

WARLOCK
by
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Book Two of The Darkwar Trilogy

BOOK THREE:
MAKSCHÉ

Chapter Fifteen

I

Bullets hammered the north wall of the last redoubt, Akard's communications center. Mortars crumpled. Their bombs banged deafeningly. Bullets leaking through the two small north windows had made a shambles of the communications gear.

Marika had done what she could to stem the nomad tide, and she had failed. She had only two regrets: that her pack, the Degnan, would go into the darkness unmourned, and that for her there would be no journey to the Reugge cloister at Maksche. For her there would be no next step on the road that might have led to the stars.

The hammer of savage weapons rose to an insane crescendo. The nomads were closing in for the last kill. Then the uproar ended. Braydic, the communications technician, whimpered into the sudden silence, "Now they will come."

Marika nodded. The last minutes had arrived. The inevitable end of the siege had come.

Marika did something never done before. She hugged the only surviving members of her pack, the huntresses Grauel and Barlog. The scent of fear was heavy upon their rough fur.

Pups of the upper Ponath packs hugged no one but their dams, and that seldom after the first few years.

The two huntresses were touched deeply.

Grauel turned to the trademale Bagnel, who was teaching her to operate a firearm. His comrade, last of those who had survived last week's fall of the trademale packfast Critza, had fallen defending one of the north windows. Someone had to hold that against the savages. Grauel's heavy spear was too unwieldy.

"Wait!" Marika gasped. Her jaw went slack. "Something . . ."

The universe of the touch, the ghost plane into which silth like Marika ducked to work their witchery, had gone mad. Some mighty shadow, terrible in its power, was raging up the valley of the Hainlin River, which this last bastion of the fortress Akard overlooked. For a moment Marika was paralyzed by the power of that shadow. Then she flung herself to a south-facing window.

Three great daggerlike crosses stormed up the frozen river. They drove into the fangs of the wind in a rigid V. That fierce and dreadful shadow-of-touch preceded them, flaying the mind with terror. Upon each cross stood five black-clad silth, one at each tip of each arm, the fifth at the axis. The incessant

north wind howled around them and tore at their dark robes. They seemed to notice it not at all.

“They are coming,” Marika shouted to Grauel and Barlog, who crowded her against the windowsill.

An explosion thundered out behind them. It threw them together. Marika gasped for breath. Grauel turned, pointed her rifle. It barked in unison with that of the trademale Bagnel as savages appeared in the dust swirling in the gap created by the explosion.

Marika clung to the windowsill, looking out, waiting for death.

The rushing crosses rose as they neared Akard, screaming into lightly falling snow, parting. Marika slipped through her loophole into the realm of ghosts and followed them as they plunged toward the attacking nomads, spreading death and terror.

Grauel and Bagnel stopped firing. The nomads had fled the breach. In minutes the entire besieging horde was in full flight. Two of the flying crosses harried the savages northward. The third returned and hovered over the confluence of the forks of the Hainlin, above which Akard brooded on a high headland.

Akard’s pawful of survivors crowded the window, staring in disbelief. Help had come. After so long a wait. In the penultimate moment, help had come.

The cross drifted closer till the tip of its longest arm touched the fortress on the level above the communications center. Marika pushed weariness aside and went to meet her rescuers. She was only fourteen, as yet far from being a full silth sister, but was the senior silth surviving. The only silth surviving. Through eyes hazed with fatigue and reaction, she vaguely recognized the dark figure which came to meet her. It was Zertan, senior of the Reugge Community’s cloister at Maksche.

It looked like she would get to see the great city in the south after all.

A moment after she had fulfilled the necessary ceremonial obsequiences, exhaustion overtook her. She collapsed into the arms of Grauel and Barlog.

Marika wakened after the fading of the light. She found herself perched precariously upon the flying cross. In one hasty glance she saw that she shared the strange craft with the other survivors of Akard. Grauel and Barlog were as near her as they could get—as they always were. Bagnel was next nearest. He rewarded her with a cheerful snarl as her gaze passed over him. Communicator Braydic seemed to be in shock.

The wind seemed almost still as the cross ran with it. To the left and below, the ruins of Bagnel’s home, Critza, appeared. “No bodies anymore,” Marika observed.

In a hard, low voice, Bagnel said, “The nomads feed upon their dead. The grauken rules the Ponath.” The grauken, the monster lying so close beneath the surface of every meth. The archetypal terror of self with which every meth was intimately familiar.

The Maksche senior eyed Bagnel, then Marika from her standing place upon the axis of the cross. She pointed skyward. “It will get worse before it gets better. The grauken may rule the entire world. It comes on us with the age of ice.”

Marika looked skyward, trying to forget the dust cloud that was absorbing her sun's power and cooling her world. She tried to concentrate on the wonder of the moment, to take joy in being alive, to forget the horror of the past, of losing first the pack with which she had lived her first ten years, then the silth packfast where she had lived and trained the past four. She tried to banish the terror lurking in her future.

Jiana! Doomstalker! Twice!

The voice in her mind was the voice of a ghost. She could not make it go away.

The hills of the Ponath gave way to plains. The snowfall faded. And the flying cross fled with the breath of the north wind licking behind.

II

For months Marika had seen nothing but overcast skies. Always the bitter north wind had been present, muttering of even colder times to come. But now the gale could not catch her. She mocked it quietly.

Cracks began to show in the cloud cover. One moon, then another, peeped through, scattering the white earth with silver.

"Hello, strangers," Marika said.

"What?"

The response startled Marika, for she had been enclosed entirely within herself, unmindful of her bizarre situation. "I was greeting the moons, Grauel. Look. There is Biter. One of the small moons is running behind her. I cannot tell which. I do not care. I am just glad to see them. How long has it been?"

The huntress shifted her weapon and position gingerly. It was a long fall to the frozen river. "Too long. Too many months." Sorrow edged Grauel's voice. "Hello, moons."

Soon Chaser, the second large moon, showed its face too, so that shadows below looked like many-fingered paws.

"Look there!" Marika said. "A lake. Open water." She too had not seen unfrozen water in months.

Grauel would not look down. She clung to their transport with a death grip.

Marika glanced around.

Five strangers, five friends. All astride a metal cross the shape of a dagger, running with the wind a thousand feet above the earth and snow. Grauel and Barlog, known since birth. Bagnel, known only months, strange, withdrawn, yet with the aroma of someone who could become very close. At that moment she decided he would become an integral part of her destiny.

Marika was silth. The Akard sisters had called her the most powerful talent ever to be unearthed in the upper Ponath. Sometimes the strongest silth caught flashes intimating tomorrow.

Braydic. The only friend the exile pup had made in her four years at Akard. Marika was glad that Braydic had survived.

Finally, two pups of meth who had served the silth, holding one another, terrified still, not yet knowing

their fates. She realized that she did not know their names. She had saved them, as she had saved herself, for redoubled exile. Shared terror and last-second salvation ought to account for more intimacy.

“So,” she said to Grauel and Barlog. “Here we go again. Into exile once more.”

Barlog nodded. Grauel merely stared straight ahead, trying to keep her gaze from taking in the long fall to the silvered snows.

The Hainlin twisted away to the west and out of sight for a time, then swept back in beneath. It widened into a vast, slow stream, though mostly it remained concealed behind a mask of white. Time passed. Marika shook off repeated fits of bleak memory. She suspected her companions were doing the same.

Meth were not reflective by nature. They tended to live in the present, letting the past lie and allowing the future to care for itself. But the pasts of these meth were not the settled, bucolic pasts of their foredams. Their pasts reechoed with bloody hammer strokes. Their futures threatened more of the same.

“Lights,” Grauel croaked. And in a moment, “By the All! Look at the lights!”

Ten thousand pinpricks in the night, like a nighttime sky descended to earth. Except that the sky of Marika’s world held few stars, filled as it was with a dense, vast cloud of interstellar dust.

“Maksche,” Senior Zertan said. “Home. We will reach the cloister in a few minutes.”

The flying crosses pacing them suddenly swept ahead, vanished into the darkness. The lights ahead bobbed and rocked and swelled, and then the first passed below, maybe five hundred feet down. Marika felt no awe of the altitude. She exulted in the flying.

Soon the cross settled into a lighted courtyard, to a point between crosses already arrived. Scores of silth in Reugge black waited silently. The cross touched down. Zertan stepped off. Several silth approached her. She said something Marika did not catch, gestured, and stalked away. The other silth left their places at the tips of the cross.

A meth female in worker apparel approached Marika and the others. “Come with me. I have been instructed to show you quarters.” She assessed them cautiously. “Not you,” she told Bagnel, diffidently. “Someone from your Bond is coming for you.”

Marika was amused, for she knew this meth saw only savages out of the Ponath. Even her, for all she was silth. And she knew this city meth was frightened, for savages from the Ponath had reputations for being unpredictable, irrational, and fierce.

Marika gestured. “We go. You, lead the way.”

Bagnel stood aside, looking forlorn, one paw raised in a gesture of farewell.

Grauel followed the worker. Marika followed her. Barlog stayed close behind, weapon at port. Braydic and the pups tagged along at the end.

The Degnan refugees searched every shadow they passed. Marika listened with that talented silth ear that was inside her mind. She felt silth working their witcheries all around her. But the shadows were haunted by nothing more dangerous than projected fears of the unknown.

The servant led them through seemingly endless hallways, dropping first the pups, then Braydic. Marika sensed Grauel and Barlog becoming edgy. Their sense of location was confused. She grew uncomfortable herself. This place seemed too large to encompass. Akard was never so vast or tortuous that she had feared for her ability to get out.

Get out. Get out. That built within her, a smoldering panic, a dread of being unable to escape. She was of the upper Ponath, where pack meth ran free, at will.

The worker detected their mounting tension. She led them up stairs and outside, to the top of a wall at least vaguely reminiscent of the north wall at Akard, where Marika had made her away place, the place she went to be alone and think.

Each silth found such a place wherever she might be.

“It is huge,” Barlog breathed from behind Marika. Marika agreed, though she knew not whether Barlog meant the cloister or city.

The Maksche cloister was a square compound a quarter mile to a side. Its outer wall stood thirty feet high. It was constructed of a buttery brown stone. The structures it enclosed were built of the same stone, all topped with steep roofs of red tile. The buildings were all very old, very weathered, and all very rectilinear. Some had corner towers rising like obelisks peaked by triangles of red.

The worker said, “A thousand meth live in the cloister, separate from the city. The wall is the edge of our world, a boundary that is not to be passed.”

She meant what she said, no doubt, but the fierceness that rose in her charges made her drop the subject. Marika growled, “Take us where we are supposed to go. Now. I will hear rules from those who make them, and will decide if they are reasonable then.”

Their guide looked stricken.

Grauel said, “Marika, I suggest you recall all that has been said about this place.”

Marika stared at the huntress, but soon her gaze wandered. Grauel was right. At the beginning she had best submit to the local style.

“Stop,” she said. “I want to look.” She did not await approval.

The cloister stood at Maksche’s heart, upon a contrived elevation. The surrounding land was flat all the way to the horizons. The Hainlin, three hundred yards wide, looped past the city in a broad brown band two miles west of Marika’s vantage. Neat squares of cropland, bounded by hedgerows or lines of trees, showed through the snow covering the plain.

“Not a single hill. I think it will not be long before I become homesick for hills.” Marika used the simple dialect of her puphood, and was surprised when the worker frowned puzzledly. Could the common speech be so different here?

“I think so. Yes,” Grauel replied. “Even Akard was less foreign than this. It is like ten thousand little fortresses, this thing called a city.”

The buildings were very strange. But for Akard and Critza, every meth-made structure Marika had ever

seen had been built of logs and stood under twenty-five feet high.

“I am not allowed much time away from my regular duties here,” the worker said, her tone whining. “Please come, young mistress.”

Marika scowled. “All right. Lead on.”

The quarters assigned had been untenanted for a long time. Dust lay thick upon what tattered furniture there was. Marika coughed, said, “We are being isolated in some remote corner.”

Grael nodded. “Only to be expected.”

Barlog observed, “We can have this livable in a few hours. It is not as bad as it looks.”

Feebly, the worker said, “I must take you two to . . . to . . .” She fumbled for a word. “I guess you would say, huntress’s quarters.”

“No,” Marika told her. “We stay together.”

Grael and Barlog snarled and gestured toward the door with their weapons.

“Go,” Marika snapped. “Or I will tie a savage’s curse to your tail.”

The female fled in terror. Grael said, “Probably whelped and raised here. Scared of her own shadow.”

“This is a place where shadows are terrors,” Barlog countered. “We will hear from the shadow mistresses now.”

But Barlog was wrong. A week passed without event. It was a week in which Marika seldom left her quarters and had no intercourse at all with the Reugge of Maksche. She let Grael and Barlog do the physical exploration. No one came to her.

She began to wonder why she was being ignored.

The time free began as a boon. In her years at Akard she had spent most of every waking hour in study, learning to become silth. The only respite had come during summers when she had joined hunting parties stalking the nomadic invaders who brought Akard and the Ponath to ruin.

Once her quarters were clean and she had sneaked a few exploratory forays into nearby parts of the cloister, and had penetrated the rest of it riding ghosts, and had found herself an away place in a high tower overlooking the square where she had arrived, she grew bored. Even study became appealing.

She snarled her dissatisfaction at the worker who brought their meals. That was on her tenth day in Maksche.

Things seemed to move slowly in Maksche. Marika’s complaints continued for a week, growing virulent. Yet nothing happened.

“Do not cause trouble,” Grael cautioned. “They are studying our conduct. It is all some sort of test.”

“Pardon me if I am skeptical,” Marika said. “I have walked the dark side a hundred times since we have

been here. I have seen no indication that they even know we are here, let alone are watching. We have been put out of sight, out of mind, and are imprisoned in a dungeon of the soul.”

Grael exchanged glances with Barlog. Barlog observed, “All things are not seen by the witch’s inner eye, Marika. You are not omnipotent.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that one young silth, no matter how strong, is not going to use her talent to see what a cloister full of more practiced silth are doing if they do not want her to see.”

Marika was about to admit that that might be possible when someone scratched at the door. She gestured. “It is not time to eat. The drought must be over.”

Barlog opened the door.

There stood a silth older than any Marika had encountered before. She hobbled in, leaning on a cane of some gnarled dark wood. She halted in the center of the room, surveyed the three of them with rheumy cataracted eyes. Her half-blind gaze came to rest upon Marika. “I am Moragan. I have been assigned as your teacher and as your guide upon the Reugge Path.” She spoke the Reugge low speech with an intriguing, elusive accent. Or was it a natural lisp? “You are the Marika who stirred so much controversy and chaos at our northern fastness.” Not a question. A statement.

“Yes.” Marika had a feeling this was no time to quibble about her role at Akard.

“You may go,” Moragan told Grael and Barlog.

The huntresses did not move. They did not look to Marika for her opinion. Already they had positioned themselves so that Moragan stood at the heart of a perilous triangle.

“You are safe here,” Moragan told Marika when no one moved.

“Indeed? I have your sworn word?”

“You do.”

“And the word of a silth sister is worth the metal on which it is graven.” She had been studying the apparel of the old sister and could not make out the significance of its decorations. “As we who were under the sworn guardianship of the Reugge discovered. Our packsteads were overrun without aid coming. And when we fled to the Akard packfast for safety, that too was allowed to be destroyed.”

“You question decisions of policy about which you know nothing, pup.”

“Not at all, mistress. I simply refuse to allow policy to snare and crush me in coils of deceit and broken oaths.”

“They said you were a bold one. I see they spoke the truth. Very well. We will do it your way. For now.” Moragan hobbled to a wooden chair, settled slowly, slapped her cane down atop a table nearby. She seemed to go to sleep.

“Who are you besides Moragan?” Marika asked. “I cannot read your decorations.”

“Just a worn-out old silth so far gone she is past being what you would call Wise. We are not here to discuss me, though. Tell me your story. I have heard and read a few things. Now I will assess your version of events.”

Marika talked, but to no point. A few minutes later Moragan’s head dropped to her chest and she began to snore.

And so it went, day after day, with Moragan doing more asking and snoring than teaching. That day of her first appearance, she had been in one of her more lucid periods. Sometimes she could not recall the date or even Marika’s name. Most of the time she was of little value except as a reference guide to the cloister’s more arcane customs. Always she asked more questions than she answered, many of them irritatingly personal.

Her role, though, provided Marika with a role of her own. As a student she occupied a recognized place in cloister society and was answerable principally to Moragan for her conduct. Safely knit into the cultural fabric, Marika felt more comfortable teaching herself by exploring and observing.

Marika liked little of what she did learn.

Within the cloister the least of workers lived well. Outside, in the city, meth lived in abject want, suffering through brief lives of hunger, disease, and backbreaking labor. Everyone and everything in Maksche belonged to the Reugge silth Community, to the trademale brotherhood calling itself the Brown Paw Bond, or to the two in concert. The Brown Paw Bond maintained its holdings by Reugge license, under complicated and extended lease arrangements. Residents of Maksche who were neither trademale nor silth were bound to their professions or land for life.

Marika was bewildered. The Reugge possessed meth as though they were domestic animals? She interrogated Moragan. The teacher just looked at her strangely, evidently unable to comprehend the point of her questions.

“Grauel,” Marika said one evening, “have you figured this place out? Do you understand it at all? That old carque Moragan cannot or will not explain anything so it makes any sense.”

“Take care with her, Marika. She is more than she seems.”

“She is as All-touched as my granddam was.”

“She may be senile and mad, but she is not harmless. Perhaps the more dangerous for it. It is whispered that she was not set to teach you but to study you. It is also whispered that she was once very important in the order, and that she still has the favor of some who are very high up. Fear her, Marika.”

“I should fear someone I could break?”

“As strength goes? This is not the upper Ponath, Marika. It is not the strength of the arm that counts. It is the strength of the alliances one forms.”

Marika made a sound of derision. Grauel ignored her.

“Marika, suppose that some of them hope you try your strength. Suppose some of them want to prove something to themselves.”

“What?”

“Our ears are sharp from many years of hunting the forests of the upper Ponath. When we go among the huntresses of this place—and sorrier huntresses you will never see—we sometimes overhear whispers never meant for our ears. They talk about us and they talk about you and they talk about the thinking of those around Senior Zertan. In a way, you are on trial. They suspect—maybe even know—about Gorry.”

“Gorry? What about Gorry?”

“Something happened to Gorry in the final hours of the siege. There was much speculation, overheard by everyone. We said nothing to anyone about that, but we are not the only survivors brought out of the ruins of Akard.”

Marika’s heart fluttered as she thought of her one-time instructress. But she felt no remorse. Gorry had deserved the torment she had suffered, and more. All Marika felt was a heightened apprehension about being ignored. It had not occurred to her that it was that sort of deliberateness. She would have to be careful. She was in no position of strength.

Grael watched expectantly while Marika wrapped her mind around the implications.

“Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I thought you might have some regrets.”

“Why?”

“She was—”

“She was a carque of an old nuisance, Grael. She would have done it to me if she could have. She tried often enough. She got what she asked for. I do not want to hear her mentioned again.”

“As you wish, mistress.”

“Have you found Braydic yet?”

“She was assigned to the communications center here, as you might expect. Students are not permitted entry there. And technicians are not allowed out.”

“Why not?”

“I do not know. This is a different world. We are still feeling our way. They never tell you what is permitted, only what is not.”

Marika realized that Grael was upset with her. When Grael was distressed, she insisted on using the formal mode of speech. But Marika had given up trying to interpret the huntress’s moods. She was exercised about something most of the time.

“I want to go out into the city, Grael.”

“Why?”

“To explore.”

“That is not permitted.”

“Why not?”

“I do not know. Rules are not explained here. They are enforced. Ignorance is no excuse.”

What was the penalty for disobedience?

Marika banished the thought. It was too early to challenge constraints. Still, she felt compelled to say, “If this is life in the fabulous Maksche cloister, Grauel, I may go over the wall.”

“Barlog and I have very little to do either, Marika. They think we are too backward.”

III

The absolute, enduring stone of the cloister became a hated enemy. It crushed in upon Marika with the weight of massively accumulated time and alien tradition. Enforced inactivity made it almost intolerable. Each day she spent more time in her tovertop away place. Each day meditation did less to ease her spiritual malaise.

Her place overlooked nothing but the courtyard, the city, and the works of meth. There was a constant wind, a north wind, but it did not speak to her as had the winds at Akard. It carried the wrong smells, the wrong tastes. It was heavy with the sweat of industry. It was a foreign, indifferent wind. That wind of the north had been her friend and ally.

Often she did not leave her cell at all, but lay on her pallet and used a finger to draw stick figures in the sweat on the cold wall.

Sometimes she went down through her loophole into the realm of ghosts, but she found little comfort there. Ghosts were scarce where so many silth were gathered. She sensed a few great monsters way high above, especially in the night, but she could not touch them. She might as well reach for Biter.

There was a change in atmosphere in the cloister around the end of Marika’s sixth week there. It puzzled her till Barlog showed up to announce, “Most Senior Gradwohl is coming here.” Most Senior Gradwohl ruled the entire Reugge Community, which spanned the continent. “They are frantic trying to get ready.”

“Why is she coming?” Marika asked.

“To take personal charge of the effort to control the nomads. Two days ago nomads were seen from the wall of the packfast at Motchen. That is only a hundred miles north of Maksche, Marika. They are catching up with us already.” In a lower voice Barlog confided, “These Maksche silth are frightened. They have a contract with the tradermals that obligates them to protect traders anytime they are in Reugge territory. They have been unable to do that. Critza is just one of three tradermal packfasts that were overrun. There is a rumor that some tradermals want to register an open petition for the Serke sisterhood to intercede in Reugge territories because the Reugge can no longer maintain order.”

“So?” Marika asked indifferently.

“That would affect us, Marika.”

“How? We have no part in anything. We are tolerated for some reason. Barely. We are fed. And otherwise we are ignored. What do we have to fear? If no one sees us, who can harm us?”

“Do not talk that way, Marika.”

“Why not?”

“These sisters can go around unseen. One of them might hear you.”

“Don’t be silly. That’s nonsense.”

“I heard it from . . .” Barlog did not finish for fear of compromising her source.

“How much longer can you tolerate this imprisonment, Barlog? What does Grauel think? I won’t endure it much longer, I promise you that.”

“We can’t leave.”

“Says who?”

“It’s not permitted.”

“By whom? Why not?”

“That’s just the way it is.”

“For those who accept it.”

“Marika, please . . .”

“Go away, Barlog. I don’t want to hear you whine.” As Barlog was about to leave, she added, “They’ve tamed you, Barlog. Made a two-legged rheum-greater out of a once fine huntress.” Use of the familiar mode made Marika’s words all the more cutting.

Barlog’s lips parted in a snarl of fury. But she restrained herself and even closed the door gently.

Marika went to her tower to observe the most senior’s arrival. Gradwohl came in on one of the flying crosses, standing at its axis. Marika watched it drop past the tower, the silth at the tips of its arms standing rigidly with their eyes closed. There was a thrumming rhythm between them that Marika had missed during her flight south. But then she had been exhausted physically, drained mentally and emotionally, and had been interested in little but leaving a shattered fortress and life behind.

She went down inside herself and through her loophole and was astonished to find the cross surrounded by a roiling fog of ghosts, great ghosts similar to the dark killing ghosts she had ridden in the north. The sister at the tip of the longer arm controlled them. They moved the ship. The other sisters provided reservoirs of talent from which the senior sister drew. The most senior did nothing. She was but a passenger.

This, finally, was something about which Marika could get excited. How did they manage it? Was it

something she could learn to do? It would be fantastic to ride above the world by night upon one of those great daggers. She studied the silth. What they were doing was different from killing, but it did not appear difficult. She touched the senior sister, trying to read what was happening, as the cross neared the ground.

Her touch distracted the silth. The cross dropped the last foot. Marika recoiled quickly. A countertouch brushed her, but was not specific. It did not return.

A great deal of pomp and ceremony followed the most senior's landing. Marika remained where she was. The most senior, her party, and those who welcomed her, vanished into the labyrinthine cloister. Marika gazed over the red rooftops at the horizon. For once the wind carried a hint of the north. That chill breath of home worsened her feeling of alienation.

Grael found her still there near midnight, chin on arms on stone, eyes vacant, staring at the far fields of moon-frosted snow as if awaiting a message. "Marika. They sent me to bring you."

Grael seemed badly shaken. There was something in her voice that stirred the dangerous flight-fight response within her. "Who sent you?"

"Senior Zertan. On behalf of the most senior. Gradwohl herself wants to talk to you. That Moragan was with them. I warned you to watch yourself with her."

Marika bared her teeth. Grael was terrified. Probably of the possibility that they would get thrown out of the cloister. "Why does she want me?"

"I don't know. Probably about what happened at Akard."

"Now? They're interested now? After almost two months?"

"Marika. Restrain yourself."

"Am I not perfectly behaved before our hosts?"

Grael did not deny that. Marika even treated Moragan with absolute respect. She made a point of giving no one cause to take offense—most of the time.

Nevertheless, she was not liked by the few sisters who crossed her path. Grael and Barlog claimed the Maksche sisters feared her. Just as had the sisters at Akard.

"All right. Show me the way. I'll try to mind my manners."

They made Grael stop at the door to the inner cloister, the big central structure opened only for high ceremonies and days of obligation. Marika touched Grael's elbow lightly, restraining her. Grael responded with a massive shrug of resignation—and, Marika thought, just the faintest hint of amusement in the tilt of her ears. It was a hint only one who knew Grael well would have caught.

What was she up to? And where was Grael's rifle? She had not been parted from the weapon since she had received it from Bagnel. She slept with it, it was so precious. Her carrying it all the time had to be cause for consternation and comment.

Almost, Marika looked back. Almost. Native guile stopped her.

Two silth led her to a vast, ill-lighted chamber. No electricity there, just tapers shuddering in chilly drafts. As must be in a place where silth worked their magics. Electromagnetic energies interfered with their talents.

This was the chamber where the most important Reugge rites were observed. Marika had been there before only as a dark-walker. Other than in its symbolic value, the place was nothing special.

Two dozen ranking silth waited, perched silently upon tall stools. Only the occasional flick of an inadvertently exposed tail betrayed the fact that anything was happening behind their cold obsidian-flake eyes. Every one of those eyes was fixed upon Marika.

She was less intimidated than she expected.

Several worker-servants moved among the silth, managing wants and refreshments. One with a tray approached Marika. She was an ancient whose fur had fallen in patches, leaving only ugly bare spots. She dragged her right leg in a stiff limp. As Marika waved her away, she was startled by the meth's scent. Something familiar . . .

In a low voice the servant said, "Mind your manners, pup." She hitch-stepped off to the sideboard that seemed to be her station.

Barlog!

Barlog. With a limp. And Grauel's treasure was missing.

With that rifle Barlog could cut down half the silth in the room before any even thought of employing their witchery.

Marika was pleased by the resourcefulness of Grauel and Barlog. But she felt no more confident of her ability to handle the subtleties of the coming interview.

Of the silth in that room, Marika recognized only two. Zertan and Moragan. Marika faced the senior and performed the appropriate ceremonial greeting to perfection. She would show Barlog who could mind her manners.

"This is the one from Akard?" a gravelly voice asked.

"Yes, mistress."

The most senior, Marika assumed. Younger than she had expected. She was a hard, chunky, grizzled female with slightly wild eyes. Like a Gorry still sane. A sister who was as much huntress as silth, and a hungry huntress at that.

"I thought she would be older. And bigger," the most senior said, echoing Marika's own thoughts.

"She is young," Moragan said, and Marika noted that she was completely awake and vibrant and alive. Moragan's stool stood between those of Zertan and the most senior, an inch nearer that of the latter, subtly proclaiming her most important tie.

Senior Zertan said, "We do not know what to do with her. Her history is repellent at best. She is an

astoundingly strong feral detected accidentally four years ago. Akard took her in. That was soon after the first nomadic incursions into the upper Ponath. Her hamlet was one of the first overrun. It seems that, with no training whatsoever, purely instinctively she drew to the dark and slew several savages. Her latent ability in that respect so disturbed some of our sisters that they labeled her Jiana, after the mythological and archetypal doomstalker Jiana. A sister, Gorry, who had a Community-wide reputation before the necessity for her rustification arose—”

A revenant shrieked in Marika’s mind. Jiana! Doomstalker!

“Zertan.” Most Senior Gradwohl’s voice was coldly cautionary.

Zertan shifted her emphasis slightly. “Gorry had very strong, very negative feelings about the pup. In one way of seeing, Gorry was correct. She has twice been almost the only survivor of monstrous disasters that befell those who nurtured her. Gorry was very much afraid of her, but was her teacher. Thus her training there was haphazard at best. Reliable reports do indicate that she achieved a commanding ability to reach and command the darkest of those-who-dwell.”

The object of discussion was growing more irate by the moment. Barlog’s cold stare helped her control her tongue.

“Zertan,” Gradwohl said again. “Enough. I have seen all the reports you have, and more.” For a moment the Maksche senior seemed startled. “Can you tell me anything new? Anything I do not know? How does she feel about the sisterhood?”

After a silence that began to stretch painfully, Zertan admitted, “I have no idea how she feels. But it does not matter. A pup’s attitudes are the clay that the teacher—”

Gradwohl did not seize upon Zertan’s clumsiness. Instead, she shifted approach. “Senior Koenic reported to me shortly before Akard fell. Among other things, we discussed a feral silth pup named Marika. This Marika, though only fourteen years old, was directly responsible for the deaths of several hundred meth. Senior Koenic was as scared of her as Gorry was. Because, as she put it, this Marika was an embryonic Bestrei or Zhorek—without the intellectual handicaps of those two dark-walkers. Senior Koenic knew Bestrei and Zhorek before her rustification. She watched Marika for four years. She was in a position to form an intelligent estimate of the pup.”

Gradwohl eased down off her stool, surveyed the assembly. “What does it matter what a pup thinks of the Community? Consider two ideas. Trust, and personal loyalty.

“For all the backbiting that goes on, trust cements the Reugge Community. We know we are in no physical danger from one another. We know none of our sisters will willfully work to the detriment of the order. Our subordinates know we will protect and nurture them. But Marika believes none of that.

“Why? Because her hamlet and hundreds of others were overrun by savages the Reugge were pledged to repel. Because genuine attempts have been made upon her life. Because she has not been educated to see the good of the Community as paramount.”

Gradwohl sounded like some windy Wise meth giving the convocation on a day of high obligation. The longer Gradwohl talked, the less closely Marika listened and the more she became wary. There was some silth game running and she was just a counter.

“About personal loyalty, few of you know a thing,” the most senior continued in a hard voice. “Let us

experiment. Moragan. Proceed.”

Moragan got off her stool. She drew a long, wicked knife from inside her robe, presented it to Senior Zertan.

Gradwohl said, “Carry out your instructions, Zertan.”

Zertan left her stool with obvious reluctance. She looked at Marika for a moment.

She flung herself forward.

Marika’s response was instantaneous and instinctive. She ducked through her loophole into the ghost realm. A thought captured a ghost. A mental shout scattered the few others before any other silth could come through and seize them. She hurled her ghost at the vaguely perceived form plunging toward her.

She returned to reality while the bark of a rifle still reverberated through the chamber. Zertan was pitching forward, dropped knife not yet to the floor. Gradwohl was turning, spun by Barlog’s bullet. Marika flung up a paw, restraining Barlog before she commenced a massacre.

The chamber door exploded inward. The guards posted outside tumbled through. Grauel leaped through with a Degnan ululation, shield on one arm, javelin poised for the cast. Behind her, a quivering Braydic menaced the guards with a sword she had no idea how to use.

Not one of the silth on the stools moved more than the tip of a tail.

Some silth game.

Most Senior Gradwohl recovered. The bullet had but clipped her shoulder. She met Marika’s cold stare. “I seldom miscalculate. But when I do, I do it big.” Her paw went to her shoulder, where moisture seeped into the fabric of her robe. “I did not anticipate firearms. Halechk! See to Zertan before she dies on us.”

A silth with healer’s decorations left her stool and hastened to Zertan.

Gradwohl said, “Personal loyalty. Even in the face of certain disaster.” Her teeth ground together. Her wound had begun to hurt.

Zertan’s knife had come to rest only inches from the tip of Marika’s right boot. She kicked it across the floor to the most senior’s feet.

Gradwohl’s cheek began to twitch. She whispered, “Have a care, pup. Had it been real, you might have gotten through it by having surprise on your right paw.”

“Had it been real, there would be only three meth alive in this room right now.” Marika spoke with conviction. She broke eye contact long enough to glance at the knife. “We had a saying in the Ponath. ‘As strength goes.’ ” She had to say it in dialect. Gradwohl did not react. Perhaps it went past her.

“When I am manipulated or pushed, mistress, I must push back.”

Gradwohl ignored her. She surveyed the silth, still perched upon their stools. “This assembly has served its purpose. It is as I suspected. Someone has been remiss. Someone allowed prejudice to overwhelm

reason. Listen! This pup ambushed and destroyed a ranking sister of the Serke Community. And I promise you, that House is giving that fact a lot more attention than this one has.”

Gradwohl stared at Marika hard. Marika continued to meet her gaze, refusing to be intimidated. Beneath, beyond the test of wills, she sensed a kindred soul.

“This assembly is at an end,” Gradwohl said, still holding Marika’s gaze. “Go. All but you, pup.”

Silently, silth began filing out. Two helped carry Senior Zertan.

Barlog and Grauel did not move.

Braydic, though, Marika noted, had disappeared. Ever cautious and timid Braydic.

Just as well, perhaps. Just as well.

Marika focused upon this meth strong enough to rule the fractious Reugge Community.

Chapter Sixteen

I

Gradwohl climbed onto a stool. “Sit if you like,” she told Marika.

Marika settled crosslegged upon the floor, as had been the custom among the packs of the upper Ponath. Furniture had been unknown in her dam’s loghouse.

“Tell me about yourself, pup.”

“Mistress?”

“Tell me your story. I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

“You know, mistress. Through your agent Moragan.”

Gradwohl seemed amused. “She was that transparent?”

“Only looking back.”

“Nothing substitutes for direct examination. Begin simply. Tell me your story. What is your name?”

“Marika, mistress.”

“Tell me about Marika. From her birth to this moment.”

Marika sketched an autobiography which included her first awarenesses of her talent, her unusually close relationship with her male littermate Kublin, her troubles with one of the Wise of her dam’s loghouse, and all her troubles during her stay at the fortress Akard.

Gradwohl nodded. “Interesting. But possibly even more interesting in complete privacy.”

“Mistress?”

“You have told me very little about Marika inside.”

Marika grew uneasy.

“Do not be frightened, pup.”

“I am not, mistress.”

“Liar. I met a most senior when I was your age. I was petrified. There is no need. I am here to help. You are not happy, are you? Honestly, now.”

“No, mistress.”

“Why not?”

She thought she had made that clear. Perhaps their backgrounds were too alien. She rambled till Gradwohl lost patience. “Get to the point, pup. There are no ears here but mine. Even were there, your sisters would make no reprisals for what you say. I will not permit that. And do not lie. I want to know what the real Marika thinks and feels.”

Irrked, Marika tested the water with a few mild remarks. When Gradwohl did not explode, she continued till she had revealed most of her dissatisfactions.

“Exactly what I suspected. An absolute lack of vision from the very beginning. I was not a feral myself, but I endured similar troubles. They sense strength and power, and it frightens them. In their way, silth have minds as small as any common meth. Those who might be surpassed want to stifle you before you develop the skills to command them. It is a severe shortcoming of the society silth have developed. Now. Tell me more about Akard.”

Gradwohl spoke no more of Marika’s place in things, nor of her feelings. Instead, she concentrated upon a minute examination of events during Akard’s final days. “What has become of the other survivors? Especially the commtech and the tradermale?” She used the Ponath dialect word tradermale as though it was unfamiliar.

Marika reflected carefully before saying, “Braydic was assigned work in the communications center here.” Had the most senior noted the sword-carrying meth who had threatened the guards behind Grauel, keeping them from interfering? “They will not let me see her. Bagnel vanished. I assume he rejoined his brotherhood. They say there is a tradermale place here in Maksche.”

“Presumably I could reach him through his factors.”

“Darkship, mistress?”

“The flying cross. That was you in the tower, was it not? You touched Norgis just before we set down.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“What did you think?”

“I was awed, mistress. The idea of riding such a thing. . . . I rode one coming down from Akard, but most of that escapes me.”

“You are not frightened by it?”

“No, mistress.”

“You do not find those-who-dwell frightening?”

“No, mistress.”

“Good. That will be all, pup. Return to your quarters.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“There will be changes in your life, pup.”

“Yes, mistress,” Marika said as she walked toward the doorway.

Grael went through first, surveyed the hallway, nodded. Barlog backed out behind Marika, rifle still trained on the most senior.

Not one word about the confrontation passed between the three of them.

The changes began immediately. The morning following the interview, a silth the age of Marika’s dam came to her cell. She introduced herself as Dorteka. “I am your instructress, detached from the most senior’s staff for that purpose. The most senior has ordered an individualized program for you. We will get started now.” Plainly, Dorteka did not like her assignment, but she was careful to avoid saying so.

Marika would soon note a cloisterwide shift of attitude toward one who had caught the most senior’s interest.

That first morning Dorteka took her to a meditation chamber. They sat upon the floor, across a table of the same stone as the cloister, in the eerie light of a single oil lamp. On Dorteka’s side lay a clipboard and papers. Dorteka said, “Your education has been erratic. The most senior wants you to go back and begin at the beginning.”

“I would be with pups . . . ”

“You will proceed at your own pace, independent of everyone else at every level. Where your training has been adequate, you will advance rapidly, to your limits.” Dorteka straightened a paper. “What would you like to do for the sisterhood?”

Marika did not hesitate. “Fly the darkships. To the starworlds.”

A trace of amusement showed in the tilt of Dorteka’s ears. “So the most senior suggested. The darkship is possible. The starworlds are not.”

“Why?”

“We were too late going out. We looked in the wrong places. The starworlds are all enfeifed, and they

are guarded jealously by the sisterhoods who own them. Even to leave the planet now would mean an immediate challenge to darkwar. So darkwar can be our only reason for entering the dark. We will not. We have no one capable of challenging.”

Puzzled, Marika asked, “What is darkwar? No one will explain.”

“At your level it will be difficult to comprehend. In essence, darkwar is a bloodduel between the leading Mistresses of the Ships of Communities in conflict. The survivor wins the right of the dispute. Darkwar is rare because it usually seals the fate of an entire Community.”

Bloodduel Marika understood. She nodded.

“Time enough for such things after you gain a solid foundation. You wish to become involved with the ships. Then you shall become involved, if you remain interested once you become qualified. There are never enough sisters willing to work them. You do read and write?”

“Yes, mistress.”

Dorteka handed her a sheet of paper. “This is our schedule. We will adjust it as needed.”

Marika looked it over. “Not much time left for sleep.”

“You wish to fly darkships, you must learn to endure sleeplessness. You wish to see your friend Braydic, you will remain stubbornly devoted to your studies.” Dorteka pushed a scrap of paper across the table. The notes on it were in a paw almost mechanically perfect. “Suggested motivators for the feral subject Marika.”

“The most senior?”

“Yes.”

The interest shown by the most senior was a bit intimidating.

The sheet was filled with a complicated diagram for earning the right to visit Braydic or the city.

“As you see, a visit to your friend requires you to accumulate one hundred performance points. Those are mapped out for you there. Leave to go outside the cloister will be more difficult to obtain. It is subject to my being satisfied with your progress. You will never get out if I feel you are giving less than one hundred percent.”

Crafty old Gradwohl. She had speared to the heart of her and tapped forces which could make her learn. The thought of seeing Braydic sparked an immediate urge to begin. The opportunity to get into the city, too, stirred her, but less concretely.

“I doubt that I will permit a city visit anytime soon. Perhaps we will accumulate several opportunities for later.”

“Why, mistress?”

“The streets could be dangerous for an untrained silth. We have been having a problem with rogue males. I expect the Serke are behind that, too. Whatever, silth have been assaulted. Last summer ringleaders

were rounded up and sentenced to the mines, but that did little good. The brethren—those you call tradermales—may have a paw in the movement.”

“The world is not so complicated on an upper Ponath packstead,” Marika observed.

“No. You see the schedule and rewards. Are they acceptable?”

“Yes, mistress.”

“You will become a full-time student, with no other duties. You will accept the discipline of the Community?”

“Yes, mistress.” Marika was surprised to find herself so eager. Till this morning she had cared about nothing. “I am ready to begin.”

“Then begin we shall.”

II

Marika’s education commenced before the next dawn. Dorteka wakened her and took her to a gymnasium for an hour’s workout. A bath followed.

Marika’s determination almost broke. She nearly broke her vow to obey and conform.

A bath! Meth—of the upper Ponath, at least—hated water. They never entered it voluntarily. Only when the populations of insects in one’s fur became too great to stand . . .

The bath was followed by a hurried meal prior to the first class of the day, which was an introduction to being silth. Rites and ceremonies, dogma and duties, and instruction in the secret languages of the sisterhood, which she hardly needed. She discovered that there were circles of sisterhood mysteries silth were supposed to penetrate as they became older and more skilled. Till Dorteka, she had no idea how much she had been shut out.

She ripped through those studies swiftly. They required rote learning. Her memory was excellent. Seldom did she need to be shown anything more than once.

She excelled in the gymnasium. She was her dam’s pup. Skiljan had been fast, strong, hard, and tough.

The second class lay across the cloister from the first. Dorteka made her run all the way. Dorteka made her run everywhere, and ran with her. The second class was not as susceptible to rote learning, for it was mathematics. It required the use of reason. Silth naturally tended to favor intuition.

After mathematics came the history of the sisterhood, a class which Marika devoured in days. The Reugge were a minor Community with a short, uneventful past, an offshoot of the Serke that had established independence only seven centuries earlier. Sustenance of that independence was the outstanding Reugge achievement.

Silth had a history that stretched into prehistory, countless millennia back, when all meth lived in nomadic packs. The earliest sisterhoods existed long before the keeping of records began. Most silth had little interest in those days. They lived in an eternal now.

Marika’s pack had maintained a record of its achievements called the Degnan Chronicle. That it had

been kept in her dam's loghouse had been a source of pride to the pup. Barlog still kept it up, for she and Grauel believed that as long as it survived and remained current, the Degnan pack survived. As a historical instrument, the Degnan Chronicle was superior to any kept by the Reugge even now. For the Reugge Community, history was an oral tradition mainly of self-justification.

Broader historical studies proved no more informative. They raised more questions than they answered, as far as Marika could see. What were the origins of the meth? In olden times—as now among the nomads of the north—they were pack hunters. Physically, they resembled a carnivore called a kagbeast. But kagbeasts were not intelligent, nor did their females rule their packs. In fact, female meth did not rule the primitive packs of the southern hemisphere, where silth births were rare. There the males hunted on equal footing.

When Marika asked, Dorteka theorized, "Female rule developed because of the high incidence of silth births in northern litters. So I have heard.

"Primitive packs such as your own are structured around the strong. When the strong become weakened by time or disease, they are pushed aside. But a silth could stave off challengers even though she was weak physically, and once in command would tend to be partial to those who shared her talent. In primitive packs where breeding rights are reserved for the dominant females, silth dominance would mean especial favor to the spread of the silth strain."

Marika observed, "Then an old female like my instructress Gorry, at Akard, could stay in control till she died, yet could not lead or make rational decisions, really."

Dorteka snorted. "Which indicts the silth structure, yes. For all the most senior said about trust and whatnot in your interview—yes, I have heard all about that—we live under rule by terror, pup. The most capable do not run the Communities. The most terrible do. Thus you have a Bestrei among the Serke without a brain at all but in high station because she is invincible in darkwar. She is one of many who would not survive long if stripped of her talent."

After general history came another meal, followed by a long afternoon spent trying to harness and expand Marika's talents.

Dorteka went through everything with her, side by side. She graded herself, making herself the standard against which Marika should perform.

Marika almost enjoyed herself. For the first time since the fall of the Degnan packstead, she felt like her life was going somewhere.

The exercises, the entire program, were nothing like what she had had to suffer through with Gorry. There were no monsters, no terrors, no threats, no abuses. For silth class Marika seated herself upon a mat, closed her eyes, led herself into a trance where her mind floated free, unsupported by ghosts. Dorteka adamantly insisted she shun those-who-dwell.

"They are treacherous, Marika. Like chaphe is treacherous. You can turn to them too often, till you become dependent upon them and turn to them every time you are under pressure. They become an escape. Go inside and see how many other paths lie open."

Marika was amazed to discover that most silth could not reach or manipulate the deadly ghosts. That was a rare talent, dark-walking. The rarest and most dread talent of them all was being able to control the giants that moved the darkships—the very giants she had summoned at Akard for more lethal

employment against nomads.

Her heart leapt when she learned that. She would fly!

Flight had become a goal bordering upon obsession.

“When can I begin learning the darkships, mistress?” she asked. “That is what interests me.”

“Not soon. Only after you have a sound grounding in everything it takes to become true silth. The most senior would like you to become a flying sister, yes, but I feel she wants you to be much more. I suspect she plans a great future for you.”

“Mistress?” At Akard there had been much talk of a great future, little of which anyone had been willing to explain.

“Never mind. Go through and see how far you can extend your touch.”

“To whom, mistress?”

“No one. Just reach out. Do you need a target?”

“I always have.”

“To be expected of the self-taught, I suppose.” Dorteka never became exasperated, even when she had cause. “It is not necessary. Try it without.”

Despite the grind, which left little time for sleep, Marika often visited her tower, sat staring at the stars, mourning the fate that had enlisted her in a sisterhood incapable of reaching them.

Dorteka’s sessions could be as intense as Gorry’s, if not as dangerous. Marika found herself grasping skills instinctively, progressing so rapidly she unsettled her instructress. Dorteka began to see what the most senior had intuited. That much talent in the paws of one raised to the primitive huntress world view, with its harsh and uncompromising values . . . The possibilities were frightening.

Evenings after supper, Marika’s education turned to the mundane, to the sciences as the Reugge knew them. Though they were laden with a mysticism that left Marika impatient, her progress was swift, and limited only by her ability to grasp and internalize the principles of ever more complex mathematics.

Word came down from the most senior: expand the time given math. Let the sisterhood trivia slide.

Dorteka was offended. The forms of silthdom were important to her. “We are our traditions,” she was fond of saying.

“Why is the most senior doing this?” Marika asked. “I do not mind. I want to learn. But what is her hurry?”

“I am not sure. I am certain she would disapprove of my guessing. But I believe she may be thinking in terms of sculpting some sort of liberator for the Reugge. If the Serke keep pressing us and the winter keeps pushing south, we could be devoured within ten years. She does not want to be remembered as the last most senior of the Reugge Community. And she has begun to feel her mortality.”

“She is not that old. I was surprised when first I saw her. I thought she would be ancient.”

“No, she is not old. But always she hears the Serke baying behind her. However, that is not our worry. Mine is to teach. Yours is to learn. The whys are not relevant now. Time will unfold its leaves.”

Marika continued to advance at a rate that shocked Dorteka. The teacher observed, “I begin to suspect that, despite themselves, our sisters at Akard taught you a great deal. At this rate you will, in every way, surpass your own age group before summer. In some ways you already exceed many sisters accounted full silth.”

Much of what Marika encountered was new. She did not tell Dorteka that, afraid of frightening her teacher with the ease with which she learned.

After evening classes there was an events-of-the-day seminar conducted by the Maksche senior’s second, a silth named Paustch. This took place in the hall where Marika had confronted Gradwohl, and Marika was required to attend. She kept the lowest profile possible. Her presence was tolerated only because Gradwohl insisted. No one asked her opinion. She offered none. She had no illusions about her presence there. She was the senior’s marker, but she did not know in what game. She ducked out first when the seminar ended.

Thus she stayed close to the warming feud with the Serke, with the latest on nomad predations, gained an idea of the shape of politics between sisterhoods, heard of all their squabbles, caught rumors about the explorations of distant starworlds. But mostly the Maksche leadership discussed the nomads and the ever more common problem of male sedition.

“I came into this in the middle,” Marika told Dorteka. “I am not certain I understand why the problem is such a problem.”

“These males are few and really only a minor irritant,” Dorteka said. “Taken worldwide their efforts would not be noticeable. But they have concentrated their terrorism in Reugge territories, especially around Maksche. And a large portion of their attacks have been directed against guests of the Reugge—clearly an effort to make us appear weak and incapable of policing our fiefs. And the Serke, as you might expect, have been making the most of the situation. We have been subjected to a great deal of outside pressure. All part of the Serke maneuver against us, of course. But we cannot prove they are behind it.”

“If the behavior of males here is unusual . . . Are these rogues homegrown?” As an afterthought, she added the appropriate, “Mistress?”

Dorteka’s ears tilted in mild amusement. “You strike to the heart of the matter. In fact, they are not. Our native males are perfectly behaved, though they often lend passive support by not reporting things they should. Sometimes they even grow so bold as to provide places of hiding. Certainly they sympathize with the rogues’ stated goals.”

Those goals were nothing less than the overthrow and destruction of all silthdom. A grand vision indeed, considering the iron grip the Communities had upon the world.

III

Marika’s first attempt to visit Braydic did not go well at all. Called out of the communications center, the technician met her with evasive eyes and an obvious eagerness to be away. Marika was both amused and pained, for she recalled who it was who had held the door guards at bay in the heat of crisis.

“No one saw you, Braydic,” she said. “You are safe. I doubt the guards themselves could identify you. They were on the edge of hysteria and probably recall you as being a demon nine feet tall and six wide.”

Braydic shuddered and stared at the floor. Marika was disappointed, but knew what that momentary commitment had cost Braydic. She had risked everything.

“I owe you, Braydic. And I will not forget. Go, then, if you fear having me for a friend. But I promise my friendship will not falter for it.”

Marika returned two weeks later. Braydic was no more sure of herself. Pained, Marika determined that she would not return again till she had attained some position of power, the shadow of which could fall upon Braydic.

She had begun to grow aware of the value and uses of power, and to think of it. Often.

That second visit, cut short, left her an hour free. She went to her away place in the tower.

Spring now threatened Maksche. The city lay under a haze from factories working overtime to fulfill production quotas before their workers had to report to the fields. Because of the shortening growing seasons, every worker now had to labor in the fields to get sufficient crops planted, tended, and harvested. Else the city would not make it through the winter.

This failing winter had been the worst in Maksche’s history, though it was mild compared to those Marika had seen in the upper Ponath. But succeeding winters would be worse. The Maksche silth were now driving their tenants, their dependents, their meth property, so Maksche would be prepared for the worst when it came.

A darkship rose from the square below. The blade of the dagger turned till it pointed northward. Once it was above Maksche’s highest structures, it fled into the distance.

From the date of the most senior’s arrival, darkships had been airborne every day the weather permitted, hunting nomads, tracking nomads, scouting out their strong points and places of meeting, gathering information for a summer campaign. The Reugge could not challenge the Serke directly. They had neither the strength nor proof other Communities would consider adequate. So the most senior meant to defeat their efforts by obliterating their minions.

She was tough and bloodyminded, this Gradwohl. She meant to fertilize the entire northern half of the Reugge province with nomad corpses. And if she could manage it, she would add several hundred troublesome rogue males to the slaughter.

The cloister was ahum with an anticipation Marika hardly noticed. She did not expect to become involved in Gradwohl’s campaign.

How long before Dorteka allowed her to explore Maksche? She was eager to be away from the cloister, to break for a few hours from this relentless business of becoming silth.

Maksche was odd, a city of marked contrasts. Here sat the cloister, all but its ceremonial heart electrically lighted and heated. One could get water simply by lifting a lever. Wastes were carried away in a system of sewage pipes. But outside the cloister’s walls few lights existed, and those only candles or tallow lamps. Meth out there drew their water from wells or the river. Their sewers consisted of channels

in the alleyways, washed clean when it rained.

It had not rained all winter.

Meth out there walked, unless they were the rare, rich, favored few who could rent dray beasts, a driver, and a carriage from the trademales of the Brown Paw Bond. Silth sisters going abroad in the town usually rode in elegant steam coaches faster than any carriage. If Dorteka allowed her out, would she be permitted the use of such a vehicle? Not likely. They were guarded jealously, for they were very expensive. They were handcrafted by one of the trademale underbrotherhoods not part of the local Brown Paw Bond, and imported. They were not silth property.

The traders sold no vehicle outright, but leased them instead. Lease contracts demanded huge penalty payments for damages done. Marika suspected that was motivated by a desire to keep lessees from dismantling the machines to see how they worked.

A trademale operator came with every vehicle. Outsiders were not allowed to learn how to drive. Those males obligated to the vehicles of the cloister lived in a small barracks across the street from the cloister's main gate, whence they could be summoned on a moment's notice.

When her hour was up, Marika went to Dorteka and asked, "How many more points do I have to accumulate before I can go into the city?"

"It is not a point system, Marika. You can go whenever I decide you deserve the reward."

"Well? Do I?" She had held back nothing. Having been used as a counter in a contest she did not understand, for reasons she could not comprehend, she had gone all out to arm herself for her own survival. Dorteka could not have demanded more. There was no more she could give.

"Perhaps. Perhaps. But why go out into that fester at all?"

"To explore it. To see what is out there. To get out of this oppressive prison for a while."

"Oppressive? Prison? The cloister?"

"It is unbearable. But you grew up here. Maybe you cannot imagine freedom of movement."

"No. I cannot. At least not out there. My duties have taken me into the city, Marika. It is disgusting. I would rather not traipse around after you while you crawl through the muck."

"Why should you, mistress?"

"What?"

"There is no reason for you to go."

"If you go, I have to go."

"Why, mistress?"

"To keep you out of trouble."

“I can take care of myself, mistress.”

“Maksche is not the Ponath, pup.”

“I doubt that the city has dangers to compare with the nomad.”

“It is not danger to your flesh I fear, Marika. It is your mind that concerns me.”

“Mistress?”

“You do not fool me. You are not yet silth. And you are no harmless, eager student. A shadow lives behind your eyes.”

Marika did not respond till she carefully stifled her anger. “I do not understand you, mistress. Others have said the same of me. Some have called me doomstalker. Yet I do not feel unusual. How could the city harm my mind? By exposing me to dangerous ideas? I have enough of those myself. I will create my own beliefs here or there, regardless of what you would have me believe. Or could it harm me by showing me how cruelly Reugge bonds live so we silth can be comfortable here? That much I have seen from the wall.”

Dorteka did not reply. She, too, was fighting anger.

“If I must have company and protection, send my packmates, Grauel and Barlog. I am certain they would be happy to accept your instructions.” Her sarcasm was lost on Dorteka.

She and Grauel and Barlog had been at odds almost since the confrontation with the most senior. The two huntresses had been making every effort to appear to be perfect subjects of the Community. Marika did not want them to surrender quite so fast.

“I will consider that. If you insist on going out there.”

“I want to, mistress.”

The great ground-level gate rolled back. Grauel and Barlog stepped out warily. Marika followed, surprised at their reluctance. Behind her, Dorteka said, “Be back before dark, Marika. Or no more passes.”

“Yes, mistress. Come on!” She ran, exulting in her freedom. Grauel and Barlog struggled to keep pace. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It stinks,” Grauel said. “They live in their own ordure, Marika.”

And Barlog; “Where are you going?” Already it was evident that Marika had a definite destination in mind.

“To the tradermale enclosure. To see their flying machines.”

“I might have guessed,” Barlog grumbled. “Slow down. We’re not as young as you are. Marika, all this obsession with flying is not healthy. Meth were not meant for it. Marika! Will you slow down?”

Marika glanced back. The two huntresses were struggling with the cumbersome long rifles they carried. "Why did you bring those?" She knew Grauel preferred the weapon she had gotten from Bagnel.

"Orders, Marika. Pure and simple and malicious orders. There are some silth who hope you'll get killed out here. The only reason you get a pretense of a bodyguard is because you have the most senior's favor."

"Pretense?"

"Any other silth would have at least six guards. If she was insane enough to come out on foot. And they would not be so shoddily armed. They would not have let us come except that we are two they won't miss if something happens."

"That's silly. Nobody has been attacked since we've been here. I think all that is just scare talk. Good old grauken in the bushes."

"No one has been foolish enough to walk these streets either, Marika."

Marika did not want to argue. She wanted to see airships. She pressed ahead. The tradermale built machines that flew. She had seen them in her education tapes and from her tower in the nether distance, but it was hard to connect vision screen images and remote specks with anything real. The airfield lay too far from the cloister for examination from her tower.

An aircraft was circling as Marika approached the fence surrounding the tradermale enclave. It swooped, touched down, rolled along a long concrete strip, and came to a halt with one final metallic belch. Marika checked Grauel and Barlog for their reactions. They had seen nothing like it before. Servants of the silth saw very little of the world, and tradermale aircraft were not permitted to fly near the cloister.

They might have been watching carrion birds land upon a corpse.

"Let's get closer," Marika said. She trotted along the fence, toward a group of buildings. Grauel and Barlog hurried after her, glancing over their shoulders at the aircraft and at two big transport dirigibles resting in cradles on the far side of the concrete strip.

The advantage of being silth, Marika believed, was that you could do any All-bedamned thing you wanted. Ordinary meth would grind their teeth and endure. She breezed into an open doorway, past a desk where a sleepy tradermale watched a vision screen, dashed down a long hallway and out onto the field proper, ignoring the startled shout that pursued her. She headed for the freighters.

The nearest was a monster. The closer she ran, the more she was awed.

"Oh," Grauel said at last, and slowed. Marika stopped to wait. Grauel breathed, "All bless us. It is as big as a mountain."

"Yes." Marika started to explain how an airship worked, saw that she had lost both huntresses, said instead, "It could haul the whole Degnan pack. Packstead and all. And have room left over."

Tradermale technicians were at work around the airship's gondola. One spotted them. He yelled at the others. A few just stared. Most scattered. Marika thought that was amusing.

The fat flank of the ship loomed higher and higher. She leaned back, now as awed as Grauel and Barlog. She beckoned a male either too brave or too petrified to have fled. He approached tentatively. "What ship is this, tradermale?"

He seemed puzzled by that latter, dialect word, but got the sense of the question. "Dawnstrider."

"Oh. I do not know that one. It is so big, I thought it must be Starpetal."

"No. Starpetal is much larger. Way too big for our cradles here. Usually only the smaller ships come up to the borderlands."

"Borderlands?" Marika asked, bemused by the size of the ship.

"Well, Maksche is practically the end of the world. Last outpost of civilization. Ten miles out there it turns into Tech Three Zone and just gets worse the farther you go." He tilted his ears and exposed his teeth in a way that said he was making a joke.

"I thought I hailed from the last outpost," Marika countered in a bantering tone. "North edge of the Tech Two." If she could overcome his awe, he might have something interesting to say. She did realize that most meth considered Maksche the end of the world. It was the northernmost city of consequence in the Hainlin basin, the limit of barge traffic and very border of Tech Four-permitted machine technology. It had grown up principally to service and support trade up the Hainlin, into the primitive interior of the vast and remote northern Reugge provinces. "Well, savagery is relative. Right? We are civilized. They are savages. Come, Barlog. Grauel."

"Where are you going?" the tradermale squeaked. "Hey! You cannot go in there."

"I just want to look at the control cabin," Marika said. "I will not touch anything. I promise."

"But . . . wait . . ."

Marika climbed the ladder leading to the airship's gondola. After a moment of silent debate, Grauel and Barlog followed, shaking visibly, driven onward only by their pride. A Degnan huntress knew no fear.

Dawnstrider was a freighter. Its appointments were minimal, designed to keep down mass so payload could be maximized. Even so, the control cabin was bewildering with its array of meters and dials, levers, valves, switches, and push-buttons. "Do not touch anything," Marika warned Grauel and Barlog for the benefit of the technician, who refused to leave them unsupervised. "We do not want this beast to carry us away."

The huntresses clutched their weapons and stared around. Marika was puzzled. They were not ignorant Ponath dwellers anymore. They had been exposed to the greater meth universe. They should have developed some flexibility.

She did not remain impressed long. Dawnstrider was a disappointment, though she could not pin down why. "I have seen enough. Let us go look at the little ships."

She went down the ladder behind the technician, amused by the emotion betrayed in his every movement. She was getting good at reading body language.

She did not sense the wrongness till she had moved several steps from the base of the ladder. Then it

was too late.

Tradermales rushed from beneath the airship, all of them armed. Grauel and Barlog snapped their weapons to the ready, shielded Marika with their bodies.

“What is this?” Marika snapped.

“You do not belong here, silth,” a male said. “You are trespassing on brethren land.”

Marika’s nerve wavered. Yet she stared the male in the eye with the arrogance of a senior and said, “I go where I please, male. And you mind your manners when you speak—”

“You are out of line, pup. No one comes into a brethren enclave without permission of the factors.”

He had the right of it. She had not thought. There were compacts between the Reugge and the tradermales. She had overlooked them in her enthusiasm.

A stubborn something within her refused to back down, insisted that she up the risk. “You better have these males put their weapons aside. I do not wish to harm anyone.”

“I have twenty rifles, pup. I count two on your side.”

“You are speaking to a darkwalker. I can destroy the lot of you before one trigger can be pulled. You think about dying with your heart ripped out, male.”

His lips peeled back in a snarl. He was ready to call her bluff. The set of Grauel’s shoulders said that the huntress thought her mad to provoke the male so, that she would get them all killed for nothing.

Fleetingly, Marika wondered why she did provoke almost everyone who ever challenged her.

“We shall see.” The tradermale gestured.

Marika felt an odd tingling, like that she experienced around high-energy communications gear. Something electromagnetic was being directed at her. She spotted a tradermale in the background aiming a boxlike device her way.

She dived down inside herself, through her loophole, snagged a ghost, and slammed it into the guts of the box. She twisted that ghost and compressed it into an ever more rapidly spinning ball, all within an instant. She watched it shred wires and glass.

She came back in time to watch the box fly apart, to hear the technician’s startled yelp. He raised a bleeding paw to his mouth.

Fingers strained at triggers. The leading tradermale betrayed extreme distress. “You see?” Marika demanded.

“Hold it! Hold it there!” someone shouted from the distance. Everyone turned.

More males were running along the airstrip. In a moment Marika realized why one seemed familiar. “Bagnet,” she said softly. Her spirits rose. Maybe she would escape the consequences of her own stupidity after all.

The instant she began to see hope, she started worrying about the consequences that would follow the report that would reach the cloister. There would be a complaint, surely. Tradermales were said to be militant about their rights. They had struggled for ages to obtain them. Their organization was by-the-rules where those were concerned.

Marika was mildly amazed to discover she was more afraid of Dorteka than she was of this potentially lethal confrontation.

A few tradermale weapons sagged as they awaited those approaching. Tension drooped with them. Grauel and Barlog relaxed, though they did not lower their weapons.

Bagnel rushed up, puffing. "Timbruk, what have you got here?" He peered at Marika. "Ha! Well! And I actually thought of you when they told me. Marika. Hello." He interposed himself between Marika and the male he had called Timbruk. "Can we have a little relaxation here, meth? Everybody. Put the weapons down. There is no call to get anyone hurt."

Trimbruk protested, "Bagnel, they have trespassed . . ."

"Obviously. But no harm done, was there?"

"Harm is not the point."

"Yes. Yes. Well, Trimbruk, if they need shooting we can do that later. Put the weapons down. Let me talk. I know this sister. She saved my life in the Ponath."

"Saved your life? Come on. She is just a pup. She is the one who . . . ?"

"Yes. She is that one."

Trimbruk swallowed. His eyes widened. He looked spooked. He stared at Marika till she became uncomfortable. Twice his gaze seemed pulled toward a group of buildings at the north end of the field. Each time he jerked it back to her with sudden ferocity. Then he said, "Relax, brothers. Relax. Weapons on safety."

Marika said, "Grauel, Barlog, stand easy. Put your weapons on safe."

Grauel did not want to do it. Her every muscle was tense with a rigidly controlled fight-flight response. But she did as she was told, though her eyes continued to smolder.

Barlog merely heaved a sigh of relief.

Bagnel did likewise. "Good. Now, shall we talk? Marika, what in the name of the All did you think you were doing, coming in here like that? You cannot just walk in like you own the place. This is convention ground. Have they not taught you anything over there?"

"I know. It was stupid." She stepped closer, spoke more softly. "I was just wandering around, exploring. When I saw the airships I got so excited I lost my head. I forgot everything else. I just had to look. Then these males . . ." She broke off, realizing she was about to make accusations that would be unreasonable and provocative.

Bagnel was amused. But he said, "Did you have to be so . . . I see. They have taught you—taught you to be silth. I mean, the way silth here understand being silth. Cold. Arrogant. Insensitive. Never mind. As they say, silth will be silth. Timbruk. It is over. There is no need for you here now. This is to be forgotten. No record. No formal protest. Understand?"

"Bagnel . . ."

Bagnel ignored him. "I owe you a life, Marika. But for you I would have become meat in a nomad's belly more than once. I repay a fraction of the debt here. I forgive the trespass." In soft humor, he added, "I am sure your seniors would have a good deal to say to you if they heard about this."

"I am sure they would. Thank you."

Timbruk and his males were stalking away, some occasionally glancing back. Except for the male who had tried to use the box. Despite his wound, he was crouched over the remains, prodding them with a finger, shaking his head. He seemed both baffled and disturbed.

"Come," Bagnel said. He started toward the buildings through which Marika had made her dash.

She asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I am assigned here now. As assistant security chief for the enclave. Since I did such a wonderful job as security officer at Critza, they awarded me a much more important post." His sarcasm was thick enough to cut. Marika could not determine its thrust, though. Was he his own target? Or were the seniors who had given him the job?

"That was what you were doing up there? I always had a feeling you were not a regular wander-the-forests-with-a-pack-on-your-back kind of trademale."

"My job was to protect the fortress and manage any armed operations undertaken in the region of its license."

"Then you were in charge of that hunting party you were with the first time we met."

"I was."

"I thought old Khronen was in charge."

"I know. We allowed you think so. He was just our guide, though. He had been in the upper Ponath all his life. I think he knew every rock and bush by name."

"He was a friend of my dam. At least as near a friend as she ever had among males."

Bagnel, daring beyond belief, reached out and touched her lightly. "The memories do haunt, do they not not? We all lost so much. And those who were never there just shrug it off."

Marika stiffened her back. "Can we look at the small aircraft on the way to the gate?"

Bagnel rewarded her with a questioning look.

"The crime is committed," she replied. "Can I compound it?"

“Of course.” He altered course toward a rank of five propeller-driven aircraft.

“Stings,” Marika said as they approached. “Driven by a single bank nine-cylinder air-cooled radial engine that develops eighteen hundred meth power. Top speed two hundred ten. Normal cruising speed one sixty. Not fast, but capable of carrying a very large payload. A fighting aircraft. Who do trademales fight, Bagnol?”

“You amaze me. How did you find out? We fight anyone who attacks us. There are a lot of wild places left in the world. Even here in the higher Tech Zones. There is always a demand for the application of force.”

“Are these ones here for the push against the nomads?”

“No. We may reoccupy our outposts if the Reugge manage to push the nomads out, but we will not help push.”

“Why not? The Brown Paw Bond suffered more than we did, if you do not count the packs. Posts all along the Hainlin . . . ”

“Orders, Marika. I do not pretend to understand. Politics, I guess. Little one, you picked the wrong sisterhood at the wrong time. Strong forces are ranged against the Reugge.”

“The Serke?”

“Among others. They are the most obvious, but they do not stand alone. That is off the record, though. You did not hear it from me.”

“You did not tell me anything I did not know. I do wonder why, though. No one has bothered the Reugge since they split from the Serke. Why start now?”

“The Reugge are not strong, Marika, but they are rich. The Hainlin basin produces a disproportionate amount of wealth. Emeralds out of the Zhotak—those alone might be reason enough. We Brown Paw Bond traders have done very well trading junk for emeralds.”

Marika harkened to younger days, when trademales had come into the upper Ponath afoot or leading a single rheum-greater, exchanging a few iron tools, books, beads, flashy pieces of cloth, and such, for the clear green stones or otec furs. Every year Dam’s friend Khronen had come to the Degnan packstead, bringing precious tools and his easy manner with pups, and had walked away with a fortune.

The Degnan had been satisfied with the trades. Emeralds were of little value on a frontier. Otec fur was of more use, being the best there was, but what it would bring in trade outweighed its margin of value over lesser furs.

Junk, Bagnol called the trade goods. And he was right from his perspective. Arrowheads, axe heads, hoes, hammers, rakes, all could be manufactured in bulk at little cost in Maksche’s factories. One emerald would purchase several wagonloads here. And books, for which a pack might save for seasons, were produced in mass in the city’s printshops.

“Is that why the Ponath is kept savage?”

Meth, with the exceptions of tradermales and silth, seldom moved far from their places of birth. Information did not travel well in the mouths of those with an interest in keeping it close. How angry Skiljan would have been had she known the treasures she acquired for the pack cost the traders next to nothing. She would have believed it robbery. Just another example of innate male perfidy.

“Partly. Partly because the silth are afraid of an informed populace, of free movement of technology. Your Communities could not survive in a world where wealth, information, and technology traveled freely. We brethren would have our troubles. We are few and the silth are fewer still. Between us we run everything because for ages we have shaped the law and tradition to that end.”

They walked around the fighting aircraft. Marika found its presence disturbing. For that matter, the presence of Dawnstrider was unsettling. Trade in and out of Maksche did not require a vessel so huge. There was more here than met the eye. Maybe that explained Timbruk’s hostility.

“The Sting’s main disadvantage is its limited range when fully fight-loaded,” Marika said, continuing with the data she had given earlier.

“You are right. But where did you learn all that, Marika? I would bet only those of us who actually fly the beasts know all you have told me.”

“I learned in tapestudy. I am going to be a darkship flyer. So I have been learning everything about flying. I know everything about airships, too.”

“I doubt that.” Bagnel glanced back at Dawnstrider.

“But those craft . . .” Marika indicated several low, long, ovoid shapes in the shadow of a building on the side away from the city. “I do not recognize those.”

“Ground-effect vehicles. Not strictly legal in a Tech Four Zone, but all right as long as we keep them inside convention ground. You came close to catching us using them that time you first met me.”

“The noise and the smell. And Arhdwehr getting so angry. Engines and exhaust. Of course.”

“Every brethren station has a few for emergency use. Mainly for hurried getaways. You remember the odd tracks going away from Critza? Where I said some of our brethren got out? Ground-effect vehicles made those. They leave a pretty obvious trail in the snow.” He went on to explain how the machines worked. Marika had no trouble grasping the concept.

“There is much I do not yet know, then,” she said.

“No doubt. There is much we all do not know. Let me give you some advice. Try to consider the broader picture before you let impulse carry you away again.”

“What?”

“There is a great deal of tension between the Brown Paw Bond and the Reugge right now. Our factors not only refused to help reclaim the provinces overrun by the nomad, they would not lease the fighting aircraft the Reugge wanted. I do not pretend to understand why. It was a chance for us to sweep up a huge profit.”

“I see.” Marika considered the fighting aircraft once more. It was a two-seat, open cockpit biplane with

two guns that fired through the airscrew, four wing-mounted guns, and a single gimbal-mounted weapon which could be fired rearward by the occupant of the second seat. "I would love to fly one of those," she said. The tapes mentioned capabilities that could be matched by no darkship.

"It is an experience," Bagnel agreed.

"You fly?"

"Yes. If there was trouble and the aircraft had to be employed, I would be a backup flyer."

"Take me up."

"Marika!" Grauel snapped.

Bagnel was amused. "There is no limit to her audacity, is there?"

"Marika," Grauel repeated, "you exceed yourself. You may be silth, but even so we will drag you back to the cloister."

"Not today, Marika," Bagnel said. "I cannot. Maybe some other time. Come back later. Be polite at the gate, ask for me, and maybe you will be permitted entrance—without all this fuss. Right now I think you had better leave before Timbruk goes over my head and gets permission to shoot you anyhow." Bagnel strode toward the gateway buildings. Marika followed. She was nervous now. There would be trouble when she got home.

Bagnel said, "I do not think your sisters would be upset if Timbruk did you in either. You still have that smoky look. Of the fated outsider."

"I have problems with the silth," Marika admitted. "But the most senior has given me her protection."

"Oh? Lucky for you."

They parted at the gate, Bagnel with a well-wish and repeated invitation to return under more auspicious circumstances.

Outside, Marika paused to scan the field, watched Bagnel stride purposefully toward distant buildings. Her gaze drifted to those structures in the north. Cold crept down her spine. She shivered.

"Come. We are returning to the cloister right now," Grauel said. Her tone brooked no argument. Marika did not protest, though she did not want to go back. She did have to cling to the goodwill of Grauel and Barlog. They were her only trustworthy allies.

Chapter Seventeen

I

Marika went from the gate to her tower, where she sat staring toward the tradermale compound. Several dots soared above the enclave, roaming the sky nearby.

Grauel came to her there. She looked grim. "Trouble," she said.

"They have registered their protest already? That was fast."

“Not that kind of trouble. Home trouble. Somebody got into our quarters.”

“Oh?”

“After we turned in the weapons they gave us, we went up to clean up. My rifle was gone.”

“Anything else?”

“No. The Degnan Chronicle had been opened and moved slightly. That is all.”

“The most senior should spend more time here instead of talking about spending more time here.”

Marika had noted that in Gradwohl’s absence she was treated far more coolly. She wished that most senior would move into Maksche in fact as well as name. Despite declarations of intent, she just visited occasionally, usually without warning.

“I will not tolerate invasions of my private space, Grauel. No one else in the entire Community has to suffer such intrusions. Back off and give me a few minutes of quiet.”

She slipped down through her loophole and cast about till she found a ghost she thought sufficiently strong. She took control and began roaming the cloister, beginning in places she thought were most likely to reveal the missing weapon.

Finding it took only minutes. It was in the cloister arsenal, where some sisters argued it belonged anyway. A pair of silth were dismantling it.

Marika returned to flesh. “Come.”

“You found it? That quickly?”

“It is not hidden, actually. It is in the arsenal. We will take it back.”

“And I was right there a few minutes ago.”

The arsenal door was closed and locked now. Marika had no patience. Rather than scratch, wait, ask permission to enter, and argue, she recalled her ghost and squeezed it down as she had done when she had destroyed the electronic box belonging to the tradermale. She shoved the ghost into the lock and destroyed the metal there.

That made enough noise to alert the silth inside. They peered at her with fear and guilt when she stalked into the room where the parts of Grauel’s weapon were scattered upon a table. One started to say something. Marika brushed her soul lightly with the ghost. “Grauel. Put it back together. You. Where is the ammunition? I want it here. Now.”

The sister to whom she spoke thought of arguing, eyed Marika’s bare teeth, thought better of it. She collected the ammunition from a storage box. After placing it upon the table, she retreated as far as the walls would allow. She choked out, “The orders came from Paustch. You will be in grave—”

“Ask me how much I care,” Marika snapped. “This is for you to remember. And perhaps even share. The next meth who enters my quarters without my invitation will discover just how vicious a savage I really am. We invented some truly fascinating tortures to get nomads to tell us things we wanted to

know.”

Grael cursed under her breath.

“Is it all there?”

“Yes. But they have mixed things up. It will take me a few minutes.”

Marika used the time to glare at the two sisters till they cringed.

She heard Grael slam the magazine home and feed a round to the chamber. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Grael said, sweeping the weapon’s aim across the silth. Her lips pulled back in a snarl that set them on the edge of panic. “I do suppose I should thank them for cleaning it. They did that much good.”

“Thank them, then. And let us be gone.”

Gradwohl might not have been present in Maksche, but her paw was firmly felt. Darkships began arriving, bearing Reugge whose accents seemed exotic. They paused only to rest and eat and further burden their flying crosses. Some of the darkships lifted so burdened with meth and gear they looked like something from the worst quarters of the city.

“Everyone that can be spared,” Barlog said as she and Marika and Grael watched one darkship lift and another slide in under it. “That is the word now. The cloister is to be stripped. They have begun soliciting workers from the city, offering special pay. I would say the most senior is serious.”

There had been some silth, at the evening meetings Marika attended, who had thought Gradwohl’s plans just talk meant to form the basis for rumors that would reach the Serke. Rumors that would make that Community chary of too bold interference. But the lie had been given that view. The stream of darkships was never ending. The might of the Reugge was on the move, and impressive might it was.

Mistresses of the Ship could be seen in the meal halls almost all the time. Bath—the sisters who helped fly the darkships from their secondary positions at the tips of the shorter arms—sometimes crowded Maksche silth out of the meal lines. Scores seemed to be around all the time. Marika spent all her free time trying to get acquainted with those bath and Mistresses. But they would have little to do with her. They were an order within the order, silent, separate beings with little interest in socializing and none in illuminating a pup.

Three small dirigibles, contracted to the Reugge before the Brown Paw Bond elected not to support the offensive, appeared over the cloister and took aboard workers and silth and construction equipment. The cloister began to have a hollow feel, a deserted air. A shout would echo down long, empty halls. No one was there to answer.

The dirigibles would all make for Akard, which the most senior wanted rebuilt and reoccupied. It would become the focal point of a network of satellite fastnesses meant to interdict any nomad movements southward.

“I do not think she realizes how many nomads there are,” Marika told Grael. “Or really how vast her northern provinces are. All that might is not a tenth enough.”

“She knows. I believe she is counting on the nomads having spent the best they had in the past few years. I think she expects it to be a job of tracking down remnants of the real fighting bands, then letting next winter finish the rest.”

“I think she would be wrong if that is the basis of her strategy.”

“So do I.”

“We shall see, of course. Let us hope the answer is not savages in the cloister.”

The early reports from the north told of a big harvest of nomads, of kills far more numerous than anyone expected. The numbers caused a good deal of uneasiness. They implied other numbers that might prove troublesome. For everyone agreed that there would be a dozen live and concealed nomads for every one dead.

II

The dream was a nightmare Marika had not known for several years, but it was old and familiar.

She was trapped in a cold, dark, damp place, badly hurt, unable to call for help, unable to climb out.

The dream had tormented her every night since her return from the trademale enclave. She had told no one, but Grauel and Barlog sensed that something was torturing her.

Marika wished she could go visit Braydic. The last time the dreams had come, soon after her arrival at Akard, following the destruction of the Degnan packstead, she had shared her pain with the communications technician. Braydic had been unable to interpret the dream. Eventually, she had agreed it must be Marika's conscience nagging her because the dead of the Degnan pack had not gone into the embrace of the All with a proper Mourning.

After the return of the dreams, she had asked Grauel and Barlog where they stood in regard to that unsettled debt.

“We can do nothing now,” Barlog told her. “Someday, though, we will take care of it. Perhaps when you are important and powerful. The score is not forgotten, nor considered settled.”

That was good enough for Marika. But meantime she had to endure the horror of her nights.

Dorteka wakened her from this dream. She was early, but Marika was too fuddled to realize that till after they had been into their gymnasium routine for some time. “Why are we up so early?” she asked.

“We have new orders, you and I. We are headed north.”

“Up the river? To chase nomads?” Marika was astonished. It was the last thing she expected.

“Yes. The great hunt is in full cry. The most senior is sending everyone who has no absolute need to remain. She sent a note saying that means us especially.”

Just last evening word had come round that the most senior had ordered all patrolling darkships to destroy any meth they found upon the ground. They were to operate on the assumption that no locals had survived. No mercy was to be shown.

“What is it all about, mistress?” Marika asked. “Why is Gradwohl so determined? I have heard that winter may not break this year, at least in the upper Ponath. That the ground will remain frozen. No crops could be planted there. So why fight for useless territory?”

“Someone exaggerated, Marika. There will be a summer. Not that it matters. We are not going to send settlers into the Ponath. We are simply validating our claim to our provinces. In blood. Gradwohl is leading us in a fight against the Serke, and this is the only way we can battle them. Indirectly.”

“Why are the Serke so determined, then? I am told wealth is the reason. I know about the emeralds, and there is gold and silver and copper and things, but nobody ever did any mining up there. It is a Tech Two Zone. There must be some other reason the Serke risk conflict.”

“Probably. We do not know what it is, though. We just know we cannot allow them to steal the Ponath. Them or the brethren.”

“You think the reason the tradermales will not help us is because they want to steal the Ponath, too?”

“I expect the Brown Paw Bond would stand with us if they could. We have been close associates for centuries. But higher authority may have been offered a better cut by the Serke.”

“Could we not impose sanctions?”

Dorteka appeared amused by her naiveté. “Without proof? Wait. Yes. You know, and I know, and everyone else alive knows what is happening. Or we think we do. We suspect that the brethren and the Serke Community have entered into a conspiracy prohibited by the conventions. But no Community extant will act on suspicion. The Serke have Bestrei, and flaunt it. As long as the Reugge cannot present absolute and irrefutable proof of what is happening, no other Community faces the disagreeable business of having to take sides. They would rather sit back and be entertained by our travails.”

“But if the Serke get away with this, they will be a threat to everyone else. Do the other orders not see that? Armed with all our wealth, and Bestrei besides . . .”

“Who knows what is really going on? Not you or I. The other sisterhoods may be in it with the Serke. There are ample precedents.”

“It all seems silly to me,” Marika said. “Will Grauel and Barlog be able to go with me?”

“I am sure they will. You are a single unit in most eyes.”

Marika glanced at her instructress, not liking her tone. She and Dorteka tolerated one another because the most senior insisted, but there was no love between them.

Marika, Grauel, Barlog, and Dorteka, with their gear, boarded a northbound darkship about the time Marika should have begun her mathematics class. The bath, before going to their places at the tips of the short arms, made certain the passengers strapped themselves to the darkship’s frame. All gear went into bins fixed around the cross’s axis.

Marika paid much more attention to the darkship and its operators this trip. “Mistress Dorteka. What is

this metal? I have seen nothing like it before.” It seemed almost invisible when probed with the touch.

“Titanium. It is the lightest metal known, yet very strong. It is difficult to obtain. The brethren recover it in a process similar to that they use to obtain aluminum. They fairly rob us for these ships.”

“They make them?”

“Yes.”

“I would think it something we would do for ourselves. Why do we let them rob us?”

“I am not sure. Maybe because to argue is too much trouble. We do buy them, I think, because their ships are better. We have been buying them for only about sixty years, though. Before that most of the orders made their own. There was a lot of artistry involved. Most of those old darkships are still in service down south, too, around TelleRai and the other big cities.”

“What were they like? How were they different? And what do you mean, buy? I thought the trademales only leased.”

“Questions, questions, questions. Pup . . . They do not lease darkships. We would not let them get away with that. In some ways they have us too much in their power now.

“The old ships are not much different from those you have seen. Maybe smaller, generally. They were wooden, though. A few were pretty fanciful because they were seen as works of art. They were pawcrafted from golden fleet timber, a wood that is sensitive to the touch. The trees had to be at least five hundred years old before they could be cut. They were considered very precious. The groves are protected by a web of laws even now. So-called poachers can be slain for even touching a golden fleet tree.

“Every frame member and strut in the old ships was individually carved from a specially selected timber or billet. The way I hear, a shipbuilder sister might spend a year preparing one strut. It might take a building team twenty years to complete a ship. No two darkships were ever alike, unlike these brethren products. These things are plain and all business.”

All business maybe, but hardly plain. This one was covered with seals and fanciful witch signs that, Marika suspected, had something to do with the Mistress and her bath.

“You say those old ones are still around?”

“Most of them. I have seen some in TelleRai that are said to be thousands of years old. Silth have been flying since the beginning of time. The Redoriad museum at TelleRai has several prehistoric saddleships that are still taken up once in a while.”

“Saddleships?” Here was something she had missed in her search for information on flying.

“In olden times that sort of silth who today would become a Mistress of the Ship usually flew alone. Her ship was a pole of golden fleet wood about eighteen feet long with a saddle mounted two-thirds of the way back. You would find the Redoriad museum interesting, what with your interest in flight. They have something of everything there.”

“I sure would. I will find out about it if I ever get to TelleRai.”

“You will get there soon enough if Gradwohl has her way.”

“Then I suppose the reason for buying metal ships is because that is easier than making them.”

“No doubt.”

“Are there any artisans left? Sisters who could build darkships if necessary?”

“I am sure there are. Silth are conservative. Old things take a thousand years to die. And about darkships there are many still devoted to the old. Many who prefer the wooden ships because the golden fleet wood is more responsive than cold metal. Also, many who feel we should not be dependent upon the brethren for our ships.

“The brethren keep taking over chunks of our lives. There was a time when touch-sisters did everything comm techs do now. Their greatest bragged that they could touch anyone anywhere in the world. That far reach is almost a lost art now.”

“That is sad.”

The darkship was fifty miles north of the city already. Ahead, Marika could just distinguish the fire-blackened remains of a trademale outpost. Kharg Station. It marked the southernmost flow of nomad raiding for the winter. Its fall had been the final insult that had driven Gradwohl into the rage whence this campaign had sprung. Its fall had come close to costing Senior Zertan her position, for she had made no effort to relieve the besieged outpost.

“I think so, too. We live in the moment, we silth, but many long for the past. For quieter times when we were not so much dependent upon the brethren.” Dorteka eyed the ruins. “Zertan is one of those. Paustch is another.”

The darkship moved north at a moderate pace. After marveling at the view of the plain and the brown, meandering Hainlin, Marika slid down inside herself. For a time she studied the subtle interplay of talent between the bath and the Mistress of the Ship. These were veterans. They drew upon one another skillfully. Fatigue would be a long time coming.

Once she thought she understood what they were doing, Marika began cataloging all she knew about her own and others' talents. She found what she was seeking. She returned to the world.

“Dorteka, could we not make our own metal darkships? Assuming we want to produce the ships quickly? We have sisters who could extract the metal from ore with their talents. It could not be difficult to build a ship if the metal was available.”

“Silth do not do that kind of work.”

Marika ran that through her mind, looking at it from every angle but the logical. She already knew the argument made no logical sense. She must have missed something because she still did not understand after trying to see it as silth. “Mistress, I do not understand.”

Dorteka had forgotten already. “What?”

“Why should we not build a metal darkship if it is within our capacity? When it is all right for us to build a

wooden one? Especially if the trademales are working against us.” There was some circumstantial evidence that a trademale faction was supporting the ever more organized efforts of the rogue males plaguing the Reugge.

Dorteka could not explain in any way that made sense to Marika. She became confused and frustrated by her effort. She finally snapped, “Because that is the way it is. Silth do not do physical labor. They rule. They are artists. The wooden darkships were works of art. Metal ships are machines, even if they perform the same tasks. Anyway, we have tacitly granted that they fall inside the prerogatives of the brethren.”

“We could have our own factory inside the cloister . . .” Marika gave it up. Dorteka was not interested in a pup’s foolish notions. Marika invested in a series of mental relaxation exercises so she could clear her thoughts to enjoy the flight.

The darkship did not pursue a direct course toward Akard. It roamed erratically, randomly, at times drifting far from the river, on the off chance contact would be made with nomads. The day was far advanced when Marika began to see landmarks she recognized. “There, Grauel. What is left of Critza.”

“The trademales will not be restoring that. That explosion certainly took it apart.”

Bagnel had set off demolition charges in what the nomads had left of the packfast, to deny it value to any nomads who thought to use it later.

“Now. There it is. Straight ahead,” Barlog said as the darkship slipped around a bend in the river canyon.

Akard. Where Marika had spent four miserable years, and had discovered that she was that most dreaded of silth, a strong darkwalker.

The remains of the fortress were perched on a headland where the Hainlin split into the Husgen and an eastern watercourse which retained the Hainlin name. It was webbed in by scaffolding. Workers swarmed over it like colony insects. The darkship settled toward the headland.

It was a scant hundred feet off the ground when Marika felt a sudden, strong touch.

Hang on. We have a call for help.

That was the Mistress of the Ship with a warning so powerful even Grauel and Barlog caught its edges.

Marika barely had time to warn them verbally. The darkship shot forward, rose, gained speed rapidly. The robes of the Mistress and bath crackled in the rushing wind. Marika ducked down through to examine the altered relationship between the Mistress and bath. The Mistress was drawing heavily on the bath now.

The darkship climbed to three hundred feet and arced to the east, into the upper Ponath. A few minutes later it passed over the site of the Degnan packstead, where Marika had lived her first ten years. Only a few regular lines in the earth remained upon that hilltop clearing.

Marika read grief in the set of Grauel’s upper torso. Barlog refused to look and respond.

The darkship rushed on toward the oncoming night. Way, way to her left Marika spotted a dot coming down from the north, angling in, occasionally spilling a crimson flash as sunlight caught it. Another

darkship. Then to the south, another still. All three rushed eastward on intersecting courses.

Marika's ship arrived first, streaking over a forest where rifles hammered and heavier weapons filled the woods with flashes. A clearing appeared ahead. At its center stood an incomplete fortress of logs. It was afire. Huntresses enveloped in smoke sniped at the surrounding forest.

Something black and wicked roiled around Marika. The darkship dropped away beneath her, plunging groundward. The darkness cleared. The Mistress of the Ship resumed control of her craft, took it up. Chill wind nibbled at Marika's face.

Screams came from the forest.

The second and third darkships made passes while Marika's turned. Marika went down through her loophole, located a ghost not bearing the ship, and went riding. She located a band of wild silth and wehrlen. They were feeble but able to neutralize the three silth who commanded the besieged workers and huntresses.

A hum past her ear pulled Marika back. The Mistress was into her second pass. Rifles flashed ahead. Bullets whined past the darkship. One spanged against metal and howled away.

Marika dived through her loophole, found a steed, lashed it toward the wild silth. She allowed her anger full reign when she reached them.

She was astonished by her own strength. It had grown vastly during her brief stay at Maksche. A dozen nomads died horribly. The others scattered. In moments the nomad fighters followed.

The darkships began flying fast, low-level circles, spiraling outward from the stronghold, exterminating fugitives. Marika's Mistress of the Ship did not break off till after three moons had risen.

III

Paustch was in charge of the reconstruction of Akard. She was no friend of that uppity pup Marika or her scandalously undisciplined savage cohorts, Grauel and Barlog. She tolerated their presence in her demesne only a few days.

During those days Marika wangled a couple of patrol flights with the Mistress on whose darkship she had come north. The Mistress was not being sociable or understanding of the whims of a pup. She respected Marika's darker abilities and hoped they would help her survive her patrols.

No contact came during either flight.

On her return from the second venture, Marika found Dorteka packing. "What is happening, mistress? Have you been recalled?"

"No. We have been assigned the honor of establishing a blockhouse directly astride the main route from the Zhotak south into the upper Ponath, somewhere up near the Rift." The look she gave Marika said much more. It said this was an exile, and that it was all Marika's fault because she was who and what she was. It said that they were being sent out into the wilderness because Paustch wanted her both out of her fur and into a difficult position.

Marika shrugged. "I would rather be away from here anyway. Paustch and her cronies persist in aggravating me. I am long-suffering, but under the circumstances I might eventually lose my temper."

Dorteka first tilted her ears in amusement, then came near losing her temper. "This hole is primitive enough. Out there there will be nothing."

"The life is not as hard as you imagine, mistress. And you will have three experienced woodsmeth to show you how to cope."

"And how many nomads?"

Marika broke away as soon as she could. She did not want to argue with Dorteka. She had plenty of firm enemies already among those who had power over her. Dorteka would never be a friend, but at present she could be counted upon for support as an agent of the most senior.

She was pleased to be assigned to a blockhouse garrison. It meant a respite from the grinding silth life, with all its ceremony and all the animosity directed her way. She did not enjoy that, though perforce she must live with it.

Next morning a school of darkships lifted Marika, Grauel, Barlog, Dorteka, and another eight huntresses and ten workers across the upper Ponath. The assigned site overlooked the way that had been both the trade route with and invasion route for the nomads of the Zhotak. Marika did not anticipate any real danger from nomads. She believed the savages all to have left the Zhotak long since. The vast majority should be looking for easy hunting far to the south of the upper Ponath.

"Dorteka. The nomads have lived hard lives ever since I have been aware of their existence. The Zhotak was a harsh land even before the winters worsened. Before they became organized, the raids they made were all acts of desperation. Now that they are fighting everywhere, all the time, they do not seem so desperate."

"What are you driving at, pup?" They had just landed at the site, a clearing on a slope overlooking a broad, meadowed valley. There was a great deal of snow among the trees on the opposite slope yet.

"In the past they did not have time free from trying to get ready for the next winter to spend their summers attacking and plundering. Now they have that time. To me it would seem their problems getting food have lessened. But I do not see how that could be. They are hunters and gatherers, not farmers. The winters have wiped out most of the game animals. So where are they getting food? Besides from eating their dead?"

"From the Serke, I suppose. I do not know. And I do not care." Dorteka surveyed the valley, which Marika thought excitingly beautiful. "I do not see why we bother fighting them for this wasteland. If they want it so badly, let them have it."

She was in a mood. Marika moved away, joined Barlog and Grauel, who were helping the workers unload supplies and equipment.

"We will need some sort of barrier right away," Grauel said. "I hear there are still a few kagbeasts in these parts. If so, they would be hungry enough to attack meth."

"I saw some snarltooth vines just west of here as we were coming in," Marika said. "Drive stakes and string some of those with some briars from the riverbank down there. That will do till we get a real palisade up."

“Grauel and I will work out a watch rotation. We will need big fires at night. Do we have permission to harvest live wood if there is not enough dead?”

“If necessary. But I think you will find plenty of deadwood. The winters are killing some of the less hardy trees already.”

The outpost had to be built from the ground up. The task took a month. That month passed without incident, though on a couple of occasions Marika sensed the presence of strange meth on the far side of the valley. When she grabbed a ghost and went to examine them, she found that they were nomad scouts. She did not bother them. Let them prime themselves for falling into a trap.

Marika was unconcerned for her own safety, so unconcerned she sometimes wandered off alone, to the distress of Grauel and Barlog, who tracked her down each time.

Marika often joined in the physical work, too. She found it a good way to work out the frustrations she had accumulated during her months in Maksche. And in labor she found temporary surcease from concerns of the past and future.

This close to the Degnan packstead she could not help thinking often of the Mourning she owed. But there were no nightmares. Could that be because of the work? That did not seem reasonable.

After a time most of the southern huntresses joined the work, too, for all of Dorteka’s disapproving scowls. There was nothing else to do but be bored.

The workers appreciated the help, but did not know what to make of it. Especially of a silth who actually dirtied her paws. Marika suspected they began to think well of her despite all the rumors they had heard. By summer’s end she had most of them talking to her. And by summer’s end she had begun consciously trying to cultivate their affection.

Dorteka refused to do anything but tutor Marika. That assignment she pursued doggedly, as if motivated mainly by an increasing desire to get the job over with. Their relationship deteriorated as the summer progressed, and Marika steadfastly refused to be molded into traditional silth shape.

Though the summer gave Marika a respite from her concerns and fears, she did spend a lot of time thinking about the future. She approached it with a pragmatic attitude suitable for the most cynical silth.

The only attack came soon after the blockhouse was complete. It was not a strong one, though the savages thought it strong enough. They cut through the snarltooth vine fencing and evaded the pit traps and booby traps. They used explosives to breach the palisade. Distressed, Dorteka reached out to Akard with the touch and asked for darkship support.

Marika obliterated the attackers long before the one ship sent arrived.

She deflected and destroyed the attackers almost casually, using a ghost drawn from high in the atmosphere. She had learned that the higher one could reach, the more monstrous a ghost one could find.

Afterward, Dorteka shied away from her the way she might from a dangerous animal, and never did get

over being nervous when Marika was close.

Marika did not understand. She was even pained. She did not need Dorteka's friendship, but she did not want her fear.

Was her talent for the dark side that terrible? Did she exceed the abilities of other silth by so much? She could not believe that.

Soon after the first snowflakes flew, a darkship arrived bearing winter stores and a replacement silth. Marika and Dorteka received orders to return to the Maksche cloister.

"I am not going," Marika told Dorteka.

"Pup! I have had about all of your insubordination that I am going to stand. Get your coat on and get aboard that ship." Dorteka was so angry she ignored Grauel and Barlog.

"This is the last darkship that will come here till spring, barring a need for major support if the blockhouse comes under attack. Not so?"

"Yes. So what? Do you love these All-forsaken woods so much that you want to stay here forever?"

"Not at all. I want to go home. And so do these workers."

That caught Dorteka from the blind side. She could do nothing but look at Marika askance. Finally, she croaked, "What are you talking about? So what?"

"These meth were hired for the season. They were promised they would return home in time for the Festival of Kifkha. The festival comes up in four days. And no transportation has been provided them yet. You go ahead. You go south. You report to the most senior. And when she asks why I did not come back with you, you tell her why. Because once again the Reugge Community is failing to live up to a pledge to its dependents."

Dorteka became so angry Marika feared she would have a stroke. But she stood there facing her teacher in a stance so adamant it was clear she would not be moved. Dorteka went inside herself and performed calming rituals till she was settled enough to touch someone at Akard.

The workers went out next morning. From all over the upper Ponath they went, with an alacrity that said that Gradwohl herself must have intervened. Before they left, two workers very quietly told Marika where they could be reached in Maksche if ever she needed them to repay the debt. Marika memorized that information carefully. She had Grauel and Barlog commit it to memory too, protecting it through redundancy.

She meant to use those workers someday.

She had plans. During that summer she had begun to look forward in more than a simpleminded, pup-obsessed-with-flying sort of way. But she was careful to mask that from everyone. Even Grauel and Barlog remained outside.

"Will your holiness board her darkship now?" Dorteka demanded. "Is the order of the world arranged to your satisfaction?"

“Indeed. Thank you, Dorteka. I wish you understood. Those meth may be of no consequence to you. Nor are they to me, really. But a Community can only be as good as its honor. If our own dependents cannot trust our word, who else will?”

“Thank the All,” Dorteka muttered as Marika began strapping herself to the cold darkship frame.

“Such indifference may well be the reason the cloister is having so much trouble keeping order in Maksche. Paustch is determined not to do right and Zertan is too lazy or too timid.”

“You will seal your mouth, pup. You will not speak ill of your seniors again. I still have a great deal of control over how happy or miserable your life can be. Do I make myself understood?”

“Perfectly, mistress. Though your attitude does not alter the truth a bit.”

Dorteka was furious with her again.

Chapter Eighteen

I

In most respects Marika had attained the knowledge levels expected of silth of her age. In many she had exceeded those. As she surpassed levels expected, she found herself with more and more free time. That she spent studying aircraft, aerodynamics, astronomy, and space, when she could obtain any information. The Reugge did not possess much. The brethren and dark-faring sisterhoods clung to their knowledge jealously.

Marika had a thousand questions, and suspected the only way to get the answers was to steal them.

How did the silth take their darkships across the void? The distances were incredible. And space was cold and airless. Yet darkships went out there and returned in a matter of weeks.

She ached because she would never know. Because she was stuck in a sisterhood unable to reach the stars, a sisterhood that might not survive much longer.

To dream dreams that could not be attained, that was a horror. Almost as bad as the dreams that came by night.

The nightmares resumed immediately upon her return to Maksche. They were more explicit now. Often her littermate Kublin appeared in them, reaching, face tormented, as if crying for help. She hurt. She and Kublin had been very close, for all he was male.

Most Senior Gradwohl had shifted from TelleRai to Maksche in fact as well as name while Marika was in the north. Four days after Marika’s return, the wise ones of Maksche, and many others from farflung cloisters of the Community, gathered in the ritual hall. Marika was there at Gradwohl’s command, though she had not as yet seen the most senior.

After a few rituals had been completed, Gradwohl herself took the floor. Meth who had accompanied her from TelleRai began setting up something electrical, much to the distress of Zertan. They tried to argue that such should not be permitted within the holy place of Maksche.

Gradwohl silenced them with a scowl. It was well-known that the most senior was not pleased with

them. Though she remained outside the mainstream of cloister life, Marika had heard many rumors. Most made the futures of the Maksche senior and her second sound bleak.

The device set up projected a map upon a white screen. Gradwohl said, "This is what the north looked like at its low ebb, last winter. The darker areas are those that were completely overrun by savages.

"Our counterattack seems to have caught them unprepared. I would account the summer's efforts a complete success. We have placed a line of small but stout fortresses up the line of the Hainlin, running from here to Akard. A second line was gone in crosswise, here, roughly a hundred miles north of Maksche. It runs from our western boundary to the sea. Each fastness lies within easy touch of its neighbors. Any southward movement can be detected from these, and interdicted with support from here in Maksche.

"Akard is partially restored. It now forms the anchor for a network of fastnesses in the Ponath. They will allow us to maintain our claim there without dispute. A small fleet of darkships based there will thwart any effort to reduce the fastnesses. Work on Akard should be completed next summer.

"Next summer also, I hope to begin squeezing the savage packs from the north, south, and east, giving them no choice but to flee west into the territories of our beloved friends the Serke. Where they may do more evil than they have done. The Serke raised them up like demons. May they suffer as a witch whose demon breaks the ties that bind."

Gradwohl scanned the assembly. Nearly a hundred of the most important members of the Reugge Community were present. No one seemed inclined to comment, though Marika sensed that many disapproved of Gradwohl and her plans.

"As strength goes," Marika murmured. Gradwohl was getting her way only because she was the strongest of Reugge silth.

"Also next spring we will begin restoring several brethren strongholds that will be of use to us. Especially the fortress Mahede. From Mahede it will be possible to mount year-round darkship patrols and up the pressure on the savages even more."

Gradwohl tapped the screen with a finger. Mahede lay halfway between Maksche and Akard. She used a claw to draw a circle around Mahede. It was obvious that circles of the same size centered upon Akard and Maksche would overlap, covering the entire Hainlin rivercourse north of the city. The Hainlin was the main artery of the northern provinces.

"Meantime, this winter we will continue hunting the savages the best we can, with all the resources we can bring to bear. We must keep the pressure on. It is the only way to beat the Serke at their own game."

Several senior silth disagreed. A murmur of discontent ran through the audience. Marika scanned faces carefully, memorizing those of her mentor's opponents. They would be her enemies, too.

In the course of the discussion that followed, it began to appear that those who opposed Gradwohl's scheme did so principally because it interfered with their comfort and their abilities to exploit their own particular demesnes. Several seniors of cloisters complained because they had been stripped of their best silth and, as a result, were having trouble maintaining order among their workers. Especially among the males.

The pestilence of rebellion was spreading.

“I suspect our problems with workers are the shadows of the next Serke move against us,” Gradwohl said. “It is unlikely that they expected me to collapse under pressure from the savages. The northern packs were expendable counters in their game. So will our workers be. But we will deal with that in its turn. The most critical task facing us is to make sure the northern provinces are secure no matter what troubles plague us elsewhere.”

“Why?” someone demanded. The shout was anonymous, but Marika thought the voice sounded like that of Paustch.

“Because the Serke want them so desperately.”

Once the grumbling faded, Gradwohl expanded somewhat. “I see it this way, sisters. The Serke appear willing to spend a great deal, and to risk even more, in order to wrest the north from our paws. They must have very powerful reasons for their behavior. If they have reasons, then we have reasons for taking every measure to retain our territories. Even though we do not know what they are.

“But I will find out what they are. And when I do, you will be informed immediately.”

More grumbling.

“While I am most senior none of this is subject to debate. It will be done as I have decreed. In coming days I will speak to each of you individually and have more to say at that time. Meantime, this assembly is adjourned. Senior Zertan. Paustch. I wish to speak to you immediately. Marika. I want you to remain here. I will call upon the rest of you as I have the opportunity.”

That was a dismissal. Silth rose from stools and began drifting out. Marika studied the groups they formed, identifying alliances of interest. She heard several seniors grumbling about being tied down at Maksche when they had problems at home demanding immediate attention.

Paustch and Zertan left their stools and moved forward to face Gradwohl. Marika remained upon her stool in the shadows, well away. The Maksche senior and her second did not need to be reminded of her presence.

Gradwohl said, “Mildly stated, I am not pleased with you two. Zertan. You are walking close to the line. Your problem is plain laziness compounded by indifference and maybe a dollop of malice. I will be here for some time now, watching over your shoulder. I trust my presence will lend you some incentive to become more ambitious.

“Paustch. For a number of years you have been the true moving spirit here in Maksche. You have been responsible for getting done most of what has gotten done. It is my sorrow that most of that has been negative. I have in mind several directives that you carried out to the letter but managed to sabotage in spirit. I cannot shake the feeling that I have clung too close to TelleRai since becoming most senior. My paw should have been more evident in the outlying cloisters.

“I will no longer tolerate undermining and backstabbing by subordinates. To that end, you will be transferred to TelleRai immediately. A courier darkship will be leaving at dawn. You will be aboard. When you reach TelleRai, you will report to Keraitis for assignment to duties there. Understood?”

Her entire frame shaking with rage, Paustch bowed her head. “Yes, mistress.”

“You may leave us.”

Paustch drew herself up, turned, marched out of the hall. Marika thought she might become trouble unless Gradwohl made further moves to neutralize her malice. Unless by its very nature her new assignment placed her where she could do no harm.

Gradwohl turned to Zertan once Paustch was outside. “Do you feel a spark or two of wakening ambition, Zertan? Do you feel you can become more productive?”

“I believe I do, mistress.”

“I thought you might. You may go, too.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Only the sounds of Zertan’s slippers disturbed the silence of the hall. Then she was gone, and Marika was alone with the most senior. Silence reigned. Lamplight set shadows dancing. Marika waited without fear, without movement.

Finally, Gradwohl said, “Come forward.”

Marika left her stool and approached the most senior.

“Come. Come. Not to be frightened.”

“Yes, mistress.” Marika slipped into the role she assumed with every superior, that of simplicity.

“Marika, I know you, pup. Do not play that game with me. I am on your side.”

“My side, mistress?”

“Yes. Very well. If you insist. How was your summer?”

“A pleasant break, mistress. Though the Ponath is colder now.”

“And going to get a lot colder in years to come. Tell me about your day on the town.”

“Mistress?” The debacle in the tradermale enclave had slipped her mind completely.

“You visited the brethren enclave, did you not?”

“Yes, mistress.” Now she was disturbed.

Her reaction was not well concealed. Gradwohl was amused. “You had quite an adventure, I gather. No. No need to be concerned. The protest was an embarrassment, but a minor one, and a blessing as well. Am I right in assuming that the male Bagnel is the male we brought out of Akard?”

“Yes, mistress.”

“And you are on friendly terms? He kept the fuss to a minimum.”

“He thinks I saved his life, mistress. I did not. I was saving myself. That the others were saved was incidental.”

“The fact is seldom as important as the perception, Marika. Illusion is the ruling form. Shadow signifies more than substance. Silth always have been more fancy than fact.”

“Mistress?”

“It is not important whether or not you made an effort to save this male. What signifies is his belief that you saved him. Which in fact you did.”

Marika was puzzled. Why the interest in Bagnel?

“You have been away for a while. Living in rather primitive, difficult circumstances. Would you like another day on the city?”

Yes, she thought excitedly. “I have studies, mistress.”

“Yes. I hear you have added your own regimen to Dorteka’s.”

“Yes, mistress. I have been studying flying, space, and—”

“When do you sleep?”

“I do not need much sleep, mistress. I never have.”

“I suppose not. I was young once, too. Are you learning anything?”

“There is not much information available, mistress. Most paths of inquiry lead to dead ends where tradermales or other Communities have invoked a privilege.”

“We will find you fresh sources. About this Bagnel.”

“Yes, mistress?”

“Will he accept a continued friendship?”

Warily, Marika replied, “He invited me to return, mistress. He told me I should ask for him, and he would see that there was no trouble.”

“Excellent. Excellent. Then go see him again. By all means.”

“Mistress? What do you want?”

“I want you to cultivate him. The brethren are supporting our enemies for reasons we do not understand. It is not like them to compromise their neutrality. You have a contact. See more of him. In time you might learn something to help us in our struggle with the Serke.”

“I see.”

“You do not approve?”

“It is not my place to approve or disapprove, mistress.”

“You have reservations then?”

“Yes, mistress. But I cannot say what they are exactly. Except that the thought of using Bagnel makes me uncomfortable.”

“It should. We should not use our friends. They are too precious.”

Marika gave the most senior a calculating look. Had she meant more than she had said? Was that a warning?

“Yet at times greater issues intervene. I think Reugge survival warrants pursuit of any path to salvation.”

“As you say, mistress.”

“Will you pursue it? Will you cultivate this male?”

“Yes, mistress.” She had decided instantly. She would, for her own purposes. For information she wanted. If some also fell the most senior’s way, good. It would keep the cloister doors open.

“I thought you would.” The most senior’s tone said she knew Marika’s mind. It said also that she was growing excited, though she concealed it well.

Perhaps she could read minds, Marika thought. Some silth could touch other minds and steal secrets. Was that not how a truthsaying worked? And would that not be a most useful talent for one who would command an entire unruly Community?

“I will tell Dortecka to let you out whenever you want. Do not overdo it. You will make the brethren suspicious.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“There is plenty of time, Marika. We will not reach the time of real crisis for many years yet.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Gradwohl again expressed restrained amusement. “You could become one of the great silth, Marika. You have the proper turn of mind.”

“They whisper behind my back, mistress. They call me doomstalker and Jiana.”

“Probably. Any of us who amount to anything endure a youth filled with distrust and fear. Our sisters sense the upward pressure. But no matter. That is all for today. Unless there is something you want to discuss.”

“Why do we not make our own darkships, mistress? Why depend upon trademales?”

“Two answers come to mind immediately. One is that most sisters prefer to believe that we should not

sully our paws with physical labor. Another, and the one that is more close to the honest truth, is that we are dependent upon the brethren in too many other areas. They have insinuated tentacles into every aspect of life. If they came to suspect that we were trespassing on what they see as their proper rights, they might then cut us off from everything else they do for us.

“There is an ecological balance between male and female in our society, as expressed in silth and brethren. We are interdependent, and ever more so. In fact, I suspect an imbalance is in the offing. We have come to need them more than they need us. Nowadays we would be missed less than they.”

Marika rose. “Maybe steps ought to be taken to change that instead of pursuing these squabbles between Communities.”

“An idea that has been expressed often enough before. Without winning more than lip service support. The brethren have the advantage of us there, too. Though they have their various bonds and subbonds, they answer to a central authority. They have their internal feuds, but they are much more monolithic than we. They can play one sisterhood against another.”

“Find ways to split them into factions,” Marika said from the doorway. And, “We built our own ships for ages. Before the tradermale.”

Gradwohl scowled.

“Thank you, mistress. I will visit Bagnel soon.”

II

Grael and Barlog were beside themselves when Marika announced another expedition to the tradermale enclave. They did everything possible to dissuade her. She did not tell them she had the most senior’s blessing. They gossiped. She knew, because they brought her snippets about the Maksche sisters. She did not doubt but what they paid in kind.

The huntresses became suspicious soon after they left the cloister. “Marika,” Grael said after a whispered consultation with Barlog, “we are being followed. By huntresses from the cloister.”

Marika was not pleased, but neither was she surprised. A silth had been set upon by rogue males not a week before her return from the upper Ponath. “It’s all right,” she said. “They’re looking out for us.”

Grael nodded to herself. She told Barlog, “The most senior protecting her investment.”

“We’ll be watched wherever we go,” Marika said. “We have a friend.”

“One is more than we did have.”

“Does that tell me something?”

“Did you know that we were not supposed to come back from the Ponath?”

“We weren’t?” The notion startled Marika.

“The story was whispering around the barracks here. We were sent out to build that blockhouse behind the most senior’s back. We were not supposed to get out of it alive. That is why Paustch was demoted. It was an attempt to kill us.”

Barlog added, "The senior councillors here are afraid of you, Marika."

"We survived."

Grael said, "It is also whispered that nomad prisoners confessed that our blockhouse wasn't attacked once they found out who the keeper was. You have gained a reputation among the savages."

"How? I don't know any of them. How could they know me?"

"You slew the Serke silth at Akard. That has been bruited about all the Communities, they say. The one who died had a great name in her order, though the Serke aren't naming it. That would mean admitting they were poaching on the Ponath."

"I love this hypocrisy," Marika said. "Everyone knows what the Serke are doing, and no one will admit it. We must learn the rules of this game. We might want to play it someday."

"Marika?"

Grael's tone warned Marika that she had come too far out of her role. "We have to play the silth game the way it is played here if we are to survive here, Grael. Not so?" She spoke in the formal mode.

"I suppose. Still . . ."

Barlog said, "We hear talk about the most senior sending you to TelleRai soon, Marika. Because that is where they teach those who are expected to rise high. Is this true? Will we be going?" Barlog, too, shifted to the formal mode.

Marika shifted back. "I don't know anything about it, Barlog. Nothing's been said to me. I don't think there's anything to it. But I will not be going anywhere without you two. Could I survive without touch with my pack?"

How could she survive without the only meth she had any reason to trust? Not that she trusted even them completely. She still suspected they reported on her to curry favor, but to do that they had to stay close and remain useful.

"Thank you, Marika," Barlog said.

"Here we are. Do not hesitate to admonish me if I fail to comport myself properly." Marika glanced back. "Any sign of our shadows?" She could have gone down through her loophole and looked, but did not care enough.

"None, Marika."

"Good." She touched the fence lightly, examined the aircraft upon the field. Today the airstrip was almost naked. One small freight dirigible lay in one of the cradles. Two Stings sat near the fence. There were a couple of light craft of a type with which she was unfamiliar. Their design implied them to be reconnaissance or courier ships.

She went to the desk in the gateway building. The same guard watched the same vision screen in the same state of sleepy indifference. He did not notice her. She wondered if his hearing and sense of smell were impaired, or if he just enjoyed being rude to meth from the street. She rapped on the desk.

He turned. He recognized her and his eyes widened. He sat up.

“I would like to speak to Assistant Security Chief Bagnel,” Marika told him.

He gulped air, looked around as if seeking a place to hide, then gobbled, “Yes, mistress.” He hurried around the end of his desk, down the hallway leading to the airfield. Halfway along he paused to say, “You stay here, mistress.” He made a mollifying gesture. “Just wait. I will hurry him all I can.”

Marika’s ears tilted in amusement.

The guard turned again at the far door, called back, “Mistress, Bagnel is no longer assistant chief. He was made chief a few months ago. Just so you do not use the wrong mode of address.”

“Thank you.” Wrong mode of address? What difference? Unless it was something the nervous guard had let carry over from the mysteries of the tradermale brethren.

She supposed she ought to examine the relevant data—what was known—if she was going to be dealing with Bagnel regularly.

Time enough for that later. After today’s encounter had shown its promise, or lack thereof. “Grauel, go down the hall and keep watch. Barlog, check the building here, then watch the street.” She stepped around the desk and began leafing through the guard’s papers. She found nothing interesting, if only because they were printed in what had to be a private male language. She opened the desk’s several drawers. Again she found nothing of any interest.

Well, it had been worth a look. Just in case. She rounded the desk again, recalled Grauel and Barlog. To their inquisitive looks she replied, “I was just curious. There wasn’t anything there.”

The guard took another five minutes. He returned to find them just as he had left them. “Kentan Bagnel will be here shortly, mistress. Can I make your wait more comfortable somehow? Would you care for refreshments?”

“Not for myself, thank you. Barlog? Grauel?”

Each replied, “No, mistress,” and Marika was pleased with their restraint. In years past they would have chastised any male this bold.

“You called Bagnel Kentan. Is that a title or name?”

The guard was fuddled for a moment. Then he brightened. “A title, mistress. It denotes his standing with the brethren.”

“It has nothing to do with his job?”

“No, mistress. Not directly.”

“I see. Where does a kentan stand with regard to others? How high?”

The guard looked unhappy. He did not want to answer, yet felt he had to conform to orders to deal with her hospitably.

“It must be fairly high. You are nervous about him. The year has treated Bagnel well, then.”

“Yes, mistress. His rise has been . . .”

“Rapid?”

“Yes, mistress. We all thought your last visit would cause him grave embarrassment, but . . .”

Marika turned away to conceal her features. A photograph graced the wall opposite the desk. It had been enlarged till it was so grainy it was difficult to recognize. “What is this place?”

Relieved, the guard came around his desk and began explaining, “That is the brethren landhold at TelleRai, mistress.”

“Yes. Of course. I have never seen it from this angle.”

“Marika?”

She turned. Bagnel had arrived. He looked sleek and self-confident and just a bit excited. “Bagnel. As you see, I’m behaving myself this time.” She used the informal mode without realizing it. Grauel and Barlog gave her looks she did not see.

“You’ve grown.” Bagnel responded in the same mode. His usage was as unconscious as Marika’s.

Grauel and Barlog bared teeth and exchanged glances.

“Yes. Also grown up. I spent the summer in the Ponath, battling the nomad. I believe it changed me.”

Bagnel glanced at the guard. “You’ve been grilling Norgis. You’ve made him very uncomfortable.”

“We were talking about the picture of the Tovand, kentan,” the guard said.

Bagnel scowled. The guard retreated behind the barrier of his desk. He increased the volume of the sound accompanying the display on his screen. Marika was amused, but concealed it.

“Well,” Bagnel said. “You’re here again.”

Grauel and Barlog frowned at his use of the familiar mode.

“I hoped I could look inside the aircraft this time. Under supervision, of course. Nothing secret seems to be going on now. The fighting ships and the big dirigibles are gone.”

“You tease me. Yes, I suppose we could look at the light aircraft. Come.”

As they stepped outside, Marika said, “I hear you’ve been promoted.”

“Yes. Chief of security. Another reward for my failure at Critza.”

“You have an unusual concept of reward, I’d say.”

Grael and Barlog were displeased with Marika's use of the familiar mode, too.

"I do?" Bagnol was amused. "My superiors do. I haven't done anything deserving." Softly, he asked, "Do you need those two arfts hanging over your shoulder all the time?"

"I don't go anywhere without Grael and Barlog."

"They make me nervous. They always look like they're planning to rip my throat out."

Marika glanced at the huntresses. "They are. They don't like this. They don't like males who can or dare do more than cook or pull a plow."

He gave her a dark look. She decided she had pushed her luck. Time to become Marika the packless again. "Isn't this a Seifite trainer?" She indicated an aircraft standing straight ahead.

"Still studying, are you?"

"Always. When I can get anything to study. I told you I plan to fly. I have flown three times, on darkships. Each flight left me more convinced that flight is my tomorrow." She glanced at several males hurrying toward them. Grael and Barlog interposed themselves quickly, though the males were not armed.

"Ground crew," Bagnol explained. "They see us coming out here, they expect us to take a ship up."

The males slowed when they discerned Marika's silth garb. "They're having second thoughts," she said.

"You can't blame them, can you? Silth are intimidating by nature."

"Are they? I've never seen them from the outside."

"But you grew up on a packstead. Not in a cloister."

"True. And my pack never mentioned them. I was silth before I knew what was happening." She made the remark sound like a jest. Bagnol tried to respond and failed.

"Well?" he asked. "Would you like to go up? As long as you're here?"

"Can you do that? Just take off whenever you want?"

"Yes."

"In cloister we would have to have permission all the way from the senior." She climbed a ladder to the lower wing of the aircraft. "Only two places. No room for Grael and Barlog."

"Unfortunately." Bagnol did not sound distraught.

"I don't know if they'd let me."

"You're silth. They're just—"

"They're just charged on their necks with bringing me back alive. Even if that means keeping me from

killing myself. They don't trust machines. It was a fight just getting to come here again. The idea wasn't popular at the cloister. Someone made a protest about last time."

"Maybe another time, then. When they understand that I don't plan to carry you off to our secret breeding farm."

"What? Is there such a place? Oh. You are teasing."

"Yes. We recruit ragtag. Especially where the traditional pack structures still predominate. A lot of the Brown Paw Bond youngsters came out of the Ponath."

"I see."

Each spring newly adult males had been turned out of the packsteads to wander the hills and valleys in search of another pack willing to take them in. They had had to sell themselves and their skills. Thus the blood was mixed.

Many, though, never found a place. A pack did not need nearly as many males as females. Marika had not wondered much about what had become of the unsuccessful. She had assumed that they died of exposure or their own incompetence. Their fates had not concerned her, except that of her littermate Kublin, the only male for whom she had ever held much regard.

"Well? Up? Or another time?"

Marika felt a longing so intense it frightened her. She was infatuated with flight. More than infatuated, she feared. She was obsessed. She did not like that. A weakness. Weaknesses were points where one could be touched, could be manipulated. "Next time," she grated. "Or the time after that. When my companions have learned to relax."

"As you wish. Want to sit in it? Just to get the feel?"

And so it went, with Marika getting a look at every ship on the field, including the Stings. "Nothing secret about them," Bagnel assured her. "Nothing you'd understand well enough to tell our enemies about."

"You have enemies?"

"A great many. Especially in the sisterhoods. Like that old silth—what was her name? Gorry. The one who wanted us thrown back to the nomads when we came to Akard asking help. Like all the other dark-faring silth have become since we joined the Serke and Redoriad in their interstellar ventures."

"What?" Why had that not been in the education tapes? "I was not aware of that. Brethren have visited the starworlds?"

"There are two ships. One is Serke, one is Redoriad. The silth move them across the void. The brethren deal on the other end."

"How is that possible? I thought only specially trained silth could stay the bite of the dark."

"Special ships. Darkships surrounded with a metal shell to keep the air in. Designed by brethren. They put in machines to keep the air fresh. Don't ask me questions because that's all I know. That is another bond entirely, and one we have no contact with."

“And the other sisterhoods are jealous?”

“So I gather. I don’t know all that much. The Brown Paw Bond is an old-fashioned bond involved in trade and light manufacturing. Traditional pursuits. The only place you could get the kind of answers you want would be at the Tovand in TelleRai. I tell you, the one time I saw that place it seemed more alien than the Reugge cloister here. Those are strange males down there. Anyway, I was telling about the Serke and the Redoriad. Rumor says they asked the brethren to help them with their star ventures. That could be why the Reugge have become so disenchanted with the Serke.”

“Don’t fool yourself. The disenchantment did not begin with us. The Serke are solely responsible. There’s something in the Ponath that they want.” She studied Bagnel closely. He gave nothing away.

“The brethren won’t go back to Critza, Bagnel. I thought you said trade was lucrative up there.”

“When there was someone to trade with. There isn’t anymore.”

“Nomads?”

“What?”

“They’re getting their weapons somewhere. They were better armed than ever this summer. They shot down two darkships. There is only one source for firearms.”

“No. We haven’t sold them weapons. Of that I’m certain. That would be a self-destructive act.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know.”

“They had to get them from you. No one else is allowed to manufacture such things.”

“I thought you said the Serke were behind everything.”

“Undoubtedly. But I wonder if someone isn’t behind the Serke. No. Let’s not argue anymore. It’s getting late. I’d better get home or they won’t let me come again.”

“How soon can I expect you?”

“Next month maybe. I get a day a month off now. A reward for service in the Ponath. As long as I’m welcome, I’ll keep coming here.”

“You’ll be welcome as long as I’m security chief.”

“Yes. You owe me, don’t you?”

Startled, Bagnel said, “That, too. But mostly because you break the tedium.”

“You’re not happy here?”

“I would have been happier had the weather never changed and the nomads never come out of the

Zhotak. Life was simpler at Critza.”

Marika agreed. “As it was at my packstead.”

III

“Well?” the most senior demanded.

Marika was not sure what to say. Was it in her interest to admit that she suspected Bagnel had been given an assignment identical to her own?

She repeated only what she thought Barlog and Grauel might have overheard. “Mostly we just looked at aircraft and talked about how we would have been happier if we had not had to leave the Ponath. I tried to avoid pressing. Oh. He did tell me about some ships the dark-faring Serke and Redoriad had built special so the brethren could—”

“Yes. Well. Not much. But I did not expect much. It was a first time. A trial, You did not press? Good. You have a talent for the insidious. You will make a great leader someday. I am sure you will have him in your thrall before long.”

“I will try, mistress.”

“Please do, Marika. It may become critical down the path.”

“May I ask what exactly we are doing, mistress? What plans you have for me? Dorteka keeps telling me—”

“You may not. Not at this point. What you do not know you cannot tell anyone else. When it becomes tighter tactically . . . When you and I and the Reugge would all be better served by having you know the goal and able to act to achieve it, you will be told everything. For the present, have faith that your reward will be worth your trouble.”

“As you wish, mistress.”

Chapter Nineteen

I

It was the quietest time of Marika’s brief life, at least since the years before the nomads had come to the upper Ponath and destroyed. The struggle continued, and she participated, but life became so effortless and routine it fell into numbing cycles of repetition. There were few high points, few lows, and each of the latter she marked by the return of her nightmares about her littermate Kublin.

She could count on at least one bout with dark dreams each year, though never at any time predictable by season, weather, or her own mental state. They concerned her increasingly. The passing of time, and their never being weaker when they came, convinced her that they had little to do with the fact that the Degnan remained unMourned.

What else, then? That was what Grauel, Barlog, and even Braydic asked when she did at last break down and share her distress.

She did not know what else. Dreams and reason did not mix.

She did see Braydic occasionally now. The comm technician was less standoffish now it was certain

Marika enjoyed the most senior's enduring favor.

Studies. Always there were studies. Always there were exercises to help her expand and increase her silth talents.

Always there were frightened silth distressed by her grasp of those talents.

Years came and went. The winters worsened appreciably each seasonal cycle. The summers grew shorter. Photographs taken from trademale satellites showed a swift accumulation of ice in the far north. Glaciers were worming across the Zhotak already. For a time they would be blocked by the barrier of the Rift, but sisters who believed themselves experts said that, even so, it would be but a few years before that barrier was surmounted and the ice would slide on southward, grinding the land.

It never ceased to boggle Marika, the Serke being so desperate to possess a land soon to be lost to nature.

The predictions regarding the age of ice became ever more grim. There were times when Marika wished she were not in the know—as much as she was. The world faced truly terrible times, and those would come within her own life span. Assuming she lived as long as most silth.

Grael and Barlog were inclined to suggest that she would not, for she never quite managed to control her fractious nature.

The predictions of social upheaval and displacement, most of which she reasoned out for herself, were quite terrifying.

Each summer Marika served her stint in the north, from the time of the last snowfall till the time of the first. Each summer she exercised her ability to walk the dark side, as much as the nomads would permit. Each summer poor Dorteka had to endure the rustification with her, complaining bitterly. Each summer Marika helped establish a new outpost somewhere, and each summer the nomads tried to avoid her outpost, though every summer saw its great centers of conflict. She sometimes managed to participate by smuggling herself into the strife aboard a darkship commanded by a pliable Mistress.

Gradwohl's strategy of driving the nomads west into Serke territories seemed slow in paying off. The savages clung to Reugge lands stubbornly, despite paying a terrible price.

The Reugge thus settled into a never-ending and costly bloodfeud with the savages. The horde, after continuous decimation through attack and starvation, no longer posed quite so serious a threat. But it remained troublesome because of the rise of a warrior caste. The crucible of struggle created grim fighters among the fastest, strongest, and smartest nomads. Composed of both male and female fighters, and supported by ever more skillful wild silth and wehrlen, it made up in ferocity and cunning what the horde had lost in numbers.

Gradwohl's line of blockhouses north of Maksche did succeed in their mission. The final southward flow crashed against that barrier line like the sea against an uncrackable breakwater. But the savages came again and again, till it seemed they would never withdraw, collapse, seek the easier hunting to the west.

As the nomad threat waned, though, pressure against the Reugge strengthened in other quarters. Hardly a month passed but what there was not some incident in Maksche involving rogue males. And that disease began to show itself in other Reugge territories.

But none of that touched Marika. For all she was in the middle of it, she seemed to be outside and immune to all that happened. None of it affected her life or training.

She spent the long winters studying, practicing, honing her talents, making monthly visits to Bagnel, and devouring every morsel of flight- or space-oriented information Gradwohl could buy or steal. She wheedled more out of Bagnel, who was pleased to help fill such an excited, eager mind.

He was learning himself, turning his interests from those that had occupied him in the Ponath to those of the future. His special interest was the web of communications and weather satellites the brethren maintained with the aid of the dark-faring silth. The brethren created the technology, and the silth lifted the satellites aboard their void-faring darkships.

Marika became intrigued with the cycle and system. She told Bagnel, "There are possibilities that seem to have escaped everyone."

"For example?" His tone was indulgent, like that of an instructress watching a pup reinvent the wheel.

"Possibilities. Unless someone has thought of them already and these ridiculous barriers against the flow of information have masked the fact."

"Give me an example. Maybe I can find out for you."

It was Marika's turn to look indulgent. "Suppose I do have an original thought? I know you tradermals think it unlikely of silth, but that possibility does exist. Granted? Should I give something away for nothing?"

Bagnel was amused. "They make you more a silth every time I see you. You're going to be a nasty old bitch by the time you reach Gradwohl's age, Marika."

"Could be. Could be. And if I am, it'll be the fault of meth like you."

"I'd almost agree with you," Bagnel said, his eyes glazing over for a moment.

Those quiet years were heavily flavored with the most senior's favor. With little fanfare, initially, Marika rose in stature within the cloister. In swift succession she became a celebrant-novice, a celebrant-second, then a full celebrant, meaning she passed through the stages of assistanceship in conducting the daily Reugge rituals, assistanceship during the more important rites on days of obligation, then began directing rites herself. She had no trouble with the actual rituals.

There were those who resented her elevation. Of course. Traditionally, she should not have become a full celebrant till she was much older.

Each swift advancement meant someone else having to wait so much longer. And older silth did not like being left behind one who was, as yet, still a pup.

There was far more resentment when Gradwohl appointed Marika junior censor when one of the old silth died and her place among the cloister's seven councillors was taken by the senior censor. Zertan was extremely distressed. It was a cloister senior's right to make such appointments, without interference even from superiors. But Zertan had to put up with Gradwohl's interference or follow Paustch into exile.

Marika questioned her good fortune less than did Grauel or Barlog, who looked forward to a dizzying fall. Those two could see no bright side in anything.

The spring before Marika's fourth Maksche summer, shortly before she set out for her fourth season of counterattack, death rested its paw heavily upon the cloister leadership. Two judges fell in as many days. Before Marika finished being invested as senior censor, Gradwohl ordered her elevated to the seventh seat on the council.

Tempers flared. Rebellion burned throughout the halls of the ancient cloister. Marika herself tried to refuse the promotion. She had much more confidence in herself than did any of the Maksche sisters, but did not think she was ready for the duties of a councillor—even though seventh chair was mainly understudy for the other six.

Gradwohl remained adamant in the face of unanimous opposition. "What will be is what I will," she declared. "And time only will declare me right or wrong. I have decreed it. Marika will become one of the seven judges of this house."

As strength goes. There was no denying the strong, for they had the power to enforce their will.

But Gradwohl's will put Marika into an unpleasant position.

The sisters of Maksche had not loved her before. Now they hated her.

All this before she was old enough to complete her silth novitiate. Officially. But age was not everything. She had pursued her studies so obsessively that she was the equal or superior of most of the sisters who resented her unnaturally fast advancement. And that was half their reason for hating her. They feared that which possessed inexplicable strength and power.

The strengthened resentment caused her to turn more inward, to concentrate even more upon studies which were her only escape from the misery of daily cloister life. Once a month, there was Bagnol.

And always there was a touch of dread. She suspected doom lurking in the shadows always, at bay only because Gradwohl was omnipresent, guarding her while she directed the northern conflict. While she let the sisterhood beyond Maksche run itself.

Marika was sure there would be a price for continued favor of such magnitude. She believed she was prepared to pay it.

Gradwohl had plans for her, shrouded though they were. But Marika had plans of her own.

II

The summer of Marika's fourth return to the Ponath marked a watershed.

It was her last summer as a novice. On her return to Maksche she was to be inducted full silth, with all

the privileges that implied. So she began the summer looking beyond it, trying to justify the ceremonies in her own mind, never seeing the summer as more than a bridge of time. The months in the north would be a slow vacation. The nomads were weak and almost never seen in the Ponath anymore. The snows up there were not expected to melt. There was no reason to anticipate anything but several months of boredom and Dorteka's complaints.

Gradwohl assigned her the entire upper Ponath. She would be answerable only to Senior Educan at Akard. She made her headquarters in a log fortress just miles from the site of the Degnan packstead. In the boring times she would walk down to the site and remember, or venture over hill and valley, through dead forest, to Machen Cave, where first she became aware that she had talents different from those of ordinary packmates.

A great shadow still lurked in that cave. She did not probe it. Because it had wakened her, she invested it with almost holy significance and would not desecrate the memory by bringing it out into the light for a look.

She was responsible for a network of watchtowers and blockhouses shielding the Ponath from the Zhotak. It seemed a pointless shield. The Zhotak was devoid of meth life. Only a few far arctic beasts lingered there. They were no threat to the Reugge.

That Gradwohl considered the northernmost marches safe was indicated by Marika's command. She had twenty-three novices to perform the duties of silth, and Dorteka to advise her. Her huntresses and workers—commanded by Grauel and Barlog, who had risen by being pulled along in the wake of her own rise—were ragtag, of little use in areas more active. Except inasmuch as the command gave her some experience directing others, Marika thought the whole show a farce.

The summer began with a month of nonevents in noncountry. The Ponath was naked of meth except for its Reugge garrisons. There was nothing to do. Even those forests that were not dead were dying. The few animals seen were arctic creatures migrating south. Summer was a joke name, really. Despite the season, it snowed almost every day.

There was a momentary break in the boredom during the third week. One of the watchtowers reported sighting an unfamiliar darkship sliding down the valley of the east fork of the Hainlin, traveling so low its undercarriage almost dragged the snow. Marika dived through her loophole, caught a strong ghost, and went questing.

"Well?" Dorteka demanded when she returned.

"There may have been something. I could not make contact, but I felt something. It was moving downstream."

"Shall I inform Akard?"

"I do not think it is necessary. If it is an alien darkship, and is following the east fork down, they will spot it soon enough."

"It could have been an unscheduled patrol."

"Probably was."

A darkship out of Akard patrolled Marika's province each third day. Invariably, it reported a complete

absence of nomad activity. What skirmishing there was was taking place far to the south. And the few nomads seen down there were now doing as Gradwohl wished. They were migrating westward, toward Serke country.

There were rumors that Serke installations had been attacked.

“Looks like the Serke have lost their loyalty,” Marika told Dorteka after having examined several such reports.

“They have used them up. They will be little more than a nuisance to our cousins.”

“I wonder what the Serke bought them with. To have held them so long on the bounds of death and starvation.”

Dorteka said, “I think they expected to roll over us the year they took Akard. The intelligence says they expected to take Akard cheaply and follow that victory with a run that would take them all the way to Maksche. Maksche certainly could not have repelled them at the time. The glitch in their strategy was you. You slew their leading silth and decimated their best huntresses. They had nothing left with which to complete the sweep.”

“But why did they keep on after they had failed?”

“Psychological momentum. Whoever was pulling the strings on the thing would have been high in the Serke council. Someone very old. Old silth do not admit defeat or failure. To me the evidence suggests that there is a good chance the same old silth is still in charge over there.”

“By now she must realize she has to try something else. Or must give up.”

“She cannot give up. She can only get more desperate as the most senior thwarts her every stratagem.”

“Why?”

“The whole world knows what is happening, Marika. Even if no one admits seeing it. Our hypothetical Serke councillor cannot risk losing face by conceding defeat. We are a much weaker Community. Theoretically, it is impossible for us to best the Serke.”

“What do you feel about that?”

“I feel scared, Marika.” It was a rare moment of honesty on Dorteka’s part. “This has been going on for eight years. The Serke councillors were all old when it started. They must be senile now. Senile meth do things without regard for consequences because they will not have to live with them. I am frightened by Gradwohl, too. She has a disregard for form and consequence herself, without the excuse of being senile. The way she has forced you onto the Community . . .”

“Have I failed her expectations, Dorteka?”

“That is not the point.”

“It is the only point. Gradwohl is not concerned about egos. The Reugge face the greatest challenge of their history. Survival itself may be the stake. Gradwohl believes I can play a critical role if she can delay the final crisis till I am ready.”

“There are those who are convinced that your critical role will be to preside over the sisterhood’s destruction.”

“That doomstalker superstition haunts my backtrail still?”

“Forget legend and superstition—though they are valid as ways of interpreting that which we know but do not understand. Consider personality. You are the least selfless silth I have ever encountered. I have yet to discern a genuine shred of devotion in you, to the Community or to the silth ideal. You fake. You pretend. You put on masks. But you walk among those who see through shadows and mists, Marika. You cannot convince anyone that you are some sweet lost pup from the Ponath.”

Marika began to pace. She wanted to issue some argument to refute Dorteka and could not think of a one she could wield with conviction.

“You are using the Reugge, Marika.”

“The Reugge are using me.”

“That is the way of—”

“I do not accept that, Dorteka. Take that back to Gradwohl if you want. Though I am sure she knows.”

Grael witnessed this argument. She grew very tense as it proceeded, fearing it would pass beyond the verbal. Dorteka had been having increasing difficulty maintaining her self-restraint.

Marika had worked hard to bind Grael and Barlog more closely to her. Again and again she tested them in pinches between loyalties to herself and loyalties to the greater community. They had stuck with her every time. She hoped she was laying the foundations of unshakable habit. A day might come when she would want them to stick with her through extreme circumstances.

For all she had known these two huntresses her entire life, Marika did not know them very well. Had she known them well, she would have realized no doubt of their loyalties ever existed.

Barlog entered the room. “A new report from Akard, Marika.”

“It’s early, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Another sighting.”

“Another ghost darkship?”

“No. This time it’s a possible nomad force coming east on the Morthra Trail. Based on two unconfirmed sightings.”

“Well, that is no problem for us.”

The Morthra Trail was little more than a game track these days, lost beneath ten feet of snow. At one time it had connected Critza with a trademale outpost on the Neybhor River, seventy miles to the west. The Neybhor marked the western frontier of Reugge claims in that part of the Ponath.

“Sounds like wishful thinking,” Marika said. “Or a drill being sprung on us by the most senior. But I suppose we do have to pass the word. Dorteka, you take the eastern arc. I will take the western.” Marika sealed her eyes, went inside, extended a thread of touch till she reached an underling in an outlying blockhouse. She relayed the information.

Two days later touch-word brought the news that Akard had lost contact with several western outposts. Darkships sent to investigate had found the garrisons dead. An aerial search for the culprits had begun.

One of the darkships fell out of touch.

Senior Educan sent out everything she had.

When found, the missing darkship was a tangle of titanium ruin. It had buried itself in the face of a mountain, evidently at high speed. The Mistress of the Ship and her bath appeared to have suffered no wounds before the crash.

“That is silth work,” Marika said. “Not nomads at all, but Serke.” She shivered. For an instant a premonition gripped her. Grim times were in the offing. Perhaps times that would shift the course of her life. “This must be the desperate move you predicted, Dorteka.”

The instructress was frightened. She seemed to have suffered a premonition of her own. “We have to get out of here, Marika.”

“Why?”

“They would send their very best. If they would go that far. We cannot withstand that. They will exterminate us, then ambush any help sent from Maksche.”

“Panic is not becoming in a silth,” Marika said, parroting a maxim learned at Akard. “You are better at the long touch than I am. Get Akard to send me a darkship.”

“Why?”

“Do it.”

“They will want to know why. If they have lost one already, they will want to hoard the ones that are left.”

“Invoke the most senior if you have to.”

Sighing, Dorteka started to go into touch.

“Dorteka. Wait. Find out which outposts were silenced. And where that darkship went down.”

“Yes, mistress,” Dorteka replied.

“Sarcasm does not become you. Hurry. Before those fools panic and run away.”

Dorteka went into touch. Her strained, twisting face betrayed her difficulty getting through, then an argument ensuing. Marika told Grauel, "If those fools don't come across, I'll hike down there and take a darkship myself. Why did they put Educan in charge? She is worse than Paustch ever was. She couldn't . . ." Dorteka had come out of touch. "What did they say?"

"The darkship is coming. I had to lie, Marika. And I had to invoke Gradwohl. I hope you know what you are doing."

"What state were they in?"

"You can guess."

"Yes. Educan was packing. Grauel. Get my coats, boots, and weapons." On the frontier Marika dressed as one of the huntresses, not as silth.

Dorteka studied a map while Marika dressed. Marika glanced over her shoulder. "A definite progression, yes?"

"It does look like a developing pattern."

"Looks like? They will hit here next, then here, here, and then try Akard. No wonder Educan is in a dither. They will reach the Hainlin before dawn tomorrow."

"You have that look in your eye, Marika. What are you going to do?"

No particular thought went into Marika's answer. "Ambush them at Critza." It was the thing that had to be done.

"They would sense our presence."

"Not if we use our novices to keep our body heat concealed."

"Marika . . ."

"We will hit them on huntress's terms initially. Not as silth. They will not be looking for that. We will chew them up before they know what is happening."

"Critza is not inside your proper territory."

"If we do not do something, Educan will run off and leave us here. The Serke will not have to come after us. They can leave us to the grauken if they take Akard."

"True. But—"

"Perhaps one of the reasons Gradwohl favors me is that I am not bound by tradition. Not if form's sake means sticking my head into a kirm's den."

"Perhaps."

"Contact the outposts. We will gather everyone. Grauel. Prepare for two days of patrol for the whole

force.”

III

Marika kept the darkship aloft continuously, bringing huntresses to Critza, till she felt the Serke party could be within an hour of her ambush. The western outposts had fallen as she had predicted. Akard was in a panic. The leadership there had so wilted, Marika no longer bothered trying to stay in touch.

A pair of darkships raced over, fleeing south, practically dripping meth and possessions. “That,” Marika observed, “is why we silth are so beloved, Dorteka. Educan has saved everthing she owns. But how many huntresses and laborers were aboard?”

Dorteka did not try to defend Educan. She was as outraged as Marika was, if not quite for the same reasons. The Akard senior’s flight was indefensible on any grounds.

“Everyone in place?” Marika asked. There were no tracks in the snow, nothing to betray the ambush physically. The huntresses had dropped into their positions from the darkship. “See if you can detect anybody, Dorteka. If you do, get on the novice covering.” She could detect nothing with her own less skillful touch.

Fear proved to be a superb motivator. The novices hid everyone well.

“That is it for Chaser,” Marika said as the last of the major moons settled behind the opposite ridge. But there was light still. Dawn had begun to break under a rare clear sky. Long shadows of skeletal trees reached across the Hainlin. The endless cold had killed all the less hardy. They were naked of needles. Occasionally the stillness filled with the crash following some elder giant’s defeat in its battle with gravity. Farther north, where the winds kept the slopes scoured of snow, whole mountains were scattered with fallen trees, like straw in a grain field after harvest.

A far hum began to build in the hills opposite Critza. “Utter silence now,” Marika cautioned. “Total alertness. Nobody move for any reason. And hold your fire till I give the word. Hold your fire.” She hoped it would not be much longer. The cold gnawed her bones. They had dared light no fires. The smell of smoke would have betrayed them.

A machine thirty feet long and ten wide eased down the far slope, sliding between trees. It slipped out onto the clear highway of the rivercourse, surrounded by flying snow. For a moment Marika was puzzled. It seemed like a small darkship of odd shape, floating above the surface. It made a great deal of noise.

Then she recalled where she had seen such a vehicle. At the tradermale station at Maksche.

Ground-effect vehicle. Of course.

A second slithered through the trees, engine whining as it fought to keep from charging down the slope. Marika silently praised Grauel and Barlog for having established superb discipline among the huntresses. They were waiting as instructed.

They dared not open fire till all the craft were in the open.

She could see meth inside them, ten and an operator for each of those first two. At a guess she decided two silth and eight fighters aboard each. And definitely not nomads.

What had Bagnel told her about ground-effect vehicles? Yes. They were not sold or leased outside the brethren. Ever.

This ambush would stir one hell of a stink if she pulled it off.

A third and fourth vehicle left the forest. These two appeared to be supply carriers. No heads were visible through their domes, only unidentifiable heaps.

A fifth vehicle descended the slope, and a sixth. And still those already on the river hovered, waiting.

Marika ground her teeth. How much longer could fire discipline hold among huntresses already badly shaken by what faced them?

Not long. As the eighth vehicle appeared, making four carrying meth and four carrying supplies, a rifle cracked.

The huntress responsible was a competent sniper. Her bullet stabbed through a dome and killed an operator. The vehicle surged forward, gained speed rapidly, rose, and smashed into a bluff a third of a mile upriver. Its fuel exploded.

Long before that happened Marika's every weapon had begun thundering at the Serke. For a while the vehicles were hidden by smoke and flying snow.

Two more vehicles came down into the storm of death.

"Get that darkship up over the trail," Marika snapped at the Mistress of the Ship. "Wait. I am going with you. I do not want you following Educan. Dorteka. Keep hitting them. Get the personnel carriers first."

A vehicle broke out of the fury and scooted away north, sideslipping around the burning vehicle upstream. "That was a transport. We will catch it later. Take it up."

The darkship rose. At a hundred feet Marika could see that the remaining craft had been disabled. Huntresses had come out of some and were returning fire.

A fuel tank blew, spread fire to other crippled vehicles. The conflagration generated a battle between volatile fuel and melting snow. Burning fuel spread atop the running melt.

Marika reached with her touch and found several silth minds among the survivors, all bewildered, shocked, unready to respond. She jerked back, ducked through her loophole, grabbed the first suitable ghost she found, and hurtled down there. Slap. Slap. Slap. She dispatched three silth.

There were at least four more vehicles in the forest, all carrying silth and huntresses. They had halted. Marika flung herself that way, hammered at silth hearts and minds till she encountered one that hurled her back and nearly broke through her defenses.

She ducked back into the world long enough to order the darkship forward. The bath carried automatic weapons and grenades. She would wrestle the Serke sisters while the darkship crew demolished them with mundane weapons.

And so it went for a few minutes, the bath crippling two of the vehicles. Marika fenced the strong Serke sister, and ducked around her occasionally, discovered that hers was the only Serke silth mind still

conscious.

On the river the survivors of the ambush were getting organized. The Serke silth ducked away from Marika and went to prevent Dorteka and the novices from overwhelming her fighters.

The huntresses on the mountainside headed down to help their sisters. They fired on the darkship as they went.

You are a strong one, the Serke silth sent. But you will not survive this.

I have survived the Serke before, Marika retorted. This is the end of the Serke game. Here, today, you will all die. And you will leave the Reugge the proof needed to call the wrath of all the Communities down upon the Serke. You have fallen into the trap.

You are the one called Marika?

Yes. Which great Serke am I about to destroy?

None.

The silth slammed at her. Marika barely turned the blow, interposing her ghost between herself and that ruled by the Serke. She had made a tactical error. She had issued too strong a challenge before fully assessing the strength of the other's ghost. It was more powerful than hers.

Bullets hummed around the darkship. One spanged off the metal framework. Marika wondered why the ship was not moving, making itself a more difficult target. She ducked into reality for a second, saw that one bath had been wounded and another had been knocked entirely off the darkship. The Mistress had only one bath to draw upon. She could do little but remain aloft, a target for rifle fire.

Marika flung a hasty touch Dorteka's way. Dorteka. Get some mortar fire into the woods up here. Under the darkship. Before they bring us down and we are all lost.

The Serke attacked again. She wobbled under the blow, fought its effects, tried to locate a more powerful ghost. There was none to be reached quickly enough. There were some great ones high above that might have been drawn in had she had time, but the Serke would give her no time.

She dodged another stroke, slipped back into reality. Bombs had begun to fall on the slope below. Had she had the moment, Marika would have been amused. Those mortars were all captured weapons, taken from slain nomads. The brethren were adamant in their refusal to sell such weapons to the Reugge.

She located the Serke silth visually. The female stood beside her disabled vehicle. Marika tried a new tack, hammering at the snow in the trees above the meth.

A shower fell, distracting the silth. Marika used the moment won to stab at the huntresses firing on the darkship. She slew several. The others broke and ran.

The silth regained her composure, punched back, adding, You do not play the game by the rules, pup.

Marika dodged, sent, I play to win. I own no rules. She struck at a tree instead of the silth. The brittle trunk cracked. The giant toppled—in the wrong direction. She cracked another, then fended off the silth again.

This was not going well. The Serke was wearing her down. And the darkship had begun to settle toward the surface. For the first time she felt uncertainty. The Serke sensed it, hurled mockeries her way.

Angered, she cracked several more trees. This time the Serke was forced to spend time dodging the physical threat.

Marika used the time to unsling her rifle and begin firing. Her bullets did not touch the silth, but they forced her to keep moving, ducking, too busy evading metal death to employ her talent.

Marika hurled a pair of grenades. One fell close. Its blast threw the silth ten feet and left her stunned.

Marika took careful aim, pumped three bullets into the sprawled form, the last through the brain.

“That should do—”

The darkship began to wobble, to slide sideways, to tilt.

The Mistress of the Ship had been hit by a stray bullet.

She had wanted to fly for so long. Marika’s thoughts were almost hysterical. She hadn’t wanted her first opportunity at flight to come at a time like this! She grabbed at the ship with her mind, trying to put into practice what she knew only as theory, while she edged out the long arm toward the wounded Mistress.

Tree branches crackled as the darkship settled. Marika was afraid a giant would snap and in its fall sweep her and the darkship to the surface.

Without her and the darkship, the Serke would win still.

The darkship was low. She’d probably survive the fall. Still, she had to do more than survive. She had to save the darkship. She had to be available to support her huntresses, who were in a furious firefight with the Serke huntresses. She had to . . .

She reached the Mistress of the Ship. Despite the meth’s salvageable condition, Marika pitched her off the position of power, ignored her cry of outrage as she fell. There was no time for niceties.

Marika closed into herself, felt for those-who-dwell, who had begun scattering, summoned them, made them stabilize the craft before it fell any farther. She drew upon the bath and willed the ship to rise.

It rose. Smoothly and easily, it rose, amazing her. This was easy! She turned it, drove it toward Critza, brought it down a little roughly just a few feet from its original hiding place.

The wounded bath died moments later, drained of all her strength. The other passed out. Marika had drawn upon them too heavily.

Marika had nothing left herself. Darkness swam before her eyes as she croaked, “Dorteka! What is the situation?”

“They have gotten dug in. There are too many of them, and they still have a few silth left. Enough to block our dark-side attacks. We dare not assault them. They would cut us apart. I am hoping the mortars will give us the needed edge. You killed the leader?”

“Yes. It was a close thing, too. I had to trick her, then shoot her. Keep using the mortars to pin them down till I recover. No heroics. Hear?”

Dorteka gave her a look that said she was a fool if she expected heroics from her teacher.

Marika drained her canteen, ate ravenously, rested. Weapons continued to crackle and boom, but she noticed them not at all.

The Serke huntresses had gotten out of their transport with nothing but small arms. Thank the All for that. Thank the All that she had been able to think quickly aboard the darkship. Else she would be dead now and the Serke would soon be victorious.

The moment she felt sufficiently strong, she ducked through her loophole, found a monster of a ghost, flung it toward where the surviving Serke silth covered, arguing about whether or not they should try to retreat to the two unharmed vehicles and flee.

They were terrified. They were ready to abandon their followers to their fates. The one thing that held them in place was their certain knowledge of what defeat would mean to their Community.

Marika sent, Surrender and you shall live.

One of them tried to strike at her. She brushed the thrust aside.

She killed them. She touched their huntresses and told them to surrender, too, then slaughtered those who persevered till she had no more strength. She returned to flesh. “The day is yours, Dorteka. Finish it. Round up the survivors.”

When it was all done neither Marika nor Dorteka had strength enough to touch Akard and let the garrison there know that the threat had been averted.

Grael started fires and began gathering the dead, injured, and prisoners inside the ruins of Critza. She came to Marika. “All rounded up now.”

“Many surrender?”

“Only a few huntresses.” Her expression was one of contempt for those. “And five males. Tradermale. They were operating those vehicles.”

“Guard them well. They mean the end of the threat against the Reugge. I will examine them after I have rested.”

Chapter Twenty

I

The moons were up, sprawling skeletal shadows upon the mountainsides. As Marika awakened, it seemed she could still hear the echoes of shots murmuring off the river valley walls. “What is it?” Barlog had shaken her gently. The huntress wore a grim expression.

“Come. You will have to see. No explanation will do.” She offered a helping paw.

Marika looked at Grael, who shrugged. “I’ve been here watching over you.”

Barlog said, "I moved the prisoners over here, where I thought we could control them better. I did not notice, though, till one of the males asked if they could have their own fire. I spotted him when the flames came up. Before that it was like he was somebody else."

"What are you talking about?" Marika demanded.

"I want you to see. I want to know if I am wrong."

Marika eased between fallen building stones, paused. "Well?"

Barlog pointed. "There. Look closely."

Marika looked.

The astonishment was more punishing than a physical blow. "Kublin!" she gasped.

The tradermale jerked around, eyes widening for a moment.

Kublin. But that was impossible. Her littermate had died eight years ago, during the nomad raid that destroyed the Degnan packstead.

Grael rested a paw upon Marika's shoulder, squeezed till it hurt. "It is. Marika, it is. How could that be? Why did I not recognize him earlier?"

"We do not look for ghosts among the living," Marika murmured. She moved a couple of steps closer. All the prisoners watched, their sullenness and despair for a moment forgotten.

The tradermale began shaking, terrified.

"Kublin," Marika murmured. "How? . . . Grael. Barlog. Keep everybody away. Don't say a word to anyone. On your lives." Her tone brooked no argument. The huntresses moved.

Marika stood there staring, remembering, for a long time. Then she moved nearer the fire. The prisoners crept back, away. They knew it was she who had brought them to this despair.

She settled onto a stone vacated by a Serke huntress. "Kublin. Come here. Sit with me."

He came, sat on cold stone, facing away from the other prisoners, who pretended not to watch. Witnesses. Something would have to be done . . .

Was she mad?

She studied her littermate. He was small still, and appeared no stronger than he had been, physically or in his will. He would not meet her eye.

Yet there was an odor here. A mystery more than that surrounding his survival. Something odd about him. Perhaps it was something in the way the other males eyed him beneath their lowered brows. Was he in command? That seemed so unlikely she discarded the notion immediately.

"Tell me, Kublin. Why are you alive? I saw you cut down by the nomads. I killed them . . ." But when the fighting ended, she recalled, she had been unable to find his body. "Tell me what happened."

He said nothing. He turned slightly, stared into the fire. The other males came somewhat more alert.

“You’d better talk to me, Kublin. I’m the only hope you have here.”

He spat something derogatory about silth, using the dialect they had spoken in their packstead. He mumbled, and Marika no longer used the dialect even with Grauel and Barlog. She did not catch it all. But it was not flattering.

She patted his arm. “Very brave, Kublin. But think. Many of my huntresses died here today. Those who survived are not in a good temper. They have designs on you prisoners. Especially you males. You have broken all the codes and covenants. So tell me.”

He shrugged. “All right.”

He was never strong with her, Marika reflected. Only that time he tried to murder Pohsit.

“I crawled into Gerrien’s loghouse after dark. There was still a fire going in the male end. I tried to get to it, but I fell into the cellar. I passed out. I do not remember very much after that. I kept trying to get out again, I think. I hurt a lot. There was a fever. The Laspe found me several days later. I was out of my mind, they said. Fever and hunger.”

Marika drew one long, slow, deep breath, exhaled as slowly. Behind closed eyes she slowly played back the nightmare that had haunted her for so long. Being trapped in a dank, dark place, badly hurt, trying to climb a stair that would not permit climbing . . .

“The Laspe nursed me back to health, out of obligation. I must have been out of my head a long time. My first clear memories are of the Laspe three or four weeks after the nomads came. They were not pleased to have me around. Next summer, when tradermales came through, I went away with Khronen. He took me to Critza. I lived there till the nomads came and breached the walls. When it became obvious help from Akard would not arrive in time, the master put all the pups aboard the escape vehicles and helped us shoot our way out. We were sent someplace in the south. When I became old enough, I was given a job as a driver. My orders eventually brought me here.”

A true story, Marika thought. With all the flesh left off the bones. “That’s it? That’s all you can tell me about eight years of your life?”

“Can you say much more about yours?”

“What were you doing here, Kublin?”

“Driving. That is my job.”

A truth that was at least partly a lie, Marika suspected. He was hiding something. And he persisted in using the formal mode with her. Her. When they had been pups, they had used only the informal mode with one another.

“Driving. But driving Serke making an illegal incursion into Reugge territory, Kublin. You and your brethren knowingly violated age-old conventions by becoming directly involved in a silth dispute. Why did you do that?”

“I was told to drive. Those were my orders.”

“They were very stupid orders. Weren’t they?”

He would not answer.

“This mess could destroy the brethren, Kublin.”

He showed a little spirit in answering, “I doubt that. I doubt it very seriously.”

“How do you expect the Communities to respond when they hear what brethren have done?”

Kublin shrugged.

“What’s so important about the Ponath, that so many must die and so much be risked, Kublin?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know.”

That had the ring of truth. And he had given in just enough to have lapsed into the informal mode momentarily.

“Maybe you don’t.” She was growing a little angry. “I’ll tell you this. I’m going to find out.”

He shrugged a third time, as though he did not care.

“You put me in a quandary, Kublin. I’m going to go away for a little while. I have to think. Will you be a witness for me? Before the Reugge council?”

“No. I will do nothing for you, silth. Nothing but die.”

Marika went away, amazed to find that much spirit in him. And that much hatred of silth. So much that he would not accept her as the littermate he had shared so much with.

Marika squatted beside Grauel. She nodded toward the prisoners. “I don’t want anyone else getting near them,” she whispered. “Understand?”

“Yes.”

Marika found herself a place beside the main fire, crowding in among her surviving novices. She did not pay them any heed.

Kublin! What was she to do? All they had shared as pups . . .

She fell asleep squatting there. Despite the emotional storm, she was too exhausted to remain awake.

Marika wakened to the sting of cold-blown snow upon her muzzle and the crackle of small-arms fire. She staggered up, her whole body aching. “What now?”

Snow was falling, a powder driven by the wind. A vague bit of light said it was near sunrise. She could

see just well and far enough to discover that yesterday's bodies and wreckage already wore a coat of white. "Dorteka! What is happening?"

"Nomads. There was a band following the Serke force. They stumbled onto the vectors I had going through the vehicles on the far slope."

"How many are there?"

"I do not yet know. Quite a few from the sound of it."

Marika moved out into the open to look across the valley. She was surprised at the effort it took to make her muscles carry out her will. She could see nothing through the falling snow. "I am still worn out. I used up far more of me than I thought yesterday."

"I can handle this, Marika. I have been unable to detect any silth accompanying them."

Marika's head had begun to throb. "Go ahead. I must eat something. I will be with you when I can."

The firing was moving closer. Dorteka hurried off into the falling snow. Marika turned, stiffly returned to the fire where she had slept, snatched at scraps of food. She found a half-finished cup of soup that had gone cold, downed it. That helped some almost immediately.

Stiffly then, she moved on to the prisoners.

Grael sat watching them, her eyes red with weariness. "What is all the racket, Marika?"

Marika glared at the prisoners. "Nomads. Our friends here had a band trailing them, probably to take the blame." They must have known. "I wondered why the reports mentioned sighting nomads but not vehicles." She paused for half a minute. "What do you think, Grael? What should I do?"

"I can't make a decision for you, Marika. I recall that you and Kublin were close. Closer than was healthy, some thought. But that was eight years ago. Nearly half your life. You've gone different paths. You're strangers now."

"Yes. There is no precedent. Whatever I do will be wrong, by Degnan law or by Reugge. Get some rest, Grael. I'll watch them while I'm thinking."

"Rest? While there is fighting going on?"

"Yes. Dorteka says she can handle it."

"If you say so."

"Give me your weapons. In case they get ideas. I don't know if my talents would respond right now."

"Where are your weapons?"

"I left them where I fell asleep last night. Beside the big fire. Go on now."

Grael surrendered rifle and revolver, tottered away.

Marika stared at the prisoners for a few minutes. They were all alert now, listening to the firing as it moved closer. Marika suspected they would be very careful to give no provocation. They nurtured hopes of rescue, feeble as those hopes might be.

“Kublin. Come here.”

He came. There seemed to be no defiance left in him. But that could be for show. He was always a crafty pup.

“What do you have to say this morning?” she asked.

“Get me out of this, Marika. I don’t want to die.”

So. He knew how much real hope there was for a rescue by the nomads. “Will you stand witness for me?”

“No.”

That was an absolute, Marika understood. The brethren had won Kublin’s soul.

“I don’t want you to die, Kublin. But I don’t know how to save you.” She wanted to say a lot more, to lecture him about having asked for it, but she refrained. She recalled how well he had listened to lectures as a pup.

He shrugged. “That’s easy. Let me run. I overheard your huntresses saying there were two vehicles that weren’t damaged. If I could get to one . . .”

“That’s fine for you. But where would it leave me? How could I explain it?”

“Why would you have to explain anything?”

Marika indicated the other prisoners. “They would know. They would tell when they are interrogated. You see? You put me into a terrible position, Kublin. You face me with a choice I do not want to have to make.”

The firing beyond the river rose in pitch. The nomad band seemed to be very large. Dorteka might be having more trouble than she had expected.

“In the confusion that is causing, who is going to miss one prisoner? You could manipulate it, Marika.”

She did not like the tone of low cunning that had come into his voice. And she could not shake the feeling that he was not entirely what he seemed.

“My meth aren’t stupid, Kublin. You would be missed. And my novices would detect you sneaking toward those vehicles. They would kill you without a thought. They are hungry for blood. Especially for male blood, after what they have learned here.”

“Marika, this is Critza. Critza was my home for almost four years. I know this land . . .”

“Be quiet.” Marika folded in upon herself, going away, opening to the All. It was one of the early silth lessons. Open to intuition when you do not know what to do. Let the All speak to your soul.

The dream returned. The terrible dream with the pain and the fever and the fear and the helplessness. That had been Kublin. Her mind had been in touch with his while he was in his torment. And she had not known and had not been able to help.

Grael was right. Though he appealed to the memory, this Kublin was not the Kublin with whom she had shared the loft in their dam's loghouse. This was a Kublin who had gone his own way, who had become something . . . What had he become?

That horrible dream would not stay away.

Perhaps her mind was not running in appropriate channels. Perhaps her sanity had surrendered briefly to the insanity of the past several dozen hours, to the unending strain. Without conscious decision she captured a ghost, went hunting her novices, touched each of them lightly, striking them unconscious.

Dorteka, though, resisted for a moment before going under.

She returned to flesh. "All right, Kublin. Now. Start running. Go. Take one of your vehicles and get out of here. This may cost me. Don't slow down for anything. Get away. I can't cover you for long."

"Marika . . ."

"Go. And you'd better never cross my path again, in any circumstances. I'm risking everything I've become for your sake."

"Marika . . ."

"You damned fool, shut up and get out of here!" She almost shrieked it. The pain of it had begun gnawing at her already.

Kublin ran.

The other prisoners watched him go, a few of the males rising, taking a pace or two as if to follow, then freezing when they saw the look in Marika's eye. Their mouths opened to protest as, slowly, as if of its own volition, Grael's rifle turned in her paws and began to bark.

They tried to scatter. She emptied the rifle. Then she drew the pistol and finished it.

Grael and the surviving bath sister rushed out of the snowfall. "What happened?" Grael demanded.

"They tried to run away. I started to nod off and they tried to run away."

Grael did not believe her. Already she had counted bodies. But she did not say anything. The bath looked studiously blank. Marika asked her, "How do you feel this morning? Able to help me move ship?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Good. We'll start toward Akard as soon as Dorteka finishes with the nomads."

The firing was rolling toward the river quickly, Marika realized.

Then she gasped, suddenly aware of what she had done. By knocking out the novices so Kublin could slip away, she had robbed her huntresses of their major advantage in the fight. They had no silth to support them. She plunged into the hollowness inside herself, reached out, found a ghost, flogged it across the river.

She had done it for sure. The huntresses were in retreat from a nomad party that had to number more than two hundred. Most of the novices had been found and slain where she had left them unconscious.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

She captured a stronger ghost. With it she hit the nomads hard, decimating them. They remained unaware of what was happening because so few could see one another through the snowfall. They came on, and they kept overtaking Marika's huntresses.

She extricated Barlog from a difficult situation, scanned the slopes, killing here and there, and by the time she returned to Barlog found the huntress trapped again.

Only a dozen of her meth made it to the river.

Only when they assembled before taking up the pursuit in the open did the nomads discover how terribly they had been hurt.

Marika ravened among them then, and they panicked, scattered.

She searched for Kublin. She found him starting up the far slope safely downstream from the action. She stayed with him till he reached an operable vehicle, silencing any nomad who came too near. Though he seemed aware of their presence almost as soon as she, and shied away. And as he had said, he knew the land and made use of its masking features.

Even so, she hovered over him while he transferred fuel to fill one vehicle's tanks, then got it going. As it began climbing the trail over which the attack had come, Marika hurried back to her proper form.

When she came out she was more exhausted than she had been the evening before.

"Marika?" Grauel asked. "Are you all right?"

"I will be. I need food and rest. Get me something to eat." The firing had stopped entirely. "Any word from over there?"

"Not yet. You went?"

"Yes. It looked awful. There were hundreds of savages. And Dorteka guessed wrong. There were silth with them. Wild silth. Most of our meth are dead, I think. Certainly most of the novices are. I could find no sign of them."

Grauel's lips twitched, but she said nothing. Marika wondered what thoughts lay behind her expressionless eyes.

Huntresses began to straggle in almost as soon as Grauel had gotten a cookfire going. Only seven showed. Marika turned inward and remained that way, loathing herself. She had fouled up about as bad as it was possible to do. That All-be-damned Kublin. Why did he have to turn up? Why couldn't he have

stayed dead? Why had fate dragged him across her trail just now?

“Marika? Food.” Grauel gave her of the first to come from the fire. She ate mechanically.

Dorteka staggered out of the snowfall fifteen minutes after Marika began eating. She settled beside the fire. Grauel gave her food and drink. Like all the rest of them, she ate and stared into the flames. Marika did not wonder what she saw there.

After a while Dorteka rose and trudged toward where the prisoners had been held. She was gone fifteen minutes. Marika was only marginally aware that she had gone.

Dorteka returned. She settled beyond the fire, opposite Marika. “The prisoners tried to get away during the fighting?”

“Yes,” Marika said, without looking up. She accepted another cup of broth from Grauel. The broth was the best thing for a silth who reached this exhausted state.

“One got away. A trail runs down the slope. I heard an engine over there while I was coming back. Must have been one of the males.”

“I do not know. I thought I got them all.” She shrugged. “If one got away he will take warning to the rest.”

“Who was he, Marika?”

“I do not know.”

“You helped him. Your touch cannot be disguised. You were directly responsible for the deaths of all of our novices and most of the huntresses. Who was he, Marika? What is this thing you have with males of the brotherhood? Why was the escape of this one so important you destroyed yourself?”

Was there no end to it?

Marika clutched Grauel’s revolver beneath her coat. “You believe what you have said. Yes. I see that. What are you going to do about it, Dorteka?”

“You have left me no choice, Marika.”

Powder burned Marika’s paw. The bullet struck Dorteka in the forehead, threw her backward. She lay spasming in the snow, her surprise lingering in the air of touch.

The huntresses yelped and began to rise, to grab for weapons. Grauel and Barlog did the same, but slowed by tangled loyalties.

This would be the ultimate test of their faith, Marika thought as she slipped through her loophole, grabbed a ghost, and struck at the seven.

The last fell. Marika waited for the bullet that would tell her Grauel or Barlog had turned against her. It did not come. She returned to flesh, found both huntresses staring at her in horror. As was the bath from the darkship, who had been sleeping for so long Marika had forgotten her.

She summoned what remained of her strength and energy and rose, collected a rifle, put several bullets into each of the downed huntresses so it would look like nomads had slain them.

“Marika!” Barlog snarled.

Grael laid warning fingers upon her wrist.

Marika said, “The snow will cover everything. We will report a huge battle with savages. We will be the only survivors. We will be stricken with sorrow. The Reugge do not Mourn their dead. There is no reason anyone should investigate. Now we rest.”

Her companions radiated the sort of fear huntresses betrayed only in the presence of the mad. Marika ignored them.

She would pull it off. She was sure she would. Grael and Barlog would say nothing. Their loyalties had passed the ultimate test. And now their fates were inextricably entwined with hers.

II

Just a few minutes more, Marika thought at the All. Just a few more miles. They had to be close.

The limping darkship was just a hundred feet up, and settling lower all the time. And making but slight headway. Snowflakes swirled around Marika. The north wind pushed at her almost as hard as she was able to push against it. When she risked opening her eyes to glance back, she could barely distinguish the bath at the girder’s far end. Grael and Barlog, riding the tips of the crossarm, were scarcely more visible.

The huntresses had little strength she could draw, but she took of them as well as of the bath. She also dredged deep into her own reserves. She knew she was not doing this right, that she was devouring far more energies than needful in her crude effort, but survival was the prize.

Only savage will kept the darkship aloft and moving.

Will was not enough. Cold gnawed without mercy. Weariness ravened as Marika rounded the last bend of the Hainlin before it forked around Akard, the ship’s rear grounding strut began to drag in the loose snow concealing the river’s face. Marika sucked one final dollop of strength from the bath and herself, raised the darkship a few yards, and threw it forward.

The draw was too much for the bath. Her heart exploded.

The rear of the darkship dropped into the snow. The ship began tilting left. The left arm caught. Grael and Barlog tumbled off. The flying dagger tried to stand on its point. Marika arced through bitter air and, as snow met her, flung one desperate touch at the shadowy fortress looming above her.

III

Marika opened her eyes. She was in a cell walled with damp stone. A single candle provided weak light. She could not distinguish the features of the face above her. Her eyes refused to focus.

Had she damaged them? A moment of panic. Nothing was so helpless as a blind meth.

“Marika?”

“Is that you, Grauel?”

“Yes.”

“Where are we? Did we make it to Akard?”

“Yes. Most Senior Gradwohl is on comm from Maksche. She wants to talk to you.”

Marika tried to rise. Her limbs were quicksilver. “I can’t . . .”

“I’ll have you carried there.”

The face disappeared. Darkness and dreams returned. The dreams were grim. Ghosts wandered through them, taunting her. The most prominent was her littermate, Kublin.

She was lying in a litter when she revived. The smell of soup tempted her. She opened her eyes. Her vision was better this time. Barlog walked beside her, her gait the strained labor of a tired old Wise meth. She carried a steaming stoneware pot. Her face was as empty as that of death. The bitter chill behind her eyes when she met Marika’s gaze had nothing to do with weariness.

“How did we get here?” Marika croaked.

“You touched someone. They sent huntresses out after us.”

“How long ago?”

“Three days.”

“That long?”

“You went too far into yourself, they say. They say they had trouble keeping you anchored in this world.” Did she sound the slightest disappointed?

So many times Dortecka had warned her against putting all her trust in those-who-dwell. There were ways less perilous than walking the dark . . . So close.

Barlog said, “They sent huntresses to Critza to find out what happened there. In case you did not make it. Their fartoucher reported by touch this morning. The most senior wanted to know when she did. She wanted you wakened when that happened. Even she was not certain you could be drawn back.”

Gradwohl had taken a direct interest? Mild trepidation fluttered through Marika. But she hadn’t the energy for real fear. “Give me a cup of that soup.”

Barlog stopped the stretcher-bearers long enough to dole out a mug of broth. Marika gulped it down. In moments she felt a surge of well-being.

The soup was drugged. But not with chaphe. That would have propelled her back into the realm of nightmare.

Barlog said, “The most senior did not think to question simple huntresses such as Grauel and I.”

Marika understood the unstated message.

Grael met them at the comm room door. "I have placed a chair facing the screen, Marika. I will be over here, out of hearing, but watching. If you have trouble, signal me and we will develop technical difficulties." The huntress chased the technicians out. There would be no outside witnesses.

"I can handle it," Marika said, wondering if in fact she could match her show of confidence with actions. The most senior was difficult enough to fool even when Marika had full control of her faculties.

She kept her eyelids cracked as Grael and Barlog levered her into the chair.

The face on the screen was not that of the most senior at all, but of Braydic. Braydic looked as if she had put in some hard hours of worry. Good Braydic. She would have to be remembered in times to come.

The distant communications technician said something to someone at her end, moved out of view of the pickup.

Gradwohl replaced her. The most senior appeared concerned but neither suspicious nor angry. Maybe the effort to make it look like the nomads had wiped out the ambush had been successful.

Marika opened her eyes. "Most senior. I am here."

"I see. You look terrible."

"They tell me I did stupid things, mistress. I may have. It was a desperate and narrow thing. But I think I will recover."

"Tell me about it."

Marika told the story exactly as it had happened till the moment she had discovered Kublin. She left her littermate out of it. She left her treachery out of it. Of course. "I am not sure why the nomads were following so far behind. Maybe the Serke outdistanced them in their eagerness to reach and silence Akard before help was summoned. Whatever, I was unprepared for the advent of nomads. They surprised us while I was unconscious and my huntresses were scattered, going through the damaged vehicles. They overran everyone and crossed the river before anyone wakened me. Then the prisoners broke away and added to the confusion.

"Had the snowfall not been so heavy the savages might have been intimidated by their losses. But they could not see those. It came to hand-to-hand fighting in our camp before I managed to slay the last silth protecting them. And then I did not have the strength to finish them. All I could do was lie there while my huntresses died around me.

"Mistress, I must take responsibility for this disaster. I have betrayed you. Through my inattention I turned victory into defeat."

"What defeat, Marika? It was costly, yes. I will miss Dorteka. But you broke the Serke back. You saved the Ponath. They will not try anything like this again."

"Mistress, I . . ."

"Yes?"

“I lost my command. I lost Dorteka. I lost many valuable novices. I lost everything. This is not a thing to celebrate.”

“You won a triumph, pup. You were the only one to stand her ground. Your seniors lost heart and fled before the battle was joined. And I am certain the Serke did not make it easy for you. Or you would not be in the state you are now.”

“There was one of their great ones with them,” Marika reiterated. “I bested her only through trickery.”

Gradwohl ignored her remarks. Her voice took on a flint-knife hardness. “Educan is going to rue her male cowardice. The tall tales she told when she reached Maksche will cost her every privilege she has.” A glint of humor appeared in the most senior’s eye. “You would have appreciated her expression when the news came that you had saved Akard. That the garrison she abandoned there never saw hair of the invaders.”

“Mistress, I fear what might happen if news of this gets out to other Communities.”

“I am two steps ahead, pup. Let the villains quake and quiver. Let them wonder. What happened is not going to leave the circle of those who know now. We will let the snows devour the evidence.”

Marika sighed.

“We are not ready for the upheaval going public would cause. We have years yet to go.”

Marika was puzzled by what Gradwohl said. She told herself not to underestimate the most senior. That female had a labyrinthine mind. She was but a little animal being run through its maze, hoping she could keep her head well enough to use as much as she was used. “Yes, mistress. I was about to suggest that.” Let the snows devour the evidence.

“I think we will have less trouble with the Serke now. Do you agree? Yes. They will walk carefully for a while, now. Come back to Maksche, Marika. I need you here.”

Marika could think of nothing to say. Her mind refused to function efficiently.

“You flew the darkship blind, untrained, with but one bath to support you. I am impressed and pleased. You give me hope.”

“Mistress?”

“It is time your education moved into new, more practical areas.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“That is all for the moment, Marika. We will examine this more closely after you return. When you are more fully recovered. A darkship will come for you soon.”

“Thank you, mistress.”

The most senior stepped off pickup. Braydic reappeared for a moment, made an encouraging gesture. Then the screen blanked.

“You ducked that one, didn’t you?” Grauel asked. When Marika glanced her way, she found the huntress’s back turned.

The most senior turned out the cloister in Marika’s honor. Because only a very few knew the whole story, the older sisters acclaimed her only grudgingly.

“What do they want of me?” Marika asked Grauel. “No matter what I accomplish, they resent it.” She was surprised that, after all these years facing the disdain of the Reugge Wise, she could still be hurt by their attitudes.

“I do not know, Marika.” Grauel’s voice was tired, cold, remote. “You are a heroine now. Your future is assured. Is that not enough?” She would not criticize, but censure choked her body language.

For a very long time she and Barlog would speak to Marika only when the course of everyday business required it.

Chapter Twenty-one

I

For a year the Reugge were free from outside pressures. The Serke Community assumed a posture of retrenchment that baffled the silth world. They seemed to be digging in quietly in anticipation of some great fury while overtly shifting more of their energies into offworld ventures. But nothing happened.

Some who watched the brethren closely noted that they, too, sought a lower profile. Some of the constituent bonds, especially those strongest politically within the brotherhood, also seemed to anticipate some great terror. But nothing happened.

Except that Most Senior Gradwohl of the Reugge gathered legates of the Communities at the Reugge complex in TelleRai to formally announce a major victory over the savages plaguing the Reugge northern provinces. She declared those territories officially pacified.

The savages had come to concern several other Communities whose lands bounded the Reugge and would have been threatened had the Reugge campaign been unsuccessful. Those Communities were pleased by Gradwohl’s declaration.

Gradwohl publicly announced that a young Reugge sister named Marika had engineered the end of the savages’ tale.

Privately, Marika did not believe the threat to be extinct. She thought it only dormant, a weapon the Serke would unsheathe again if that seemed profitable.

TelleRai, where many silth Communities maintained their senior cloisters, simmered with speculations. What was the truth behind this bland bit of Reugge folkloring? Who was this deadly Marika, of whom there had been rumors before? Why was Gradwohl taking so little genuine note of what in fact amounted to a withering defeat for Serke intrigues? What was the Reugge game?

Already Gradwohl was a shadowy, almost sinister figure to the silth of TelleRai, known by reputation rather than by person. Her intensity and determination on behalf of a relatively minor, splinter Community, while she herself remained an enigma, were making of her an intimidating legend, large beyond her actual

strength. Her spending most of her time away from TelleRai only strengthened the aura of mystery surrounding her.

Was the legend striving toward some goal greater than plain Reugge survival? Her plots were intricate, complex, though always woven within the law . . . She made more than the Serke ruling council uncomfortable.

Once a month, on no set day, Marika left the Maksche cloister and walked to the brethren enclave. The only escort she accepted consisted of Grauel and Barlog.

“I will not be loaded down with a mob of useless meth,” she insisted the first time after her return from the north. “The more I drag along, the more I have to worry about protecting.”

It had become customary for a silth sister daring the streets to surround herself with a score of armed guards. Invariably there would be at least one sniping incident.

Marika wanted to get the measure of the rogue infestation. In the back of her mind something had begun to see them as potentially useful, though she had as yet formulated nothing consciously.

Silth learned to listen to their subconscious even when not hearing it clearly.

The rogues did not bother her once, though she presented an inviting target.

Grauel and Barlog invariably chided her. “Why are you doing this? It’s foolish.” They said it a dozen ways, one or the other, every time.

“I’m proving something.”

“Such as?”

“That there is a connection between the rogue problem and the nomad problem.”

“That has been the suspicion for years.”

“Yes. But the Serke always get blamed for all our troubles. This is more in the nature of a practical experiment. If they feel I really burned their paws in the Ponath, maybe they’ll be afraid to risk troubling me here. I want to be satisfied that the same strategists are behind both troubles.”

She had other suspicions that she did not voice.

More than once Barlog admonished, “Do not become too self-important, Marika. The fact that we do not draw fire in the street may have nothing to do with it being you that is out there.”

“I know. But I think if we are ignored often enough, it would be safe to say it’s purposeful. Especially if everybody else still gets shot at. Right?”

Reluctantly, both huntresses admitted that that might be true. But Grauel added, “The Serke will now think that they have a blood debt to balance. They will want your life.”

“I might stoop to murder to achieve my ends,” Marika admitted. “But the Serke will not. That’s more a male way of doing things, don’t you think?”

Grael and Barlog looked thoughtful.

Marika continued, “The Serke are too tradition-bound to eliminate an important enemy that way.” She did not add that others with, perhaps, an equal interest in her death would not be bound by silth customs. Let the huntresses figure that out for themselves.

Those untraditional meth might be the ones who controlled the rogues tactically.

“You’re in charge, Marika,” Grael said. “You know what you are doing, and you know the ways of those witches. But that city out there is wild country, for all its pretense to civilization. The wise huntress remains always alert when she is on the stalk.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

She did not need the admonition. She made each trip by a different route, carefully keeping near cover, with more wariness than even Grael demanded. She probed every foot of the way with ghosts before she traversed it.

Not once did she divine the presence of would-be assassins.

Did that mean the Serke in fact controlled their unholy alliance with the brethren—or only that all her enemies were equally intimidated?

During that, the year of silence, Marika and Bagnol sparred carefully and subtly, each gently mining the other for flecks of information. Marika often wondered if he was as conscious of her probable mission as she was of his. She suspected he was. He was quite intelligent and perceptive. For a male.

Halfway through the year Bagnol began teaching her to fly one of the brethren’s simplest trainers. His associates and hers alike were scandalized.

The visits to Bagnol relieved a growing but as yet unspoken pressure upon Marika. On returning from the Ponath she had been eligible for the final rites of silth adulthood, the passage that would admit her into full sisterhood among the Reugge. But she had not asked to be passed through the ritual. She evaded the subject however obliquely it arose, hinting that she was too busy with her duties, too involved with learning the darkship, to take out the months needed for preparation.

She did spend most of her waking time studying and practicing the methods of the silth Mistresses of the Ship, driving herself to exhaustion, trying to become in months what others achieved only after years.

II

It was not her darkship, of course, but she fell into the habit of thinking of it that way. It was the cloister’s oldest and smallest, its courier and trainer. There were no other trainees and few messages to be flown. Its bath were old and drained, no longer fit for prolonged flights. They were survivors of other crews broken up by time or misfortune during the struggle with the savages. They did not mesh perfectly, the way bath did after they had been together a long time, but they did so well enough to give a young Mistress-trainee a feel for what she had to learn.

Marika had the most senior's permission to avail herself of the darkship anytime it was not employed upon cloister business. It almost never was. She had it to herself most of the time. So much so that when an occasion for a courier flight did arise, she resented having it taken from her.

She spent as much time aloft as the bath would tolerate.

They did have the right to refuse her if they felt she was using them or herself too hard. But they never did. They understood.

One day, drifting on chill winds a thousand feet above Maksche, Marika noticed a dirigible approaching. She streaked toward it, to the dismay of Grauel and Barlog, and drifted alongside, waving at the freighter's master. He kept swinging away, disturbed by silth attention.

She thought of Bagnel, realized she had not seen him in nearly two months. She had been too engrossed in the darkship.

She followed the frieghter in to the enclave.

She dropped the darkship onto the concrete just yards from Bagnel's office building. Tradermales surrounded her immediately, most of them astonished, many of them armed, but all of them recognizing her as their security chief's strange silth friend.

Bagnel appeared momentarily. "Marika, I swear you'll get yourself shot yet." He ignored the scowls his familiarity won from Grauel and Barlog.

"What's the matter, Bagnel? Another big secret brethren scheme afoot out here?" She taunted him so because she was convinced such schemes did exist. She hoped to garner something from his reactions.

"Marika, what am I going to do with you?"

"Take me up in a Sting. You've been promising for months. Do you have time? Are you too busy?"

"I'm always busy." He scratched his head, eyed her and her huntresses and bath, all hung about with an outrageous assortment of weapons. Marika refused to leave the cloister unarmed, and even there usually carried her rifle. It was her trademark. "But, then, I've always got time for you. Gives me an excuse to get away from my work."

Right, Marika thought. She grew ever more certain that she was his primary occupation. "I've got a better idea than the Sting. You're always taking me up in your ships. Let me take you up on mine."

Grauel and Barlog snapped, "Marika!"

The eldest of the bath protested, "Mistress, you forget yourself. You are speaking to a male." She was scandalized by Marika's use of the familiar even more than by her invitation.

"This male is my friend. This male has ridden a darkship before. He did not defile it then. He will not now. Come on, Bagnel. Do you have the courage?"

Bagnel eyed the darkship. He examined the small platform at the axis, usually shared by Grauel and Barlog. He licked his lips, frightened.

Marika said, "Grauel, Barlog, you stay here. That will give him more room."

The huntresses surveyed the unfriendly male crowd with narrowed eyes. Unconsciously, Barlog unslung her rifle. Grauel asked, "Is that wise, Marika?"

"You'll be all right. Bagnel will be my hostage for your safety. Come on, tradermale. You claim to be the equal of any female. Can you fly with no cushion under your tail and no canopy to keep the wind out of your whiskers?"

Bagnel licked his lips and approached the darkship.

Grauel and Barlog stepped down. Marika suggested, "Use the harness, Bagnel. Don't try to show off the first time. First-timers have been known to get dizzy and fall if they aren't harnessed."

Bagnel was not too proud to harness himself. He did so carefully, under the grim gaze of the leading bath.

They were angry, those old silth. Marika expected them to resist when she tried to take the darkship up, so she lifted off before they were ready, violently, shocking them into assuming their roles for their own safety's sake.

She made a brief flight of it, stretching her capabilities, then brought the darkship down within inches of where it had settled before.

Bagnel unfastened his harness with trembling fingers. He expelled a great breath as he stepped down to the concrete.

"You look a little frayed," Marika teased.

"Do I, now? Ground crew! Prepare the number-two Sting. Come with me, Marika. It's my turn."

Grauel, Barlog, and the bath watched, perplexed, as Bagnel seated Marika in the Sting's rear seat and strapped her in.

"What's this?" Marika asked. She had worn no harness when they had flown in trainers.

"Parachute. In case we have to jump."

Bagnel wriggled into the forward seat, strapped himself in. One of the ground crew spun the ship's airscrew. The engine coughed, caught, belched smoke that stung Marika's eyes and watered her nose. The ground crew jerked the blocks away from the ship's wheels.

The aircraft bucked and roared with a power unlike any Marika had seen in the trainers. Its deep-throated growl swelled, swelled. When Bagnel let off the brakes, the ship raced down the airstrip, jumped into the air, climbed faster than was possible for any darkship.

Bagnel leveled off at one thousand feet. "All right, smart pup. Let's see about your courage."

The Sting tilted, dove. The airstrip swelled, spun. Buildings whirled dizzily. "You're getting too close," Marika said.

The ground kept coming up. Slam! It stopped spinning. Slam! Marika's seat pressed into her back hard. Her guts sagged inside her. The ground slid away ahead. The horizon appeared momentarily, then whipped upward as Bagnel dumped another fifty feet of altitude. It reappeared and rotated as Bagnel rolled the aircraft. It seemed she could pluck the frightened growls from the lips of Grauel and Barlog as the ship roared past them.

The great engine grumbled more deeply as Bagnel demanded more of it. Clouds appeared ahead—and slid away as Bagnel took the ship over onto its back. He completed the loop, resumed the climb, reached five thousand feet, and went into a stall. The ship spun and fluttered.

Bagnel turned, said, "I've been meaning to ask you about that business in the Ponath last summer. What happened anyway? I've heard so many different stories . . ."

Marika could make no sense of what was happening outside. She clung to her courage by a thread. "Shouldn't you be paying attention to what you're doing?"

"No problem. I thought this would be a chance to talk without those two arfts hanging over your shoulder."

"I ambushed a mob of nomads. It was a tough fight. Hardly anybody got out on either side. That's all there was to it." Her eyes grew wider as the surface drew closer.

"Really? There are so many rumors. I suppose they're exaggerated."

"No doubt." He was digging. Carrying out an inquiry on instructions from his masters, she supposed. The brethren seniors would be getting nervous. They would want to know the Reugge game. That amused her mildly. She did not know the game herself. The most senior kept its strings held close to her heart.

"Looks like time to do something here," Bagnel said. "Unless you'd like to land the hard way?"

"I'd rather not."

"You're a cool one, Marika."

"I'm scared silly. But silth aren't allowed to show fear."

He glanced back, amused, then faced forward intently. He took control. The world stopped rocking and spinning. Then Bagnel went into a hard roll.

Something popped in the right wing. Marika watched a strut tear away, dragging fabric and wire. The ship staggered. The fragment spun behind, whipping at the end of a wire, threatening to pull more wing with it. "I think we might have trouble, Bagnel."

"I think you might be right. Hang on. I'll take us down."

His landing was as stately and smooth as any he had made in a trainer. He brought the wounded ship to a halt just yards from his ground crew, killed the engine. "What did you think, Marika?"

The roar in her ears began to fade. "I think you got even. Let's don't do that to each other anymore."

"Right." He unbuckled, climbed out, and dropped from the lower wing to the concrete. Marika followed.

When he finished briefing the ground crew about the strut, he told Marika, "You'd better leave now. My masters won't be happy as it is."

"Why not?"

"You dropped in unannounced. Better give warning from now on. Every time."

Marika glanced at the freighter. She wondered if it really had brought in something the trademales did not want seen by silth eyes. "All right. Whatever you say. Oh. I wanted to tell you. The most senior says it's all right if you want to visit me at the cloister. If you have time off and have nothing better to do. My time isn't as tight as it once was. I spend most of it learning the darkship. Maybe we could try another flight on one."

News of that permission had scandalized the older sisters. Already they considered her friendship with Bagnel a filthy reflection upon the cloister, a degradation, though there was nothing even a little scandalous in the relationship. When her periodic estrus threatened, Marika was scrupulous about sinter, the self-isolation of silth who had not yet completed the Toghar ceremonies leading to full sisterhood. The pressure remained silent, but it was mounting. Her resistance was becoming more conscious.

III

Marika learned to manipulate a darkship as well as any Mistress of the Ship assigned to the Maksche cloister. And she did so in months instead of years.

She was not accepted within the select group of Mistresses, in their separate and sumptuous cloister within a cloister, though they did condescend to speak with her and give her advice when she asked it. No more was she accepted by the bath, who, in their way, formed a subCommunity even more exclusive than that of the Mistresses. They, like everyone else, had become frightened of the talent she showed.

There was nothing more she could learn from them anyway. She told herself she did not hurt for lack of their society. She had become the best again.

She received a summons to Gradwohl's presence. She believed her accomplishments were the reason for it, and felt vindicated in her belief when, after the amenities and obeisances, Gradwohl said, "If you belonged to a major Community, Marika, you would be destined for the big darkships. For the stars. There are moments when I hurt because the Reugge are too small for you. Yet, there is tomorrow."

In private Gradwohl seemed partial to such cryptic remarks. "Tomorrow, mistress?"

"You once asked why we do not build our own darkships anymore. When the brethren announced that they would no longer replace darkships lost by the Reugge, I started looking into that. I located sisters willing to soil their paws on the Community's behalf. I found more of them than I expected. We are not as far gone in sloth and self-importance as one like yourself might think. I have them hidden away now, with a good crew of workers to help them. They have begun to report modest successes. Extracting the titanium is more difficult than we expected.

"But there are several golden-fleet groves within the Reugge territories. Those most immediately threatened by the advancing ice I have ordered harvested. Old shipwrights with the ancient skills promise me that we do not need to be fancy, and that wood can be substituted many places even in the brethren designs.

"So we will no longer be dependent. May a curse fall upon all male houses. If this works out the way I

expect, we may even be able to build our own void darkships.”

Marika arrayed her face in a carefully neutral expression. Now she understood the additional, intensified silth exercises she had been assigned on her return from the Ponath.

There was little more she could learn from teachers available at Maksche. Indeed, she seemed to have exhausted the Reugge educational resources. Her responsibilities as a councillor took up very little time. She was free to pursue private studies and to expand her silth capacities. Gradwohl insisted she do the latter, feeling she was especially weak in her grasp of the far touch.

The far touch was a talent increasingly rare because the use of telecommunications was so much easier. One side of Marika was lazy enough to want to ignore the talent—just as that lazy side throughout the Reugge Community was responsible for the talent’s diminution. She rebelled against that laziness, hammered away at learning. And at times was very amused at herself. She, the outsider, the cynic about silthdom’s traditional values, seemed to be the Community’s most determined conservator of old ways and skills.

Often she wrestled the question of why Gradwohl wanted her to become the complete silth when what she really wanted was to create a Mistress of the Ship able to darkwar for the Reugge.

In one of her more daring moods, Marika asked the most senior, “Is Bestrei getting old, mistress?”

“You cannot be fooled, can you? Yes. But we all age. And the Serke, knowing how much their power depends upon their capacity for darkwar, have other strong darksiders coming up behind Bestrei.”

“Yet you believe I will be able to conquer them.”

“In time, pup. In time. Not now. I have never encountered anyone with your ability to walk the dark side. Not even Bestrei herself. And I have met her. But you are far from ready for such a confrontation. The Reugge must survive till you have been tempered, and hardened in your heart, and till we have built ourselves a true voidfaring darkship, and assembled bath who can fare the dark with you.”

“So that is why you have been avoiding confrontation when you knew you could force it and probably win the backing of the other Communities.”

“Yes. I am playing this game for the biggest stakes imaginable.”

Marika put that aside. She said, “I have had an idea for a device I think would be useful. To test it I would need someone from communications to modify one of the receivers for taking signals off the satellite network.”

“You are zigging when I am zagging, Marika.” Gradwohl appeared mildly baffled.

“I want to try to steal the signals of other sisterhoods, mistress. From what Bagnel has said, doing so should not be difficult. Just a matter of altering one of the receivers so it will accept signals other than our own.”

Gradwohl reflected for a moment. “Perhaps. The males would be most incensed if ever they discovered the fact.” Like mechanized transport, communications equipment came from the brethren on lease. Only minor repairs were permitted the lessees.

“They will not find out. I will use receivers we took away from the nomads.”

“All right. You have my permission. But I suspect you will find it more trouble than it is worth. Any messages of importance will be couched in the secret languages of the Communities sending them. And in code besides, if they are critical. Still, much could be learned from the daily chatter between Serke cloisters.”

Marika was more interested in intercepting data returned from trademale research satellites, but she could not have interested the most senior in that. Gradwohl was an obsessive, interested only in defeating the Serke and augmenting Reugge power. “We might even find out what is so important about the Ponath,” Marika said. “If we knew that we might become a more powerful Community simply by possessing the knowledge.”

“That is true.” Gradwohl did not seem much interested in pursuing the thought, though. Something else was on her mind. Marika had a glum suspicion. Gradwohl said, “Let us get to the point, Marika. To the reason I called you here.”

“Yes, mistress?”

“Utiel is about to retire.”

“Mistress?” Marika knew what was coming. Utiel was fourth on the Maksche council. Only first chair, or senior, held more real power.

“I want to move you to fourth chair, Marika.”

“Thank you, mistress. Though there will be protests from—”

“I can quiet the egos of those passed over, Marika. Or I could if I did in fact move you up. I said I want to move you. I cannot. Not the way things stand.”

Marika slipped into her cautious role. “Mistress?” She controlled her emotions rigidly. Fourth chair she wanted badly. It could become her springboard into the future.

“Fourth chair is understudy for third as well as being responsible for cloister security, Marika.”

She knew that well. In the security responsibility she saw opportunities that seemed to have evaded those who had held the chair before.

Gradwohl continued, “Third chair is liaison with other cloisters, Marika. A coordinating position. A visible, public position. As fourth, understudying, you would be expected to begin making contacts outside the Maksche cloister. As fourth you would become known to the entire sisterhood as my favorite. As fourth you would be seen to have ambitions beyond Maksche.

“For all those reasons your behavior and record would be subjected to the closest scrutiny by those who hope to place obstacles in your path.

“From fourth chair, Marika, it is only a step to an auditor’s seat at conventions of the Reugge seven at TelleRai.”

“I understand, mistress.”

“I do not think so, Marika.”

“Mistress?”

“Never has one so young sat upon the Maksche council. Or any other cloister council, except in legend. But the sisters here accept your age, if grudgingly, because of your demonstrated talent, because of all you have done for the Community, and especially because you have my favor. They can brag about you before sisters from other cloisters. You have helped put a remote cloister upon the map, so to speak. But there are limits to what their pride and my power can force them to swallow.”

“Mistress?”

“They would revolt before they permitted you to assume a position in which you would represent this cloister elsewhere, pup.”

“You have lost me, mistress.”

“I doubt that. I doubt that very much. You know exactly what I am talking about. Don’t you? I am talking about Toghar, Marika. You have been eligible for the ceremony since you returned from the Ponath. You have put it off repeatedly, calling upon every excuse you can muster.”

“Mistress . . .”

“Listen, Marika. I am speaking of roads to the future opened and closed. If you continue to evade the ceremony you will not only not rise any higher than you are now, you will begin to slide. And there will be nothing I can do. Tradition must be observed.”

“Mistress, I—”

“Marika, you have many dreams. Some I know, some I infer, and some must be entirely hidden. You are one moved by dreams.” The most senior stared at her intently. “Listen, pup. Marika. Your dreams all live or die with that ceremony. No Toghar, no stars. And the darkship will go. We cannot invest so much of the Reugge in one who will not invest of herself in the Community.”

She awaited an answer. None came.

“Pay the price, Marika. Demonstrate your dedication. So many smaller, weaker, less dedicated silth have done so before you.”

Still Marika did not respond.

She had witnessed the Toghar ceremonies. They were not terrible, just long. But the cost . . . The price of acceptance as an adult silth, with full privileges . . .

She had no plans to birth pups, ever. She did not wish to be burdened with trivial, homey responsibilities. Yet to surrender the ability to dam them . . . it seemed too great a price.

She shook her head. “Mistress, do you have any idea what Grauel would give to possess the ability you are asking me to surrender? What she would do? We came out of the Ponath, mistress. I carry the burden of ten years of living with and accepting those frontier values that—”

“I know that, pup. The entire cloister knows. That is why I am being pressed to push your ceremonies. There are those who hope you will stumble upon that early training.”

She had already. When she had released her littermate Kublin. Where was he now? There had been none of the terrible nightmares since that day on the Hainlin. Had she laid some ghosts?

“Make up your mind, Marika. Will you be silth? Or will you be a Ponath huntress?”

“How long do I have, mistress?”

“Not long. There are pressures I cannot resist forever. So make it soon. Very soon.”

Smug bitch, Marika thought. She was sure what the decision would be. She thought she had Marika’s every emotional end tied to a puppet string.

“But enough of that now, Marika. I also want your thoughts on the rogue situation. Did you hear that there was another factory explosion last night?”

“At another place belonging to someone friendly to us?”

“It was at the tool plant. That pushes the brethren down the list of suspects, does it not?” When she spoke in council, Marika always insisted the brethren were connected with the rogues.

“No.”

There had been a series of explosions lately, all of which had damaged meth bonded to the Maksche cloister. One bomb had gone off in a farm barracks during sleeping hours, killing twenty-three male field workers. Rumor blamed disaffected males. As yet there had been no captures of those responsible.

Marika, like everyone else in the cloister, believed the Serke were responsible. But unlike everyone else, she believed the rogues were drawing support from within the tradermale enclave. Were, perhaps, striking from there, and thus remaining unseen.

“There is no such evidence, Marika,” the most senior argued. “Males are naturally foolish, I admit, but there are few fools among the Brown Paw Bond—with whom we have had an understanding for centuries.”

“There is no evidence because no one is trying to collect it, mistress. Why is it that Utiel cannot catch the males responsible for these explosions? Is she not trying? Or is she just inept? Or could it be that she still does not believe the rogues to present a threat worth taking seriously? Do they have to start throwing bombs over the cloister wall before we take direct action? I have heard that several of the Communities have begun watching us here.”

“Do not lecture me, pup. Utiel has tried. She is old and has her faults, I admit, but she has tried. She has been unable to detect them. It is almost as if the rogues have found a way to hide from the touch.”

“So must we be so dependent upon our talents? Must we be wholly committed to one method of looking? We cannot assume a reactionary stance and expect to handle this sort of threat.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Several. Again, does Utiel take all this seriously enough? I do not believe she does. Old silth grumble about rogues but just go on about their business. They say there are always a few rogues. It is a pestilence that will not quite go away. But this is a disaffection that has been growing for years. As you know. And it is clear that there is organization behind it. Organization and widespread communication. It is worst here in Maksche, but the same shadow falls upon a dozen other Reugge cloisters. I think we would be fools to just try waiting it out. Before long we would be watching the Educans run away when reality closes in.”

“You will not forgive her, will you?”

“I lost a lot of meth because of her. If she had not lost her nerve, we could have devoured the nomads and Serke before they knew what hit them.”

The most senior looked at her hard. Marika was sure Gradwohl had not swallowed her whole story about what had happened at Critza. But she was equally certain that the most senior did not suspect the truth.

She hoped Kublin had had sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

“I would have had her shot, mistress. Before the assembled cloister.”

“Perhaps. You think you can do better with the rogues? You think you can handle the security function of fourth chair? Then take charge.”

“Mistress?”

“It is fourth chair’s responsibility.”

“Will you assign me the powers I will need to get the job done?”

“Will you take the Toghar rites?”

“Afterward.”

Gradwohl eyed her coldly. “This is your watershed, pup. You had better. There will be no more bargaining. Be silth, or be gone. You can have whatever you need. Try not to walk on too many toes.”

Chapter Twenty-two

I

Marika moved quickly, drafting every silth and huntress she respected. Two nights after receiving the most senior’s blessing, she began moving small teams into every site she believed to be a potential rogue target. She followed the dictum of the ancient saw, “The night belongs to the silth.” She moved in the dark of the moons, by low-flying darkship, unseen even by those who managed the places she chose to protect.

She was certain there would be an attack soon. Some show of strength. She had written Bagnel bragging about her appointment, transparently implying that she suspected his bond of being behind the rogues.

If he was what she believed, and reported the contents of her letter to his factors, there should be a move made in an effort to show nothing so simple would frighten them off. Or to make it appear the Brown

Paw Bond really had no control over the rogue group.

She hoped.

Her planted teams kept themselves concealed from those who worked and dwelt in and around the potential targets. Marika herself shifted to a nighttime schedule, remaining aloft on the trainer darkship she had made her own.

The rogues waited four days. Then they walked into it. It could not have gone better for Marika had she been giving the villains their orders.

Three were slain and two captured in an action so swift no shots were fired. Marika lifted the captives out quietly and carried them to the cloister aboard her darkship.

One of those two managed to poison himself. The other faced a truthsaying.

He yielded names and addresses.

Marika threw teams out aboard every darkship the cloister possessed, ignoring all protests, invoking the most senior where she had to. By dawn seven more prisoners had been brought into the cloister. Five lived long enough to be questioned.

A second wave of raids found several rogues forewarned or vanished completely. This time there was some fighting. Few rogues were taken alive.

Even Marika was surprised at how many rogues Maksche boasted.

The third wave of raids took no prisoners at all. Few rogues were found. But weapons and explosives enough for an arsenal were captured, along with documentary evidence of rogue connections in TelleRai and most cities where the Reugge maintained cloisters.

Marika had the captured arms laid out upon the cloister square. The dead rogues joined them.

“Very good, Marika,” Gradwohl said as she and the Maksche councillors inspected the take. “Very impressive. You were right. We were too passive, and even I underestimated the scale and scope of what was happening. No one could see this and remain convinced that we are dealing with the usual scatter of malcontents. I will order all the Reugge cloisters to—”

“Excuse me for interrupting, mistress. It would be too late for that. The rogues will have vanished everywhere. Posting rewards might help a few places, if they are large enough. A point that I have to make, over and over till everyone understands, is that for all their broad antisilth sentiments, and all that the evidence shows them established almost everywhere, these rogues are attacking nobody but the Reugge.”

“Noted,” Gradwohl replied. “And right again. Yes, Marika. The Serke are behind them somewhere, though the rogues themselves would not know that.”

“They did not when we questioned them.”

“Where did they go? Those who disappeared?”

Marika felt certain the most senior knew the answer she was about to give—and did not want to hear it. “Mistress?”

“You did not collect two thirds of those you identified. I know this. So where did they go?” Gradwohl seemed resigned to a great unpleasantness.

“Into the trademale enclave, mistress. I had the gate watched. As a sort of experiment. Inbound traffic grew rapidly after we began raiding. It peaked before our third round. Almost no one came out.”

“So they are safe from retribution. Accursed—”

“Safe? Mistress? Are you certain? What are the legalities? Is there no mechanism for extracting fugitives from convention territories?”

“We shall see.” Gradwohl flung a curt gesture at the rest of the council. “Come.”

“If there is no mechanism, I will make one,” Marika said softly.

The most senior gave her a narrow look. “I believe you would, pup.” A few paces later, “Take care, Marika. Take care. Sometimes this world will show a toughness that is different from that of the Ponath. Sometimes losing can be the better path to winning.”

“You didn’t let me know you were coming,” Bagnel complained. “How come you’re back already? You usually stall around.” He looked abashed. He also looked as if he was under a strain.

“Official business this time.” Marika glanced at the clipboard she carried, though she knew the names and numbers by heart. She turned it so he could see the list. “These meth, all fugitives from the law, were seen entering this gate yesterday.”

His lips peeled back in an unconscious snarl, and she knew the cause of the strain that had him so edgy.

“I have brought the orders necessary for their removal from the enclave. They have a future in the mines.”

“There must be some mistake.”

“None whatsoever, Bagnel. Each of these meth has been convicted in court, on evidence presented by confederates. Sentence has been passed. Each was seen entering here. Would you like photographs of them doing so? I will have to send to the cloister for them.” She ran a spur-of-the-moment, inspired bluff with that remark. Photo surveillance had occurred to her only in retrospect.

“Holding the job you do, by now you have heard about the ruckus in town. I presume your staff were involved in this behind your back.” Give him a ready-made excuse. “The males on this list fled here. They are here still. No airships have left the enclave. You have two hours to deliver them to Grauel and Barlog. If you do not, you will be considered in violation of the conventions and your charter.”

Bagnel looked aghast.

Grael and Barlog waited outside with a dozen armed huntresses.

“Marika . . .” Bagnel’s tone was plaintive. “Marika, that sounds like a threat.”

“No. Here I have a copy of the charter negotiated before your brethren assumed control of this enclave. I have added a map for your personal information.”

Bagnel examined the map first. “I do not understand.” He couched his speech in the formal mode.

“You will note that it shows your enclave surrounded entirely by land belonging directly to the Reugge Community. At the time they assumed control, the Brown Paw Bond had no aircraft. Now they do. You must know that the conventions say that no aircraft of any sort may be flown over silth lands without direct permission of the sisterhood involved.”

“Yes, but—”

“The Brown Paw Bond have never obtained that permission for the Maksche enclave, Bagnel. They have never applied. The enclave is in violation of the conventions. Overflights will cease immediately. Otherwise sanctions will be applied.”

“Sanctions? Marika, what in the world is going on here?”

“Any aircraft or airship attempting to leave this enclave will be destroyed. Come.” She led him to the doorway, showed him three darkships slowly circling the enclave.

Bagnel opened and closed his mouth several times, said nothing.

Marika presented a fat envelope. “This contains a formal notice of the Reugge Community’s intent to cancel all Brown Paw Bond charters that now exist within Reugge territories.”

“Marika . . .” Bagnel began to get hold of himself. “These fugitives. You really want them that badly?”

“Not really. Not personally. It would not matter now if you did sneak them out. They are dead. Bounties have been posted on them—very large bounties. As you once noted, the Reugge are a very wealthy Community. No. What is at stake is a principle. And, of course, my future.”

Bagnel looked puzzled. She had come at him hard, from unexpected directions, and had managed to keep him off balance.

“I have reached a position of substance within my sisterhood, Bagnel. I am very young for it. My age alone has made me many foes. Therefore I have to consolidate my position and fashion a springboard to a greater future. I have chosen to do that in my usual way, by taking the offensive against enemies of the Community. My opponents inside the sisterhood are unable to fault that.” A pause for effect. “Those who get in my way can expect the worst.”

“You intend to climb over me?”

“If you get in my way.”

“Marika, I am your friend.”

“Bagnel, I value you as a friend. I have treasured your friendship. Often you were the only one I could turn to.”

“And now you are so strong you do not need me anymore?”

“Now I am so strong I do not need to blind myself to what you are doing. Nor was I ever so weak as to allow crimes to be committed simply because a friend was involved.”

“Involved?”

“Drop the act, Bagnel. You know the brethren are backing the Serke effort to steal the Ponath from us. You know the brethren have been sponsoring the terrorism practiced by disaffected males. It is another ploy against us. You use criminals now that there are no more nomads to be your proxies. You even flew in males from outside because Maksche did not produce enough villains of its own. Now, is that something I should ignore simply because one of the behind-scenes movers is a friend?”

“You are mad, Marika.”

“You will stop. Cease. Give me my prisoners and do nothing more. Or I will see the Brown Paw Bond torn apart like an otec rent by kagbeasts.”

“You are totally insane. They have given you a taste of power and it has gone to your head. You begin imagining nonexistent plots.”

“Phoo! Think, Bagnel. I struck near the mark, yes? Insofar as you know? Naturally, you have not been trusted with full knowledge. You deal with me. You traffic with silth. Can they trust you? When they hoard knowledge the way old Wise females hoard metal in the Ponath? You recall my great triumph up there, so called? Did you know that nomads had very little to do with it? Did you know that what I defeated was actually an invasion carried out by Serke and armed brethren, with a few hundred nomads along for show? If you do not know these things, then you have been used worse than I suspect.”

Almost out of pity she stopped hitting him. She could see that he was hearing much of this for the first time. That, indeed, he had been used. That he did not want to believe, yet his faith was being terribly tested.

“Enough of that. Friend. When you report to your factors, as inevitably you must before you dare yield the criminals I want, tell them for me that I can produce thirteen burned-out ground-effect vehicles, with their cargoes and the corpses of their drivers and passengers, anytime I feel inclined to assemble delegates from the various Communities.”

Bagnel composed his features, but could not help staring.

“You do not have to believe me, Bagnel. Just tell them what I said. Nice word, ‘driver.’ It is from the brethren secret speech, is it not? Not everyone aboard those vehicles died in the ambush.”

“What is this madness you’re yammering?”

He was innocent of guilty knowledge, she was now sure. A tool of his factors. But he had heard so many wild rumors that she now had him on the edge of typical male panic. Composed as he kept his face, his eyes glittered with fear. His hackles had risen and his head had dropped against his shoulders. She wanted to reach out to him, to touch him, to reassure him. To tell him she did not hold him personally

responsible. She could not. There were witnesses. Any softening would be perceived as weakness by those who were not here and did not know them.

“The message will register once you pass it along, Bagnel. Tell them the price of silence is their desertion of the Serke. Tell them they can tell the Serke that if they want to do us in, henceforth they must come at us directly, without help.”

He began to understand. At least, to understand what she wanted him to understand. He whispered, “Marika. As a friend. Not as Bagnel the trademale or Bagnel the security chief of this enclave. Don’t push this. You’ll get rolled under. I know nothing of the things you have talked about. I do know that you cannot withstand the forces that are ranged against the Reugge. If you really have the sort of evidence you claim, and I report it, they will kill you.”

“I suspect they’ll be reluctant to try, Bagnel.” She spoke in a whisper herself, and pointed to one of the circling darkships, to make those watching think she was talking about her threats. “Their force commander in the Ponath was the Serke number four. Stronger than anyone but Bestrei herself. She’s dead. And I’m here.”

“There are other ways to kill.”

Marika rested a paw upon the butt of her rifle. “And I know them. They may have their way with the Reugge. But they will pay in blood. And pay and pay and pay. We have just started fighting, Gradwohl and I.”

“Marika, please. You’re too young to be so ruled by ambition.”

“There are things I want to do with my life, Bagnel. This struggle with the Serke is a distraction. This scramble is something I want to get over early. If I sound confident of the Reugge, that’s because I am. In the parlance of your brethren, I believe the hammer is in my paw. I’d rather you and your silth allies just went away and left us alone. I’d rather not fight. But I am ready to bring on the fire if that is the way they want it. You may tell them that we Reugge believe we have very little to lose. And more to gain than they can imagine.”

Bagnel sighed. “You always were headstrong and deaf to advice. I will tell my factors what you’ve said. I’ll be very much interested in their response myself.”

“I’m sure you will. As you walk over there, keep one eye on the darkships up top. Keep in mind that they have orders to kill anyone who tries to leave the enclave. You can shoot them down if you like. But I don’t think even the Serke will tolerate that.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Marika. I really do. I think, though, that you don’t. I think you have made some grave and erroneous accusations, and based serious miscalculations upon them. I fear for you.”

She was making a long bet, setting the price of protecting the rogues so high the brethren factors would have no choice but to surrender them. A success would cement her standing within the Community.

She did not care if the silth liked her, so long as they respected and feared her.

“I intend to be very careful, Bagnel. I give these things more thought than you credit me for. Go. Grauel and Barlog will be waiting here at the gate.” She walked through the building beside him, halted at the

door to the airstrip, counted silently while he walked fifteen steps. "Bagnel!"

"What?" he squeaked as he whirled.

"Why is the Ponath worth risking the very existence of the brethren?"

An instant of panic betrayed him. If he did not know, he had firmly founded suspicions. Perhaps because the tradermales of Critza had been involved from the beginning?

"The plan is for the brethren to betray the Serke after they take over, isn't it? The brethren think they have some way to force the Serke out without a struggle."

"Marika . . ."

"I questioned some of the drivers who were with the Serke invaders, Bagnel. What they didn't know was as interesting as what they did."

"Marika, you know very well I do not know what you are howling about. Tell me. Does Most Senior Gradwohl know what you are doing here?"

"The most senior has ambitions greater than mine."

That was not a direct answer, but Bagnel nodded and resumed walking, his step tentative. He glanced at the circling darkships only once. His head lowered against his shoulders again.

She had rattled him badly, Marika knew. Right now he was questioning everything he knew and believed about his bond. She regretted having had to use him so harshly. He was a friend.

Given her victory, the day would come when things would balance.

When she returned to the street outside the enclave, Grauel asked, "Are they going to cooperate?"

"I think they will. You can put anything over on anybody if you sound tough enough and confident enough."

"And if they are guilty as charged?"

"That will help a lot."

Barlog looked at one of the darkships. "Did you really order . . . ?"

"Yes. I could not run the bluff without being willing to play part of it out. They might test me."

Barlog winced, but said nothing.

II

Grauel received the rogue prisoners within the deadline. "But nine of them were given over dead, Marika," she reported.

"I expected that. They resisted being turned over, did they?"

“That is what Bagnel told me.”

“Want to bet the dead ones could have connected the brethren of the enclave with their movement?”

“No bet. They had to get their weapons and explosives somewhere. Bagnel slipped me a letter, Marika. A personal communication, he said.”

“He did?” She was surprised. After what she had put him through? “Let’s see what he has to say.”

Bagnel said much in few words. He apologized for his brethren having betrayed the conventions. He had not believed her at the gate, but now he had no choice. He was ashamed. As his personal act of contrition, he appended two remarks. “Petroleum in the Zhotak. Pitchblende in the western Ponath.”

Petroleum she understood instantly. She had to go to references to make sense of the other.

She hurried to Gradwohl’s quarters. “My cultivating the male Bagnel has finally paid a dividend, mistress,” she reported. She did not mention the brethren yielding the criminals. Gradwohl’s meth would have reported all that already. “He has told me what is so important about our northern provinces.”

“You broke him down? How? I had begun to think him as stubborn as you.”

“I shamed him. I showed him how his factors had been making a fool of him, using him in schemes he would not have touched had they asked him directly. But no matter. He has turned over the roges, and he has given me the reason behind all the years of terror.

“Petroleum and pitchblende. Our natural resources. Considering what they were willing to risk, the deposits must be huge.”

“Petroleum I understand.” It was a scarce commodity, very much in demand in the more advanced technological zones farther south. “But what is pitchblende? I have never heard of it.”

“I had to look it up myself,” Marika admitted. “It is a radioactive ore. A source of the rare heavy elements radium and uranium. There is very little data available in our resources, but there is at least the implication that the heavy elements could become an energy source far more potent than petroleum or other fossil fuels. The brethren already use radioactives as power sources in some of their satellites.”

“Space. I wonder . . . Now I wonder why the Serke would . . . ?”

“Yes. Suddenly, it looks like we have seen everything backward, does it not? For a long time I thought the Serke were using the brethren. Now I think the brethren have been using the Serke the way the Serke used the nomads. The Serke promised a great prize and secret support. The savages had little real choice, pressed as they were by the onset of the ice age. The brethren in turn baited their snare with the petroleum of the Zhotak. And the Serke leapt on it like an otec onto the scraps of greasy bread huntresses use in their traps along the side creeks. I am sorry. The brethren. I believe they are interested in the pitchblende.”

“You have evidence?”

“Only intuition at this point.”

Silth accepted intuition as a reliable data base. Gradwohl nodded. “Can you guess what their motives

might be?"

"I think that brings us full circle, back to the problem that put me in a position to learn what I have. I think their ultimate goal is the destruction of the silth. Not just the Reugge, a minor Community, but all silth everywhere."

"That is stretching intuition into the wildest conjecture, Marika. Into implausible conjecture."

"Perhaps. Yet there were those who said that about the connection between the rogues and the enclave brethren. And there is no evidence to the contrary. Nothing to show any great tradermale love for silth. Not so? Who does love us? We even hate ourselves."

"I will not permit that kind of talk, Marika."

"I am sorry, mistress. Sometimes I grow bitter and am unable to contain myself. May I proceed upon my assumptions?"

"Proceed? It seems to me that you have handled the situation." Gradwohl glared suspiciously, sensing that Marika wanted to cling to power momentarily gained. "Now it is time we started planning your Toghar ceremonies."

"There will be more incidents, mistress. The brethren have been allowed to create an alternative society. One with far greater appeal to the mass of meth. One in which silth are anachronistic and unnecessary. In nature, the species that is unnecessary soon vanishes."

"I am becoming fearful for your sanity, Marika. Intuition is a fine thing, but you persist in going far beyond intuition, into the far realms of speculation, then treating your fantasies as though they are fact. That is a dangerous habit."

"Mistress, the brethren have created a viable social alternative. Please think about that. Honestly. You will see what I mean. Their technology is like a demon that has been released from a bottle. We have let it run free for too long, and now there is no getting it back inside. We have let it run free so long that now it nearly possesses the power to destroy us. And we have no control over it. They have cunningly held that in their own paws so long that tradition now has the virtual force of law. Our own traditions of not working with our paws cripple us."

"My head understands your arguments. My heart insists you are wrong. But we cannot listen to our hearts always. I will reflect."

"We cannot confine ourselves to reacting to threats only, mistress. As in the old folklore, devils spawn devils faster than they can be banished. They will keep on gnawing off little chunks of us unless we go straight after the demons who raise the demons."

Gradwohl set aside a traditionalist silth's exasperation with ideas almost heretical. That, more than her grasp of silth talents, was the ability that had fueled her rise to the first position among the Reugge. "All right, Marika. I will accept your arguments as a form of working hypothesis. You will be replacing Utiel soon. By stretching the imagination, the problems you conjure will fall within the purview of fourth chair. You may pursue solutions. But be careful who you challenge. It will be years yet before the Reugge are in any position to assert independence from the brethren."

Marika controlled her features carefully. She exulted inside. Saying that, Gradwohl revealed far more

than she knew. She did believe! And somehow, though she did not want it known, she was moving to loosen the chains of trademale technology.

“As you wish, mistress. But let us not remain so enamored of our comforts that we allow ourselves to be destroyed for fear of losing them.”

“The ceremonies, Marika. All your arguments, all your desires, all your ambitions are moot without Toghar. Will you stop ducking and changing the subject? Are we going to secure your future? Or deliver it into the paws of those who would see you fail?”

Marika sighed. “Yes, mistress.”

“Can we set a date, Marika? Sometime soon?”

Fear twisted Marika’s guts. What was the matter with her? Toghar was simple. Countless silth had survived it. None that she had heard of had not. It was less to be feared than facing down the brethren over a few dozen criminals. Why could she not overcome her resistance? “Yes, mistress. I will begin my preparations immediately.”

Maybe something would come up to delay it.

III

“Grauel . . . I’m terrified.”

“Thousands have been through it, Marika.”

“Millions have been through birthing.”

“No one has ever died.”

Hard edge to Grauel’s words. The birthing remark was the wrong thing to say before her two packmates. “It’s not that. I don’t know how to explain. I’m just scared. Worse than when the nomads came to the packstead. Worse than when they attacked Akard and we all knew we were not going to get out alive. Worse than when I was bluffing Bagnel about attacking brethren aircraft if they tried to leave the enclave.”

“You were not bluffing.”

“I guess not. I would have done it if he had forced me. But I didn’t want to. And I don’t want to do this.”

“I know. I know you’re scared. When you’re genuinely terrified, you can’t shut up.”

Startled, Marika asked, “Really? Do I give myself away so easily?”

“Sometimes.”

“You will have to educate me. I can no longer allow myself to be easily read.”

Barlog stepped around Grauel, held out the white under-shift that was the first of the garments Marika would don. She appeared less empathetic than did Grauel. But when Marika leaned forward to allow her to slide the shift over her head, Barlog hugged her.

Each huntress, in her own way, understood well the price of becoming silth. Grauel, who never could bear pups, and Barlog, who had not been allowed since accepting the Reugge bond. Barlog said, "It isn't too late to leave, Marika."

"It's too late, Barlog. Far too late. There's nowhere we could go. Nor would they tolerate us trying. I know too much. And I have too many enemies, both within and outside the Community. The only way out is death."

"She's right," Grauel said. "I've heard the sisters talking. Many hope she won't go through with it. There is a powerful faction ready to take all our heads."

Marika walked to a window, looked out on the cloister. "Remember when we rated nothing better than a cell under Akard?"

"You've come a long way," Grauel admitted. "You've done many things of which we couldn't approve. Things I doubt we can forgive, even knowing what moved you. There are moments when I can't help but believe what some say, that you're a Jiana. But I guess you've only done what the All demands, and that you've had no more choice than we do."

"There's always a choice, Grauel. But the second option is usually the darker. Today the choice is Toghar or die."

"That's why I say there really isn't any choice."

"I'm glad you understand." She turned, let Barlog pull the next layer of white over her head. There would be another half-dozen layers before the elaborate outer vestments went into place. "I hope you'll understand in future. There will be more evil choices. Once I fulfill Toghar, my feet will settle onto a path from which there will be no turning aside. It is a path into darkness, belike. A headlong rush, and the Reugge dragged right along with us, into a future not even the most senior foresees."

Grauel asked, "Do you really believe the trademales want to destroy the silth? Or is that just an argument you're using to accumulate extraordinary powers?"

"It's an argument, Grauel, and I'm using it that way. But it also happens to be true. An obvious truth to which the sisters have blinded themselves. They refuse to believe that their grasp is slipping. But that's of no moment now. Let's move faster. Before they come to find out why I'm taking so long."

"We're right on time," Barlog said, arranging the outer vestments.

Grauel slipped the belt of arft skulls around her waist. Barlog placed the red candidate's cap upon her head. Grauel passed her the gold-inlaid staff surmounted by a shrunken kagbeast head indistinguishable from a meth head in that state. In the old days it would have been the head of a meth she had killed.

Grauel brought the dye pots. Marika began staining her exposed fur in the patterns she had chosen. They were not traditional silth or Reugge. They were Degnan patterns meant for a huntress about to go into single, deadly combat. She had learned them as a pup, but never had seen them worn. Neither had Grauel or Barlog, nor anyone of the pack that they could recall. Marika was confident none of today's witnesses would understand her statement.

She stared at herself in a mirror. "We are the silth. The pinnacle of meth civilization."

“Marika?”

“I feel as barbaric as any nomad huntress. Look at me. Skulls. Shrunken head. Bloodfeud dyes.” For weeks she had done nothing but prepare for the ceremonies. She had gone into the wild to hunt arfts and kagbeasts, wondering how other candidates managed because the hunting skills were no longer taught young silth.

The hunt had not been easy. Both arfts and kagbeasts were rare in this winter of the world. She had had to slay them, to bring the heads in, and to boil the flesh off the arft skulls and to shrink the head of the kagbeast. Grauel and Barlog had assisted only to the limits allowed by custom. Which was very little.

They had helped more preparing the dyes and sewing the raiments. They were better seamstresses than she, and the sewing had been done in private.

“Do you want to go over your responses again?” Grauel asked. Barlog dug the papers out of the mess on Marika’s desk.

“No. Any more and it’ll be too much. I’ll just turn off my mind and let it happen.”

“You won’t have any problems,” Barlog prophesied.

“Yes,” said Grauel. “Overstudy . . . I studied too hard when they made me take the vector exams.”

“Vactor” was the silth word that approximated the Degnan “huntress,” though it also meant “guard” and “one who is trusted in the silth presence bearing weapons.”

“There were questions where I just went blank.”

Barlog said, “At least you got a second chance at the ones you missed. Marika won’t.”

It did not matter terribly, insofar as the outcome of the ceremonies proper, if Marika stumbled occasionally. But to be less than perfect today would lend her enemies ammunition. They would use any faltering as a sign that she was less than wholly committed to the silth ideal.

Appearances, as always, were more important than substance.

“Barlog. Are you still keeping the Chronicle?”

“Yes.”

“Someday when I have the free time I’d like to see what you have said about what has happened to us. What would Skiljan and the others have thought if they could read what you’ve written, only fifteen years ago? If they’d had that window into the future.”

“They would have stoned me.”

Marika applied the last daub of vegetable dye. Gathering the dyes had been as difficult as collecting the animal heads. There had been no choice but to purchase some, for the appropriate plants were extinct around Maksche, destroyed by the ongoing cold.

Marika went to the window again, stared north, toward her roots. The sky was clear, which was increasingly rare. The horizon glimmered with the intensity of sunlight reflected off far snowfields. The permanent frostline lay only seventy miles from Maksche now. It was expected to reach the city within the year. She glanced at the heavens. The answer lay up there, she believed. An answer being withheld by enemies of the silth. But there would be nothing she could do for years. There would be nothing she could do, ever, unless she completed today's rites.

"Am I ready?"

"On the outside," Grauel said.

"We haven't forgotten a thing," Barlog said, referring to a checklist Marika had prepared.

"Let's go."

Turmoil twisted into hurricane ferocity inside her.

The huntresses accompanied Marika only as far as the doorway to the building where the ceremonies would be held. The interest was such that Gradwohl had set the thing for the great meeting chamber. Novices turned the huntresses back. Ordinarily the Toghar rites were open to everyone in the cloister. Only those involved and their friends turned out. But Marika's ceremonies had drawn the entire silth body. She was no ordinary novice.

Her enemies were there in hopes she would fail, though novices almost never did so. They were there in hopes their presence would intimidate her into botching her responses, her proper obeisances. They were there in hopes of witnessing a stumble so huge that it could not be forgiven, ever.

Those who were close to Gradwohl, and thus to the most senior's favorite, were there to balance the grim aura of Marika's enemies.

The enemies made sure no nonsilth were present. Marika was more popular among the vactors, whom she had given victories, whom she treated as equals, and who liked the promise of activity she presented.

Marika stepped through the doorway and felt a hundred eyes turn upon her, felt the disappointment in enemies who had hoped she would not show. She took two steps forward and froze, waiting for the sisters not yet seated to enter the hall and take their places.

Fear closed in.

It was not a proper time. Gradwohl and Dorteka both repeatedly had tried to tell her not to place all her trust in those-who-dwell. Even knowing she should not, she slipped down through her loophole, into that otherworld that overlapped her own, and sought the solace of a strong dark ghost.

She found one, brought it in, and used it to ride through the chamber ahead, reassuring herself that the ceremonies would proceed in the usual way. It was a cold world out there, with the ghosts. Emotion drained away. Fear dribbled into the ether, or whatever it was through which the ghosts swam. The coldness of that plane drained into her.

She was ready. She had control. She could do it now. She could forget what it would cost her, could forget all her nurture as a huntress-to-be, dam-to-be, of the Degnan pack. She released the ghost with a stroke of gratitude, pulled back to the world of everyday, of continuous struggle and fear. She scanned

the hall ahead with cold eyes. All the sisters had taken their places.

Coolly, she stepped forward, standing straight, elegant in her finery. She paused while two novices closed the door behind her. She faced right and bent to kiss the rim of an ancient pot that looked like a crucible used till it had had to be discarded. She dipped a finger in, brought thick, sweet daram to her lips and tongue.

That pot was older than the Reugge. Older, even, than the dam Community, the Serke. Its origins had been lost in the shadows of time. Its rim had been worn by the touch of countless lips, its interior crusted by residue from the tons of daram that had filled it over the ages. It was the oldest thing in the Reugge world, an icon-link that connected the Community with the protosilth of prehistory, the symbolic vessel of the All from which silth were granted a taste of infinity, a taste of greater power. It had been the kissing bowl of seven gods and goddesses before the self-creation of the All.

The glow of the daram spread through Marika, numbing her as chaphe would, yet expanding her till she seemed to envelope everyone else in the hall. They, too, had tasted daram. Their mind guards were down a fraction. Touch leaked from everyone, pulling her into a pool of greater consciousness. Her will and personality became less sharply defined and singular. It was said that in the ancient lodges, before civilization, silth had melded into a single powerful mind by taking massive doses of daram.

That part of her, the majority, which remained wholly Marika, marveled that hidden beyond this welcoming glow there could be so much fear, spite, enmity, and outright irrational hatred.

Her sponsor Gradwohl and the chief celebrants waited at the far end of the hall. She spoke her first canticle, the novice requesting permission to approach and present her petition for recognition. A silth somewhere to her right asked a question. She replied automatically, with the proper response, noting in passing that her primary interrogator would be Utiel, the old female she would replace in fourth chair. All the Maksche councillors seemed to have assumed roles in the ceremonies, even the senior, who had been all but invisible since falling out of favor with Gradwohl.

Before she realized what was happening, the initial interrogatory ended. She approached the celebrants. Again there were questions. She did not become involved on a conscious level. She responded crisply, automatically, made her gestures at the exact appropriate instant. She felt like a dancer perfectly inserted into her dance, one with the music, leaping, twisting, turning with absolute grace, the thing itself instead of an actor, the ultimate and ideal product of a perfect sorcery. Her precision, her artistry, fed back to the celebrants so that they, too, fell into her matchless rhythm.

The slight tension brought on by the presence of enemies faded from the shared touch of the daram, expunged by the experience of which she was heart. That experience began to swell, to grow, to drown everything.

And yet, deep within her, Marika never wholly surrendered to the commitment the rite was supposed to represent.

The celebrants completed the final interrogatory. One by one, Marika surrendered her staff, her belt of skulls, her cap, her ceremonial raiments to the kettle of fire around which the celebrants stood. Noisome smoke rose, filled the hall. In moments she stood before the assembly wearing nothing but her dyes.

Now the crux. The stumbling stone. The last hope of those who wished her ill. The truly physical part, when they would stretch her on the altar and a healer sister would reach into the ghost realm and summon those-who-dwell, lead a ghost into her recumbent form, and destroy forever her ability to bear young.

Marika met Gradwohl's eye and nodded. The most senior stepped around the smoking kettle, presented the wafer. Marika took it between her teeth.

And added her bit of style, her own fillip to the ceremony. She faced the assembly before biting down, chewing, swallowing. She felt the stir in the entwined touch, the slight, unwilling swell of admiration.

The wave of well-being came over her as concentrated chaphe spread through her flesh. The celebrants stepped around the kettle and allowed her to settle into their arms. They lifted her to the altar. The healer sister loomed over her.

That reluctant something tried to wriggle forth, tried to scream, tried to will her to move, break away, flee. She stifled it.

She felt the ghost move inside her. Felt her ovaries and tubes being destroyed. There was no pain, except of the heart. There would be little discomfort later, she had been promised.

She turned inward, felt for the ghost world, fled there for several moments.

It was all over when she returned. The observers were filing out. The celebrants and their assistants were cleaning up. Gradwohl stood over her, looking down. She seemed pleased. "That was not so bad, was it, Marika?"

Marika wanted to say the hurt was all in her mind, but she could not. The daram and chaphe held her. She reflected momentarily upon a pack still unMourned and wondered if their spirits would forgive her. Wondered if she could ever forgive Gradwohl for forcing her into this crime against herself.

It would fade. The heart's pains all faded.

"You did very well, Marika. It was a most impressive Toghar. Even those who dislike you had to admit that you are extraordinary."

She wanted to protest that they never had denied that, that that was the reason they feared her, but she could not.

Gradwhol patted her shoulder. "You are fourth chair now. Utiel officially announced her retirement the moment the ceremony was complete. Please use your power wisely. Your two vactors will be in to help you shortly. I will tell them to remind you that I want to see you after you have recovered." Gradwohl touched her gently, almost lovingly, in a fashion her own dam never had managed. For a moment Marika suspected there might be more to her patronage than simple interest in the fate of the Reugge.

She forced that out of mind. It was not difficult with the chaphe in her blood.

"Be well," Gradwohl murmured, and departed.

Grael and Barlog appeared only several minutes after the last of the silth departed. Marika was vaguely amused as she watched them prowling the chamber, peering into every shadow. They, who believed silth could render themselves invisible with their witchcraft. Finally, they came to her, helped her down off the altar.

"How did it go?" Barlog asked. She seemed under a strain.

“Perfectly,” Marika croaked through a throat parched by drugs.

“Are you all right?”

“Physically, I’m fine. But in my soul I feel filthy.”

Again both huntresses scanned the shadows. “Can you speak business? Are you too disoriented?” Grauel asked.

“I can. Yes. But take me away from here first.”

“Storeth found those workers,” Grauel told Marika, after they had taken her to her quarters. “She reported while you were in that place. They were reluctant to talk, but she convinced them she came from you. They acknowledged their debt. They knew very little, but they did say there is a persistent rumor that the rogues have found themselves a powerful wehrlen. One who will be able to defeat silth at their witchcraft when he is ready. So the thing is not done. As you thought.”

In the questioning of all the rogues taken, there had been that thread of belief in something great about to befall the criminal movement. Marika had not been able to identify it clearly. In the end she had decided to seek out two Maksche workers who had served her in the Ponath years ago, workers who had vowed they would repay an imagined debt.

“Warlock,” she murmured. “And a great one, of course. Or he would not be able to inspire this mad hope.”

She had not mentioned anything of this to the most senior. Intuition told her this was a thing best kept to herself. For the present, at least.

“We must find him. And kill him, if he cannot be used.”

For once Grauel and Barlog concurred in a prospective savagery.

They remembered the wehrlen who first brought the nomads out of the Zhotak.

BOOK FOUR: TELLERAI

Chapter Twenty-three

I

Barlog relayed the message that had been left at the cloister gate. “A communication from Bagnel, Marika. And I wish you would do as the most senior suggests and move to quarters more suitable to one of your status. I am growing too old to be scampering up and down stairs like this.”

“Poo. You’re only as old as you think, Barlog. You’re still in your prime. You have a good many years ahead of you. What is it?”

“But are they all years of up stairs? I don’t know what it is. It’s sealed.”

“So it is.” Marika opened the envelope. It was a large one, but contained only a brief note.

“Well?”

“He wants a meeting. Not a visit. A meeting.” She pondered that. It implied something official. Which further implied that the trademales were aware of her official elevation to fourth chair and her brief for dealing with rogue males. She had not wanted the news to get out of the cloister so quickly. But outside laborers would talk. “I guess a month of secrecy is enough to ask. Barlog. I want to talk to Braydic. In person. Here. Don’t let her give you any of the usual excuses.”

Ever since the confrontation in the main ceremonial hall, Braydic had bent every effort to avoid compromising herself further by avoiding Marika.

“Yes, mistress.”

Braydic’s evasions had done her no good. Marika had made her head of a communications-intercept team. Like it or not. And Braydic did not.

Marika did not quite understand the communications technician. From the first a large part of her friendship for the refugee pup had been based upon her belief that Marika would one day become powerful and then be in a position to do her return favors. But now she was afraid to harvest what she had sown.

Braydic was too conservative. She was not excited by new opportunities and new ideas. But she carried out her orders and did so well. In the nine days since she had gotten the intercept system working, she had stolen several interesting signals.

Marika paced while waiting. She was not sure where she was going now. There had been a time when she thought to displace Gradwohl and head the Reugge Community in her own direction. But Gradwohl seemed to be steering a course close to her own ideal, if sometimes a little cautiously and convolutedly, and not seizing control of the sisterhood meant not having to deal with the flood of minutiae which swamped the most senior.

She lamented having so few trustworthy allies. She could not do everything she wanted herself, yet there was no one she could count on to help move the sisterhood in directions she preferred.

Was she getting beyond herself? Looking too far down the path?

She went to a window, stared at the stars. “Soon,” she promised them. “Soon Marika will walk among you.”

She returned to her desk and dug out the file containing outlines of Braydic’s reports.

The critical notation to date was that Braydic had identified signals from more than one hundred orbital satellites. Though the spacefaring sisterhoods did not announce an orbiting, the available data suggested that they had helped boost no more than half that number into orbit. Which meant that the brethren had somehow put the rest up on their own, trespassing upon silth privilege by doing so. The space codicils to the conventions specifically excluded the brethren from the dark, except as contract employees of the sisterhoods.

Intriguing possibilities there.

Braydic entered tentatively. "You sent for me, mistress?"

"Yes. I want to know what you have intercepted recently. Especially today."

"I sent a report not two hours ago, mistress."

"I know, Braydic. A very long, thick, dull report that would take forever to get through. It will take less time if you just tell me if there was anything worth overhearing. Especially from our male friends at the enclave."

"There has been heavy traffic all day, mistress. Much has been in cant or in the brethren cult language. We have not been able to decipher much of it, but we think they are expecting an important visitor."

"That would make sense," Marika murmured to herself. "That is all?"

"All we could determine without an interpreter. If you expect me to unravel the content of these messages, you are going to have to give me interpreters or scholars capable of discovering the meaning of the secret languages. Neither I nor any of my team are capable."

"I will see what I can do about that, Braydic. It would please me, too, if we could understand everything being said. Thank you for taking time to come up here. And I want you to know I appreciate your efforts."

"You are welcome, mistress. Oh. Mistress. The Serke network has also been carrying a heavy traffic load today."

"There might be a chance of a connection? Yes? Good. Thank you again. This calls for reflection." Marika seated herself, closed her eyes, allowed herself to sink into the All. She waited for intuition to fuel her thoughts.

She came out to find Barlog poised near the doorway, waiting, doing nothing to disturb her. "Barlog?"

"Is there to be an answer to the message, Marika? The messenger is waiting."

"Indeed? Then tell him to tell Bagnel that I will be there an hour after midnight." She consulted her calendar. "An hour and thirteen minutes after, to be precise."

The major moons would attain their closest conjunction of the month at that time. The tides would rise high enough to halt the flow of the Hainlin. The hour would be one considered especially propitious to the silth. Bagnel would understand. She was sure he had been studying everything known about the silth with as much devotion as she studied everything known about flying and space. He might not be wholly aware of the part he was playing in this game, but he was as dedicated as she. A pity he could not become her prime opponent. He would make a good one. The tension of their friendship would add spice.

From Bagnel she shifted thought to the rumored wehrlen. Was that anything but wishful thinking by rogues? She could catch the odor of nothing even remotely concrete. Her resources were inadequate.

Ten minutes before she was due at the enclave, Marika assumed her position at the tip of the dagger of her darkship. She had elected to fly to avoid the chance of rogue ambush. She did not fear ambush, but it would be too much of a distraction.

Grael and Barlog accompanied her, standing at the axis of the cross. Marika and they carried their weapons. She made the bath go armed. The moment they were airborne Grael used a portable transceiver to contact the trademale controller. She followed procedures identical to those Bagnol used on landing approaches.

Marika thought that amusing. Especially if the brethren were up to some wickedness.

She brought the darkship down near Bagnol's headquarters. Barlog and Grael dismounted quickly and took their places to either paw. One bath went ahead of Marika, two followed. The party bristled with weapons. Marika herself carried a revolver and automatic rifle taken from enemies in the Ponath. She hoped the trademales would see the symbolism.

Bagnol handled her irregular arrival well. She wondered if she could surprise him anymore. He greeted her pleasantly. "Right on time. Come into the back."

Marika was startled. Never before had he offered her entrance to his private quarters.

"Is all the hardware necessary?" Bagnol asked.

"That remains to be seen. We live in strange times. I don't believe in taking needless chances."

"I suppose." He sounded as though he thought his honesty had been questioned.

"It's not personal, Bagnol. I trust you. But not those who use you. I want to be able to shoot back if somebody shoots at me. More sporting than obliterating them with a blow from the touch. Don't you think?"

"You've developed a bloodthirsty turn, Marika."

She wanted to tell him it was calculated. But even with him there were truths best kept close to the heart. So she told him an incomplete truth. "It's my upbringing. I spent so much time getting away from meth who wanted to eat me. What did you expect anyway? This can't be social. You've never invited me over in the middle of the night. That would be an impropriety."

Marika gestured. Grael, who retained the sensitive nose of a Ponath huntress, stepped up and sniffed the fruit punch Bagnol had begun preparing. The trademale eyed her with a look of consternation.

"I didn't think you'd be fooled," he said. "Knowing you, you have it half figured out."

"You want me to meet someone who is going to try to bribe me or twist my arm. I trust that you were a good enough friend to warn them that their chances of success are slight."

"Them?"

"I expect there will be more than one, and at least one will be female, of exalted rank, representing the Serke."

A door opened. Marika glimpsed a sleeping room. Bagnel had spartan tastes in private as well as public. She credited him with a point to his account of positives. He worked to fulfill his tasks, not to acquire a more luxurious life.

Several meth came out of the sleeping room. None were armed and none were of low status. Their trappings reeked of power and wealth. Marika's party seemed incongruous in their presence, all of them clad for the field, all armed, the bath and Grauel and Barlog nearly fight-alert against the walls.

Marika had hit near the mark. There were two silth and two males. The males were so old their fur had a ratty, patchy look. Both exuded a strong presence seldom seen even in females. She recognized neither, but there were few photographic records of those who were masters among the brethren.

One of the males stared at her in a fashion she found too bold. Too much like a butcher sizing up livestock.

"Marika," Bagnel said, stirring the punch, "I want to be on record as having arranged this meeting under orders. I don't know what it's about, so don't blame me personally if you don't like the way it goes."

"I know that, Bagnel. It would be unreasonable to expect thieves to give any consideration to friendship. Few of them are aware that it exists. I'll bet the word does not occur in the Serke secret tongue, or even in your tradermale cant." She turned. "Greynes. Natic. Korth. Guard the outside. One of you take the hall doorway. The other two patrol around outside. I doubt you will see anyone, as these bandits will not want it known what they are doing and orders will have been given keeping everyone away from here. But, just in case, shoot first and ask questions later."

The moment the door closed behind the bath, she asked, "What are you going to offer?" She brought her gaze ripping across four sets of hard but mildly unsettled eyes.

The silth looked back blankly, careful students of their art. Marika judged them to be high in their order. Almost certainly from the Serke controlling council itself. They would want a close look at the Reugge youngster who had slain two of their number.

The tradermale remained blank, too.

None of the four spoke.

"But surely you have something to offer. Some way of getting me to betray my Community so you can work your wicked wills. Think of the prizes at stake. Our Reugge provinces are floating on oil. Those parts that are not sinking beneath the weight of rare heavy elements." She revealed her teeth as she tilted her ears in a contrived expression of amusement. "But look at you, crinkling around the corners of your eyes and wondering what is this creature? It is just me. The troublesome savage Marika. The shin-kicker who forestalls the conspiracies of thieves. Trying to drive a wedge between you."

Teeth began to show. But for some reason they had made it up to allow her all the initial talking. Perhaps a test?

"Yes. I am forthright. I tell you right out front that I am going to put you at one another's throats. No proxies and no lies. Sisters, did your friends here ever tell you about the pitchblende in the western Ponath?"

One of the trademales jerked upright, lip peeling back in an unconscious snarl. The silth did not miss that. Grauel and Barlog snapped their rifles down, aimed at his chest.

“Pitchblende is a source of radioactives, rare and dangerous heavy metals. They have very limited technological applications at the moment—primarily as power sources in satellites. But it takes no imagination to see that major surface installations could be built by an advanced technology. I suspect the brethren could have something operating within ten years. Sisters, do look up radium and uranium when you get back to Ruhaack, or wherever. While you are checking things, see if you can get an accurate count on the number of satellites orbiting our world. Compare that number with the number that the dark-faring Communities have lifted.”

Marika faced the trademales. “I am perfectly transparent, am I not? It is your turn. You, of course, have been anticipating Serke treachery from the beginning. That is the way those witches are. You have been preparing for the scramble for the spoils. But suppose we could short-circuit the process? Lovely technical term, short-circuit. Suppose you did not have to deal with the Serke at all? Suppose I offered you a Reugge license allowing you access to all the pitchblende you want? Without your having to sneak through the wilds outside the law, hoping you can survive the malice of your accomplices.”

The males exchanged looks.

“There? You see? I have been perfectly obvious, and yet I have given you much on which to think. Why not get what you want the cheaper and safer way? I understand you better than you think. I know what moves you.” She shifted her gaze to the silth. “You, though, remain enigmas. I do not know if I will ever fathom your motives for committing such hideous crimes.”

She settled into the one chair standing on her side of the room, waiting. A shaken Bagnel hovered in no-meth’s land. He sped Marika a look of appeal.

“I am waiting,” she said after half a minute of silence.

They had found their strategy wanting, though they took its failure well. One of the males finally said, “Not long ago you placed the brethren in a tight position. You tied us up so we had no choice but to do something we considered despicable.”

“That is just beginning, old-timer. If you persist in arming, training, sending out criminals to attack silth, you are going to find yourselves in even tighter places. You will find the Reugge have so many criminals under sentence we will be selling their sentences to Communities that have a shortage of condemned laborers.”

Her confidence rattled the male for a moment. But he recovered, held unswervingly to what had to be a prepared line of argument. “We have decided to do unto you as you did unto us.”

“Really? Why do I get the feeling I am about to witness the unfolding of a grand delusion?”

“We do not delude ourselves!” he snapped. She could almost hear him thinking, You silth bitch.

“Arrogant silth bitch,” she corrected aloud. “Come ahead, then. Try me.”

For the first time the Serke looked genuinely uncertain. The appearance of confidence becomes confidence, Marika reminded herself.

The male who had not yet spoken did so now. From several glances he had thrown Bagnel's way, Marika inferred that he must somehow be her friend's superior. He said, "Some time ago you ambushed a joint force in the Ponath. You once threatened to make the circumstances public. We would like it noted that the same event can be used to your detriment. If you refuse to cooperate with us."

Marika was not surprised. She had expected that Kublin would come back to haunt her eventually. But she had let the matter float, hoping she could do the right thing intuitively when he did.

The male suggested, "You might want to send your guards outside."

"I might not. There are two Serke of exalted status here. I might not be able to kill both of them quickly enough to keep you from sticking a knife into me. Go ahead with your threats."

"As you wish. You allowed a littermate to escape that ambush. Surrounding circumstances suggest that you did more than that to assure his safety. Suppose that were made known?"

The one thing Marika had done about the matter was to send a group of huntresses, picked by Grauel, to Critza. They were under instructions to lie low and capture any snoopers. So she controlled the physical proofs. "Go ahead. If that is your best."

"What we have in mind is presenting the evidence to your most senior. She, I believe, is your principal anchor within the Reugge Community."

Marika shook her head, honestly less worried by the moment. "Go with it. See what it gets you. While you are at it, though, why not up the stakes? Why not try to buy me somehow?"

That caused more consternation.

"We will present Most Senior Gradwohl with the evidence."

"I said go ahead. You will have assembled a fair file on me by now. You know I do not bluff."

"We know your bluff has not been called. We know you are young. A characteristic of youth is that it takes long risks, betting that older, more cautious heads will not hazard stakes as dangerous."

"Play your stakes," Marika said. "Grauel, our presence here seems pointless. Tell the bath to ready the darkship."

"Wait," one of the silth said. "You have not heard what we want."

"To tell the truth, I do not care what you want. It would not be anything in my interest, or in the interest of the Reugge Community."

"You could become most senior of the Reugge if you cooperated."

"I have no wish to become most senior. That is a job that would distract me too much from those things that do interest me."

"Is there any way to reach you?"

"Almost certainly. We all want some things so badly we will befoul ourselves to get them. Witness

yourselves. But I cannot think of anything that is within your power to offer. At least nothing I cannot take for myself. I suggest you stop trying to steal the Ponath. Accept the fact that the Reugge control it. Deal for the petroleum and pitchblende. Frankly, I find it impossible to comprehend your frenzy for outright control.”

Marika looked at the trademales, hoping they would understand that she actually had no trouble at all understanding. “I will go now. You four squabble over the ways you may have planned to stab one another in the back.”

With Grauel and Barlog covering her, she backed to the doorway. She paused there, added, “The most senior is away this month, as she often is. You will not be able to contact her for some time. However, she will return to Maksche for a two-week period beginning the fifth day of Biter—if you feel compelled to present your evidence. My own proofs are held by a trusted sister at TelleRai, under seal. She is under bond to break the seal in the event of my death or prolonged disappearance.” She left. But after she had taken a few steps, she turned back to add, “After me, my fine thieves, the end of the world. At least for you and yours.”

Her feet flew as she dashed to the darkship. She had gotten away with yanking their whiskers. Very nearly with yanking them out by the roots. She had left them completely at a loss. It was wonderful.

It was the sort of thing she had wanted to do to some of her elders almost from the time she had grown old enough to reason.

She took the darkship up, on a long flight, pursuing the rogue orbit of a small retrograde moon. She pushed hard, glorying in the cold air’s rush through her fur.

After the crude joy began to fade, she halted, floated high, where the air was thin but cut like knives of ice. She looked southward. Far, far down there were the great cities of the world. Cities like TelleRai, which spawned the Gradwohls and silth like the Serke she had faced tonight. And thousands of miles farther still lay the equator, over which orbited many of the trademale satellites.

The ice was advancing because the world had cooled. The world had cooled because not enough solar radiation impinged upon it now that it had entered the interstellar cloud. To halt the ice required only an increase in the amount of solar energy reaching the surface of the planet. Someday, and perhaps not that long now, she would begin throwing more coals on the fires of the sun—as it almost had to be said in the dialect of her puphood, naked as it was of technical and scientific terms.

II

Marika had won again, apparently. Neither the Serke nor brethren appeared inclined to test her.

A quiet but busy year passed.

Three months after the confrontation in Bagnel’s quarters, third chair came open. Gradwohl moved her up. Marika clung to those security functions pertaining to the rogue male problem. She continued to expand them as much and as often as she dared, though she operated with a more delicate paw than had been her custom. With more to lose and more to gain, she invested much thought before making more enemies.

Third chair meant having to monitor meetings of the Reugge council at TelleRai. Tradition insisted third chair accompany first chair, or senior, at each such gathering. Marika refused to attend in person, though

Gradwohl herself often urged her to make herself known to the sisters of the ruling cloister.

She audited the meeting electronically. She did not feel comfortable leaving the heart of the network she had begun building.

She spent seven months in third chair, then second came open. The All was a persistent taker during those years at Maksche, an ally almost as valuable as Gradwohl herself, hastening her rise till it rattled her almost as much as it did her detractors.

At every step of her elevation she was the youngest ever to hold her position.

Gradwohl moved her into second chair. And within the month her ally the All passed its shade across the order's ruling council itself. Gradwohl appointed her seventh chair, a step which shook the entire Community. Never before had an order-wide chair been held by one less than a cloister senior. Never before had two chairs been held by sisters from the same cloister.

Marika ignored the grumbles and uproar. Let the most senior deal with it if she insisted on elevating her favorite over others who felt themselves more deserving.

Again the most senior urged her to make herself known at TelleRai. Her arguments were basic and irrefutable. One day she would have to deal with those meth regularly. She should get to know them now, while they could yet become comfortable with her.

Again she demurred, wishing to remain near the root of a growing political power.

She did not have to be in TelleRai to know what they were saying down there. It was the same old thing, on the larger scale of the sisterhood. They did not like one so young, from the wilds, acquiring so much power within the Community. They were afraid, just as the sisters of Maksche and Akard had been afraid. But the resistance down in TelleRai was even more resistance of the heart than of the mind. They did not know her at all. Only a few had encountered her during the campaigns in the Ponath. The silth there recognized her accomplishments. They were not as bitter as the silth at Maksche. Even those silth gave her very little real trouble, preferring to hate her in their hearts and minds while hoping she set herself up for a fall.

Marika slept very little that year. She pushed herself hard, developing her antirogue force, making of it a personal power base she insinuated into every Reugge cloister. Cynically, she made strong use of the rumors about a great wehrlen lurking among the rogues. If Gradwohl understood what she was doing, she said nothing.

With Braydic's reluctant help Marika developed stolen technology into tools suited to her tasks. Her finest became a listening device she planted in the quarters of those she suspected of trying to thwart her. Toward the end of the year she began having such devices installed in the quarters of anyone she thought might someday get in her way.

The listening devices, unknown outside her circle, gave her a psychological edge on her enemies. Some of her more superstitious sisters came to believe that she could indeed become invisible as in old silth myth. Her revenges were subtle but emotionally painful. Before long all Maksche lived in fear of offending her. The terror of her sisters remained mainly a terror of what she might become, not a fear of what she was.

Each such tiny triumph of intimidation strengthened her. In building her power base she switched back

upon her past, in other cloisters, and tried to recruit the most reactionary silth to manage the rogue program.

Her efforts in that direction yielded results sufficient to convince the most doubting silth that there was a grand conspiracy against the sisterhoods, with the Reugge the chosen first victim. Every criminal male taken and questioned seemed to provide one more fragment fitting into a grand mosaic of revolution.

The warlock began to take substance, if only as a dreadful shadow.

Marika's first contacts outside her own Community came not as a result of her place on the council at TelleRai but because several of the more friendly sisterhoods became interested in creating their own rogue-hunting apparatus before the problem in their territories swelled to the magnitude of that in the Reugge. They came to Marika for advice.

The parade of outsiders impressed the Maksche sisters. Marika made of that what she could, gradually silencing more of her strongest critics.

Yet silence bought nothing. The more widely known she became, the more hated she became by those who had chosen to stand against her in their hearts.

There was no conquering irrationality. Especially not among silth.

There were nights when she lay awake with the pain of unwarranted hatred, vainly consoling herself with the knowledge that all silth who attained any stature did so at the cost of hatred. Few of the Maksche council were well liked. No one liked Gradwohl. Were the most senior there more often, instead of away doing what no one knew what, she might have absorbed some of the hatred directed her favorite's way.

Often when Marika did sleep she fell into a strange dream wherein she rode a surrealistic, shifting beast across a night infested with stars, without a wind stirring her robes and fur, without a planet below. There was peace in that great star-flecked void.

Mornings afterward she would waken with her determination refreshed, no longer caring if anyone loved her.

She was alive for the sake of a creature called Marika, not for anyone else. She would salvage the freedom of the Reugge if she could. She owed the Community something. If she succeeded, so much the better. If she did not, she would not much care.

She would help the Serke if there were no other way of opening her pathway into the great dark.

She was second chair, yet Gradwohl tinkered with it in a manner that there were no duties for her at Maksche. In time her campaign against the rogues was so successful she had little to do but monitor reports of ever-dwindling criminal activity. She began to find herself with time on her paws. That left her time to brood. She began to feel hemmed in, pressured, restless.

III

It was the anniversary of Marika's confrontation in Bagnel's quarters. She had extended her morning exercises by an hour, but they had done nothing to stay her restlessness. A call to Bagnel had proven fruitless. He was tied up, unable to entertain her. She faced a long and tiresome day of poring over stolen texts, searching for something she did not already know; of skimming reports from Braydic's intercept teams and plant listeners, finding the same old things; of scanning statements from informants seeking

rewards for helping capture members of the rogue movement.

She had had all she could stand of that. She wanted to be free. She wanted to fly.

“This is not what I want to do with my life. How do they get anyone to take first chairs? Barlog! Tell the bath to prepare my darkship.”

“Marika?”

“You heard me. I am sick of all this. We’re taking the darkship up.”

“All right.” Barlog disapproved. She had found herself a niche, helping direct the movement of information, which suited her perfectly. And she did not like Marika’s laying claim to the ship. It was not yet assigned her formally. It still belonged to the cloister generally, though no one else had used it all year. Barlog was becoming very conscious of place and prerogative. “Where will you be going?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just be going. Anywhere away from all this. I need to feel the wind in my fur.”

“I see. Marika, we have come no nearer finding the warlock.”

Marika stifled a sharp reply. She was tempted to believe the warlock a product of rogue wishful thinking. “Inform Grauel. She’ll need to find a sub if she has cloister duty today.”

“Do you expect to be up long?” Barlog looked pointedly at a heap of reports Marika had yet to consider.

“I think so. I need it this time.” She had done this before, but only for brief periods. Today, though, demanded an extended flight. The buildup of restlessness and frustration would need awhile to work off.

“As you command.” Barlog departed.

Marika scowled at her back. For one who had come to set so much stock in place, Barlog was getting above herself. She shuffled papers, looking for something that might need immediate attention.

For no obvious reason she recalled something Dorteka had said. About a museum in TelleRai. The Redoriad museum? Yes.

TelleRai. Why not? She was secure enough now. Both in her power and within herself.

She summoned one of the novices assigned to run and fetch for her. “Ortaga, get me some medium-scale maps of the country south of here. The Hainlin to the sea, the coast, and everything west to and including the air corridor to TelleRai. As far south as TelleRai.”

“Yes, mistress.”

The maps arrived before Barlog returned. Marika laid out a flight path that would pass over outstanding landmarks she had heard mentioned by bath and Mistresses of the Ship with whom she had spoken. She told the novice, “I will be gone all day. I expect to return tonight. Have the other novices sort the papers the usual way. Tag any that look important.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Barlog. At last. Is the darkship ready?”

“It will be a short time yet, mistress. The bath told me that they will want to fulfill the longer set of rites if you intend an extended flight.”

“I see.” Marika did not understand the bath. They had their own community within the greater Community, with private rites they practiced before every flight. The rites apparently amounted to an appeal to the All to see them through unscathed.

There were Mistresses, like Bestrei of the Serke, who considered their bath in the same class as firewood. They cared not at all for them as meth. They drew upon them so terribly they burned them out.

Even lesser and more thoughtful Mistresses had been known to miscalculate and destroy their helpers.

Marika took some coin from her working fund, then donned an otec coat. Otec fur was rare now. The coat was her primary concession to the silth custom of exploiting one’s status. Otherwise she lived frugally, dressed simply, used her position only to obtain information. Any sort of information, not just news about rogue males or about the space adventures of the dark-faring Communities. She had accumulated so much data she could not keep track of it all, could not keep it correlated.

Grael joined her as she and Barlog reached the grand court where the darkships came and went. Workers were removing hers from its rack. It was so light only a half dozen were needed to lift it down and carry it to the center of the square. They unfolded the short arms and locked them into place. Marika eyed the line of witch syringes painted on shields hung along the main beam.

“Someday I will have a darkship all my own. I will have it painted all in black,” she said to no one in particular. “So it can’t be seen at night. And we will add Degnan symbols to those of the Reugge.”

“The tradermale could still follow you with their radar,” Grael said. “And silth could still find you with the touch.”

“Even so. Where are they? Do their rituals take so long? Barlog, where are your weapons? We don’t go anywhere without our weapons.” She herself carried the automatic rifle and revolver captured in the Ponath. She carried a hunting knife that had belonged to her dam, a fine piece of tradermale steel. She never left her quarters unarmed.

Grael still carried the weapon Bagnol had given her during the siege of Akard. It remained her most precious treasure. She could have replaced it with something newer and more powerful, but she clung to it superstitiously. It had served her well from the moment it had come into her paws. She did not wish to tempt her fates.

Barlog was less dramatically inclined. Marika often had to remind her that they were supposed to be living savage roles. Marika wanted other silth to perceive them as terribly barbaric. It amused her that those with the nerve sometimes asked why she did not wear ceremonial dyes as well as always going armed.

She never bothered telling them that the daily dyeing of fur was a nomad custom, not one indigenous to the Ponath. For all there had been a deadly struggle of years, most of the Reugge could not understand the difference between Ponath and Zhotak meth.

There was a chill bite to the morning wind. It made her eager to be up and away, running free, riding the gale. Someday she wanted to take the darkship up during a storm, to race among growling clouds and strokes of lightning. Other Mistresses thought her mad. And she would never be able to try it. The bath would refuse to participate. And they had that right if they believed a flight would become too dangerous.

Marika had worked long and hard to develop and strengthen her natural resistance to electromagnetic interference with her silth talents. But in her more realistic moments she admitted that even she would be overwhelmed by the violent bursts of energy present in a thunderstorm. Flight among lightnings would never be more than a fantasy.

Barlog came hustling back armed as though for a foot patrol against the nomad. She even carried a pod of grenades. Marika ignored the silent sarcasm, for the bath appeared at the same time, each with her formal greeting for the Mistress of the Ship. All bath seemed to be very much creatures of ceremony.

Each of the bath was armed as a huntress. They knew Marika's ways.

They did not like serving with her, Marika knew. But she knew it was nothing personal. The Reugge bath did not like any of the Reugge Mistresses of the Ship. It was part of their tradition not to like anyone who held so much power over their destinies.

"Positions," Marika said.

"Food?" Grauel asked. "Or have I guessed wrong? Will it be a brief flight?"

"I brought money if we need it. Board and strap, please."

The bath counted off the ready. "Stand by," Marika called, and stepped onto her station. Unlike the bath, she often disdained safety restraints. This was one of those times when she wanted to ride the darkship free, in the old way, as silth had done in the days of slower, heavier wooden ships.

"Be prepared!"

Marika went down inside herself, through her loophole, and sent a touch questing. Ghosts were scarce around the cloister. They did not like being grabbed by silth.

She knew the cure for that. A whiff of the touch, like the sense of one of their own calling. A lure laid before them and drawn slowly closer. They were not smart. She could draw in a score at a time and bind them, and reach for another score.

The grand court was aboil within a minute with more ghosts than any other Mistress could have summoned. There were far more than Marika really needed to lift and move the darkship. But the more there were, the safer she would be. The more there were, the farther she could sense and see through that other level of reality. And the higher and faster she could fly—though speed was determined mainly by her ability to remain aboard the darkship in the face of the head wind of her passage.

She squeezed the ghosts, pressed them upward. The darkship rose swiftly. Grauel and Barlog gasped, protested, concerned for her safety. But Marika always went up fast.

She squeezed in the direction she wished to travel. The titanium cross rushed forward.

She rose as high as she dared, up where the air was cold and rare and biting, like the air of a Ponath winter, and maintained control of the ghosts with a small part of her mind while she gazed down on the world. The Hainlin was a wide brown band floating between mottled puzzle pieces of green. From that height she could not make out the flotsam and ice which made river travel hazardous. The dead forests of the north were coming down, seeking the sea. She glanced at the sky overhead, where several of the smaller moons danced their ways through the sun's enfeebled light. She again wondered why the tradermales did nothing to stay the winter of the world.

She would, one day. She had mapped out a plan. As soon as she had garnered sufficient power . . . She mocked herself. She? A benefactor? Grauel and Barlog would be astonished if they knew what she had in mind.

Well, yes. She could be. Would be. After she had clambered over scores of bodies, of sisters, of whoever stood in her path. But that was far away yet. She had to concentrate upon the present. Upon the possibilities the Serke-brethren conspiracy presented. She had to get back to them, to sound them out. There might be more there than she had thought.

IV

Marika followed the Hainlin for a hundred miles, watching it broaden as two mighty tributaries joined it. She was tempted to follow the river all the way to the sea, just to see what the ocean looked like. But she turned southward toward the Topol Cordillera, not wishing to anger anyone by trespassing upon their airspace. She was not yet in the position of a Bestrei, who could fly wherever and whenever she wished. That lay years in the future.

Quietly, she admonished herself against impatience. It all seemed slow, yes, but she was decades ahead of the pace most silth managed.

The Topol Cordillera was a low range of old hills which ran toward TelleRai from the continent's heart. The airspace above constituted an open, convention corridor for flights by both the sisterhoods and the brethren. The hills were very green, green as Marika recalled from the hills of her puphood. But even here the higher peaks were crowned by patches of white.

The world was much cooler. The waters of the seas were being deposited as snow at an incredible rate. "And it need not be," she murmured. She wondered that meth could be so blind as to miss seeing how the ice could be stopped. Never did she stop persisting in wondering if they did see, know, and do nothing because that was to their advantage.

Whose?

The tradermales', of course. They were the technicians, the scientific sort. How could they help but see?

Who would hurt most? The nomads of the polar regions first. Then the pack-living meth of remote low-technology areas. Then the smaller cities of the far north and south, in the extremes of the technologized regions. The great cities of the temperate zones were only now beginning to catch the ripple effect. They would not be threatened directly for years. But the silth who owned them and ruled from them drew their wealth and strength from all the world. They should try to do something, whether or not anything could be done.

Ordinary meth would direct their anxieties and resentments toward the sisterhoods, not toward the

brethren, who were careful to maintain an image as a world-spanning brotherhood of tinkers.

The real enemy. Of course. Always it added up when you thought in large enough terms. The brethren pursued the same aim as the rogues. Secretly, they supported and directed the rogues.

Then they had to be broken. Before this great wehrlen came out of the shadows.

Her ears tilted in amusement. Great wehrlen? What great wehrlen? Shadow was all he was. And break the brethren? How?

That was a task that could not be accomplished in a lifetime. It had taken them generations to acquire the position they held. To pry them loose would require as long. Unless the Communities were willing to endure another long rise from savagery.

The mistake had been made when the brotherhood had been allowed to become a force independent of the Communities. The attitude that made it unacceptable for a sister to work with her paws had become too generalized. The brethren's secrets had to be cracked open and spread around, so silth-bonded workers could assume those tasks critical to the survival of civilization.

Her mind flew along random paths, erratically, swiftly curing the world's ills. And all the while the darkship was driving into the wind. The world rolled below, growing greener and warmer. Ghosts slipped away from the pack bearing the darkship. Others accumulated. Marika touched her bath lightly, drawing upon them, and pushed the darkship higher.

The Cordillera faded away. A forested land rolled out of the haze upon the horizon, a land mostly island and lake and very sparsely inhabited. The lakes all drained into one fast watercourse which plunged over a rift in a fall a mile wide, sprinkled with rainbows. The fall's roar could be heard even from that altitude. The river swung away to Marika's left, then curved back beneath her in a slower, wider stripe that, after another hundred miles, left the wilderness for densely settled country surrounding TelleRai. TelleRai was the most important city on the continent, if not on the meth homeworld.

The silth called this continent the New Continent. No one knew why. Perhaps it had been settled after the others. None of the written histories went back far enough to recall. Generally, though, the cities on other continents were accepted as older and more storied and decadent. Several were far larger than TelleRai.

The outskirts of the city came drifting out of the haze, dozens of satellite communities that anchored vast corporate farms or sustained industrial enclaves. Then came TelleRai itself, sometimes called the city of hundreds because its fief bonds were spread among all the sisterhoods and all the brethren bonds as well. It was a great surrealistic game board of cities within the city, looking like randomly dropped pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with watercourses, parks, and forests lying between the cloisters.

Marika slowed the darkship and came to rest above the heart of the city, a mile-wide circle of convention ground enfiefed to no Community, open to everyone. She harkened to the map in her mind, trying to locate the skewed arrowhead shape of the Reugge cloister. She could not find it.

She touched her senior bath. Greynes. You have been here before. Where is our cloister?

Southwest four miles, mistress.

Marika urged the darkship southwestward at a leisurely pace. She studied the city. It seemed still and

lifeless from so high above. Till she spied a dirigible ascending. That must be one of the trademale fastnesses there.

Now she saw the Reugge cloister. Even from close up it did not resemble the picture she had had in mind. She took the darkship down.

From a lower altitude the cloister began to look more as it should. It had tall, lean spires tapering toward the sky. Almost all its structures were built of a white limestone. It was at least three times the size of the Maksche cloister and much more inviting in appearance.

The city itself looked more pleasant than Maksche. It lacked the northern city's grim, grimy appearance. It did not suffer from the excessive, planned regularity of Maksche. And the poverty, if it was there, was out of sight. This heart of the city was more beautiful than Marika had imagined could be possible.

Meth scurried through the visible cloister as the darkship descended. Several startled touches brushed Marika soon after it became obvious her darkship would land. She pushed them aside. They would not panic. They could see the Reugge ensignia upon the underframe of the darkship.

She drew on Greynes for word of the proper landing court, drifted forward a quarter mile, completed her descent as silth and workers rushed into the courtyard.

The landing braces touched stone. Marika relaxed, released the ghosts with a touch of gratitude. They scattered instantly.

Grael and Barlog were there when she was ready to step down. The three bath positioned themselves a step behind. "A beautiful flight, sisters," she told the bath. They seemed fresher than she was.

The eldest bowed slightly. "You hardly drew upon us, Mistress. It was a pleasure. It is seldom we get a chance to see much of the country over which we travel. If from ever so high." She removed her gloves and rubbed her paws together in a manner meant to suggest that Marika might refrain from going up into such chill air.

Several silth rushed to Marika, bowed according to their apparent status. One said, "Mistress, we were not informed of your coming. Nothing is prepared."

"Nothing needs to be prepared," Marika replied. "It was an impulse. I came to visit the Redoriad museum. You may arrange that."

"Mistress, I am not sure—"

"Arrange it."

"As you command, mistress."

They knew who she was. She smelled the fear in the courtyard. She sensed a subtle flavor of distaste. She could read their thoughts. Look at the savage. Coming into the mother cloister under arms. With even her bath carrying weapons. Carrying mundane arms herself. What else could be expected of a feral silth come from the northern wilderness?

"I will view the highlights of the cloister while arrangements are being made."

The level of panic did not subside. More silth arrived, including several of the local council. They appeared as distressed as their lesser sisters. One asked, "Is this a surprise inspection, Marika?" The name stuck in the silth's throat. "If so, you certainly have taken us off our guard. I hope you will forgive us our lack of ceremony."

"I am not interested in ceremony. Ceremony is a waste of valuable time. Send these meth back to work. No. This is not an inspection. I came to TelleRai to visit the Redoriad museum."

Her insistence on that point baffled everyone. Marika enjoyed their confusion. Even the senior silth did not know what to make of her unannounced arrival. They went out of their way to be polite.

They knew she had the favor of the most senior, though. And the most senior's motives were deeply shadowed. They refused to believe this a holiday excursion.

Let them think what they would. The most senior was not around to set them straight. In fact, she was not around much at all anymore. Marika often wondered if that did not bear closer examination.

"How is the most senior?" one of the older silth asked. "We have had no contact with her for quite a long time."

"Well enough," Marika replied. "She says she will be ready to begin what she calls the new phase soon." Marika hoped that sounded sufficiently portentous. "How soon will a vehicle be ready?"

"The moment we obtain leave from the Redoriad. Come this way, mistress. You should see the pride of the cloister."

Marika spent the next hour tagging after various old silth, leaving a wake of staring meth. Her reputation had preceded her. Even the lowliest of workers wanted to see the dangerous youngster from the north.

A novice came running while Marika's party was moving through the most senior's private garden, where fountains chuckled, statues stood frozen in the midst of athletic pursuits, and flowers of the season brightened the soft, dark soil beneath exotic trees.

Marika said, "I cannot see Gradwohl having much taste for this, sisters."

The eldest replied, "She does not. But many of her predecessors liked to relax here. Yes, pup?" she snapped at the panting novice.

"The Redoriad have given permission, mistress. Their gate has been informed. Someone will be waiting."

Marika's companions seemed surprised. She asked, "You did not expect them to allow me to see their museum?"

"Actually, no," one of the old silth said. "The museum has been closed to outsiders for the last ten years."

"Dorteka did not mention that."

"Dorteka?"

“My instructress when I first came to Maksche. She reminisced fondly of a visit to the Redoriad museum when she was a novice herself.”

“There was a time, before the troubles began, when the Redoriad opened their doors to everyone. Even bond meth and brethren. But that has not been true since rogue males tried to smuggle a bomb inside. The Redoriad have no wish to risk their treasures, some of which date back six and seven thousand years. After the incident they closed their gates to outsiders.”

Another silth explained, “The Redoriad take an inordinate interest in the past. They believe they are the oldest Community on the New Continent.”

“May we go, then?” Marika asked. “Is a car ready?”

“Yes.” The old silth seemed displeased.

In a merry tone, Marika said, “If you really want to be inspected, I can come back later. I must become acquainted with this cloister, as I no doubt will be moving here soon.”

Deep silence answered that remark. The older silth started walking.

“Why are they this way?” Grauel asked. “Feeling hateful, but being so polite?”

“They fear that I’m Gradwohl’s chosen heir,” Marika replied. “They don’t like that. I am a savage and just about everything else they don’t like. Also, my being heir apparent would mean that they would have no chance of becoming most senior themselves. Assuming I live a normal life span, I will outlast them all.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing we arrived unannounced, then.”

“Possibly. But I doubt they would go to violent extremes. Still, be alert when we get into the streets. There has been time for news of our arrival to have gotten out of the cloister.”

“Rogues?”

“And the Serke. They aren’t pleased with me either.”

“What about these Redoriad? They are the other major dark-faring Community. Might not their interests parallel those of the Serke? Getting into their museum so easily . . .”

“We’ll find out. Just don’t let them move me out of your sight.”

“That has not needed saying for years, Marika.” Grauel seemed almost hurt by the reminder.

Marika reached out and touched her arm lightly.

Chapter Twenty-four

I

The vehicle selected for Marika’s use proved to be a huge steam-powered carriage capable of carrying twelve meth in extraordinary comfort. Silth began climbing aboard. Marika snapped, “Leave room for my companions. Barlog, you sit with the driver.”

She hustled the bath and Grauel inside, climbed aboard herself. The coach’s appointments were the

richest she had ever seen. She waited indifferently while the silth jockeyed for seats. She intervened only to make certain her TelleRai deputy in the antirogue program found a place. She confined her conversation to business while the coach huffed along TelleRai's granite-cobbled streets at a pace no faster than a brisk walk. Grauel watched the world outside for signs of any special interest in the coach. Marika occasionally did the same, ducking through her loophole to capture a ghost. She would flutter with it briefly, trying to catch the emotional auras of passersby.

She detected nothing that warranted excessive caution.

The Redoriad were the largest of all sisterhoods as well as the oldest upon the New Continent. Their cloister showed it. It was a city in itself in an ornate, tall architectural style similar to that of the Reugge cloister.

The steam vehicle chugged to a gate thirty feet high and nearly as wide. The gate opened immediately. The vehicle pulled through, halted. Silth in dress slightly different from the Reugge formed an honor guard. An old female with the hard, tough look of the wild greeted Marika as she descended from the coach.

"They told me you were young. I did not expect you to be this young."

"You have a beautiful cloister. Mistress . . . ?"

"Kiljar."

Marika's local companions made small sounds of surprise.

"You honor me, mistress." She was surprised herself. The Kiljar whose name she knew would be second or third of the Redoriad, depending upon one's information source.

"You know me, then?"

"I am familiar with the name, mistress. I did not expect to be snowed under with notables on a simple visit to a museum."

"Simple visit?" The Redoriad silth began walking. Marika followed, staying just far enough away to allow Grauel and Barlog room. Kiljar was not pleased but pretended not to notice. "Do you really expect anyone to believe that?"

"Why not? It is true. I wakened this morning feeling restless, recalled an old instructress's wonder at the Redoriad museum, decided to come see it for myself. It was sheer impulse. Yet everyone is behaving as though my visit has some sort of apocalyptic portent."

"Perhaps it does not, after all. Nevertheless, the name can be the thing. What is expected is what is believed. Recent times have made it seem that the fate of the Reugge Community may revolve around you. Your name has become known and discussed. Always twinned with that of Most Senior Gradwohl, as strange and unorthodox a silth as ever became a most senior."

"I will agree with that. A most unusual female."

Kiljar ignored that remark. "Young, ambitious silth everywhere are militating for agencies similar to that you created within the Reugge. Old silth who have had brushes with you or yours follow your every move and wonder what each means. Brethren beg the All to render you less a threat than you appear."

Marika stopped walking. The column of Reugge and Redoriad halted. She faced Kiljar. "Are you serious?"

"Extremely. There has not been a day in months when I have not heard your name mentioned in connection with some speculation. Usually it is on the order of, 'Is Marika the Reugge behind this?' Or, 'What is Marika the Reugge's next move?' Or, 'How does Marika the Reugge know things as though she were in the room when they were discussed?' "

Marika had had some success with her signal intercepts, but not that much. Or so she had thought. Penetrating the various secret languages was very difficult, with the results often unreliable. "I am just one young silth trying to help her Community survive in the face of the most foul conspiracy of the century," she replied. She awaited a response with both normal and silth senses alert.

"Yes. To have a future you must have a Community in which to enjoy it. But I have heard whispers that say the Serke made a proposal in that regard."

Marika did not miss a step or feel a flicker of off-beat heart, but she was startled. Word of her encounter with the Serke and brethren had gotten out? "That is not quite true. The Serke approached me once, in their usual hammer-fisted way. They tried to compel me to turn upon my sisters. Nevertheless, the Reugge are stronger today, and the Serke are more frightened."

"Do they have cause?"

"Of course. A thief must be ready to pay the price of getting caught."

"Yes. So. But these are thieves with considerable resources, not all of which have entered the game yet."

"Bestrei?"

"Especially Bestrei."

"Bestrei is getting old, they say."

"She can still deal with any two Mistresses of the Ship from any other Community."

"Perhaps. Who can tell? But that is moot. The Reugge will not challenge her. And how could the Serke challenge us? Would that not amount to a public admission that the Reugge have a right to leave the surface of this planet? I would so argue before the convention on behalf of all those sisterhoods denied access to space." Carefully, Marika admonished herself. This old silth speaks for a Community of darkfarers at least as powerful as the Serke.

"There is that. This thing you have about rogue males. This campaign you have undertaken in the rural territories. I wish to understand it better. In modern times the Redoriad have concentrated their attention offworld. We have leased our home territories to other sisterhoods and paid little attention to what is happening here."

"Are the Redoriad still calling for censure because the Reugge allow such flouting of the law within their provinces?" Marika lifted her upper lip enough to make it clear she was being facetious.

"Hardly. Today there is a fear that you may be going too far in the opposite direction. That you may be

drawing the brethren in. Particularly since several Communities have begun emulating you.”

“With less success.”

“To be sure. But that is not the point. Marika, some of the Communities have become very uneasy with this.”

“Because all paths lead one way?”

“Pardon?”

“Because each path through the rogue tangle eventually leads to a brethren enclave?”

“Exactly.” Kiljar seemed reluctant to admit it.

“They are trying to destroy the sisterhoods, Mistress Kiljar. Nothing less than that. There is no doubt about it, much as so many would blind themselves to the fact. There is ample evidence. Even this winter that is devouring the world has become a weapon with which they weaken silthdom. They are manipulating the Communities, trying to bring on feuds like the one the Reugge have smoldering with the Serke. They are trying to gain control of natural resources properly belonging to the sisterhoods. They are doing everything within their power, if subtly, to crush us. We would be fools not to push back.”

“The brethren are—”

“Essential to society as we know it? That is one of their weapons, too. That belief. They think that belief will stay our paws till it is too late for us. Come into the museum with me, Mistress Kiljar. Let me show you what you Redoriad have had here all the time. Nothing less than proof that silth can exist without the brethren.”

“Marika . . . ”

“I do not propose that they be destroyed. Not at all. But I believe they should be disarmed and controlled before they destroy us.”

“Mistress?” Grauel said from behind Marika. “May I speak with you a moment? It is important.”

Surprised, Marika dropped back. Barlog dropped even farther, to prevent the column from drawing close enough to overhear. “What? Have you seen something?”

“I have heard something. You are talking too much, Marika. That is not Barlog or myself, or even the most senior. That is the second of the Redoriad, a Community whose interests are not identical to those of the Reugge.”

“You are right. Thank you for reminding me, Grauel. She’s crafty. She knew just how to goad me. I’ll watch my tongue.” She overtook Kiljar. “My chief vactor reminds me that I did not come here to lay bare the Reugge breast. That we came entirely unofficially, to examine old darkships.”

“I see.” Kiljar seemed amused.

“May we proceed, and perhaps save the discussion for a time when I feel more comfortable with the Redoriad?”

“Certainly. I will remind you, though, that the Redoriad are no friends of the Serke.”

“Mistress?”

“The Serke have been the next thing to rogue among silth for centuries. They have gotten away with it because they have always had a strong champion. They have become intolerable since they developed Bestrei. No sisterhood dares challenge them. There are many of us who follow the Reugge struggle with glee. You have embarrassed them many times.”

“That is because we avoid confronting their strengths. We let them hurt themselves. The most senior is a crafty strategist.”

“Perhaps she outsmarts herself.”

“Mistress?”

“She is preparing a challenger for Bestrei. Buying time till you are ready. Do not argue. What is evident is evident. Certainly, it is possible that when you attain your full strength Bestrei will have aged so much she can no longer best you. It is said you are as strong as she was at your age. Perhaps stronger, because you have a brain and more than one talent. It is whispered that twice you have slain Serke who came from their ruling seven.”

“Mistress, that is not—”

“Do not argue. These things are whispered but they are known. Let me tell you a thing I know. You are alive today only because you belong to a sisterhood without access to space. Because, as you mentioned, there would be extensive legal ramifications to a challenge.”

Marika waited patiently through a long pause while Kiljar ordered her thoughts. They were on the doorstep of the museum. The door was open. She was eager to see what lay beyond, but waited while the old silth found what she wanted to say.

“You cannot hope to best Bestrei at her most senile without learning the ways of the dark, Marika. Handling a darkship out there is not the same as handling one on-planet. You are Reugge. You have no one to teach you those ways. You dare not teach yourself. The Serke will know if you go out on your own. And they will challenge immediately because you will in effect have challenged the sisterhoods who hold the starworlds. They will make it a challenge for the existence of the Reugge. And Bestrei will devour you.”

Involuntarily, Marika glanced at the sky. And sensed the truth of what Kiljar said. She had not thought the situation through.

Had Gradwohl?

“I have a solution,” Kiljar said. “But we will save that for another time. Today you came here only to look at old darkships.” There was a light touch of mockery in her voice.

II

The Redoriad museum was as marvelous as Dorteka had claimed. Marika breezed through most of it,

eager to reach the darkships, having saved them for last. She had done that with treats as a pup.

She did stop once to ask about a set of wooden balls. "What are these?"

"In primitive times one test for the presence of silth talents was juggling. All female pups were taught. Those who showed exceptional talent early often were managing the balls unconsciously. They were tested further. Today we have more subtle methods."

"May I touch them?"

"They are not breakable."

"I was a very good juggler. My littermate Kublin was, too. We would put on shows for the huntresses when they were in a mood to tolerate pups." She tossed a ball into the air, then a second and a third. Her muscles no longer recalled the rhythms. Her mind stepped in, made the balls float in slowed motion. She kept them moving for half a minute, then fumbled one and immediately lost them all. "I am a little out of practice." She returned the balls to the display.

Memories came back. Kublin. Her dam, Skiljan. The Degnan packstead. Juggling. Flute playing. She had been very good with the flute, too. She had not picked one up since fleeing Akard for Maksche. Maybe that deserved some attention. Playing the flute had been as relaxing as flying the darkship or fleeing into the realm of ghosts.

Enough. Thought could be too painful. In this instance it reminded her that her pack remained unMourned.

She went for her treat.

There were a dozen darkships, arranged to show stages of evolution. First a quarter scale model of a darkship similar to the newest flown by the Reugge. Then another, similar yet different. The plaque said it was aluminum. There was only one more metal ship, also of aluminum, incredibly ornate.

"This one never got off the ground," Kiljar said. "The brethren created an exact copy of a famous golden-fleet darkship of the period, but it would not fly. It takes more effort to lift metal, even titanium, than it does golden-fleet wood. Even though the wood is heavier. There is power in the wood itself. It pleases those-who-dwell. With the metal ships they come only under compulsion."

"Then why use brethren darkships? Why use a vessel less effective and made by someone we do not control?"

"Because building a wooden darkship, even in its most rudimentary, functional form, is a long and difficult process. Because the brethren can produce all we want almost as fast as we want them. Consider the Reugge experience with the nomads. My sources tell me you lost six darkships in the fighting. In the old days you could not have replaced those in two generations. Generations during which other sisterhoods might have devoured you. These days when you lose a darkship you just order another. The brethren take it out of stock."

"Sometimes. If you happen to be in favor."

"That is right. They would not replace yours. That is on the agenda for the next convention. They will be required to defend that decision."

“They could refuse all the Communities.”

“The convention will sort it out.”

“If there is one.” It took a majority of sisterhoods agreeing one was needed before a convention could actually convene.

Marika moved along the line of darkships. The next was wooden, similar in style to the brethren ship that would not fly. It was a work of art, almost grotesque in its ornateness. She noted almost thronelike seats for the Mistress and bath.

The wooden darkships grew simpler and more primitive, ceased to be crossed. The last three were saddleships, also declining in complexity. The latest looked like an animal with an impossibly elongated neck. The oldest was little more than a pole with fletching at its rear.

Kiljar indicated the fanciest. “In this period silth imitated life. There was an animal called a redhage which was used as a riding beast. It has become extinct since. Saddleships of the period are stylized imitations with the neck elongated. The longer a saddleship was, the more stable it was in flight. As you can see, the oldest were stabilized the same as an arrow.”

“But an arrow spins in flight.”

“So it does. It may have been a clumsy way to travel. We do not know now for certain. The redhage type still gets taken up occasionally, though. Some of our Mistresses enjoy them. And they are much faster than anything in common use. The Mistress can lie on its neck and cut loose. The weakness of the darkship being the obvious: the Mistress is limited by her own endurance.”

“Bath are that important?”

“That important. Well? Are you satisfied?”

“I think so. I have seen what I came to see. I should get back. There is no end to the work that awaits me at Maksche.”

“Think on what I have said about the Serke, Bestrei, and learning the ways of the void. Mention it to Most Senior Gradwohl. Mention that I am interested in speaking with her.”

“I will.”

“There is, by the way, a voidship that belongs to the museum. An early one, now retired, but still far too big to bring inside. Would you like to see it?”

“Of course.”

Marika followed Kiljar out a side door, into a large courtyard. Barlog and Grauel followed alertly, shading their eyes against the sudden change in lighting, searching for signs of an ambush. Marika reached through her loophole and checked. She made a gesture telling the huntresses all was well.

She stopped cold when she saw the void darkship. Her hopes for walking among the stars almost died. Yes. There was no way she was going to challenge a Bestrei anytime in the near future. “That is a small

one, you say?" It was three times the size of the largest Reugge darkship.

"Yes. The voidships the Redoriad use today are twice this size. And the voidship we run in concert with the brethren is bigger still."

"If it is so difficult to move metal ships, how . . . ?"

"Out there those-who-dwell are much bigger, too. And much more powerful. That is one thing you would have to learn before you dared face a Bestrei. How to manipulate the stronger ghosts."

"Thank you." Marika closed in upon herself, squeezing a knot of disappointment down into a tiny sphere. "I think I had best be off for Maksche. I have let my duties slide long enough."

"Very well. Do not forget to tell Gradwohl that Kiljar of the Redoriad wishes to speak with her."

Marika did not respond. With Grauel and Barlog and her train of bath and TelleRai silth keeping pace, she strode back to the steam coach. She climbed aboard, settled into her seat, and closed in upon herself again.

This required a lot of thinking. And rethinking.

III

It was very late when Marika returned to the Reugge cloister. She dismissed her bath with a grunt instead of the usual thank-yous, went straight to her quarters. Grauel and Barlog followed and stayed near, but she did not take advantage of their unspoken offer. She went to bed immediately, exhausted from the day's flights.

She had the dream again, of whipping through a vast darkness surrounded by uncountable numbers of stars. It wakened her. She was angry, knowing it to be false. She would not walk the stars.

Asleep again, she dreamed once more. And this time the dream was a true nightmare, a littermate of the one she had had soon after fleeing the overrun Degnan packstead. But in this dream a terrible shadow hunted her. It raced across the world like something out of myth, howling, slaving, tireless, faceless, murderous. It hunted her. It would devour her. It drew closer and closer, and she could not run fast enough to get away.

This time she wakened shaken, wondering if it were a true dream. Wondering what the shadow could represent. Not Bestrei. There had been a definite male odor to it. An almost familiar odor.

Warlock! something said in the back of her mind. Certainly it was a presentiment of sorts.

The rogue problem, which had seemed close to solution, took a dramatic turn for the worse. In places, outlying cloisters were surprised and suffered severe damage. It almost seemed her return from TelleRai signaled a new and more bitter phase in the struggle, one in which the rogue leadership was willing to sacrifice whatever strength it had left.

For a month it made no sense whatever. And nothing illuminating came off the signal networks of the Serke or brethren. Then the most senior returned to Maksche, making one of her ever more infrequent and brief visits.

"Think, Marika. Do not be so provincial, so narrow. You visited the Redoriad," Gradwohl said. "There

are times you are so naive it surpasses belief. The Redoriad are in harsh competition with the Serke among the starworlds. The competition would become fiercer if there were a champion capable of challenging Bestrei. Your visit was no secret. Your strength is no secret. You have slain two of their best. It is no secret that the Reugge have no access to the void, and only slightly less well known that we covet an opportunity out there. If you were Serke, unable to see what transpired within the Redoriad cloister, had suffered several embarrassing setbacks at the paw of a Marika, what would you suspect?"

"You really believe the Redoriad want to train me?" It was a revelation, truly.

"Just as the Serke suspect."

Much of what Kiljar had said without saying it in so many words, and much of the attitude of the silth during her TelleRai excursion, became concrete with that reply. "They all thought—"

"And they were right. As you suggested, I got in touch with Kiljar. And that is exactly what she had in mind. An alliance between Reugge and Redoriad. Marika, you have to think. You have become an important factor in this world. Your every move is subject to endless interpretation."

"But an alliance . . ."

"It is not unprecedented. It makes sense on several levels. In fact, it is an obvious stratagem. So obvious that the Serke—yes, all right, and the brethren, too—must make some effort to counter or prevent it. Thus rogues who will devour your time while they hatch something more grim. Be very careful, Marika. I expect you will be spending a great deal of time in TelleRai soon. TelleRai will be far more dangerous than Maksche."

"And you?"

"I am fading away, am I not?" Gradwohl seemed amused.

"If you are trying to slip me the functions of most senior without having to rejoin the All, I want you to know that I do not want them. I have no intention of assuming that burden ever. I do not have the patience for the trivial."

"True. But patience is something you are going to have to learn anyway, pup." No one else called her "pup" these days. No one dared.

"Mistress?"

"Consider a Reugge sisterhood without a Most Senior Gradwohl. It would not much benefit you without your being in charge. Would it?"

"Mistress . . ."

"I am not immortal. Neither am I all-powerful. And there are strong elements within the sisterhood who would not scruple to hasten my replacement, if only to prevent your becoming most senior. That danger is partly why I have made myself increasingly inaccessible."

"I thought you were spending all your time with the sisters trying to build us darkships of our own."

"I have been. In a place completely isolated. My bath are the only meth outside who know where it is.

And there are times when I do not trust them to remain silent.”

The bond between Gradwohl and her bath was legendary.

Marika said, “I did get the feeling that the TelleRai council are disturbed by your lack of visibility. One sister went so far as to hint that I might have done away with you.”

“Ah?” Again Gradwohl was amused. “I should show myself, then. Lest someone get silly notions. I could adopt your approach. Go armed to the jaw.”

Now Marika was amused. “They would accuse me of having acquired an unholy influence over you.”

“They do that already.” Gradwohl rose, went to a window, slipped a curtain aside. It was getting dark. Marika could see one of the smaller moons past the most senior’s shoulder. “I believe it is time, “ Gradwohl mused. “Yes. Definitely. It is time. Come with me, pup.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my darkship manufactory.”

Marika followed the most senior through the cloister, to the courtyard where the darkships landed. She felt uneasy. Grauel and Barlog were not with her.

Gradwohl’s bath were waiting. Her darkship was ready for flight. Marika’s uneasiness grew. Now it surrounded the most senior. Gradwohl had made this project her own. Her revealing it implied that she feared she might not be around much longer.

Had she had an intuition? Sometimes silth of high talent caught flashes of tomorrow.

Gradwohl said, “We are doing this on the sly, pup. No one is to know we are leaving the cloister. They may wonder why we do not appear for ceremonies, but I do not think our failure will make anyone suspicious. If we hurry. Come. Step aboard.”

“I could use a coat.”

“I will stay low. If the wind is too much for you, I will slow down.”

“Yes, mistress.”

In moments they were airborne, over the wall, heading across the snowbound plain.

Gradwohl became another person while flying, a Mistress of immense vigor and joy. She flew with the verve of a Marika at her wildest, shoving the darkship through the night at the greatest speed she dared. The countryside whipped away below, much of it speckled silvery with patches of snow-reflected moonlight.

The flight covered three hundred miles by Marika’s estimate. She had the cold shakes when they arrived at their destination. She had not yielded to weakness and touched the most senior with a request that she slacken the pace.

Gradwohl’s goal proved to be an abandoned packfast well north of the permanent snowline, far to the

west, on the edge of Reugge territory. Even from quite close it appeared empty of life. Marika could detect no meth presence with her touch. She could smell no smoke.

But thirty sisters turned out for the most senior's arrival. Marika recognized none of them. None were from Maksche. Too, some wore the garb of other Communities, all minor orders like the Reugge. She was surprised.

She said nothing, but Gradwohl read her easily enough. "Yes. We do have allies." Amused, "You have been my chosen, but there is much that I have not told you. Come. Let me show you the progress we have made here."

They went down deep into the guts of the old fortress, to a level that had been dug out after its abandonment, to a vast open area lighted electrically. Scattered about were the frames of a score of partially assembled darkships.

"They are wooden!" Marika exclaimed. "I thought—"

"We discovered that while sisters could extract titanium as you suggested, the process was slow and difficult. With modern woodworking machinery, we could produce a wooden darkship faster. Not elegant ships like those of the high period before the brethren introduced their imitations, but functional and just as useful as anything they produce. Over here are the four craft we have completed so far. We are learning all the time. Using assembly-line techniques, we expect to produce a new ship each week once we are into production. That means that soon no sisterhood will be dependent upon the brethren for darkships. We expect to produce a large reserve before circumstances force us to reveal ourselves. Come over here."

Gradwohl led Marika to a large area separate from the remainder. It was empty except for a complex series of frameworks. "What is this?" Marika asked.

"This is where we will build our voidship. Our Reugge voidship."

"A wooden one?"

"Why not?"

"No reason, I guess."

"None whatsoever. And it would not be a first. Over here. Not exactly a darkship, but something I had put together for you. I thought it might prove useful."

"A saddleship."

"Yes."

"It is gorgeous, mistress."

"Thank you. I thought you would appreciate it. Want to try it?"

"Oh, yes."

"I thought you might take it back to Maksche."

“But mistress . . .”

“I will follow you in case you have trouble managing it. It is not difficult, though. I learned in minutes. You just have to get used to not having bath backing you.”

“How do we get it out of here?”

“It disassembles. All these ships come apart into modules. We thought it would be useful to be able to take them inside, where they would be safer.”

Marika thought of the brethren’s airships and nodded. “Yes. All right. Let us do it.”

Half an hour later she was riding the wooden steed through the night a thousand feet up, racing the north wind toward Maksche. She found the saddleship far more maneuverable and speedy than the conventional darkship, though more tiring.

The experience filled her with elation. Gradwohl had to press her to take the saddleship down before the cloister began rising for the day. The most senior wanted her to keep its existence secret. “Use it only when you are certain you will not be seen. It is for emergencies. For times when you have to go somewhere swiftly and secretly. Which I will be talking to you about more later.”

Chapter Twenty-five

I

Most Senior Gradwohl’s “later” came just two weeks after she gifted Marika with the saddleship.

Those two weeks saw rogue pressure rise markedly. Marika sent three hundred prisoners to the Reugge mines. The sisters responsible for managing them protested they could feed no more, had work for no more. And still the rogue movement found villains willing to risk silth wrath.

They came from everywhere, and though few recalled how they had come to Reugge territory, it was obvious they had been transported. They spoke openly, almost bragging, of the great wehrlen who was their champion. But Marika could learn nothing about him. Could not even gain concrete evidence of his existence as more than a legend being used to motivate the criminals.

The rogues succeeded in killing a number of silth. They overran one small, remote cloister and slaughtered everyone within. Marika was distressed. She could not understand how those attackers could have been so successful. Unless they had been led by this wehrlen himself.

The rogues were active elsewhere, too, for the first time, though to a lesser degree. But whomever they struck, wherever, friends of the Reugge Community were hurt.

Even the Redoriad suffered.

There was one assassination right in TelleRai.

The Serke hardly pretended noninvolvement anymore. Marika intercepted a message in which a rumor was quoted. It claimed a senior sister of the Serke had said in public that anyone who stood with the Reugge could expect to suffer as much as did they.

Marika remained baffled by the Serke determination. And angry. She had to ask Grauel to keep

reminding her to control her temper. At one point she nearly flew off on a one-meth mission to destroy a Serke cloister in retaliation.

Two weeks after receiving her saddleship, she began to get less sleep.

Gradwohl visited her. She was direct. "I have spoken with Kiljar, Marika. An arrangement has been made. Each third night you will fly to TelleRai, directly to the Redoriad cloister, where you will meet Kiljar. Your first few visits will be devoted to teaching you to pass as a Redoriad sister. When she is satisfied that you can do that, you will be introduced to the voidships."

Marika had seen it coming. Her furtive late night flights aboard her saddleship, which she could assemble and slip out the largest window of her quarters, had shown her it was capable of velocities far beyond those of a standard darkship. If she used the saddle straps, and lay out upon the saddleship's neck, and bundled herself against the chill of passing air, she could reach TelleRai in two hours. Obviously, the most senior had had something in mind when she had the saddleship built.

"To the world's eye you will remain here, pursuing your normal routine. Only the most reliable silth on either end will be aware of what is happening. We hope the Serke and brethren will be lulled."

"I do not believe they will be, mistress. That is, they may not see what we are doing, but they already see the possibility. Otherwise they would not have resumed pressing so hard."

"That will come up at the convention. The Serke are trying to avoid one, but they will not be able to stall for long. They have made themselves immensely unpopular. Their behavior is no longer a matter of strictly parochial interest."

Marika went into TelleRai that night undetected, and joined Kiljar in her private quarters. She discovered that the Redoriad seniors lived very well, indeed. She did not learn much else that trip, except that she had limits. She barely had the strength to keep the saddleship aloft long enough to return to Maksche. She slept half the following day.

She returned to her work groggy of mind and aching in her joints. That she did not understand, for there had been nothing physical in her night.

The experience repeated itself each time Marika flew south, though each trip became easier. Developing endurance for flying was easier than developing it for running.

She had let her morning gym sessions lapse once Dorteka was no longer there to press her. She resumed those now.

Grael caught on during Marika's third absence. Marika returned to her quarters to find her packmates awake and waiting. They eyed the saddleship without surprise. Marika disassembled it and concealed the sections. Still they said nothing.

"Does anyone else know? Or guess?" Marika asked.

"No," Grael replied. "Even we do not know anything certain. It just seemed strange that you should be so tired each third day. Each time you looked like you had not had much sleep."

“I should learn to bar my door.”

“That might be wise. Or you might have someone guard it from within. If there was anyone you could trust to do so.”

Marika considered the huntresses. “I suppose I do owe you an explanation. Though the most senior would not approve.”

Grael and Barlog waited.

“I have been flying down to TelleRai. To train with the Redoriad silth. As soon as I can pass as a Redoriad sister I will begin learning the ways of their voidships.”

“It is what you wanted,” Barlog said.

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am still a Ponath huntress at heart, Marika. Still Degnan. I was too old when I came to the silth. All this flying, this feuding, this witchcraft, this conspiring and maneuvering, they are foreign to me. I am as frightened now as I was when we arrived at Akard. I would as soon be back at the packstead, for all the wonders I have seen.”

“I know. But we have been touched by the All. The three of us. We have no choice of our own.”

“Touched how?” Grael asked. “There are mornings when I rise wondering if it might not have been better had the nomads taken us all at the beginning.”

“Why?”

“Things are happening, Marika. The world is changing. Too much of that change centers upon you, and you never seem fully aware of it. There are times when I believe those sisters who feared you as a Jiana sensed a truth.”

“Grael! Don’t go superstitious on me.”

“We will stand by you as long as we survive, Marika. We have no choice. But do not expect us to give unquestioning approval to everything you do.”

“All right. Accepted. I never expected that. Did anything interesting happen while I was away?”

“It was a quiet night. I suspect you were right when you predicted the rogues would give up on Maksche. You’d better rest now. If you still plan to go flying with Bagnel this afternoon.”

“I forgot all about that.”

“You want to cancel?”

“No. I see him so seldom as it is.”

Despite all else, she maintained her relationship with Bagnel. He maintained his end as well, despite hints that it was no longer fashionable with his superiors. He was, she felt, her one true friend. More so than

Braydic, for he asked only that she be his friend in return. He stayed as close as Grauel and Barlog, in his way, without being compelled by their sense of obligation.

“Yes. Definitely. I’ll be going. I wish I could show him the saddleship. Maybe someday. Waken me when it’s time.”

Thenceforth Grauel and Barlog watched her quarters while she was away.

II

Marika had just come to the end of her seventh visit. She asked, “How much longer do you think, mistress? I am getting impatient.”

“I know. Gradwohl warned me you would be. Next time we will go aloft. The Mistress of the Ship and her bath will be preoccupied with the ascent. They should not notice your peculiarities. What they do note can be explained by telling them that you are from the wilderness. We will pass you off as a junior relative of mine. I come from a rural background myself, though I went into cloister younger than you did. We Redoriad keep a better watch on our dependents.”

“Three days, then.”

“No. Five this time. And find a reason for being out of sight longer. We will not be able to make an ascent and return in time to get you home in one night.”

“That may be difficult. Maksche keeps a close eye on Marika.”

“If you do not appear I will know that you were unable to make the arrangements.”

“I will manage it. One way or another.”

She did so by feigning ill health. She began three days early, pretending increasing discomfort. Grauel and Barlog aided in the deception. She received offers of help from the healer sisters, of course, but she put them off. Before departing, she told Grauel, “They will want to treat me when you tell them I am not feeling well enough to come out. If only so they can report my condition to my enemies. Stall them. I expect to be tired enough to look thoroughly ill when I get back. We can let them at me then. I’ll make a swift recovery.”

“Be careful, Marika.” Grauel was both in awe and dread of what Marika was about to do. “Come back.”

“It isn’t that dangerous, Grauel.” But, of course, she could not convince the huntress of that. Grauel was only a few years past not even being able to imagine walking among the stars.

Marika began assembling her saddleship, eager to be airborne, eager to be free of her mundane duties, eager to mount the voidship, and more than a little frightened. Her insides were tight with anticipation.

“This coming and going . . .” Grauel started, then tailed off.

“Yes?”

“I think some of the sisters are suspicious. You move at night, but the night is the time of the silth. Even at night there are eyes to see strange things moving above Maksche’s towers. There has been talk about

strange visions in the moonlight. Whenever strange things happen they somehow become attached to the name Marika, despite the evidence. Or lack of it. I may not be able to keep the sisters from entering if—”

“You may go to any extreme but violence. This has to be kept quiet as long as possible. A leak could bring both the Reugge and Redoriad into direct confrontation with the Serke. That would mean the end of us.”

“I understand.”

Marika finished assembling the saddleship. She bestrode it, strapped herself into a harness she had modified, lay down behind the windscreen she had installed. Windscreen and harness adaptations made it possible to fly at great speeds.

She reached for ghosts. The saddleship lifted and drifted through the window, brushing its stone frame. She glanced back once to wave to Grauel, and saw Barlog come rushing into her apartment. What did she want?

No matter. Nothing could be more important than tonight’s flight.

She set her ghosts to work with a vengeance, raced away.

She thought she heard a far voice call her name, but decided it was just a trick of the air rushing around the windscreen.

Snow-splattered earth whipped past below.

III

Softly, Kiljar said, “Just stand there on the axis, the same as any passenger on any darkship.”

“Will we get cold?” Marika asked question after question, all of which she had asked before and had had answered. She was too nervous to control her tongue. She recalled Grauel or Barlog telling her, long ago, that she betrayed her fear because she talked too much when she was frightened. She tried to clamp down.

The senior bath left the Mistress of the Ship and came to Marika and Kiljar carrying a pot like a miniature of the daram cauldron that stood inside the doorway to the grand ceremonial hall at Maksche. She held it out to Kiljar. The Redoriad took it and drank. The bath then offered it to Marika, who sipped till Kiljar said, “That is enough.”

“It tastes like daram, but it is not as thick.”

“There is essence of daram in it. Several other drugs as well. They make it possible for the Mistress to draw fully upon everyone aboard. You will see.”

A feeling of peace crept over Marika, a feeling of oneness with the All. She turned into herself, went down through her loophole, watched as the Mistress gathered ghosts and drew upon her bath. The giant cross lifted slowly. Marika sensed the strain required to elevate so massive a darkship. She was tempted to help, overcame that temptation. Kiljar had admonished her repeatedly against doing anything but remaining an observer. There would be ample opportunity for participation later. First she had to experience being separated from her birth world, to explore a new realm of those-who-dwell.

The darkship rose straight toward Biter, which stood at zenith, glowing down from his pockmarked face. Higher and higher. For a time Marika did not realize how high, for there was no change in temperature nor of the rarity of the air she breathed.

Then she could see all TelleRai spread below her. She had flown very high aboard her saddleship, but never so high that she could see all the city and its satellites in their entirety. The satellites lay scattered over hundreds of square miles. To the west, clouds were moving in, rolling over the islands of light.

The Mistress of the Ship was surrounded by a golden glow. Turning, Marika saw that the same glow surrounded each of the bath. It was not intense, but it was there. She could detect nothing around Kiljar or herself.

She started to ask a question.

Touch, Kiljar sent. Use nothing but the touch.

Yes. The glow. What is it?

The screen that restrains the void. What some sisters call the Breath of the All.

We are surrounded, too?

We are. Watch now. Soon you will begin to see the horizon curve. Soon you will see the moonlight shining off the snow in the north. No. Not tonight. It is snowing there again. Off the backs of the clouds, then.

It is a rare night when it is not snowing north of Maksche, mistress. The darkship was gaining velocity rapidly. What is that glow along the horizon? The horizon had developed a definite bow.

Sunlight in the atmosphere and dust cloud.

Marika lost herself in growing awe. She could see almost all the moons. More than she had seen at one time before. She could discern a score of the satellites put up by the brethren and dark-faring sisterhoods. They were brilliant dots moving against the darkness.

What is that? She indicated a bright object rising from the glow along the edge of the world. It was too small to be a moon, yet larger than any satellite.

The Serke-brethren voidship Starstalker. Just in from the dark this week. We will pass near it. By design. The Redoriad ship is out, but Starstalker is similar.

Won't they . . . ?

Be upset? Perhaps. But they have no basis for a protest. We can look. Inside Biter orbit is convention space.

Marika glanced back at the world—and was startled. The Mistress had reoriented the voidship. The planet was down no longer. The darkship was moving very fast now.

She was in the void. If the glow she could not see failed her, she would die quicker than the thought.

All sense of motion vanished, yet the world continued to grow more curved. The bright spark of the voidship Starstalker drew closer, though the ship upon which Marika stood seemed at rest.

She looked upon the naked universe, sparkingly bright, clearer than ever she had seen it from the surface, and surrendered to awe.

Kiljar touched her. Over there. The darkness where there are almost no stars at all. That is the heart of the dust cloud. The direction our sun and world are traveling. It will become more dense before it clears. It will be five thousand years before we finish passing through.

That is a long winter.

Yes. We are getting close to the voidship. Do nothing to attract attention to yourself. They will be displeased enough as it is.

The darkship turned till its long arm indicated a piece of sky ahead of the swelling voidship. It began to move, though Marika could tell only because the voidship skewed against the fixed stars. As they approached the shining object, she detected lesser brightnesses moving around it. Closer still. The voidship resolved into something more than a bright glow. Looking over her shoulder, Marika saw that the sun had risen above the edge of the world. The world itself, where it was daytime, was extremely bright—especially at the upper and lower ends of the arc of illumination. The snowfields, she supposed. The cloud cover looked heavier than in any photograph she had seen. A quick query to Kiljar, though, told her that it was a phenomenon of the moment.

It was impossible to discern the shapes of continents and islands. This world looked like no globe she had seen.

Turning to Starstalker, she found that the voidship had swollen into an egg shape. The surrounding sparks had become smaller ships. They looked like none she had seen before. Two were moving away, one of them well ahead of the other. Two were moving in. Another waited idly, matching orbit. Several were nosed up to the voidship like bloodsucking insects. Marika asked no questions for fear her touch would leak over and be detected.

But Kiljar looked as puzzled as was she. Marika felt a leak-over as she touched the Mistress of the Ship. Their approach slowed. Then the Redoriad darkship began to turn away. Marika looked at the Redoriad with her question plain upon her face.

Something is happening here that should not be, Kiljar sent. Those little ships are like nothing I have ever seen, and I have been in space for three decades. They may be in violation of the conventions. Oh-oh. They have noticed us.

Marika felt the questioning touch, felt it recoil in surprise, alarmed because the darkship was not Serke.

The touch returned. Stop. Come here immediately.

Kiljar waved at the Mistress of the Ship. Starstalker began to dwindle.

A spear of fire ripped through the great night, coming from one of the small ships. It touched nothing. Marika had no idea what it was, but felt the deadliness of it. So did the Mistress. She commenced a turn to her left and dove toward the planet.

What is happening? Marika asked.

I do not know. Do not distract me. I am trying to touch the cloister. They must know about this in case we do not survive.

Fright stole into Marika's throat. She stared back at the dwindling voidship. Another spear of light reached for the Redoriad darkship, came no closer than the last. The Mistress skewed around and took the darkship another direction, like a huntress dodging rifle fire.

Flames bloomed around one end of one of the small ships attendant upon Starstalker. It came after the darkship, its lance of light probing the darkness repeatedly. Behind it another such ship blossomed flame and joined the chase.

Marika nearly panicked. She hadn't the slightest notion of what was happening, except that it was obvious someone wanted to kill them. For no apparent reason.

Another spear of fire. And this one grazed the pommel end of the dagger that was the darkship. A silent scream filled Marika's head. The rear bath drifted away, tumbling. She disappeared in the great night, her glow gone.

Kiljar ran along the titanium beam to the spot where the bath had stood. And in her mind, Marika felt, Use that vaunted talent for the dark side, Reugge. Use it!

Marika had begun to get a grip on herself. Down through her loophole she went—and froze, awed.

They were huge out here! Not nearly so numerous as down below, but more vast even than the monsters she sometimes detected above while flying high in the chill upon her saddleship. Bigger than imagination.

Another beam snapped through the dark. The Mistress of the Ship was in the shadow of the planet now, trying to hide as she would from another darkship. But her maneuver proved more liability than asset. The pursuers had vanished into the darkness, too, but seemed able to locate the darkship, and had the muscle to keep after it.

A thousand questions plagued Marika. She shoved them aside. They had to wait. She had to survive before she dared ask them.

She grabbed the nearest ghost. She felt a definite, startled response to her seizure. Then she had it under control and began searching for a target.

A flare from one of the pursuing ships gave her that. She hurled the ghost, marveled at the swift cold way it dispatched the tradermales inside the ship.

Tradermales. That ship was crewed entirely by brethren. It was wholly a machine. Rage filled Marika. She clung to its fire and hurled her ghost toward another flare. Again brethren died.

All the ships around Starstalker were in the chase now, strung out in a long arc back around the planet's horizon. Only one more seemed to be close enough to reach the darkship with its deadly spear of light. Marika hurled her ghost again.

This time, after she finished its crew, she lingered over the ship's interior. Within minutes she understood

its principles.

She explored its drive system. Brute force supplied by what Bagnel called rocket engines. She used her ghost, compressed to a point, to drill holes in a liquid-oxygen tank, then into another that carried a liquid she did not recognize, but which seemed to be a petroleum derivative.

The rear of the ship exploded.

She did the same to the other two vessels, though the last was difficult, for it was far away. She might die here in the realm of her dreams tonight, but she would make of it an expensive victory for the brethren.

She ducked back into reality to find the planet expanding below and the darkship headed back in a direction opposite that it had been flying when she went down. High above there were flares as brethren ships changed course. Was that good enough, mistress? she asked Kiljar.

More than adequate. A terrible awe informed the Redoriad's thought. Now let us get down and start raising a stink.

IV

It was not that easy. The tradermales came down after them. They plunged into atmosphere far faster than the Mistress of the Ship dared do. Spears of light ripped past the falling cross. But it fluttered and swayed in the wisps of air, making a difficult target.

Marika went back through her loophole and destroyed another two brethren ships. These proved more difficult. The tradermales were prepared for silth attack, and were very good flyers.

Nevertheless, she took them, blew them, and fragments of them raced past the darkship, beginning to glow.

Then she sensed something coming up from below. Several somethings, in fact, but one something far stronger than the others, rising on a fury like that of something elemental.

She slipped back into reality, saw that the darkship was over TelleRai now, at perhaps 250,000 feet. Kiljar. Darkships are coming up. At least five of them.

I know. I completed touch. The cloister is sending everyone able to come.

But it was not a Redoriad voidship that appeared moments later, shoved past, dropped like a stone, and matched fall. It bore Serke witch signs.

Marika tried to make herself small. She did not have to be told who was riding the tip of that dagger. The power of the silth reeked through the night.

Bestrei.

Bestrei, who was the destiny Gradwohl had determined for her. Bestrei, who could eat her alive right now. Bestrei, who made her feel tiny, vulnerable, without significance.

The darkship continued to fall.

Marika felt a leak of touch as something passed between Kiljar and the champion of the Serke. She was

unable to read it. The ship fell, and she unslung her rifle, feeling foolish, doubting she could hit anything in her unsettled state, aware recoil might throw her off the darkship.

Another darkship materialized, coming out of the night below, not so much rising as not falling as fast till Bestrei and the Redoriad darkship caught up. It slid beneath the other darkships and took station on Bestrei's far side. Marika could not make out its witch signs, but felt it was friendly. Then another slid out of the deeps of night and fell in behind Bestrei.

Marika sensed the tension slipping away. Below, the clouds began to have a touch of glow as the lights of TelleRai illuminated them from beneath. She guessed they were below one hundred thousand feet now, falling fast, but not as fast as before. The witch signs aboard her ship had begun to wobble as though in the passage of a high wind. At that altitude the air had be extremely rare, so the ship had to have a great deal of velocity left.

She leaned back to stare at the night above. Starstalker had passed beyond the horizon. The surviving brethren ships had gone with it. No more danger there.

Another Redoriad darkship had appeared, was on station below Bestrei. And now Marika could sense at least a score more darkships in the sky, all closing slowly, trying to match their rapid fall. They had to have come from half a dozen Communities, for none of the dark-faring sisterhoods had so many unoccupied.

Bestrei's voidship surged forward, out of the pocket formed by the Redoriad, tilted, went down like a comet, outpacing everyone.

We are safe, Kiljar sent.

She did not do anything, Marika responded. Why?

Bestrei may be stupid and vain, but she has a sense of honor, Kiljar returned. She is very old-fashioned. There was nothing in what we did deserving of challenge. She was angry with those who wakened her and sent her up. I think she will cause a stir among her sisters today. They will talk her out of it, of course. They always do. But by then it will not matter. We will be long safe, and you will be on your way back to Maksche.

Puzzled, Marika made a mental note to investigate Bestrei more closely. Did she recognize me?

I think not. I did my best to distract her. It was not wise of you to start waving a rifle. There is no known silth but Marika the Reugge who flies around armed like a vactor.

What now?

Now we return to the cloister. You rest till nightfall, then hasten home. Meanwhile, the Communities will get into a great fuss about what happened. You lie low till you hear from me. There can be no more lessons till less attention is turned toward the void. I think, after this, that the Serke will have great difficulty blocking the convening of a convention. And the brethren themselves will have some long explaining to do once that happens.

We must find out why they are so anxious.

Of course.

The darkship plunged into the clouds, slipped through. Another layer of clouds lay below, lighted more brightly by the city. The Mistress plunged down through it and into the night a few thousand feet above TelleRai.

The entire city was in a state of ferment. Touch scalded the air.

Chapter Twenty-six

I

Marika wakened suddenly, completely, as though by alarm, two hours before sunset. The flight into the void returned. She shuddered. So close. And that Bestrei! The sheer malignant power of the witch!

Something called her from the north. An impulse to be gone, to head home? Now? Why so intense? That was not like her.

The urge grew stronger, almost compulsive.

She completed a rapid toilet and went to her saddleship. She was eager to get back to Braydic. There would have been a great many signals today. Braydic was bound to have intercepted something that would illuminate the behavior of the Serke and brethren. There had to be some outstanding reason for their having been so touchy about having their voidship observed.

She was supposed to wait for darkness, but she could not. The compulsion had grown overwhelming. She told herself that no one would notice one tiny saddleship ripping through the dusk.

As she flitted out the window, she sent a touch seeking Kiljar. Something came back, anxious, but by then Marika had attained full speed and was rushing away north too fast for Kiljar to catch the moving target.

The region of lakes appeared and fell behind. The Topol Cordillera passed below, speckled golden and orange in the fading light. She reached the Hainlin and turned upstream. Seventy miles south of Maksche she passed over a squadron of brethren dirigibles plowing along on a westward course. Seven? Eight? What in the world? The setting sun made great orange fingers of them. Some were as big as the first airship she had ever seen. What did that mean?

Minutes later she began to suspect.

The light of the setting sun painted the westward face of a pillar of smoke that rose in a great tower far ahead, leaning slightly with the breeze, vanishing into high cloud cover. The reverse face of the pillar was almost black, so dense was the smoke. As she drew nearer, she began to pick out the fires feeding it.

Maksche. All Maksche was aflame. That could not be. How? . . .

She forced her ghosts to stretch themselves, plowed down through thicker air so swiftly it howled around her.

She roared right through the smoke, so shocked she barely maintained sense enough to stay above the taller towers. The cloister was the heart of it. The Reugge bastion had been gutted. The main fires now burned among the factories and tinderbox homes of Reugge bonds.

Meth still scampered around down there, valiantly fighting the flames. They fought in a losing cause. Back

over the cloister Marika passed, and saw scores upon scores of bodies scattered in the sooty courts, upon the blackened ramparts. She dropped lower, though the heat remained intense. The stone walls radiated like those of a kiln. She let her touch roam the remains, found nothing living.

She had not expected to find anything. Nothing could have lived through the inferno that raged down there.

Up she went, and across the city, touch-trolling, pain filling her. She hurt as she had not hurt since the day the nomads had crossed the packstead wall and left none but herself and Kublin living. And Grauel and Barlog.

Grauel! Barlog! No! She could not be alone now!

Touch could not find one silth mind.

She heard shooting as she rocketed over the tradermale enclave, certain it had had something to do with the disaster.

She went down, saw tradermale behind boxes and bales and corners of buildings firing at the gatehouse. Rifles barked back at them. Outside the gatehouse lay two dead meth in Reugge livery. Voctors. They had attacked the enclave.

She read the situation instantly. The huntresses were survivors of the holocaust. They had decided to die with honor, storming the source of their grief.

Tradermales in great numbers were closing a circle around the gatehouse. Machine guns yammered away, slowly gnawing at the structure. None of the brethren looked up.

They might not have seen her in the treacherous firelight anyway.

Marika lifted her saddleship a hundred feet, detached one large ghost, and sent it ravening while her conveyance settled toward the runway. By the time the carved legs of the wooden beast touched concrete, the male survivors were in full flight, headed for the one small dirigible cradled across the field.

Marika dismounted, sent the ghost after them. They died swiftly.

The firing from the gatehouse had ceased. Because the huntresses there were dead? Or because they had recognized her? She started that way.

A badly mauled Grauel slipped out a doorway, stood propped against the building. There was blood all over her.

Marika ran to her, threw her arms around her. "Grauel. By the All, what happened? This is insane."

Weakly, Grauel gasped into her ear, "Last night. During the night. The warlock came. With his rogues. Hundreds of them. He had a machine that neutralized the silth. He attacked the cloister. Some of us decided to break out and circle around. One of the sisters thought they had come in on tradermale dirigibles because a whole flight of airships dropped into the enclave after sunset."

"Where's Barlog?"

“Inside. She’s hurt. You’ll have to help her, Marika.”

“Go on. Tell me the rest.” She thought of that westbound squadron she had seen during her passage north. The same? Almost certainly. She had been within a few thousand feet of the warlock, that she had thought an imaginary beast.

“They destroyed the cloister. Surely you saw.”

“I saw.”

“Then they destroyed everything that belonged to the Reugge and Brown Paw Bond. The fires got out of control. I think they would have killed everyone in the city just so there would be no witnesses, but the fires drove them off. They left a couple of hours ago, just leaving the one airship load to finish up. I think they may have wanted to search the ruins after the fires died down, too.”

“Come inside. You have to rest.” Marika supported Grauel’s weight. Inside she found most of a dozen huntresses. The majority were dead. Barlog was lying on her side, a froth of blood upon her muzzle. Only one very young vactor was uninjured. She was in a state bordering on hysteria.

Bagnel lay among the casualties. He had been bound and gagged. Marika leapt toward him.

He was not dead either, though he had several bullets in him. He regained consciousness briefly as she pulled the gag from his mouth. He croaked, “ I am sorry, Marika. I did not know what was happening.”

She recalled Grauel saying the raiders had destroyed Brown Paw Bond as well as Reugge properties. “For once I believe you. You are an honorable meth, for a male. We will talk later. I have things to do.” She turned. “Grauel. You’re in charge. Get this pup settled down and have her do what she can. And, Grauel? When I get back I want to find Bagnel healthy. Do you understand?”

“Yes. What are you doing, Marika?”

“I have a score to balance. This is going to become painfully costly for those responsible.”

“You’re going after them?”

“I am.”

“Marika, there were hundreds of them. They had every sort of weapon you can imagine. And they had a machine that can keep silth from walking the dark side.”

“That is of no import, Grauel. I will destroy them anyway. Or they will destroy me. This marks the end of my patience with them. And with anyone who defends them. You tell me the one called the warlock was with them. Did you see him?”

“He was. I saw him from very far away. He did not move far from the airships. We tried very hard to shoot him, but the range was too great. He was very strong, Marika. Stronger than most silth.”

“Not stronger than I am, I am sure. He will pay. The brethren will pay. Though I be declared an outlaw, though I stand alone, this is the first day of bloodfeud between myself and them. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

“And if you’re not?”

“You do what you have to do. Sooner or later someone will come.”

“And maybe not, Marika. Before we lost the signals section, we heard that they were attacking several other cloisters as well.”

“That figures.” Where did they gather their strength? She had been killing and imprisoning them for years.

“Braydic did have some advance warning, Marika. She tried to tell us. But you flew off to TelleRai too fast.”

Marika recalled Barlog rushing into her quarters as she went out the window.

This was her fault, then. If she had waited a moment . . . Too late for regrets. It was time to give pain for pain received.

“Good-bye, Grauel.” She stalked out of the gatehouse, and shut everything behind her out of mind, out of her life. Bloodfeud. There was nothing but the bloodfeud. From this moment till death. A short time, perhaps.

An entire squadron of dirigibles. How did one go about destroying them? Especially when they had some device capable of rendering a silth’s talent impotent?

Worry about that in its time. First she had to find them again. She strapped herself on to her saddleship and rose into the night, raced to the southwest, cutting a course that would cross that last seen being made by the dirigibles.

II

Marika did not spare herself. In less than an hour she found the squadron, still doggedly flying westward, chasing the vanished sun. The ships were down low, hugging a barren landscape. They did not want to be seen.

She hung above them a few minutes, way up in the rare air. She was tempted to strike then, but desisted. She even refrained from probing, certain the wehrlen would detect her. Then she found her appropriate idea.

They had attacked silth using a device that stole the silth talent. She would requite them in similar coin.

Maps slipped through her mind. Yes. A major, remote brethren enclave lay nearly two hundred miles ahead. Their destination? Probably. There were no neighbors to witness what villainy was being launched from the enclave. She headed there as swiftly as she could, dropping to treetop level as she approached, flying slower because of the denser air and reduced visibility.

She hedgehopped because she was not sure her saddleship would be invisible to tradermale radar. What she had learned from Bagnel suggested she would not be seen, but now was no time to make such bets. Now she wanted to play the longer odds her own way.

She supposed she was an hour ahead of the dirigibles when she reached the edge of the enclave. There were hundreds of lights burning there, lots of activity. Yes. The base expected the raiders. Doubtless it had been the staging ground for all the attacks. The sheer number of males suggested something of vast proportion being managed from there. There were thousands of males. And the enclave bristled with

weaponry. Whole squadrons of fighting aircraft sat upon the runway. Half a dozen dirigibles rested in the enclave's cradles, and there were cradles enough to take another score.

She gave herself ten minutes to rest, then she ducked through her loophole. Her anger was such that she wanted to go ravening among these brethren, killing all she could, but she did not yield to the red rage. She scouted instead, and was astounded by the magnitude of what she had found.

She did not let numbers intimidate her.

Once she was certain she knew where everything lay, she came back, checked the time, went out, and collected the most awesome monster of a ghost she could reach. She took it to the trademale communications center.

It took her ten seconds to wreck the center and slay the technicians there. Then she drove the ghost to a workshop stocking instruments she suspected of being the devices the trademales used to neutralize the silth. They resembled the box she had destroyed during the first confrontation on the airstrip at the Maksche enclave.

She wrecked them all, then scooted around the base, ruining anything that resembled them.

Only when that was done did she allow herself to go mad, to begin the killing.

There were so many of them that it took her half an hour. But when she finished there was not one live male inside the enclave. Hundreds had escaped, after panicking in typical male fashion. By now they were well on their ways to wherever they were trying to run. She did not expect them back.

She came back to her flesh, checked the time again. The dirigibles should arrive soon. Maybe fifteen minutes. By now they should be alert because they could make no radio contact.

She wanted to rest, to bring herself down from the nerve-wrecking high of the bloodletting, but she had no time. She trotted forward, catching a ghost once more and using it to slice a hole through the metal fence surrounding the enclave. She slipped through and raced toward the combat aircraft.

Every one was fully fueled and armed. The Stings even carried rockets. The males had been ready. Ready for anything but her. She examined several aircraft quickly, as Bagnel had taught her, and selected the one that looked soundest. Into it she climbed.

It was a well-maintained ship. Its starter turned over, and its engine caught immediately. She warmed it as Bagnel had taught her, a part of her blackly amused that one of the brethren had taught her to use the one weapon that would be effective for what she planned.

Eight minutes, roughly. They should be in sight soon. She jumped out of the aircraft, kicked the chocks away, piled back inside, harnessed herself, closed the canopy, and shoved forward on the throttle. Down the runway she rolled, and whipped upward into the night, without moonlight to help or hinder. Night was the time of the silth.

This would be a surprise for them. They seldom flew by night. Too dangerous. But they did not have the silth senses she did. Except for one.

Up. Up. Eight thousand feet. Where were they? They were showing no running lights. She caught a ghost, took it hunting.

There. The dirigibles were several minutes behind the schedule she had estimated. They were running more slowly than before. Perhaps they were concerned about the enclave's lack of response.

Down. Full throttle. Bagnel said you should fight at full throttle, though no one he knew ever had been in actual aerial combat. The brethren pilots skirmished with themselves, practicing.

She found the safeties for the guns and rockets. She was not quite sure what she was doing with those. Bagnel had not let her fire weapons.

A dark sausage shape appeared suddenly. She yanked back on the stick as she touched the firing button. Tracers reached, stitched the bag, rose above it. She barely avoided a collision.

Back on the throttle. Lesser speed and turn. At the speed she had been making there was no time to spot and maneuver.

Up and over in a loop. Grab a ghost during the maneuver. Use it to pick a target. Close in. Tracers reaching as she ran in from behind, along the airship's length, the belly of the Sting nearly touching it.

Still too fast. And doing no special damage.

She sideslipped between two dirigibles and came up from below, firing into a gondola, felt the pain of males hit, saw the flash of weapons as a few small arms fired back. Could they see her at all?

She felt the brush of one of the talent suppressors. For an instant it seemed half her mind had been turned off. But it did not bother her as much as she expected.

In the early days, at Akard, she had somehow learned to get around the worst effects of proximity to electromagnetic energies. This was something of the sort, and something inside her responded, pushing its worst effects away.

She turned away, found a ghost as soon as she could, reached in to study the airships more closely. This was not quite the same as seeing drawings in books.

She slammed the throttle forward and went after the airship out front.

Which ship carried the warlock? Would he respond to her attack?

She came in from the flank and fired a rocket. It drove well into the gasbag before blowing its warhead. Deeply enough to pass through the outer protective helium bag and reach the bigger hydrogen bag inside.

The brethren used hydrogen only when they wanted to move especially heavy cargoes. For this raid they had used hydrogen aboard all the airships, inside, where Reugge small arms could not penetrate.

She rolled under the dirigible as it exploded. The Sting was buffeted by the explosion. She fought for control, regained it, climbed, turned upon the rest of the squadron. She glanced over her shoulder, watched the airship burn and fall, meth with fur aflame leaping from its gondola.

"One gone," she said aloud, and found herself another ghost. She used it to spot another target.

This time the neutralizing weapon met her squarely. Its effect was like a blow from a fist. Yet she gasped,

shook its worst effects, fired a rocket, climbed away. Small arms hammered the night. The very air was filled with panic. She came around and swept through the squadron, firing her guns, felt them firing back without regard for where their bullets might be going.

Back again. And again. And again. Till the Sting's munitions were exhausted. Five of the airships went toward the ground, four of them in flames, the fifth with gasbags so riddled it could no longer balance the leaks.

Now she was at risk. If she wished to continue attacking, she would have to go take another aircraft. If they came after her . . .

But they did not. Their vaunted warlock seemed as panicked as the rest. The survivors shifted course.

Marika put the Sting down fast and hard. She threw herself out of the cockpit even before it stopped rolling, hit the concrete running, and picked a second aircraft. In ten minutes she was aloft again, pursuing the remnants of the airship squadron.

One after another she sent them down and continued to attack till each had burned. She went back for the one that had descended for lack of lift, used her last two rockets to fire it.

Where was the warlock? Why did he not fight back? Was he staying low, sacrificing everything, because he knew the certain destruction he faced if he gave himself away? Or had he been killed early?

She returned to the enclave. And this time when she crawled into a cockpit, she went to sleep.

She did not have much left. They could have taken her then, easily.

She wakened before dawn, startled alert. Someone was nearby. She reached for a ghost rather than raise her head and betray herself.

Some of the males from the airships had found their way to the base. They were standing around stunned, unable to believe what had happened.

Marika's anger remained searing hot. Not enough blood had been spilled to quench the flames. She took them, adding them to the hundreds of corpses already littering the enclave. Then she started the Sting and went aloft, and in the light of dawn examined the wreckage of the dirigibles she had downed. She could not believe she had managed so much destruction.

She strafed survivors wherever she found them, like a pup torturing a crippled animal. She could have slaughtered them with her talent easily, but she was so filled with hatred that she took more pleasure in giving them a slow, taunting death, letting them run and run and run till she tracked them down.

But by midday that had lost its zest. She returned to the enclave and settled into a more systematic, businesslike revenge. After spending a few hours demolishing the base, she went to her saddleship and resumed hunting survivors again.

The brethren and rogues would not soon forget the cost of their treachery.

She wondered if she ought not to try taking a few prisoners. Questions really ought to be asked about the fate of the wehrlen. If he had existed at all, his survival might well keep the rogue movement alive despite her fury.

Toward sundown she suffered a horrible shock.

She was circling above woods where a dirigible had gone down, and . . . two things happened at once. She detected a small force of dirigibles approaching the enclave from the north, which fired her hatred anew, while below her she detected a moving meth spark that was all too familiar.

Kublin!

III

Kublin. More killer airships. Which way to throw herself?

Those airships would not be able to flee fast enough to escape her. She could catch them later. Kublin might vanish into the forest.

Down she went, among the trees, pushing through branches till her saddleship rode inches off the ground. She stalked him carefully, for he seemed quite aware that he was being hunted. He moved fast and quiet, with the skill of a huntress. Once, when she drew close, he sent a burst of automatic weapons fire so close one bullet nicked the neck of her saddleship.

Kublin. The treasured littermate for whom she had risked everything. Here. With the killers of her cloister.

Even now she did not want to harm him, though she remained possessed of a virulent hatred. She seized a small, feeble ghost and went hunting him, found him, struck quickly, and touched him lightly.

He brushed the ghost aside and threw a stronger back at her, almost knocking her off her saddle.

What?

Wehrlen!

Kublin?

Another blow as ferocious as the last. Yes. It could not be denied.

She dodged his blows and collected a stronger ghost, struck hard enough to knock him down. He struggled to fight off the effects.

He did have the talent, though he was no stronger than a weak sister.

In a way, it made sense. They were of the same litter, the same antecedents. He had shown a feel for the talent as a pup, a strong interest in her own early unfoldings of silth talents.

She grounded the saddleship, rushed him before he could recover, hit him physically several times, then slowly, forcibly, nullified his talent, reaching inside to depress that center of the brain where the talent lived.

Her attack left him too groggy to answer questions.

She sat down and waited, studying the uniform he wore.

She had seen its like several times before. The rogues wore uniforms occasionally. She had examined enough prisoners to have learned their uniform insignia.

Either Kublin had adopted insignia not properly his or he was very important among the rogues. Very important, indeed. If his insignia could be believed, he was a member of their ruling council.

She should have killed him in the Ponath. Before she asked the first question, she had the dark feeling the Maksche raid would not have occurred had she finished him there.

She ached inside. He was still Kublin, her littermate, with whom she had shared so much as a pup. He was the only meth for whom she had ever felt any love.

He recovered slowly, sat up weakly, shook the fuzziness from his mind, felt around for his weapon. Marika had thrown it into the brush. He seemed puzzled because it was not there beside him. Then his glance chanced upon Marika, sitting there with her own rifle trained upon him.

He froze. In mind and body.

“Yes. Me again. I did all that last night. And I have just begun. When I have finished, the brethren and rogues will be as desolate as Maksche. And you are going to help me destroy them.”

Fear obliterated Kublins’s defiance. He never did have much courage.

“How does a coward rise so high among fighters, Kublin? Ah. But of course. You rogues and brethren are all cowards. Slabbers in the back. Friends by day and murderers by night. But the night is the time of the silth.

“No! I do not want to hear your rationale, Kublin. I have heard it all before. I have been feeding on rogues for years. I am the Marika who has taken so many of your accomplices that we no longer have room for laborers in the Reugge mines. You know what I am doing with them now? Selling them to the Treiche. They have a hard time maintaining an adequate work force in their sulfur pits. The fumes. They use up workers quickly. I do not think it will be long before the Treiche have all the methpower they can handle.”

“Stinking witch,” he muttered, without force.

“Yes. I am. Also an enraged, bloodthirsty witch. So enraged I will destroy you brethren and your proxies, the rogues and this warlock, even if I die in the process. Now it is time for you to sleep. I have more airships to destroy. Later, I will return and ask you about this great warlock, this great cowardly murderer who animates you rogues so.”

He gave her an odd look.

She continued, “This is the base from which the whole filthy thing was launched. It is fitting that the villains die here. I will wait here and slaughter your accomplices as they return.” She snagged a ghost and touched him, left him in a coma.

She slew the crews of two airships. The others drove her off with the talent suppressors. She had made a mistake, destroying everything at the enclave. The Sting remained the best weapon against airships.

Later, she decided. She would find more fighting aircraft somewhere else.

The madness had begun to pass. She could not get her whole heart into the fight. It was time to move on. Time to take Kublin in and drain him of knowledge. Time to find the most senior and join her in assessing the damage to the Reugge Community.

Time to rest, to eat, to recover. She was little stronger than a young pup.

She returned to Kublin.

He had wakened and gnawed at his wrists in an effort to kill himself. Her touch had left him too groggy to succeed. She was astonished that he had had the will and nerve to try. This was her cowardly Kublin? Maybe his courage was selective.

She bandaged him with strips torn from his clothing, then threw him across the neck of her saddleship. She clambered aboard, called up ghosts, rose from the woods. Airships quartered the wind to the west, searching for those who had destroyed the enclave and attacked them. She bared her teeth in bitter amusement. Never would they believe that all that damage had been done by a single outraged silth.

“Have to be more careful next time,” she mused. “The time after that for sure. They will be ready for any kind of trouble then.”

As the saddleship limped eastward, slow and unstable with Kublin aboard, she fantasized about the Tovand, the main brethren enclave in TelleRai. A major strike there would make a dramatic statement. One that could not be misinterpreted. She imagined herself penetrating its halls by night, stalking them like death itself, leaving a trail of corpses for the survivors to find come sunup. Surely that would be something to make the villains think.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I

Marika's passage eastward was a slow one. The extra burden of her littermate added geometrically to her labor. And she had been expending her reserves for days.

Each fifty miles she descended for an hour of rest. One by one, the moons rose. She considered Biter and Chaser and a point that might be the Serke voidship Starstalker. The weather seemed better lately. Did clear skies signal a change for the better? Or just a brief respite?

It took her awhile to recall that it was the tail end of summer. In a month the storm season would arrive. The snows would return. Below, scattered patches threw back silvery glimmers. Despite the season and latitude. It would get no better.

As Marika neared the Hainlin she sensed something ahead. It was little more than a premonition, but she took the saddleship down. Kublin whimpered as the bottom dropped out.

Too late. That something had sensed her presence, too. It moved toward her.

Silth.

She dropped to the surface, skipped off the saddleship, slithered into the brush, checked her rifle and

pistol, ducked through her loophole to examine the ghost population. "Damn," she whispered without force. "Damn. Why now, when I'm too tired to face a novice?" The All laughed in the secret night.

She did her best to make herself invisible to silth senses.

The silth did miss her on her first passage, sliding over slightly to the north. Marika extended no probes, for she did not want to alert the hunting Mistress or her bath.

She felt the silth halt at the edge of perception, turn back. "Damn it again." She slipped the safety off her rifle, then collected a strong ghost.

She would not use the ghost offensively. She was too weak. She would fend attacks only, and use the rifle when she had the chance. Few silth expected rifle fire from other silth.

Not once did it occur to her that the prowler might be friendly.

The silth approached cautiously. Marika became more certain her intentions were unfriendly. And she was a strong one, for she masked herself well.

Almost overhead now. Low. Maybe she could get a killing burst off before . . . A shape moved in the moonlight, dark, low, slow . . .

That was no darkship! That was a saddleship like her own.

Marika?

There was no mistaking the odor of that touch. Gradwohl! A flood of relief. Here, mistress. Right below you. She left the brush and walked toward her own saddleship as the most senior descended.

"What are you doing here, mistress?"

"Looking for you. What have you been doing?"

"I went after the raiders. Have you been to Maksche, mistress?"

"I came from there."

"Then you know. I got them, mistress. All of them. And many more besides. Perhaps even their warlock. They have paid the first installment."

Gradwohl remained astride her saddleship, a twin of Marika's. Marika mounted her own. Gradwohl indicated Kublin. "What is that?"

"A high-ranking prisoner, mistress. Probably one of the leaders of the attack. I have not yet questioned him. I was considering a truthsaying after I have recovered my strength."

She felt rested after the few minutes down, despite the tension. She was eager to get back to Grauel and Barlog. She lifted her saddleship. Gradwohl followed, hastened to assume the position of honor. They rose into the moonlight and drifted eastward at a comfortable pace.

I want you to drink chaphe when we get back, Gradwohl sent. I want you to rest long and well. We have

much to discuss.

Marika considered that thoroughly before she responded. Between them she and Gradwohl had seldom shifted from the formal mode, yet tonight there was an unusually odd, distant aroma to the most senior's sending. She was distressed about something.

What is wrong, mistress?

Later, Marika. After you have rested. I do not want to go into it when you are so exhausted you may not be in control of all your faculties.

Marika did not like the increased distance implied by the sending's tone. I think we had best discuss what must be discussed now. In the privacy of the night. I sense a gulf opening between us. This I cannot comprehend. Why, mistress?

If you insist, then. The Reugge have been crippled, Marika. This is what is wrong. This is what we must discuss. The Reugge have been hurt badly, and you want to make the situation worse.

Mistress? The Reugge have been hurt, that is true, but we have not been destroyed. I believe the cornerstones of our strength remain intact. We can turn it around on the brethren and—

We will turn it around, but not in blood. All the world knows what happened. No one believes rogues made the raids on their own, unsupported. Those, and Kiljar's experience with the Serke voidship, have been enough to cause a general clamor for a convention. Even by some elements within the brethren. The Brown Paw Bond nearly ceased to exist because of the raids. Their enemies within the brotherhood tried to exterminate them along with us. The Redoriad are going to demand dismemberment of the Serke and the banning of all brethren from space for at least a generation. Already some among the brethren are crawling sideways, whimpering as they try to bargain for special consideration for their particular Bonds. They have imprisoned a number of high masters, saying they acted on their own, without approval, in a conspiracy with the Serke. We have won the long struggle, Marika. At great expense, yes, but without resort to challenge or direct bloodletting—other than that in which you have indulged yourself. It is time now to back away and let the convention finish it for us.

You will accept that? After all these years? After all the Reugge have suffered? You will not extract payment in blood?

I will not.

Marika reflected a moment. Mistress, will I be continuing my education with Kiljar?

Gradwohl seemed reluctant to respond. Finally, she sent, There will be no need, will there? Bestrei will have been disarmed by the dispersal of her Community.

I see.

I am not sure you do. Your focus is sometimes too narrow. That is why I want you to rest under the influence of chaphe. To become totally recovered before we examine this in detail. I want you able to see the whole situation and all the options. We will be headed for a period of delicate negotiations.

What will become of Bestrei? She could not imagine a sisterhood being dismantled. But there were precedents. The Librach had been disbanded by force after a convention four centuries earlier, after

considerable bloodshed.

She will be adopted into another Community. If she wishes.

And the Serke assets?

They will be dispersed according to outstanding claims.

The Reugge will possess the strongest of those. Yes? And because the brethren will pretend to have been used, and to be contrite, and will sacrifice a few factors, they will get off with a wrist slap. And in a generation, before you and I are even gone, they will be back stronger than ever, better prepared, more thoroughly insinuated into the fabric of society.

Marika. I told you you should rest before we discuss this. You are becoming unreasonably emotional.

I am sorry, mistress. I remain a Ponath bitch at heart. When I see bloodfeud directed my way, I have difficulty letting the declarer beg off if he sees that he is going to lose. Particularly when he will return as soon as he feels strong enough to try again.

The brethren were manipulated by the Serke.

You are a fool if you believe that, mistress. The brethren were the manipulators. You have seen the evidence. They used the Serke, and now I see them starting to use you even before they have shed their previous victims.

Marika! Do not anger me. You have been brought far in a very short time. You are a member of the ruling council of the Reugge, soon to be one of the major orders.

At the price of honor?

Do not harp on honor, pup. Yours remains indicted by the existence of the male lying before you.

Mistress? Coldness crept into Marika.

Would you subject him to a truthsaying? Really? Now?

It would provide the final proof of the villainy of the brethren.

Perhaps. And what would it prove about you?

Mistress?

You accuse me, Marika. By your tone you accuse me of crimes. Yet I have forgiven you yours. Dorteka was precious to me, pup, yet I forgave even that. For the sake of the Community.

You know?

I have known for more than a year. The Serke presented the evidence. You saved a littermate in the Ponath. The result was what has happened these past few days. But even that I can forgive. If you will shed the role of Jiana.

Jiana? And, You engineered this holocaust? This is where you were headed all along? You had no intention of challenging Bestrei? Of breaking into the void? I was just your distraction?

I pursued both goals equally, Marika. The success of either would have satisfied me. My mission is to preserve and strengthen the Reugge. I have done that. I will not permit you to diminish or destroy what I have won.

You called me Jiana. I do not like that.

There are times when you seem determined to fill the role.

Mistress?

Everywhere you go. Maksche is just the latest.

I had nothing to do with that. I was in TelleRai when—

You were. Yes. And that is the only reason you survived. The rhythm of your visits altered. The only reason the brethren attacked was to destroy you. You, Marika. The other attacks were diversions meant to keep aid from rushing to Maksche. But you were not there. You went off to TelleRai off schedule. You did not have the decency to perish. Accept, Marika. Do not continue to be a doomstalker.

I am no doomstalker, mistress.

Destruction walks in your shadow, pup.

This is foolishness, mistress.

First your packstead, Marika. Then your fortress, your packfast, Akard. Now Maksche. What has to happen before you see? The end of the world itself?

Marika was baffled. Gradwohl had been sound of mind always, spurning such superstitious nonsense. This made no sense. All these things would have happened without me, mistress. The brethren and Serke began their game long before anyone ever heard of Marika.

The All knew you. And the All moved them.

Marika gave up. No argument could change a closed, mad mind. She peered down at moonlight reflected off the Hainlin. That was as much of the void as she might see. I want the stars, mistress.

I know, Marika. Perhaps we can get something for you in the settlement.

I will not accept perhaps, Most Senior.

This is not the time to—

This is the time.

This is what I feared. This is why I did not want to discuss this with you now. I knew you would be unsettled.

When will this convention set the silth stamp of approval on the treacheries of the brethren?

The first session will meet as soon as I reach TelleRai. I will take my saddleship south as soon as I have won your promise to support me.

I cannot give you that, mistress. My conscience will not permit it. There is bloodfeud involved. You would betray all those sisters who have perished.

Damned stubborn savage. Put aside your primitive ways. We are not living in the upper Ponath. This is the real world. Allowances and adjustments have to be made.

Wrong.

I did not want it to come to this, pup.

Marika felt the otherworld stir. She was not surprised, nor even much frightened. The moment seemed destined.

She did not try her loophole. It was too late for that. She did what silth never seemed to expect. She squeezed the trigger of the rifle she had not returned to safety. The entire magazine hammered the air.

Gradwohl separated from her saddleship and tumbled toward the river.

Marika! Damn you, Jiana! Then the sensing of Gradwohl vanished into a fog of pain. And then that spark went out.

Marika circled twice, fixing the spot in her mind. Then she went on, composing herself for Maksche.

II

Marika had nothing left when she brought the saddleship down on the airstrip near Bagnel's quarters, Kublin still limp across its neck. Someone came out, recognized her, shouted back inside. In a moment Grauel limped forth. She reached out feebly, far too slowly, as Marika slipped off and fell to the concrete. "You're still here," Marika rasped.

"Yes." Grauel tried to lift her to her feet, could not. More meth gathered around. Marika recognized faces she had not seen last visit. Somehow, Grauel had assembled some survivors. "The most senior told us to remain."

"Gradwohl. Where is she?"

"She went looking for you."

"Oh. I got them, Grauel. Every one of them."

"Take her inside," Grauel told the others. "Where did you find him?" She indicated Kublin.

"With them. He may have been one of their commanders."

"Oh."

"Yes."

“Give her the chaphe,” Grauel ordered as they entered the building.

“Grauel . . . ”

“The most senior’s orders, Marika. You get two days of enforced rest.”

Marika surrendered. She did not have the strength to resist.

Several times she wakened, found Grauel nearby. She told the huntress about the brethren base in snatches. Grauel did not seem much interested. Marika allowed the enforced rest to continue, for she had stretched herself more than she had realized. But the third night she refused the drug. “Where is the most senior? Enough is enough. Things are happening and we are out of touch.”

“She has not returned, Marika. I have become concerned. Sisters from TelleRai were here this morning, seeking her. I had thought she might have gone there.”

“And?” Time to be cautious. Time to have a care with Grauel, who persisted in using the formal mode.

“They flew west, seeking some trace. I believe they called for more darkships to join in the search. They were very worried.”

“Why?”

“The . . . You do not know, do you? A convention of the Communities has been called to bring the Serke and brethren to account. The most senior must be there. The Reugge are the principal grievants.”

Marika struggled up from her cot. “That’s happening? Gradwohl is missing? And you’ve kept me drugged? Grauel, what . . . ?”

“Her orders, Marika.”

“Orders or not, that’s over. Bring me food. Bring me fresh clothing. Bring me my weapons and prepare my saddleship.”

“Marika . . . ”

“I have to go to TelleRai. Someone has to represent the most senior’s viewpoint. Someone has to be there if the worst has happened. If the brethren have slain her and the wrong sisters hear of it first, her whole dream will die. Get me out of here, Grauel. I’ll send for you as soon as I get there.”

“As you command.”

Marika did not like Grauel’s tone. She let it slide. “How is Barlog doing?”

“Recovering. The most senior was able to save her.”

There was an accusation behind those words. “I am sorry, Grauel. I was not myself that day.”

“Are you ever, Marika? Are you now? Have you slaked your blood thirst yet?”

“I think so.”

“I hope so. They say this convention is an opportunity to end what has been happening. I would not want to see it fail.”

“How are Bagnel and Kublin doing?”

“Bagnel is recovering nicely. The most senior treated him, too, inasmuch as he seems to be the sole surviving Brown Paw Bonder from this enclave. Kublin is in chains. There were those who wanted to do him injury. I have protected him.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have. I’m not sure why I brought him in. When the darkship comes, bring him to TelleRai. He may prove useful during the convention.”

“Perhaps.”

“What is the matter, Grauel? I feel . . .”

“I fear you, Marika. Since you returned from this vengeance, even I can see the look of doom upon you. And I fear you the more because Gradwohl is not here to temper your ferocity.”

“Be about your business, Grauel.” Marika stood. Her legs were weak. She ducked through her loophole to check her grasp of the otherworld, fearful she might not be strong enough to get to TelleRai in time.

She would manage. She was not weak in her grasp of the dark.

She visited Bagnel briefly. He apologized again. “It was despicable,” she agreed. “But I think we’re about to conclude that era. Keep well, Bagnel.” Outside, as she prepared to mount her saddleship, Marika told Grauel, “Bring Bagnel, too.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Marika looked at Grauel grimly. She did not like it when the huntress took the formal mode. It meant Grauel did not approve.

Irrked, she lifted the saddleship without another word.

She sped southward, paused briefly where Gradwohl had gone down. She found no trace of the most senior’s body. She did find Gradwohl’s saddleship, broken, in a tree. She dragged it out, dismantled it, threw the pieces into the river. Let them become driftwood, joining other flotsam come down from the dying north.

The sisters at TelleRai were not pleased with her advent. Many had hoped she had perished in the raid. More feared the most senior had perished sometime afterward. They dreaded the chance the savage northerner would lay claim to the most senior’s mantle.

As strength goes. They were convinced none could challenge the outlander.

“I will not replace the most senior,” Marika told anyone who would listen. “It has never been my wish to become most senior. But I will speak for Gradwohl till she returns. Her mind is my mind.”

Word of what had happened at the enclave in the wilderness had reached TelleRai. Though Marika did not claim responsibility and no one made direct accusations, there were no doubts anywhere who had been responsible for the slaughter. Terror hung around her like a fog. No one would dispute anything she said.

Grael and Barlog, Kublin and Bagnel arrived a day after Marika, near dawn, with the first group of survivors brought out of the ruins of Maksche. Marika had insisted that every survivor, including workers and Reugge bonds, be evacuated south. That earned her no friends, for it would strain the resources of the TelleRai cloister.

Barlog was somewhat recovered. She was not pleasant at all when Marika visited her.

There was a small fuss when Marika insisted Bagnel be assigned guest quarters. She had Kublin imprisoned. She did not visit him.

Grael and Barlog retired to their new quarters to rest, or to hide. Marika was not certain which. They were attached to Marika's own, where she paced outside their door, wondering what she could do to recover their goodwill.

Someone knocked on the apartment door. Marika answered it, found a novice outside. "Yes?"

"Mistress, second Kiljar of the Redoriad wishes to speak with you."

"Is she here?"

"No, mistress. She sent a messenger. Will there be any reply?"

"Tell her yes. The second hour after noon, if that is convenient. In the usual place. She will understand what I mean."

"Yes, mistress."

Shortly after the novice departed, sisters Cyalgon and Tascil, the order's sixth and third chairs, in TelleRai for the convention, came calling. Marika knew Cyalgon. She had been with the party that had gone to the Redoriad museum. She presumed upon that now. After the appropriate greetings, Marika asked, "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

Cyalgon was direct. "First chair. You say you would refuse it. We wish to know if this is true or just a ploy."

"I have made no secret of the fact that I have no wish to bury myself in the petty details that plague a most senior. But for that I would not mind having a Community behind me."

"Perhaps something might be arranged."

"Oh?"

"Someone might assume the weight of detail."

"I will not become a figurehead in any task I assume. In any case, I would prefer being the power behind. I am young, mistress. I still have dreams. But this whole discussion is moot. The Reugge have a most

senior.”

“It begins to appear that Gradwohl is no longer with us.”

“Mistress?”

“Even experts at the long touch cannot detect her.”

“Perhaps she is hiding.”

“From her own sisters? At a time like this? She would have responded if she could. She must be dead.”

“Or possibly a prisoner? Suppose the brethen captured her. Or the Serke. They could have lifted her off-planet. She could be alive and there be no way to touch her.”

“Amounts to the same thing.”

“I fear it does not. I fear I do not want to be party to what could later be interpreted as an attempt to oust a most senior who has been very good to me. I think I would like stronger proof that she is not with us. But I will give the matter some thought. I will speak to you later.”

They had not gotten what they wanted. They departed with shoulders angrily stiff.

“Starting to line up for a grab-off,” Marika snarled after they departed. “I suppose I will hear from them all. I wish I knew them better.”

She was speaking to herself. But a voice from behind said, “Perhaps if you had paid more attention to your duties here . . .”

“Enough, Grauel. I am going out. Take the names of any who ask to see me. Tell them I will contact them later.”

“As you command, mistress.”

Irked, Marika began assembling her saddleship.

III

Marika swept in over the Redoriad cloister as fast as she dared, hoping to remain unnoticed. Vain hope. There was an inconvenient break in the cloud cover. Her shadow ran across the courts below, catching the eyes of several Redoriad bonds. By the time she reached Kiljar’s window, meth were running everywhere.

“You came,” Kiljar said.

“Of course. Why not?”

“I received your message but doubted you would make it. My sources suggested there is a lot of maneuvering going on inside the Reugge.”

“I have been approached,” Marika admitted. “But only once. I will tell them all the same thing. First chair is not open. If it were, I would not take it. Though I do want someone philosophically compatible to be

most senior. I am busy enough with the brethren and Serke.”

“That is what I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Mistress?”

“Do not become defensive, Marika. It is time you assessed your position. Time you shed this hard stance.”

Marika’s jaw tightened.

“Were you not satisfied with what you wrought at that brethren enclave?”

“No, mistress. That was not sufficient at all. That was an insect’s sting. I am going to devour them. They destroyed a city. Without cause or justification. They will pay the price.”

“I do not understand you, Marika. Victory is not enough. Why do you make this a personal vendetta?”

“Mistress?”

“You are not killing for the honor or salvation of your Community. You are more selfish than the run of silth. No! Do not deny it. For you your order is a ladder to climb toward personal goals. Gradwohl was crafty enough to use you to the benefit of the Reugge. But now Gradwohl is gone. We all fear . . .”

“Why does everyone insist that? For years Gradwohl has been in the habit of disappearing. Sometimes for months.”

“This time it is for good, Marika.”

“How can you know that?” A blade of ice slashed at her heart.

Kublin might know what had become of Gradwohl. That had not occurred to her before. Suppose he had not been unconscious throughout the whole flight? Indeed, all he needed to know was that she and Gradwohl had met.

“Come.” Kiljar led her to another room. “Look.” She indicated fragments of wood. Some retained bits of gaudy paint. “Parts from a saddleship not unlike yours. Some of our bonds found them drifting in the Hainlin yesterday. I have heard of only one saddleship other than yours. The one Gradwohl was flying when last seen.”

Marika settled into a chair uninvited. “Does anyone else know?”

“My most senior. Do you accept this evidence?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“I think it is close enough to conclusive. It seems obvious Gradwohl went down in the Hainlin. How we may never know. What stance will you take now, Marika? Will you think of someone besides yourself?”

“Oh. I suppose. Yes. I have to.” Was Kiljar suspicious?

“You had best reconsider your position on the Serke, the brethren, and the convention, then.”

“But . . .”

“I will explain. I will show you why it can be in our interest to see the convention through to the conclusion you abhor. Let me begin with our passage near Starstalker.”

“Mistress?”

“We were attacked. Without provocation. Unprecedented. Have you not wondered why? And the how was so startling.”

“Those ships.”

“Exactly. Nothing like them has been seen before. Yet they could not have been created overnight. And, sneaky as they are, the brethren could not have built them without the project having come to my attention.”

“The brethren have done many things without attracting attention, mistress. Including putting satellites into orbit without the help or license of any Community.”

“Yes. I know. They used rockets half as big as TelleRai, launched from the Cupple Islands. For all the organizing you have done, I have resources that you do not. The brethren are not monolithic. Some bonds can be penetrated with the wealth at my command. There are no secrets from me in TelleRai.”

Kiljar paused. Marika did not care to comment.

“The brethren did not build those ships here. They came here aboard Starstalker. We were not supposed to see them because the brethren did not build them at all.”

Startled, Marika asked, “What?”

“The brethren did not build them. It took great pressure upon my contacts and the spreading of much Redoriad largess, but I wormed out an amazing truth. A truth which has been before us all for years, unseen because it was so fantastic.”

“You are toying with me, mistress.”

“I suppose I am. Marika, the fact is, Starstalker crossed starpaths with another dark-faring species fifteen years ago. A species without silth. They are like the brethren, only more so. The Serke were unable to comprehend them, so they enlisted the help of those bonds with whom they had operated closely before. And the brethren took control. Much as you have claimed.”

Marika could not keep her lips from peeling back in a snarl.

“At first only a few dark-faring bonds were in it with the Serke. Thus, overall brethren policy was inconsistent. The Serke began trying to seize Reugge territories because of advantages they hoped to gain from these aliens. Their ally bonds helped. At the same time the Brown Paw Bond, being uninformed, were battling the nomads the Serke and other brethren had armed. Do you follow?”

“I think I see the outline. Bagnel once said—”

“After Akard and Critza fell, but before you defeated the force near the ruins of Critza, the dark-faring bonds gained ascendancy over all the brethren. A smaller faction inimical to silth controlled them. Though you Reugge suffered, there was much quiet feuding among the bonds in private. Increasing bitterness, failure of communication, and outright disobedience on the part of a few highly placed individuals resulted in the ill-timed, ill-advised, much too massive attempt to kill you at Maksche.”

“To kill me? They destroyed an entire city just to get me?”

“Absolutely. There was one among them who was quite mad.”

“The warlock. We have been hearing about him for some time.”

“The warlock. Yes. He engineered the whole thing. My contacts say he had an insane fear of you. Insanity bred insanity. And when it went sour it all went sour. His madness caused the overthrow of the dark-faring brethren. They have been replaced by conservatives who favor traditional relationships with the Communities. Now.”

“Mistress?”

“Now is the time you must listen and hear. Timing is important now. If the convention moves fast the rogue faction can be disarmed forever. What the Serke found, and hoped to use to our detriment, can be exploited for the benefit of all meth. If we do not move fast the dark-faring brethren may regain their balance and attempt a counter-move. I have gotten hints that they received fearsome weapons and technologies from the aliens.”

Marika left the chair, began to pace. She recalled once naively telling Dorteka or Gradwohl that the Reugge ought to try creating factions within the brethren.

“The pitchblende. These aliens wanted it?”

“The brethren believed so. Apparently they use it in power plants of the sort you once predicted in one of our discussions. It seems the Ponath deposit is a rich one indeed. It was because of it that the dark-faring brethren took control of all the brethren. They believed they could use the ore to buy technology. And thus the power to destroy all silth. But for you they might have succeeded.”

“Me?”

“You have a friend among the brethren. You were open with him apparently, even when relationships were most strained. The brethren, like silth, are able to extract a great deal from very little evidence. Like the Serke and Gradwohl and everyone else who paid attention to you, they saw what you might become.”

“Bestrei’s replacement.”

“Exactly. With a strong conservative bent and a tendency to do things your own way. The brethren foresaw a future in which they would lose privileges and powers. Also, you are more than Bestrei’s potential successor. You have a reasonable amount of intelligence and a talent for intuiting whole pictures from the most miniscule specks of evidence. That you insisted on isolating yourself in a remote industrial setting only further disturbed those who feared you. You recall the stir at the time of your first visit here? You recall me remarking that everyone was following you closely? Had you spent more time in TelleRai

you might have been more aware of what you are and how you are perceived.”

“Such talk mystifies me, mistress. I have heard it for years. It always seems to be about someone else. I think I know myself fairly well. I am not this creature you are talking about. I am no different from anyone else.”

“You compare yourself to older silth, perhaps. To sisters who have risen very high, but who are in the main within a few years of death. They have passed their prime. You have your whole life ahead of you. It is what you might become that scares everyone. Your potential plus your intellectual orientation. That can frighten meth who, to you, may seem unassailable.”

Marika looked inside herself and did not find that she felt special. “Where do we stand now? Where are we headed? You wished specifically to know about my position on the convention.”

“Yes. It is critical that none of us holds a hard line. We must not give the dark-faring brethren excuses to recapture control. We must be satisfied with recapturing yesterday. The ruling brethren are eager to please right now.”

“They attacked—”

“I know what they did, pup! Damn you, listen! I know bloodfeud. I come from a rural background. But you cannot make enemies of all brethren. That will give the wicked among them ammunition. In that you risk defeat for all silth.”

Marika moved toward her saddleship, suddenly aware that Kiljar was unusually tense. There was a threat implicit in her plea.

“Yes,” Kiljar said, reading her well. “If you sustain your stance, you will find yourself very unpopular. It is my understanding that some elements within the Reugge have sent out feelers seeking aid in removing you.”

“I see. And if I bend? If I go along? What is in this for me?”

“Probably anything you want, Marika. The Communities want to avoid further confrontation. You could name your price.”

“You know what I want.”

“I think so.”

“That is the price. I will put it to the convention formally.”

Kiljar seemed amused. “You will do nothing the easy way, will you?”

“Mistress?”

“The dark-faring Communities will shriek if you demand extraplanetary rights for the Reugge.”

“Let them. That is the price. It is not negotiable.”

“All right. I will warn those who should know beforetime. I suggest you present a list of throwaway

demands if you wish to make them think they have gotten something in return.”

“I will, mistress. I had better return to the cloister. I must shift my course there, too. Immediately.”

Kiljar seemed puzzled.

Marika slipped astride her saddleship and took flight. She rose high above TelleRai and pushed the saddleship through violent, perilous maneuvers for an hour, venting her anger and frustration.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I

Marika told the gathered council of the Reugge Community, “I have changed my mind. I am laying claim to first chair. I have seen that there is no other way for the Community to properly benefit from the coming convention.”

None of the sisters were willing to challenge her. Many looked angry or disappointed.

“I have been to the Redoriad cloister. They showed me evidence, collected upon their estates, that Most Senior Gradwohl is no longer with us. Despite my claim, however, my attitude toward the most senior’s position has not altered. I intend to retain first chair only long enough to win us the best from the convention and to set our feet upon a new, star-walking path. Once I succeed, I will step aside, for I will have a task of my own to pursue.”

Blank stares. Very blank stares. No one believed.

“Does anyone wish to contest my claim? On whatever grounds?”

No one did.

“Good. I will leave you, then. I have much to do before tomorrow morning. As long as you are all here, why not consider candidates for seventh chair?” She thought that a nice touch, allowing them an opportunity to strengthen themselves by enrolling another of her enemies in the council.

She truly did not care. Like Gradwohl before her, her strength was such that she could do what she liked without challenge.

She departed, joined Grauel, who had awaited her outside the council chamber. “Gradwohl’s darkship crew is here in the cloister somewhere. Assemble them. We have a flight to make.”

Grauel asked no questions. “As you command, mistress.” She persisted in her formal role.

“Have Kublin and Bagnel brought to the darkship court. We will take them with us. And have someone you trust care for Barlog. Most of the Maksche survivors have arrived now, have they not?”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Go.”

Marika hurried to her quarters, quickly sketched out what she would demand from the convention. Space rights for the Reugge. Serke starworlds for the Reugge. The void-ship Starstalker for the Reugge. The other orders could squabble over Serke properties on-planet.

Bar the brethren from space forever, not just for a generation. Disarm the brethren except in areas where weapons were necessary to their survival. Allow them no weapons exceeding the technological covenants for any given area, so that brethren in a region like the Ponath, a Tech Two Zone, must carry bows and arrows and spears like the native packs. Demand mechanisms for observation and enforcement.

There would be screams. Loud and long. She expected to surrender on most all the issues except Reugge access to space and a Reugge share of Serke starholdings. As Kiljar had said, let them think they had won something.

“Ready, mistress,” Grauel said from the doorway. “The bath were not pleased.”

“They never are. They would prefer to spend their lives loafing. Kublin and Bagnet?”

“They are being transferred to the courtyard. I told the workers to break out a darkship. Everything should be ready when we arrive.”

The flight was uneventful, though early on Marika had to lose a darkship following her at the edge of sensing. She crossed the snowline and continued north, and by moonlight descended into the courtyard of Gradwohl’s hidden darkship factory. “Good evening, Edzeka,” she said to the senior of the packfast. “Have you been following the news?” The fortress could send no messages out, except by touch, but could collect almost everything off almost every network. Gradwohl had established one of Braydic’s interception teams there. She would miss Braydic more than anyone else who had died at Maksche.

“Yes, mistress. Congratulations. Though I was unhappy to hear that Most Senior Gradwohl has left us for the embrace of the All.”

“There will be no changes here, Edzeka. We will continue to do what we can to make the Communities independent of the brethren. We will expand our operations when we can.”

Edzeka seemed pleased. “Thank you, mistress. We were concerned when it seemed you would forego first chair.”

“There is a great deal of pressure on me to abandon the ideals that drew Gradwohl and me together, and you to her. I may have to present the appearance of abandoning them. It will be appearance only. The fact that you continue your work will be my assurance that I have not changed in my heart.”

“Thank you again, mistress. What can we do for you?”

“I need one of the new darkships. Tomorrow I must speak for the Reugge before a convention of the Communities. I thought I might make an unspoken statement by arriving aboard one of your darkships.”

“You have males with you.”

“Yes. Two very special males. The one who is not bound is a longtime friend, one of the few survivors of a bond friendly to the Reugge, who may be at risk in these times. I wish to keep him safe. He is to be accorded all consideration and honor.”

“And the other?”

“A prisoner. One of the commanders of the attack upon Maksche. He is to be assigned to the communications-intercept section to translate messages out of the brethren cant. Do what you need to to enforce his cooperation. Otherwise do not harm him. I may have a use for him. Now. May I have one of the new ships?”

“Of course. I will give you the one prepared for the most senior.”

“Good. I cannot spend time here, unfortunately, for I have to be back in TelleRai early. I will need to borrow bath as well. Mine need rest. I will need a Mistress of the Ship also, if I am to get any rest myself.”

“As you wish.”

“And something to eat.”

“Never any problem there, mistress. Come down to the kitchen.”

II

Grael wakened Marika as the darkship approached TelleRai. She checked the time. Edzeka had not given her the strongest of Mistresses. It was later than she had hoped. There would be no time to pause at the cloister. She touched the Mistress, told her to proceed directly to convention ground. The convention would meet there despite the weather, which threatened snow.

The flight south had encountered patch after patch of snowfall, the Mistress being unwilling to climb above the clouds. She was young and unconfident.

It smelled like another hard winter, one that would push farther south than ever before.

A victory today, Marika reflected, and she would be in a position at last to do something about that.

The sky over TelleRai was crowded. Every darkship seemed to set a course identical to Marika's. She edged up to the tip of the wooden cross, touched the Mistress, took over.

The moment the silth reached the axis, Marika took the darkship up five thousand feet, well above traffic, and waited in the still chill till it seemed the crowd should have cleared. Then she dropped a few hundred feet at a time, feeling around in the clouds.

If something was to be tried, this was the time.

So many enemies.

She glanced over her shoulder. Grael was alert, her weapon ready. She checked her own rifle, then allowed the darkship to sink till it had cleared the underbellies of the clouds.

Still a fair ceiling. The snow might hold off awhile.

The air was less crowded. In fact, the few darkships aloft seemed to be patrolling.

She let the bottom fall out.

Startled touches bounced off her, then she was swooping toward the heart of convention ground as faces turned to look. The glimpses she caught told her they were thinking of her as that show-off savage, making a late, flashy entrance.

Exactly.

She touched down fifty feet from the senior representatives of the Communities. Kiljar was the only silth she recognized. The Redoriad came toward her, skirting a small pond.

Tall, slim trees surrounded the area, winter-naked, probably dying. The heart of convention ground centered upon a group of fountains surrounded by statuary, exotic plantings, and benches where silth came to meditate in less exciting times. A dozen Serke waited near the trees in silence, eyes downcast, resigned. On the opposite side of the circle stood a larger group of males, most of whom were old. Marika spied the trademales from Bagnel's quarters among them. She raised a paw in mocking greeting.

The males were sullen and hateful.

They were resigned, too, but theirs was not the resignation of the Serke. Marika sensed an undercurrent, something resembling the odor of triumph.

Was there something wrong here? A truthsaying might be in order.

"I had begun to be concerned," Kiljar said. "Where were you? Your cloister told me you were away." She eyed Marika's darkship. While not as fancy as those of times past, it was large and ornate. "Where did you get that?"

"Sisters made it. That was Gradwohl's legacy. A first step toward independence for the brethren."

"You might avoid that subject."

"Why did you wish to contact me?"

"Shortly after you announced you would become first chair of the Reugge, there was a rebellion among the brethren of the Cupple Islands. They have taken control there. What they do next depends upon what you say now."

"I see."

"I hope so."

"I thought it was foregone what would happen. Dismember the Serke and ban the brethren from space for a while."

"Essentially. But the details, Marika. The details. Your past attitude toward the brethren is well-known."

"These prisoners. They are the sacrificial victims?"

"You could call them that."

"The males are old. Those who will replace them are all younger?"

“I would not be surprised.”

“Yes. Well. To be expected, I suspect. I have brought a list. As I said, I will negotiate on everything but a Reugge interest in the void.”

“Understood. Come. I will introduce you. We will get into the details, then go to the convention for approval. Simply a matter of form, I assure you.”

Marika scanned the encircling trees. Here, there, curious faces peeped forth. Silth by the hundred waited in the greater park outside. “Have those meth no work?”

“This is the event of the century, Marika. Of several centuries. I will gather everyone. Tell them what is on your mind.”

Marika watched Kiljar closely, wondering about her part in the game. She was behaving as though there was some special alliance between herself and the new most senior of the Reugge.

Random snowflakes floated around. Marika glanced at the overcast. It would not be long.

“Speak, Marika,” Kiljar told her. And in a whisper, “Demand what you like, but avoid being belligerent.”

Marika spoke. The silth listened. She became uncomfortable as she sensed that they were trying to read into her tone, inflexion, and stance more than was there. She was too young to deal with these silth. They were too subtle for her.

Her speech caused a stir among the trees. Many silth hastened away to tell others farther back.

Kiljar announced, “The Redoriad endorse the Reugge proposal.” More softly, she said, “Remember, Marika, this is an informal discussion, not the official convention. Do not take to heart everything that is said.”

“Meaning your endorsement is a maneuver.”

“That, and that some unpleasant attacks may be made by those opposed. Those who speak against will not be declaring bloodfeud.”

The various representatives responded individually. Some felt compelled to do so at great length. Marika seated herself on a bench. She felt sleepy. Sitting did not help. She caught herself nodding.

The breeze became more chill. The snowflakes became more numerous, pellets of white that swirled around the heart of the park. They caught in the grass and whitened it till it looked like the fur of an old female. Kiljar settled beside Marika. “That fool Foxgar will never shut up.”

“Who is she?”

“Second of the Furnvreit. A small Community from the far south with limited holdings in the outer system. In a convention the smallest order speaks with a voice equaling that of the largest. Unfortunately. She may be stalling in hopes her vote will be bought.”

“Do the Furnvreit have any claim on the Serke?”

“None whatsoever. Few Communities do. But they all want a share of the plunder. And they will get it. Otherwise the convention will go nowhere.”

“Wonderful.”

A slith came from the trees, hastened to Kiljar, whispered. Kiljar looked grim.

“What is it?” Marika asked. A bad feeling twisted her insides.

“Somebody relayed your opening terms to the Cupple Islands. Those ships we saw around Starstalker. A great many of their type are lifting off, packed with brethren.”

Marika’s bad feeling worsened.

III

An old silth appeared, too excited to retain her cool dignity. “The darkships are leaving the cloister at Ruhaack! The Serke are . . . are . . .”

“You would deal with brethren!” Marika snapped at Kiljar. She raced to her darkship. “Grauel! Get aboard. Bath! Mistress! Get it airborne.”

The remaining silth stood bewildered for a moment, then scattered.

Marika was well away before anyone else lifted off. She touched the Mistress of the Ship. The Reugge cloister. Hurry.

“What is it, Marika?” Grauel asked. She kept turning, weapon ready, seeking something she could not find.

“I don’t know. But I don’t like this. I have a bad feeling. A premonition. I don’t want to be caught on the ground. We’ll pick up Barlog, then head for Ruhaack.” She was as confused as any of the silth aboard the darkships swarming up below.

Any course of action had to be positive.

The enemy was on the move.

She touched the Mistress of the Ship again, showed her where to go as Grauel protested, “Marika, Barlog is in no condition to—”

“I don’t care. I want her with me till we see what’s going to happen.”

The Mistress of the Ship brought the darkship to rest beside the window to Marika’s quarters. Marika gestured violently. The Mistress rotated the darkship, brought one arm into contact with the windowsill. “Hold it there!” Marika ordered. “We’ll be back in a minute. Grauel, break that window.”

Grauel tottered along the beam, eased past the bath at its tip, smashed glass with her rifle butt. She jumped through. Marika followed. “What now?” Grauel asked.

“Barlog.” In her mind a clock was ticking, estimating the time it would take the brethren fugitives to

rendezvous with Starstalker.

Intuition began shrieking at her. "Hurry!" she barked.

They found Barlog sleeping, still partially immobilized by the healer sisters. They pulled her out of bed and hustled her to the window. Marika leapt out onto the arm of the darkship. It sank beneath her weight. "Hold it steady!" she yelled. "All right, Grauel. Push her up. Come on, Barlog. You have to help a little."

Barlog was no help at all. Marika pulled, balanced the huntress upon her shoulder. For a moment she became conscious of the long plunge that awaited her slightest misstep, froze. Never before had she been particularly cognizant of the danger of falling. She turned carefully, gestured the bath to duck, eased past. "Come on, Grauel."

Grauel, too, was conscious of the emptiness beneath the darkship. She was slow about boarding and slower crossing to the axis. Marika had Barlog strapped down by the time she arrived. "Strap up fast," Marika said. "Mistress! Take us up! Go high and head toward Ruhaack."

Marika became aware that she was being observed from a darkship poised just beyond the boundary of the cloister. Kiljar. She waved, pointed. Kiljar's darkship rose.

The clock in Marika's mind told her the trademale lifters would have reached Starstalker. She touched Kiljar. I am going to the Ruhaack cloister. With any luck those left behind may be cooperative.

Do not forget Bestrei.

How can I? Would you care to bet that she was not aboard the first voidship up?

Behind them, above the city, darkships swarmed like insects on a warm morning. Touches of panic fluttered the otherworld. There had been collisions and deaths by falling.

Marika reached, touched every sister she could, told them to get higher, to get away from the city.

She felt for the sky, for the Serke voidships, and to her surprise she found them. They were clustered, more than a dozen of them, and they were much higher than she could rise in pursuit. They were on the edge of the void and hurrying outward.

Marika felt Starstalker rise from behind the rim of the world. There was a deadly feel to the voidship, as though it had metamorphosed into something terrible. It radiated a threatening darkness. It climbed the sky rapidly.

It lost its deadly aura as it approached zenith, as Marika hurried to TelleRai's southwest, toward Ruhaack. That modest city, where the Serke made their headquarters, lay a hundred miles away. Its supporting satellites brushed those of greater TelleRai.

Why did Starstalker seem less black? Marika opened to the All. There! The deadliness remained, but it had separated from the voidship.

Kiljar. They have sent something down against us.

That something came down fast. Very fast. Streaks of fire burned the upper sky and backlighted the

clouds. Thunder hammered the air.

They were forty miles from TelleRai when the first sword of fire smote the world.

The first flash blinded Marika momentarily. There were more flashes. A grisly globe of fire rolled upward above the city. Shuddering, fur bristling, Marika felt the thundering wind, the first shock wave raging toward her.

Another great flash illuminated the mushroom cloud.

The Mistress of the Ship lost control. The darkship twisted toward the ground.