

THE CLOAK AND THE STAFF

By

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Descending in the icy grey November dawn from the crowded bus that had brought the airline passengers over the mountains from Bologna—as frequently happened in wintertime, the airport at Milan, Italy, was fogged in; and the courier ship, like the commercial jets, had been forced to set down in Bologna—Shane Evert caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of a small stick figure, inconspicuously etched on the base of a lamppost.

He did not dare to look at it directly, but the side glance was enough. He snagged a taxi and gave the driver the address of the Aalaag Guard Headquarters for the city.

“*Efreddo, Milano,*” said the driver, wheeling the cab through the nearly deserted morning streets.

Shane gave him a monosyllable in a Swiss accent, by way of agreement. Milan was indeed cold in November. Cold and hard. To the south, Florence would be still soft and warm, with blue skies and sunlight. The driver was probably hoping to start a conversation and find out what brought his human passenger to an alien HQ, and that was dangerous. Ordinary humans did not love those who worked for the Aalaag. If I say nothing, Shane thought, he may be suspicious. No, on second thought, he’ll just think from the Swiss accent that I’m someone who has a relative in trouble in this city and doesn’t feel like conversation.

The driver spoke of the summer now past. He regretted the old days when tourists had come through.

To both these statements, Shane gave the briefest of responses. Then there was silence in the cab, except for the noise of travel. Shane leaned his staff at a more comfortable angle against his right leg and left shoulder, to better accommodate it to the small passenger compartment of the cab. He smoothed his brown robe over his knees. The image of the stick figure he had seen still floated in his mind. It was identical with the figure he himself had first marked upon a wall beneath the triple hooks with the dead man on them, in Aalborg, Denmark, over half a year ago:

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But he had not marked this one on the lamppost. Nor, indeed, had he marked any of the other such figures he had glimpsed about the world during the last eight months. One moment of emotional rebellion had driven him to create an image that was now apparently spawning and multiplying to fill his waking as well as his sleeping hours with recurring nightmares. It did no good to remind himself that no one could possibly connect him with the original graffito. It did no good to know that, all these eight months since he had been an impeccable servant of Lyt Ahn.

Neither fact would be of the slightest help if for some reason Lyt Ahn, or any other Aalaag, should believe there was cause to connect him with any one of the scratched figures.

What insane egocentric impulse had pushed him to use his own usual pilgrim sect disguise as the symbol of opposition to the aliens? Any other shape would have done as well. But he had had the alcohol of the Danish bootleg aquavit inside him; and with the memory of the massive Aalaag father and son in the square, watching the death of the man they had condemned and executed—above all, with the memory of their conversation, which he alone of all the humans there could understand—also burning in him, for one brief moment reason had flown out the window of his mind.

So, now his symbol had been taken up and become the symbol of what was obviously an already

existent human underground in opposition to the Aalaag, an underground he had never suspected. The very fact that it existed at all forecast bloody tragedy for any human foolish enough to be related to it. By their own standards, the Aalaag were unsparingly fair. But they considered humans as “cattle”; and a cattle owner did not think in terms of being “fair” to a sick or potentially dangerous bull that had become a farm problem...

“*Eccolo!*” said the cab driver.

Shane looked as bidden and saw the alien HQ. A perfectly reflective force shield covered it like a coating of mercury. It was impossible to tell what kind of structure it had been originally. Anything from an office building to a museum was a possibility. Lyt Ahn, First Captain of Earth, in his HQ overlooking St. Anthony’s Falls in what had once been the heart of Minneapolis, scorned such an obvious display of defensive strength. The grey concrete walls of his sprawling keep on Nicollet Island had nothing to protect them but the portable weapons within, though these alone were capable of leveling the metropolitan area surrounding in a handful of hours. Shane paid the driver, got out, and went in through the main entrance of the Milan HQ.

The Ordinary Guards inside the big double doors and those on the desk were all human. Young for the most part, like Shane himself, but much bigger; for the largest of humans seemed frail and small to the eight-foot Aalaag. These guards wore the usual neat, but drab, black uniforms of servant police. Dwarfed among them, in spite of his five feet eleven inches of height, Shane felt a twinge of perverse comfort at being within these walls and surrounded by these particular fellow humans. Like him, they ate at the alien’s tables; they would be committed to defend him against any non-servant humans who should threaten him. Under the roof of masters who sickened him, he was physically protected and secure.

He stopped at the duty desk and took his Key from the leather pouch at his belt, leaving the documents within. The human duty officer there took the Key and examined it. It was made of metal— metal which no ordinary Earth native was allowed to own or carry —and the Mark of Lyt Ahn was stamped on the square handle.

“Sir,” said the officer in Italian, reading the Mark. He was suddenly obliging. “Can I be of assistance?”

“I sign in, temporarily,” answered Shane in Arabic, for the officer’s speech echoed the influence of the throat consonants of that language. “I am the one who delivers messages for the First Captain of Earth, Lyt Ahn. I have some to deliver now to the Commander of these Headquarters.”

“Your tongue is skilled,” said the officer in Arabic, turning the duty book about and passing Shane a pen.

“Yes,” said Shane and signed.

“The Commander here,” said the officer, “is Laa Ebon, Captain of the sixth rank. He accepts your messages.”

He turned and beckoned over one of the lesser human guards.

“To the outer office of Laa Ebon, with this one bearing messages for the Commander.”

The guard saluted, and led Shane off. Several flights of stairs up beside an elevator which Shane would have known better than to use even if the guard had not been with him brought them to a corridor; down which, behind another pair of large carved doors, they reached what was plainly an outer room of the private offices of the Aalaag Commander in Milan.

The guard saluted and left. There were no other humans in the room. An Aalaag of the twenty-second

rank sat at a desk in a far corner of the large open space, reading what seemed to be reports on the sort of plastic sheets that would take and hold multiple overlays of impressions. In the wall to Shane's left was a window, showing the slight corner shading that betrayed an Aalaag version of one-way glass. The window gave a view of what must be an adjoining office having benches for humans to sit on. This office was empty, however, except for a blond-haired young woman, dressed in a loose ankle-length blue robe tied tight around her narrow waist.

There was no place for Shane to sit. But, in close attendance as he customarily was on Lyt Ahn and other Aalaag of low-number rank, he was used to waiting on his feet for hours.

He stood. After perhaps twenty minutes, the Aalaag at the desk noticed him.

"Come," he said, lifting a thumb the size of a tent peg. "Tell me."

He had spoken in Aalaag, for most human servants had some understanding of the basic commands in the tongue of their overlords. But his face altered slightly as Shane answered, for there were few humans like Shane—and Shane both worked and lived with all of those few—who were capable of fluent accentless response in that language.

"Untarnished sir," said Shane, coming up to the desk and stopping before it, "I have messages from Lyt Ahn directly to the Commander of the Milan Headquarters."

He made no move to produce the message rolls from his pouch; and the Aalaag's massive hand, which had begun to extend itself, palm up, toward him at the word "messages," was withdrawn when Shane pronounced the name of Lyt Ahn.

"You are a valuable beast," said the Aalaag. "Laa Ebon will receive your messages soon."

"Soon" could mean anything from "within minutes" to "within weeks." However, since the messages were from Lyt Ahn, and personal, it was probable that it would be minutes rather than a longer time. Shane went back to his corner.

The door opened, and two other Aalaag came in. They were both males in middle life, one of the twelfth, one of the sixth rank. The one of sixth rank could only be Laa Ehon. A Captain of a rank that low-numbered was actually too highly qualified to command a single HQ like this. It was unthinkable that there would be two such here.

The newcomers ignored Shane. No, he thought, as their gaze moved on, they had not merely ignored him. Their eyes had noticed, catalogued, and dismissed him in a glance. They walked together to the one-way window; and the one who must be Laa Ehon spoke in Aalaag.

"This one?"

They were examining the girl in the blue robe, who sat unaware of their gaze in the other room.

"Yes, untarnished sir. The officer on duty in the square saw this one move away from the wall I told you of just before he noticed the scratching on it." The Captain of the twelfth rank pointed with his thumb at the girl. "He then examined the scratching, saw it was recently made, and turned to find this one. For a moment he thought she had been lost among the herd in the square, then he caught sight of her from the back, some distance off and hurrying away. He stunned her and brought her in."

"His rank?"

"Thirty-second, untarnished sir."

“And this one has been questioned?”

“No sir, I waited to speak to you about procedure.”

Laa Ehon stood for a moment, unanswering, gazing at the girl.

“Thirty-second, you said? Did he know this particular beast previously to seeing her in the square?”

“No sir. But he remembered the color of her apparel. There was no other in that color nearby.”

Laa Ehon turned from the window.

“I’d like to talk to him, first. Send him to me.”

“Sir, he’s presently on duty.”

“Ah.”

Shane understood Laa Ehon’s momentary thoughtfulness. As commanding officer, he could easily order the officer in question to be relieved from duty long enough to report to him in person. But the Aalaag nature and custom was such that only the gravest reason would allow him to justify such an order. An Aalaag on duty, regardless of rank, was almost a sacred object.

“Where?” Laa Ehon.

“The local airport, untarnished sir.”

“I will go and speak to him at his duty post. Captain Otah On, you are ordered to accompany me.”

“Yes, untarnished sir.”

“Then let us move with minimal loss of time. It is unlikely that this matter has more importance than presently seems, but we must make sure of that.”

He turned toward the door with Otah On behind him. Once more his eyes swept Shane. He stopped and looked over at the Aalaag.

“What is this one?” he asked.

“Sir,” the Aalaag at the desk was on his feet. “A courier with messages for your hand from Lyt Ahn.”

Laa Ehon looked back at Shane.

“I will accept your messages in an hour, no more, once I’ve come back. Do you understand what I have just said to you?”

“I understand, untarnished sir,” said Shane.

“Until then, remain dutiful. But be comfortable.”

Laa Ehon led the way out of the room, Otah On close behind him. The Aalaag at the desk sat down again and went back to his sheets.

Shane looked once more at the girl beyond the one way glass. She sat, unaware of what another hour would bring. They would question her with chemicals, of course, first. But after that their methods would become physical. There was no sadism in the Aalaag character. If any of the aliens had shown evidence

of such, his own people would have considered it an unfitting weakness and destroyed him for having it. But it was understood that cattle might be induced to tell whatever they knew if they were subjected to sufficient discomfort. An Aalaag, of course, was above any such persuasion. Death would come long before any degree of discomfort could change the individual alien's character enough to make him or her say what they wished to keep unsaid.

Shane felt his robe clinging to his upper body, wet with a secret sweat. The woman sat almost in profile, her blond hair down her shoulders, her surprisingly pale-skinned (for this latitude) face, smooth and gentle-looking. She could not be more than barely into her twenties. He wanted to look away from her, so that he could stop thinking about what was awaiting her, but—as it had happened to him a year ago with the man on the triple hooks when he had first created the symbol—Shane could not make his head turn.

He knew it now for what it was—a madness in him. A madness born of his own hidden revulsion against and private terror of these massive humanoids who had descended to own the Earth. These were the Masters he served, who kept him warm and well-fed when most of the rest of humanity chilled and ate little, who patted him with condescending compliments—as if he was in fact the animal they called him, the clever house pet ready to wag his tail for a kind glance or word. The fear of death was like an ingot of cold iron inside him, when he thought of them; and the fear of a long and painful death was like that same ingot with razor edges. But at the same time there was this madness—this madness that, if he did not control it by some small actions, would explode and bring him to throw his dispatches in some Aalaag face, to fling himself one day like a terrier against a tiger, at the throat of his Master, First Captain of Earth, Lyt Ahn.

It was a real thing, that madness. Even the Aalaag knew of its existence in their conquered peoples. There was even a word for it in their own tongue—*yowaragh*. *Yowaragh* had caused the man on the hooks a year ago to make a hopeless attempt to defend his wife against what he had thought was an Aalaag brutality. *Yowaragh*, every day, caused one human, at least somewhere in the world, to fling a useless stick or stone against some shielded untouchable conqueror in a situation where escape was impossible and destruction was certain. *Yowaragh* had knocked at the door of Shane's brain once, a year ago, threatening to break out. It was knocking again.

He could not help but look at her; and he could not bear to look at her—and the only alternative to an end for both of them was to somehow keep it from happening—Laa Ehon's return, the torture of the girl, and the *yowaragh* that would lead to his own death.

In one hour, Laa Ehon had said, he would be back. Rivulets of perspiration were trickling down Shane's naked sides under the robe. His mind had gone into high gear, racing like an uncontrolled heartbeat. What way out was there? There must be one—if he could think of it. The other side of the coin to what they would do to the girl was built on the same lack of sadism. The Aalaag would only destroy property for some purpose. If there was no purpose, they would not waste a useful beast. They would have no emotional stake in keeping her merely because she had been arrested in the first place. She was too insignificant; they were too pragmatic.

His mind was feverish. He was not sure what he planned, but all his intimate knowledge of the Aalaag in the three years he had lived closely with them was simmering and bubbling in the back of his mind. He went and stood before the Aalaag at the desk.

“Yes?” said the Aalaag, after a little while, looking up at him.

“Untarnished sir, the Captain Commander said that he would be back in an hour to accept my messages, but until then I should be dutiful but comfortable.”

Eyes with grey-black pupils gazed at him on a level with his own.

“You want comfort, is that it?”

“Untarnished sir, if I could sit or lie, it would be appreciated.”

“Yes. Very well. The Commander has so ordered. Go find what facilities there are for such activities in the areas of our own cattle. Return in an hour.”

“I am grateful to the untarnished sir.”

The grey-black pupils were cast into shadow by the jet brows coming together.

“This is a matter of orders. I am not one who allows his beasts to fawn.”

“Sir, I obey.”

The brows relaxed.

“Better. Go.”

He went out. He was moving swiftly now. As when before, in Denmark, he was at last caught up in what he was doing. There was no longer any doubt, any hesitation. He went swiftly down the outside corridor which was deserted, ears and eyes alert for sign of anyone, but particularly one of the aliens. As he passed the elevators, he stopped, looked about him.

There was no one watching; and once aboard the elevator he would be able to go from this floor down to street level or below without being seen. There would be other doors to the outside than the one by which he had come in; and on other levels, sub-main-floor levels, he could possibly find them. There would be portals used only by the Aalaag themselves and their most trusted servants, and they would be free to come and go without being noticed.

He punched for the elevator. After a moment it came. The doors swung wide. As it opened he turned away and readied himself to pretend—in case there was an Aalaag aboard—that he was merely passing by. But the elevator compartment was empty.

He stepped inside. The only danger remaining for him now was that some other Aalaag on a floor below would have just punched for this elevator. If it stopped for one of the aliens and the door opened to reveal him inside, he would be trapped—doubly guilty, for being where he should not be and also for being absent from his duty, which at the present was to lie down or otherwise relax. Only Aalaag were permitted to use elevators.

For a moment he thought the one in which he was descending was going to hesitate on the first floor. In the back of his mind, plans flickered like heat lightning on a summer evening. If it did stop, if the door did open and an Aalaag walked in, he planned to throw himself at the alien’s throat. Hopefully, the other would kill him out of reflex, and he would escape being held for questioning as to why he was where he was.

But the elevator did not stop. It continued moving downward, and the telltale light illuminating the floor numbers as they passed showed it was approaching the floor just below street level. Shane punched for the cage to stop. It did, the door opened, and he stepped into a small square corridor leading directly to a glass door and a flight of steps beyond, leading upward. He had hit on one of the alien ways out of the building.

He left the elevator and went quickly along the corridor to the door. It was locked, of course; but in his pocket he carried the Key of Lyt Ahn, or at least the Key that all the special human servants of Lyt Ahn were allowed to bear. It would open any ordinary door in a building belonging to the aliens.

He tried the Key now, and it worked. The door swung noiselessly open. A second later he was out of it, up the stairs, and into the street above.

He went down the street, walking at a pace just short of a run, and turned right at the first crossing, searching for a market area. Four blocks on, he found a large square with many shops. A single Aalaag sat on his riding animal, towering and indifferent to the crowd about him, before a set of pillars upholding a sidewalk arcade at one end of the square. Whether the alien was on duty or simply waiting for something or someone, it was impossible to tell. But for Shane, now, to use a shop on this square would not be wise.

He hurried on. A few streets farther on, he found a smaller collection of shops lining both sides of a blind alley, and one of these was a store for such simple clothing as the Aalaag allowed humans to use nowadays. He stepped inside and a small bell over the door chimed softly.

“*Signore?*” said a voice.

Shane’s eyes adjusted to the interior dimness and saw a counter piled high with folded clothing and with a short dark-faced man with a knife-blade nose behind it. Remarkably, in these days of alien occupation, the proprietor had a small potbelly under his loose yellow smock.

“I want a full-length robe,” Shane said. “Reversible.”

“Of course.” The proprietor began to come around the counter. “What type?”

“How much is your most expensive garment?”

“Seventy-five new lire or equivalent in trade, *signore.*”

Shane dug into the purse hanging from the rope around his waist, and threw on the counter before him metal coins issued by the Aalaag for use as an international currency—the gold and silver rectangles with which his work as an employee of Lyt Ahn was rewarded.

The store owner checked his movement. His eyes moved to the coins, then back to Shane’s face with a difference. Only humans of great power under the alien authority, or those engaged in the illegal black market, would ordinarily have such coins with which to pay their bills; and it would be seldom that such would come into a small shop like this.

He moved toward the coins. Shane covered them with his hand.

“I’ll pick the robe out myself,” he said. “Show me your stock.”

“But of course, of course, *signore.*”

The proprietor went past the coins and out from behind the counter. He opened a door to a back room and invited Shane in. Within were tables stacked with clothing and cloth. In one corner, under a kerosene lamp, was a tailor’s worktable with scraps of cloth, tools, thread, and some pieces of blue or white chalk.

“Here are the robes, on these two tables,” he said.

“Good,” said Shane, harshly. “Go over to the corner there and turn around. I’ll pick out what I want.”

The man moved swiftly, his shoulders hunched a little. If his visitor was black market, it would be unwise to argue with or irritate him.

Shane located the reversible robes among the others, and pawed through them, selecting the largest one he could find that was blue on one side. The other side of it was brown. He pulled it on over his own robe, the blue side out, and drew the drawstring tight at the waist. Stepping across to the worktable, he picked up a fragment of the white chalk.

“I’ll leave a hundred lire on the counter,” he said to the back of the proprietor. “Don’t turn around, don’t come out until I’ve been gone for five minutes. You understand?”

“I understand.”

Shane turned and went. He glanced at the counter as he passed. He had snatched coins from his purse at random and there was the equivalent of over a hundred and fifty lire in gold and silver on the counter. It would not do to make the incident look any more important to the storeman than was necessary. Shane scooped up fifty lire-equivalent and went out the door, heading back toward the square where he had seen the mounted Aalaag.

He was very conscious of the quick sliding by of time. He could not afford to be missing from the headquarters more than the hour the officer on duty had allowed him. If the Aalaag had left the square...

But he had not. When Shane, sweating, once more emerged into the square, the massive figure still sat unmoved, as indifferent as ever.

Shane, because of his duties, was allowed to carry one of the Aalaag’s perpetual timepieces. It lay in his purse now, but he dared not consult it to see how much time remained. A glimpse of it by the ordinary humans around would identify him as a servant of the aliens, and win him the bitter enmity of these others; and that enmity, here and now, could be fatal.

He went quickly through the crowd swarming the square. As he got close to the Aalaag on the riding animal, the adrenaline-born courage inside him almost failed. But a memory of the prisoner back at the headquarters rose in him, and he pushed himself on.

Deliberately, he made himself blunder directly beneath the heavy head of the riding animal, so that it jerked its nose up. Its movement was slight—only an inch or two—but it was enough to draw the attention of the Aalaag. His eyes dropped to see Shane.

Still moving, Shane kept his head down. He had pulled his hair down on his forehead as far as possible, to hide his face from the alien’s view—but it was not really that he was counting on preserving his anonymity. Few Aalaag could tell one human from another—even after two years of close contact, Lyt Ahn recognized Shane from the other courier-interpreters more by the times on which Shane reported than by any physical individualities.

Shane scuttled past; and the alien, indifferent to something as mere as a single one of the cattle about him, raised his eyes to infinity again, returning to his thoughts. Shane went on for only a few more steps, to the nearest pillar, and stopped. There, hiding his actions with his body from the alien behind him, he pulled the tailor’s white chalk from his pouch and with a hand that trembled, sketched on the stone of the pillar the cloaked figure with its staff.

He stepped back—and the sudden, almost inaudible moan of recognition and arrested movement in the

crowd behind him drew—as he had known it would—the attention of the Aalaag. Instantly, the alien wheeled his animal about, reaching for the same sort of stunning weapon with which the woman prisoner had been captured.

But Shane was already moving. He ran into the crowd, threw himself down so that the bodies about would shield him from the view of the Aalaag, and rolled, frantically pulling off the outer reversible robe.

Instinctively, defensively, the other humans closed about him, hiding him from the alien, who was now—weapon in one massive hand—searching their numbers to locate him. The reversible robe stuck and bound itself under his armpits, but at last Shane got it off. Leaving it on the ground behind him, still with its blue side out, he scuttled on hands and knees farther off, until, at last near the edge of the square, he risked getting to his feet and leaving it as quickly as he could without drawing attention to himself.

Panting, soaked with sweat, leaving behind humans who studiously avoided looking at him and beginning to move now among others who looked at him with entirely normal interest, Shane half-ran toward the Aalaag headquarters. Subjectively, it seemed as if at least an hour had passed since he had first stepped under the nose of the Aalaag riding animal; but reason told him that the whole business could not have taken more than a few minutes. He stopped at a fountain—bless Italy, he thought, for having fountains—to bathe his face, neck, and underarms. Officially, the Aalaag were indifferent to how their cattle stank; but in practice, they preferred those humans who were physically as much without odor as possible—though it never seemed to occur to them that they were as noisome in human noses as humans were in their own. But for Shane to return smelling strongly from what had theoretically been a rest period might attract interest to the period of time he had spent out of the office.

He let himself in with his Key through the same door which had given him egress; and this time took a stair, rather than the elevator, to the entrance level of the headquarters. No one saw him emerge on the entrance level. He paused to check his timepiece and saw that he still had some twelve minutes of his hour.

He made use of that time by asking one of the Ordinary Guards where the rest facilities for cattle were, went to it, and retraced his steps from there to the office he had waited in before. Outside the office door, he discovered he had still four minutes left, and stood where he was until he could enter at the exact moment on which he had been told to return.

The alien officer at the desk looked up as he came in, glanced at the clock face over the door, and returned to his papers silently. Nonetheless, Shane felt the triumph of a minor point scored. Precise obedience was a mark in any human's favor, in Aalaag eyes. He went back to the spot on which he had been standing before—and stood again.

It was nearly three-quarters of an hour later that the door opened and Laa Ehon, with Otah On, entered. With a subjected being's acuteness of observation, reinforced by the experience gained in his two years of close contact with aliens, Shane recognized both of the officers at once. They went directly to the one-way glass to stare at the human prisoner beyond; and Shane's heart sank in panic.

It was inconceivable that his actions in the square of an hour before should not have been reported by this time. But it looked as if the two senior officers were about to proceed with the young woman as if nothing had happened. Then Laa Ehon spoke.

"It is indeed the same color," the headquarters Commander said. "There must be many of the cattle so dressed."

"Very true, untarnished sir," answered Otah On.

Laa Ehon studied the young woman for a moment longer.

“Was she at any time made aware of the specific reason for her being brought here?” he asked.

“Nothing has been told her, untarnished sir.”

“Yes,” said Laa Ehon, thoughtfully. “Well, then. It is a healthy young beast. There is no need to waste it. Let it go.”

“It will be done.”

Laa Ehon turned from the one-way glass and his eyes swept over the rest of the room, stopping on Shane. He walked forward to Shane.

“You were the beast with dispatches from Lyt Ahn?”

“Yes, untarnished sir,” said Shane. “I have them here for you.”

He produced them from his pouch and handed them into the large grasp of the Commander. Laa Ehon took them, unfolded and read them. He passed them to Otah On.

“Execute these.”

“Yes, untarnished sir.”

Otah On carried the dispatches over to the desk of the duty officer and spoke to him, handing him the papers. The eyes of Laa Ehon fastened on Shane, with a glimmer of interest.

“You speak with great purity,” said the Commander. “You are one of the First Captain’s special group of beasts for speaking and carrying, are you not?”

“I am, untarnished sir.”

“How long have you spoken the true language?”

“Two years of this world, untarnished sir.”

Laa Ehon stood looking at him, and a trickle of perspiration crept coldly down Shane’s spine under his robe.

“You are a beast worth having,” said the Commander, slowly. “I did not think one such as you could be brought to speak so clearly. How are you valued?”

Shane’s breath caught silently in his throat. Existence was barely endurable as one of the favored human group that was the personal property of Earth’s ruling alien. The madness he feared would come quickly, if instead he should be trapped here, in this building, among the brutes that made up the Interior Guard.

“To the best of my knowledge, untarnished sir”—he dared not hesitate in his answer—“I am valued at half a possession of land—”

Otah On, who had just regained the side of his commander, raised his black eyebrows at the voicing of this price, but Laa Ehon’s face remained thoughtful.

“—and the favor of my Master Lyt Ahn,” said Shane.

The thoughtfulness vanished from Laa Ehon’s features. Shane’s heart was pounding. It was true he had

prefaced his answer with “to the best of my knowledge,” but in fact he had never officially been acquainted with the fact that part of his price involved the favor of his owner. What he knew himself to be valued at, half a possession of land—about forty miles square of what the Aalaag called “good country”—was an enormously high price in itself for any single human beast. It was roughly equivalent to what, in pre-Aalaag days, would have been the cost of a top-price, custom-made sports car, gold-plated and set with jewels. But Laa Ehon had looked ready to consider even that. It was not the first time Shane had been aware that he possessed the status of a sort of luxury toy. Only, this time, Shane had mentioned that his price included the favor of Lyt Ahn. “Favor” was a term that went beyond all price. It was a designation meaning that his Master was personally interested in keeping him, and that the price of any sale could include anything at all—but probably something Lyt Ahn would favor at least as much as what he was giving up. Such “favor,” involved in a sale, could constitute in effect a blank check signed by the buyer, cashable at any time in the future for goods or actions by the seller, guaranteed under the unyielding obligation code of the Aalaag.

Shane had never been told he had Lyt Ahn’s favor. He had only overheard Lyt Ahn once saying to his Chief of Staff that he must get around to extending his favor over all the beasts of that special group to which Shane belonged. If Laa Ehon should check with Lyt Ahn, and this had never been done, then Shane was doomed as an untrustworthy and lying beast. Even if the favor had been extended, Lyt Ahn might question how Shane had come to know of it.

And then, again, the First Captain, busy as he was with much more weighty affairs of Aalaag government, might simply conclude that he had mentioned it at some time to Shane and since forgotten the fact. Claiming it now was one of the daily gambles necessary to human daily existence in the midst of the aliens.

“Give him his receipt,” said Laa Ehon.

Otah On passed Shane a receipt for the dispatches, made out a moment before by the duty officer. Shane put it in his pouch.

“You return directly to Lyt Ahn?” Laa Ehon said.

“Yes, untarnished sir.”

“My courtesies to the First Captain.”

“I will deliver them.”

“Then you may go.”

Shane turned and left. As the door closed behind him, he drew a deep breath and went quickly to the stairs, then down to the entrance floor and the entrance itself.

“I’m returning to the residence of the First Captain,” he told the officer of the Ordinary Guards in charge at the entrance. It was the same man with the Arabic influence noticeable in his spoken Italian. “Will you get me space on the necessary aircraft? I’ve priority, of course.”

“It’s already taken care of,” said the officer. “You’re to travel with one of the Masters on courier duty in a military small craft, leaving in two hours. Shall I order transportation to the airfield?”

“No,” said Shane briefly. He did not have to give the reasons for his actions to this uniformed lackey. “I’ll get myself there.”

He thought he caught a hint of admiration in the officer’s steady gaze. But then, if the other ever thought

of walking the Milan streets alone, it would be in his regular uniform, which he was never permitted to discard. Someone like this officer would never be able to imagine the freedom of Shane in going about, ostensibly as one of them, among the ordinary humans of the city—nor could he imagine how necessary these few moments of illusory freedom were to Shane.

“Very well,” said the officer. “The Master who will carry you is Enech Ajin. The Masters’ desk at the air terminal will direct you to him, when you get there.”

“Thank you,” said Shane.

“You are entirely welcome.”

They had both picked up inevitably, Shane thought bitterly, the very courtesies and intonations of their owners.

He went out through the heavy right-hand door of the pair that made up the entrance and down the steps. There were no taxis in sight—of course. No human without need to be there would hang around the alien headquarters. He turned up the same street he had followed to find the square.

He had gone past no more than two corners when a taxi passed him, cruising slowly. He hailed it and got in.

“To the airport,” he said to the driver, looking at the thin overcoated man behind the wheel, as his fingers automatically opened the cab door. He stepped inside—and tripped over something on the floor as he got in.

The door slammed, the cab took off with a rush. He found himself held, pinioned by two men who had risen from crouching positions on the floor of the cab’s back seat. They held him helpless and he felt something sharp against his throat.

He looked down and saw a so-called glass knife, actually a dagger made by a sliver of glass held between two bound-together halves of a wooden dagger. The glass formed the cutting edge and could be— as this one had—sandpaper to razorlike sharpness.

“Lie still!” growled one of the men in Italian.

Shane lay still. He smelled the rank old stink of dirty clothing from both of the two who held him tightly. The taxi whirled him away through unknown streets to an unguessable destination.

They rode for at least twenty minutes, though how much of this was necessary distance to reach their goal, or how much was to mislead Shane in any attempt to estimate the length of the trip, was impossible to guess. At length the taxi turned, bumped over some very uneven pavement, and passed under the shadow of an arch. Then it stopped, and the two men hustled Shane out of the vehicle.

He had just a glimpse of a dark and not-too-clean courtyard surrounded by buildings before he was pushed up two steps, through a door, and into a long narrow corridor thick with ancient paint and cooking odors.

Shane was herded along the corridor, more numb than frightened. Inside him there was a feeling of something like fatalistic acceptance. He had lived for two years with the thought that someday ordinary humans would identify him as one of those who worked for the aliens; and when they did, they would then use him as an object for the bitter fear and hatred they all felt for their conquerors but dared not show directly. In his imagination, he had lived through this scene many times. It was nonetheless hideous now for finally having become real, but it was a situation on which his emotions had worn themselves out.

At the end, it was almost a relief to have the days of his masquerade over, to be discovered for what he really was.

The two men stopped suddenly. Shane was shoved through a door on his right, into a room glaringly lit by a single powerful light bulb. The contrast from the shadowed courtyard outside, and the even dimmer hallway, made the sudden light blinding for a second. When his eyes adjusted, he saw that he was standing in front of a round table and that the room was large and high-ceilinged, with paint grimed by time on the walls and a single tall window which, however, had a blackout blind drawn tightly down over it. The cord from the light bulb ran not into the ceiling but across the face of it, past a capped gas outlet, and down the farther wall and to a bicycle generator. A young man with long black hair sat on the bicycle part of the generator and whenever the light from the ceiling bulb began to fade, he would pump energetically on his pedals until it brightened again and held its brightness.

There were several other men standing around the room, and two more at the table together with the only woman to be seen. She was, he recognized, the prisoner he had seen through the one-way glass. Her eyes met his now with the look of a complete stranger, and even in his numbness he felt strange that he should recognize her with such strong emotional identification and she should not know him at all.

“Where’s that clothing store owner?” said one of the men at the table with her, speaking to the room at large in a northern Italian underlaid with London English. He was young—as young in appearance as Shane himself; but, unlike Shane, spare and athletic-looking, with a straight nose, strong square jaw, thin mouth, and blond hair cut very short.

“Outside, in the supply room,” said a voice speaking the same northern Italian, but without accent.

“Get him in here, then!” said the man with the short hair. The other man beside him at the table said nothing. He was round-bodied and hard-fat, in his forties, wearing a worn leather jacket, with a short-stemmed pipe in one corner of the mouth of his round face. He looked entirely Italian.

The door opened and closed behind Shane. A minute later it opened and closed again, and a blindfolded man Shane recognized as the proprietor of the store where he had bought the reversible cloak was brought forward and turned around to face Shane. His blindfold was jerked off.

“Well?” demanded the short-haired young man.

The shopkeeper blinked under the unshaded electric light. His eyes focused on Shane then slid away.

“What is it you want, *signori*?” he asked. His voice was almost a whisper in the stark room.

“Didn’t anyone tell you? Him!” said the short-haired man impatiently. “Look at him? Do you recognize him? Where did you see him last?”

The store proprietor licked his lips and raised his eyes.

“Earlier today, *signore*,” he said. “He came into my shop and bought a reversible cloak, blue and brown—”

“This cloak?” The short-haired individual made a gesture. One of the men standing in the back of the room came forward to shove a bundled mass of cloth into the hands of the proprietor, who slowly unfolded it and looked at it.

“This is mine,” he said, still faintly. “Yes. This was the one he bought.”

“All right, you can go then. Keep the cloak. You two—don’t forget to blindfold him.” The short-haired

man turned his attention to the young man slouching on the bicycle seat of the electric generator. “How about it, Carlo? Is he the one you followed?”

Carlo nodded. He had a toothpick in one corner of his mouth and through his numbness Shane watched him with an odd sort of fascination, for the toothpick seemed to give him a rakish infallible look.

“He left the Square of San Marco and went straight back to the alien HQ,” Carlo said. “As fast as possible.”

“That’s it, then,” said the short-haired man. He looked at Shane.

“Well, do you want to tell us now what the Aalaag had you up to? Or do we have to wait while Carlo works you over a bit?”

Suddenly Shane was weary to the point of sickness—wary of the whole matter of human subjects and alien overlords. Unexpected fury boiled up in him.

“You damn fool!” he shouted at the short-haired man. “I was saving *her*!”

And he pointed at the woman, who stared back at him, her gaze frowning and intent.

“You idiots!” Shane spat. “You stupid morons with your resistance games! Don’t you know what they’d have done to her? Don’t you know where you’d all be, right now, if I hadn’t given them a reason to think it was someone else? How long do you think she could keep from telling them all about you? I’ll tell you, because I’ve seen it—forty minutes is the average!”

They all looked at the woman, reflexively.

“He’s lying,” she said in a thin voice. “They didn’t offer to do a thing to me. They just made me wait a while and then turned me loose for lack of evidence.”

“They turned you loose because I gave them enough reason to doubt you were the one who made the Mark!” The fury was carrying Shane away like a dark inexorable tide. “They let you go because you’re young and healthy and they don’t waste valuable beasts without reason. Lack of evidence! Do you still think you’re dealing with humans?”

“All right,” said the short-haired man. His voice was hard and flat. “This is all very pretty, but suppose you tell us where you learned our Mark.”

“Learned it?” Shane laughed, a laugh that was close to a sob of long-throttled rage. “You clown! I invented it. Me—myself! I carved it on a brick wall in Aalborg, two years ago, for the first time. Learn about it! How did you learn about it? How did the Aalaag learn about it? By seeing it marked up in places, of course!”

There was a moment of silence in the room after Shane’s voice ceased to ring out.

“He’s crazy, then,” said the hard-fat man with the pipe.

“Crazy,” echoed Shane, and laughed again.

“Wait a minute,” said the woman. She came around and faced him. “Who are you? What do you do with the Aalaag?”

“I’m a translator, a courier,” said Shane. “I’m owned by Lyt Ahn —me and about thirty men and women like me.”

“Maria—” began the short-haired man.

“Wait, Peter.” She held up her hand briefly and went on without taking her eyes off Shane. “All right. You tell us what happened.”

“I was delivering special communications to Laa Ebon—you know your local Commander, I suppose—”

“We know Laa Ebon,” said Peter, harshly. “Keep talking.”

“I had special communications to deliver. I looked through a one-way mirror and saw you—” He was looking at the woman named Maria. “I knew what they’d do to you. Laa Ebon was talking to one of his officers about you. All that had been spotted was some human wearing a blue robe. There was just a chance that if they had another report of a human in a blue robe making that Mark it would make them doubtful enough so they wouldn’t want to waste a healthy young beast like you. So I ducked out and tried giving them that other report. It worked.”

“Why did you do it?” She was looking penetratingly at him.

“Just a minute, Maria,” said Peter. “Let me ask a few questions. What’s your name, you?”

“Shane Everts.”

“And you said you heard Laa Ebon talking to one of his officers. How did you happen to be there?”

“I was waiting to deliver my communications.”

“And Laa Ebon just discussed it all in front of you—that’s what you’re trying to tell us?”

“They don’t see us, or hear us, unless they want us,” said Shane bitterly. “We’re furniture—pets.”

“So you say,” said Peter. “What language did Laa Ebon speak in?”

“Aalaag, of course.”

“And you understood him so well that you could tell there was a chance to make them think that the human they wanted was someone else than Maria?”

“I told you.” A dull weariness was beginning to take Shane over as the fury died. “I’m a translator. I’m one of Lyt Ahn’s special group of human translators.”

“No human can really speak or understand the Aalaag tongue,” said the man with the pipe, in Basque.

“Most can’t,” answered Shane, also in Basque. The weariness was beginning to numb him so that he was hardly aware of changing languages. “I tell you I’m one of a very special group belonging to Lyt Ahn.”

“What was that? What did you say, Georges?” Peter was looking from one to the other.

“He speaks Basque,” said Georges, staring at Shane.

“How well?”

“Well...” Georges made an effort. “He speaks it... very well.”

Peter turned on Shane.

“How many languages do you speak?” he asked.

“How many?” Shane said dully. “I don’t know. A hundred and fifty—two hundred, well. A lot of others, some...”

“And you speak Aalaag like an alien.”

Shane laughed.

“No,” he said. “I speak it well—for a human.”

“Also, you travel all over the world as a courier—” Peter turned to Maria and Georges. “Are you listening?”

Maria ignored him.

“Why did you do it? Why did you try to rescue me?” She held him with her eyes.

There was a new silence.

“*Yowaragh*,” he said, dully.

“What?”

“It’s their word for it,” he said. “The Aalaag word for when a beast suddenly goes crazy and fights back against one of them. It was like that first time in Aalborg, when I snapped and put the Pilgrim Mark on the wall under the man they’d thrown on the hooks to execute him.”

“You don’t really expect us to believe you were the one who invented the symbol of resistance to the aliens.”

“You can go to hell!” Shane told him in English.

“What did you say?” said Peter quickly.

“You know what I said,” Shane told him savagely, still in English, and in the exact accent of the London area in which the other had grown up. “I don’t care whether you believe me or not. Just give up trying to pretend you can speak Italian.”

A small dark flush came to Peter’s cheeks and for a second his eyes glinted. Shane had read him clearly. He was one of those who could learn to speak another language just well enough to delude himself—but he didn’t speak it like a native. Shane had touched one of his vulnerabilities.

But then Peter laughed, and both flush and glint were gone.

“Caught me, by God! You caught me!” he said in English. “That’s really very good! Magnificent!”

And you’ll never forgive me for it, thought Shane, watching him.

“Look now, tell me—” Peter seized one of the straight-backed chairs and pushed it forward. “Sit down and let’s talk. Tell me, you must have some sort of credentials that let you pass freely through any inspection or check by the ordinary sort of Aalaag?”

“What I carry,” said Shane, suddenly wary, “is my credentials. Communications from the First Captain of Earth will pass a courier anywhere.”

“Of course!” said Peter. “Now sit down—”

He urged Shane to the chair; and Shane, suddenly conscious of the weariness of his legs, dropped into it. He felt something being put into his hands; and, looking, saw that it was a glass tumbler one-third full of a light-brown liquid. He put it to his lips and smelled brandy—not very good brandy. For some reason, this reassured him. If they had been planning to drug him, he thought, they surely would have put the drug in something better than this.

The burn of the liquor on his tongue woke him from that state of mind in which he had been caught ever since he had stepped into the taxi and found himself kidnapped. He recognized suddenly that he had now moved away from the threat involved in his original capture. These people had been thinking of him originally only as one of the human jackals of the Aalaag. Now they seemed to have become aware of his abilities and advantages; and clearly Peter, at least, was thinking of somehow putting these to use in their resistance movement.

But the situation was still tricky and could go either way. All that was necessary was for him to slip, and by word or action imply that he might still be a danger to them; and their determination to destroy him could return, redoubled in urgency.

For the moment the important thing was that Peter, who seemed to be the dominant of their group, appeared to be determined to make use of him. On his part, Shane was finding, now that his first recklessness of despair was over, that he wanted to live. But he did not want to be used. Much more clearly than these people around him, he knew how hopeless their dream of successful resistance to the Aalaag was, and how certain and ugly the end toward which they were headed, if they continued.

Let them dig their own graves if they wanted. All he wanted was to get safely out of here and in the future to stay clear of such people. Too late, now that he had answered their questions, he realized how much leverage against himself he had given them, in telling them his true name and the nature of his work with the Aalaag. Above all, he thought now, he must keep the secret of Lyt Ahn's Key. They would sell their souls for something that would unlock most alien doors—doors to warehouses, to armories, to communication and transportation equipment. And the use of the Key by them would be a certain way to his association with them being discovered by the Aalaag. He had been making himself far too attractive to them, thought Shane grimly. It was time to take the glamour off.

"I've got thirty minutes, no more," he said, "to get to the airport and meet the Aalaag officer who's flying me back to Lyt Ahn's headquarters. If I'm not there on time, it won't matter how many languages I can speak."

There was silence in the room. He could see them looking at each other—in particular, Peter, Georges, and Maria consulting each other with their gazes.

"Get the car," said Maria, in Italian, when Peter still hesitated. "Get him there on time."

Peter jerked suddenly into movement, as if Maria's words had wakened him from a dream so powerful it had held him prisoner. He turned on Carlo.

"Get the car," he said. "You drive. Maria, you'll go with me and Shane. Georges—"

He spoke just in time to cut short the beginnings of a protest from the man with the pipe.

"—I want you to close this place up. Bury it! We may end up wanting better security on this than we ever have had on anything until now. Then get out of sight, yourself. We'll find you. You follow me?"

"All right," said Georges. "Don't take too long to come calling."

“A day or two. That’s all. Carlo—” He looked around.

“Carlo’s gone for the car,” said Maria. “Let’s move, Peter. We’ll barely make it to the airport as it is.”

Shane followed them back through the hall by which he had entered. Crammed in the back seat of the taxi between Maria and Peter, with Carlo driving up front, he had a sudden feeling of ridiculousness, as if they were all engaged in some wild slapstick movie.

“Tell me,” said Peter in English, in a voice that was friendlier than any he had used until now, “just how it happened you made that first Mark in—where did you say it was?”

“Denmark,” said Shane, answering in English also. “The city of Aalborg. I was delivering messages there and on my way back from that I saw two of the aliens, a father and a son, mounted on their riding animals, crossing the square there that has the statue of the Cymri bull—”

It came back to him as he told them. The son, using the haft of his power lance to knock aside a woman who otherwise would have been trampled by his riding animal. The husband of the woman, suddenly mad with *yowaragh*, attacking the son bare-handed and being easily knocked unconscious. The woman trying to rescue the man and being killed for it—and all of them, who were human and in the square at the time, being forced to watch under Aalaag law while the man, still unconscious, was thrown onto the sharp points of the triple punishment hooks on the wall of a building on the edge of the square.

Shane had stood, for the half hour it took the man to die, almost within arm’s length of the two Aalaag sitting on their riding animals. He had been trapped into listening, as the senior of the two, who could have no suspicion he was within earshot of one of the rare humans who actually understood Aalaag, gently reprimanded his son for bad judgment in trying to save the woman from being trampled. Because of this, they had been forced to kill not one, but two, healthy beasts; and also to engage in a ritual of justice—which always had a disturbing effect on the others, no matter how necessary. Remembering, Shane felt the inner center of his body grow icy with the recalled horror and the near approach of his own madness. He told how he had gone on to the bar, drunk the bootleg rotgut the bartender had claimed was aquavit, how he had been set upon by the three vagabonds and killed or badly damaged two of them with his staff, before the third had run off. He had not intended to tell it all, movement by movement; but somehow, once started, he could not help himself. He told how, once more crossing the now-empty square, on impulse he had scratched the Mark of the Pilgrim beneath the body on the hooks, before returning to the airport. “I believe you,” said Peter.

Shane said nothing. Crowded together as they were, he was conscious of the softness of Maria’s thigh pressed against his; and the warmth of her seemed also to press in upon the iciness within him, melting it as if he was someone lost and frozen in a snowstorm that was now getting back life and heat from the living temperature of another human being.

He felt a sudden desperate longing for her as a woman. Beasts were encouraged by the Aalaag to breed—particularly valuable cattle like those special human translator-couriers of Lyt Ahn; but living continually under the observations of the aliens as Shane and the others did cultured a paranoia. They all knew too well the innumerable ways that could bring them to destruction at the hands of their Masters; and when their duties were completed, their instinct was to draw apart, to creep separately into their solitary beds and lock their individual doors against each other, for fear that close contact with another could put their survival too completely in another’s power.

In any case, Shane did not want to breed. He wanted love—if only for a moment; and love was the one thing the highly paid human servants of the First Captain of Earth could not afford. Suddenly the warmth of Maria drew him like a dream of peace...

He jerked himself out of his thoughts. Peter was looking at him curiously. What had the man just been saying—that he believed Shane?

“Get someone to check Aalborg and ask people there what happened. The Mark I made might still be there, if the Aalaag haven’t erased it.”

“I don’t need to,” said Peter. “What you say explains how the Mark could spread around the world the way it already has. It would have to take someone who can move around as you can to get it known everywhere as the symbol of resistance. I always thought there must have been someone at the root of the legend.”

Shane let the first part of Peter’s comment pass without answer. The other man obviously did not understand what Shane had learned in his travels—the speed with which rumor of any kind could travel in a subject population. Shane had been present at the origin of rumors in Paris which he had heard again in this city of Milan less than a week later. Also, Peter seemed to be giving him credit for continuing to spread the Mark around, himself; and that, too, was probably a matter on which it was better not to correct the other.

“But I think you ought to face something,” Peter said, leaning hard against him for a second as Carlo whipped the taxi around a corner. “It’s time to move on from just being a legend, time to set up an organization with practical goals of resistance against the alien, looking forward to the day when we can kill them all, or drive them off the Earth, entirely.”

Shane looked sideways at him. It was incredible that this man could be saying such things in all seriousness. But of course Peter had not seen what Shane had, up close, of the power of the Aalaag. Mice might as well dream of killing or driving off lions. He was about to say this bluntly when the instinct for survival cautioned him to go cautiously, still. Avoiding a direct answer, he fastened on something else. “That’s the second time you’ve mentioned a legend,” he said.

“What legend?”

“You don’t know?” There was a note of triumph in Peter’s voice.

He did not offer to explain.

“There’s talk all the Marks are made by one person,” said Maria, also in English, now. She had only a trace of Italian accent—Venetian. “By someone called simply the Pilgrim, who has the ability to come and go without the Aalaag being able to stop or catch whoever it is.”

“And you, all of you, have been helping this Pilgrim, is that it?” said Shane, raising his voice.

“The point is,” Peter interrupted, “that it’s time the Pilgrim was associated with a solid organization. Don’t you think?”

Shane felt a return of the weariness that had deadened him when he had first been abducted by these people.

“If you can find your Pilgrim, ask him,” he said. “I’m not him, and I’ve got no opinions.”

Peter watched him for a moment.

“Whether you’re the Pilgrim or not is beside the point,” he said. “The point still is, you could help us and we need you. The world needs you. Just from what you’ve told us, it’s plain you could be invaluable just acting as liaison between resistance groups.”

Shane laughed grimly.

“Not on the best day in the year,” he said.

“You aren’t even stopping to think about it,” Peter said. “What makes you so positive you don’t want to do it?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you ever since you kidnapped me,” said Shane. “You’re the one who doesn’t listen. You don’t know the Aalaag. I do. Because you don’t know them, you can fool yourself that you’ve got a chance with this resistance of yours. I know better. They’ve been taking over worlds like this and turning the native populations into their servants for thousands of years. Did you think this was the first planet they’d ever tried it on? There’s nothing you can come up with by way of attacking them that they haven’t seen before and know how to deal with. But even if you could come up with something new, you still couldn’t win.”

“Why not?” Peter’s head leaned close.

“Because they’re just what they say they are—born conquerors who could never be dominated or defeated themselves. You can’t torture an Aalaag and get information out of him. You can’t point a weapon at one of them and force him to back off or surrender. All you can do is kill them—if you’re lucky. But they’ve got so much power, so much military power, that even that’d only work if you killed them all in the same moment. If even one escaped and had warning, you’d have lost.”

“Why?”

“Because with any warning at all, any one of them could make himself or herself invulnerable, and then take all the time he needed to wipe out whole cities and sections of Earth, one by one, until the other humans who were left served you and anyone else who had been fighting the Aalaag up on a platter, to stop the killing.”

“What good would it do just one Aalaag, to do all that,” Peter said, “if he was the last one on Earth?”

“You don’t think all the Aalaag in the universe are here, do you?” said Shane. “Earth, with only one Aalaag left alive on it, would only represent that much new homesteading territory for the surplus Aalaag population, elsewhere. In a year or less, you’d have as many Aalaag here as before; and the only result would be the humans who’d died, the slagged areas of Earth, and the fact that the Aalaag would then set up an even stricter control system to make sure no one like you rose against them again.”

There was silence in the car. Carlo whipped them around another corner and Shane could see a sign beside the highway announcing that the airport was now only one kilometer distant. The warmth of Maria’s body penetrated through his, and he could smell the harsh clean odor of the all-purpose soap with which she must just this morning have washed her hair.

“Then you won’t lift a finger to help us?” said Peter.

“No,” said Shane.

Carlo turned the car onto an off-ramp leading up to the airport road.

“Isn’t anybody willing to do anything?” burst out Maria suddenly. “Not anybody? Nobody at all?”

An icy electric shock jarred all through Shane. It was as if a sword had been plunged clear through him, a sword he had been expecting, but a sword to take his life nonetheless. It cut to his instinctive roots, to the ancient racial and sexual reflexes from which *yowaragh* sprang. The words were nothing, the cry was

everything.

He sat for a numb moment.

“All right,” he said. “Let me think about it, then.”

He heard his own voice far off, remote.

“You’re never going to get anywhere the way you’ve been acting so far,” he said. “You’re doing all the wrong things because you don’t understand the Aalaag. I do. Maybe I could tell you what to do—but you’d have to let me tell you, not just try to pick my brains, or it won’t work. Would you do it that way? Otherwise it’s no use.”

“Yes!” Maria said.

There was a slight pause.

“All right,” said Peter. Shane turned to stare at him.

“If you don’t, it won’t work.”

“We’ll do anything to hit at the Aalaag,” said Peter; and this time his answer came immediately.

“All right,” said Shane, emptily. “I’ll still have to think about it. How do I get in touch with you?”

“We can find you, if we know what city you’re coming into,” said Peter. “Can you arrange to put an ad in the local paper before you come—”

“I don’t have that much warning,” said Shane. “Why don’t I go into a shop in the center of a city when I first get there, and buy a pilgrim robe—a grey one like the one I’m wearing—and pay for it in a silver or gold Aalaag coin. You can have the shopkeepers warn you if anyone does that. If the description fits me, you watch the local Aalaag HQ and pick me up coming or going.”

“All right,” said Peter.

“One other thing,” Shane said. They were almost to the terminal building of the airport. He looked directly into Peter’s eyes. “I’ve seen the Aalaag questioning humans and I know what I’m talking about. If they suspect me, they’ll question me. If they question me, they’ll find out everything I know. You have to understand that. If everything else fails, they have drugs that just start you talking and you talk until you die. They don’t like to use them because they’re not efficient. Someone has to wade through hours of nonsense to get the answers they want. But they use them when they have to. You understand? Anyone they question is going to tell them everything. Not just me—anyone. That’s one of the things you’re going to have to work with.”

“All right,” said Peter.

“What it means, as far as I’m concerned, is that I don’t want anyone who doesn’t already know about me to know I exist.”

He held Peter’s eye, glanced meaningfully at Carlo and back to Peter.

“And those who aren’t to have something to do with me in the future—if I decide to have anything to do with you in the future—should believe that I get out of this car now and none of you ever see me again.”

“I understand,” said Peter. He nodded. “Don’t worry.”

Shane laughed harshly.

“I always worry,” he said. “I’d be insane not to. I’m worrying about myself right now. I need my head examined for even thinking about this.”

The taxi pulled up to the long concrete walk fronting the airline terminal and stopped. Peter, on the curb side of the car, opened the door beside him and got out to let Shane out. Shane started to follow him, hesitated, and turned for a second back to Maria.

“I will think about it,” he said. “I’ll do whatever I can, the best I can.”

In the relative shadow of the corner of the taxi’s back seat, her face was unreadable. She reached out a hand to him. He took and held it for a second. Her fingers were as icy as Milan itself had been this morning.

“I’ll think about it,” he said again, squeezed her fingers, and scrambled out. On the walk, he stood for a second, facing the other man.

“If you don’t hear from me in six months, forget me,” he said.

Peter’s lips opened. He appeared about to say something; then the lips closed again.

He nodded.

Shane turned and went swiftly into the terminal. Just inside the entrance doors, he spotted a terminal policeman and swung on him, taking the Key from his purse and exposing it for a second in the palm of his hand to the other’s gaze.

“This is the Key of Lyt Ahn, First Captain of Earth,” he said in rapid Italian. “I’m one of his special couriers, and I need transport to the Masters’ section of the field, fast. Fast! Emergency! But do it without attracting attention!”

The officer snapped upright, jerked the phone from his belt and spoke into it. There was no more than a thirty-second wait before an electric car came sliding through the crowd on its air cushion. Shane jumped into one of the passenger seats behind the driver, glancing at his watch.

“The hangars for smaller military craft!” he said. He hesitated, then made up his mind. “Use your siren.”

The driver cranked up his siren, the crowd parted before him as he swung the car around and drove at it. They slid swiftly across the polished floor, out through a vehicle passway by the entrance to the field itself.

Once on the field, the car lifted higher on its cushion and went swiftly. They swung around two sides of the field and approached the heavily-guarded silver hangars housing the military atmosphere ships of the Aalaag. They slowed at the guard gate of the entrance to this area. Shane showed his Key and explained his errand to the human Special Guard on duty there.

“We’ve been warned to expect you,” said the Guard. “Hangar Three. The courier ship is piloted by the Master Enech Ajin, who is of the thirty-fifth rank.”

Shane nodded and the driver of the car, having heard, moved them off without any further need for orders.

In the hangar, the slim dumbbell shape of the courier sat dwarfed by the large fighter ships of the Aalaag,

on either side of her. Yet, as Shane knew, even these seemingly larger ships were themselves small as Aalaag warships went. The true fighting vessels of the Aalaag never touched planetary surface, but hung in continual orbit and readiness—as much for reasons of principle as for that there was no air or spaceport on Earth where they could have set down without causing massive damage.

He jumped down from the car as it paused by the open port of the courier vessel, and ran up the steps of the port, stepping into the cramped interior. It need not have been so cramped; but even this ship designed for carrying dispatches was heavy with armament.

The massive back of an Aalaag showed itself above one of the triple seats at the control panel in the front of the ship. Shane walked up to just behind the seat and stood waiting. This was not only his duty, but all that was necessary, even if the pilot had not heard him come in. This close to the other, he smelled the typical Aalaag body odor plainly; and the pilot was as surely scenting him. After a moment the pilot spoke.

“Take one of the seats farther back, beast.” It was the voice of an adult Aalaag female. “I have two other stops to make before I bring you to the area of the First Captain.”

Shane went back and sat down. After only a couple of minutes, the courier ship lifted and hovered lightly perhaps ten feet off the floor of the hangar. It slid out into the late daylight of the field, turned, and went softly to a blast pad. At the pad it stopped and Shane let the air out of his lungs and laid his arms in the hollows of the armrests on either side of his chair.

For a second there was neither sound, nor movement. Then something like a clap of thunder, a great weight crushing him into the seat so that he could not move for a long moment—then sudden freedom and lightness, so that he felt almost as if he could float out of the chair. Actually, the feeling was exaggerated. He was still within gravity. It was the contrast with the pressure of takeoff that created the illusion of lightness.

He looked at the viewing screen in the back of the seat before him and saw the surface of the Earth below, a curving horizon and a general mottling of clouds. Nothing else. The look of no expression on Maria’s face as he had left her came so clearly back into his imagination that it was as if her face floated before him in the air this moment. He felt the coldness of her fingers against his fingers, and her voice rang, re-echoing in memory in his ear—

“Isn’t anybody willing to do anything? Not anybody? Nobody at all?”

They were all insane. He shivered. He had been wise to play along and pretend to consider their suggestion that he involve himself in their charade of resistance, that could only lead to torture and death at Aalaag hands. They had no chance. None. If he had seriously considered joining them, he would have been as insane as they were.

His heart beat heavily. The cold touch of Maria’s fingers that lingered in his fingers seemed to spread up his arms and all through him. No, it was no use. It made no difference that they were insane.

He had no choice. Something within him left him no choice, even though he knew what it would mean. He would do it even though he knew it would mean his death in the end. He would seek them out again and go back to them. Join them.