

Time Of The Star

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The ancient name for Airships is Eyreships, but most people never know this. They look at you oddly when you say it, and even more so when you tell them that the spelling for Lake Air, the ancient salt lake, is Lake Eyre. E-Y-R-E. It means nothing.

For a start, they confuse the infrequent Desert Sea of legend with the great man-made Inland Sea further to the north near the burning heart of Australia. Finally, when you've explained it carefully and they understand you at last, they will say something like: "Oh yes, Lake Air. The place where the Ab'O fleets fight. Where the wrecks are.- But it's the word 'Air' they'll remember. Air and the ships.

This much you can discover from a postcard in the souvenir kiosks at Twilight Beach. Those busy little shops always have artists' impressions of the ships abandoned in the Air, or dramatic, so-called imagined scenes of the great open-plan vendetta fleets coming together over some matter of tribal honour. Whenever I see these garish portrayals, or hear tourists talk of the dead salt lake in the south, I think of the times I have stood on the silent desolate beaches at Madiganna and Cresa and studied the wrecks way out in the salt, yearning to go out among them, and the one time I did go onto the lake and met a small part of my destiny during the Time of the Star.

It began with a postcard in a sense. A postcard and a comet. Comet Halley had returned to the inner planets and was heading for perihelion, and in that period when it was in the sky, certain Ab'O laws were in abeyance, some breaches of custom could be overlooked, traditions challenged and changed. I was in Armfeld's in Twilight Beach, browsing through the comet material, enjoying an all-too-rare layover and some idle hours. I had picked out a postcard to examine from the Ab'O merchandise, an imagined scene from a famous battle held on the Air a year before, the collision of two great sand-ships in which the Ajaro Prince lost his life.

I was marvelling at the chance of a Prince dying that way, exposed and vulnerable as they so rarely are.

The ceremonial fleets which meet out on the dry salt-lake are allowed full use of holoform projections - ghost-ships for ancestors who have died on the Air - so the armadas are usually vast affairs, awesome spectacles of colour and display but with little substance. There might be as few as twenty core-ships to a side, and those scattered wide of each other so as not to foul their sailing canopies. But as they come together, projectors operating, a hundred ghost-ships might crowd the interstices, rolling along in front, kites filling the sky, making it a difficult and lengthy business to engage and destroy the enemy.

It is easy to see how the legends begin: of Anu and Coorina, of Bindakara, of how the Emmened fleet once fought all day, cutting back and forth through the phantom ships of the Wagiri seeking core-ships, only to find at end of day that there were no Wagiri core-ships at all, that the ghosts faded to leave an empty salt-plain littered with ancient hulks and detritus.

There are many such stories, with no-one to prove what is myth or rumour or told from ignorance. All media and tourists are barred from the great ritual fighting ground, and only a small number of Nationals have seen the battles there and come back with their stories of the great punitive formations. Now and then, illicit photographs appear, or what resemble fairly detailed satellite scan enhancements, but trafficking in such contraband images is a dangerous business. Still, as I studied the card, it was hard to look at the artist's representation and not see the photograph on which it was based. I could sense the captured moment beneath the linework and air-brushing.

"I nearly killed the men who took that picture," a voice said softly, very close to me.

"It is not a photograph," I replied, automatically, immediately doubting my

words when I saw the tall fine-looking young Ab'O behind me. He wore a plain djellaba over soft fatigues, and ornate double swords thrust in his belt in the Japanese way.

"You know it is, Captain Tom," he said. "You of all people should recognise the Ajaro Airship Baiame. That is too close to what I saw to be an artist's rendering."

"You saw?"

The young man nodded. "I was on Semmeret. I saw my father and brother die, and I saw the Airmen pirate ship that slipped in to film the incident in between looting the wrecks."

I spoke my next words quietly. "Then you are . . ."

"Yes."

I replaced the postcard in the rack and walked with him out on to the street.

"But, Lord, how . . . ?"

"I am John to you, Captain. John Stone Grey."

"How can you be here, John?"

"The comet. It is the Time of the Star. A Prince can dare such things." "Your enemies would be glad to find you alone this way."

"No doubt. But there are reasons, and I will not be buried alive in Fireon-Stone under all those traditions and never see my world. I have urgent business to discuss." The Ab'O raised the hood of his robe, hiding his handsome features, then made sure his swords were concealed.

I led him down to the sand-ship moorings, through the First Gate and on to the Sand Quay. Like most of the big coastal towns, depending on one's moods, needs and perceptions, Twilight Beach can seem large or small. Now it was too small to conceal this quiet young man, this most vulnerable and incredible of things, an Ab'O Prince without his entourage, without his Elders and Clever Men and his Unseen Spears.

We boarded Rynosseros. Rob Shannon was instructing our newest crewmember, an eighteen-year-old Ab'O youth, an oddly fair-skinned outcast named Buso who had joined us earlier in the week during this layover. Rob looked up from splicing cables with him and nodded.

"Mission," I told him, and made the finger-sign that said: "Watch the Quay. Be ready."

Then I saw that John Stone Grey was studying the Ab'O youth who knelt alongside Shannon.

"You have an Ab'O in your crew?"

"An outcast. He has no tribe."

John Stone Grey stared at the lad, probably six or seven years younger than himself, his expression unreadable.

"You fear a spy?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "I do not approve of an Ab'O who becomes an outcast."

We went below, and in the aft-cabin John Stone Grey sat at the chart table and seemed to relax at last. He covered his face with his fine brown hands, then removed them to regard me sitting across from him.

"My father and brother died in the Air a year ago," he said. "The Chaness are – at last reckoning – three times more powerful than the Ajaro. Several Princes had a betrothal claim on the Chaness princess, Chian, but ours is the oldest, the first, and had to be honoured or disputed. The Chaness Prince wanted his daughter to wed the Madupan Prince's son. We challenged the right. The dispute was taken into the Air and we lost."

"So the Madupan won Chian?"

"No. They should have. But it was more than the death of our Prince and my brother when Baiame and Ptah collided. Those ships were both flagships and each named for the god of creation in one of its different guises. A year's grace was made because of it, a year before Chian could be given over and before I could assume the title. During that year no new ships could be built. The battle would be resumed with exactly the same vessel count. That year expired four days ago, but now it is the Time of the Star and Chian chose me – a new Prince – as her consort."

"What does this mean, John? I don't know the full law on this."

"Many of the Elders did not either," the young Ab'O said. "But still they met and made a ruling. Stalemate. The Chaness and the Ajaro must fight again with exactly the ships left from last time, as if the year did not exist."

"So why are you here? I am a State of Nation captain.-

"Yes, and one of the few captains who can sail his vessel anywhere near Lake Air without the Chaness and Madupan satellites destroying him outright.

Chian's choice, claiming Star immunity, came while I was away from Fire-on-Stone. I did not expect it, did not dream it could be possible, that she would be so headstrong as to defy her tribe. I had only a small group of Clever Men and Unseen Spears with me and I was out of my State. The Chaness and Madupan sent wan-iors and mind-fighters at once to stop my return."

"What of your entourage?"

"We used the shadow-warrior."

"A duplicate?"

"No. Not a duplicate. I am a younger son, the Anonymous Son. I am not allowed a clone surrogate to take my place in the Japano shadow-warrior tradition. I have not had time to prepare one yet. But it doesn't matter. As the Anonymous Son I was never seen at the tribal fires. I did not become a known face during the year of waiting. I still have that advantage and another. I had a vat-grown andromorph conditioned to be me, to fool a monitor should such a device be used. He was with me and led my escort while I hid and then came here to Twilight Beach to wait for you. The deception worked. My enemies were halfway to Wani before my entourage was caught and destroyed."

"How did you learn of it?"

John Stone Grey touched his temple. "By implant. A signal sent the moment the shadow-warrior died."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"I have one companion, Captain Tom, a powerful Clever Man named Iain Summondamas, my last bodyguard and friend. He has been away from my side only twice - once as a temporary envoy to the Chaness for several months, once a year ago when he participated in the battle on the Air. The re-staging of this battle is in three days' time. I wish you to take the two of us to Lake Air and bring me to my fleet. It will be waiting there. We have only eighteen core-ships against the Chaness fifty-seven. I must be there to lead the Ajaro, to affirm that I am the Faced Prince, or I forfeit. Chian goes to the Madupan. The comet means nothing.-

I studied the glittering dark eyes, the lean handsome face, the hands composed on the chart table.

"They will suspect immediately what we are doing."

"Yes," the Ab'O said. "They will. But only when we are near the Air. We are just another ship till then. Then it is too late. Your mandate is valid, the Roads are open to you and safe. The tribal satellites and our own ancient Ajaro facility know to watch. No Chaness or Madupan would dare strike at us. Once I am on your ship, on an official Road, under your protection, I am safe."

"Except for pirates and privateers. With carefully insulated hulls."

"That is true. That is the risk. But only when we are near the Air. When we have made it plain that our destination is that place and not some other." I laughed.

"What is it?" the Ab'O said.

"To think that probably the only way the Chaness and Madupan can stop you is to use the very pirates who loot the Airships and photograph the battles."

"The Eagle Cleland Buchanan?"

"He's the one."

John Stone Grey smiled. "I am an eagle too. My totem is the hammoneagle. Buchanan will not stop us. Well?"

"I'll take the Ajaro Prince to the Air."

The Ab'O nodded. "I will not forget this."

"When will your Prince arrive?" I said.

The dark eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"You are Iain Summondamas," I said.

The Ab'O smiled. "Of course I am, Captain Tom. And the Prince arrived several days ago. He is the young outcast we saw on deck splicing cables with your crewman."

I did not warm to the real John Stone Grey as quickly as I had the false one, though the Ajaro Prince was an intense and dedicated young man and promised to make the Ajaro a good Prince. If he lived.

As we ran towards Adelaide on the Aranda-Aidalay Road, the Rynosseros doing 80 k's under twenty kites, I stood with him on the forward deck, watching the wide gibber plain that flanked the Road on all sides, from time to time gazing at the slender figure beside me.

It was easy to tell from his remarks that he was the Anonymous Son, the younger son kept hidden at the tribal capital, with only the year that had lapsed in the company of Summondamas and the other Clever Men to ready him for what was soon to happen.

On some matters, he was still too innocent and uninformed, and there were moments when I forgot about his sheltered life, when his impatient questions became tiresome. Iain Summondamas tried to be there to spare me such moments, but John Stone Grey sometimes insisted, and angrily, that the Clever Man leave us alone together.

"My crime is being young and inexperienced, Captain," the Prince said on one occasion when Iain had left us. "What Iain forgets is that I must measure myself against as many strangers as I can. You, your crewmen, anyone we meet. He must not always be a filter to the world I see."

"That makes good sense, John. But Iain is the last of your bodyguard.

Naturally he feels . . .

"He is my only bodyguard," John Stone Grey said. "The others came to me when Baiame went into the salt. As Anonymous Son I had one andromorph and one Clever Man - Iain. The Ajaro are not a great tribe now. We must win or we will become extinct like the Wagiri."

"Chian chose you. That will force a great alliance with the Chaness.

"If we win at Air," the Prince said. "And Chian chose Iain Summondamas. Three years ago when he was Ajaro envoy to the Chaness for a time, they were close. She accepts me completely because he is my dear friend. Iain says this is not true, but I know better."

"Complex."

"What life is. Cleopatra, Helen of Sparta, Guinevere: men's love of women makes history. People dare things for power, wealth, ideas, all manner of reasons, but they sometimes do extraordinary things just for another person." I watched the gibber flats, studied the kites, and brought my thoughts back to our journey. Even as we ran along the Aranda-Aidalay, I knew that in the south arrangements were being made with Buchanan and perhaps other renegade sandmen to be ready for any ship changing course for the Roads leading near the Air. With the Prince aboard, we had dispensation for constant comsat scans of the deserts we crossed. Several times during an hour, one of the crew - Rim or Strengi - would key in the Ajaro code and data would appear, telling us of any traffic in the region. We knew of the three Chitalice charvolants which passed us at 1042 on the second day a full hour before we met the vessels as they headed north.

It was reassuring that the tribal charvis barely bothered to acknowledge us, just a single banderole from the poop of the closest ship.

Iain Summondamas came on deck when the newcomers had gone. John Stone Grey followed.

"They knew a Clever Man was on board," Iain said, explaining the flag. "I sensed theirs - two. I wonder what they know."

"What can it matter?" I said. "We've carried Clever Men before. Even royalty. A registered ship carrying a Clever Man to his tribe is nothing to cause concern."

"Perhaps, Captain Tom. I cannot stop being my Prince's protector. He is all I

have."

More and more clearly now, despite the bickering, I saw how strong the bond was between the young Prince and his adviser, bodyguard, weapons-master. And it was a two-way thing, a constant learning for them both.

When a look of concern crossed Iain Summondamas' face, I saw John rest a hand on his Clever Man's shoulder.

"We will be in time, Iain. It is our destiny." Then he faced me. "Captain, tell me of Lake Air."

"Lord, we have spoken of it . . . Summondamas said.

But the youth cut him short. Iain, I know what you have told me." The Clever Man nodded and moved away, to stand by Shannon and Scarbo who were tending the controls.

"The ancient name for Air is Eyre," I began, "E-Y-R-E", then realized that as Anonymous Son, limited by the year of grace, John had never been to the fighting ground, that it was Iain who had seen Baiame die. I went on to tell him what many people did not know, that the vast salt lake was almost twenty metres below sea level in some places, and was even now the 'dead heart' of Australia that Professor Gregory had once spoken of, not the burning gibber and sand deserts further north. I could not tell what was new to him and what was known, but plainly my telling of it was as important as what I said. One thing did fascinate him - when I spoke of how the 10,000 square kilometres of burning salt was the ancient flood plain for the river systems of the Diamantina, the Warburton and the Cooper, and told him how once all the inland rivers had sought to end there. Only twice in living memory had the Air flooded, and many suspected that the more recent Ab'O terraforming projects had interfered with the drainage systems and the great artesian table that fed the area. Now the Inland Sea to the north took most of the run-off from the northern and eastern rains, and the Air remained a terrible waste, almost totally empty of life.

John told me things in turn. He had seen recordings taken during the Air battles conducted by his tribe; he had the scans from his old Ajaro satellite of other actions on the lake. He knew the wrecks sunken into the salt, scattered across the immense glaring fighting ground. He even recited the names of all the Ajaro charvolants which had been found amid the mirror-ships and rammed, left crippled and abandoned to the lake.

He said their names as he would a litany, and as he spoke them I turned to see Iain Summondamas watching his dutiful Prince, his eyes glittering with quiet pride and other hidden emotions, his own lips ghosting the words being said exactly as he had taught them. Too young himself to have done much fighting for his State, kept at the tribal capital by the side of a younger son except for his brief time among the Chaness and on the Air, he was thrust now into the affairs of the world: a chase, a vital mission, a pending battle to determine the future of one small world.

I understood more and more what was happening here, the completion of a forced growth, the dramatic changes, the levels of fulfilment being met and satisfied in both men.

At 1125, we turned off the Road and headed into the southwest towards the ancient course of the Cooper. The winds made it difficult for kites, so with John's consent we took the luxury of running on solar power. Scarbo put our silvered inflatables in the sky, four long wide sun-snares that kept the accumulators humming.

At noon, the pirates came.

We were on an old battle road, running between claypans and long steep sandhills red with ferric oxides and scoured by endless winds. We had scan going, and Strengi read an intermittent signal, the sort of indistinct reading that can mean anything from a freak power flux to regional interference to insulated vessels in hiding.

"Broken signal!" he cried, and we acted at once. In two minutes, Scarbo had the sun-snares down and had sent up death-lamps. Rim, Iain, John and I uncovered the deck lenses and harpoons.

"You know tribal policy, Iain," I said as we adjusted the deadly glass frames. "Will Buchanan's men use hi-tech?"

Iain shook his head. "No! Laser gives too clear a trace to the satellites. They dare not risk it. The Chaness could not allow it either. They would be incriminated and made to forfeit."

But no more discussion was possible. The Airmen pirates were suddenly there, two sixty-foot vessels in sand-ochre camouflage coming at us from either side down long open wadis. They had been waiting, primed and ready, but needed to gather speed, so we were past them before they reached the battle trail. All the same, they scored hits with their lamps, lenses and ballistics, and we were smoking at the bow and trailing a land-anchor hanging by its cable from an Airmen harpoon lodged near our stern.

Once the anchor's barbs caught on an outcropping, Rynosseros would be lost - capsized or badly crippled.

But, fortunately, for a time, the battle trail was straight and reasonably smooth, and Shannon steered a careful central course, though the Airmen did not mean to let that happen for long. With no other kites aloft than their twisting, flashing death-lamps, the low armoured and powered ships gathered speed and started closing. Behind us, the anchor dragged, bouncing and sending dust curling up. That at least was in our favour, for it concealed our position and gave Iain and Rim time to cut at the cable.

Above us, one of our death-lamps exploded, a direct hit, and another drag-line harpoon glanced off the starboard edge of our travel platform, then bounced back.

The Airmen were careless to have risked such a shot in the dust haze, for one of the raider ships ran across that deflected land-anchor and damaged itself. Strengi reported one of our pursuers dropping back. Meanwhile, Rim and Iain sawed at the cable.

While they worked, John Stone Grey, still dressed in the fatigues of Buso the deck-boy, came to me on the poop.

"Can we pull that anchor in?" he asked. "Ease the cable tension?" "A major gamble, John," I said.

"They will not get it free in time. Your ship."

Gamble against gamble. I considered the Airmen strategy: a stretch of flats to get harpoons in, then rocks to catch their anchors afterwards. "Tell them!" I said.

The youth ran to Iain and spoke. The Clever Man glanced up at his Prince, then immediately changed actions. Rim fed the harpoon line through an open two-hand winch while Iain guided it.

The anchor came towards us as the line shortened.

Both men worked in a frantic double-handed motion about their cranks while John Stone Grey guided the line. Scarbo gave assistance too once tension was off the harpoon shaft, working it back and forth so that if it pulled free it would tear out less of our hull. Though the spring-barbed head had opened on impact and would still cause us great damage, it might pull free rather than turn and capsize the ship.

Shannon steered; I managed the lenses on the poop and sent flashes of burning light back at the unseen Airmen ships.

"Rocks on scan!" Shannon cried, loudly so Iain and the others could hear.

"Five k's."

Now we would know. Iain and Rim winched furiously; John Stone Grey fed in the cable and hacked at it with Iain's short-sword; Scarbo pulled at the shaft. The anchor was four metres out, sending up a great cloud of dust which boiled along the battle trail and hid our attackers, though all our death-lamps had gone now and there were two more burn points where the light metal plating was buckled and the paint blistered.

There were shouts at the winch. The anchor was clear of the desert, ours to use as a weapon once the line was free. Scarbo immediately returned to the cable-boss, fitted two more lamps and our old Javanese fighting-kite. Iain and Rim hoisted the anchor up to where they could aim it, while John still worked

at the cable.

I felt the uneven terrain under our wheels and sighed with relief. "One ship only!" Strengi called up from scan. "They've definitely lost one.- We could see that was so with the anchor no longer raising its trail of dust: one Airmen raider still closing, its companion somewhere far behind amid red dunes, no doubt with a crippled travel platform.

I fired a small hot-pot harpoon back at the pirate vessel. It went wide, and the Airmen captain increased speed, obviously wanting to get in range of another land-anchor shot or their own hot-pots before we could prime and fire again.

"Now!" John cried, as the cable gave way, and the captured anchor went over the side.

Through the dust from our wheels, and the sun's relentless glare, the Buchanan crew may not have seen our retrieval of that iron claw earlier. Now they saw it coming back at them, and there was a choice of seconds: to go over it or swerve aside.

The raider swerved, but the battle trail had narrowed and the ground was broken and uneven with sand-drifts. As the craft began to topple, the captain applied more power, but it was too late - the Airmen craft disappeared into the sandhills. We barely heard its death roll above the roar of our own wheels.

"Scan clear!" Strengi called, and we relaxed at last, dividing up into our different watches as Rynosseros ran on through the harsh terrain.

The Chaness had tried subterfuge and failed. Now there was only the lake. We approached the Air on its eastern side, along the graded battle circuit beside what had once been the Cooper. We ran between sandhills, below salmon-pink sandridges and knolls flashing with gypsum. Now and then we crossed remainders of the ancient Cooper watercourse, wide flat gullies, some green with lignum and samphire amid the white sand-crests, showing where an Ab'O bore had been sunk in the old way, others ragged with saltbush and nitrebush and strange clumps of never-fail.

Halfway through the afternoon, the sandhills cleared at last to reveal the immense glaring expanse of the lake itself, stretching to the horizon. There was no chance of seeing the Airships in this leering haze, with the sun a lid of burning mercury above a chrome land.

I brought up my old National map, a yellowing laminated facsimile, and placed it with the new map Summondamas had provided.

To the south, hazy in all this space and light, lay the vast sweep of the Madigan Gulf, and other landmarks with their ancient National names -Sulphur Peninsula, Pittosporum Head, Artemia Point, Jackboot Bay.

I turned the deck-scan fully on macro, trying to find any trace of those magical places. Such names had replaced far more ancient, prehistoric tribal names, I realized, just as those on Summondamas' chart had banished ours almost from memory.

Beside me, John Stone Grey surveyed those same distances unaided. "It is a place of lies," he said, and I wasn't sure how to take his words.

On the poop's port side, Iain Summondamas was using the other scan to examine the land ahead. Before I could ask John what he meant, the Clever Man stood back and pointed to a beach of sand and salt seven or eight kilometres away around the fiat shoreline, where the road started to dissolve in the odd suffused light of a mirage. "There!" Summondamas said. "Go there!"

Scarbo had the helm and silently obeyed, shifting our course from the main road so we ran along another battle trail on the edge of the Air, travelling north to the Ajaro rendezvous.

A hot dry wind blew in off the lake, and sent sand hissing in sudden plumes from the domed white sandhills and shifting sandridges on the shore.

We dared not trust our vision. Shannon and I used the scans, while Scarbo wore his desert glasses and steered us between the crests of fuming sand.

It was indeed a place of apocalypse. Bad enough when it filled with water in those rare times. Now, but for the bores and sinks, the condensation posts and

the lonely clanking tribal windmills I had not seen but knew would be out there, it was a bone land.

I watched that beach for ten minutes, mesmerized by the wall of image-ridden light just beyond it, the ever-receding mirage.

Then there was a movement at my elbow. I looked up, and for a moment thought it was Iain Summondamas – the figure had that indefinable presence – but saw instead John Stone Grey. The lake was changing him. How could I have taken this light-skinned Ab'O for an outcast deck-boy? That identity had gone. Now John wore fighting leathers under his djellaba, and the twin swords were thrust into his belt. I dared not say it but he resembled Iain in so many ways, ways that were dear to them both and unspoken.

"You have been here before?" he said.

"Yes, John. A few times. Once I was allowed to witness mind-war on the Sulphur Peninsula. Big corroborree. Many Clever Men, many dragons. No media could attend, but they wanted National accreditation for the outcome. I came by tribal ship then."

Iain Summondamas had come up on deck also.

"Neo-Dieri?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "The outcome made it possible to raise the new tribe. The Neo-Dieri."

"They are false men," Iain said.

"They did not ask to be cloned," I reminded him. "The Ulla are responsible. They found the Dieri mummy and they gave the dead tissue. They won the right to proceed, to restore that people."

Iain turned his dark eyes on me.

"They do not bring ships to the Air. The Neo-Dieri are not allowed ships yet."

"Worse than Nationals," I said, trying to make my point obliquely. "Worse than most Nationals, yes," the Clever Man said.

I tried to change the subject. "The Neo-Dieri care for the lake, Iain. They sink bores and grow things. Sometimes the birds even come. The hammon-eagles," I added pointedly. "The kings of the sky."

Iain stared at me. He might have said: "Vat-bred creatures!" were not that new strain his Prince's sign. He returned instead to the main point. "They are the corruption of an ancient people."

There was silence for a moment, then John Stone Grey spoke. "When the Neo-Dieri come, Iain, we will give them honour."

"They will have honour," Iain said. "Spoken honour is easy."

We discovered that the Ajaro fleet was already in position 20 k's or more out on the lake to the north. Only one ship waited at the rendezvous, standing quietly on the salt a hundred metres from shore. This was Kuddimudra, the one-hundred-and-forty-foot Ajaro flagship, an eccentric painted and armoured charvolant with a stern coloured with dramatic orange flashes. Through half-closed eyes or at a distance, that stern did indeed resemble the tail of a hammon-eagle, though the vessel was named for the ancient water-demon of Air, a different beast entirely.

Waiting on the shore across from the big charvi were the Neo-Dieri, four very dark, shorter-than-average Ab'O's wearing long desert robes. They stood near their modest camp – two wurlies, a battered condensation tower and four camels. John Stone Grey and Iain climbed down to the hard pan and went to greet them formally. They talked awhile out of our hearing, then John returned.

"It is hard for Iain," the young Prince said. "Sometimes he forgets. He tries to be an Elder for me, the father I did not often see. I have left him to make the arrangements with the Neo-Dieri. Can we see the Airship wrecks together?"

"I think we can," I said. "The light is less harsh now."

We left Rynosseros and walked several metres out upon the glaring surface of the Air, listening to the silence. The incredible emptiness made us lower our voices, brought awe, almost a reverence, welling up inside us when we did speak. I raised my pocket glass and peered down the hot metal tube at the

horizon. At first there was nothing to mar the desolation, just the endless waste of white salt meeting a hot sky so pale a blue as to be an uncertain stained white itself.

I moved the glass from north to south, adjusted the magnification and tried again. Now what had been half-imagined darker motes dancing in the lake's searing shimmer resolved into the hulks of long-dead ships lifting out of the salt, curving lunate sections of hull, long skeletal prows thrusting into the sky, rusted broken stern assemblies. The sun and the wind had reduced them to ciphers and strange totems, had taken all meaning from them. At night the winds would race across the dead lake bed and whistle and thrum about the wrecks, lifting the loose deck plates, slamming them back and forth, souging and crying through fused and shattered ports, whispering down the empty passageways, bringing salt and sand and a fleeting ghostly semblance of life. In those rare years when the lake still filled itself from artesian springs and coastal rainfall, the wrecks would sit in a vast sheet of shallow water that glistened with a startling difference under the burning desert sun and moved to the ruffling breezes. Then the wrecks would be lonely twisted reefs painted with faded war-signs, crusted with verdigris and salt, and would for a time resemble sea-going vessels, the detritus of Salamis, Actium or Lepanto, shapes and forms from other places and other ages brought here to this ancient salt-sea, discarded from time.

I handed the glass to John but continued to stare out at where the wrecks were. Saying they reminded me of primeval land and sea animals, whales, dinosaurs, was not true. There was that other comparison, more recent, which always came first whenever I saw the postcard renderings.

"Aircraft," I said. "They're like aircraft."

"I know this," John said, hearing the term his way.

"No. No. Aircraft. Old hi-tech flying machines. I once saw pictures of a bomber aircraft buried in the desert. Big tail vanes like on some of those hulks out there. But with wings."

"I know," John added. "For the sky. Heavier than air, right? Like the shuttles." He sounded accepting but I knew it was an enormous conceptual leap.

"That's right. They are still used in parts of the world. In the great museum collections or as craft of State."

John swung the glass along the horizon.

"There are hundreds of them," he said, marvelling. Though he had seen pictures and recordings and knew the statistics, he was seeing them for the first time in reality.

"You're looking at lifetimes of tribal wars settled out there," I said.

"Thousands of men, hundreds of ships. Great open-plan fleets, the new ones navigating around the wrecks of the old, leaving more wrecks behind."

John handed me the glass. "It is some joke, Tom.-

"Yes," I said. "I" think of aircraft, and here they are in this dry lake, fighting in the Air.

We laughed, then stood in silence. I had time to study John Stone Grey, to consider him as I did the lake, as part of this world.

There was something about the youth that impressed me, that stirred my tried admiration, a recognition of the worth in what is new and young and un- "Most people lack any sense of destiny," he said and caught me watching him. "But not you. Why?"

I began speaking of my time in the Madhouse and how it had changed me. I told him how I had made an oath when I was incarcerated there, coming to self-awareness and objective time-consciousness, of how I vowed quietly, in spoken words, there in my dark place that linked me to all times, all places and possibilities, that I would live as Alexander the Great was said to have lived, for the moment, for the instant couched in the promise of forever. I would take risks, be reckless when it felt good and vital, that I would never be afraid to feel. I explained how it was an easy promise to make then, with all of my life coming back to me like that, but it wasn't simply the sort of pledge the reprieved man makes, a temporary provisional thing, short-lived and

insubstantial.

I knew I would dare things, do things, strive at least, and knew that this would equip me to deal with not just the Ab'Os but all men. It was a divine moment, the sort we all have but often cannot fully grasp; a moment when the psyche is balanced and eloquent to itself, when it sees and knows what cannot be said. Having unlocked the door of my madness, I had such an instant. I knew how it had to be.

John Stone Grey listened, not speaking, not challenging, but seeming to accept that I believed what I said, measuring me as he did anyone he met. He thanked me afterwards and gave me an inquiring look.

"Do you think I am a man of destiny also?" he said.

"I have no doubt of it, John."

"How do you know?"

"Heart knows," I said, which he accepted as he had the rest.

Iain Summondamas had come out on to the lake and was standing a little apart, talking softly with the Neo-Dieri headman, Si Akara, and his three tribesmen. Now the young Prince turned to him.

Iain?"

The Clever Man turned at once. "Yes?"

"Tomorrow you must stay with Rynosseros. You must wait until this action is done."

"No, Prince! I must . . ."

"Iain! Si Akara and Tom Rynosseros are listening. I have good reasons. You will stay with Rynosseros. Please accept this."

Iain did, but it caused him anguish. I watched the salt, not wishing to add to his shame, and only turned back when John and Iain, Si Akara and his men had gone.

At 0600 the next morning, Kuddiinudra lofted twenty-four display kites and moved out onto the Air. We watched her grow smaller until nothing was visible without glass or scan.

Three hours later, in the sharp morning light, the Chaness fleet came. At first there was just a strange edge to the silence, so that we peered out among the wrecks, feeling rather than hearing something across the salt. Then, through scan, low against the horizon, appeared a dark line, a jagged crust between brilliant white and blue, widening, thickening, starting to move forward through the scattered, lonely ship-reefs.

A great fleet under full ceremonial display, advancing to the sound of drums and bullroarers. More than a hundred ships, possibly two hundred, with nearly sixty core-ships, a great array travelling close together, more closely than charvolants normally dared. It was how the Spanish Armada must have looked, or the converging galleys at Actium, only here the sky was filled with kites insulated against mirror-flash, riding lines coated with powdered glass or with tantalum alloy edges. The air thrummed and throbbed with their approach. Then, from the north, came the Ajaro fleet, smaller, much smaller, and with a great many replicant ships considering the eighteen core-ships the Ajaro had. It was a dreamlike scene. In the glare and the hot dry wind, the ships began to lose their sharpness as the lake surface heated and the air shimmered. It was already 55° Celsius.

Si Akara came aboard and climbed to the poop carrying two letters. One he handed to Iain Summondamas, the other he gave to me.

"Do not open," Si Akara told me. "Open later, when this is done." He turned to Iain. "You open this when it is clear in your heart how this business goes, you understand? Only then."

Iain nodded, and the Neo-Dieri went back to where his tribesmen stood with their camels on the hard salt-pan. Iain studied the sealed letter, then put it inside his djellaba. He gripped the rail, put his face into the hood of the macro-scan and watched the ships out on the lake. I did the same, slipping my letter into my own desert robes for later.

The fleets were very close now. Kites were changing, a fascinating thing to see. Most of the brightly-coloured top-kites and parafoils were pulled down.

Drab battle-kites took their place, and sparkling death-lamps gorging on deadly sunlight, flashing and spinning across the approaching lines. On our scans, we started to see some of the ghost-ships for the enantiomorphs they were, which made the sight even more dreamlike and unreal. Now and then a charvolant would approach a wreck buried in the salt and pass through it, dissolving around the hulk and resolving again on the other side as substantial as before. I could not help but get a sense of intersecting realities, of two worlds merging, as if the wrecks scattered across the salt waste were the future remains of today's battle or, conversely, the ghosts of those dead and broken charvolants were re-enacting their final moments yet again, restless in death.

The Chaness and Ajaro ships met. Even where we stood, the air throbbed with sound, with the drone of bullroarers and war-didjeridoos, the constant boom boom boom of the damning-drums, with the chanting of warriors and the deeper roar of so many wheels travelling on salt-pan and sand-flat.

And then, as if in a dream, like so much heat-born mirage on this ancient sea of illusion, the fleets passed through each other.

"First pass," Iain Summondamas said. "Nothing."

Which was not quite true. On the lake surface behind the parting lines of ships were tangles of kites and cables from the hidden core-ships, snared out of the hot sky by long boom-gaffs and spring-powered boomerang snares fired at random into the canopies of the enemy.

But it was an easy pass, as Iain said, and as good as nothing. This early in the engagement, kites and cables could be replaced, new snares and booms set. The fleets cleared one another by several kilometres, slowly turned and began moving together again, gathering speed.

Near me, Iain did not move from the macro-scan. He knew the configurations of the Ajaro ships well, could probably tell which of the twenty or more flagships replicated out there was the real Kuddimudra with his Prince aboard.

The second pass was slow and deadly. Before the ships met, harpoons and hot-pots arced out from the advancing armadas, death-lamps flashed concentrated light into the overlapping canopies. When a burn point on a hull showed fire, or a kite went up in flame, the gunnery crews plotted carefully the likely position of their target ship amidst the myriad random and instantaneous replications that occurred.

It was a complex business. So many ships were attacking at the same time, causing damage and trying to monitor the replications of their own successful hits in the endless search for core-ships. Distribution patterns were the first priority but any worthwhile captain knew what a distraction that could be. They posted spotters and samplers, but for the most part took their chances with any vessel that came at them. Weapon strikes first, if possible, then ramming.

No ships died on that exchange either, but both fleets took smoking hulls with them and the ground between was littered with burning kites, dumped fragments of smouldering superstructure, and bodies.

Another pass followed, and another, and with each one the captains gained a better idea of the enemy's disposition, the pattern of ship details being reproduced. It did not take the Chaness long to know how thinly-spaced the Ajaro ships were.

As the day wore on, we watched the next six passes, saw four Ajaro core-ships rammed and left burning, saw how sections of the Ajaro fleet winked out, leaving large gaps that made safe travelling spaces for the Chaness on the next pass.

The Ajaro were fighting fiercely. Eleven Chaness were either burning on the salt or trailing their formations. It meant approaches came less frequently as the Chaness used the recoveries and turns to re-position their ships. The damaged vessels simply missed a pass to tend to their wounds; the Chaness formation tightened, which they could easily afford to do. The Chaness fleet

may have looked smaller than when it first appeared, but it was still many times larger than the moving patchwork of the Ajaro.

I was awed by the spectacle. Here was what I had seen in the postcards and simulations, the reality of so many charvis working together, not allowed to use their comp systems or scanning equipment, their stored power or hi-tech armament, just the mirror-ship projectors; forced by their own tribal rulings to rely on code weaponry and the constant burning winds of the Air.

On the other side of the sky, looking down on this waste painted in ochre, red, gamboge, mustard and chrome, were the unseen tribal satellites, monitoring the silent com frequencies to see no-one transgressed, reading energy levels and recording every phase of the operations.

There were four more passes that day, and we watched each one of them till our eyes ached. The Ajaro fleet remained an open lattice, the mirror-shps duplicating every hurt suffered by the vessel giving them existence, the core-ships trying to protect the hidden Ship of their Prince by not gathering too closely about him. The lake was dotted with burning hulls and broken travel platforms, some ships toppled on their sides, others standing upright, burning or crippled.

At sunset, the fighting stopped. Si Akara and the other Neo-Dieri watchers around the shore lit bonfires of canegrass to tell the fleets that they must disengage for the day.

The ships did so, gladly, returning in the deep silence of growing dusk to their ends of the lake, moving as dreamlike as ever, phantom silhouettes against the westering sun.

It was 40°C and cooling, and around us the land was changing. The dunes along the shore glowed furnace red, antique gold and salmon pink, flashing with flecks of lime and gypsum. In the strong wind, the sandhills fumed at their crests like newly-born volcanoes. Canegrass and spinifex along the ridges soughed and rustled, and the sun sank like a vast red dish through a chameleon sky: one moment burnt copper, then a stained smoky lavender, and finally, before evening fell altogether, a deep and mournful grey, the colour of wounded angels.

Iain left the scan only when the visibility had gone. He stood away from it, his hair stirring in the wind from the west, and seemed half in trance, staring at the darkness.

"Iain?" I said, knowing better than to interrupt but too concerned for him to stay silent.

The eyes turned to me. "I was not with him," he said.

"Then you have obeyed your Prince well. You have given him his chance."

The Clever Man stared at me. Then he walked away, climbed down to the salt-shore and went to sit with the Neo-Dieri. It was an irony that he should take solace there with those dark revenant folk, but our best silences were still questions and theirs were easy with ancient understanding. I heard voices talking over the soft grumbling of the camels, then the chanting started as the beacon fires burned low. During the night, the hot wind continued to blow out of the west, to set the lanterns creaking and the lines thrumming and bringing salt and sand and little sleep.

The next morning made the darkness of the night seem an illusion, another lie, a promise which had been broken. Again there was the salt-sea shimmering in the clear relentless sunlight, the strong dry winds, a world resolved into a fierce duality, the startling twin registers of blue sky and blinding white salt-flat. The landscape hurt the eyes, even through our glasses. At 0950 it was already 50°C.

Iain Summondamas was back from the Neo-Diri camp, and stood on the deck in fighting-leathers and djellaba, plainly a replenished man, his swords and an ancient Dieri war-boomerang thrust in his belt, a great honour. A peace of sorts had been made, and it was easy to speak to him as if nothing had happened.

At 1000 the ships came with drums and pulsing bullroarers, the Chaness in a

vast concentration, the Ajaro in a carefully-spaced grid, hoping to divide their enemy and see replication patterns. Again the first pass was a cautious thing, a tentative sounding-out of ghosts and distributions. No strikes were made.

On the second pass, an Ajaro ship was hit with a hot-pot, and instantly across the Ajaro formation twenty mirror-ships wore the same plumes of smoke. Death-lamps flashing, some Chaness ships closed in on where the hotpot had landed, and soon they had crippled the core-ship which was left burning on its travel platform. Moments later, the vessel exploded and took its ghosts out with it. Across the salt came the racket of snaphaunce fire that meant close deck-fighting, a steady prickle of sound almost lost in the roar of the wheels and the damning-drums.

Then, with the suddenness of dream, it seemed that half the Ajaro ships were burning. Billows of heavy black smoke folded out from them, which told us that John Stone Grey had semaphored for smokescreens. It was a sound gamble for a smaller fleet to take against a larger – though it meant there would be no more coordinated moves until the smoke cleared and the semaphores could be read again. Now the ghosts were useless, hidden in the pall that rolled across the waste.

For several hours we watched the dark smoke haze, using the scans to see which vessels came and went out of the billows. I shared my instrument with Shannon, Scarbo and Rim, and Strengi too when he came on deck, leaving Iain alone with the other scan.

All of us on Rynosseros had studied the accounts of smokescreen warfare; we could guess what would be happening on the lake. Tactics had changed. For a start, the Chaness had accepted the Ajaro's strategy and were adding smoke of their own, having no doubt decided that they need only manoeuvre as a moving barricade, close together, to catch the Ajaro core-ships or at least foul their kites and cables.

We saw only the black cloud now, deepening, swelling forth, distending and being replenished as the winds of the lake drew it into streamers and eddies. Under that mantle, the desperate contest continued. With visibility reduced to fifty metres in places, it had become a much slower affair. Now the passes did not happen at all. The ships remained in the boiling cathedrals of smoke they had erected for themselves, so many fuming chalices waiting for encounters, ready now for prolonged deck-fighting as much as fire and ballistic strikes and ramming. We waited to see what was resolved, feeling excluded and helpless, in a separate world.

Then, near the end of the day, Iain cried out and staggered away from the macro-scan, to stand steadying himself at the rail.

"Iain!" I cried. "What is it?"

"Mind-war!" he said. "I felt it. A ship came close to Kuddimudra. With many Clever Men. As they passed, they went into trance and killed four of my Prince's Clever Men. They know his ship."

"Are you sure? Could it . . ."

"The ship that did this is called Kurdimurka."

"I don't understand."

"It is chance! 'Kuddimudra' and 'Kurdimurka' refer to the same mythic water creature – the ancient serpent of the Air. It is the same matter the tribes ruled on before. If that ship takes my Prince, there can be his death but no victory. The contest must be fought again a year from now, with fewer ships and fewer men. All we do here will have been in vain."

Without saying more, we went to our scans, though nothing could be seen but the palls of smoke along the horizon.

"Where is John's ship now?" I asked him.

"The extreme left of the Ajaro line," Iain said, not needing his eyes to know such things.

"And is Kurdimurka going after her?"

"They are going to try! Their Clever Men are searching down the mind-lines for Ajaro shapes."

I exchanged glances with Shannon and Rim who stood by the scan awaiting their turns.

"Open your Prince's letter, Iain," I said.

The Clever Man brought his head from the hood and looked across at me. "No!" "You know how this is going to go," I told him. "If the similarly-named ships collide, you will lose both your Prince and the victory. Those ships must be kept apart! Open the letter!"

The Ab'O hesitated, then reached into his desert robes and pulled forth the document. He tore it open and read.

"No!" he cried. "No!"

I reached for the paper and he let me take it. Then, while Iain moved to the rail, I looked at what the young Ajaro Prince had written.

Iain,

This is my final command to you. At the moment you read this, you are Prince of the Ajaro.

Remember that everything I now do is to confirm this fact. It is the Time of the Star and all things can be dared. Chian must be yours.

John Stone Grey.

There were tears in Iain's eyes, and anger and bewilderment. "What can be done?" he asked. Then, as if deciding, he shouted down to the tribesmen crouching on the shore. "Bilili! Bring camels!"

Bilili, the Neo-Dieri jackman, came running, Si Akara with him.

"I want camels!" Iain said when the revenant Ab'O's were on deck. "No, Summondamas," the Neo-Dieri headman said. "No camels on the Air. It is law!" Iain turned to face me. "Captain Tom?"

"Iain, we can't! No ships can be added!"

"You read it," he said. "I am Prince of the Ajaro! It is the Time of the Star. All things can be dared!"

"The satellites!" I reminded him.

Iain snatched the letter from me and thrust it at Si Akara. "Read!" he said.

"Go to com and call the satellites for us! Tell them! Time of the Star. Tell them!"

Si Akara read the letter and muttered to Bilili in dialect. Then Shannon led both men below to our comlink.

Iain turned back to me. "Go, Tom! Go now!"

"The Neo-Dieri!" I said.

"Go! They are true men, you say? Then they are tribal people. Let them get honour. Go! Go!"

It was madness, but I went to the controls, brought life to the circuits. Scarbo hurried to the cable-boss. On the commons, Strengi and Rim began hooking on kites.

"Use power!" Iain cried. "Kites and power! This is now the flagship. But we must be in the battle. Go! Go!"

Rynosseros moved forward, down the salt-pan on to the lake itself. The big wheels ground the sand and salt crystals, gaining speed.

I had never feared for my ship so much. I expected a strike at any moment, a quick decisive death from the comsats in orbit, the Chaness and Madupan especially, but from any of the units appointed to watch the Air.

When the strikes did not come, I added more power from the cells. Our canopy strained out above, the photonic parafoils drinking in the hot light, the death-lamps building their charges. Scarbo put up five colourful top-kites so we would not appear as a pirate to those watching above.

Rynosseros gathered speed, running at 90 k's, then 100. On the commons, Shannon, Strengi and Rim were bringing out weapons – the harpoons and hot-pots and big deck lenses. Scarbo tended the cables, jockeying the kites for greatest pull.

Si Akara was on deck too, yammering in dialect at Iain Summondamas, demanding

to know what was happening, while Bilili remained below at corn, sending our message to all who would listen.

"Si Akara," I heard Iain tell the Neo-Dieri. "You are pariah people. Do you accept that? Here is your chance to be a tribe. The Ajaro are nearly gone. The Ajaro-Dieri may be here on Rynosseros. Here!"

Si Akara was as uncertain as we all were, as no doubt the arbitrators of the Air contests were at this moment. But it was an appeal that worked, that spoke to the pride and secret hopes of the revenant headman.

"We will talk later," Si Akara said, which was as much of an affirmation as Iain Summondamas needed.

We ran across the lake on a surface smoother and harder than any Road we had ever used before. Ahead, the smoke seemed to be thinning before the hot winds but it was an illusion. The ships manoeuvring in those swirls and eddies were adding to the billows at the level where it was still the most effective tactic, creating a storm-light to fight in.

On the quarterdeck of Rynosseros, Iain Summondamas went into trance, questing for concentrations of enemy Clever Men he could engage in mind-war, or use to locate Kuddimudra and the Chaness Kurdimurka before it was too late, before similarly-named flagships engaged and the contest was voided. The rest of us used the time to don fighting-leathers and prepare our personal weapons. Ten kilometres remained. Iain came back to us and saw we were suited and ready. He went to speak but hesitated, then flung aside his djellaba to reveal fully his suit of lights underneath, the small mirrors sewn to the leather catching the fierce sunlight so that he was a blinding figure to look upon.

At three kilometres, we were already in the pall of roiling smoke, and our display kites were hauled down ready for battle. The lowering sun had become a sharp-edged coppery shield, as one sometimes sees it during a sandstorm, suspended a handspan above the horizon.

We could see the first of the ships, hazy shapes, ghost-ships or perhaps the core-ships themselves, we could not tell which. It was a navigator's nightmare – constant half-seen forms, startling in their sudden arrivals and departures, making us edgy, ready to fire at anything.

We had no damning-drums to warn of our position, to signal our allies among the Ajaro, no horns, didjeridoos or bullroarers. We ran along in increasing gloom to the last-known position of the Chaness Kurdimurka, trusting to Iain's reading of the whereabouts of enemy Clever Men to lead us to the Chaness Prince, to save John Stone Grey if we could.

Drums sounded ahead. In the boiling funereal haze, we saw a charvi approaching, two, three, a small formation of Chaness ships. As they saw us, the drums stopped, to deprive us of an accurate bearing.

"No Clever Men aboard!" Iain cried, which meant there was probably only one true ship, but which meant too we had to trust our own judgement.

Scarbo made that decision, confirming my own. "The one on the left is it!" he cried, and at that instant three hot-pot harpoons left our guns, trailing snare lines. There were two hits, one went wide. The Chaness ship flared into flame at the bow and on the starboard edge of its travelling stage, our good fortune for it hampered both steering and gunners. The damning-drums started again, a summoning rhythm, enemy strike, Ajaro core-ship engaged, come to us Chaness.

We veered away at once, not having enough fighting men to engage in deck-war using spears and snaphaunce fire, and not wishing to get caught up with other Chaness ships.

I knew yet again how mortal Rynosseros was, how completely vulnerable, and how untried in fleet fighting we were.

The burning ship tried to use its flames to stop us, but with drive cables afire, it manoeuvred too late. I ran Rynosseros through one of the holoforms, an uncanny thing, then corrected our course for Kurdimurka.

Iain had readings, more mind-war a kilometre ahead. I steered blindly, with the pall hanging across the sky, fed by a furnace-red sunset now, and Iain

Summondamas, the new Ajaro Prince, half in trance, murmuring directions in my ear. Mind-war was ritual war, but in this blind fighting it had a new vital role, to let Clever Men track other Clever Men, and the greatest concentrations were naturally attending the Princes. So Kurdimurka was hunting Kuddimudra, so we were seeking them both, by the mind-fields of their own searching Clever Men.

Another ship crossed our bow, an Ajaro sixty-footer, Jusu, trailing smokescreen at the stern. The small ship saw our colours and the command pennon and changed course to follow Rynosseros. At the same time, Iain flashed into trance and told her Clever Man captain who we were. Jusu's damning-drums started up and on the poop, clear of the cables, crewmen swung their bullroarers in droning accompaniment, calling ships, Ajaro come to us, Prince formation here.

Now the gamble started in earnest, for there might be conflicting signals, two flagships calling, dividing the Ajaro fleet, though I doubted the problem would arise. John Stone Grey, paradoxically hampered by his ritual entourage of Clever Men, would have stopped calling. The brave youth would be gambling that Iain had read the formations, read the Chaness Clever Men, and knew of Kurdimurka's quest for the Ajaro flagship. There were technical breaches here that possibly the Star could not excuse, but there was so little to lose and so much to be gained.

Another ship darted past, a low insulated hull painted in sand-ochre camouflage, slipping by us under six photonic parafoils.

"Pirate!" I cried, but the vessel vanished down a smoke tunnel of its own making, drawing coils and wisps after it like hungry hands.

Buchanan's men again, after more photographs, more provocative and contraband footage for the souvenir kiosks and archives of the coastal cities, for the curiosity-seekers of the world. The Eagle's men may have assisted the Chaness for a time, but now we had reached the Air, they were back to their usual operations, capitalizing on what had to be a sensational development – the presence of a National ship in all this. Comp estimates were seven chances in ten of that raider making it off the lake back to Buchanan's eyrie, four in ten at that speed of colliding with an ancient wreck or another core-vessel, but that was a considered risk. Many Buchanan pirates had become wealthy men. "Kurdimurka ahead!" Iain Summondamas cried.

Before us, shapes were moving in the gloom. Iain went into trance, gave a mind-command for Jusu to rush ahead, the least he could do for Rynosseros and her crew. Then he turned to us.

"The Chaness know what we have done," he said.

"How? Clever Men?"

"Who can say? A powerful Clever Man read it. Buchanan may have told."

"What of Kuddimudra and John Stone Grey?"

"We are too late. His ship is down."

"Survivors?"

"I cannot tell. I believe all the Clever Men with him are dead from mind-war. Jusu will lead us there, but it is very late now. Kurdimurka has gone. I get no readings. All the Chaness ships have gone. Tomorrow will be the end of it." When we found the broken and smouldering hulk of Kuddimudra, the sun had dropped below the line. The smoke haze had vanished before the dry desert wind and the sky had lost the last of its soft rose and lavender twilight. The horizon was rimmed with the deepest verdigris where the copper sun had set. Kuddimudra had collided with an ancient Airship wreck, not at great speed but with enough force to snap the drive lines, sheer the main pins and cripple the leading wheels. The hundred-and-forty-foot Ajaro ship had toppled across the ancient hulk and wedged there, and the Chaness flagship and its escort vessels had simply halted and sent hot-pots then warriors across.

There were three Ajaro survivors, all crewmen, and one of them told us how the Ajaro Clever Men had faced their enemies, greatly outnumbered, and died in savage mind-war. Then most of Kuddimudra's complement, John Stone Grey included, had fallen to Chaness swords and spears, a sad and futile end to the

day.

But instead of a voided war, another year of grace, a re-engagement, and one more chance for the Chaness to put an end to the Ajaro tribe forever for their impudence, the battle would continue tomorrow. For better or worse, we had that much.

Jusu's damning-drums began once more, a forlorn sound, and led the remaining Ajaro ships to us. Slowly, moving carefully, the survivors came kiting in the darkness on a refreshingly-cool change of winds, steering by starlight and moonlight, manoeuvring in around Rynosseros and Jusu and the wreck of Kuddimudra.

In all, there were only five tribal ships left, and one of these, Emu, was crippled and would not be repaired in time for battle. Still, Iain gave her captain honour and did not order his vessel from the lake.

For an hour the exhausted crews of the ships helped to move the Ajaro dead and wounded on to Emu. Then we trudged across the salt in the relief of the cool wind for a meeting on the canted but largely intact commons of Kuddimudra. The captains and their weary crews gathered on the sloping deck, watching the lanterns swinging and creaking in the wind, waiting for Iain Summondamas to tell them what was to happen now.

The young Clever Man climbed to the damaged quarterdeck and introduced himself, for most of the veteran sandsmen had never been to the tribal fires and seen the Anonymous Son's bodyguard, this man John Stone Grey had committed them to honouring.

Iain began softly, but as he explained how he had become Prince, how the similarly-named flagships had almost voided the whole engagement, his voice took on a greater and greater presence.

"Tomorrow we will win!" he said finally, and left a silence.

"Tomorrow finishes it!" one shipmaster said. "Unless we are cunning and greatly fortunate."

"You are Pina," Iain said, identifying the man, name-claiming him before them all.

"Yes."

"Then if what you say is what you believe, Pina, you can do no worse than trust me as John Stone Grey did."

"John Stone Grey is dead," Pina said.

"And gave us a day. And an unvoided war, do you understand? Tomorrow is his."

"Who are these others?" an old Clever Man asked.

"You are Bel," Iain said, and name-claimed him too. "Tom Rynosseros and his crew you know, as I've explained. The others down on the lake there, waiting for us, are Si Akara and his jackman, Bilili, from the NeoDieri. Our friends and brothers."

There was muttering and many hard looks. Several tribesmen peered through the darkness at the figures on the cooling lake.

Si Akara and Bilili did not seem to care. While Iain outlined his plan for bonding the tribes, the Neo-Dieri were studying the lake surface, Si Akara crouched on his haunches running a handful of salt crystals through his fingers.

Iain came to the end of his proposal. "I ask for a ruling on this," he said, and discussion began.

This was tribal business so I went down to where the Neo-Dieri communed with the lake. Si Akara looked up.

"Do you trust us older Ab'Os, Captain Tom?" he said, his dark eyes catching the lamplight from ruined Kuddimudra, the barest hint of a frown visible on the weathered face.

"This is your land twice over," I said. "I trust you."

Si Akara squeezed salt through his fingers. "The Ajaro must go from here.

Twenty kilometres. There!" He pointed in the direction of the NeoDieri camp, where we had entered the lake.

"Why?"

"Nothing is lost if we do it," he said. "We will still be on the lake."

Trust." "In the morning. These men are tired."

Si Akara stood. "Too late. Now!"

"Tell Iain Summondamas."

Si Akara shook his head once. "The Ajaro will not accept it from a Prince who is still unproven. They will not accept it from dead men made hot again."

"Me?"

"Rynosseros is the flagship until Iain orders you from the lake, which he will do soon now to save you from tomorrow's battle. You made this possible, this chance, as much as the boy did. You must persuade him."

"There is so much to lose."

"Trust," Si Akara said, and gave me what was left of his handful of salt. The lumps and flakes felt moist, oddly frangible to the touch, and spoke their silent message clearly enough.

I went to Iain Summondamas. The captains and Clever Men were still deciding on the Neo-Dieri brotherhood, talking as if this was the tribal home-fire and there was a future for the Ajaro beyond the setting of tomorrow's sun.

In a low voice, I told the young Prince what Si Akara had said. He hesitated less time than I had.

"Enough!" he cried, and drew his sword, an echoing, superbly-deft action, so that all eyes locked on him at once. "I have ruled. It is done. We go to the shoreline and we launch our attack from there. Follow Rynosseros. Pina, sit down! Any man who disputes this may fight me, here, now -warriors with sword, Clever Men with mind-war. I am your Prince or I am not."

Everyone stared at the figure on the quarterdeck of Kuddimudra, where so recently John Stone Grey had fought and died. Iain's suit of lights shone through the front of his djellaba. His sword was a mirror curve of reflected lamplight.

The simplicity of the fierce ultimatum was inspiring. Iain had owned his Princehood. I looked to where Si Akara was standing with Bilili and saw the Neo-Dieri headman nodding with what I took to be approval.

Iain strode across the canted deck, through the assembled warriors and Clever Men. "We move in ten minutes,- he said. "Follow my drums!" Then he went back to Rynosseros, taking with him four drummers and seven of the remaining Clever Men.

At the end of the allotted time, the drums and bullroarers began, and the small Ajaro fleet moved away from Kuddimudra. The twenty kilometres to the eastern shore took several hours due to the pace of the damaged hospital ship, and because of the dark wrecks which loomed like flattened twisted skulls, silent death totems, in the searchlights striking out from the atropaic eyes in Rynosseros' bow.

The salt under our wheels told the same story as Si Akara's handful earlier. The lake surface was more powdery than it had been. Our wheels made grooves rimmed with flashing crumbling salt crystals.

What the Chaness would be thinking, what the comsats understood, we could not know, but they were reading six charvolants moving in convoy under non-photonic parafoils, driving across the Air with searchlights ablaze and drums pounding.

With five kilometres to go, there was water under our wheels at last, the beginnings of the flooding that had nearly spelt our doom.

Iain remained with the body of John Stone Grey during our journey across the salt, chanting softly at times, paying his final respects. But when our searchlights picked out clumps of spinifex and hummocks of canegrass on the sandridges, he abandoned his vigil and came up on deck to supervise the landing.

We did not leave the Air. Manoeuvring with difficulty in the darkness our tiny fleet moored a hundred metres out from the Neo-Dieri camels and huts at the shore-camp, our wheels half-covered by water, with winch-lines fixed to posts hammered firmly into the hard pan, ready to haul our vessels to safety.

"How did you know?" Iain asked Si Akara.

The Neo-Dieri laid a finger along his temple. "The wind. The salt. The Star is

here." He shrugged.

And that was the end of it. There would be the scientific explanations -news of rains in the far north-east, a blocked or broken subterranean conduit to the Inland Sea, or accumulated waters from the sandstone catchment areas on the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range feeding through the water table, overloading the Great Artesian Basin underlying this most arid part of Australia.

When the sun rose the next morning, we were in the shallows on the edge of a glittering desert sea, with a strong warm wind blowing waves against the upper edges of our travel platforms and spray cooling our faces.

Out in that windswept expanse of water, the broken Airship wrecks were like strange ocean creatures, barbed, finned and vaned, their toppled hulls spired and arching in the bright sunlight. And in the distance, our scans showed the Chaness fleet swamped and stranded. Most vessels were in five metres of water at least and would never move again. Others, on hummocks of silt, could be given new travel platforms and other lives. But when the flood waters drained back into the hidden chambers of the earth, not one ship would be able to move from the lake on its own. Technically, they belonged to the lake now, though the Chaness were a powerful tribe and there would be negotiations with the arbitrators and special pleas made at the great corroborees, claims for Star dispensation. But most of the ships would stay all the same.

The Chaness had lost, and to the real kuddimudra of this waste, the enduring water spirit of this primeval inland sea.

We waited all morning, until the confirmation came through that the Chaness had forfeited and the Ajaro claim was to be upheld. Then and only then did our ships winch themselves ashore, the successful vessels helping to drag in the others until we were safely on the salt-pan before the sand-ridges facing the new sea.

An Airmen pirate ship, unseen in its ochre markings against the shifting dunes, suddenly came to life and, risking power, moved from where it had been recording our beaching activities.

This raider was not so lucky. The satellites were watching us closely and they received readings. There were flashes of hard light, the distinctive tearing sound of sky-born laser, and the Buchanan vessel exploded and rolled burning into the dunes, a final drama in all that had happened.* * *

At 1400, we were checking out the electrics and cleaning Rynosseros down when Iain Summondamas and Si Akara came aboard.

"We should go," I told the new Prince.

He nodded. "My hand will always be open to you, Captain Tom." "I value that greatly, Prince."

"Iain," I said, and smiled.

"One day," he continued, "I may send you a deck-boy, a younger son, to be taught the National ways. Will you accept this?"

"I will gladly, Iain."

Iain Summondamas nodded again. "One thing more. Your letter." "You wish to know what John Stone Grey said to me?"

"No," Iain said. "While I do not know, my Prince still lives. He has something more to say. But you will read it when you leave here, while you can see the Ajaro-Dieri ships and the lake. Yes?"

"Yes."

We shook hands then, Iain first, then Si Akara, and as we did, the headman slipped something small and hard into my palm, his eyes telling me of its secrecy.

Then the Ab'Os turned and left Rynosseros. As they headed for Jusu, I examined what Si Akara had given me, then issued the order to move out.

We were running through the sandhills and fuming ridges under the hot afternoon sun when I drew John Stone Grey's letter from inside my djellaba. I broke the seal, opened it out and read.

Tom,

Win or lose, you have survived. I have survived in you and in lain, for I must believe that he lives also and in great honour. Si Akara has given you a small thing, a stasis-flask with an authorization. The flask contains some cells for cloning.

Grow me this andromorph. In three years he will be my age now, if the program is true: an unwed son's only chance, a father no other way. Let him earn his way on the Starship, where I learned what I needed. Call him Hammon.

I love you for what you have done, and wish I could be there now to tell you so.

John Stone Grey

Ajaro Prince

Anonymous Son Hammon-Eagle.

I laughed and wept.

The Starship. Of course, the Starship. Airships and Starships!

Rynosseros moved at speed amid the dunes, with twenty kites in the sky and a strong lake wind at our backs. When I turned to look behind me, it was as much to hide the tears falling on to John Stone Grey's final words as to see Jusu and the tiny flashing mirror-figure of lain Summondamas.

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

Everything we do is to complete our destiny, everything, word or deed, and as I held the stasis-flask firmly in my hand, it seemed that this fact could never be more true than at that moment, as we ran from the Air, safe again, full of the blessings of renewal and a sense of destiny at the Time of the Star.