tunnel, bringing the club around to catch the second of the trio on the shoulder. The man screamed as bone broke, and then bounced off the corridor wall as Case ducked low, looking for the third.

He was three paces away—with a knife. The man snarled hatred, jumped forward, ready to strike beneath Case's ribs and rip open his sides.

Case kicked out against the wall of the corridor, found it with the flat of his boot and used it to launch himself toward the man with the knife. The sudden twisting forced the blade from its target as Case hit him low with his numbed right shoulder. Breath whooshed from the man and the knife went flying.

"By the black heart of Satan!"

The man with the broken shoulder, his face twisted with pain, was staring at Case; the other two were unconscious. He pulled himself to his feet, leaned against the wall.

"What devil's spawn are you?" he demanded.

"None," said Case, wiping his mouth with the back of the hand that still held the club. "What sort are you, to attack an innocent stranger?"

"An innocent, is it?"

He laughed harshly—until Case reached up to brush the sweat from his eyes and knocked the hood back from the wound. The invisible bandage had slipped in the battle, hung by one corner, revealing the crimson burn.

"You're the player they banished today!"

"Were you there?"

He laughed again. "Not likely! They put it on the screens as it happened, and they've repeated it for every public 'cast since. Oh, they are makin' a prime example of you, my friend."

The others were moaning now, sitting up; the man who owned the knife saw it almost within reach and grabbed for it, but his companion stopped him.

"There's bones enough broken, lad. Rest easy." He looked at Case. "It didn't take you long to find your way down here—but I suppose there wasn't much of a choice. What do you propose to do now, player?"

"I don't know—yet. I want this removed."

Case indicated the brand, and the man nodded. "Difficult. I know a medic who might be able to do a graft—he's a rummy, but if you can keep him sober he'll do a good job. Of course, the price comes high."

"How high?"

"How much do you have?"

"Not enough," Case admitted.

"Then you'll have to get more. Maybe I can help you there, too... for a share."

"What sort of share?"

"Oh, no more than a commission." He grinned.

"Thirty percent—cheap enough, when you consider."

"If you earn it," said Case. "To this point you've done nothing but move your lips."

"You'll get action." He moved, wincing from the pain of his shoulder. "Devil, but I need a medic myself."

Case saw the others looking toward the knife again and bent to scoop it up, slipping it into his belt.

"Tell me what you can do to earn your commission."

"Why, I will take you to the Toad. He's the smartest one down here, and he'll know just how to make use of a strong young player."

"Take me to him."

"The medic first—"

"No. First the Toad."

"Right you are. I'm Essen, Player. I'm a good man to know in the undercity."

He did not bother to introduce the others.

A sound at the door opened Case's eyes. He was staring at the low ceiling, a single panel of plastic that was spotted with water stain. He knew he had been asleep for some time, for his body felt rested now.

The door cracked and the ferret face of the female medic peered in. Then she was quickly inside, closing the door behind her, grinning conspiratorially.

"Good day't' you, young sir," she said, setting her case on the table. She

touched a control and it opened for service, but first she came to Case to check the progress of the graft she had transplanted to his forehead.

"Ah, yar, it comes good. Saura works good, e'en though the bassars went into the bone on ye. Simas will be pleased."

Simas, Case had learned, was the man known to most of the inhabitants of this sector of the undercity as the Toad; the woman Saura was the only one to call him by his name.

"We can take th' dressin't'day, lad. Good air's the best bandage now."

She set about removing the last of the bandage and then brought a hand mirror from her case. Case studied himself, saw no evidence of the brand. But when he touched his forehead with his fingers he could find the place that was not the same, trace the shape of the letter.

It did not show, however; that was the important point.

Saura was foul of figure, dirty of body; the first time she had come to him he did not trust her. She had pushed him down on the bed and then pain stabbed, flooding his entire system. His back arched as electric warnings flashed through every nerve, his throat cording, his fingers and toes clawing. He could not scream: too much agony fired his system, paralyzing his vocal cords. His heart seemed to explode in his chest.

But the first treatment was the worst; now there was only a sensation of coolness where the fiery iron had struck.

Saura's treatment seemed to rely heavily on sleep; during the weeks following the grafting she had kept him drugged for all but an hour or so each day. He had early lost track of time until now he could not say if it had been a week or more than a month since his arrival in the undercity.

"Well." Saura stood back. "I think ye be ready."

An hour later he was before the Toad again, for his second interview.

The Toad was cadaverously thin, fleshless, discolored skin stretched tight over slender bones. It was impossible to guess at his age for he was completely hairless. The only excess of skin was beneath his chin, which seemed to pulsate obscenely with each hissed breath.

He stared at Case with eyes that were ebony in sallow whiteness, his flesh almost saffron. The room was small and crowded by an immense desk, the walls hung with rich drapery. There was no other furniture but the desk and Toad's own chair.

"You have recovered, Player." His voice was cold, mechanical, almost as though it came from a robot's voice box. "Do you feel up to repaying your part of our bargain?"

Case had learned that the undercity was larger than he had imagined—yet small in relation to the city above. There were villages down here—true villages, clusters of small buildings tacked up around a stanchion, gimcrack affairs that seemed to have no permanence. Large areas were lit with sunlamps and beneath them patches of gardens flourished. But none was large in size; the boundaries were ragged, the area no more than a single man could defend.

The people as well seemed different than those above, although he could not so easily mark the differences. They were furtive, stealing their basic needs from taps into the city's supply systems. They all seemed afraid, shying from sudden noises, sudden approaches.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Case.

The Toad touched bony fingers to his forehead; his elbow rested on the desk. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

"We of the undercities live on sufferance, Player, even though our history is as old as the cities above us—these rooms that I now occupy have stood for hundreds of years, occupied in turn by a hundred generations of masters such as myself. We receive the outcasts of the cities, of course—such as yourself— but we cannot live on such garbage. Most of us are born here, live out our lives—briefer than any drones—in these villages. We've no written history of the generations, but I know my own family history for seven generations back."

He leaned back, turned. "We exist on the dregs, forced into thievery. Our measure is less than the most worthless drone's and causes us more labor in a week than he would know in a lifetime. It isn't enough—not for me."

"What do you want?"

"No more than the birthright of every Citizen of this planet, Player—I want to leave Earth."

Case stared, surprised. "Emigrate?"

"The starworlds have closed the lists to all except highly skilled technicians, and none of us can qualify. But you do not understand—I am not a Citizen, Player. I am not even a person! I have no rights at all. The only way I can leave is to buy my passage, and the cost is higher than you might guess."

"What can I do?"

"You were a player. I shall send you to another district, to a very rich citizen who delights in sponsoring young players. Handsome young players. He keeps wealth enough in his apartments to buy a starworld, but I want just one thing—he has a cluster of fire jewels, the largest one known. With that, I can buy passage to any world I choose and have enough left over to establish myself on my new homeworld."

"And what happens to me?"

"Bring me the fire jewels and I'll take you with me."

Case met his cold lizard gaze and knew that he was lying.

CHAPTER 7

A week later Case was mounting a high tower in a district half the North American continent away. Most of that week had been used in transporting him across the country. The Toad was with him until they reached the sector of his goal, and then the lord of the undercity retired nervously to an area away from the local subcity dwellers. There was cooperation between districts, but the local master would not appreciate the crime planned for his city.

Case kept wiping the palms of his hands against his trousers. The elevator cage was ornate, decorated with mirrors. He studied himself, content that the brand was hidden by the graft, yet certain that his intentions were marked plain on his face.

The cage stopped, opening into a lobby. A human attendant was behind a broad desk, a panel of controls visible at his right hand. He looked up as Case came out.

"Yes?" He was snotty, his thin face supercilious.

"Citizen Anders, please. I request an audience."

"Identification."

Case handed the plastic card across, unable to still the trembling in his fingers—and hoped that the attendant would mark it up to the nervousness of a young man paying his first visit on a notorious rake. The vital information belonged to a player who had permitted his sponsor to behave foolishly in the undercity. The photo and retinal prints belonged to Case, however.

The houseman's index confirmed that there was such a person as indicated on the card; he saw no reason to check eye-prints. He indicated another elevator that now opened against the far wall. When Case entered the doors closed silently and the car began to move upward rapidly.

Another human was waiting when the door opened. He was younger, taller than the one below— obviously a bodyguard, even though there were no visible weapons.

He did not bother to ask for identification, but led Case to a small sitting room. Case sat down, resting on the very edge of the chair. The furnishings of this apartment were far more ornate than those in Senator Calidor's house.

Several minutes passed, and then the Citizen entered. Case stood, stiffly, staring beyond the Citizen's left ear, his nervousness showing clearly.

"Yes, young man? You wished to see me?"

Anders was middle-aged, but seemed afflicted with a skin disease; his flesh was gray and had the appearance of scales. His fingers were heavily bejeweled, his suit worked in stiff brocade.

Case spoke quickly. "Sir, I seek a sponsor! Your name was given to me."

He mentioned a reference provided by the Toad, and the citizen smiled.

"Yes. You are... Thomas Leyden? Tell me, Thomas, what is your score?"

Case gave the number he had earned honorably before the treachery of the starman, and the citizen smiled again.

"That is excellent for a first listing. And as it happens, I do have a slot coming up. A bachelor apartment goes with it, of course, and a reasonable expense allowance. I find that players are usually reasonable about everything—I suppose it's your training. You understand, of course, that I will have to see you in action, first. When are you posted for your next games?"

"Next week, sir." He gave the date of the next games for this district's arena—one in which the real Thomas Leyden was already listed.

"Very well, then. I shall be watching with interest."

He turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, by the way—Saturday? Yes, three nights from now. I'm having a small affair here. Twenty couples. I shall expect you at nine, Thomas. Bring your briefs, for I shall want to show you off."

He left the room, and the breath escaped from Case's lungs. It was obvious what services would be expected from the young men sponsored by this Citizen.

The bodyguard was at the door, waiting. Case went toward him, started to mount the step—and suddenly turned, chopping out with his right hand. He caught the unconscious body before it could slump to the floor.

He listened, stilling his own breath, but the slight sound had gone unheard. A quick frisk of the bodyguard produced a tiny stunner, small enough to be swallowed by his fist. When Case touched the key the signal glowed bright red, a sign that it was fully charged; but that might mean no more than a dozen charges for a weapon this small. He kept it in his hand as he moved to the door.

The Toad had been able to provide a plan of the apartment, bought from a human attendant fired for disturbing the Citizen on a hung-over morning. According to his information, there were only three other

human attendants at this time of the evening— a valet, a chef, and another bodyguard. There were more than a score of rooms, but the only suite that mattered was the Citizen's own.

The first problem was to locate the second bodyguard and eliminate him; and then the valet, who had a room next to the master's.

The guard was stationed in an alcove at the end of the main hallway. Case drew the knife that he had taken from Essen's footpad, a heavily weighted thing, and stepped into the hall. The guard reached for a weapon, but the knife was quivering in his chest before he could react. Case raced down the hallway to grab the blade, twisting it, and the guard died before he could utter a word.

Case propped him on his chair, arranged his hand: within his thighs. To a distant watcher, he slumped unnatural slumber.

A shorter corridor gave access to the master suite. Case listened at the bedroom door, heard muffled voices; the valet was still with his master.

He moved to the next door, found it open. He slipped into the valet's bedroom, a room twice the size of an entire drone family apartment. A connecting door to the master bedroom was closed, and he could still hear the voices.

A tiny bathroom was opposite the connecting door, a closet in the wall at hand. Case chose the latter, stepping in and easing the door almost shut. It was only a matter of minutes before he heard the connecting door open, the valet saying good night to the Citizen. Then the man walked to his own bed and began to remove his outer garments.

Case eased the closet door open and moved silently to approach the valet from the rear. But the servant sensed something wrong and turned, as Case leaped across the last few paces. His fist connected with the man's chin, driving him over his bed. He rolled completely across it, fell to the floor on the far side.

Case checked him quickly; then crouched, listening. But the noise had gone unnoticed next door. He moved to the sealed window, brought out a tool to unfasten the screws holding the frame, and set the pane aside. The window was just to the side of the railing around the Citizen's balcony, an easy step across.

But light spilled across the balcony. Case turned his head as a moan came from the valet, moved to check the man. He applied pressure to certain points on the neck, and the servant was still. By the time he returned to the window the light spill had gone out.

Case forced himself to wait twenty minutes, going out once to check the condition of the first bodyguard, applying the nerve pinch to him, before he finally stepped through the window and pulled himself to the balcony. He moved to the edge, looked down, swallowed. It was nearly three hundred meters straight down. Above him were the protruding shapes of two or three other balconies, but none was closer than a hundred meters.

Off to the south, between two dark towers, was a splash of bright light—the main spaceport for the continent. That was the next goal.

The Citizen's balcony doors were ajar to give fresh air; light curtains moved out in the wind. Case listened, but no sound came out of the room. He counted another ten minutes on his watch, then stepped in.

A soft glow came from his left; a dark mass to his right was the bed. He heard a small snore being swallowed into the Citizen's throat, and relaxed. A servant was nothing, only a drone, but an attack on a Citizen would turn out every guard in the district.

He turned to the glow, and stopped, transfixed.

The fire jewel.

It was five branched, like a coral polyp, tipped at the branch ends with the soft plum-sized clusters that were famous across the hundred worlds. But no coral, no planet-bound mineral, ever shone like this. The jewels spread their light no farther than the case that held them, but Case was nearly hypnotized with their beauty.

He touched the glass bell covering them, expecting the stridence of an alarm. But there was nothing: the Citizen had not imagined that anyone would dare try for this prize. Where could it be sold? The cluster would be recognized instantly by any Citizen.

The jewels came from a shattered planet orbiting a dead star, products of a mysterious biological process long ended. There were no more than a dozen clusters known, and half a hundred individual jewels; this was by

far the finest.

Case transferred the cold jewel to its leather case and placed that in a cloth bag brought from his shirt. A wire closed the bag and was wrapped around his belt to hold it secure.

Now the room was completely dark; he found his way to the slightly lighter shade of gray of the balcony door, stopping once more to be sure that the Citizen was still asleep. He heard another soft snore, and went out.

Now he tugged up his shirt, removed a flat medallion nearly twenty centimeters across. He fastened it carefully to the railing, testing it by sitting down and pulling back with all of his strength. It held, so he unsnapped a catch and pulled a length of fine wire free. From his leg came a flat strip of leather that sealed around the wire and afforded a hold for his hands; the strip in turn fastened to a harness beneath his belt. He tested the pull once more, and straddled the railing.

The wind was stronger now as he stepped into space. The leather in his hands sang as the wire whistled out, and then there was a sudden jerk, the balcony barely a dozen meters above his head as the brake caught. He swung for perhaps ten seconds, conscious of the drop, and then the wire began paying out at a steady hundred meters a minute. Case counted slowly, reaching one-forty when he started looking down. The ground was rushing up; he tensed, bending his knees, and hit.

"You have it?"

The Toad came from the darkness as Case freed himself of the harness saw the bag at his belt. "Let me see!"

He reached, greedily—and then Case saw the two forms coming out of the darkness. His hand slipped into his pocket. Before the bandits could see what he was doing he pressed the stud on the stunner, chopping the beam across the man to his right. There was a grunt as the body fell, but when he swung the weapon toward the other, that man was diving low.

The Toad cried out as he hit Case, knocking him back.

"Be careful, fool? Don't damage the jewel!"

Case was on his back, the attacker's hands reaching for his throat. He tried to grab the wrists, but the other was strong enough to move against him. Case gagged as the thumbs caught his windpipe.

Suddenly he brought his knee up—but the other was twisting away without relinquishing his hold. He raised one foot, stamped it across Case's shin, cringing stars into his vision. But the movement had loosened his hold and now Case rolled, the jewel case cutting into his hip.

The assailant pummeled Case—and then the player arched, raising his hips from the ground. He dragged his feet back to form table legs and arched higher— then suddenly yanked his knees back against his chest, used them to raise the other completely from him. He pulled his feet, got them beneath the other, kicked up to throw him away.

The man was stunned by the fall, and Case was on his feet. He ended the battle by kicking the other in the temple, then turned to the Toad.

"You don't trust me?" Chest heaving, he wiped his mouth.

The Toad was visibly trembling. "I trust no one."

"You said someone is "waiting for this—we'll go together. I'll keep the jewel."

"All right." The Toad sighed. "But let's get moving."

"What about them?" He indicated the fallen pair.

"Leave them."

The Toad did not look back as he left the two who had served him half a continent away from their only home.

The meeting place was a saloon just outside the spaceport's cargo gate, well away from the main entrance. The main bar room was low and broad, filled with half a hundred tables, a third of them occupied. Case choked as they stepped into the miasma rising from burning tobacco and other weeds.

The Toad stopped an attendant, questioned him; the man led them to one of a score of closed doors along the inner wall. The Toad knocked and

opened the door, revealing a booth. The starship captain had been brooding over a beaker of beer, but looked up now.

"You took your time. Get in, get in!" Then he saw Case and frowned. "Two of you?"

"Yes," said Case.

"I was not expecting two. I cannot make room."

"The price will be worth it, Captain," said the Toad.

Case placed the cloth bag on the table, undid the wire carefully removed the box. The Toad watched in fascination as he opened the box, let the sides fall away. As the glow entered the booth, the captain gasped, slopping his beer.

"By space! Is it real?"

"The finest yet discovered," said the Toad, with pride.

"Don't tell me who owned it—or what happened to him. I don't want to know."

"Two tickets to Centaurus," said the Toad, holding out his hand. "And a hundred thousand credits for me."

"No." He was holding it in his cupped hands, but now he put it down, shook his head. "Two tickets only."

"It's worth a king's ransom!" cried the Toad. "You could buy a starworld with that!"

"I could," the captain agreed. "You could not. If you had another market for this, you'd be there now. No, I set the price on this. If you don't like it, leave."

Suddenly he reached under the table, came up with a heavy-duty stunner.

"Alone."

Case leaned back, smiling, hooking his thumbs into his belt. The

captain was grinning as well, his eyes moving to the Toad—and in that instant Case came out with the stunner he had used before and pressed the button, chopping the beam across the captain's gun arm. There was a yelp of pain and the weapon clattered to the table. Case took it and placed it in his shirt.

"There are other starships," he said. "Other captains." He began to wrap the jewel, to place it back in its box.

"All right!" The captain spoke through clenched teeth. "We'll do it your way—the tickets, and the hundred thousand. I'll arrange for a credit transfer to Alpha C. 4."

"When can we lift?" asked the Toad.

"1630 tomorrow." He was still surly. "I have a contract cargo coming aboard in the morning, and it will have to be inspected. 1600 is the earliest I can take you."

"Why not now?" asked Case. "We need a bed for the night."

"No. I'll take the jewel if you want, but you can't come aboard before tomorrow afternoon."

"The jewel will arrive when we do."

He picked up the bag and opened the door, stepped out into the big room. The Toad, right behind him, nearly stumbled over Case's heels when the younger man stopped, staring at the far corner.

Randel!

The starman was sitting alone, but he had seen them. Now he was rising, calling out...

CHAPTER 8

For a moment Case stood frozen, watching the starman move—and then the Toad panicked. He did not know Randel, but he understood that his fugitive player had been recognized. He leaped to the conclusion that he had been betrayed.

He grabbed for the jewel, pulled the bag from Case's grasp. Case turned, but the Toad was moving fast, fear lending speed. Before Case took three paces he had reached the swinging doors that led into the kitchen.

The Toad hit the door with an outstretched palm, cradling the jewel under his left arm. The door swung before him—and slammed to a stop, barely inches away. There was a loud cry of anguish and the clatter of breaking crockery.

The Toad stopped as though he had slammed into a wall. The bag flew out from under his arm and was caught by a patron at a near table. The fellow was turning it over uncertainly, stupefied by alcohol, when Case reached the Toad and spun him around.

"No!"

The man's eyes flared with fear, but Case ignored the plea in his voice, slammed him once with his fist. The Toad flew back, head cracking against the panel of the swinging door. He hung there a moment, suspended, supported by the door. Then it moved slowly inward and he slumped to the floor.

When Case reached him again his eyes were wide open but beginning to dull. He leaned forward, the back of his skull red with blood.

Case turned on the man with the jewel, snatched the bag from his hands. The man blinked, but Case was moving toward the entrance—

To face Randel.

The starman held his hands out from his body, open to show them empty. The other patrons were watching, but none were bold enough to move into the dispute.

"I'm alone, Case."

"Get out of my way!"

"I want to talk to you."

Case laughed, bitter. "Talk? About how you bribed the Master to trick me?"

"I want to talk sense," Randel said, quietly. "We came for you that day—came to where the attendants had dumped you—but you were gone. We looked for you for almost a month before we called off our searchers. We thought the vultures had you."

"You tricked me. You knew what was going to happen."

"Yes. Now will you listen to why we did it?"

The manager was there, plucking nervously at the starman's sleeve. "Please!" he said. "The Guard will come!"

Case switched his attention. "They'll do nothing— he wasn't a registered person. Nor will there be any friends to lament his passing, or come seeking justice."

Randel reached into his pocket, came out with currency. He peeled off several notes, pressed them into the man's hand.

"Take care of this."

The money disappeared even as he nodded. He backed into the kitchen and a moment later the door swung open far enough to permit hands to grab the Toad. The body disappeared.

The other patrons had lost interest. Case glanced across the tables—and saw the captain of the freighter. He was nursing another beaker, his eyes staring down into the foam. But Case knew that his attention was on the bundle in his hands.

He stared at the starman. "Talk."

Randel nodded toward an empty booth. "In there." A moment later they were seated, the door sealed; he brought forth a cone-shaped instrument, a red jewel resting in a tiny depression at the top. As soon as it touched the table a feeling of deadness spread through the tiny booth.

"A silence generator. No one can overhear us now. Why did you run that day?"

Case stared, astonished.

"What was I expected to do—stay and ask the Masters for forgiveness?"

They branded me—banished me!"

Randel sighed. "It may be too late—but we have to try. Two months wasted..."

He placed his hands flat on the table. "I made a mistake, listened to the wrong people. We should have taken you into our confidence from the beginning—then this whole foul-up would never have happened."

Case touched the graft. "This?"

"That is essential." There was no hint of amusement on his face now. "We need you marked. We weren't going to do it this way, but a graft may not be a bad idea. It covers the brand, but it is obvious to anyone who knows or looks."

Randel sighed. "Case, we want you off Earth."

Case stared for a few seconds, then laughed. He touched the bundle. "Then we want the same thing. Why do you think I'm here?"

The starman stared at the box, and Case began to unwrap it. The other's eyes widened as the sides fell away from the case to reveal the jewel. After a minute he reached to pick up the cluster, turning it over in his hands.

"The Imperial cluster. Calidor will know its owner. Your friend would know that there is no possible market on Earth. What starworld were you trying to reach?"

Case shrugged. "Centaurus."

"Has the bargain been sealed."

"Yes."

"Centaurus is not the right system. Case. We want you on Garond."

"Who is *we*?" said Case, slamming his fist on the table. "And why should I do what you want?"

Randel leaned back. "I speak for the government of Earth—the effective government, not the senate and the council. We chose you, Case, to be our

agent. I promised you citizenship at our first meeting—if you carry out our mission, that promise is a guarantee."

Case sat silent a moment; then: "I'm listening."

"Your training has been single-minded, Case—I doubt that you know anything of history, of the political situation as it now exists, on Earth and on the hundred worlds. Earth is hated by every other star-world. They trade with us, for we are still the most advanced. But our only advantage comes from being lucky enough to make it back to the stars a thousand years before any of them were ready.

"Until a century ago, we ruled the other star-worlds. It could not last, once they had developed their own technologies—the problems of space travel are too great to permit one planet to wage war on another. But while it lasted, we took from them the best of their labors and gave back only what we begrudged."

He tapped the table, reached to study the jewel again. "For the past century the hundred worlds have respected each other's rights. Now, however, it seems there are those who would once more *rule* the hundred worlds—including Earth."

Case stared, saying nothing. Randel continued.

"There is a possibility that our sector has been infiltrated by a human race from beyond the hundred worlds. We do know that several of the starworlds have lately come under the influence and the dominance of a new breed of men—they style themselves as Star Masters. Our commercial contacts tell us that Garond is one of their strongholds.

"We want you to go to Garond for us, Case. We want you to find these Star Masters."

Case laughed. "I am only a player—not a superman."

"You are a branded player, with good reason to hate Earth. We cannot send our usual agents, for Earthmen are distrusted. But your story will be believed, for you are wearing the mark of dishonor. No one would deliberately accept such disfiguration."

"As I would not have accepted, given the choice."

Randel opened his hands. "We will make it up to you, that you must believe."

"Say that I do find these Star Masters—what then?"

"The most important thing is to find them. Then, if you can, assess their strength, try to learn their place of origin. You will have a code that will let you contact any starship captain—the message will reach us by priority."

He smiled. "I'm not to attack them by myself, wipe them out where they stand? Perhaps it would be a good idea if I destroy the planet, tear it down to its bare rocks."

"Give us a target to move against. Case. That is all that we ask—a target."

"And if I refuse?"

"I know you are armed. But if you strike me, then an alarm will sound in many different places. You would not leave this building alive."

Case leaned back now. "You offer me no options."

"We have none to offer. To locate these Star Masters, we will ransom Earth itself."

"You are frightened men."

"The galaxy is large—and I for one believe that these men do come from beyond our sphere. Will you serve?"

"I have no choice."

"Very well. We planned on several weeks of deep conditioning, but too much time has been wasted. Garond is six weeks away—we'll make do with a hundred hours."

"The ship for Centaurus leaves tomorrow."

Randel frowned, stood to open the door. The freighter captain was at the same table; he rose when the starman snapped his fingers, came over. Randel waved him to a seat in the booth.

"You want this?"

The captain stared at the case. "Of course."

"We need time—four days, six if possible."

"Impossible! I lift tomorrow at 1630. Nothing can delay me."

"If you leave then, it will be without the cluster."

He scowled. "A few hours..."

Randel shook his head. "Four days minimum. Then you will take this one passenger to Garond."

"What?" He was shaking his head violently now. "The agreement was Centaurus! Garond is two weeks off my orbit, perhaps more. Besides, I cannot land there—I and my crew are not welcome."

"I don't care what sins you have committed, Captain. If you want the cluster, you will take this man to Garond. A few days here, two weeks en route— what are they against retirement with riches?"

"There's a price on my ship," admitted the other, unwillingly. "I won't risk ending my days in the labor gangs."

"Don't land, then—toss him out in a drop suit. He can make planetfall by himself."

The captain unwrapped the jewel again, held it in his hands. Then he nodded. "Agreed."

He smiled and offered his hand to Randel, who took it. With one final glance at the cluster, he left the booth. Case closed the door, turned to see that starman scowling.

"You realize that neither of you would have lived past Mars's orbit?"

Case's face remained perfectly blank. "What is to prevent him from killing me now?"

"He won't dare cross me," replied Randel, standing. "We've wasted time enough and there's weeks of work to do in the next hundred hours. Come!"

It was a bare four days later when they returned to the spaceship. During that time the news of the theft of Citizen Anders's prize cluster swept the world, but no one in the place where Randel took him questioned the constant presence of the gray bag at Case's belt.

Case had undergone long hours of hypnotic training and deep suggestion during those four days; now his thoughts were jumbled, confused, until he barely knew what he was doing as he followed Randel through the cargo gate and to the *Mercy O*, the ship that would be home for the next six weeks.

"Rest as much as you can on the ship," said Randel, before letting him enter. "Things will sort themselves out soon enough. By a week from now you'll have a head clear of the jumble that's bothering you now. Until triggered, you'll remember nothing but the banishment and the reason you are running from Earth. The false reason."

By the time he was handing the cluster to the captain, Case was suffering from a blinding headache. Only the image of the starman's face was solid in his thoughts—the face as he had first seen it, smiling sardonically as he told the young player of his destiny.

Lose, Case. You will lose...

He was in agony when the captain strapped him into his couch. The mate who served as medic was summoned to give him a sedative injection, but the drug was not powerful enough to drive away that terrible image.

CHAPTER 9

His own stink was strong in his nostrils, sharp enough to make him choke in uneasy sleep. Case opened his eyes without seeing, arched his back, and then moved—cracking his head against a wooden support.

A cry escaped his lips, his rasping, dry mouth. He tried to sit up, but something was pinning him down.

"Here, drink this."

He blinked, focusing: Galden was beside him, offering a steaming mug.

The room was different, and there was someone behind the Garond official, but he could not see the man's face.

"It's only broth," assured Galden as Case raised himself high enough on one elbow to sip at the mug. The taste was pungent, with fibers of meat, but it felt good as it went down. The heat of the soup moved through his body, easing a bit of the pain.

"How is your head?"

He blinked again, conscious of the dull, throbbing ache. Now he could see machinery in the background, medical equipment; electrodes were attached to his chest, and there were areas of strangeness at each temple where others had been removed.

Case finished the broth and sighed deeply. The weariness caused by the dungeon still drained him— even the crude quarters in the star freighter had been more comfortable. There had been little to stem boredom—certainly no room for him to work out. The crew had been content to bury itself in the entertainment tapes, but he had never learned to find release in such vicarious pleasures.

It had been a relief to leave the ship for the long fall to the planet. The captain had refused to come closer than the orbit of the planet's moon, although space traffic near Garond was sparse enough that he could have risked landing in an isolated area to discharge his passenger. But he had sealed Case into the drop suit—an old one, stinking with the smells of many years of use—and flung him without ceremony from the lock.

The drop had seemed to take forever: Case had had no concept of the boredom involved in crossing two hundred thousand kilometers of space. Unskilled in the operation of the suit, Case had touched down far from the intended target area. For a time it had seemed that he would drop in high mountains, snow-peaked and barren, but his landing point was a desert a hundred kilometers from the mountain range. There was cultivated land to the south of the drop area, but no sign of cities or villages—Case had not been told during his orientation that the Garond had retreated into the basic rock of their planet to construct their fortress towns.

He had started south, retreating to the foothills of the mountains to find water. It was on his sixth day on the planet that he had met the band of natives. He had approached them openly, glad to see humanity—to be

seized and bound. They had dragged him behind their mounts for the rest of that day and half of the next, until they at last had arrived at this city.

There a police official barked angry questions in a dialect that had not been implanted during the hypnotic training; when Case could not answer, it was straight to the dungeon, to be dumped with the other troublesome offworlders.

Someone was plucking the mug from his fingers. He blinked and recognized Galden again. The other man came up now, was pressing him down against the table. It was easy to close his eyes...

When Case awoke again, it was to find himself in a soft bed—too soft: there was a sensation of discomfort in the small of his back, the beginnings of an ache. From childhood he had been used to a hard mattress, a limited sleeping surface. This bed was big enough to let him stretch out to his full length in any direction.

He sat up, found that a strange garment was rolled about his waist. He tugged at it, saw that it could stretch over his upper body to form a tight sleeveless and legless suit. Only his lower body was covered now, for the room was conditioned to a comfortable twenty degree centigrade.

Case rolled to the edge of the bed, set his feet on the carpeted floor. A large mirrored wall reflected his image and he became aware that the signs of the dungeon stay had been removed. He was cleanshaven and clean; even his hair had been trimmed.

A door opened and a woman dressed as a nurse came in—a Garond woman, stilling the rising thought that somehow he was no longer on the barbaric planet.

"Did you sleep well, sir?"

"Yes." He stood, worked the tension from his shoulders. "I'm hungry."

"I will order a breakfast." He did not notice that she was speaking a local dialect, for he had answered in the same tongue. She opened another door, revealing a bathroom. "Perhaps you wish to bathe while waiting."

"My clothes?"

She opened a closet, and he was relieved to see the garments he had worn when leaving the spaceship. The nurse bowed out and he stripped off the night-suit, found a wrinkle in his skin where the folds had pressed during the night. The garment was uncomfortable at best, and seemed silly to him as he examined it more closely.

As he used its facilities, he found the apartment to be as luxurious as a Citizen's quarters on Earth. But he had no desire to experience its frivolities; the shower produced billowing clouds of steam and strong pressure for its needle spray, and that was luxury enough.

He had just finished dressing when the nurse reappeared. Standing to one side, she indicated the next room.

"Your breakfast, sir. And Lord Galden awaits."

The outer room of the suite was twice as large as the bedroom. A table had been set Earth-fashion in a draperied alcove; standing by it, fingering a cup, was Galden. He looked up as Case entered, smiling.

"Good morning, Player. You look fit."

Case stared at him for twenty seconds before returning the greeting. "I am no longer a prisoner?"

Galden made a face. "That remains to be seen. But you will find these quarters more comfortable than the dungeon."

He touched a switch and the draperies parted, to reveal a rough-cut window in the rock wall of the cliff city. As Case moved closer he saw that they were very high above the valley floor. The thick glass of the window distorted the view somewhat, but it was still impressive.

Case sat, found the food familiar. Galden was silent as he ate, dropping onto a couch some distance away. But he was on his feet the instant that Case finished.

"There is one matter that disturbs us," he said, coming closer. "Why did you choose Garond?"

Case recalled the brief waking moment yesterday— or however many days ago it had been; he understood that he had been drained of his

knowledge, questioned under the drugging as to his every thought and motive. He leaned back, touched his forehead— found that the graft was flaking much more heavily now, the skin rougher to the touch.

"Why Garond?" repeated Galden. "It would seem more reasonable to choose one of the central worlds."

"The ship I chose was passing here first," said Case. "The captain refused to put me off where he made planetfall, and so he dropped me on Garond."

"Ummm. Reasonable. And now that you are here, what would you do? Do you wish to strike back at Earth, for branding you as a coward? If so, I must tell you that Garond is weak, Earth strong. Perhaps the hundred worlds together could strike against Earth, but never one planet by itself."

"Overt war over interstellar distances is impossible for any world. But there are rumors of other activities."

"You would spy for Garond?"

Spy? But that would mean returning to Earth...

"No!" It came more forcefully than he intended. He forced himself to relax, speak more slowly. "I would... help you, in any way that I can. But I cannot return to Earth."

"I see. These rumors that you heard on Earth— did they make any reference to specific activities? Any mention of... special groups?"

"There was one name mentioned, once or twice. A group, I suppose—the Star Masters."

"Ah!" Did he seem pleased? Case was not sure. "And who might these Star Masters be?"

"That's all I know, just the name. I heard the rumor near the spaceport, but the captain that brought me here denied any knowledge of such a group. Away from the spaceports you hear nothing at all."

"Interesting." He thought a moment. "For the time, Player, you are the guest of Garond. You will find these quarters comfortable—whatever you

desire will be provided, within our abilities. Of course, that does not include the freedom to wander about the city. I'm afraid that our citizens would be ill-pleased to find an Earthman in their midst. My duties require my presence elsewhere now, but I shall try to return this evening. We can talk further then."

Galden did not return that evening, nor the next day. It was three full days before he came again. During that time Case saw no one but the nurse, who took care of his needs. He was glad of the opportunity to exercise more fully than the dungeon had permitted, but the time passed slowly. He grew quickly bored with the distractions of the apartment, found himself wondering about the fate of his fellow prisoners.

From listening to their complaints among themselves, Case had gathered that the Centaurans had been brought to Garond as a private guard for a high official. When the time came for their three-year contract to be paid off, they claimed that he tried to cheat them. To show that their honor was strong, they destroyed the official's estate; now they waited for someone to buy off the damage they had done, for even three years' wages for the twenty-two in their group was not enough to pay more than a fraction of the wreckage. The Centaurans laughed among themselves as they recounted the day of destruction, proud of their strength. If they were not ransomed soon they would be impressed into labor-gangs, but they seemed not to be worried. Perhaps they were planning their escape once freed from the strictures of the dungeon.

The candlebearer appeared two days after Case's own imprisonment, but the Jovian kept to himself, the player unable to learn his crime. The candlebearers were regarded as magicians on many of the more backward planets because of their psionic powers. They traveled the hundred worlds at will, although no one ever learned why—but they never returned to Earth. The several hundred years of separate evolution in their colony domes had produced a breed of man completely unlike any seen before. And their hatred for the mother planet was the strongest of any of Earth's former colonies.

When Galden finally reappeared he was not alone; a silver-haired man accompanied him. The man appeared aged, but there was also evidence of much strength in the way he carried himself, moved.

"This is Pesht," said Galden. "He is interested in your story."

"Slightly interested," said Pesht. "It is not very singular, young man—you say that you were tricked by the Masters, but that is nothing to us. The Citizens of Earth have always used trickery and treachery in their dealings. You ask asylum, and Galden feels that it should be granted. But there are those of us who question his wisdom in this matter. If we do accept you as what you say you are, how do you propose to repay us?"

"I will do whatever is within my power."

"Ummm. You are strong, there is that. Your back seems supple. There is a chronic shortage of labor for the mines—are you willing to serve us there?"

Case stared. The offer meant slavery. And the prospect of a much-shortened life.

And slavery was what he had fled Earth to escape—the slavery of tyranny. Of course, Earth had rejected him, banished him—but weren't the two forms much the same in the end? Both denied the dignity of the individual.

"I would hope," he said, slowly, "that my services would prove useful in other ways."

Galden laughed, but Pesht did not react at all. Case grew nervous under his cold stare, found that sweat was beading on his forehead. At last the old man shrugged.

"You may prove useful. However, you must first prove yourself. There will be a test."

CHAPTER 10

They were in a natural cavern, an immense place, the vaulted ceiling arching so high above them that it was lost in darkness. There had been a long series of these caverns since leaving the city proper, the first ones used by the local populace for storage and manufacturing. In the outer caverns they passed several villages, roofless constructions of native stone, usually no more than a score but once nearly a hundred houses.

The last of those villages was several caverns behind them—but now

they were entering an area of construction again. Ancient ruins formed the remnants of walls, although here and there a small structure seemed intact. Unlike the houses before, these were roofed.

"These are the oldest ruins on the planet," said Galden, riding at Case's side. "There are those who believe that they date to the First Empire."

Case was shocked. "There are no First Empire remains."

"No proven ones."

"What is in the roofed buildings?"

"No one knows. We've never been able to break the seals."

"Earth's scientists have failed?"

"Until now, no one from off-planet has seen this place."

Now the little caravan was slowing, the three cars swinging out to come around within a circle. Circular walls were around them now, most of them crumbled into ruins, but enough stood to show that this had once been an amphitheater.

There was a broad area, an oval, that was swept clean of debris and dust; the floor was formed by the naked rock of the planet. Toward the center of the oval's edge rose several steps, long and broad enough to serve as seats for perhaps a hundred. As they came closer, Case saw that these were a more recent construction.

The party stopped, Pesht and one who seemed even older sitting on the first step. Galden and the others climbed higher in the tier.

"Earthman Case."

Lights were strung on poles behind the seats and spaced equally around the clearing. They brightened as the caravan approached, until there was now a pool of artificial illumination in the center of the cavern.

"You are a player of Earth," said Pesht. "Trained in the arts of single battle. You challenged those of your own planet in a test of strength. We ask you now to meet our champion."

He came from behind a ruined wall. He must have been waiting there, for Case could not have missed him in the caravan.

If he was a Garond, he must be a sport. He was taller than most of his planetmates, although several centimeters shorter than Galden and half a head less than the Earthman. But he was as broad as a Centauran, rolls of muscles bunching his shoulders, ballooning his arms. Case knew that he would never be able to get his arms around this man.

He was naked, his genitals almost invisible in a natural fold of protective tissue. His body was completely hairless, his weight so great that his legs were splayed.

Pesht stood. "This is our champion, Player. In the name of Garond he issues you a challenge—a test to the death. There can be nothing less, for there can be only one champion. The loser of the match will not leave this field."

Case breathed softly, trying to slow the sudden spurt of his heartbeat. The native was alarming in size, and from the way that he moved in walking onto the field, the Terran knew that he could use those masses of muscle efficiently.

It was impossible to read any expression from the native's face. Air whistled slightly as it moved in and out of the flat nostrils. He stared at Case, blinking only often enough for his eyes to be replenished with moisture. He stood motionless, waiting, a statue carved from the living rock.

"What test?" Case touched his tongue to his lip, found that it was dry. "Freestyle or weapon?"

"Do you need a weapon?" Pesht snapped a finger and an attendant stepped forward with Case's own knife. "Use that if you need. He does not."

Case studied the blade as though he had never before seen it, then looked toward the native, wondering if even the razor steel was sharp enough to penetrate that hide. Suddenly he snapped the weapon back to the attendant in an underhand toss, and began to undress. He stripped until he was in his underwear, wishing that he had the protection of the single garment of the games. Then he removed the last article of his

clothing, stood as,naked as the other.

"There will be no treachery this time," said Pesht.

"That we promise you. You may strike first—or you may walk from the field now, and keep your life."

"And my honor?"

The Garond shrugged, turned one hand over. "You will serve in the name of Garond."

"Slavery in the mines. I will be slave to no man."

Pesht waved. "Then fight."

The oval was broader than the games circle of truth, nearly twice that in the long axis. There was plenty of room in the swept rock area for battle— but there was no soft grass to cushion a fall. To be put down would be as dangerous as taking a direct blow.

He moved out cautiously, testing the surface with the soles of his feet. He moved around the native who turned with him, circling him completely, Case trying to spot a possible weakness. But there was nothing apparent.

The other was waiting for him to strike the promised first blow. Regretting his rejection of the knife, feeble though it might be, Case concentrated on forcing as much oxygen as possible into his bloodstream. He wiped sweat from the bridge of his nose and from his eyes, blinking to be sure that his vision was clear.

He moved toward the Garond.

The man must weigh close to a hundred and seventy-five kilos—it would be deadly to let him get on top. He could crush the breath from Case's lungs without effort.

He eyed the native's legs, the joints where leg and arm touched body, feeling the eyes of the small audience on him. They were certain that he would fail. He feared failure—but if he must die, then he would go out in as spectacular a fashion as he could.

Case advanced again, his hands held stiff, as though to chop out, the tension showing in the quivering of his arms. His stomach muscles tightened, the rippling caught by the Garond.

Case moved, started to chop out with his right hand—then twisted away, kicking back with all of his strength at the native's bowed knee. There was a jar of pain as his heel slammed against the side of the joint, and then Case had moved completely around, backing away in time to see a frown pass over the other's face. The kick had not jarred him, but it had been felt.

It was the Garond's turn to strike, and he started for Case without hesitation. His fists were clubbed, swinging loose at his side as he followed the movements of the Earthman. Case kept sliding away from the native, one eye checking every few seconds to make sure that the path behind him remained clear.

A sharp bark came from the native as he suddenly swung out. Case ducked away from a blow that could have torn his ear from his head. The native grunted, swung back as he turned, but by that time the Earthman was on the other side of his tree trunk body. He moved in, slammed the chopping edges of his hand against the massive juncture of head and shoulders that would have been a neck on any other man.

The Garond blinked, shook his head; the blows had been barely felt. Now he began to advance, reaching for Case with opened hands.

Case moved back, knowing that he had only one advantage—science. The other knew nothing of the art of battle, understood no more than the use of his weight and strength.

The Garond struck out with both hands, trying to capture the Earthman's head. But Case was not there: he ducked under the blow, rolling with his shoulder to come up and slam into the native's gut. Before the other grunted, Case brought his elbow into the same target, using his hand over that fist as a hammer to drive it deep.

The flesh barely gave way, but the native staggered back with another grunt, then tried to club down. Case reached for the swinging hand, caught it with both of his. He tried to wind it around, use it to flip him off-balance. He succeeded in forcing the arm part way behind the other's back, but there he was stopped, the Garond bringing his arm back by the

sheer power of his muscles.

Before the native could think to bring his free hand around, Case released the captive, slammed again into the belly and brought his knee up into the groin. But the protective pocket prevented any serious damage there, and now the champion was pushing the Earthman back, Case almost stumbling. The Garond roared laughter at his weakness, and came on again with clubbed fists.

But Case managed to recover, rolling away and scrambling to his feet. His left arm had scraped against the rock floor, leaving some skin behind. He moved again, was in position to see the audience. Pesht sat stony-faced, but Case seemed to read a glint of triumph in Galden.

The native was reaching wildly now, frustrated at his inability to lay a firm hand on the Earthman. Case moved with him, always dancing just out of reach—and then saw an opportunity to come in from the side. He slammed the edge of his hand against the native's eyes, but where there would have been bone in an Earthman to break easily, his hand trapped only a hard swelling that gave the nose what little shape it had. His fingers stung with the pain of hitting it, but the heel of the hand had struck the one eye, and now the native was shaking his head to clear his vision.

Case could not let him recover; he moved in again, quickly slammed his fist toward the other eye. He made contact, the Garond rocking back from the force of the blow—but before the Earthman could turn away, the native had caught him in the crook of one arm.

Now he hugged Case tight against his thick-larded side, grunting with the effort. Pain instantly shot through the player's frame, and he knew that his ribs could stand only seconds of this pressure. If they broke, he was finished.

He hammered the side of the native's face, trying to break the lock. The Garond was moving in a circle now, the one arm holding the Earthman, the other dangling free. Case had managed to close the one eye, and the other was swollen; but the champion needed no sight to complete the squeeze against Case's thorax. Sharp pain lanced again, and Case knew that ribs had cracked under the pressure.

He reached up, twisting his upper frame even though his waist was held tight in the vise, and reached again for the Garond's eyes. This time

he managed to dig a finger into the corner of the one that could still see. The breath was completely gone from him, his own vision red with pain and his throat raw as his lungs tried to bring breath into the tightly constricted musculature. The Garond screamed, his free hand automatically going to his eye.

Now Case managed to grab a fold of pendulous pectoral flesh with his teeth. The taste of the native was oily, disgusting in his mouth, but he bit with all of his strength.

The Garond screamed again, and dropped Case, his hand going to his chest. The one eye was blind, the other the tiniest of slits as he tried to see. He moved around the oval, clumping, almost staggering as the Earthman rolled away.

Case gasped breath into his lungs, it was not until the pain of oxygen starvation was gone that he stopped retreating, pulled himself erect to move once more toward the Garond.

The native stopped, sensing the Earthman although he could not see. His arms rose from his sides, swept out, but Case ducked the blow. He moved behind the Garond, circling to stay with him—and suddenly slammed his foot out, catching the champion in the back of the knee.

The Garond staggered, and Case kicked out again at the same target. The native's arms waved wildly as he tried to balance himself, his shoulders falling back. Suddenly the Earthman was grabbing him there, kicking once more at the knee, pulling the giant backward.

He was falling, and for an instant Case was forced to hold that massive weight as he rolled himself free. Then the native slammed heavily against the ground, the breath knocked from him.

Case moved in quickly, kicking again, slamming his heel against the other's temple. He rained a dozen blows, the native trying to turn away—and then the massive frame shuddered, and was still.

Case moved back, almost stumbling as exhaustion hit his frame. He wiped his mouth, the sweat from his eyes, and blinked, watching the native. But there was no movement from the fallen champion, only the barest rise and fall of the great chest as he breathed.

The Earthman looked to the benches, saw that Pesht was standing. Galden was already on the floor, coming out to meet him. There was a smile on his face—but the expression on the elder was unreadable.

Was Pesht registering disgust?

"You won," said Galden. "I did not think it possible."

Pesht passed the Earthman, stood looking down at the fallen champion. He said something and one of the others bent low. A knife appeared, touched the neck line. The man finished the job quickly.

Case made a noise, and Pesht looked at him.

"The conditions of the match were stated, Earthman. Only one can leave the floor."

He moved to his car, then, most of the natives following, getting into another of the vehicles. They started off without ceremony, leaving only Case and Galden, and a driver for the third car. The latter was out of earshot.

Case moved to his clothes, began to dress slowly, Galden studying him. He sat down to draw on his hose and his boots, the Garond sitting beside him.

"Do you still wish to fight Earth?"

"I don't know." Case shrugged. "I'm tired."

"You mentioned the Star Masters, Case—they do exist. Of course, their numbers are limited and so they are still weak. They could use the services of one such as yourself. But it might be necessary for you to return to Earth."

Case stared. "No."

"There is only the one Star Master on Garond, Case. I am he."

"One man to rule a planet?"

"Not rule—to advise, instruct. To lead. Earth is our enemy, Case—the enemy of every one of the hundred worlds. You can serve us there—we

need someone we can trust completely, and you have proven that your hatred of Earth is as strong as our own."

The trigger fell, and the information buried by Randel's technicians was suddenly available. Case stared at Galden—at the man who called himself Star Master—remembering everything. He smiled, amused at the thought that one man could cause so much concern to the strongest planet of the hundred worlds. One man against Earth!

"Will you help us?"

"Where is your homeworld?" Case asked, slowly.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We are weak now, but our strength is growing. Please, I ask you—join us."

The knowledge that had been hidden even from himself was back—but with it came no lessening of his hatred for Earth. They had marked him, banished him, then thought to appease his anger by promising him citizenship if he did what they wanted. Perhaps the men of Earth thought that such a prize was the ultimate reward—but in this instance they were wrong.

The starman had sent Case to Garond to spy out the Star Master, and the job was done. It was only justice that he now return to Earth to help the Star Master!

In that moment Case felt as though he had been reborn. He had proven himself in the circle against the champion of this planet—it no longer mattered whether or not he was permitted to do the same on his homeworld. He did not ask Galden what reward the Star Masters could offer against the promise of Earth citizenship—he did not care. He would do this to satisfy his honor, and for no other reason. "I'll go to Earth," he said.

CHAPTER 11

Returning to Earth was not as simple as coming out, although there were no illegalities involved in the trip itself. Garond was a backwater, well off the normal shipping lanes and producing little of value to Earth. So there were no direct ship connections to Earth. Most of the planet's stellar

contacts were limited to its nearest neighbors.

Case spent several days in the guest apartment cooling his heels, not seeing Galden. When the Star Master did reappear, the player found that he was to be transferred to a Garond military-training center and tacked on to a group of officer cadets being pushed through a course in government espionage. Much of the information implanted duplicated that which had been pumped into him during the hundred hours of hypnotic training before he left Earth; but now he had the chance to see field exercises working.

His appearance in their midst was not an occasion of joy for the natives, but he was accompanied by priorities strong enough to still overt reactions. Still he was quartered alone and ate alone, and even his instructors looked beyond him when imparting necessary information.

The training helped pass the weeks of waiting, and he did have a chance to bring himself back to physical peak in the gymnasiums. Once it seemed that he would have to fight his way out as several obstreperous cadets waylaid him, but the appearance of a noncom broke their urge for battle. Case did not bother to thank his rescuer—it was too apparent that the corporal would rather have seen him taken down.

Case thought of Randel's fear that time was working in favor of the Star Masters, that everything to stop them must be done as soon as possible. Earth was far stronger than it realized—the worst danger to Galden and his fellows on the other starworlds was of being caught in the wash of Earth's overreaction.

During the first few weeks Galden spent long hours with Case, much of the time probing him with the aid of a psychotechnician. They did not seem to be digging for evidence of conspiracy, but rather were more interested in the minutiae of Terran life. Case protested that his experience was limited, specialized, but his knowledge was peeled to the very earliest memories of childhood. It seemed to him a waste of time when they were done, but Galden professed satisfaction.

And at last he came to tell Case that passage had been arranged. The first jump would be aboard a tramp making the circuit of the half dozen worlds in this sector. The ship was slow compared with those that came directly from Earth, but local needs demanded no more. On the third planet from Garond there would be contact with a larger ship that would

head for the central worlds, the older, more technologically advanced of the starworlds. And there he would find constant traffic to Earth itself.

Life at the training base has settled into routine; Case found himself anxious to be moving by the time Galden brought him the news that the trip was set. The journey would begin in three days, and he was glad to be shaking the dust of Garond from his feet. Not that he had seen much of the planet—most of his time had been spent in one form or another of confinement. His impression of the city was limited to the dungeons, the apartment, and the few corridors he had traveled between them. Apart from the ruins where he had battled the champion, there was little to mark this planet apart from the barracks and hives of Earth.

News of his departure seeped down to the cadets; there were several more near confrontations, the bolder ones anxious to test the mettle of the hated Earthman. But before a fight could explode, an armed watch was placed over Case. The officers of the base had heard of the way he had defeated their champion, and did not care to risk the health of their young wards.

Galden accompanied him in the aircar that carried Case to the planet's single spaceport. Traffic was sparse—there were no more than two or three ships a week. Apart from the tramp that was to take him, the only other ship at the port was an outmoded patrol craft, suited for nothing beyond close planetary orbits.

The physical amenities were crude as well, customs and operations sharing a single low-roofed building. Galden introduced Case to the purser, who grumbled.

"About time. The other three are already aboard."

"You're not due to lift for half a day," said Galden, amiably. But there was fury in his gaze, and the purser saw it. He accepted Case's papers, tagged the one sealed piece of luggage for transshipment to Earth so that it would avoid intermediate customs, then called an agent over to check the contents of the bag that the player was carrying aboard. When that was done, Case was left with the job of restowing his belongings in the case.

"Well." They were alone now, the purser hurrying off after indicating the port Case was to use. Galden seemed suddenly stiff, formal. "I hope, Case, you prove worth the investment we have made in you."

"You expect me to defeat Earth by myself?"

The sarcasm was sharp in his voice. Galden smiled. "I expect you to annoy Earth's lordly rulers for a time—perhaps enough to gain for yourself the full measure of revenge you seek. I hope you can frighten them, force them to divert their energies in searching for you. Time—that is what we need. We must have the chance to build our strength here before Earth can smash us."

"How much time do you need?"

It was a question he had asked before, but Galden had always waved it away. Now he shrugged.

"I don't really know—perhaps less than we originally thought."

"Then you will attack Earth?"

"Then we will deal with Earth," he said, and would say no more. He clapped his hands on Case's shoulders.

"Goodbye, Player. Play well your challenges and you will win that you most want."

He was gone then, disappearing as though he were a ghost. Case turned and blinked, staring in the direction he must have gone; a door was easing silently shut. Then the player picked up his luggage and headed for the loading port.

There were only half a dozen locals between Case and the ship; they turned away as he approached, consciously denying his existence. He felt their hatred for his Terran heritage, wished that he could tell them that he was working in their interests. But the burden of Earth was heavy on his shoulders; even the crewman at the port carried hatred, although Case did not recognize his homeworld from his appearance.

The ship was stubby, ungraceful, showing the wear of long years of service. There were twenty passenger cabins in three rings of eight, eight and four. Case found that he was quartered in the innermost ring, where gravity was at its lowest when spin was put on the ship. The passengers' lounge/dining quarters were in the outermost ring, so there would be discomfort in making the transfer at each mealtime.

Although quarters had been cramped by the absence of passenger accommodations, the freighter that had brought him from Earth was far newer, and had seemed far more spaceworthy than this tub. The crewman jerked a thumb over his shoulder when Case asked directions to his cabin, leaving the player to make his own awkward way up the ladder to his ring. The cabin was the farthest from the ladder, as though to make matters as difficult as possible for the Earth man.

The doors of the other three inner-ring cabins stood open as Case passed. Only his cabin door was closed, indicating occupancy. He checked the number to be sure, then pressed the plastic chit the purser had given him to the lock. The door slid back, and he stepped in—

To see the Jovian from the dungeon sitting in the cabin's only chair!

Case stopped, startled. The candlebearer had half risen from the chair, bony hands clenching the arms to lever himself up. He wore his cloak, the hood pulled over his head, but the yellow eyes shone brightly in their sockets even though the other features were shadowed, as though the eyes carried their own illumination.

"I'm sorry," said Case. "They assigned me to this cabin—there must be some mistake."

He backed out, retrieving the key chit, and the door closed again. He dropped his bag in the corridor, hurried back to the ladder, and made his way back to the port.

The same crewman was there, eyed him with hostility as Case explained what had happened.

"No mistake, mister—the two of you are goin' to Earth system, they put you together."

"But the other cabins are empty!"

He shrugged. "Complain to the Captain. He don't like candlebearers almost as much as he don't like Earthmen."

Case understood. "Why... is he on this ship?"

"I hear tell his buddies ransomed him handsomely, so Garond is giving

him the boot. The magicians aren't very popular on any of the worlds in this sector. He's lucky they didn't leave him in the dungeons to rot—almost as lucky as you."

Case chewed his lip for a minute. Galden had supplied a certain amount of cash against the necessity of expenditures. "How much—for a private cabin?"

The crewman looked him up and down, slowly, then smiled. "Somehow, mister, I don't think you can afford it—'less you happen to have a fire jewel on you. That might get you to the end of our line. 'Course, there's two more legs of the trip ahead, and I kinda think you'll find quarters a bit cramped on all of them."

Case thought of the cluster that had bought his passage from Earth—but it was gone. By now that lucky captain must have sold his ship, set himself up in luxury on one of the central worlds. He wondered idly which one the man had chosen.

But there was obviously nothing to be done here. The crewman had turned away at Case's first appearance, keeping only his profile to the player to show his disdain. Case stepped back and made his way up to the cabin again.

The Jovian was still in the chair, although this time he did not start to rise.

"I'm sorry," said Case. "They wish to annoy us as much as possible. We will have to share these quarters."

Did the other shrug, almost imperceptibly? Even though the candlebearer had not turned away, Case was aware that his attention was elsewhere. If it would do no good to protest the arbitrary actions of the crew, then it was obvious that the other would do nothing at all.

The cabin's bunks were mounted against the wall; Case found one of the lockers empty and stowed his meager belongings. Even so there was barely enough space for the collapsed luggage case to be tucked away.

Space was limited in the extreme; the only table surface was one that could be swung up over the chair, and with the bunks in their present position there was no other seat at all. The 'fresher arrangements were

skimpy, and embarrassingly in plain view. Although it was no more embarrassing than the dungeon with its sewer trough that was flushed at erratic times, when the guards thought of it.

Case wanted to sit, to think about what he was to do—he wanted most of all to be alone. During his entire life the only time he had not been surrounded by others was in the apartment and then at the base here on Garond. As a child, later in the training center for players and at the arena itself, he had lived in dormitories. The presence of another body was not what was disturbing him, for the sound of fifty expelled breaths, a hundred voices talking, was so natural as to be ignored.

No—it was the candlebearer's presence, not the fact of another human being. Case listened, stilling his own breath, but he could detect no sign of the other's physical being—there was no hiss of breath, no soft flutter of air currents passing across the intruding body. It was as though the space where the Jovian sat was completely empty, his appearance an illusion.

Case felt a cold shiver touch his spine, was sure at that moment that the candlebearer's eyes were examining his back. He turned, but all was as before. The other ignored him as though the two were not together in this limited space.

Well, he could do something about that for a brief time, anyway. A ship's clock was in the bulkhead over the door: it marked the hours until lift-off. Case checked it, then stepped out of the cabin to head for the lounge. But even as the cabin door slid shut the candlebearer continued to stay in that one position, revealing nothing of himself, nothing of his emotions. Case shivered again, remembering a fragment of nightmare from some distant childhood dream.

The lounge was empty when he entered, the other passengers apparently still in their quarters. Presumably they were more comfortable than those of the inner ring. He dropped into a chair, touched his fingers to the controls that would summon tapes, music, refreshment... and let them rest there without keying a demand.

The trip back to Earth would take at least twice as long as the journey out, but he found his heart beating faster with sudden anticipation. He was going to have the chance to strike back at Randel and his fellows on their own ground! As yet, the program was completely open—he would insinuate himself into the undercity, using Galden's supplied money to

purchase the aid of those who were not disenfranchised—according to the masters of Earth, they had never been! With their help Case would try to throw a spanner into the smooth workings of Earth society, make Randel and his others fear that the Star Masters were indeed threatening their security, even their homes.

He rubbed his forehead with his right hand, supported by his left arm across his chest—the graft was definitely flaking. He had asked Galden to renew the covering for the brand, but the Star Master had pleaded a lack of available technicians. At the time Case had not believed him, for they had just finished a session with the psychotechnician. But he could not call the man a liar. With luck, the woman, Sari, would be available, although undoubtedly in thrall to the Toad's successor. If not, there must be others of her skill in the undercity.

He looked up: a Centauran was entering the lounge—a minor official, by the cut of his clothes. The newcomer saw the Earthman, frowned; but he said nothing, drawing a drink from the bar. Case wondered if he had come to Garond because of his fellows in the dungeons—if he even knew that there were worldmates here. If not, he should be told— but the player knew that he was not the one to pass the news.

The time passed, as time always passes if one waits long enough. As it drew closer to departure time the lounge began to fill with the other passengers, come to see who would be sharing the next leg of the trip. Most of them were of two or three physical types, natives of the worlds the ship would be touching— none were pleased to see the Earthman. But none of them came close, offered any form of conversation.

A klaxon warned of imminent takeoff, and all of the passengers hurried to their cabins. Case found the Jovian already strapped against one of the bunks— which was too short by ten centimeters for comfort. And that meant that Case would be at an equal disadvantage. There was another klaxon warning, a different series of signals this time, and the artificial gravity suddenly came on, putting everything into proper position. Case sagged into his mattress, which was discouragingly thin; he knew he would feel the force of acceleration against his hips—although the fleshless Jovian would suffer far more. Still, it was the last measure of Earth-normal gravity that he would know during this leg of the journey. Once in space the ship would be spun to conserve the gravity generators.

Takeoff was anticlimactic: a half hour of discomfort. The systems

changed, Case floating in midair for the minute between. He managed to grab the strap he had just loosened in time to stop himself from hitting a projection. The Jovian had not yet released his straps. Then spin began, and gravity gradually returned.

The three weeks of this first leg passed in stages: it was eight days to the first planetfall, three to the next, with half a day on each to discharge and take on cargo. A few of the passengers disappeared at each stop, a few more came on; none were Earthmen or Jovians, and all seemed displeased to find the presence of Case and his cabin mate.

The days passed—but the nights were the worst. Again the space was too limited to permit Case the full program of exercises that he tried to follow each day—and when he did indulge in some of the milder forms, it brought protests from the other passengers. He spent the days in contemplation of the future, of what he had learned from Galden's training.

Which left the nights empty of distraction. He slept fitfully, his body not drained and exhausted of the energy. For long hours he lay in the bunk, legs drawn up so that his heels would not kick over the end, conscious of the presence of the Jovian less than an arm's length away. Many times Case let his arm drop over the side of the bed, reaching toward the other—although he never closed the last few inches between them. He wondered what it would be like to touch the other—would his skin feel human?

And then one night he awoke to the knowledge that the candlebearer was observing him. The clock was not in a position for him to read without turning, and he did not want to move. He knew from the progress of his body's functions that the night was no more than half over, although he did not know how long he had been sleeping.

He rolled his head, blinked—saw in the shadows of the cabin that the Jovian was resting on his back, as always. Yet the impression that the other was studying him was still strong. Fear touched his spine.

A tendril of thought entered his mind, curled there, waiting for recognition. It was a distasteful thing, seemed slimy—he recoiled, tried to deny it. But it would not go away, although it did not insist that he act against it. At last, remembering the stories of psionic powers that had been credited to the candlebearers, he approached the thought.

Enemies....

The universe was filled with enemies; there was hatred for the men of Earth on every side. But... this was something more. It was not a concept of universal hatred—but of some focused area of distinct danger.

Danger to whom?

There was warning, but it was impossible to read more. He wanted to speak out, call out, for suddenly the feeling of terror was pressing around him. He knew without understanding how he knew that the danger was personal, directed against himself. A crisis point lay before him, one that could be avoided... if only he recognized it in time.

Was the Jovian indeed a magician, possessed of the power to know the future? If so, why was he choosing this way to give warning to an Earthman— to one of the race most hated of all by his kind. The candlebearers had avoided all contact with Earth for hundreds of years, denying the major planet of their system landing privileges on their moon, bringing their necessary imports from the distant starworlds even when it would be infinitely cheaper to trade with their enemy. The Jovians refused to acknowledge Earth's existence—

What did it mean, this visitation in the night? Did the candlebearer recognize Case's own hatred for the planet of his birth? Or was the menace a common one—that so threatened both Earth and Jupiter that the candlebearers must join forces with the most ancient of their enemies to save themselves?

CHAPTER 12

The journey ended at last. There was a week's wait for the liner that would take them into the central worlds, and during that time Case and the candlebearer were limited to tiny transient quarters at the spaceport. They were ordered roughly to stay in their quarters until it was time to transfer to the ship; even their meals were served there.

At least in the ship he could pace the distance of the corridors—in their prison, two paces brought him to the end of the open space, or put him in danger of stumbling over the Jovian's feet.

Things were better on the second ship: there were more than a hundred other passengers, and they were not forced to share the same cabin. They were neighbors, however, and Case was always aware of the candlebearer's presence on the other side of the thin bulkhead.

But there was no further contact—if that thought in the night had indeed come from the Jovian.

At the second planetfall the Jovian was no longer alone: he was met by two of his fellows, and all three disappeared. This was a busy spaceport, almost as large as the North American one on Earth; there were other Terrans, mixed with an assortment that might have been drawn from every one of the hundred worlds. There might have been antipathy for the men of Earth, but it was not overtly expressed in this cosmopolitan atmosphere.

Case knew the ship that he would be taking home, but first he had to contact a man whose name had been given him by Galden. They met in a seedy dive just outside the spaceport, the player passing papers that he was sure included a draft against Star Master funds here. The man was a ferret-faced member of the local race; he read through the message rapidly, then stowed it.

"No problem—the ship is already in port. Departure time is set for tomorrow, so we'd better get you aboard tonight."

The ship was seedier than Case had expected, the purser somewhat soiled. He scratched himself as he studied the player for a long moment, concentrating on his face. Case wondered if the man was memorizing his features.

"Okay, can do." He nodded several times. "Bring your stuff aboard now—I'll see to your checked baggage. You can have a second-tier cabin—we're only two-thirds full."

The air of seediness prevailed throughout the ship, although Case found his cabin comfortable enough. He was waiting in the lounge the next morning, watching the other passengers loading— and was surprised by the appearance of the Jovian again. The candlebearers never traveled ships of Terran registry!

He was accompanied by the two who had met him yesterday, but they

soon departed. Case was almost concealed by a tape case, and now he was surprised again—the candlebearer was searching the lounge, making no pretense of detachment.

He spotted the player—and then things were as before. The Jovian consulted a chart near the entrance, found his quarters, and left, with Case as disturbed as he had been the night of the strange warning.

He did not see the candlebearer again, however; meals on this ship were available in the cabins, and the Jovian kept completely to himself. The drive for Earth was straight and fast, this speedier ship making the journey in half the time it had taken Case to first reach Garond.

The purser came to him again as they entered the outer fringes of the solar system. It was ship night; most of the passengers were asleep, or at least in their quarters. He led Case through the lounge and into crew country, then down toward the rear of the ship where only a thin umbilicus separated them from the star drive. This ship was so large that the quarters for the passengers and crew could not be permitted close to the engines.

Space was cramped on every side, service pipes and wires exposed behind panel framework. The purser found a place where a passageway curved sharply, then made a corner; he tugged, and a panel opened, revealing a space barely large enough to hold a man. The walls were padded, and there was a bottle of water clipped to one wall while another bottle on the floor served as sanitary necessity.

"I don't know what crime you did," said the purser, showing Case how to fit himself into the cramped space, "Most fellas riding this are out-bound, trying to get away from Earth—you're the first I've seen trying to sneak back."

Case did not answer the obvious questions, and so the purser continued: "We'll be at Asteroid Station in about four hours. Figure another four hours there to discharge traffic for the other planets and take aboard the inspectors, and then twenty hours to Earth. They'll search the ship both before and after we discharge cargo and passengers, so figure this as home for the next thirty-six hours."

Case nodded, fitted his hand through handles that had been provided to ease the discomfort of acceleration and deceleration. The purser moved

the panel back, then held it open for another minute as he once again examined the player's features. Then he shrugged and locked the panel into place.

The hiding place was extremely uncomfortable. Case shifted, found that he just had room to bring his arm across his body to reach the water bottle; solid rations were already tucked into his pockets. A small bulb overhead gave just enough light to still the fears of claustrophobia, and he found that by easing his back and carefully bending his knees, he could just reach the bottle on the floor with his fingertips. Uncomfortable—but everything functioned as intended.

He leaned back, letting his head touch the padding—and realized that the wall was slanted just far enough to permit a slight relaxation. The purser had warned him to skip sleep during the past twenty-four hours, so that he would sleep through as much of the imprisonment as possible; but right now he was completely awake. His system was flooded with adrenaline, and he could hear the loud beat of his heart in the close space. He could even count his pulse throbbing in his temple.

Time passed. Suddenly there was deceleration, and he knew that they were approaching the station. The captain who had smuggled him off Earth had not stopped here, for he was picking up cargo from Mars; his ship had been inspected by a bribed port official before leaving Earth.

A liner coming in was another matter; there was a team to inspect this, and they would ride down to Earth with her. There were still high profits to be made smuggling contraband from certain of the starworlds—illicit drugs that caused epidemics of crime when a new supply stole the minds of those unfortunate enough to sample them; and even a certain traffic in items of export made illegal by the producing worlds, who would deny their use to hated Earth. The smuggling would never end so long as the ships continued to be manned by human beings.

Case slept. He was awakened by the surge of the ship leaving Asteroid Station. He sighed, feeling cramped; he tried to still an itch high on his back by rubbing up and down against the padded bulkhead, but it continued to annoy him. At last he resolutely put it from mind, and forced himself to think of other subjects.

Twenty hours to Earth—twenty-eight hours to freedom.

Some time during those twenty hours his internal clock malfunctioned. He came out of a sound sleep to find sweat soaking his body—and knew that he had been imprisoned for days. He gasped for breath, feeling the heaviness of his beard weighing his chin. Something had gone wrong—the purser had not come to release him!

He brought his hand to his face, managed to look at his watch, punching the figures. He had been in the tiny compartment for slightly more than fourteen hours; now he touched his chin, felt only the slight stubble of normal growth. He found a salt tablet in a shirt pocket, undipped the water bottle, gulping after he dilated the nipple to its fullest. His heart was pounding at nearly double speed, but he willed himself to relax. Nightmare had brought him from sleep, although he could recall no detail of the dream. But it had been terrifying.

For the next half hour he performed a series of isometric exercises, conscious of his own odor in the close atmosphere of the hiding hole—the fear of the nightmare had sent all of his glands surging into production. But before exercises were done he had grown used to his smell, accepted it.

He checked his watch again: still just over half a day before landing. He began to count his heartbeat, eyes closed, trying to lull himself to sleep; but the more he concentrated, the farther away the goal seemed to be. He gave up the count at the two thousand mark, tried to make his mind a blank. But tendrils of thought kept stealing in to disturb him— thoughts that he could never be sure were entirely his own.

He did sleep again, for a time; there were two or three more of the waking periods, each time with a hint of the same nightmare that had frightened him the first time; but the fear was not so urgent now. It was a memory, rather than something happening this minute.

The ship reached Earth, went through the shudderings and twistings of planetfall. There was a wrench as the artificial gravity gave way to the true one of the planet; and then there was nothing but silence. At the Asteroid Station the ship had remained alive even during the docking time; but now the systems that carried artificial planetary conditions into space were shut off. Perhaps an hour after landing there was an hour of vibration as the cargo unloaded; and then the silence came back once more.

Case did not sleep this time: he was too close to his goal to slip from control. Consequently the subjective time seemed stretched interminably as he waited for the ship to be inspected, then emptied of the last crew members. But the purser came as he had promised; suddenly the panel moved aside, and the natural light of the ship flooded in.

Case staggered, momentarily blinded by the shift in light level. He put his hands to the walls, shaking his head to clear a sudden buzz. Then he blinked, rubbing his eyes, and leaned across the corridor, putting the flat of his hands on the other bulkhead.

"Easy," said the purser, putting out a hand to help him. "Walk if you can."

Case shook his head again and yawned widely, hearing his jaw pop. He worked it, and swallowed, aware of the stink that had surrounded him.

"Thank you—"

But the purser's hand dropped from his arm, the man staring. Now he moved back a step, his face twisting with anger.

"You're branded!"

Case looked at him blankly for a moment, then his hand went to his forehead. The skin seemed rough, but no different than usual. The purser looked as though he wanted to spit.

"Get off my ship!" .

"What ails you?" Case demanded.

"You're a fool! I don't know why you came back to Earth, but you should have stayed away. Go on— get away from me! I should have known there was something wrong about you—I should never have touched your blood money!"

Case started to reach a hand toward him, then thought better of it. He shook his head again, struck now by a constant buzzing headache.

"Is it too much to ask you to show me the way off?"

"It's too much for the likes of you to ask anything!"

But the purser backed away, turned, leaving Case to follow him. They exited by one of the cargo ports to a field lost in the darkness of a rain-dampened night. Case found his two bags waiting for him at the port, and no sign of any other crew member. He shouldered the one case, picked up the other, and dropped lightly to the ground. Behind him there was the noise of grinding machinery, and the loading dock began to close, hiding the purser.

The player wasted no more than seconds staring at the closing wall of the ship; he was surrounded by blackness now, the ship almost lost close at hand. But when he turned he saw the rain-streaked lights of a distant gate. For a moment he turned his face up, accepting the cooling drizzle. The water ran into his open mouth, rinsing away the brackish taste of the bottled water.

The spaceport seemed deserted as he trudged toward the distant lights, although the night's shadows were thicker in a score or more places, indicating the presence of ships on the field. Then he heard the crackle of electricity and looked to the far end of the field, to see the ghostly blue radiance of a ship's field coming to life. Even through the presence of the rain there was the tang of ozone seeping from the lift field, and then the blueness began to silently lift into the night sky. It moved faster, accelerating suddenly; he craned his head back to follow, but the clouds intervened. The ship was gone—and then, long seconds later, came the sound of high thunder as the thin air of the stratosphere moved in to replace the sudden vacuum created as the ship popped into space.

He reached the gate, recognized it from the surrounding buildings as the same one Randel had brought him to—how many months ago? He was reassured by its appearance, uncertain until then that he was on the same continent. It was problem enough to have to move across North America. Adding an ocean between landing site and goal would be trebly difficult.

The gate was closed, but not locked as it should have been—the purser had carried out this much of his bargain. Case saw himself in a rain-streaked window, his image ghostly against the glass. The reflection was not lit well enough to permit examination of the brand.

He chose to stop at the lee of this building, opening his luggage to extract the weather cape Takoa had given him on that other rainy night. From the same sealed bag he brought the tiny stunner, checking to be sure that the power pack that had replenished it on Garond held good across

space. The telltale glowed comfortably red, and he stowed the stunner in the most accessible pocket.

If the brand was showing now, there was nothing he could do but bring the hood of the cape low—he had to make contact with some denizens of the undercity. He saw the lights of the bar where the Toad had met his untimely end, and his stomach tightened, reminding him of the two days since he had eaten a solid meal. His body demanded to be purged as well, and after hesitation, he gave in to its needs.

Despite the hour, the place was as populated as on that other night. Case bought his way into one of the private booths, locking his luggage there while he made a sidetrip to the 'fresher. There he bought further privacy, and once inside pulled the hood back to examine the mark.

It was shadowy, as though a translucent layer of skin was all that was left of the graft. But the letter was clear to anyone of near-normal sight. Case cursed, remembering again that he had asked the Star Master for help with it. But there was nothing to be done until he had established himself in the undercity.

He finished, went back to the main room—and stopped: two members of the Guard had just entered, and were staring about the room. Most of the patrons found reason to interest themselves in their drinks, and those who did not froze when the eye of the newcomers crossed them.

Something was wrong—the patrons of the bar had not acted this way on that last occasion. Something was terribly wrong: Case knew that the Guardians had come looking for trouble.

They spotted him.

CHAPTER 13

The Guardians were tunicked in black; only a scarlet circle on the left sleeve added a touch of color to their appearance. On one the circle was crossed by a thin line, indicating the rank of corporal. The other was taller by several inches, heavily built; blond hair wet from the rain escaped his cap. The corporal was older by ten years, the tall one barely older than Case.

Each carried a nightstick that contained a built-in stunner. A leather strap kept the corporal's stick tight in his hand as he tapped it against his other palm.

"You!" He smiled toward Case, a bloodless pursing of thin lips. "Come here."

Case stared, blankly, the corporal's impatience growing quickly. "I said come here! Are you deaf?"

The player shook his head, but he did not move. Now the Guard was angry. He moved toward Case, the stick whistling through a complete circle before slapping his palm again.

"Stand, you!" He uttered a foul curse, and was reaching out to tap his stick against the player's chest, his finger no more than an inch from the stunner's button. Case held still a moment as the corporal knocked a chair from his path—and then moved before the stick could touch him.

The stunner came out of his pocket, chopped across the Guard. There was a sudden bellow of rage as the man felt the numbness make his arm useless, the stick dropping, to dangle by its strap. He roared anger, calling the other into action.

Case swung the beam toward the second man— but the corporal had caught another chair with his able hand and was heaving it at the player. Case reached up to fend it off, and the stunner was knocked from his hand. The other Guard was on him now, swinging out with his stick, the beam already keyed.

Case dived forward over the chair thrown by the corporal. The stun beam missed its target, and now Case was grabbing another chair, swinging out with it. The younger Guard was too close to duck aside, and his stick was torn from his hand, sent flying across a table of three who ducked low.

The corporal tried to untangle his stick to transfer it into his good hand. But Case moved faster, rushing him, catching him in the chest with his shoulder. The Guard was thrown back, fell across another occupied table. Hands pushed him roughly away, and he went to his knees, stunned.

Case turned, saw the younger man diving for him. He threw himself to

one side, but not quick enough; the other's hands touched him, his, arms moving about his chest. The man was strong; he was crushing the air from the player's chest, his face buried against Case's neck.

Case forced himself erect, brought his hands back—and slammed them into the other's belly. The Guard grunted, but did not loosen his hold. Again the player gathered his strength, repeated the blow. This time he forced his fists upward, between their chests, prying the other away from him. Then he brought his knee up into the Guard's groin and chopped down with the edge of his hand against his neck. The man groaned and collapsed.

There was barely time to catch his breath: the corporal was making his way toward his lost stick. Case reached him a step before he could touch it, kicked out. The force of his blow caught the man in the middle of the back, sent him crashing into one table, which fell over to dump him in a tangle. He sprawled where he landed, unconscious.

Case staggered, leaned against a chair. The room was emptying of patrons, most of them slipping by ones and twos into the rainy night. Several servitors hung back against the walls, before bolting for the kitchens.

"Please!"

Case spun, saw the same frightened manager who had disposed of the Toad's body. He was wringing his hands now.

"Please—go before they recover! I don't want my place destroyed!"

Case caught the little man's arm, looked deep into his face. "Do you know me?"

The man blinked, chin trembling. "Should I? I don't want to know anything!" If he did recognize the player from the night of the Toad's death, he made no sign of it now.

"What did they want here?"

"The Guard is everywhere now—they check everyone. Where have you been—off-planet?"

"What are they looking for?"

"No one knows." He spread his hands. "There are stories of conspiracy, but no one knows the truth of them. Honest workers aren't safe any more—even Citizens are stopped, questioned."

There had been changes in the months since he had left. The Guard was always unobtrusive, usually concentrating on keeping the petty crimes of the drones away from sight, where they would not offend the sensibilities of Citizens. If the highest class was subject to harassment, then the rulers of Earth must indeed be frightened.

Case rubbed his hand across his chin, suddenly aware that he was very tired. He wanted nothing more than the chance to bathe and drop into a bed for twelve hours of natural sleep. Then his stomach reminded him that it was still empty, and he added food to the list of priorities.

But the manager was urging him again, tugging at his sleeve. "Please! Go now, before it's too late. They will wake up!"

Case forced himself to breathe slowly, deeply, replenishing the oxygen in his bloodstream. He stared at the manager.

"Where is the nearest entrance to the undercity?"

"You can't go there! The exits have been sealed; they are guarded!"

He laughed, bitterly. "Where then can I go?"

"I don't know! You can't stay here!" He remembered the money Randel had passed and brought currency from his pocket. The manager's eyes brightened, and his tongue touched his lip. But he shook his head.

"I can't help you—not this time. Nobody can help you!"

So he did remember Case. But the fear of the Guard was stronger than his greed; a bribe would not buy his assistance this time.

Now what was he to do? Galden's plan had been predicated on his making contact with the undercity population—and his own needs demanded the same. The graft would be worn completely away in a matter of days, and he would be branded for any to see.

Suddenly he remembered his theft of the fire jewels—was that the reason for the change in the Guards' behavior? Perhaps it wasn't fear of the Star Masters after all. But if that were so, then his own position was all the more precarious.

There must be a way out, but he was too tired to think properly. He had to find a place to rest.

"Bring me food." The manager jumped. "Bring anything—but hurry!"

The little man disappeared into the kitchens as Case moved to the fallen Guardians. Both were safely unconscious. He picked up their nightsticks, slipping the two of them into his belt, then went to the private booth to retrieve his luggage. By the time he placed it near the exit the manager was back with a platter containing thick sandwiches, and carrying a mug of steaming soup.

Case wolfed one of the sandwiches, scarcely tasting the meat, and washed it down with the soup. He was still ravenous, but the other sandwiches went into pockets of his cape. He wanted nothing more than the chance to slump into a chair, rest, but he had to keep moving.

The manager was relieved to see him shoulder his baggage and move to the door. For a moment he was tempted to abandon the luggage, but there was too much in it that he might need. Without it, he would be helpless.

Outside, the rain had increased in intensity. Case paused a moment in the shadows beside the barroom entrance to probe the night, but there appeared to be no one nearby. The patrons had completely abandoned the area.

He had seen a communications booth near the gate to the spaceport. For a moment he thought of making his way aboard one of the starships, abandoning his mission here on Earth. He had cash enough from Galden to bribe one of the freighter captains into letting him have a berth. At least he could get off Earth, even if only to Mars.

Or Jupiter.

But he had not come back just to run again at the first sign of danger. Hatred brought him here—hatred for what Randel had done to him. He had come to Earth seeking vengeance, and he would win it!

He reached the communications booth, dropped into the seat, although there was not room to bring the luggage out of the rain. For a moment he rested there, drying clammy perspiration on his hands against his legs. His fingers moved to the keyboard, rested.

Who was he planning to call?

His choices were limited—who did he know of sufficient importance to come to his aid now? There was Randel—who thought he was still on Garond. Could he invent a story that would convince the starman he had succeeded in his mission?

He rejected the idea as soon as it formed: Randel would place him under probe. No lie would stand up without intense programming by technicians as skilled as those who would be stripping him for the truth.

Tell Randel the truth?

No. Galden was his ally. He would not betray the Star Master just to gain respite from the pressures on him now.

There was Citizen Anders. How would that worthy react to the possibility of regaining his prize? Perhaps he could use Anders to effect his escape from this sealed-off spaceport—they could not have the whole world sealed off! The idea was too monstrous; he would not let himself think it.

Perhaps the manager of the bar had been lying— why would they seal off the entire city? Only if there was good reason to believe that the object of their search would try to make his escape that way...

Case cradled his forehead in the palm of his hand, feeling the roughness of the graft—and that was enough to reinforce his hatred for Randel and his fellows. His left hand moved to the keyboard, idly brought it to life even though he was far from a decision as to his next move. Flickerings of color caught his attention: public service announcements moved across the screen in the absence of any override on his part.

There was a banner of blazing scarlet: announcement of the next games for the district. Case jabbed a finger and stopped the flow of images. He glanced at the date and time in the lower corner of the screen, saw that the games were scheduled for three days hence.

He keyed for further information. This was not a small arena, such as the one where he had been posted for his first list; there were no first-timers here at all. The banner proclaimed the presence of several lesser Champions, trying to win a place in the next continental meetings. That would give the successful ones a chance to try for the next World Games, and a try at citizenship itself.

Apart from the special attractions, there were the usual fifty players posted. The list moved before him, Case reading off the names and the scores— and then his finger froze it into place again.

High on the list was Takoa!

The score beside the Asian's name was impressive; he had been listed again after that first trial, in another arena. He stood only twentieth in total score of those posted to this arena, but many of those above him in points were older, had been through three, and even four, games. The oriental had earned only a fifth in his second match—but again, all the players in that one were experienced.

Case keyed for a channel to the arena, wondering if Takoa would help him now. There was delay in making contact, and his heart beat faster; perhaps his friend was not even there, was sponsored. He tried to think of Takoa with someone like Anders and shuddered. Then he suddenly remembered the senator's wife and wondered if she would be any improvement.

The equipment finally made contact for him, and switched him to the players' barracks. He kept his screen blank as *he* asked for Takoa, and again there was a wait that seemed disturbingly long. He glanced at his watch, shocked to remember that dawn was no more than an hour or two away. The reason for the delays was now apparent.

The screen responded, showed a sleepy Takoa blinking grit from his eyes. He wore a night robe, and his voice was surly as it came from the speaker.

"Who is this? Why are you blanked?"

"I am sorry to disturb you at this unseemly hour, Takoa—my friend."

He paused, and the image of Takoa blinked, sat up straight. The other's

head moved slightly, his eyes checking something behind him.

"Do you know me?" asked Case.

"Yes. Where are you?—no. Don't say. This channel may be monitored."

"I must see you."

"I can't come now—the city is sealed. Movement after curfew is restricted."

Takoa sighed, rubbed his eyes. "There is a street of small shops near the arena. I have to pick up a gift for my sponsor—something in leather. The best place for leather goods is beneath the sign of the twin crimson globes. There is no point in getting there before ten."

Abruptly the screen went blank—had the oriental cut off? Or was the contact indeed monitored?

Case was not going to wait to find out. He slipped out of the booth, grabbed his luggage, moved into the night. The residential sector of the city was miles away from the spaceport; now he remembered that after the area of factories and warehouse petered out, there was a buffer zone of farm land. If the Guardians were coming here, it might offer cover for a time.

The factory district stretched for nearly three kilometers before the stretch of greenery suddenly appeared, a blaze of different shadows across the night. It was crossed by the lighted ramps of the roadway, but the farmland itself stretched for a good ten kilometers before the city proper bulked against the night.

A dozen times in that journey Case came close to throwing away his luggage. If he had been less tired, he might have done so; but the stubbornness made him keep on with it, until at last he stumbled from the road into the farm.

There was an electric tingle as he moved through the bug barrier along the roadside, and then there was a sudden strange silence. The rain had stopped completely, the clouds separating to reveal a low-riding crescent moon and a number of bright star points.

Once as he moved along the street a patrol car appeared in the distance. He ducked into an alley, and the car glided by silently. There had been no alarm; they could not have intercepted his call to Takoa.

There was stubble remaining from the fall harvesting and a great deal of mud between the rows. Case splashed through the mud, trying to put distance between the road and himself—and then saw a long building loom out of the darkness. As he came closer he saw that it was a garage for the great farming equipment.

There was a smaller building, empty and unlocked, which proved to be for the ground cars that brought the equipment operators out from the city. And he noticed a broad dirt road that would have saved him the unpleasant floundering across the field if he had gone on a short distance farther.

There was an empty bench at the back of the building. He closed the doors, moved his luggage there, opened it to remove the balance of Galden's money and several more weapons. Then he stripped off the clothes that he had been wearing for the past forty-eight hours, stood naked in the chill of the garage as he found dry wash in his toilet kit and cleaned himself of his stink. He rubbed depilatory across his chin, then pulled on clean clothing. He left off his boots, however, and made a bed of his other garments across the bench. He could afford two hours for sleep, and he intended to make the most of it.

Case sat up, yawning and stretching the tensions of the uncomfortable bed from his body. It would be a pleasure to sleep further, but there was no time. He pulled on his boots, gathered everything back into the luggage, and then stowed the bags beneath the bench. With luck, it might be months before they were found.

Breakfast consisted of two more of the sandwiches from the bar, gulped down as he walked across the field. Steam rose from the water-soaked ground as the sunlight moved across the ranks of corn stubble. Traffic was starting to move in the factory district, although sparsely enough that he managed to emerge from the field without being discovered.

He found a communications booth, keyed a map of the city. The arena was marked in red at the edge of the city farthest from the spaceport. He memorized the street coordinates and the route of public transportation that would take him there.

There was no feeling of a closed city this morning as he came out looked toward the spaceport; a ship was rising, the blue of its field almost lost in the sun. He gazed at it until it disappeared, and a minute later heard the sound of its thunder.

A bus pulled up at the corner, disgorging a score of workers for the factories—men a step above the drone level because of their aptitudes for machinery or electronics, but still far below the level of citizenship. Yet it was better for them than the drones, the latter living every day empty of purpose.

Case caught the bus before it could pull away, the robot brain beeping a warning at his tardiness. He was the only passenger as they moved across the stretch connecting spaceport with city; and now the fields where he had spent the last hours of the night seemed bleak even under the bright morning sunlight.

He stayed with the bus until it reached a transfer point in the center of the city, then dropped out to spend the next hour in a public park. Again there was no sign of the Guard, or any public surveillance, and he wondered if he had spent the night in nightmare. But he still had one of the nightsticks in his cape and remembered the urgency that underlay Takoa's warning. He kept watch for strangers, for signs of uniform; kept to himself to avoid scrutiny of his face.

And then it was time to head for the arena. A certain strangeness, a tight feeling rose in his chest when the place came into view. This was where he should be now, competing with the others of his age and class for the honors that Earth could bestow. Randel had robbed him of this—the starman would have to pay!

The street of shops was at hand, although quiet at this hour of the morning. But he found the leather workers congregated in the third block, and saw the sign of the twin crimson globes prominent in their midst.

It was little more than a stall, although it seemed to run impossibly far back into the depths of its building. The shop was open to the street and crowded on every side with leather handiwork— sandals, bags, cases of every size and description. There was much bright color here as well, many of the goods worked with bright enamels that reminded him of the mural on the ceiling of Galden's office.

It was time. He looked about for Takoa, but there was no sign of the player. He moved through the shop back to the street, stood on the corner. Five minutes passed—and then he sensed the presence of the man who had come up behind him.

He turned suddenly, saw a man even taller than himself—a player by his carriage.

"Do you wait for Takoa?"

Case nodded. "Where is he?"

"Near. Follow me."

They moved along the street, cut into an alley. Case could see the bulk of the arena above the surrounding structures, its pennants flying in honor of the approaching games. It was obvious that his guide was leading him in that direction. Soon enough they were away from the populated street and entering the field set aside for the carnival. The bright, striped tents were already in place and a number of people moved among them. He could hear the rasp of a power saw intermingled with hammering.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded.

"Through here."

The guide pointed, and they threaded between two of the larger tents, came out to an open space behind them. This was a cul de sac, completely surrounded by the carnival tents and with only the single way to inside.

The Asian player was in the center of the little square, facing away from Case. He was hunched over, his hands clutching his knees.

"Takoa!"

He straightened at Case's call, staggering; and then he turned. He opened his mouth to speak and one hand rose—touching the shaft of the knife in the center of his chest. Then he fell forward.

Case froze for an instant, then moved toward his friend. But before he reached him a weight landed on his back, something heavy struck the base of his skull. He dropped into unconsciousness...

CHAPTER 14

There was a moment of utter blackness, total silence—and then an icy wind slammed into him, bringing driving sleet that chilled his blood, froze his skin. He gasped against the fury of the storm—

And opened his eyes to see someone standing over him, holding an upturned bucket. Water ran in rivulets down his face, soaked into his chest. Case gasped, sputtered, and tried to sit up, but the man with the bucket started to kick him.

"Hold! Let him be for now."

His tormentor looked around, backed away. Case pulled himself up to a kneeling position, using his hands to clear the water from his eyes.

"Get up, coward!"

He was surrounded—there were a dozen of them, a score of players gathered in a tight circle. A few of them were dressed for the streets, but most of them wore only practice briefs.

"What are you doing—"

"Shut up!" A naked foot slammed against his shoulder, knocked him sprawling. "Speak when we ask questions, coward! Why did you kill him?"

Case took his time orienting himself. He saw the blue of the sky cupped in the distance by the rim of an amphitheater; he was in the arena. It was empty except for the group of players.

And then he saw the litter beyond the circle. It bore the uncovered form of Takoa, knife still in his chest. But for that, the Asian might have been sleeping.

Case choked, spat; he shook his head.

"I didn't kill him."

"Liar!" He rolled away from another kick. "You called him from the arena, he went to meet you! He trusted you!"

He shook his head again, looked around to see if they were going to let him stand. He looked closely at each in turn, but there was no sign of the tall player who had guided him to Takoa. He knew none of these men, for Takoa was the only one from his group to be posted to these games.

"What are we going to do with him?"

"Kill him!" said another.

"Kill him!" said a third. "The brand wasn't enough—we should finish what was started!"

"Wait!" It was the oldest of the group, a player perhaps three or four years older than the rest. "Only an outcast could strike another without mercy. He was a player—he would have been a good one. I say give him the chance to earn back his honor as he dies."

"What do you mean, Logan?"

"Let him challenge us—all of us. We will face him one at a time, wearing him down until at last he pays for his crime."

"It's more than he deserves," someone muttered.

"But it will let us keep our own honor," said Logan. "Who will be first—draw lots!"

They drew back, huddled together as someone brought forth a box of numbered buttons; Case saw that this affair had been carefully arranged. His call to Takoa must have been monitored—why bother to hunt him down near the spaceport when they had only to wait for him to walk into their trap?

But why did they kill Takoa? The little Asian had done nothing to dishonor himself, dishonor others. Was friendship then to be a sin? And more important than why—who? Randel had arranged for Case's original disgrace—was this more of his work? But Randel thought him still far from Earth—how could he be involved in this?

There were no answers to the questions plaguing him. And now there was a shout of triumph as one of the players who would judge him received the first number. He seemed happy as he turned to face Case, a

youth barely out of boyhood. One of the others came with weapons, and he selected two short swords, throwing one at Case's feet.

"Pick it up, coward—face a man able to fight back!"

His head was still ringing from the blow that had knocked him out as Case bent to retrieve the sword. His opponent was stripped to briefs and barefoot, while he was still dressed. They had taken his cape, however, and his pockets had been emptied. He wanted to strip off his boots, have the same advantage on the grass as the other—but he was given no chance. The young player moved in with his sword held high beside his face almost before Case had touched his own weapon. Now he was chopping down, forcing Case to roll away. The blade skimmed his shoulder as he caught himself, came to his feet.

"Ah, you're fast, coward—from experience with running?"

He held the sword above his shoulder now, the muscles of his arm bunched in tight knots as it crossed his chest. Case moved back, his boot sliding against the grass. He read the intentions of the other, danced back from another mighty swing.

The other realized that brute strength was not going to be enough. He changed his own blade to a thrust and parry position, the two gladiators circling each other. The others were drawn back to form a natural ten meter circle for the fight.

The youth moved in and the sword tips flashed brightly in the sunlight for a minute, ringing against each other. The attacker pressed forward, caught his hilt against Case's blade and forced it back against his chest.

For a moment they leaned against each other, testing strength. Then Case broke the pressure, pulled back and shoved forward almost in the same motion, pushing the other back. The player danced to keep his position as Case pressed the attack now, making his sword flash again as he worked the other. They were almost to the ring of onlookers before the player found a place to stand.

There was a sudden pause, the players measuring each other again—and then the youth leaped forward, the point of his blade moving past Case's guard. There was a sharp sting in his upper arm and he knew blood was flowing. The youth renewed the attack, using both hands on the

hilt of his sword now, swinging it with all of his strength as he tried to beat Case down against the ground.

Case felt his foot slipping, knew that he was going to fall. He took advantage of the inevitable, although his knee suffered a sharp crack. But he moved around, beat up against the other from a different position. He felt the sweat pouring across his body, knew that it marked his shirt. The stinging sensation still stabbed at his arm, but it was only a slight distraction. He dared not look to see how much blood was spilling—if it was an arterial wound, then he would feel the weakness as his life pumped out. But there was only the sting for now, and so he gave it no attention, concentrating instead on the other.

Suddenly he drew back. His opponent followed through on the move, overreached himself—Case was inside his guard and coming up. The hilts of the swords met, clanged together, Case pressing up. And then he relaxed the pressure for an instant, came back again, and the other's sword went flying across the circle.

The youth drew back, shocked only for an instant. Then he dove barehanded at Case. As the other committed himself Case stepped aside and rapped the passing head with the hilt of his sword. The player fell to the grass, stunned; Case prodded him in the shoulder with the point of his sword, then turned him over.

He looked toward Logan. "You called the rules— shall I finish him?"

"Only a coward strikes an unarmed man."

Their eyes crossed, held steady for a minute; at last Case broke the contact, conceding the contest to Logan. He turned away from the fallen youth, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and two of the others came into the circle to help him to his feet. Case did not watch him back away, but he felt the fire of the youth's gaze on his back.

"I am next!"

He turned, saw another bronzed youth giant advancing into the ring. This one seemed as eager as the first, a broad grin lighting his face.

"This is madness!"

Case swung around, slashing his sword about his head. The nearest danced back from the blade, and he advanced toward the litter, using the sword to clear his path. He stopped when he reached the litter, looking down at his friend. There was no expression at all on Takoa's face despite the blade in his chest; his features were composed, seemed if anything to be at peace.

"I did not kill him!" said Case, looking at them. "What must I do to prove that? I will face any of you in a fair challenge—any one of you, weapons of your choice. I will fight now if you will choose— but if I must face all of you, then strike me down now! Kill me—as someone killed Takoa!"

The tears began then, and he sank to his knees beside Takoa, burying his face against the dead man's breast. The sword slipped from his hand, but none of them approached him until the outburst subsided. He looked up, saw that they had drawn back behind Logan.

Now Logan spoke, choosing his words with care. "Why should we believe you—a branded man? You wear the mark of the coward."

"I wear the brand—I am not guilty!"

He stood, shook his head. "From boyhood my only goal was to challenge in the circle of truth. Can it be possible to spend an entire lifetime in a falsehood?"

"Why are you branded?"

Could he tell them of the deceit of Earth's leaders? The story was too fanciful to bear belief.

He shrugged. "I was played false. Takoa was my friend; he believed in me. Why else would he come to meet me?"

"And why did you kill him?" said Logan, holding up his hand to still a mutter that came from some of the others.

"I did not," said Case. "Who found me? I was unconscious beside him—I was struck down by the same man, the same men, who killed him."

"Your enemies."

"So it must be."

Logan looked at the others a moment, but his thoughts were his own. He glanced back to Case.

"I believe you."

"Thank you."

"Do you know who did this?"

He shook his head. "I do not. There is a man I distrust more than any other—but I do not see how he could be the cause of this."

"Do you intend to search for the guilty ones?"

"I will, if I am permitted. If I can manage to keep myself alive."

Logan turned his head, snapped his fingers. He said something, and a minute later one of the players came up with a basin and bandages to dress Case's arm. For the first time he looked at the damage that had been done, saw that there was less blood than he had expected. It was little more than a deep scratch, although broad; his shirt appeared to have suffered the greatest damage.

Suddenly he felt drained of strength and sagged against the arm of the one dressing the bandage. For a moment he blacked out; then came awake again to the stringent smell of a strong vapor being wafted beneath his nose. Logan helped him to sit up.

"It is bad that someone could use the games to dishonor you, Case. Takoa told us what happened—he was sure that the baton dropped, that you were tricked. Otherwise he would never have helped you as he did—as he tried to do now. We must cleanse ourselves of this shame."

Logan did not realize that he speaking against the leaders of his government. Case glanced at the others, knew that he had gone as far as he could by himself. He could not operate alone—there must be help.

"You are the oldest," he said, and Logan nodded. "How many points do you need to become a Champion?"

"Not many. If I can win first here and again in one more list, then I

shall have the honor."

"We must talk—alone. I trust you to give what I say to those who should know it, can make best use of it, but I do not know these others."

"You do not know me."

"I have always known you," he said. "You are what I would have been—what they would not let me be."

Logan nodded, turned to say something to the others. Someone started the litter, and they followed it from the field, leaving Case alone with the one in whom he had chosen to confide.

He gave Logan the entire story as he knew it. When he told of Randel's self-serving explanation for the treachery the other snorted in disgust. And then he described Galden and the few other Star Masters who were trying to lead the starworlds into a stronger position against Earth's ancient power.

"You say these Star Masters come from beyond the hundred worlds?"

"Randel said that—he believes it."

"Why do you believe this Galden? Why are the Star Masters any more suited to rule than the Masters we already know?"

Case shrugged. "I don't know that they are any better. I do know Randel—I chose against him."

"But in truth, Case, there may be two sets of devils against us. I think you moved too quickly in choosing sides with either of them."

Case touched his forehead. "I had reason."

"Perhaps. And perhaps you chose rightly. But the matter bears closer investigation. Are these two the only rivals? It seems that power has become a very precarious thing these days—witness the measures that have been taken in recent months. A planet-wide curfew, scouring of the undercities—"

"Planet-wide?" asked Case.

"On every hand. There are Guardians everywhere."

"Then my appointment with Takoa was a trap! But—why have they let me go?"

"You're not exactly free. Whoever arranged this little exhibition probably assumes that you are now dead, thanks to our revenged honor."

"It must be Randel!" said Case.

"Or else the Star Masters are already here, on Earth."

The thought was sobering—but answered many questions. Case had been too willing to believe on Garond; he saw now that he had swallowed everything Galden said.

"I almost wish I had stayed with the candlebearer," he said. "A man who will not speak to you cannot lie."

"A Jovian? There is one in this city now—and that is another unusual event that demands examination. He is the first of his kind to come to Earth for over three hundred years."

Suddenly Case was sure that it was the same one.

The candlebearer had been everywhere—in the dungeons, on all of the ships bringing him back, now on Earth itself. The Jovians must be involved in this.

Enemies. The thought had come in the night, but now he was certain that it was a message, a deliberate warning. The menace of the Star Masters must be far greater than even Randel imagined, if it could strike the candlebearers in their fortress world—if it could make them join forces with their most ancient enemy.

"I must see him!" he said. "The candlebearer." Logan nodded once, making the same connection. "It won't be easy—we may have to bring him to us. Right now we have to decide on a place to hide you, before the Guard learns that you are not dead."

"Do you think the Guardians killed Takoa?"

"At the moment it is the best answer. I wonder, though, which set of

masters they serve—or think they serve?"

"Randel," said Case. "I will have to go to him."

"Eventually, yes. For the moment, let me concentrate on the problem at hand."

He studied Case a moment, then shook his head. "Players are born to honor, Case; perhaps we mistakenly believe that others share the same morals. We obey our leaders, for that is the honorable action to take. But if our leaders are lacking that one most important ethic in which we believe, then we are no longer bound to them. Perhaps Earth needs a new set of leaders after all."

For the moment Logan was lost in his thoughts— but Case knew that he was seeing himself as one of those to take control!

CHAPTER 15

The temporary solution to the problem of hiding Case seemed simple: the players took him into their own barracks. There was no one else in the arena to see, and normally no one would come to the barracks without special invitation. Players who had proven themselves in a series of games were accorded a good deal of privacy, and the Masters always kept to themselves, resenting those who still had the chance to win champion status.

"The Guardians will want to see a body," said Case. "They will want proof that I am dead."

"We are working on that," said Logan. "The carnies owe us—we make their livelihood possible. And many of them are unregistered. They'll find us a body to keep the Guard away from their own business."

"The Masters—the attendants: where were they this afternoon?"

"They found business elsewhere. Players are always permitted the repair of their honor."

He slept then, exhausted by the emotional drain of the past two days. He had wondered about the Champions participating in the coming

Games, but Logan laughed.

"They are well away from here, showing off for their sponsors. We won't see them until the final twenty-four hours, when they come to soak the alcohol and other excesses from their system. And of course they would never lower themselves to fraternization with less than their own rank."

When he awoke, a supper tray was waiting. Case found that he was famished for solid food and wolfed the meal quickly. Then he found a small council waiting in the players' lounge, three others that Logan had chosen. They wanted to hear Case's story firsthand.

"Who brought the news of Takoa's murder?" asked Case, when that was done.

Logan shrugged. "A carnie, I thought. A great one for tipping his cap—it was 'Y' lordship' this and 'Y' lordship' that. We checked the lot for him this afternoon, but there's no sign of him. And the others profess not to know him."

"Why did they scour the undercity? What happened to the people there?"

Again Logan shrugged. "According to the government, the undercities are myth, a legend used too long to frighten wayward children. There are no such places, no such creatures—they aren't people, of course. Unregistered persons do not have existence."

"But there were thousands of them!" exclaimed Case. "Did they kill them?"

"I don't know—I have never been there."

"I have," said another. "My sponsor took me down with a slumming party. We had bad liquor and bad food in a very uncomfortable dive. Afterwards my lady said that it was all deliciously wicked."

Another player joined them, stripping off outer wear. He shook his head as he reported to Logan.

"I tried to approach the Jovian's hotel, but he is guarded better than the crown jewels—you can't get within the same block. And the curfew is

already on—I barely made it back. The patrol has also been increased."

"I should get away from here, said Case. "Matters may be calmer in another city."

"If you could wait until the games, the carnies could take you," said Logan. "For now—"

"Any action will have to wait until tomorrow," interrupted the one who had reported. "The city is sealed."

The discussion degenerated after that, no one able to make a worthwhile suggestion. Case sat back, letting their chatter pass by, lost in his own thoughts. And soon enough the light level lowered, then came back again. Others of those in the lounge began to move toward the barracks, and a few minutes later Logan adjourned the meeting.

"Tomorrow," he said. "We can make something happen then."

He waited until the others had left, drew Case back a moment. "You know, potentially we offer one of the most cohesive forces on the planet."

"The organization of players?"

Logan nodded. "Many of us have high-level contacts with the Citizens and the government through our sponsors."

"You're suggesting a political effort."

"Why not? Why shouldn't we have a hand in the control of our planet?"

"It's something to think about."

But as Case made his way to the bed that was his for the night, he knew that Logan had considered power as a goal much too late. The other forces had been working for a long time—years, in the case of the Star Masters, centuries in that of Earth's governing leaders. If there was to be upheaval, the spontaneous demonstrations of groups suddenly power-hungry might help tip the scale against the incumbents, but one of the main forces would win.

He settled on the comfortable hard mattress that was like those he had known since childhood and, despite the turmoil of his thoughts and the

urgency of the situation, found himself relaxing. Perhaps it was the knowledge that there was nothing to be done while the city was a prisoner of the restrictions, but sleep came quickly.

Before he slipped into the dream state, however, he had decided his move: tomorrow he would contact Randel.

He came awake to the touch of a hand on his arm. The barrack was dark, except for the red light indicating the exit and an amber nightlight marking the 'fresher. His internal clock told him it was past midnight.

"Shhh! Case!"

In the dark he could not recognize the whisperer, but he sat up, padded barefoot after the other, following him to the lounge. There, by the single light of a table lamp, he saw that it was the player who had gone into the city.

"I've a message for you," he said, speaking low but not whispering any longer. Case saw that he was fully dressed. "From the candlebearer."

Case blinked, studying the other. He was one of the older players, although younger than Logan. He seemed nervous now, kept glancing around as though to be sure that they were alone and unheard.

"What is it?"

"He wants you to come to him—now."

"What about the curfew?"

"He isn't far—you won't have to enter the city."

He considered, staring at the other. There were questions in his mind, but there seemed little point in asking them. Answers would come from the Jovian, if there were answers to be had.

At last he nodded, returned to the barrack to dress quickly in the fresh clothing that had been supplied by the players. He still had his own cape and the little stunner—the nightsticks taken from the Guardians had disappeared, were gone when they found him, according to Logan. That was another detail that made it seem the ambush had been the work of

the Guardians.

The stunner had discharged somewhat, but there should be power enough left for half a dozen chops. He slipped it into a pocket, then went back to the lounge. His guide was waiting impatiently just within the door between the two rooms, and now he led the way out.

The night was crisp, a sharp chill in the air. Case brought a breath deep into his lungs and felt the needle stabs of early frost. The sky was cloudless, the moon just beginning its descent toward the horizon. The moonlight reflected whitely from the half-frozen dew on the grass.

"Where?"

The guide pointed, and they moved out of the gate, toward the carnival lot. The city rose before them, roofs sloping up from the factories and warehouses toward the rising residential pylons. All seemed black, a city of the dead, except for the navigation beacons on the highest towers.

They moved through the carnival tents, the colorful stripings ghostly gray and white in the night. There was no breeze at all, no sound to be heard except for their own boots gliding across the dew-touched ground. They were moving toward the collection of vans and buses that transported the carnival between cities and served during stops as living quarters for the workers.

The guide stopped, touched Case's shoulder. He pointed to a ground car drawn up a hundred meters beyond the last of the vans.

"There. He's waiting for you."

Suddenly the player was gone, slipping back into the shadows. Case whirled, trying to follow him— then saw a tent quiver. Suspicious from the beginning, he debated going after the messenger; then thought better of it. For better or worse, something was about to happen.

He stayed in the shadows of the tents and then the vans as he moved closer to the car, moving quickly until he was at the end of the cover. The interior of the car was darkened; it was impossible to tell if there was someone waiting—or if it was full of Guardians.

He stopped, held himself against the side of the last van, trying to make

his night vision pierce the car's cover of darkness. Moonlight glinted from the windshield, but no more; there was no sign of movement, of life.

He took a deep breath, held it for a moment; then let it out again slowly. Another—and then he stopped breathing, letting his senses take in every touch of the night around him. His hearing picked up the quivering of machinery supporting the life of the sleeping vans behind him; his olfactories caught a wisp of acridity, sharp smoke expelled that might have come from an exhaust ventilator. But from the car came nothing at all.

Case continued to wait, conscious that his guide was now gone from the area. His internal clock kept track of the passing minutes, counted off ten, and then twenty. He was trying to outwait whoever was in the car, raise their impatience to the point where they would have to take action. Something deep in his thoughts kept insisting that this was a trap, kept urging him to run now, make for the city, try for the undercity.

But if it were a trap, then they knew that he was here—perhaps had sensors that read his body heat and told them exactly where he was standing. Suddenly it seemed pointless to continue.

He touched the stunner, drew oxygen into his system, and moved cautiously away from the van. Now he was in the open, clearly visible in the moonlight. He approached the car quickly, waiting for something to happen, fighting the urge to turn and run.

When he was ten meters from the car the interior lights came on, revealing a single figure wearing the hooded cloak of the candlebearer. Case relaxed, feeling the tension ease from his body. The car's door opened for him, and he came up to it, slipped into the seat. The door closed, and with it the lights went out, but there was still a soft glow coming from the dash, enough to let him see as the Jovian turned to him, slipped the hood from his face.

"Ah! It's the handsome young man who stole my Imperial cluster."

It was not the Jovian—it was Citizen Anders!

CHAPTER 16

Case tensed—but before he could move there was a sharp sting against his thigh, another in the meat of his shoulder. He hung there, paralyzed instantly by the drug, unable to move, to turn his head. His hand was inches from the stunner, his eyes wide, staring into the grinning face of the Citizen. He was frozen in that instant of time, a sudden rush of perspiration wetting his face and his tunic the only sign of continuing life force.

The Citizen said something, but there was a ringing in his ears; he couldn't make out the words. Suddenly there were others in the car; one directly in his vision took over the controls as the Citizen moved aside, another crept into the very corner, no more than a shadow. If there were more, he could not tell.

The car was moving, the surge of acceleration nearly throwing Case off-balance. Fire ran through his system now, cold in every joint; the two sensations passed each other, separately felt even as they blended. He ached, but remained conscious enough to know that they were speeding someplace.

Then the car drew up, the newcomers coming around to manhandle him. The Citizen remained in the background, approving—although he clucked his tongue once as they accidentally knocked Case's head against a doorjamb.

An elevator surged, stopped. There was another moment of manhandling, and then the stab of another needle, scarcely felt in the overriding pain of the paralysis. Every muscle surged at the same time, the hand that had reached for the stunner slamming against his hip, the other slapping his thigh with all of the force in his body. His knees crumpled, throwing him forward to bang his head on the floor. When the stars settled behind his eyes they had picked him up, shackled him to a chair.

Case gasped for breath, head hanging back and mouth wide open. The sensation of pain was still felt in every joint of his body, and his extremities were trembling. At last he managed to ease his eyes shut, lick his lips. He straightened, opened them again to look at the Citizen.

"You are a naughty boy," said Anders. "I do want my cluster back. What did you do with it?"

Case stared, and then there was another needle pricking his arm. A

lassitude spread over him, the pain still there but deadened. His head lolled to one side.

"We will try again—the cluster! Where is it?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do with it?"

"Bought passage..."

Anders stiffened. "Passage? Off-world?"

"Yes..."

The affability was gone, leaving cold eyes staring. The Citizen turned away, obviously controlling rage. Nearly a minute passed before he turned back to Case.

"This game you are playing—who sent you?"

There were several possible answers to the question—Randel, originally selecting him to go off-world. But on Garond Case had committed himself to a new power, and Galden directed his return to Earth. Now there was the possibility that both were acting against his interests, which left him leaderless, directionless. In that case, he was acting for himself.

He chose the last firm commitment as answer: "The Star Master."

The breath hissed from Anders. "Impossible!"

Case waited to be questioned again, the minutes dragging on. His eyes blinked, but he could not find the strength to move them, to lift his head; he saw what passed before his line of vision, saw Anders cross the room, but nothing more. For a time that might have been minutes, might have been many hours, there was the absence of activity near him. His internal clock had been disconnected; he was aware of time, but only as an abstraction that did not matter to the real world of his existence in this chair.

And then someone was in the room again, paying attention to him. There was another needle, and gradually a measure of control returned to his body— bringing an awareness of his own smell, of what his body had

done. He tried to sit up, to lift an arm, but was drained of his strength. Even the feeling of hunger was dulled now, little more than a lesser distraction.

"Take it easy. I've got to get you cleaned up."

It was an attendant, a human servant, although no one he had ever seen before. The man lifted him, moving his hundred kilos as though he were an infant. He was undressed, moved into a shower, propped against the tile wall as the hot water pounded his flesh. Then the spray shut off and the attendant washed him, rinsed him, helped him stand in the soft movement of drying air.

When he was dressed in loose pajamas, the attendant took him to another room where a tray was waiting. Case nearly fainted at the smell of the food, his hands trembling as he tried to pick up the implement. The attendant fed him with a large spoon, the player helpless, his hands trembling in his lap.

But his body was soothed, eased; the food replaced the emptiness, the warmth moving gently through his middle. There was still some left on the tray when he shook his head, settled back in the chair with a sigh.

"How long have I been here?"

The attendant was answering no questions. He helped him stand, move to a bed, then eased him beneath the covers. The bed was fluid-filled, adjusting to him, and Case closed his eyes immediately. The smell of cleanliness was still with him, one of the most satisfying odors he had ever experienced. That far corner of his mind that had remained aware during the drugged state knew that much time had passed—days at least, perhaps even more. But it couldn't have been too much more, or he would have died of dehydration.

Days, then. As he slipped into exhausted sleep, that distant thought wanted to know why he had been abandoned.

The attendant came in a moment after Case woke, checked him with a few simple medical instruments. Now the player saw that he was in a room designed for an invalid: a hospital bed whose monitoring equipment was not now in use. The room was adorned by a single dresser and a nightstand by the bed that held only a carafe of water and a tumbler. The

bed might have been in any hospital.

And then he realized the room was windowless.

This room might serve an invalid—but it would equally serve as a prison.

"Feel strong enough to get up?"

The attendant helped him from the bed when he nodded, sat him at a small table. He left, to return a moment later with a breakfast tray. This time Case was pleased to see that the trembling had subsided enough to let him handle his own implements.

The questions started when he pushed the tray away: "Where am I? How long have I been here?"

But the attendant kept silent, would speak only when it was absolutely necessary. He opened the 'fresher, made up the bed and laid out fresh pajamas while Case took care of his needs. When the player indicated that he wanted to stay up, the man shrugged, taking the soiled linen and the tray away. The door closed behind him, a featureless oblong set in the wall. After a while Case summoned the strength to stand, to go and try it. But any controls were on the other side.

He was trembling violently again when he managed to return to his chair. For a time he dozed; then came awake again, to sit with his thoughts. His internal clock was once more functioning: when it told him that time enough had lapsed for lunch to be imminent, he was hungry—although he had no way of knowing the actual hour. It could as well have been midnight. A few minutes later the attendant came in again with his tray, and when he finished, he was ready to go back to bed.

Two days passed in that fashion, Case spending long hours asleep, half-doing during the hours when he was up. The attendant came regularly with the meals, once each day changing the bedding. His only words were to ask if Case were comfortable, needed something else. He could not be drawn into any further conversation.

The player drifted through those hours, his mind resting from the ordeal of the drugs. Questions buzzed at the lowest level of consciousness, but he ignored their insistent demands, chose to accept the healing period

that had been given him. It was restful to do nothing but slip through the hours.

On the third day, he woke to find that he was ravenous for breakfast. He was up before the tray came, wolfed the food; when it was gone, he regretted that there was not more. The trembling was gone from his frame now as he stood, although he was still weak. But he was ready to start functioning again.

He spent several moments questioning the attendant again, this time annoying the man. After a time the servant unsealed a viewscreen, showed him the stock of tapes. Case wasted several minutes trying to punch a news channel, before giving up; there was only the library to draw upon, and he had never been interested in such distractions.

He began to pace the room, found that four steps and then a half-turn carried him to the door; the same amount brought him back to the wall. He began walking the paces faster, energy demanding to be used, fist slamming against his palm, head bobbing as he thought of things he wanted to say to Citizen Anders—to anyone who would come and talk to him.

Soon enough sweat was pouring from his body, and his legs suddenly weakened. He collapsed into the chair, aware that his heart was pounding rapidly, gasping for breath.

But that marked a change. He dozed for a while, tested the strength of his body when he woke again, dropping to the floor. Five push-ups and he was ready to collapse again, the perspiration pouring from his body. When he managed to get up again, he drank all of the water in the carafe and refilled it in the 'fresher.

His imprisonment lasted, but after that he began to exercise regularly, rebuilding his strength. The amount of food on his tray never increased, so that soon he was constantly hungry. But the period of exercising grew longer, increased from once each morning and afternoon to twice each period; then the two periods grew long enough to fuse together, become one long one again.

On the tenth day after beginning the exercises, he was ready to act. When he heard the sound of the attendant bringing the breakfast tray he was on his feet, moving toward the door. The panel slid aside and the man

stepped in—to be dropped by a chop across the base of the skull.

The attendant dropped the tray and fell to the floor, the door panel sliding shut behind him. Case reached it, worked it open, wedged it with the chair. He listened for a minute, but there was no sign that anyone had heard. Then he stepped into the hall, moved to the door at the end. It was a normal panel, opening into a kitchen; that, too, was deserted. Spotting a rack of knives, he took one of the more wicked ones as a weapon, continued through to another corridor—this one familiar.

He was in Citizen Anders's apartment.

The discovery did not surprise him. Moving cautiously and listening at every door for five minutes told him the apartment was empty. He hurried back to the room where he had been imprisoned and bent to strip the attendant of his clothes; there wasn't time to search for his own.

Fortunately the man was only an inch shorter than Case, although slighter; his garments were tight, but serviceable. When he was dressed, Case took the carafe and emptied it in the attendant's face.

He came up, sputtering, arms flailing—to be caught by the scruff of the neck and thrown heavily into the chair that still wedged the door open. He hit hard, right hand flying up before his face—and then the point of the knife was pressing his jugular.

"Where is everyone?"

The man blinked, decided to answer. "I don't know—they been gone for weeks now."

"Leaving only you?"

"They sent me to take care of you. Take it easy, will you? They didn't tell me to be easy on you, but I was."

"Thank you. I hope I don't have to hurt you."

The attendant blanched, saw that he meant it. He shook his head. "Please!"

"Where is Anders?"

"I don't know—I don't know him. My supervisor sent me from the hospital; the guy downstairs let me in. I found you where they said I would, gave you the shots I was supposed to. Another few hours and you'd have been dead!"

Case straightened, letting the knife drop. The man was nothing more than what he seemed and not too intelligent at that; it was surprising that he had been selected from the drone ranks for service.

He considered for a minute: he did not want to tie up the man for there was no way of knowing when Anders or his people would return.

"I'm going to leave you in this room," he said. "I want you to stay here for two—no, three hours. Don't open the door, don't even think about stepping out until that time has passed. Do you understand?"

"Anything you say."

"Good. Do you have a key for the elevator?"

He shook his head. "The guy downstairs brought me up. I haven't gone out since."

That was not so good. Without a key there was no way of operating the elevator—he certainly wasn't going to call the man downstairs and ask to be let down!

"I'm going to leave you now," he said. "Remember, three hours: not a minute before. Move the chair."

He paced quickly through the apartment, returned to the master suite. Before, he had stepped in here just long enough to be sure that the rooms were empty. Now he turned on the lights, looked around. He saw the bell for the fire jewel cluster still in its place—and next to it something that he recognized. He crossed the room quickly, and laughed.

It was the escape wire he had used the night of stealing the cluster. Anders had retrieved it and brought it inside—now Case saw that it was in the exact place where the cluster had rested; the bell was moved to one side.

A goad to the Citizen's pride? Whatever, it was welcome.

The leather harness was still attached, simplifying matters. Case took the gadget, moved to draw the draperies from the broad windows.

It was night, proving that the hours in the closed room bore no reality to the true clock. The attendant had begun the routine when he found Case, and kept to his own schedule. Case looked about, saw a clock above the bed. It was nearly ten.

A heavy snow was falling, drifting gently in the absence of a wind, filling the floor of the balcony and frosting the railing to a depth of nearly twenty centimeters. Case opened the door, was struck by a stab of cold. He had been too long in the controlled environment of his prison. He shivered.

He closed the door again and crossed to the Citizen's dressing room. The closets were stuffed with clothes of every description, sign that Anders did intend to return at some point. He pawed through several in turn, until at last he found a weather cape. It was gaudy, to his taste, but it fitted well enough. Wrapping it around his shoulders, he sealed it down almost to his waist.

Back to the balcony. His boots scuffed deep tracks in the snow as he pushed his way to the railing, but behind him the snow was already sifting into the runs. A few hours and the marks would be obliterated.

He brushed snow enough from the railing to clip the medallion in place, fastened the harness to his waist, and tested the pull. It seemed strong enough, and he wasted no time in straddling the railing, then dropping over. The wire sung through the leather in his hands—and jerked to a sudden halt as before. Then the wire began to play out at its steady hundred meters a minute.

It was a different sensation, dropping through this snow-filled night. He was moving faster than the flakes about him, so that the snow seemed to be falling up. Everything about him was absolutely still, the snow smothering all possible noise. He counted, as before, but somewhere he miscalculated: the ground was there before he was ready, coming up to hit him hard. His knees buckled and he rolled through the drifts, landing on the side of his face and with one ear filled with the icy snow.

Case undipped the harness and stood up, brushing himself off. He wondered if Anders would want to keep the wire as a souvenir a second

time.

He looked about, trying to orient himself. The tower stood apart from its nearest neighbors, and now he saw the glow of the entrance. Moving that way brought him to the street.

But where to go now? The last time he had come here via the Toad's aircar, and they had left the same way. He didn't even know his way about this sector.

He moved; that was the essential thing. Wherever he decided to come to rest, he wanted as much distance as possible between Anders's home and himself. Even if the attendant kept his word, the alarm would be out soon enough.

He hurried through the snowy night, the streets empty of any other traffic. Fifteen minutes was sufficient to bring him into a commercial district, the buildings close together now; there were Citizen's stores on both sides, and ahead, the light of a hostelry flooded the street from the other side. Case wanted to avoid that. He stayed in the shadows, looking toward the lighted entrance as he hurried by.

And then he stopped, saw several figures coming out. One of them was the Jovian—the candlebearer! And close behind him came Senator Calidor.

The party of half a dozen stopped inside the weather screen, obviously waiting for a vehicle. Case drew back against the building at his back, staring at the candlebearer. Suddenly the Jovian lifted his head, looked straight at the player—across that distance their eyes met! Beneath the cowl of his hood yellow orbs poured fire into the night.

And Case saw that the candlebearer was shackled!

CHAPTER 17

Help me!

The cry came as clear as though it had been shouted in Case's ear. He looked closer at the five men around the prisoner, saw that Calidor and perhaps one other were Citizens, a third, a human attendant.

But the other two were Guardians.

He still had the knife he had taken from the kitchen—and now he wished that he had spared the time to search more closely for better weapons. But if he had, then he would not have been here until too late.

Vehicle lights appeared, punching holes through the snow. There were two of them, ground cars, the first drawing up now before the entrance. The doors opened, the driver getting out as a mark of respect. The Guardians hustled the prisoner into the vehicle, the Citizens followed, leaving no room for their servant. He stood back until his masters were seated and the doors closing, then moved toward the second car.

The first vehicle moved out, and Case cut across the street behind it, reaching the second car just as the door started to close. He caught it, held it back long enough to slip into the back seat beside the servant.

"What? You can't come—"

The point of the knife touched the driver's throat.

"Shut up! You know where they are going?"

The man nodded, his mouth still hanging open.

Case pressed harder, the knife point puncturing the skin, and the man turned white.

"Follow them! Act normally, as though nothing has happened."

The servant was crowded into the corner, cowed by the knife. Now Case gave him a sour look to emphasize the bad position he was in and settled back as the driver sent the car after the other.

It was impossible to pick out individual landmarks through the snow, and he would not have recognized them in any event; suddenly he was aware that the darkness was more widespread on either side, and realized that they were moving toward the spaceport. The guess was confirmed minutes later when they passed through an open gate.

Now Case could see light pouring from the open port of a ship. The first car stopped a hundred meters away, a portable weather screen coming to

life. His own driver stopped just behind it—and before he could make any move, Case silenced him with a rabbit punch. He turned on the servant, found that the man had fainted in his fright.

The ship was small, an intersystem freighter that rarely strayed from its tramp course through the asteroid belt. Such vessels were usually crewed by no more than two, and sometimes a single man would be hungry enough to take it out by himself. The insignia of its Earth registry was marked beside the port, and now a single figure appeared there.

The first of the Guardians got out of the car, turned to reach in. Case slipped out of his weather cape and opened his door, moving quickly to close it again before the light flare could mark him. He moved across the space between the two cars, chopping out at the Guardian as soon as he reached him.

His blow landed on the shoulder rather than where he had aimed, but the man was knocked away from the door. He cursed, spinning around. One hand reached for the numbness, then went for his stick, but Case was kicking, caught him square in the gut. The stick flew from his hand and was lost in the darkness.

The other Guardian was coming out now, his stick ready to use. Case ducked as the man chopped with the beam at its widest, dove low to tackle his ankles. Before the Guardian could bring his stunner to bear, Case picked him up bodily and slid him over the top of the car. He scrabbled for a hold, then slid across on his back, to fall on the other side.

Case wasted no time in going around; he went over the car after him, landing heavily in the middle of the Guardian's back. The man grunted once as he sprawled forward in the snow, cracking his chin. He stirred, trying to lift himself, and then was still.

But now the player had his stick and turned back to the car. The driver was only a servant, but at the cursed order of Calidor he came out—only to be hit by the beam of the stick and fall unconscious beside the Guardian.

The player slid into the seat beside the Citizens, the stick ready to stun. Now Calidor recognized him, his eyes widening in shock.

"Case!—then Anders was right! But... he said you were out of the way!"

"But not dead. Why is he prisoner?"

He indicated the Jovian, who had turned to watch, his face well-enough lit to show that the candlebearer's usual calm expression had not changed.

"He is an enemy," said Calidor. "He is in the pay of the Star Masters."

"You lie," said Case, flatly. He looked out of the car, saw that the ship had closed its port. He touched the other Citizen with the stick. "Can you drive?"

The man nodded, his face colorless, coated with perspiration. He looked as though he wanted to be sick.

"Drive us!" the player ordered.

He looked to Calidor. "Where?"

"I don't know." Then he reached a decision. "To the arena."

"Why there?" asked Calidor. The Senator was obviously frightened, but he summoned courage. "Case, you're working for Earth—why are you doing this?"

"I'm working for no one," replied Case. "Certainly not for you. Drive, I said!"

The Citizen moved into the front seat and took the controls; the doors closed and the lights went off until Case ordered him to turn them on again.

"The keys," he said, holding out his hand. The Senator shook his head. "For the shackles."

"I don't have them."

"Who does?"

"No one—they weren't going to come off."

"You were going to kill him without a chance?"

"He is an enemy," the Senator said again. "You must understand,

Case—he and his kind threaten us, threaten our very lives. They are more of a menace than the Star Masters!"

Case sat back, chewing on his lip. The windows were mirrors reflecting back the light, the world outside completely invisible to him. He looked at the candlebearer, at a loss to know what move to make next. For the moment he was in control, but there was no place to go. The entire planet was hostile—he had been betrayed on every side.

And the only man he had ever called friend was dead.

The car whined softly as its air cushions carried it over the snow-wet street. The sound was soothing as he settled back in the seat. The senator had sunk into his own corner, was looking at the faint images beyond the window at his hand, his mind obviously busy.

Randel.

The thought entered his mind, and he knew instantly that it was a stranger; it did not *belong* with his own thoughts, but moved among them, gently insistent. Again he looked toward the Jovian, saw that the yellow eyes were meeting his own.

Contact Randel. Go to him.

Why? he demanded. *He is the enemy!*

Randel. He is the answer.

Case was suddenly sure that the candlebearer had been in contact with him since that first meeting in the Garond dungeons—and perhaps even before that moment. The Jovian had been directing him— chose the moment when he would make his escape from Anders's apartment. It was not random chance that brought him to the hostelry in time to see that the candlebearer was being taken away.

"Randel—where is he?"

Calidor was startled by the sudden question. He blinked, shrugged. "I'm sure I don't know—I don't keep track of everyone on the planet."

"Can you contact him?"

The senator did nothing for a moment, until Case made a move in his direction with the stick. Calidor winced, saw that he meant to follow through. He opened a panel in the back of the seat, revealing a communications screen. He keyed the starman's name and the screen searched—and paused. There was a hesitation, and then the voice of the starman came, although the screen remained blank.

"Calidor? What is it, man?"

The senator indicated Case. "Our young Lochinvar has returned."

"What? Case—what are you doing here?"

The player said, "I don't know. I don't know much of anything. Can you come to the arena at the spaceport?"

"Yes." A hesitation. "Why?"

"I don't know why!" said Case, exploding. "Just come—can you do that much? Or do I ask too much in payment for the brand you made me wear?"

"I'll come. It may take a while, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good. We'll be waiting—we'll all be waiting."

They were almost through the bulk of the city now; the arena loomed ahead. The pennants were gone from the battlements; there were no signs of life as Case ordered the car onto the field. Once through the gate they seemed surrounded by darkness barely relieved by the snow that was still falling lightly. The car settled to the ground near the gate, and they were completely alone; no tracks marked the new-fallen snow to show where others had been.

"And now?" asked the Senator.

"We wait."

He could feel the ancient weight of the amphitheater around them; it seemed to press down on his soul, on his mind, that great tradition that extended back into the history of Earth—back before the games were ever thought of. From the beginning of Earth's civilizations there had been

players, games.

The ancient Hellenes founded the Olympics, a tradition of peaceful rivalry that was renewed over two thousand years later, at a time when the planet faced the danger of destroying itself. Those new bearers of the eternal light were a small help in finding planetary peace.

After the Greeks came the Romans, with their gladiators. Later there were knights errant, and then men proud enough to face down the challenge of death in the code duello. In time there were again peaceful competitions that grew to focus the attention of nations, and from these, from the new Olympiads, came the games.

There had been heroes always, deified, honored, made legendary. And now there was Wayne Case, chosen as pawn by forces he could not himself control—he was being asked to be a hero, to be a Champion.

Danger!

The thought came slashing—but it was too late. There was sudden commotion, ground cars moving through the gate, an air vehicle hovering overhead to pin the waiting car in its spotlight. Case moved, peered into the night—and Calidor was triumphant.

"Your rescuer is late, Case—too late. Our friends have arrived."

The aircar was lowering, the ground cars drawing up. Now the first opened its doors, and Citizen Anders stepped out.

"I believe the game is ours," said Calidor.

"Not yet!" said Case. He clenched the nightstick tightly, his thumb touching the button. "I still have you!"

"But what can you do with me? Look—the force is superior on every hand. I thought Bronas would give the word from the ship, and I was right."

Anders stopped twenty meters from the car, and now Case recognized the tall man standing with him—Logan!

"Come out!" called Anders. "End this foolishness, Case. Stop being such

a trouble, and we will make it easy for you, youngster."

"Start the car!"

"To what use?" asked the Citizen who had been driver. "They have us cut off—there's no way out."

Case looked at the Jovian, saw that the fleshless features were still impassive.

"Can you use this?" He held out the stick, and the candlebearer extended his shackled hands to take it, holding it lightly. The player received the sensation of extreme distaste. "Keep it on them—use it if you have to!"

He opened the door, slid out. Anders and Logan were waiting, their reinforcements drawn up behind them. There were less than Case had first thought— no more than eight or ten. Among them he recognized several of the players, the ones that Logan had brought into their meeting—the one who had led him to Anders's trap.

"Your standards of association have changed," Case said.

Logan grinned. "No—but it may be time to bring them into the open. Are you surrendering?"

"No—and your friends are under the beam."

"Ah!" It was Anders. "And you think you have us stalemated. I must confess that I seriously underestimated you, young man—I was saving you for my private pleasure, after this matter was done with. I should have killed you."

"Who are you?" demanded Case.

"Why—you haven't guessed! I thought you were on to us from the time you came back to Earth— sent back by that fool, Galden! But he has already been dealt with, although I had great hopes for Garond. But it will come around once we have secured our positions on the other starworlds. We are the Star Masters."

Case stared, looked at Logan. "You?"

"The need for new leadership has been apparent for a long time, Case—the government of Earth does not govern, it abdicates its responsibilities to a small elite. Fortunately a few of them have seen the waste, understand the glory that can be ours once Earth again leads the starworlds!"

"And you would be a Champion?"

"It is not necessary—there are larger rewards that I will taste first."

"And so you dishonor the games."

"Dishonor them? That is a matter of interpretation. I chose to think that I have used the games to advance myself, to make myself useful. I am young—my time will come. Now I serve the Star Masters, but in time I shall be one!"

"Have you so degraded yourself that you can no longer accept a challenge?"

Logan smiled. "You would test me? With what weapon?"

"No weapon—freestyle, man against man. A fight to prove which of us is Champion. Do you dare?"

Logan rubbed his chin, looked at the players behind him. Then he shrugged, turned back.

"Why not?, I kill you now, in fair fight, and the matter will be over. The Jovian will surrender, and it will be done."

"And if I kill you?" asked Case, softly.

"Why—you will be the better man! You will be Champion. I don't think you will live too long with the honor, but so be it. I accept your challenge—I give you the chance to die with honor."

"One more question," said Case. "Who killed Takoa?"

"Why... I did."

For twenty seconds Case said nothing; then: "Shall we strip?"

"I suggest shirts only," said Logan. "The footing is rather uncertain, and bound to be uncomfortable to bare skin. Do you agree?"

Case nodded, turned to remove his shirt. There was light enough from the aircar to mark out a circle nearly ten meters, and in less than a minute both were ready. As a last few flakes of snow struck his back, he shivered in the cold air and scuffed a place in the snow. Then Logan advanced to salute him, Case returning the gesture after a barely perceptible pause.

They faced off, waited a moment even though there was no Master to drop the baton. Case was the taller by perhaps three centimeters, but Logan's shoulders were broader, his reach longer. In a normal meeting they would be well-matched.

Hands held out from their sides, each seemed to be waiting for the other to make the first move. At last Logan stepped forward, feinted—then crossed with a slashing chop of his right hand.

Case followed the first false move—and danced back out of the way of the strike. Before the other could recover he moved in, his fists pummeling the player in the belly. They clinched, Logan's arms wrapping tight about him and squeezing; then Case broke the hold by forcing his hands upward, and chopped down against the other's exposed throat.

The joint where little finger joined the palm slammed against the collar bone, a stab of agony fiery through his whole lower arm. For an instant it was useless, and he moved back—but the other had been hurt also, pain creasing his forehead. His right shoulder was raised high, the fingers of that hand working against the hurt.

They circled, both realizing that this battle would not be easy. Suddenly Logan kicked out, the hard sole of his boot cracking the side of Case's knee. At the same time Case drove his lowered shoulder toward the other's gut, jamming the man's side with his elbow. His momentum carried him forward, Logan forced to give way—and then they tumbled to the ground, rolling in the snow.

The chill was a sudden shock, making his eyes sting as Case tried to maneuver himself on top of the other. For an instant he crooked his arm around Logan's throat—and then the other was pushing him over and the hold was lost as the back of Case's head slammed against the ground.

He brought his feet up as Logan dived for him, kicking out against the thighs but catching only one. Logan grunted, landing heavily but knocked away from his target. Now they rolled together, crushing the snow in a wild fan pattern, neither able to gain.

On top for an instant, Case slammed his shoulder against Logan's chin, snapping the other's head back. The player's fingers loosened, and Case was up, reaching down to twist Logan's arm behind his back. But the other recovered quickly, rolled out of the way, came to his own feet.

They faced each other, feet spread apart for stance, hands open as the arms hung forward from their hunched shoulders. Their faces were red from the snow, their bodies marked in a dozen places where blows had landed strong enough to bruise. Case wiped his mouth, shook his head to clear the snow water from his eyes—then rushed forward, hands out as though to grab.

Logan moved back to avoid the rush—and Case's foot kicked out, slammed against his thigh. Case rolled, and brought the other up, catching him in the gut, and this time Logan went down. Before he could recover Case was on him, the one arm pinned back. But instead of forcing him down, now he was reaching for Logan's ankle, was picking him bodily into the air. He turned, keeping him stretched at arm's length over his head. Logan bucked, trying to break free as the corded muscles stood out against Case's arms, his back. The younger man's face was contorted with the strain of holding him there as he continued to pirouette, until he faced Citizen Anders and the others.

And then he threw Logan at them.

CHAPTER 18

Anders went back, those nearest him falling as well, bowled over by the hurtling form of Logan. Before any of them could recover Case was among them, reaching down, pulling the Citizen from the tangle. He caught Anders's arm, pulled it sharply behind his back, his forearm against the man's throat.

"Tell them to drop their weapons or you die!"

The warning hissed through clenched teeth, and Case tightened his

hold as proof. The Citizen's face was red, and now he choked, gasped for breath.

"All... right! Let me breathe!"

Logan was up, shaking his head to clear red haze from his eyes. He saw what Case had done.

"You can't get away, man! There's too many against you!"

"Will you throw away this one's life?" He twisted the arm and Anders jerked forward. "And try to take mine in the process?"

Suddenly there was darkness, the light from the aircar cutting off. Case, Logan, the others, looked up to see the car shooting up, trying for altitude. But before it cleared the rim of the amphitheater there were other cars, bearing the marking of the Guardians—three of them, then twice that many. They swooped low, beacons lighting the entire playing field as they took up position, and a warning voice boomed from one.

"Hold your positions! No one move!"

Other ground cars were entering as well, as many as there were in the air. They cut their air, settled into the snow, and Randel stepped from the one in the lead. At the sight of him Case relaxed his hold, releasing Anders.

They were in a room at Guard headquarters, the three of them: Case, Randel and the candlebearer. The Jovian's shackles had been removed and medical technicians had just departed after checking the condition of the two who had been prisoners.

"I must be a fool," said Randel. "Either that, or I'm too old for this business. I never dreamed that the Star Masters were a scheme hatched here on Earth—I was ready to believe that they came from beyond the hundred worlds. I was sure of it."

The Jovian spoke for the first time, his voice rusty, as though long unused. They had to strain to hear him, his words like smoke drifting from a fire.

"There are others, beyond the starworlds—a race for almost every

planet hospitable to man. Some of them are older than our race, and they have space-flight—others are just discovering it. They will come this way in time. Perhaps not this year, but soon enough."

"You," said Randel. "You hate Earth—why did you come to our aid?"

"We do not hate Earth—we hate what Earth has done to us. You drove us out, called us demons, forced us to make a home on inhospitable globes. Perhaps we would have done nothing—but the power scheme of the Star Masters would have led to civil war across the hundred worlds. Every planet would suffer, and many would die. We could not permit that."

"You can foretell the future?"

"We can read trends. We knew that the Star Masters had to be stopped."

He coughed, throat rasping, and reached for water. Randel turned to Case.

"I have done you wrong, player—we will try to make amends. There is a good medical center here, and they can draw on every technician on Earth— I'm sure we can remove that brand."

The Jovian spoke. "It goes too deep—it is marked in his soul."

He came to Case, urged the player to relax, touched him with his long bony fingers. The touch felt cool and strangely soft as Case closed his eyes. The candlebearer pressed the mark on his forehead, then cupped his temples in both hands.

Rest. The command was powerful, demanding. You will heal, you will be well. Sleep now, and when you wake all will be as it should be. Rest. ...

When his eyes opened, only Randel was in the room. He blinked, yawned, sat up straight. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep." The starman smiled, handed him a small mirror. Case held it up, saw his own reflection. For a moment he did not understand—and then he saw that the mark was gone.

"Welcome back, player," said the starman. "Welcome back."