

Prologue

THE MAN HAD BEEN WAITING IN THE SHADOWS OF

the alley for an hour when the first explosion came from the far side of the temple. The two sentries at the courtyard entrance turned instinctively in that direction, and the man stepped quickly across the road to flatten himself against the wall. He waited, hardly breathing. The sentries were only boys, but they were deadly.

The second blast was followed by distant shouts. The sentries drew their side arms and left their post at a run. The man grasped the top of the wall, pulled himself over and dropped lightly to the other side. Still crouching, he scanned the courtyard.

"I'm over the wall," he whispered. The small communications device was pinned to the neckband of his black fatigues. "Nobody around. Set off the rest of the caps in thirty seconds, then get out of here."

The courtyard was long and narrow, paved with stone. In the pale starlight he could see scattered crouching shapes that he took to be benches and

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clumps of low vegetation. Farther back was the great dark form of the temple building. Light flickered at the arched entrance. A single spire curved upward twenty meters, ghostly white against the night sky.

The man's name was Cleve Quinton. He had prepared himself as well as he could for this night, but as he crouched there looking up at the spire, he felt the danger of this place settle into his stomach like a hard knot. All his muscles were tensed for him to scramble back over the wall and escape into the darkness.

Stay calm, he told himself. He breathed slowly and forced his muscles to relax, one by one. But he couldn't take his eyes off the slender spire.

From behind the temple came a rattling crescendo of explosions. The sound startled him even

though he should have expected it. The commotion of voices told him the temple guards were still back there trying to find the source of the explosions. He drew a handgun from an inside pocket of his fatigues, checked the bead cartridge for a full load and made sure the scatter nozzle was in place. Keeping close to the wall, he made his way carefully across the courtyard to the lighted archway that was the temple's entrance. He climbed the shallow steps and ducked through the archway without a backward glance. To his left was the wide doorway that led into the sacred chamber. The flickering light came from there.

For a moment he stared into the chamber, then turned right and went through another low doorway and along a short passage to a flight of stairs.

"I'm going up," he said, surprised at the steady sound of his voice. The stomach pains of danger grew more acute now that he was inside the temple.

The light over the stairs was dim and he knew he

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would have to be careful; the steps had been designed for feet smaller than human. A ventilation grille was affixed to the wall just below the second-floor landing. Quinton moved past it to the landing and checked the door to make sure he could get through it quickly. That would be his escape route:

up to the roof, down along the wall on the far side, out into the darkness of the road—with, no doubt, the Sons of God shrieking after him.

He went back to the ventilation grille and returned the scatter gun to his pocket, then unslung his canvas bag and opened it on the landing. It took less than a minute to select the tool he needed and remove the grillwork fastenings. Then he was squirming through the horizontal metal duct. His hands and elbows stirred up choking dust. Ahead of him a dim square of light marked another ventilation outlet. He moved to it carefully and looked through. Below him was a vast circular room.

"I've reached the chamber." His eyes went to the

center of the room. "I can see the chauka." Despite the anxiety, he felt a slight disappointment; from here the chauka looked to be nothing more than a shallow metal dish about two meters across. He was unsure of its color in the dim light—grayish, he thought, or dull blue. Its base was hidden from view. Protruding from one side just below the edge of the dish was a single slender rod.

According to High Elder Alban Brill and his cronies in the Holy Order, the chauka was the most sacred of the holy relics of the Tal Tahir.

"Doesn't look like much," he said softly, thinking of his friends who had died because of the chauka. He edged forward so he could see the rest of the room. The light came from several flickering globes that were spaced along the far wall. "There are a lot of. . ." He paused, trying to think of a way

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to describe the strange-looking objects that were scattered across the floor like clumps of stony, slab-sided vegetation. They ranged in height from knee-high to a few that were taller than a man. Oddly shaped notches had been cut into the base of each. After a moment he realized that the objects were arranged in concentric circles that radiated outward from the chauka.

"Pedestals of some kind," he said at last, and made an effort to describe them. Then he heard shuffling sounds from the outer chamber. "The ceremony's about to start. I'll have to keep quiet now."

Through the ventilation grille he could see the first of the deacons as they came, two by two, through the archway. They filed by ten feet from Quinton's watching eyes and formed a neat line along the curve of the wall under the light globes. There were ten of them in white, calf-length robes. They stood perfectly still with their eyes fixed on the dish of the chauka. Quinton's eyes went back to the archway as the six elders began to file through, straight-backed in appropriately regal style. They took positions closer to the chauka, just inside the inner circle of pedestals. They, too, fixed their eyes on the metal dish.

For a long moment the room was held by heavy silence. Then two more figures moved slowly through the archway. The most striking was a tall man with pale skin that contrasted sharply with his red, ankle-length robe. Quinton recognized him instantly—Alban Brill, High Elder of the Tal Tahir, leader of the Holy Order and the most powerful man on the planet. A palm-sized silver disk gleamed at his throat. The Godstone. At his side walked a thin boy with short dark hair. The boy's smooth cheeks reflected the light and gleamed with health.

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The boy was the initiate; tonight he would become a member of the Sons of God.

A slight shudder passed through Quinton. He caught himself, thought: Now, what was that for? Alban Brill was only an old man, and the Holy Order was made up of blind fanatics.

Dangerous fanatics, he reminded himself, and carefully pulled the scatter gun out of the deep pocket.

High Elder Brill and the boy walked together past the deacons and elders, and stopped in front of the chauka. The High Elder's eyes were invisible in the pits of shadow beneath his brow. Quinton gripped the handle of the scatter gun, wondering if the proper moment had come. Brill was within easy range. But something made him wait. Curiosity!

Sudden movement brought Quinton's eyes back to the far wall. As if they had all received a silent signal at the same instant, each deacon extracted a long, flutelike instrument from the folds of his gown. They lifted the instruments and began playing. Quinton had heard the music of the priams before—if it could be called music. But there was no melody, only a series of low hums and high-pitched tones that merged from time to time into an eerie chorus.

High Elder Brill stood rigid in front of the chauka with the young boy a half step behind him. Then Brill's hands went wide and the full sleeves of his robe billowed. The music ceased abruptly. In the dim light the High Elder's narrow face shone

white like a skull. Staring intently at the empty space above the dish of the chauka, he began to moan softly. Then his voice broke into a series of short, choppy syllables. Quinton strained to hear. Brill was speaking gibberish—or a language Quinton had never heard. Then he fell silent, his eyes still on the chauka. The boy stood rigid beside

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him. Brill spoke again, this time in Basic. His voice had lapsed into the singsong tones of a chant:

"Oh Great One, who comforts us,

King of all holy places,

Lord Tern the Almighty,

Come, we ask you, hear our prayers."

The elders repeated the chant in a chorus of mixed high and low tones, their voices echoing around the chamber. The deacons back against the wall remained silent. Brill spoke again:

"Hear this our song to you,
Monarch of monarchs in whose name
Our enemies are slain.
We praise thee!"

This last was followed by a sudden clapping of hands that made Quinton jump a little. The elders echoed the chant. Then High Elder Brill knelt down on the paved floor in front of the chauka and held his hands out to it with palms open, as if he were warming them over an open fire. The elders began to chant:

"Lord Tern, Lord Tern, Lord Tern . . ."

Brill reached to his throat, and Quinton thought at first he was going to unclasp the robe. Then he realized the High Elder was removing the Godstone. Brill fondled the round disk and fitted it into the palm of his hand as if it offered cool comfort. Through all this the elders continued the droning chant. Then Brill reached out slowly and brought the Godstone into contact with the rod protruding from the edge of the chauka. Quinton heard a faint snap\

"Lord Tern, Lord Tern . . ."

Quinton swallowed. The skin of his face felt hot and dry, and he decided he had seen as much of

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this ceremony as he wanted. He lifted the gun and carefully eased the nozzle out between the rods of the grillwork. His thumb moved to the firing stud.

But once again he hesitated, telling himself that the boy stood too close and might be hit by the beads. Another part of him admitted that he was only making excuses. He was an expert with the scatter gun; he could easily hit Brill without endangering the boy. The truth was, Quinton had killed only on two other occasions, and both times he had done so in defense of his life. He didn't relish the thought of shooting High Elder Brill from a hiding place.

High Elder Brill is sick, he reminded himself. He is infecting the entire planet of Clarion with his sickness.

"Lord Tern, Lord Tern,
Lord Tern, Lord Tern:'"

The chant was building in intensity. High Elder Brill's hands wove a pattern in the air above the dish of the chauka. Quinton's thumb exerted pressure on the gun's firing stud—then his eyes jerked back to the chauka. The large dish had begun to change. He strained to see. Something was taking shape in the center of the dish, but he couldn't quite fix his eye on it. The image was slippery, like a reflection in a rippling pond.

"Hear our prayer, oh holy king,

Lord Tern the Almighty.

Smite those who would forsake thee!"

After the last rousing chant, Brill and the rest of the elders fell silent. All their attention went to the chauka. The swirling haze in the shallow dish began to take form and substance.

Quinton stared, gripped by a sudden, over-

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whelming sense of dread. Then the object in the dish snapped into focus. A small sound escaped Quinton. He dropped the gun and put his hand to his mouth, turning it so the flesh of the palm was pressed between his teeth. He bit down until the blood ran. When that wasn't enough to stifle the terror that crawled through him, he opened his mouth and screamed.

Chapter One

"IS THAT HOW IT STARTED, GRANDFATHER?"

The old man stirred in his chair and looked down at the girl, who sat cross-legged on a heavy rug at his feet. She seemed disappointed.

"What about the player's magic and Jacque the Fearless, who struck down the evil ones with fire from his hands?" She was a twelve-year-old with short dark hair and a pixie face and the watchful, gleaming eyes of her mother. Her name was Danita.

"The story began when Cleve Quinton was killed in the sacred chamber," the old man answered. "Borland Avery came to Clarion a few months later. But there's something you have to remember." He paused, wanting her to understand this above all. "Dorland Avery was a player but he was human. So was Jacque Hakim. That's what made them special. Gods can do anything. Humans have to work harder to accomplish miracles."

Dorland Avery stood motionless in the center of the stage with his feet slightly apart and his arms stretched out toward the audience. He was a strik-

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ing figure in his player's garb: loose-fitting white jumpsuit with black accents on sleeves and pant legs, wide black belt, a white headband with a silver medallion. Colors flashed around him and reflected

off the curtained backdrop, changing rapidly through red, green, blue and orange with the beat of the music. He was deep in the player's trance.

In the glass-enclosed control booth above the stage, Paul Jurick took his eyes away from Dorland and looked out over the audience. Nearly twenty thousand tonight, another full house. It was too dark to see their faces, but he knew from the absolute stillness that they were caught up in

Dorland's performance.

"Take a look," said Jeffrey Hanes from the chair

beside him. Hanes had been scanning the darkened auditorium with night goggles. Now his attention was on something in the balcony, far out behind the booth. He handed the goggles to Paul. "Upper level, fifth row on the left. A man with a beard."

Paul swiveled his chair around to take a look. The goggles gave a clear image but filtered out colors to leave everything in shades of gray. He counted the balcony rows and found the man.

"What about him?"

"He just came in," Hanes said. "Late for the

show. He looks nervous. And that outfit—he isn't from around here, that's for sure."

"Neither are we," Paul pointed out. "Last time I checked, being from someplace else wasn't a crime." The man in the balcony sat stiffly in his chair, arms thrust out with his hands grasping his knees. He stared fixedly at the stage. Paul studied what he could see of the face behind the beard. "He looks nervous about something, but not dangerous."

"The most effective killers never look dangerous."

Paul lowered the goggles and looked sideways at

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Hanes. Hanes was a small, intense-looking man who seldom smiled. Like Paul, he had served in the

Guard. But while Paul had been punching computer keys and checking supply orders for clerical accuracy, Hanes had been chasing Fringe outlaws in a Guard patrol ship. Four years ago he had gotten his belly full of that, and Paul had hired him to take charge of Dorland Avery's private security team. He took his job seriously, but in Paul's opinion he had a tendency to overreact to anything he thought to be even slightly out of the ordinary.

"We get threatening calls all the time," Paul said. "There're a lot of nuts out there. So far they haven't had the guts to follow through."

Hanes kept silent, but Paul knew he wasn't convinced. The message that had come through the hotel switchboard three hours before the show was brief and to the point: if Dorland Avery performed at the hotel's main auditorium tonight, he would be killed. Period. No reason was given, and no conditions—and of course the caller had not identified himself. Dorland knew about the call, but that hadn't stopped him from going on with the show. Even Paul was beginning to take such threats almost casually. They came with the job for well-known entertainers, especially psi-players.

Paul lifted the goggles again to look at the man in the balcony. "Anyway, he's too far from the stage to do anything."

"Not if he planted something earlier," Hanes pointed out. "An explosive, or a gas canister. He could have put it on the stage and set it to go off from a remote trigger." Hanes reached for the communicator on his belt, flipped it open and issued a few brief orders to the men he had stationed in the balcony. Then he turned to look down at the stage. "He's almost done, isn't he?"

Paul swiveled back around. The brilliant colors had given way to subdued violets and blues as the

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intensity of the music diminished. The two technicians who occupied the other chairs in the control booth were busy at their consoles, but Dorland had direct control over the music and most of the stage lights from micropads that were strapped to his

hands.

Now Dorland's face was tilted upward, pale and

calm. The medallion on his forehead reflected glittering fragments of light. Paul stared for a moment, wondering what was going on inside Dorland's head. The player's trance was deep, there was no doubt of that—

"Well?" said Hanes.

Paul blinked and cleared his throat. "He'll wrap

it up in ten minutes or so."

Hanes was silent a moment, then: "If anything's

going to happen, it'll be at the end."

Paul pulled his eyes away from Doriand.

"What?"

"That's when all the lights go out but the big

white spot from the ceiling."

Then Paul understood, and he had to admit it made sense. Doriand always closed his show the same way. The big speakers would be roaring with that peculiar hum Doriand called the mood relaxer, and the auditorium would be dark except for the single brilliant light on the stage. Doriand would make a perfect target with his arms stretched out and his feet apart in the stance that always made Paul think uncomfortably of a crucifixion. In the darkness a man would probably be able to slip away without trouble; after one of Dorland's shows, most people in the audience felt drained, without the motivation to do more than hug the person they had come with or sit quietly and consider the

deeper meaning of life.

"I'm going up to the balcony," Hanes said abruptly. He left his seat, stepped through the doorway onto the platform and climbed quickly up

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the narrow ladder. A moment later he disappeared through the dark opening that led to the service area above the ceiling. Paul lifted the goggles again. The bearded man seemed unaware of the two

security men who stood in the darkened aisle a few rows behind him. As Paul watched, Hanes emerged from a side door and went down the aisle to stand with his men.

Paul had begun to lower the goggles when he saw something that made him look again. The bearded man had leaned forward in his seat, eyes widening into an intense stare. Puzzled, Paul turned to follow the man's line of vision. He scanned the area near the stage and saw nothing that looked out of place. He turned the goggles back to the balcony and hit the stud to enlarge the image. The man was definitely reacting to something he had seen near the stage. Now Paul saw that he was not staring directly at the stage, but slightly to the side.

Again Paul followed the man's line of sight. He moved the goggles slowly across each of the first few rows; then something caught his attention and he brought them back for a second look. A thin, balding man in a dark suit sat in an aisle seat of the front row. The goggles had passed over him before, but now Paul realized that the man was not watching Dorland. He had instead turned to look down the aisle at one of Hanes's security guards, who was stationed near the exit door. As the thin man turned back to the stage, Paul saw that something was clasped in his hands. Paul touched the zoom control again and leaned forward closer to the glass wall for a better angle of view.

The object in the man's hands was a gun.

Paul felt a surge of adrenaline, and his eyes jerked back to the stage. The beat of the music had been replaced with a light melody. Dorland's face was tilted up, patterned by changing light and shadow. He was drawing close to the moment when

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sudden darkness would fall and the white beam from the overhead spotlight would hit him.

Sweat trickled inside the collar of Paul's shirt. The security guard stationed at the exit near the stage was watching Dorland, and it was clear he hadn't noticed the man in the front row. Paul

swiveled back to look at Jeffrey Hanes and the other security men. Even if he could somehow get their attention, they would never be able to reach the front row of the auditorium in time.

Paul rose from his chair, his mind churning with indecision. Then he ducked through the opening to the platform, grasped the ladder rails and went up as fast as he could through the ceiling access port. His heart pounded as he forced himself to wait a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Service catwalks with safety rails led out across the suspended ceiling. He selected one that angled in the right direction and ran along it to an exit point that he judged to be close to the stage. He dropped down the ladder to a service corridor and followed that to a door that opened into the auditorium.

The security man at the stage door was Steph Hendrikson. Paul yelled as he ran past, but didn't wait to see if Hendrikson comprehended. He rushed down the darkened aisle with no specific plan in mind, stumbling over feet yet somehow keeping his balance, ignoring the confused murmur that grew behind him. He risked a glance at the stage as the music crashed and broke into another light melody. Colors blossomed, washing away the shadows as they brightened to dazzling shades of yellow. Dorland stood rigid, arms stretched toward the ceiling. The music faded and a deep hum began to build from the speakers. The man in the front row lifted his hand and Paul saw the reflected gleam

of metal.

"No!" he yelled, still running.

The man began to turn an instant before Paul hit

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him from the back and at the same time grabbed for the wrist that held the gun, trying desperately to deflect it. He caught a brief glimpse of a narrow face and cold blue eyes before the gun's muzzle winked, and Paul heard the snap of superheated air beside his ear. The men grappled, then fell across the railing and out into the aisle. Paul's knee smashed into one of the rail supports, and a monstrous bolt of pain rammed up his leg. The thin man twisted free with surprising strength and jerked around, bringing the gun up. Paul had time

to stare at the dark muzzle an instant before he heard a crack! from behind him. The man grunted once and rolled over onto his face and lay still. Paul fell back onto his elbows and drew in whacking breaths. Steph Hendrikson leaned over him with his gun still smelling faintly of hot metal.

"Are you okay, Mr. Jurick?"

Paul couldn't find the breath to answer. Hendrikson helped him to his feet. A sudden murmur broke out around them as people began to react to what had happened. Paul turned to look up at the stage. Dorland stood motionless, arms at his sides. A violet hue still hung around him, drifting in faint, smoky wisps. His eyes were dark, half lidded, still full of the player's trance. The medalion on his forehead gleamed with purple light.

"Get him out of here," Paul rasped.

Hendrikson hesitated, looking down at the man who still lay motionless at their feet. Then Jeffrey Hanes and two of his men arrived, and Hanes took charge with a few barked orders. Two of the men went up the steps and hustled Dorland behind the curtain to the dressing room.

"You all right?" Hanes asked.

Paul nodded and looked down at the man in the aisle. "Is he . . ." The words trailed off as the odor of scorched flesh reached his nostrils. He felt something turn over in his stomach.

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Hanes took Paul's arm and pulled him away from the body. "Go back with Dorland. I'll take care of

things out here."

Paul didn't argue. His knee was beginning to cry

for attention by the time he had gone around the side of the stage and down the short passageway that led to the dressing room. Fastened to the door was a metal plate with simple black lettering:

DORLAND AVERY.

Steph Hendrikson stood just inside. He turned as Paul came in, his hand going automatically to the handle of his side arm, then moving away when he

saw who it was.

"Where's Dorland?" Paul asked.

"Changing." Hendrikson waved a hand toward the partitioned area at the back of the room. His eyes remained on Paul. "I don't know what happened out there, Mr. Jurick. I should've spotted that guy. Mr. Avery's show was so ... well . . ." His shoulders moved in a slight shrug.

"We'll talk about it later," Paul said. One of Jeffrey Hanes's greatest problems in maintaining security around Dorland Avery was that the mesmerizing effects of Dorland's performance often interfered with the alert watchfulness that was needed by the security men. The men were supposed to guard against getting too caught up in Dorland's show, but that required a mental discipline that not everyone possessed. Even Paul often felt himself sinking into the music and colors. It would be up to Hanes to decide if Steph Hendrikson would be able to do his job well enough to remain a part of the security team. "Wait outside. Don't let anyone in but Jeffrey."

Hendrikson nodded and left the room. Paul crossed to the utility counter to pour himself a cup of hot jo. The dressing room was large and luxurious, with a sofa and several deep-cushioned chairs grouped around an entertainment console in one

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corner, and an interstream commset in another. The carpet was thick and white. The dressing area was separated from the lounge area by the only piece of dark furniture in the room—a large, freestanding wooden wardrobe.

"Steph told me what happened."

Paul turned from the counter as Dorland came around the wardrobe. He had exchanged the white jumpsuit for the sort of clothing he usually wore offstage—dark slacks and a faded blue shirt.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure." Paul sat down in one of the cushioned chairs, took a sip of coffee and realized the cup was shaking so much he nearly slopped the hot liquid over his hand. He put the cup carefully on a low table beside him.

"Why were you limping?" Dorland asked.

"Banged my leg on something. It isn't serious."

"Make sure you have somebody look at it."

"Yes, Mother."

"Do you think this had anything to do with the call we got?"

"Presumably." Something about the way Dorland asked the question made Paul look at him more closely. Dorland's face was still pale, but his eyes were sharp and direct, and Paul knew the last vestiges of the player's trance had left him. "Do you have any idea why someone would try to kill you?"

"Of course not." Dorland turned away abruptly and went to the window. He pressed the wall stud to clear it and looked out at the falling dusk.

"Unhappy fan, I suppose."

"He didn't look like a fan." Paul thought about the cold blue eyes. "What he did was no impulse."

The door slid open to admit Jeffrey Hanes. He did not look happy.

"He's still alive," he said before they could ask. "In surgery now, but the doctors don't give him much chance. I don't think we'll be getting any

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answers out of him. The one in the balcony got away."

"Got away?" Paul asked in surprise. "How?"

"He slipped out before we could seal the exits."

"Damn."

"The Guard threw a net around the auditorium," Hanes went on. "Maybe we'll get lucky. Anyway, I think we should cancel the next show and get out of here."

"I agree," Paul said.

Dorland had kept silent, as if he had little interest in what had happened in the auditorium. Now he turned from the window and said, "We can't cancel the show this late. People have come from all over the local sector to see it. Besides, we'll have to schedule another one to make up for the show that was ruined."

"Ruined?" Paul said. "You were almost done. In another five minutes—"

"Set it up for tomorrow night," Dorland went on in the same quiet voice. He thought for a moment, then added, "Some people may not be able to come back because of other plans. Refund double their ticket price. That might help make up for what

happened."

Paul stared gloomily down at his hands, calculating what that would cost. He bit his lip and turned to Hanes. "Step up security for tonight. Two guards at each door, and at least a dozen inside. You'll have to use local people, but make sure you screen

them."

Hanes nodded and turned to leave. After the door had hissed shut, Paul leaned his head back and closed his eyes, letting himself sink deeper into the cushions of the chair. He felt as if all the energy had been drained out of him. A moment later he heard the sound of the heavy wardrobe door sliding open.

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"You aren't going out, I hope," he said without opening his eyes.

"Not really."

Paul's eyes snapped open. He had never heard the voice before. The bearded man stepped out of the wardrobe, ducking under the low doorway. He held a small black gun in one hand. Dorland had turned from the window to stare at him.

The man closed the wardrobe door and glanced at Paul. Then his eyes went to Dorland. A slow grin grew across his face.

"Hello, Dorland," he said. "It's been a long time."

Chapter Two

WHEN DORLAND DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, THE MAN

crossed the room in three long strides and dropped into one of the chairs across from Paul. He was a big, round-shouldered man with skin that was lined and creased from exposure to the elements. His eyelids drooped, giving him a look of haughty superciliousness. His hair was thin and sun-bleached. He seemed relaxed and at ease—much different from the way he had looked in the auditorium. The brown coveralls he wore looked as if he'd slept in them three days running.

He glanced at the door, then waved the gun. "Better lock that."

Paul hesitated, thinking about Hendrikson just outside. Then his eyes went back to the gun. It was small and black, with a bulbous muzzle and a large cylinder just above the handle grip that might have been the power supply. Paul wasn't familiar with the style, but the gun looked capable enough in the man's hand to make him decide against the idea that had half formed in his head. He pushed himself out of the chair and crossed the room to

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touch the thermal dimple beside the door. The lock slid home with a soft whir.

After Paul returned to his chair, the man's eyes went back to Dorland.

"My name is Selmer Ogram. Maybe you remember me." He spoke Basic with an accent that favored lilting vowels and light consonants. When Dorland didn't respond, he shrugged. "Or maybe not. I was just a kid when you left Clarion. My father was John Ogram." He paused again as if he expected the name to have an impact. "He was killed at the Troy Three interchange a few months after he took you out. Deacon Krause got him."

Still Dorland remained silent. He stood stiffly near the open window, staring at Ogram, his face drawn with lines of tension. Ogram's statements meant nothing to Paul. He had worked for Dorland Avery for nearly five years and had never heard him mention the name Ogram or a place called Clarion. But it was clear that Ogram's words were touching something inside Dorland.

"It would help if you told us what this is all about," Paul said.

Ogram shifted his hooded eyes. "Who are you?"

"Paul Jurick. I'm Mr. Avery's business manager."

Ogram chuckled.

"Something funny about that?"

"Dorland Avery, the great psi-player." Ogram shook his head. "Coming here was a waste of time as far as I'm concerned."

"Feel free to leave," Paul suggested.

Ogram grinned crookedly. "Can't. Not till I've done my duty."

"You still haven't told us what that is. Your friend nearly killed Mr. Avery back there in the auditorium."

"Deacon Bekman is no friend of mine," Ogram

said. "But my business isn't with you. Keep quiet while I have a chat with the great psi-player."

The mocking tone infuriated Paul, but there was little he could do while Ogram held the black gun. He throttled his anger and leaned back in the chair.

"We need your help," Ogram went on, his eyes going back to Dorland. "The situation at home has gone from bad to impossible. Sabastian wants you to come back."

Another statement that made no sense to Paul. He and Dorland had left their homeworld of Farrady three weeks ago to begin the tour, but he had been in daily contact with Trisha. She would have told him if any "situation" had developed that involved Dorland.

"High Elder Brill is turning out to be even worse than we thought," Ogram went on. "He's more destructive than all the other High Elders together. He's using Lord Tern's revelations as an excuse to commit the worst atrocities you can imagine. Sabastian says we have to stop him." Ogram paused, his eyes remaining fixed on Dorland. "We sent a man into the sacred chamber. Cleve Quinton." He nodded. "Yes, I thought you would remember Cleve. He was a good friend of mine."

Dorland spoke for the first time, his voice low and flat. "Cleve went to the chamber?"

"Like I said, we're desperate. Cleve saw something in the chamber that made him lose his mind. Then the deacons killed him."

A long silence drew out. Paul waited, gripping the arms of his chair, his eyes on Dorland. Lord Tern. High Elder Alban Brill. The religious implications were obvious enough, but Paul was sure he had never heard the names before.

When Dorland spoke again, his voice was strained, the words hesitant. "Sabastian—he is well?"

Ogram flip-flopped a hand. "As well as can be expected at his age. He lost a leg three years ago fighting his way out of a trap the deacons left for him. A doctor from Fairhope fitted a wooden peg

for him. He gets by."

Dorland's eyes dropped to his hands. "Blackburn?"

"Ah, yes. Olaf is still with us. Not K-amer,

though. He and Brit Jones were pinned to the God

Wall last year."

Something like a sigh escaped Dorland's compressed lips. Then: "My father knew violence would break out eventually. His main goal was to

prevent it."

"High Elder Brill started it, not us," Ogram said defensively. "You should know that. Sabastian says you're the only one who might be able to find out what Brill is up to. He says your early training will help you find a way to stop him." He paused, watching Dorland. "You ran out on us once. There's no reason to think you would come back now. But Sabastian says you're our last hope. He also says that you have to come back on your own. He doesn't want me to force you."

Paul issued a grunt of humorless laughter.

"That's why you brought the gun?"

"I brought the gun to make sure nobody tried to stop me until I could get my piece said."

"You've done that. Now you can get out."

"I'm waiting for the answer."

"His answer is no—"

"You're probably right," Ogram said. He slumped further down in the chair with his legs straight out in front of him. Crossed at the ankles. The black gun was held loosely in his lap. The tension in his face gave way to a look of heavy-lidded unconcern. "But I have to hear it from the great psi-player himself."

Paul turned to Dorland. "Tell him you aren't interested so he'll get out of here."

Dorland' nodded slightly, but his eyes were on Ogram. "I'm sorry about John. He was a good man. I owe him my life."

"Well, at least you acknowledge that."

"I didn't run out. I wanted to stay, but Sabastian pushed me."

"Then you'll come back?"

"I can't. We're on a tour, booked for five more shows."

Ogram's eyelids lifted slightly. "You don't believe the future of Clarion and thousands of lives are worth your five precious shows?" He waited. Then his lips formed the slight, mocking smile. "No, I suppose not." He gathered his legs in front of him and pushed himself out of the chair. He stood looking at Dorland with the gun down at his side. "It's too bad High Elder Brill couldn't see your show today. He would have been amused. Actually, it's not too different from his own Godsdays service." He issued a short bark of laughter. "Unfortunately, Bekman won't be able to give him a report about it."

It took Paul a moment to recall that Ogram had used the name earlier. "Bekman's the man who tried to kill Dorland?"

Ogram nodded. "Lon Bekman. One of Brill's deacons. Slimy scum. I hope he dies and burns on the Far Peaks with the rest of them. I tried to warn you about him."

"You're the one who called the hotel before the show?"

"Little good it did. When I saw Bekman up there by the stage, I realized I was too far away to stop him." He considered. "Not sure I would have tried, anyway. Bekman was very good with the burp gun." Ogram's eyes drifted slowly back to Dorland.

"Now that High Elder Brill knows where you are, he'll send someone else after you. He's got ten more like Bekman, and he won't give up." He shrugged. "Of course, you can always pack up and run again."

There was a knock at the door. Ogram spun around, startled. The knock came again.

"Damn!" Ogram hissed. He glanced at the wardrobe, then moved to the open window and looked through it. The window overlooked a broad expanse of lawn. Paul knew it was at least a three-meter drop to the ground.

"Guess I can make that," Ogram said doubtfully. Then, to Dorland: "You won't change your mind and come along?"

Dorland stared at him without speaking.

"Doesn't surprise me," Ogram said. He tucked the gun into a pocket of his coveralls and turned to grasp the windowsill. He pulled himself up and over and disappeared. Paul heard a single muted oof! before the knock came again at the door, louder and more insistent. He got up and crossed the room to unlock the door. As it sighed open, he heard Steph Hendrikson's voice raised in anger:

"—told you that Mr. Avery was not to be disturbed!"

What now! Paul felt close to the end of his patience. He stepped back as a man in a uniform strode into the room, followed by a red-faced Hendrikson. Two burly guardsmen stood just outside the door.

"I'm Erich Frakes," the officer said to Dorland, moving his eyes slightly to include Paul in the introduction. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a full face that was scarred across one cheek by a badly healed sizzler bum. He wasn't a Guard officer—the gray-and-black uniform was of the Security Section. The emblem on his lapel identified him as a captain. "I'm with Omega Security, on temporary assignment to the local—"

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"That doesn't mean you have the right to charge in here like you own the place," Hendrikson snarled, his cheeks blazing.

"It's all right, Steph," Paul said, touching the young man's arm to calm him down. Confrontations always upset Dorland's delicate nervous system, and his nerves had already been put through enough for one day. But Paul was curious about the captain's statement. "A report has already been filed with the Guard. Why is Security involved?"

Frakes shrugged as if the matter didn't concern him. "Sabre thinks the men who attacked Mr. Avery may be involved in an interstream matter."

"Parke Sabre?" Paul said with surprise. Parke Sabre was Security Director for Omega Centauri Sector, and the highest ranking UNSA official in the Omega Sector. "Why is he interested in this?"

Frakes moved his shoulders slightly. "Maybe you ought to ask him. He's waiting at the local Guard office."

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horizon when Frakes guided the Aire Vega down toward a connected group of modern, cubelike office buildings. Thick vegetation surrounded the complex, and farther out Paul could see residential clusters—large, rambling buildings in brown and beige.

Frakes landed in an open stall on the roof of one of the mid-level buildings and popped open the Aire Vega's gullwing doors. The whine of the engine keened downscale.

"How long will this take?" Paul asked as he ducked under the door and stepped onto the tiled roof. "Mr. Avery has another show in two hours."

"No problem," Frakes said in a tone that revealed little concern. Not his problem, he means,

Paul thought angrily.

Frakes led them in a diagonal line across the roof, picking his way easily through the parked flyers and streamcraft until he reached a section of the building that jutted above the parking level. He thumbed the lock of an unmarked door and led the way into a narrow, brightly lighted corridor. The two guardsmen stepped in behind them, but turned down another hallway and disappeared without a word.

The corridor was lined with numbered, wood-veneer doors and opened into a lobby farther down. Paul heard distant voices and the erratic chatter of a high-speed printer. Frakes stopped in front of one of the doors before they reached the lobby. He thumbed the lock and pushed open the door, then moved out of the way to let Paul and Dorland step through into a small conference room.

"Sabre's on his way down. Have a seat if you want."

Paul turned to ask a question, but the door had already closed behind Frakes with a soft whirring sound.

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"Mr. Personality," he commented.

Dorland made a noncommittal sound as he crossed to the room's only window. Paul found the room as dull and lifeless as any typical business conference room: large wooden table with six chairs, neutral landscape holos on the walls, thin carpet. In one corner stood a potted plant with large, blue-veined leaves.

It took Paul a moment to realize what was missing. There was no communications equipment—not even a local intercom. At the same time he recalled the odd sound the door had made as it closed. An electronic lock? Suddenly the room seemed more like a jail cell than a conference room.

"We shouldn't have come here," he said.

Dorland turned to lean against the wall, facing Paul with his arms folded across his chest. "Better to find out what they want and get it over with."

The words came out with a heavy weariness that made Paul look more closely at Dorland. "What do they want—"

"I don't know," Dorland said with uncharacteristic abruptness. His eyes remained steady on Paul. Then Paul realized why Dorland was being cautious. It was possible—probable, he decided—that there were unseen eyes and ears in this room.

Dorland pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. "How's your knee?"

"Bruised, but okay." Hanes had wrapped it with a cloth bandage to keep the swelling down, and a small white capsule reduced the pain to a dull ache. Paul hardly noticed it. He reached for another chair, then turned as the door behind him clicked open. Erich Frakes came in followed by another man, who wore a gray one-piece civilian suit and carried a slim brown attache case. Before Frakes could make introductions, the man swung the attache case up onto the table and held out his hand to Dorland.

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"Parke Sabre. Don't get up." He shook Dorland's hand. "I've always admired your work. I wish we could have met under better circumstances." Sabre was a contrast in almost every way to Erich Frakes—tall and slender, with sharp features and dark hair that was artfully arranged to disguise premature thinning. He spoke quickly in clipped Basic, his voice smooth and refined. He offered his hand perfunctorily to Paul. "You're Mr. Jurick?"

Paul nodded. Sabre glided on before he could speak.

"I'm glad you could come, Mr. Jurick. I've heard quite a lot about you. I understand you were in the Guard. I'm always glad to meet someone who has served his people."

The casual statement jolted Paul. How much does

he know about me?

Still grasping Paul's hand, Sabre began to edge him toward the open door. Erich Frakes waited there with his arms folded. "I'd like to ask Mr. Avery a few questions. It'll take only a few minutes. We have a visitors' lounge down the hall. Erich will help you find it. I'm sure you could use some refreshments."

"Thanks, no." Paul pulled free of Sabre's hand and sat down at the table beside Dorland. "I'll wait."

"Really, there's no need—"

"I'd like to stay, if you don't mind."

Sabre's smile faded. He stared at Paul a moment longer; then his eyes went to Dorland. He spoke with barely concealed irritation. "There are some personal aspects about this, Mr. Avery. Some of it concerns your past. It's up to you, of course."

Paul felt a chill of apprehension. Some of it concerns your past.

Dorland said quietly: "I want Paul to stay."

"Fine, fine." Sabre jerked out a chair and sat down. Frakes cleared his throat and closed the

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door. He stood with his back to it, facing the room. His expression was neutral.

"Well, now," Sabre began, clasping his hands in front of him on the table. With visible effort, he pulled out another smile. "Mr. Avery, I want to assure you we're doing everything we can to find out why that man assaulted you, and to make sure it doesn't happen again. I've instructed my people to give full cooperation to the Guard." He leaned across the table on his elbows to look intently at Dorland. "We've gone through his personal effects, but all we found was his name. Lon Bekman." His eyes were on Dorland, and Paul suddenly realized he was watching for a reaction. Paul could have told

him not to waste his time. Dorland was the most sensitive person Paul had ever met, but he was also the most effective at hiding his feelings. "He appears to be an official in some sort of church. Beyond that, we're drawing a blank. Is there any information you can give us?"

Dorland moved back in his chair to put more distance between him and Sabre. He asked cautiously: "What kind of information?"

"Do you know Bekman?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Ever see him before?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that. I didn't see his face in the auditorium."

Sabre frowned. His eyes shifted to Frakes, then back to Dorland. "I understand he was in the front row—"

"The spotlights were in Dorland's eyes," Paul said. Sabre's too-slick manner was beginning to wear on him. "There's no way he could have seen what happened. Besides, he was still in the player's trance."

"The trance?" Sabre's eyes went back to Dorland. "I assumed that was part of the show. Do you really go into a hypnotic trance?"

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Dorland nodded. He didn't bother to correct Sabre. Despite the commonly held belief, the psi-player's trance was anything but hypnotic.

"Hmm." Sabre's eyes flicked back to Paul. "I understand you were closer to Bekman when he—"

"I've never seen him before."

"Do you and Mr. Hanes often watch the show from the control booth?"

"Not the show," Paul corrected. "The audience. Jeffrey is in charge of our security team. He likes to observe from up there. Sometimes I keep him

company."

"Was there any reason for concern tonight? From

a security standpoint, I mean."

"We got a threatening call," Paul answered. He thought: Why does he keep asking questions when he already knows the answers? "We reported that to the Guard. As far as I can see, they should be handling this. Why is Omega Security involved?"

"This man Bekman wasn't working alone," Sabre said, sidestepping the question. "We know somebody else in the auditorium attracted Mr. Hanes's attention. We think Mr. Avery's life may still be in danger."

"It's the Guard's job to keep law and order, to protect citizens and all that," Paul said. He kept his growing anger under control by an act of will.

"They don't cooperate with Security unless they have to. The local Guard commander would rather pull his own thumbnails out than turn something like this over to you." Sabre started to say something, but Paul raised his voice to talk over him.

"Since he obviously has, I have to assume he's gotten orders from somebody higher up. That means that what happened today goes beyond a crackpot trying to assassinate a well-known psi-player." He glanced pointedly at his wristwatch.

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"We have to get back to the hotel for Dorland's next show. We don't have much time, and we won't make any progress here unless you tell us why you're asking all these questions."

Sabre's high cheekbones went scarlet. "Meaning you have information but won't give it to me?"

"Meaning I'm as concerned about Dorland's safety as you are," Paul snapped. "If I knew what you're looking for, maybe I could help."

Sabre stared at him.

"Have it your way." Paul stood up. "Let's go, Dorland."

Sabre reached for the attache case and popped open the clasp at each end.

"I want to show you something." He reached into the case, brought out a small black gun and held it up for Paul to see. "Do you know about weapons, Mr. Jurick?"

"A little." He looked closer. "I know where you got that one."

Sabre nodded. "Our friend Bekman." He returned the gun to the attache case. "It's a laser pistol. Very effective. You're both lucky to be alive."

"I accept that," Paul said, still standing. "But what's your point?"

"This type of gun was at one time used by Guard personnel. They called it a burp gun because of the sound the chamber's cooling mechanism makes."

Paul didn't remember seeing a gun like that when he was in Guard training, and the term was not familiar to him. But he'd left the Guard years ago, and he knew they were always trying out new weapons.

"So Bekman used to be in the Guard," he said. "That should help you identify him."

"I don't think so. The Guard stopped using laser pistols almost two hundred years ago."

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It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. Paul sat down and nodded toward the attache case.

"That gun is two hundred years old?"

"Correct. Quite a collector's piece, in fact."

Sabre's eyes remained on Paul a moment longer, then moved to Dorland. When he spoke again, it was obvious he was choosing his words carefully. "I hope you appreciate the significance of that, Mr. Avery. We want to find out why Bekman tried to kill you. We think he may have been an agent of a political faction that is not friendly to UNSA."

"The Fringe Alliance?" Paul asked. He could think of only one political faction that would be important enough to rate the attention of the Omega Security Director. But that didn't make sense—the Alliance was well armed with modern weapons. Its agent wouldn't be using a two-hundred-year-old laser gun.

"The Alliance is involved," Sabre admitted. His eyes were still on Dorland. Then he cleared his throat, leaned back in his chair and abruptly changed the subject. "Mr. Avery, we've checked our records and we find that we're missing a few pertinent details about your background. Would you mind telling me where you were born?"

Dorland answered without hesitation, as if he had been expecting the question. "Giant Forest. It's a planet in the—"

"I know where it is," Sabre interrupted. "Why isn't your birth recorded in SoSec records?"

"Giant Forest is a backwater planet. They've never been careful about keeping records."

"Have you ever been to a planet called Clarion?"

Paul felt himself flinch inside. Selmer Ogram's words came back to him: Sabastian wants you to come home. Ogram had been referring to a planet called Clarion.

"I travel a great deal," Dorland answered. "I can't remember every planet I've been to."

"Does the name Alban Brill mean anything to you?"

High Elder Brill, Ogram had said. Paul stared at

Dorland.

"Should it?" Dorland asked.

Silence descended while Sabre and Dorland regarded each other. Paul knew that Sabre was discovering something new about Dorland. Dorland Avery the man was much different from Dorland Avery the psi-player. As a player, Dorland was a striking, almost intimidating figure. From the stage, the power of his personality flowed out over the audience and merged with the colors and music to hold them fast. But off the stage Dorland was a quiet man—almost exasperatingly so at times. Socially, he was a dud; Paul had long ago given up trying to turn him into the high-lifer and party-goer the public expected of its psi-players and other top entertainers. He had instead opted to make Dorland a mystery figure, almost a recluse. That suited Dorland fine.

But one characteristic was shared between Dorland the psi-player and Dorland the introvert:

the power of his eyes. Dorland had a steady gaze that often made people feel uncomfortable. Paul even felt it at times when he looked into those dark eyes. There was a great depth in them, and it was easy to believe they could look into your very soul.

Sabre felt it, too, and he was the one who cleared his throat and looked down at his clenched hands.

"The man who tried to kill you is from Clarion," he said. "We were able to trace the gun's ident number back to the sector ship that went to Clarion two hundred years ago. I want to know why he tried to kill you."

"There's no need to go through this again," Paul said. For the second time, he pushed back his chair and got to his feet. He glanced toward the door and noticed that Frakes had not moved away from it.

He wondered if Sabre was desperate enough to keep him and Dorland here by force. He touched

Doriand's shoulder. "Let's go."

"We found Bekman's streamer," Sabre said,

barely glancing at Paul. He spoke earnestly to Dorland. "It's a scoutcraft from that same sector ship. He was after you, Mr. Avery, and I'm sorry, but I just can't believe you don't know why. You're our only lead. You have an obligation to help us." Dorland pushed back his chair and stood. "Can

we return to our hotel now?"

Sabre stared at him. "Surely you understand

what—"

"Do we have to call our lawyer?" Paul asked.

"There's no need to—"

"Good, then let us go."

Sabre's face hardened without any noticeable shift in muscles. He sat silently for a moment, staring at Paul. Then he grunted and waved a hand at Frakes. "Take them back."

Chapter Four

SILENCE DOMINATED THE FLIGHT BACK TO THE

hotel. Erick Frakes spoke only after the Aire Vega had touched down on the roof.

"Sabre's upset. He's been trying to get a lead on this place Clarion for three years. Now that he has one, he doesn't want to let it get away."

Paul was still angry and didn't try to hide it.

"Sabre's a typical UNSA bureaucrat, and Security bureaucrats are the worst. He's shut up in his dark little world, too paranoid to be honest with people even* when he needs their help. As far as I'm concerned, he can go to hell."

"Yeah, well." Frakes rubbed the side of his nose and turned to look out through the front screen.

"It's important. If you hear anything, you ought to tell him. Otherwise things could get rough."

Paul gave him a cold stare. "Is that a threat?"

Frakes shrugged. "I don't make threats. Not my style." He pressed something on the roof console, and the Aire Vega's doors swung up. "But other people don't have that problem."

Like Lon Bekman, Paul thought as he climbed

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out to stand on the roof. He remembered Ogram's words: High Elder Brill has ten more like him.

He turned back to Frakes. How much does he really know? "Sabre's got the idea Dorland came from this place Clarion. That's what the questioning was all about."

"Let's say he's got a strong suspicion about it."

"He never did say why Clarion is so important. I've never even heard of the place. It would help if we knew what he really wants."

"That should be obvious. He wants to find Clarion. He thinks Mr. Avery knows the planet's stream coordinates."

"He wants to ... find it?"

Frakes's eyes flicked to Dorland, then back to Paul. "Sabre's not a bad guy, but you're right about one thing. He's too hung up on secrecy." He got out of the flyer and came around to Paul's side. He glanced around the parking area, then leaned back against the craft with his arms folded across his broad chest. "Clarion was landed about two hundred years ago. Beautiful place from what I've

heard—a clear ninety-nine."

"I'm going in," Dorland said abruptly, and turned to walk toward the building's entrance.

Paul started to call after him, but Frakes was

talking again.

"Five hundred colonists set out for the planet on the sector ship Vanguard. That was back in the early years, when everyone was bailing out of Terra. Clarion should have been a great world. But it got

lost."

"Lost?"

"The planet. Vanguard, five hundred colonists—

the whole bunch."

A vague memory surfaced—a story Paul had

heard a long time ago. The early years, Frakes had called them, and Paul knew he meant the Expansion Era—the first century after the stream was

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discovered by Andrei Kohlmann. The k-stream opened an infinite array of pathways to the stars, and the cheap and instantaneous travel had resulted in explosive growth of colonies on dozens of worlds. Many stories had come from that era. Explorer ships had vanished with alarming regularity, and at least one sector ship had been lost in the void of the stream.

But an entire planet?

"How did it happen?"

"Somebody erased the planet's navigation coordinates," Frakes answered. "We've never figured out how."

"It was done on purpose?"

"Presumably."

"Why?"

"Good question."

Five hundred colonists. The concept was staggering: a planet colonized, then cut off from the rest of

humanspace.

"The colony—do you think it survived?" Then he realized the answer was obvious. "Bekman . . ."

Frakes nodded. "This isn't the first time we found someone from Clarion. A couple of years ago a guy by the name of Callifer tried to land one of Vanguard's old scouts on Giant Forest."

Giant Forest. Paul felt a chill. Frakes's eyes were on him, and it was clear he hadn't missed the significance.

"Yeah. Anyway, he didn't make it. Callifer wasn't much of a pilot. He hit the ground too hard and pushed a stabilizer strut up through the stasis engine housing. The engine blew. By the time they dragged Callifer out he was pretty crispy, but still alive. The Guard called Security when they realized what they had. That's how me and Sabre got involved. We managed to get a few answers out of Callifer before he croaked. But not many."

Paul took a moment to absorb what Frakes had

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told him. "That man Callifer—you said he was flying one of Vanguard's scoutships?"

Frakes nodded. "Just like Bekman."

"Then the people on Clarion know how to get back to the occupied stream."

"I know what you're thinking," Frakes said. "If they know how to get out, they could tell us how to get to Clarion. They haven't, which means they don't want to be found. Callifer wouldn't give us the Clarion coordinates even though he knew he was dying."

"Did he say why he had come out?"

Frakes looked down at the pavement, scuffed at it with the toe of his boot, then returned his eyes to Paul. "He was looking for somebody. At the time we didn't know who."

"You think he was looking for Dorland?"

"Doesn't take much to figure that out, not after what happened today. We knew Mr. Avery spent a few years on Giant Forest. Callifer obviously knew it, too."

Clarion. Cut off from civilization for two hundred years. Except for two men who had come out to look for Dorland Avery. Three, Paul realized. Selmer Ogram, too. Dorland himself had come from the planet, if Parke Sabre was right—and Paul had a feeling he was.

"Two hundred years," he said. "You can't help but wonder what's been happening on Clarion all that time."

Frakes made a noncommittal sound.

"I'm sure SoSec would be interested in finding a planet that's been isolated that long. But why is Security so interested? This late in the game, there wouldn't be anybody left to prosecute for kidnapping. It's obvious the people who live there don't want to be found. Why not leave them alone?"

"Because they won't leave us alone. After all, one of them attacked Mr. Avery—"

"That won't fly, Captain. Doriand's safety is a concern to me and Jeffrey Hanes, but it's hardly a Security matter. He's a psi-player, not a political leader. You and Sabre are interested in Clarion, not in Dorland Avery."

"Yeah, well—" Frakes rubbed the side of his nose again, cleared his throat. "I could get in a lot of trouble for telling you this."

Paul waited.

"Security has a couple of reasons for wanting to find the place. For one thing, it's a ninety-nine. People can breathe the air, drink the water. UNSA pumped a few billion udits into it already. They don't want to give it up. Habitable worlds aren't that easy to find."

"Ninety-nines are still being landed—"

"Yeah, about once a year."

"Still, we aren't starved for space," Paul insisted. "I've seen colonized planets where the entire population still lives in two or three towns. We have plenty of room to expand. Why would UNSA go to all this trouble for another planet?"

Frakes pursed his lips. "I said there were a couple of reasons. The other one's more complicated."

Paul gave him time to make up his mind. Frakes looked around, cleared his throat again.

"The sector ship Vanguard carried the usual research group. Even then, that was standard for new-landed planets. The group included an archaeology team." He paused again to glance toward the hotel entrance. "The arkies got a report out before the stream channel went dead. Said they found signs of intelligents."

It took Paul a moment to absorb the significance of that. Alien remnants had been found on only three of the hundreds of habitable worlds that had been explored by UNSA.

"Everyone assumed the gents on Clarion were dead," Frakes went on. "The arkies reported ruins,

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and they didn't mention seeing live gents. Their report was very preliminary, but you'd think they would have noticed gents running around."

Paul suddenly had a feeling he knew what Frakes was leading up to.

"Before he died, this man Callifer started babbling about somebody called Lord Tern," Frakes said. "Took us a while to realize he was talking about a gent. A Tal Tahir, he said. We think that's what they called the gents. This Lord Tern—seems they'd made him into a god."

Lord Tern. Selmer Ogram had mentioned that name.

"But you said the arkies didn't see any gents."

Frakes shrugged. "That's what they said. But according to Callifer, Lord Tern was very much alive."

Then it came together, and after the initial shock of realization had subsided, Paul felt like laughing with relief. Stranded on an isolated world, the Clarion colony had built a religion based on the ancient ruins of the intelligents. Like Bekman, the man named Callifer was probably an official in the religious organization Ogram had called the Holy Order. He must have been devout at that, because to him, Lord Tern was as alive as the god of any monotheistic religion was alive to a true believer. Callifer's belief came across to Parke Sabre as fact, and that was why Sabre was under the mistaken impression that the gents were still around.

Paul knew this simple explanation could solve a lot of problems. But he also knew that it would create more of its own. He couldn't put Frakes straight on the issue without revealing that he'd spoken to Selmer Ogram. And if Parke Sabre found out about that, he would insist on trying to find Ogram. That would involve Dorland and Paul, and the mess would become even more complicated.

Which meant he would have to keep his revela-

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tion to himself. With that sorted out in his mind, he realized that he still didn't have the answer to the question he'd originally asked.

"Finding a misplaced planet is a job for the Explorers," he said to Frakes. "If you think there may still be gents, the Blue should be called in. And it seems to me that the arkies would have an interest in it either way. I still don't see where Security fits in."

"The Archaeology Section's interested, all right," Frakes admitted. "They've been battling Sabre for first dibs on Clarion ever since Callifer decided to broil himself in that old scout." He paused again, and Paul knew he was making up his mind about something. "Callifer was out of his head when we got to him, like I said. But he kept talking about Lord Tern, and about some kind of machine Lord Tern had given to the people of Clarion. He croaked before we could find out more about it, but what he said made us think the machine was plenty powerful. He called it a chaw-ka." He paused, cleared his throat. "We think it

might be a weapon of some kind."

"A weapon?"

Frakes must have detected the skepticism in Paul's voice. "Sounds crazy to me, too. But—" He stopped, pursed his lips. He looked at the hotel entrance again, turned back to Paul. "The truth is, we know Hans Maiar is looking for the planet."

"Maiar?" That only added more confusion. Hans Maiar was chairman of the Fringe Alliance.

"We caught one of his couriers a few months ago," Frakes went on. "Maiar doesn't use commsets because he knows UNSA Security listens in on all the stream channels. The courier we ran down had a coded message for Maiar. We unraveled enough of it to know that it had something to do with the Clarion stream coordinates. Not the coordinates themselves—we weren't that lucky—

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but a message about somebody who was zeroing in on them."

"Why would Maiar be interested in Clarion?"

Frakes shrugged. "An alien race. Maybe still alive. Think about it."

Paul was gripped by sudden understanding. "Sabre wants to make sure the gents don't side up with the Fringe Alliance."

The look on Frakes's face was enough to tell Paul he was right. "We're following up on the courier's message. We might be able to get something from that, but I'm not holding my breath. Sabre's afraid the Alliance might get its hands on Clarion first. And if the chaw-ka really is a weapon—"

"Maiar might use it to attack UNSA planets?" Paul said. "Sounds farfetched to me."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. But Maiar's a little crazy. If he gets his hands on something exotic like a gent weapon, he might get himself pumped up enough to attack, whether the weapon's that useful or not."

That part wasn't so farfetched, Paul had to admit. Based on what he'd heard, Hans Maiar was looking for any excuse to start a war with UNSA.

Frakes glanced down at his wristwatch. "I gotta get back. If you change your mind, or if you or Mr. Avery thinks of anything, give me a call." He looked out over the city. "Let's keep this chat between us. My job isn't all that great, but I'd hate to lose it." He winked and turned back to the Aire Vega without waiting for a reply. He slid across to the pilot's seat, and the gullwing doors lowered. A moment later the stasis engine hummed and the craft lifted away.

Paul's mind was a jumble as he walked across the roof toward the hotel's entrance. He was sure of only one thing: he and Dorland hadn't seen the last of Parke Sabre—not if Sabre really thought

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Dorland had information that could make a difference in the struggle with the Alliance.

The Fringe Alliance was a group of ninety planets along a strip of the stream that reached from the far side of the Omega cluster to the inner loop of the Kiros Spiral. The Alliance had started back when that part of the stream was on the fringe of colonized space. Humankind had long since spread beyond that area, but the Alliance had held together. Now it controlled an area of the stream that was heavily traveled, and when Maiar had begun charging high navigation fees for the use of the Fringe breakout zones—fees for the use of navigation equipment that had been confiscated from UNSA facilities in the Fringe—that was the last straw. UNSA demanded concessions. The Alliance refused, and began building a fleet of warships.

By the time the UNSA triumvirate had gotten past the knee-jerk reaction and realized they had underestimated the determination of Hans Maiar and his Alliance command, it was too late. The Alliance had put together several dozen of the planet-buster kiester warheads and was already testing its strength. Maiar began visiting planets in adjoining sectors and politely inviting them to drop their UNSA affiliation and join the Alliance. Those

that declined were made to regret it.

It was all stupidity, Paul thought as he turned down the corridor to Dorland's room. The same kind of apelike territorialism that had killed untold millions down through mankind's bloody history.

How much farther could we have progressed by now if we had only been able to get along with one another?

War between UNSA and the Alliance would mean slaughter on a planetary scale. Everyone agreed about that, but nobody had come up with a way to cool the tension that hung between the two

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massive powers. Now, if what Frakes had told him was true, that tension had centered on a planet that had been isolated for the past two centuries. And for reasons that were still not clear to Paul, Dorland Avery was also part of that focus.

Steph Hendrikson waited outside the door to Doriand's suite. Inside, Dorland sat on the low sofa in the front room, his back unnaturally straight, arms at his sides. He looked up when Paul walked in and without any preamble said: "I'll have to go back with Selmer Ogram to Clarion. Sabastian needs me."

Paul resisted the impulse to react immediately and instead crossed the room to thejo dispenser in the comer. He took his time pouring himself a cup. With Dorland you had to take careful steps and test the situation before acting.

When he turned back, Doriand's eyes were on him.

"What about the tour?" Paul asked. "You said it yourself: you have five more shows to do."

"We'll have to cancel them."

Paul sipped hot jo. "Who's Sabastian?"

"My uncle."

Another surprise. "So you really are from this

place. Clarion?"

"I was born there, and lived there until six years ago. Then I ... had to leave."

"You told me you came from Giant Forest."

"I lived on Giant Forest for a year before I met you."

Dorland had never offered much detail about his past, and Paul hadn't pressed him. After Doriand's fame as a psi-player had spread along the stream, news service reporters had tried to dredge up information about him with no better luck. One had even tried to bribe Paul for information about Doriand's past.

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"Your parents still live on Clarion?"

"They're both dead." Doriand's eyes moved away from Paul to stare at the wall behind him. "High Elder Brill ordered their deaths."

Paul sipped his jo and allowed a moment to pass before he asked the obvious question. "Why?"

"They were heretics," Dorland answered, his eyes still fixed on the wall behind Paul. "My father disagreed with some of the High Elder's pronouncements. Disagreement is heresy, and on Clarion the penalty for heresy is death. But at least they were given a trial." His eyes moved to Paul. "Diana and Shari were not allowed even that."

"Diana and Shari?" Paul felt a sudden, certain knowledge of who they were.

"Diana was my wife. Shari was my daughter. She was six years old when Elder Jacowicz came to my house with his deacons and killed her."

"They murdered a six-year-old?"

"They were after me, but I wasn't there. Jacowicz settled his score with me by killing the two people who were most important to me."

"Because of your father?"

Dorland shook his head. "Because of me." A wry, humorless smile crossed his lips. "I was also a heretic."

"Now they've found you again."

"It would appear so."

Brill's got ten more like Deacon Bekman.

"You're wanted for heresy. But you've been away from Clarion for years. Why would they want you badly enough to risk coming after you?"

Dorland took a moment to answer. "High Elder Brill and Elder Jacowicz see me as a threat."

"Why?"

"Because I know some of their secrets."

"What kind of secrets?"

"How they maintain their grip over the people of Clarion."

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Paul decided to let that rest for a while. "We should level with Sabre. Tell him what he wants to know so he can protect you."

"Nobody can protect me from the Holy Order."

Paul sipped again from the cup. "Do you have the stream coordinates for Clarion?"

Dorland shook his head.

"Then how can we get there?"

"We'll go with Selmer."

"He's already gone."

"Selmer wouldn't give up that easily. He'll be back tonight. Tell Jeffrey to watch for him in the auditorium and let him know I want to talk to

him."

"We'll never see him again. He said you had just one chance."

"He'll be back."

Chapter Five

PAUL FELT A BRIEF INSTANT OF VERTIGO WHEN

the scoutcraft broke out of the stream after the final skip. The bank of vidscreens above the control console flickered, and the screen in the center cleared with a view of a brownish-green planet.

In the pilot's chair beside him, Selmer Ogram gave the drive system a final command and leaned back to look at the screen. "Home at last!" He looked over his shoulder at Dorland Avery in the rear passenger compartment. "Look familiar?"

Dorland offered no response. He was hunched in one corner of the wide seat, staring up at the vidscreen. His face was expressionless. He had been immersed in his own thoughts during the entire trip.

Ogram turned back to the console. "Well, it looks good to me."

Paul had fervently hoped they would never see Selmer Ogram again after his departure through the window of Dorland's dressing room. But Ogram had returned to the auditorium for the

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evening show just as Dorland had predicted. Fresh clothing and a shaved face had changed his appearance enough to get him past the guardsmen at the door, but Jeffrey Hanes had found him easily in the balcony.

Ogram hadn't seemed at all surprised by Dorland's change of heart. He wasn't happy at the prospect of taking an extra passenger, but Paul made himself a nuisance until Ogram gave in. Paul

had wanted Jeffrey Hanes to come, too, but Ogram stood his ground in refusing that request.

In real distance. Clarion was less than a hundred light-years from the planet Fynnland, but the trip had taken a long and tiring six hours. For obvious reasons, Ogram couldn't file the skip sequence with NavSec, and had been forced to use mass-plus planets and stellar objects for skip points instead of the UNSA sector stations that would have provided a shorter route.

Which meant that Paul had had a full six hours to wonder what awaited him and Dorland on Clarion.

We need your help. The situation at home has gone from bad to impossible. Sabastian wants you to come back.

That had been Ogram's message to Dorland in Dorland's dressing room—that and a few vague statements about the Holy Order and a man named High Elder Brill and something called the Sons of God. Paul had questioned him during the trip, but Ogram had refused to elaborate.

"You'll find out when we get there," he had said.

But he had freely given Paul information about the planet itself, and it was clear that Erich Frakes was right about at least one thing: Clarion was a ninety-nine. That was UNSA jargon for a planet that had the atmosphere and water and other ingredients necessary to support human life without artificial—and expensive—help. According to Ogram, the climate was mild in the area where the

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colony had taken root. The animals were small and docile, although none had been domesticated. Edible, too—but Paul wasn't surprised to learn that nearly everyone on Clarion was a vegetarian. That was typical on colonized worlds where Terran-descended livestock weren't bred. Humans had always been squeamish about eating alien flesh.

Ogram had mentioned one thing that struck Paul as an oddity: the planet's entire population still lived in a city at the site of the original colony. The sector ship Vanguard had put them down two

hundred years ago, and they had never strayed in all that time. Clarion had never been mapped or explored.

Beep.

Paul looked over as Ogram pressed a combination of keys on the console. Luminous lines of figures built across the readout screen. After a moment he pressed another console key. Beep. The screen changed.

"Whoops."

Ogram pressed another key and the screen changed again, accompanied by another tone from the console.

"Damn!" He leaned over to consult 'a sheet of stiff white paper that was clipped to the console beside him. Dark-lettered notes were scrawled across it.

"Trouble?" Paul asked. He realized suddenly how isolated they were. If something went wrong with the stasis drive or control system . . .

"Nothing I can't fix," Ogram muttered. He searched the keypad and punched another key, then grunted with satisfaction when the screen lighted with a new message. He glanced at Paul and shrugged his shoulders apologetically. "Guess I should've gotten more hands-on practice."

Paul stared at him. "You should have—practiced? Don't you know how to fly this thing?"

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Ogram gave him a hurt look. "Of course. I spent a week studying the manual." He waved at the rows of data that still scrolled across the screen. "I may have missed some of the details, though."

Paul realized with a sinking feeling that Ogram was serious. The flight from the surface of Fynnland to the skip zone had been rough, but Paul had attributed that to the condition of the aging scoutship. Now he wasn't so sure. Skipping through the stream was handled by the drive engines and navigation computers, but reaching the surface of

the planet below would require piloting skills . . .

"You learned to fly from a manual?"

"Sure." Ogram grinned. "We had to translate from old Espana. Some of the pages were in pretty bad shape, but I think we got most of it." He searched the control panel, jabbed at something with a forefinger. "See, you push this blue button and wait for something called translation."

"Transition," Paul corrected. He had sat in the front with Dorland's pilot often enough to pick up some of the jargon. During transition, the stream driver switched control to the stasis system for atmospheric flight.

"Whatever." Ogram frowned at the console when nothing happened. He leaned over to consult the card beside the readout screen. "Oh yeah, this light has to be green. To make it green you push these three switches up." He demonstrated. "Now we have to wait for the computer to beep, then we'll be ready to go."

Paul turned around in his seat to look into the rear compartment. Borland's head rested against the back of the seat, and his eyes were closed. Possibly asleep—Paul knew the last few hours had taken a lot out of him. More likely he was meditating. That was Dorland's way of sorting out his feelings. Paul had learned soon after they met that Dorland was subject to wide mood swings. Now he

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was somber and uncommunicative, drawn deeply into himself.

Beep.

Paul's thoughts were disturbed again by the sound from the console. He turned around as system lights winked from amber to green. Ogram punched out an instruction on the keypad, then nudged the drive control panel out of the way and unfolded the flight wheel. He consulted the manual again, then touched one of the hand controls. The stasis engines roared and the craft shot forward, throwing Paul back into his seat.

"Take us an hour or so to get down," Ogram said.

If we live that long, Paul thought, rearranging himself in the seat.

Ogram gestured at the vidscreens. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

A huge mass of land stretched out on the central screen, green and brown beneath scattered clouds. Paul made a grudging sound of concurrence, and in fact he was grateful to feel the first faint tug of gravity. The old scoutcraft had no grav-field, and the long period of weightlessness had made him feel a little queasy. Already the noise of passing air was building up outside the hull, whistling through the fore and aft drive webs.

Ogram activated another console screen that had a dark green background with a superimposed image in lighter green that looked to be the outline of a map. Gridlines were marked off across it, and a yellow light pulsed faintly in one corner. As Paul watched, the map shifted slightly to a new position.

"That's our beacon," Ogram replied when Paul asked about it. He used a finger to tap at the pulsing light. "The map and beacon were programmed by the original Vanguard Explorer crew. Very superficial, but it does the job. Without it we'd never find our way back."

The comment resurrected a question Paul had

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wondered about earlier. "Why hasn't the planet been explored in more detail?"

Ogram offered a wry smile. "Not exactly progressive, are we? Not like you folks, flitting hither-thither." He shook his head with open wonder. "All those planets—it boggles the mind." He sighed. "High Elder Brill won't even let us go outside our little valley. According to him, we have everything we need in Fairhope and Chalcharuzzi."

Fairhope was the village at the site of the Vanguard colony. Ogram had already told him about

that. "What's Chalcharuzzi?"

"The Tal Tahir city. Ruins, really—mostly overgrown."

Tal Tahir. Erich Frakes had used the name. "The gents?"

Ogram gave him a blank look.

"Intelligents. The race of beings that used to live on the planet."

"Oh. Yeah, that's the Tal Tahir."

Paul sensed that Ogram had loosened up somewhat. Maybe this was the time to try to get more information out of him. "Who's Lord Tern?"

Ogram glanced up at the vidscreen. He seemed to gain strength from the view of his homeworld. "According to the Holy Order, Lord Tern is the only Tal Tahir still living."

Ogram said it in such a matter-of-fact way that Paul turned to look at him. Ogram obviously opposed the Holy Order, but that didn't necessarily mean that he didn't believe in Lord Tern. "Is he really alive?"

Ogram hesitated, then shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, Lord Tern is Holy Order gobbledygook. Nobody's ever seen him outside the Holy Order's temple. But there's something funny going on inside the temple. That's what Sabastian wants to find out about."

Ogram had mentioned something earlier that came back to Paul. "You said a man went into the temple ..."

"Cleve Quinton. He tried to kill High Elder Brill. You'll find out about him."

"Brill is head of the Holy Order?"

Ogram nodded. "He's also High Elder of Clarion and First Speaker of the Tal Tahir."

A chime sounded on the console. Ogram leaned forward to study the readout screen. He thought for

a moment, then tentatively flicked a switch on the panel. Lights winked green across the bottom of the screen. Ogram grunted with satisfaction and twisted the drive wheel to turn the streamer in a wide arc to face the sun. The fore screen dimmed as a filter snapped into place. The green lights on the map formed vertical lines.

"Lord Tern is High Elder Brill's personal god," Ogram went on. "He gives the orders and Brill carries them out. Before he died, Cleve said he saw Lord Tern. Of course, he was babbling by then. Whatever he saw in the temple was too much for him. He went crazy."

Some of it was beginning to fit together. "You think Dorland can help determine what Quinton really saw in the temple?"

Ogram frowned slightly as if he just realized he'd stepped past a line of discretion. "I'll let Sabastian tell you about that."

Paul looked up at the screen as they flew out over a scruffy shoreline. Ogram eased the wheel forward. The pitch of the stasis engine changed slightly and the craft picked up speed, then veered slightly in another course correction. The pulsing light moved noticeably closer to the center of the grid. Ogram reached to the console and flipped a switch. The grid screen went dark.

"I can find my way from here," he said.

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The shoreline gave way to white beach. Paul tried to imagine a line of resort hotels, and failed. "How many people live in Fairhope?"

Ogram considered. "Five or six thousand, probably. Far as I know, nobody's bothered to count."

"That's all?" After two hundred years, Paul had expected a population of several hundred thousand. Colonies had a tendency to grow quickly.

"The Holy Order controls the birth rate," Ogram

said. "High Elder Brill wants to keep the population where it is."

"Sounds like he's got his thumb into everything."

"He owns the planet," Ogram said flatly. "At least, that's how he sees it."

"How do the rest of the people see it?"

Ogram shrugged. "Mostly, they go along. Too afraid to do anything else. Except Sabastian and me and a few others."

"And Dorland's parents?"

Ogram looked at him. "He told you about that?"

"He said they were executed as heretics."

Ogram nodded and turned back to the console. "If you oppose High Elder Brill and Lord Tern, that's the risk you run."

"Meaning Dorland will be risking it as well."

Ogram grinned crookedly. "You, too, my friend. But remember—you insisted on coming."

Another silence intervened. The craft swept up over a mountain peak that was covered with a blanket of snow, then down over wooded, brush-covered foothills. Paul glanced into the passenger compartment. Dorland still sat silently, eyes closed.

"There it is," Ogram said, pointing. "Chalcharuzzi. The Holy City."

A wide valley lay between the rugged range of mountains below them and a lower range fifty kilometers away. A river snaked through one corner, and even from here Paul could see the white

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froth of rapids. Much of the valley was overgrown with vegetation, although Paul could see scattered patches of pale pink showing through. Natural outcroppings of stone, he thought at first. Then he looked closer and realized they were structures, but

he couldn't discern their size or shape.

"Only the deacons and elders are permitted to live in Chalcharuzzi," Ogram said. "We aren't supposed to go there, but a few of us break the rules. Karyn says the Tal Tahir abandoned the city at least fifty thousand years ago."

"Karyn?"

"Karyn DiMemmo. You'll meet her. She's read all the old Vanguard reports. She knows about that stuff."

A gridwork of gray lines was prominent against the green backdrop of the ruins. Paul thought they were roads, then realized they were suspended above the city. They gleamed dully with reflected sunlight. He asked Ogram about them.

"Tubeways," Ogram explained. "Karyn says the Tal Tahir used them for transportation, with vehicles that ran inside them. They're big enough to walk through—the ones that are still standing, anyway. We use them to get into the city."

As they approached the ruins, Paul saw that long sections of the tubes lay broken among the vegetation. He lifted his eyes higher on the vidscreen, beyond the ruins, where he could see a scattering of smaller buildings that stretched along the bank of the river. "That's Fairhope?"

Ogram nodded. "Such that it is. Primitive, by your standards."

"I've seen worse." Between Fairhope and the ruins of Chalcharuzzi were large areas of flat land that were squared off in checkerboard patterns. Each square was a different color. Obviously crops, although they were too far away to be identified.

Then Paul realized that the scoutcraft was

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headed in a direction that would take it away from the village. "Isn't that where we're going?"

Ogram shook his head. "We have a camp in the mountains." He looked a little embarrassed. "Actually, it's a large cave. Yonder." He pointed to the rolling hills beyond the ruins of the city.

"You live in a ... cave?"

"Five of us. We moved out there a year ago, when High Elder Brill had Sabastian arrested as a heretic. We broke him out, but we knew we couldn't go back to Fairhope. Brill knows we're up there, but he can't do anything about it."

"Why not? If you only have five people . . ."

"High Elder Brill won't let the deacons or the Sons of God come up to the cave. Good thing for us. They have better weapons than we have, and they know how to use them. They could sneak up before dawn, wipe us out and still get back to the temple in time for morning prayers."

"Why won't he let them do it?"

Ogram shrugged. "He says Lord Tern told him it was forbidden. Lord Tern is big on rules nobody can understand. According to him, the Holy City was put there for the elders. The deacons and the Sons of God live in dormitories around the temple, but they can't leave the roadways that go directly to the temple from Fairhope. They can't cross the river and they can't go into the area of the Far Peaks. They'd have to do one of those things to get to our cave."

Beep, beep, beep.

Startled, Ogram looked up at the vidscreens. "Uh-oh."

Paul followed his gaze and saw a small dark point hovering in the middle of the aft screen, just above the horizon. "What's that?"

"Brill's flyer." He shot a suspicious look at Paul. "Unless you arranged to have one of your Guard friends follow us."

Paul shook his head. "I wanted to, but Dorland wouldn't hear of it." Not even the staff knew where they had gone. As far as the staff was concerned,

Dorland had been called away on a personal emergency. Only Jeffrey Hanes knew the truth, and he had promised not to interfere, although it was clear he hadn't liked it.

"They must've been waiting for us," Ogram said.

"How could they know we'd be coming?"

"Somebody must've tipped 'em off. The Holy Order has lots of spies."

The speck grew rapidly into the oval frontal view of a flying craft.

"Can we outrun them?" Paul asked.

"Not a chance. That flyer's a lot faster than this old scout. But we might be able to outsmart them. Brace yourself. They're going to—"

The blast threw Paul's head into the back of the seat. The scoutcraft veered as though slapped by a giant hand. Paul's ears roared. Ogram struggled with the controls, swearing.

"That was too damn close!" he said after the craft had steadied.

A quick glance at the readout screen told Paul they had lost five hundred meters. He twisted around to look into the passenger compartment. Dorland sat rigidly, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. His eyes were open.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked.

Dorland kept silent, but his head moved in a slight, affirmative gesture. Paul barely had time to make sure Dorland's safety straps were pulled tight when the craft jerked sideways under the force of another blast. Paul heard the whine of the stabilizer engines as they fought to keep it on course. Ogram pulled out the stream drive controls and keyed in a quick sequence. He muttered something, slapped a bar to cancel the sequence command and started over. On the aft screen, Paul could see the flyer

lining up for another shot. He braced himself again as light flared from the flyer's nose—

The scoutcraft lurched, leaving Paul's stomach somewhere behind. It took him a moment to realize that they hadn't been hit. The scene on the vidscreen had changed. The other craft was gone. Paul stared at the screen, puzzled as much as relieved. "Did you hit them with something?"

"Naw." Ogram was grinning with undisguised pride. He folded the stream controls away and repositioned the flight wheel in front of him. The craft's nose turned down toward a wooded area below them. "We just skipped over to the far side of the Peaks where they can't see us. I'll take 'er down low. We shouldn't have any more trouble."

Paul still didn't grasp Ogram's meaning until Dorland spoke up: "We made a local skip."

"Yeah, right!" Ogram exclaimed. "Something they can't do in that flyer. My father used to do it all the time."

Paul stared at the vidscreen. There was no sign of the ruins or the village of Fairhope.

Ogram leveled the craft at an altitude that was barely above the treetops. He glanced over at Paul. "You look a little pale. Feeling okay?"

Paul shook his head wonderingly. "I've never seen anyone skip that close to a mass-plus before."

"Mass-plus?"

"Clarion. The planet. The gravitational basis for the skip."

Ogram shrugged and turned back to the vidscreen. Paul realized with growing horror that Ogram didn't realize how close he had come to killing all of them. Even a navigation computer needed a few seconds to compute the maneuvers that were required to move a craft through the kohlmann stream using a local mass-plus. And with the mass-plus less than a thousand feet below them ...

Slowly, Paul released the deathgrip he had taken on the arms of the seat. Ogram was guiding the streamer along the scar of an old riverbed, twisting through the connected bases of low, rolling hills. He reduced the craft's speed and left the riverbed to fly up the gentle slope of a hill that was covered with lush vegetation. His eyes searched the vidscreens that were now set on wide-angle. When the craft crested the hill, Paul could again see the valley, and scattered signs of the ruins of Chalcharuzzi.

"Ah, here we are." Ogram swung the craft into a gentle turn and climbed the slope a few hundred meters. Then he brought the scoutship to a stop and hovered unsteadily above a grassy clearing that was sheltered all around by high trees.

As the craft dropped closer to the ground, a warning light winked amber on the console screen. Paul waited for Ogram to lower the landing struts and realized with a sudden surge of panic that Ogram hadn't even noticed the light. He tried to speak, but his mouth had gone suddenly dry. Frakes had said something about that other man from Clarion: He came down too fast. . . stasis engines blew. . . crispy by the time they got him out. . .

"The struts!" Paul yelled. "Lord—"

Ogram's head jerked around; then he reached forward and hit the four banded switches an instant before the streamer landed with a bone-jarring thump.

"Sorry," Ogram said. "Guess I could use a little more work on that, too."

Paul released a breath, drew another. His heart hammered.

"Anyway, we're here." Ogram swiveled around and pressed the bar to open the hatchcover. The outside environment sensors went to work while Ogram tapped his fingers impatiently on the arm of

his chair. A moment later the hatchcover lifted with a pneumatic hiss. Two men waited outside near the edge of the clearing. Ogram unsnapped his harness, ducked out through the hatchway and trotted down the short ramp. He stopped at the bottom and turned back to Paul and Borland.

"Coming?"

Paul looked at Dorland, waiting. Dorland stared at him; then something in his face softened a little

and he offered a weary grin.

"Sorry about all this. You shouldn't have come." Paul didn't know what to say. In truth, he was

beginning to feel the same way.

Dorland fumbled with his harness and got it loose with Paul's help; then the two of them went down the ramp to join Ogram. The ground underfoot was spongy. The air was cool on Paul's sweaty face and neck, and carried a pleasant outdoor

scent.

One of the men stepped forward and tilted his

head at Dorland. "Is that him?"

The voice didn't match the appearance. Paul looked closer and realized that the person who had spoken was a young woman with short hair. She wore dark coveralls like Ogram's. A belt pouch hung from her waist, cinched with dark cord.

"Dorland Avery," Ogram said by way of introduction. "This is Karyn DiMemmo. She—"

"I remember," Dorland said. A brief smile touched his lips, and he held his hand out at waist level, palm down. "You were this high when I saw you last. How are your parents?"

"They're both dead."

The smile faded. "I'm sorry . . ."

Her dark eyes remained on him a moment longer; then she looked at Paul. "Who's he?"

Ogram answered: "He works for Dorland—"

"You were supposed to bring Dorland. Nobody else."

"Dorland wouldn't come without him. Sabastian said not to bring him unless he agreed to come willingly."

The girl clearly wasn't pleased with Paul's presence. Beside her stood a thin, feral-looking man with a mane of black hair shot with gray. There was a generally unkempt, straggling look about him. He wore bulky coveralls like the others, but carried a knapsack instead of a belt pouch. He grinned up at Paul, showing teeth that were stained and broken.

"Let's get this over with," Paul said. "Dorland and I want to get back home."

"This is Dorland's home," the girl said.
"Sabastian is waiting." She turned to lead the way into the trees.

Chapter Six

OGRAM WATCHED THE GIRL STALK AWAY. "MY, aren't we in a sour mood today."

The thin man spoke for the first time. "Elder Jacowicz had three people strung up on the wall today."

The humor went out of Ogram's face. "Let's go," he muttered, and turned to follow the girl up the wooded slope.

Paul and Dorland fell into step behind him.
"What wall is he talking about?" Paul asked.

"The God Wall," Ogram said tersely. "You'll find out about it soon enough."

They climbed for a few minutes in silence. Trees with heavy gray bark towered above them, shading them with large, blue-green leaves. There was no path, but Karyn DiMemmo seemed to know her way well enough. Paul moved carefully, watching his step. Heavy underbrush pulled at him.

"How far is it?" he asked.

"Half a kil," Ogram answered. "Take us a few minutes."

The slope steepened. The forest thinned, and the

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ground became rocky with patches of vegetation showing through. They climbed past several large outcroppings of pink-veined rock, and large boulders that looked as if they were on the verge of tumbling down the slope. The boulders were oddly uniform, with rounded comers. Then Paul realized they were arranged in two curved rows that ran ten meters or more across the slope of the hill. A barrier—and when he looked closer he saw that it was a lethal one. Each boulder was held in place by a pair of wooden angle braces. Ropes attached to each brace trailed away up the slope.

They live in a cave, and their defense consists of throwing big rocks, he thought wonderingly.

They picked their way carefully through the barrier. Beyond it were a few scattered benches made of roughly cut wood. A thin wisp of smoke spiraled upward from a primitive fire pit. Beyond the pit loomed the mouth of a large cave. A big man at the entrance sat on a sawed tree stump and worked at something he held in his hands. Wood shavings lay on the ground at his feet. He wore rough coveralls and a shaggy beard. He looked up at the approaching group and pushed himself to his feet.

"Hey, Dorland!"

Dorland stopped to take the man's hand. "Olaf. It's good to see you."

"You, too, boy." The big man shook his hand.

Dorland introduced Paul, and the man named Olaf shook his hand. Then his eyes went back to Dorland. "You shouldn't have come back. I told Sabastian to leave you alone." He seemed to run out of breath. When he drew another, Paul heard an unhealthy rattle. "He wouldn't listen to me."

"Are you all right?" Dorland had a concerned look on his face.

"Aw, yeah. A little lungspot, that's all." Olaf paused for another rattling breath. "All they let me

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do around here is cook, if you can believe that." He laughed, then broke into a fit of coughing. When it was over, he hooked a thumb toward the cave.

"You better go see Sabastian. I'll fix up a big pot of stew for supper."

"This way," Karyn said, obviously impatient.

Paul and Dorland followed her into the cave. Just inside the opening, an older man sat hunched over a rough wooden table. His attention was on something that had been disassembled and laid out across the table. A machine, but unrecognizable to Paul—an odd assortment of springs and cylinders and other small pieces. A few hand tools were arranged carefully on one side of the table. A woven basket on the ground beside the table held more parts.

The old man carefully fitted a thumb-sized cylinder over the end of a tube and tightened something at the end of the cylinder with a bladed tool. Then he placed the tool on the table and leaned back in the chair to regard Dorland.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, holding up the cylinder-and-tube assembly. His voice was dry and gravelly.

Dorland looked more closely at the object. "It's part of a power pack for a light globe."

"That's right. We had twelve of them when you were here. Now we're down to three. When those are gone, we will be forced to light wooden torches at night." Nobody had bothered with introductions, but Paul had already decided the old man was Dorland's uncle, Sabastian Avery. He was lanky, with a face composed of harsh angles and straight lines. His skin was sun-darkened and wrinkled. The family resemblance was unmistakable; in Sabastian's dark, brooding eyes, heavy brows and thick black hair, Paul saw an older version of Dorland.

Sabastian's eyes moved to Paul, and a single

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bushy eyebrow rose slightly. Selmer Ogram cleared his throat and offered his brief explanation for Paul's presence. Sabastian nodded his acceptance and turned to select another cylinder from the basket beside the table.

"Thank you for coming back," he said.

This brought no response from Doriand. Selmer Ogram disappeared into the cave and returned with two folded chairs. He set them up near the table and offered them to Paul and Doriand. He and Karyn sat facing them on a log that had been placed near the fire pit. Ogram clasped his hands between his knees and looked through them at the ground. Karyn's eyes were on Doriand.

"I'm sorry we had to ask you to come back," Sabastian went on. He plugged one end of a cable into the cylinder, and the other end into a small instrument he had placed in front of him on the table. He frowned, unplugged the cable and began removing the cap from the cylinder. "It wasn't an easy decision. I had hoped you would find a new life on the outside."

"I did. Selmer said you need my help."

Sabastian looked up at Doriand, holding the cylinder shell carefully between thumb and forefinger. "There are only five of us left. Schaefer and Michelson are dead. And Cleve Quinton."

"I know," Doriand said quietly. "Cleve was first witness when Diana and I were married. Selmer said Cleve saw something come out of the chauka during the semarch ceremony."

The old man reached for the bladed tool again. "Cleve wore a fartalker, and Karyn and Jacque were listening outside the wall. Cleve relayed what he saw until the deacons found him and killed him." He twisted the tool and the end popped off the cylinder, exposing a web of tiny wires. "He may have been hallucinating. We know he was under great stress."

"This happened during a religious ceremony?" Paul asked.

Sabastian nodded. "Semarch—when the young men are initiated into the Sons of God."

"Then you're probably right," Paul said. "About Cleve Quinton hallucinating, I mean. From what I've heard, that's fairly common among some religions. People get worked up to the point they may see anything."

"Perhaps."

Paul was more interested in something else Sabastian had said. Erich Frakes had mentioned it also—a Tal Tahir machine. "What's the chauka?"

"The chauka is the most sacred of Tal Tahir artifacts," Sabastian said. He went back to work on the cylinder and made a delicate adjustment with the tool. "It is inside the temple of the Tal Tahir, and only the deacons and elders of the Holy Order are permitted to see it. According to legend, it is used to summon Lord Tern from beyond the Far Peaks."

"Selmer told me the Tal Tahir are all dead. As you said, this man Quinton must have been hallucinating. Why is the chauka so important to you?"

"The chauka is a symbol of Lord Tern. If we destroy it, the people of Fairhope will see that the Holy Order is not invincible. We hope they will learn to control their fear of the Holy Order and turn against it."

"Why do you need Doriand?"

Sabastian connected the cylinder to the instrument and frowned at the result. Once again he began prying gently at the cap. "I hope Doriand will agree to go into the sacred chamber and try to discover what Cleve saw during the semarch ceremony."

Paul issued a grunt of surprise. "After what happened to him? How can you expect—"

"Cleve saw something that he thought was Lord

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Tern," Sabastian said in the same quiet tone. "We want to find out what he saw. I have always believed that the ceremony was merely a ritual. Now I am not so sure."

The statement confused Paul. "Are you saying you think Lord Tern may really exist?"

"I am saying only that I want to learn what I can about what Cleve saw inside the sacred chamber."

"But if Lord Tern is a fabrication of the Holy Order—"

The old man turned to look at Paul. "It may be that what we have taken as myth and lies is actual fact. It may be that Lord Tern lives inside the temple."

Paul shook his head. He felt as if the conversation had drifted off somewhere and left him behind. Doriand sat silently beside him.

"Send someone else to the temple," Paul said at last to Sabastian. He waved a hand toward the thin, rough-looking man who had been waiting with K-aryn when the streamer landed. The man squatted near the fire pit talking to Olaf. He noticed Paul's attention and grinned. "He seems more the type to try something like that."

"Jacque Hakim is expert with weapons,"

Sabastian admitted. "But Doriand has been trained in the ways of the Holy Order and Lord Tern." He paused to concentrate on the fine work of removing the wiring from the cylinder. Paul wondered how he could have the patience to keep at it so persistently. Then he remembered what Sabastian had said. When these are gone, we will be forced to light wooden torches at night. "It is said that one must be properly trained before an encounter with Lord Tern. If not, his power will destroy your mind."

"How can—" Then Paul stopped and shook his head in confusion. "You're saying something happened to Cleve Quinton because he wasn't properly . . . trained?"

"We don't know what happened during the ceremony, but we know that he was subjected to a mental trauma." Sabastian got up and moved to a small wooden box that was set against the cave wall. He opened the lid carefully and removed a tool. When he came back, Paul realized he walked with a heavy limp. He remembered something Ogram had said to Doriand: He lost a leg to the deacons. "I don't know what happened to Cleve. There is much about the temple and the sacred chamber that we do not understand—secrets that are closely guarded by the Holy Order. I am hoping that Dorland's training will help him understand some of those secrets."

"You keep talking about Dorland's training. What do you mean?"

Sabastian's eyes flicked to Doriand, then back to Paul. "The deacons and elders go through a program of mental training that is meant to prepare them for communication with Lord Tern."

"The deacons and elders? But—" Paul stopped, his eyes going to Doriand. Doriand had pulled into himself and was seemingly oblivious to the discussion.

"Doriand was once in line for eldership in the Holy Order," Sabastian said.

PAUL SAT ON AN OUTCROPPING OF ROCK THAT

overlooked the valley. Clarion's butter-yellow sun hung low over the horizon. The woods around him were filled with the sounds of countless insects.

He'd been sitting there for an hour looking down at the valley and the ruins that were stretched out below him. He was only a short distance from the camp, but he felt a much-needed solitude. Too much had happened today. He had to put it in some kind of order.

But his thoughts were continually drawn to the Tal Tahir city below him. Even after fifty thousand years the vegetation had not succeeded in covering it entirely. Farther back he could see the village of Fairhope, and beyond it the speckled white fields of a crop called cotton that had been brought with the original colonists on Vanguard. Selmer had told him it was used to make most of their clothing.

The dinner he had eaten with the others at the cave lay heavy and sour in his stomach. Olaf Blackburn's stew was made from something called poca—a vegetable root that grew in the forest

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below the cave. Olaf boiled the poca in a big pot, adding other ingredients that did little to improve the root's bitter flavor. According to Selmer Ogram, poca was often dried into cakes because it was easy to pack and would keep for a long time without spoiling. Paul shuddered when he thought about dry cakes of the foul-tasting plant.

In some ways the area that was spread out below him reminded Paul of the woodlands that surrounded his house on Farrady. He and Trisha lived in a two-story flydown that was isolated from all but air traffic. The house was large and luxurious, nicer by far than anything he'd ever expected to own—one of the many benefits of being Doriand Avery's business manager. He had bought it shortly after he and Trisha had taken residence together.

Trisha. He'd hardly had time to think of her

during the past few hours, but now he felt a pang for home like he had never felt during a tour. Of all the unpleasant chores he'd had to take care of to make this unexpected trip, lying about it to Trisha had been the worst. She and Paul had been together for more than a year, and Paul was proud of the fact that he'd always been honest with her. It was a symbol to him that his hell-raising days were over—and he had felt increasingly comfortable with that. Now and then he found himself thinking of suggesting a permanent bond with Trisha. He had even considered the possibility of children.

You're overreacting, he told himself. You lied to her, but it was for her own good.

She would only worry if she knew the truth, and he couldn't discount the possibility that Parke Sabre would question her about their whereabouts. Trisha was a born innocent—Paul knew that Sabre would see through her if she knew the truth and tried to withhold it.

But if he was oversensitive to the relationship he

shared with Trisha, it was because he was so careful to avoid the mistakes his parents had made. His father came from a wealthy family and had squandered away every udit during a lifetime of waste. His mother was practical and ambitious, and the result of their conflicting personalities was constant bickering. Both of them had eventually sunk into the oblivion existence of drugs.

Two wasted lives, and Paul was aware that he had been traveling down the same road when he met Doriand. Becoming Dorland's business manager had been the first major step toward getting Paul's own life straightened out. Then he'd met Trisha, and the rest had fallen into place.

Paul heard a sound and turned his head to find Selmer Ogram standing beside him.

"Sabastian wouldn't ask him to do it if he didn't have to."

Paul turned back to face the city.

"He's up against a wall," Selmer went on. "He knows he has to do something. High Elder Brill and

Elder Jacowicz have to be stopped."

Paul kept thinking about what Doriand had said when he had at last looked at Sabastian and agreed to go into the temple. Paul had tried desperately to talk him out of it, but Doriand had already made up his mind.

I've always known I would go into the sacred chamber and speak to Lord Tern. The certainty in Dorland's voice sent a new chill down Paul's spine now as he remembered the words.

"Who's Jacowicz?" Paul asked.

"He's the elder in charge of obedience. Brill's right-hand man, and maybe even more dangerous. He's the one who set up the Sons of God." Selmer lowered himself carefully to another benchlike outcropping of rock. "Jacowicz is determined to get each of us on his God Wall."

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"You need help," Paul said. "That's obvious. But you should ask UNSA for it. I don't see how you can expect Dorland to go into that temple alone."

"We've got it all worked out. There shouldn't be any problem—"

"Is that what you thought when Cleve Quinton went in?" Paul asked. "If Dorland has to fight for his life, he won't have a chance. Dorland hates violence. Sabastian should know that."

"He does," Selmer said. "After all, Dorland's his nephew. If everything goes as planned, there won't be any violence."

"If everything goes as planned," Paul said bitterly. "All you're betting is Dorland's life."

"We're betting all our lives." Selmer held out a pair of binoculars. "Here, you can see better with these."

"I can see all I want to."

"I'd like to show you something."

Paul grudgingly accepted the binoculars and looked through them at the city. Light slanted across the valley from the setting sun. Although most of the ruins were hidden by vegetation, he could see that the patches of pale pink were the remains of domed structures. Some were still nearly whole, thrusting up through the vegetation like the top halves of pink skulls. He lifted the binoculars and focused them on the village of Fairhope—a rambling collection of small, square buildings and narrow roads, canopied by a blue haze of woodsmoke. The river snaked along one side of it. Small figures moved around. Narrow roads led between the fields toward Chalcharuzzi. He found the zoom control and expanded the image of one of the buildings. A cabin, he realized, made of cut logs. A thin spiral of smoke rose from the chimney.

"On the far right you can see the temple," Selmer said. "That's the building with the white spire."

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Paul searched until he found it: a squat, reddish-brown building dominated by a single white spire that curved up fifty meters or more to catch the last rays of the sun. A few smaller buildings were scattered behind it. A wall surrounded the entire complex.

"Look there in the back, where the wall has been built up higher."

Paul found the place Selmer was talking about. The wall was uniformly low around most of the temple complex, certainly no higher than a man's shoulders. But on the far side was a section that was raised above the rest. The heightened section ran only ten meters or so, and from what Paul could see there was no structural reason for it. He adjusted the focus control of the glasses. There was something on the raised section of wall. A dark smudge . . .

Then the smudge jumped into focus, and Paul's blood ran cold. Three bodies hung side by side on the wall, several feet above the ground. Their arms

were outstretched as if their wrists had been fastened to the wall, and their feet were bound together. Their heads lolled.

"That's the God Wall," Ogram said.

Paul couldn't take his eyes from the limp bodies. He saw no movement. "Are they dead?"

"Probably. Karyn said they were strung up three days ago. That means three days without food or water, with Jacowicz coming out from time to time to question them." Ogram placed a slight, bitter emphasis on the word question. "I'm sure they're dead by now."

"Who were they?"

"We don't know. They were probably found guilty of being heretics. Translated, that means they were accused of helping us."

"Were they?"

"No. We have a lot of friends in Fairhope. Some

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of us even have family there. But we don't let them give us any help. Too dangerous for them."

"Why would Brill put them on the wall?"

"To make a point. He must have found out I followed Deacon Bekman when he went after Dorland. High Elder Brill didn't like that, so he did this to make sure we understand."

Paul lowered the binoculars and stared at Selmer incredulously. "He would do that to people who aren't even connected with your group . . . just to

make a point?"

Selmer nodded. "This isn't the first time. He wants to pressure us into turning ourselves in."

Paul lifted the binoculars again and saw something along the bottom of the wall that he at first took to be light-colored vegetation. He focused the binoculars and realized they were piles of bones

that had fallen from the wall and collected on the ground. He shuddered and turned the binoculars back to the temple. The area around it had been cleared of rubble and vegetation, and landscaped with a flat lawn, graceful trees and clumps of flowering shrubs. That alone made the temple grounds stand out, but even more conspicuous was the white spire. Selmer shrugged when Paul asked

him about it.

"It's original. The Tal Tahir used the spire in a lot of their architecture."

"A symbol?"

Selmer shrugged again. "I don't know. I've heard that the Holy Order had the others torn down a long time ago. They left that one as a landmark for their Godsdays services."

The smaller buildings clustered behind the temple were of obviously human design. Compared with the primitive look of Fairhope and the crumbled ruins around it, the temple complex had a sound, well-maintained look. Walkways connected the buildings to the temple and to one another.

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"The deacons live down there?" Paul asked.

"Yeah. High Elder Brill lives in that first building just behind the temple. Hit the zoom—you may be lucky enough to see him on the porch. He likes to sit out there and lord over his flock."

Paul touched the control and the image expanded until he could clearly see the building Selmer meant. It was sturdy, made of sawed planks, from the look of it. In the front was a wide, covered porch bordered by hedges and flower beds. A paved walkway led up to it. A white-robed sentry stood on each side of the set of dark-stained doors.

As Paul watched, a man emerged from the door and stopped to speak to one of the sentries. He, too, wore a white robe, but this one was trimmed in scarlet. Paul described the man.

"That's Elder Jacowicz," Selmer said. "He

spends a lot of time with the High Elder."

Jacowicz was scarecrow-thin. His eyes were lost in the shadow cast by the porch's roof, but the rest of his face was clear—long, thin nose, high cheekbones, straight slash of a mouth.

He stepped down from the porch, then made his way slowly along the walkway to another building farther back. After he had gone inside, Paul turned the binoculars to the temple again. Beyond it was a large area where the vegetation was thinner, and Paul could see more of the domed structures. He studied several of them. The Tal Tahir obviously hadn't gone in for elaborate architecture. What he could see of the city was boringly monotonous.

Then he realized he was seeing something he hadn't noticed before. He took the binoculars away for an overall view.

"It's laid out in a pattern," he said.

"What?" Selmer's thoughts had been elsewhere. "Oh—you mean the circles."

The basis for the city's design seemed to be the tubeways. Many had fallen, but enough remained

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for Paul to see that they had been laid out in straight lines to form a grid across the city. He counted seven tubes running in each direction, spaced about two kilometers apart. Each square formed by the intersecting tubes was divided into quarter sections. A circular pattern of domed structures occupied each quadrant, and in the center of each circle was a large space given over to vegetation.

Presumably, the domed structures had been the primary dwelling buildings of the Tal Tahir. By moving the binoculars across the areas that were relatively free of vegetation, Paul made a rough count of about a hundred domes in each outer circle, and that many more in the two inner circles. He calculated the rest in his head: say two hundred domes per quadrant, making eight hundred in a square, times thirty-six squares came to ... close to twenty-nine thousand domes in the city. A lot

more than he would have guessed.

"Do you know how many of the Tal Tahir lived down there?"

Selmer pursed his lips. "About two hundred thousand, I think. Karyn says that's what the Vanguard archaeologists came up with."

Paul made another rough calculation. If the arkies were right, that meant each dome housed about seven individuals. Big families.

Then Paul moved the binoculars over the temple again and realized something else. The temple was situated in the center of one of the quadrants. "Are you sure the temple was a Tal Tahir building?"

"That's what Karyn says."

Paul looked more closely at the adjoining squares. None of the other clusters had a building with the white spire. That seemed odd: the Tal Tahir had obviously placed a lot of emphasis on symmetry when they built their city. Why would only one of the quadrant sections have a building

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like the temple? Then he remembered something Selmer had said earlier.

"There used to be other buildings with the white spires?"

"A long time ago. Before Sabastian was bom. Karyn says the Holy Order tore them down."

"Any idea why?"

Selmer shrugged. "I've never given it much thought. Why all the interest? It's just an old city. Hardly anything left."

"This is the first nonhuman city I've ever seen."

"Really?" He seemed genuinely surprised. "I had the impression you've traveled all over."

Paul realized Selmer would have no way of knowing how rare were signs of intelligents. When he explained that, Selmer shrugged.

"Guess we're just used to it." A thin black insect with broad wings circled Selmer's head once and settled in his hair. He pulled it out carefully and released it, then reached into a pocket of his coveralls and brought out a small flask. He offered it to Paul. Paul hesitated. The container was clear, and the liquid was dark. He sniffed tentatively, then tipped the flask and let the warm, fummy liquor run into his mouth. He swallowed, grimaced, swallowed again. The flavor was faintly familiar. He handed the flask back to Selmer. "What is it?"

"Home brew," Selmer answered with a grin. "Can't you guess what's in it?"

Paul thought about that faintly familiar flavor. Then he groaned. "Poca."

Selmer laughed. "And a few other things. It isn't too strong, but it dulls the pain. Sabastian puts up with it as long as we don't overdo it. Of course, drinking spirits is a capital offense as far as the Holy Order is concerned."

They both took another drink; then Selmer put the flask away. They sat for a while listening to the varied sounds of insects all around them.

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A rebel camp, Paul thought. There was a certain dramatic ring to it: Five Brave Souls Against an Alien God and his Human Servants.

Five brave souls . . .

"Why is Karyn here?" he asked. "She's too young to be involved in something like this."

"Her brother was initiated into the Sons a couple of years ago," Selmer answered. "He was killed a few months later by one of the deacons when he broke a rule. She came to us and said she wanted to do whatever she could to help."

"He was killed for breaking a rule?"

"That's part of being in the Sons of God," Selmer said. "Obedience, and Elder Jacowicz wields a heavy hand."

Chapter Eight

THEY SPENT THE NIGHT FAR BACK IN THE CAVE.

Paul slept fitfully on a mat of blankets, with another one over him.

The next morning was clear and cold. They made their plans for the trip to the temple over a breakfast of baked poka and several other unmemorable vegetables. Karyn seemed to be the informal leader when it came to strategy, and it was clear that she was most familiar with the Tal Tahir city. Sabastian spoke little, offering only a suggestion now and then. He and Olaf Blackburn would remain at the camp.

Jacque Hakim selected and checked over the handmade knives and the single burp gun they would take. Paul reluctantly strapped a sheathed knife around his waist, fervently hoping he would never face the prospect of using it. Dorland refused to carry a weapon.

Karyn impressed on them that timing was important. They would have to reach the temple after nightfall in order to get Dorland inside under cover of darkness, so they wouldn't leave the camp

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until late afternoon.

In order to keep in touch with Sabastian and Olaf, Karyn carried a small device called a fartalker in her belt pouch. Curious, Paul had asked to see the palm-sized box before they left the camp, and found that it was an ancient but recognizable version of an intraship communicator. According to Selmer, several hundred of the devices had been salvaged from Vanguard. Energy charges had diminished to the point that the fartalker range was only about seven kilometers, but that would be enough to stretch the distance between the temple and the mountain camp.

The air was still crisp when they left. They all wore dark coveralls, and jackets made of heavy, durable cloth. The going was rough as they made their way down the slope with Karyn and Jacque leading. Doriand and Paul followed, and Selmer Ogram brought up the rear. Several times they had to clamber over outcroppings of splintered rock. Paul noticed that Karyn always kept her eyes on the area ahead, and paused several times to survey the slope below them.

"What's she looking for?" Paul asked Selmer at one such halt.

"Deacons," Selmer answered. "Or Sons of God. She doesn't want to cross paths with them."

"I thought you said they aren't allowed up this way."

"They aren't. But I also said Lord Tern changes the rules from time to time."

They continued down the slope toward the valley in the face of a chill wind. At last the ground leveled and the rocks gave way to spongy soil and waist-high plants with flat leaves that were blue and shiny. The area was still heavily wooded, but the trees were not, as tall or as thickly foliated as those of the higher slopes.

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They paused again at the edge of the forest. Fifty meters away a large, silver-gray tube crossed high above the vegetation. Under it Paul could see the crumbled remains of pink domes.

"That's Number One tube," Karyn said. "We'll turn left and follow it."

"I thought we'd be traveling inside the tube," Paul said.

"We have to find an access point. First one we'll come to is at the intersection with David's Tube."

Paul drew a blank on that. "David's Tube?" But she had already turned away to look in the direction they would travel.

"That's Tube D," Selmer explained. He pointed off to the right. "It's part of our system. We start in the corner closest to our camp. Tube One is the first tube that runs right to the left along the edge of the city. The next one is Tube Two, and so on. Tube A is the first tube that runs the other way, straight out across to the far side of the city. That's Alyx. Then Tube B—Barth—and so on."

Paul could see how the ordering of the tubes could make sense. But one aspect of the system puzzled him. "Why give names to them?"

"Our power cells are old and weak," Selmer explained. "We get a lot of static over the fartalker. Names are easier to understand than letters."

"Will the David tube take us to the temple?"

Paul tried to remember the layout he had seen from the slope the day before.

"Not quite." Selmer squatted down and brushed away some leaves, then began to draw a diagram with his finger in the soft ground. "The temple's farther east, over here by Cassie's Tube." He made a depression in the dirt. "But Cassie has fallen down between here and the temple." He rubbed out part of the line he'd drawn to represent the C tube. "We can take David to Tube Four—that's the closest exit. But a big section of Tube Four has

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fallen down, too, so we'll have to travel on foot from there."

"Let's go," Karyn called back to them.

They picked their way through the vegetation and crumbled remains of domed structures, following a course that was parallel to Tube One. The tube was about five meters off the ground, held up by slender pylons that seemed to be spaced too far apart to give enough support. Signs of deterioration were visible on the outer surface of the curved wall—dark splotches here and there and a few ripples where the metal had begun to sag. If Selmer was right about the age of the ruins, the tube had hung here above the ground for at least fifty thousand years. Paul gave the Tal Tahir engineers a mental nod for that. The domed structures had not

fared as well; most of them in this area had collapsed, and thousands of years of exposure to the elements had caused the pinkish construction material to crumble into small pebbles that crunched underfoot. Here and there a section of curved wall had held together and jutted up through the vegetation.

Karyn called a halt at an intersection where another tube led off at a right angle from Tube One.

"David's Tube," Selmer said to Paul. He pointed at another, much narrower tube that came out of the side of the intersecting tubes and spiraled to the ground. "That's the access port."

Karyn and Jacque had stopped at the bottom of the smaller tube. It flared out as it neared the ground, presumably to form an entryway. The ground was lighter in color around it, and Paul realized there had once been pavement at the entrance. Now vegetation crowded the opening. Fragments of something that might have been a door clung to the edges.

Karyn and Jacque went through first, then Paul

and Dorland. There were steps inside the tube, gritty but free of debris. Narrow, though—Paul had to keep a tight grip on the railing that curved up along the tube at hip level. The steps seemed sturdy enough, although Paul felt the entire structure shift slightly at one point. He could climb without ducking his head, but just barely. By the time the light had faded with the first turn of the spiral, he was fighting a growing feeling of claustrophobia. He felt better when he emerged into the relative openness of the main tube.

"Careful here," Karyn warned.

The tube was about four meters in diameter, and unexpectedly bright from sunlight that poured through oval ports spaced every few meters on the upper curve. Paul realized that the access port had delivered them to a narrow platform about two meters above the curved floor.

"Karyn says they used to have vehicles that ran the tubes," Selmer said. "We think this is where they boarded."

Along each side, about a meter above the floor, were rails the thickness of a man's arm. The floor itself was cut with two parallel grooves, now mostly filled with thick dust.

Karyn retrieved the fartalker from her belt pouch and flipped it open. The call signals weren't elaborate. When the device beeped, Karyn said, "Sabastian?"

A moment passed. Then: "Here."

Karyn gave him a progress report in a few brief sentences, then closed the fartalker and returned it to her pouch.

"Let's move." She jumped nimbly down to the floor. Paul landed awkwardly on the curved surface. He turned to help Dorland, but found Dorland already beside him.

They walked down the tube for twenty minutes

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before they reached another intersection with an access port. Karyn went through without pausing. Paul dropped back to walk next to Selmer.

"How long will we stay in this tube?" he asked.

"About an hour."

Paul's eyes went to Dorland, who lagged a few paces behind Karyn. "Tell me about the Sons of God. Sabastian said they'd be guarding the temple. But if they're young boys—"

"Young, but dangerous," Selmer said. "They're initiated when they're fifteen. But only if they're good enough. The brightest, the best in physical shape—those are the ones they take."

"How many are there?"

"About twenty-five. Only twenty have been trained for combat, though. Elder Jacowicz trains

them himself. First they learn how to fight with dart guns and knives."

"Sounds primitive."

"Maybe so, but the boys are good. And the darts have poisoned tips. If one of them touches you—" He snapped his fingers and grinned. "But we have a few surprises of our own." He lifted his arm and pulled back the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a long-bladed knife strapped between wrist and elbow.

"You'd use that on a young boy?"

Selmer pulled the sleeve back down. "I don't know. But if I did, I'd be doing him a favor. High Elder Brill has told them how wonderful their existence will be beyond the Far Peaks if they lose their lives fighting for Lord Tern. Supposedly it was Lord Tern's idea to train them and organize them."

"For what reason?"

"To patrol Fairhope and make sure everyone stays pious. If they can track us down in the meantime, so much the better."

They walked for a while in silence. Then Paul

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asked: "The ceremony that initiates them into the Sons of God—that's semarch?"

"Yeah, but it's more complicated than just an initiation. It's based on something the Tal Tahir did with their young. We don't understand all of it, but we know it's supposed to bring about a change in the boys themselves."

"A change?"

"That's the theory. As far as I can see, all it does is turn nice young boys into murdering scum. But Karyn says the Tal Tahir ceremony was a transition for the young. According to her, it was quite a big deal. The young were special to the Tal Tahir."

"Transition to adulthood," Paul suggested. He'd heard of similar concepts that had carried over

from primitive Terran cultures.

"Maybe," Selmer said.

Silence fell over them again. Ahead of them, the others walked steadily, footsteps ringing hollowly inside the tube.

"Brill and Jacowicz are brainwashing the boys," Selmer said at last. "We haven't found a way to counter it. Boys are turning in their own families as heretics and praying to Lord Tern while their parents die on the God Wall." Selmer paused to take a deep breath. "The next generation will be monsters, even if the eldership changes. That's why we have to get rid of the Holy Order now, and get the Tal Tahir completely out of our lives. That's the only way Clarion will survive."

"Five of you will save the planet?"

Selmer offered him a crooked grin. "Maybe not, but we'll die trying."

Probably, Paul thought. "I've seen the God Wall, and you told me about the Sons of God and the punishment for disagreeing with the Holy Order. Why don't more people turn against the Holy Order? You said there are only ten deacons and ten

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elders, and about twenty Sons of God. Why don't the people of Fairhope throw them out?"

Selmer nodded. "Seems simple enough. But it isn't. We've tried to get people to help us. They're afraid, of course. But that isn't what keeps them back. High Elder Brill holds a spell over them."

"A spell?"

"You'll see what I mean if you ever attend one of his Godsdays services. Colored banners, music from those infernal priams—and High Elder Brill standing up there in his great robes and his arms thrust out—" He shook his head. "It's quite a show, and he uses it to lay a spell. I've even felt it—inside, you know? He starts chanting Lord Tern's latest revelation, and it all seems to grow in your mind. Like—" He broke off, and his eyes focused on Paul.

"Like it's the .truth. You want to believe in the power of Lord Tern."

Paul thought of Dorland on the stage, weaving his lights and music over the audience. He shook off a sudden chill.

"Lord Tern, the protector," Selmer went on. "Sabastian has a theory. He thinks High Elder Brill keeps all our lives so miserable and uncertain that we need a security symbol to cling to—and Lord Tern is that symbol."

They walked in silence for a long moment. Then Paul said: "You mentioned Lord Tern's revelations. What are they, exactly?"

"Words of wisdom. High Elder Brill interprets them and passes them along to his flock during Godsdays service. Usually, the revelations aren't much—information about someone with family trouble, or maybe an emotional crisis. And Lord Tern's suggestions about how to deal with it."

"He helps people solve their personal problems?" That didn't fit with other aspects of the Holy Order.

Selmer nodded. "Lord Tern gives him the revela-

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tions in advance of the service through the chauka. At least, that's what Brill says—the name of the person, the problem he's having and how to solve it."

"Does he get it right?"

"As far as I know, he's always right about the problems. The solutions are a bit shaky, but everyone's so impressed with the first part they don't seem to notice that the second part doesn't always work out. That's another reason he can control people. He comes across as all-seeing." Selmer issued a grunt of laughter. "He isn't, of course. His spies in Fairhope give him the information he uses in the service. They sneak around the village and find out who's having problems at home, who's sick with the pox—things like that. High Elder Brill brings these matters up during the

service, and makes like Lord Tern told him about the problem and how to solve it. Then once in a while he comes up with a bigger issue, like the proclamations that established the Sons of God and the God Wall. He mixes that in with a dose of nonsense about Lord Tern's strength and the magical power of Chalcharuzzi, and he sells it all as one bundle."

Ahead of them, Karyn had stopped at one of the intersections.

"We'll get out here," she said. "We'll be close to the temple, so keep your eyes open."

Jacque reached into his pouch and withdrew an odd-looking bundle. When he unrolled it, Paul saw that it was a rope ladder with sturdy metal hooks fastened to one end. With practiced ease, Jacque flipped the hooks upward at the access port opening. They caught on the protruding lip of the narrow platform, and Jacque climbed quickly up the curved wall to the platform. When Paul started to follow, Karyn stopped him.

"Let him look around first."

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Above them, Jacque stepped past the platform and disappeared into the access tube. A moment later he called the all clear, and the others followed him up the ladder and down through the access tube to the ground. Jacque retrieved his ladder, rolled it up and returned it to his pack.

Paul saw that they were in an area of thin vegetation. The dome structures were in better condition here; several were still standing and looked to be mostly intact. In the distance Paul could see the high white spire of the temple.

Karyn shielded her eyes and looked toward where the sun hung above the distant peaks. "We'll have to wait here for a while. Otherwise we'll reach the temple before dark." She looked around, then indicated one of the dome structures that appeared to be in reasonably good condition. "In there."

The dome's entrance was an archway with eroded edges. When he ducked through, Paul found

himself in a large room that was at least ten meters across. Smooth walls curved upward to a rounded ceiling far above him. Slit windows in the high curve admitted shafts of light that splashed brightly across the floor. There were no furnishings.

"It's just a shell with a few walls," Paul said.

"The Holy Order had everything taken out of the domes a long time ago," Selmer said. "Nobody knows why. It's probably all been destroyed by now."

The floor was littered with a few chunks of stone that had fallen from the ceiling and walls, but otherwise was clear of debris. Several open doorways were spaced around the curved walls. Paul looked through one of them and found that it opened into another, smaller room, also bare. Each of the other doorways opened into similar rooms. He didn't have to spend much time exploring before he had the design figured out—a large main room with the smaller rooms opening directly off it

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all around. It was easy enough to imagine this main room as the family gathering place, and the other rooms as the Tal Tahir equivalent of bedrooms. He had no doubt that each dome was designed exactly the same way. There was something oddly familiar about the design—and in a moment Paul realized what it was. The floor plan of the dome was a miniature replica of each of the city's quadrants he'd seen the day before. The realization supported his conclusion that the Tal Tahir had been fanatics for symmetry: each quadrant had a central area surrounded by circular rows of domes, and each dome had a central room surrounded by a circular row of smaller rooms.

He returned to the main room feeling somewhat depressed. There was no way of knowing what furniture the Tal Tahir had, what they used for books, for entertainment. So much of their lives had been wiped clean from this place.

The others had already taken off their packs and found places to squat or sit on the floor.

"Let's go over the plan again," Karyn said. "We

don't want any problems." She got down on her knees so she could use her finger to draw a rough sketch in the thick dust. "This is the wall around the temple, and the temple building itself." She glanced up to make sure she had Dorland's attention. "The sacred chamber is just through the entrance, here." Her finger traced a line. "Remember, you're only going in to look around. After you've finished in the chamber, come back out through the front. We'll be watching for the sentries from across the road. Jacque will make his pilgrim call—" She looked up at Dorland. "You remember what that's like?"

He nodded.

"Good. Jacque will make the call after the sentries have passed by out of sight. Wait until you hear it, then come right over the wall." She paused,

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watching him. "If you can't come through the front for any reason—"

"Why wouldn't he be able to come through the front?" Paul asked sharply.

"He will," Karyn answered. "But if somebody spots him going in, or if the sentries come back earlier than we expect, there's another way out." She turned back to Dorland. "If you have to, you can take the stairway to the roof. It's here on the right." Her finger sketched a series of horizontal lines to represent stairsteps. "There's a door leading out onto the roof. You can go along the roof to the back wall, then down over the wall in this corner." She jabbed a finger. "If you don't come through the front, we'll wait for you around there, then go back to the intersection of David and Fourth. Either way, we should be able to get back to camp before dawn." She looked up at him. "Can you do that?"

He nodded.

Karyn studied his face a moment longer, then turned to look through the tangled vines at the dome's entrance. "It's getting dark. Let's go."

Outside, they walked carefully in single file to-

ward the spire, which gleamed dully in the moonlight. Paul noticed that Karyn and Jacque had their knives unsheathed and within easy reach.

The sky was a deep cobalt blue by the time they stepped between the crumbled ruins of two domes and saw the temple less than a hundred meters away.

"We'll wait here for the sentries to go past," Karyn whispered.

They huddled against a rounded pink wall for several minutes. Then Paul heard low voices and saw two dark shapes pass by along the wall. Paul's heart began to thump uneasily inside his chest.

"Okay," Karyn whispered after the sentries were out of sight. "We have only a few minutes."

Keeping low, Karyn and Jacque moved across the roadway, then Dorland. Paul hung back, reluctant to leave the shelter of the wall. Vegetation would give them at least a thin cover once they'd reached the wall. Paul started to cross the roadway when a low hooting sound from the darkness made him jump. Behind him, Selmer laughed quietly.

"That's a reapigrim. Bird about the size of your finger. Not dangerous." He laughed again and touched Paul's shoulder. "Better get moving."

When they were all together at the wall, Karyn spoke in a low voice to Dorland.

"Once you're over, go directly across the courtyard and through the archway. Then you'll be inside the temple."

Dorland nodded.

"The sentries will be back in a few minutes," Karyn said, her eyes on Dorland. Paul was suddenly struck by the realization that she wasn't happy with this plan either. "You can still change your mind. Nobody would blame you."

Dorland didn't say anything. Karyn's eyes remained on him a moment longer; then she signaled to the others, crossed the roadway at a crouching run and melted into the shadows. Paul hesitated as

Selmer and Jacque followed her. He peered over the wall at the temple. Then he heard nearby voices, and his heart began to hammer inside his chest. The voices were those of young men, but Paul knew they couldn't be the sentries back this early. From their direction, it was clear that the boys were coming down the other side of the wall toward the corner. When they reached the cover, the boys would surely see him and Dorland crouched there against the wall.

For a frozen moment they hesitated; then Dorland grasped the wall and pulled himself over. Paul turned for a quick, panicky glance toward the black shadows across the roadway "where he knew

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Karyn and the others waited. Then the voices came closer and he knew he didn't have a choice. He followed Dorland over the wall, landed off balance on a hard surface and nearly fell. Dorland's hands were on his arm, steadying him. They waited, panting, staring at each other.

A voice came from just on the other side of the wall: "We can't go in through the gate. They'll know we didn't get here in time. We were supposed to be here a half hour before the ceremony. Let's go over here."

Chapter Nine

PAUL AND DORLAND MADE THEIR WAY CAREFULLY

across the courtyard, hugging the shadows, balancing the need to get away from the boys who would be climbing over the wall behind them against the need to avoid falling over a bench or potted plant.

Paul followed Dorland up the shallow steps and through the lighted archway, expecting at any moment to feel the sting of a dart between his shoulder blades.

The poison takes about thirty seconds, Selmer had

told him. But I saw a man die from it and I can tell you that it's a long thirty seconds.

Inside the building, they moved quickly away from the entrance and stood still, listening. Silence.

We were supposed to be here a half hour before the ceremony.

Paul hadn't stopped to think about the significance of the boy's statement, but now it was chillingly clear. A ceremony of some kind would be starting here before long. Which meant that he and Dorland would have to figure out a way to get out of here fast!

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He looked around, taking stock of the room. The inner walls and the floor were covered with dark, highly polished wood. Only the ceiling and outer wall appeared to be of the pink-veined stone of which the domes were made. Paul looked closer at the wall. It was featureless. He'd expected to see the lines of stone blocks, but there was no hint of how the building was constructed.

The layout fitted Karyn's description. To the left was a low, wide archway that led into another room. The light came from there. On the right side of the entry was a heavy wooden door that stood open. Through it Paul could see a short passageway that led to a gentle curve of stairs.

Paul touched Dorland's shoulder and turned toward that door. He had no way of knowing exactly what kind of ceremony would take place, but, based on what Selmer and Karyn had told him, chances were good it would be held inside the sacred chamber. That was a solid enough reason to avoid going in there.

Then he stopped when he realized that Dorland hadn't moved. He stood stiffly with his arms down at his sides, staring into the lighted room.

"Let's go!" Paul hissed. Then he heard the boy's voice again just outside the arched entrance:

"—sure I saw someone come across here—"

Paul pushed down the surge of panic and realized that he and Dorland had only two choices; they could follow the planned escape route by turning right and going up the stairs, or they could turn left into the sacred chamber. Taking the stairs would make them visible for several seconds to anyone who glanced through the entrance—and a perfect target.

Too risky. He urged Dorland through the archway into the sacred chamber. It was a large room, and he wasn't surprised to see that it was circular.

Like the outer chamber, the walls and floors were of varying shades of gleaming wood. Globes on the far wall provided feeble light. Set against the wall under the globes were several large wooden cabinets.

The two men stood listening to the unnatural sound of their own breathing.

Cleve described strange pedestals before he died, Sabastian had said. And the chauka. Paul took it all in—the pedestals scattered around the room, the large dish of the chauka dominating the center.

"The sacred chamber," Dorland said softly.
"Where live the Tal Tahir."

Despite his anxiety, Paul felt something close to awe. He told himself: This was constructed by alien beings. Then: For what purpose? He pulled his jacket more tightly across his chest. But the chill he felt didn't have anything to do with the temperature of the room. He had never visited the two planets where the remnants of other intelligents had been found, yet he was sure that nothing was as well preserved as this.

"Elder Jamis taught us that the Tal Tahir come to provide insight," Dorland said softly. "It is through

them that all things come to pass on our world. It is through them that all things will eventually come to pass everywhere." His head moved slowly, his eyes dark and unreadable as he looked around the chamber. "I have never come to this place, but I have seen the pedestals."

"Yeah, well." Now that he'd had a chance to survey the room, Paul was becoming aware again that the immediate danger lay not in the strange pedestals or the device called the chauka, but in the young boys outside the building and in the deacons and elders who would be coming before long for the ceremony.

The only door to the chamber was the one they

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had come through. Paul moved closer to it and heard the murmur of voices in the courtyard. He turned back to Dorland. "We have to get out of

here."

Dorland gave him a distracted look. "Yes. The

ceremony."

Cleve Quintan saw something that made him lose

his mind. . . .

But there wasn't a way out. The boys were just outside the door. If Sabastian was right, they weren't allowed to come inside the temple. Young boys don't always do as they're told, Paul thought. If the boys thought they'd seen somebody come in here, they were probably watching through the door. Which meant Paul and Dorland couldn't risk making a run for the stairway.

Cleve Quinton saw something . . .

Paul shook his head. His eyes went to the cabinets that lined the back wall. There were six of them, and each looked as if it had been made from

thick planks of green-tinged wood. Fine carvings—symbols and figures that made no sense to Paul—had been cut in vertical strips that ran the length of the double doors on three of the cabinets. The other three had strips of glass or something similar set into the doors. The cabinets were huge—there should be more than enough room inside for Paul

and Dorland.

Paul shook away the dark feeling of dread that

had settled over him and crossed the room to the cabinet in the corner, farthest from the chauka. Round metal knobs served as handles. The doors swung open with a faint rasping sound. Inside, Paul found deep wooden shelves that were covered with

tiny figurines.

"Tal Tahir artifacts," Dorland said, beside him.

"I knew they were kept in the temple, but I've never

seen them." ,

Paul picked up one of the figurines and found it

to be surprisingly heavy. Metal of some kind—its surface gleamed a dull silver. His first impression was of an insect—a long, sticklike torso with four spindly limbs. But if it was an insect, it was one that walked on two legs. The details of the head and face were too fine to be discerned. The other figurines appeared to be of the same creature, but in different poses.

"Is this Lord Tern?" he asked. When Dorland didn't answer, Paul glanced at him and found him staring at the creature. "Are you all right?"

Dorland's eyes moved slowly to Paul. "I think so," he said.

Paul wasn't sure which question Dorland had answered. He replaced the figurine and closed the door. The next cabinet had a glass strip in the door, but in the dim light Paul couldn't see through it. Inside he found shallow shelves that held long, slender tubes. He examined one briefly and decided it might be a musical instrument. He replaced it and opened the door wide to step into the cabinet. It would be a trifle crowded, but he thought there was enough space for both of them to

squeeze in between the front edge of the shelves and the doors.

He stepped back out, closed the door again and looked critically at the glass strip. In the dim light from the globes he was sure he and Dorland wouldn't be visible inside the cabinet.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Dorland looked at him. "About what?"

"About hiding in here. We can't go out that way." Paul jerked a thumb toward the door. "We have to get out of sight before the ceremony starts."

Dorland looked at the cabinet. "Seems okay," he said simply, and without a word he stepped inside. Paul fitted himself in beside him and pulled the door closed.

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Cleve Quintan saw something that made him go mad.

He swallowed. "Keep my eyes closed, he told himself. When the ceremony starts, I won't look. That way I can't see anything that might...

He decided he didn't want to think any more about that.

The globes provided enough light for a relatively good view of the chamber. Paul moved as far back from the door as he could. What if somebody decides to get something out of this cabinet? He touched the handle of the knife and made sure it was within easy reach in its sheath. Not that it would do much good if they were caught—

"Diana."

Paul jumped a little, even though the sound had come from Dorland in a soft whisper. "What?"

"I can feel her," Dorland said. "The fear has been bred into me. Its breath is mine, but I can overcome it because it has no flesh and bone."

"What are you talking about?"

"Diana and Shari were flesh and bone. They are ... close in this place." Dorland's voice was flat, but Paul could sense a deep, underlying emotion. "How long has it been since I've thought of them? How long since I've allowed their flesh and blood and love to come into my mind? Our life together, our too-short life—"

The words choked off. Paul shifted nervously. "Dorland, this isn't the time to—"

"Little Shari. Ah . . ."

Then Paul heard muted voices and the sounds of feet on the wooden floor of the outer chamber. Dorland fell silent. Through the glass Paul saw several men in robes enter the chamber and begin arranging themselves around the room. The robes were white, which meant the men were deacons, if Ogram knew what he was talking about. Slow

footsteps moved past the cabinet and a hazy shadow blocked the light, then moved on. Paul realized the deacons had taken positions against the wall, all around the cabinets. For a while there was only silence. Paul eased himself forward for a better view.

Another line of men came through the door and moved up close to the chauka. These were the elders, with white robes trimmed in scarlet. After they had gathered around the chauka, an old man in a scarlet robe came slowly into the room, leaning on a staff. This had to be High Elder Brill. The staff was curved slightly in a way that reminded Paul of the spire above the temple. A young boy walked beside Brill. The boy was tall and bone-skinny, a birdlike face with long nose, pointed chin, narrow mouth. The eyes made quick, darting movements as he followed a half step behind Brill. Paul felt tension grip him. A young boy—that meant a semarch ceremony. A new recruit would be initi-

ated into the Sons of God.

Brill's steps took him directly to the gray dish of the chauka. Using the staff as support, he lowered himself to his knees in front of it. His robe flared out around him. The boy waited, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

Stiff fabric rustled as the deacons withdrew something from the folds of their garments. Paul realized they were slender tubes like those on the shelves behind him. The deacons lifted the tubes to their mouths, and a single tone filled the room. It started low and shifted upward to a higher pitch. Then the eerie sounds merged as some of the men played low tones while others played high tones. The intertwined highs and lows were strangely familiar, even though Paul was sure he had never heard anything like it before.

The music ended abruptly, and High Elder Brill

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immediately began speaking. His words rang out in choppy, high-pitched syllables that made no sense to Paul. Then he switched to Basic:

"Oh Great One, who comforts us,

King of all holy places,

Lord Tern the Almighty,

Come, we ask you, hear our prayers."

The elders repeated the chant in slow, somber tones. Then Brill spoke again:

"Hear this our song to thee,
Monarch of monarchs in whose name
Our enemies are slain.
We praise thee!"

This went on for a few more minutes, and it didn't take long for Paul to realize that the main thrust of the chants was the Holy Order's hope that if they were faithful to Lord Tern, he would strike their enemies dead. Lord Tern and the Holy Order did not hold peace and love in high regard.

High Elder Brill reached to his throat, fumbled for a moment with a clasp and removed something that had been hanging around his neck. Paul's eye caught a dull, round gleam. A coin? Brill fondled it almost lovingly, then held it in front of a rod that protruded slightly from the side of the chauka. He leaned back, still on his knees, and lifted his hands to hold them out toward the dish of the chauka—another motion that was somehow familiar to Paul. Brill began to chant again, and the elders behind

him joined in:

"Holy One, Holy One, Holy One—"

Paul turned to look at Dorland, but a hint of motion above the chauka made him snap his head back. The air above the chauka began to take on a soft glow. Paul stared at it, and his blood went cold.

He involuntarily moved back and bumped into Dorland. Something on the shelf beside him went clunk! and he froze. In the chamber. High Elder Brill and the other elders continued to chant. Paul released pent-up breath and again peered out through the crack between the wooden doors. The rhythm of the chant soaked into him. His muscles felt soft and sluggish. The glow hovered like a mist above the chauka.

High Elder Brill moved his hands above the dish in a weaving pattern as if he were a magician conjuring up something out of thin air. Then—

Paul blinked. The glow above the chauka separated into two distinct forms, then four. Ribbonlike streamers of color swirled together as if obeying the command of Brill's moving hands. Paul wished suddenly that he were anyplace but here. The swirling shapes darkened into a shadow, formless and full of motion. Paul fought down the urgent desire to push the door open and dash out of this room to the freedom of the night outside. He felt Dorland's hand on his shoulder, a reassuring squeeze. The shadow spun and flickered. Paul

stared at it. He began to feel disoriented, cut off from reality . . .

Something touched his mind.

He recoiled, and bumped into Dorland. The touch came again, like probing fingers. He felt a bubbling panic. It came again, deeper this time. He could almost catch a thought that was certainly not his own. Something was inside him, probing through the depths of his brain, uncovering dark memories, gaining form and substance in his mind as the shadow danced above the chauka. A clear thought emerged ...

His father: defeated and tired, always dreaming of something better but never quite able to find it. His mother—she spent half her time sleeping and the other half taking drugs. By the time Paul had left

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home, her brain had been squeezed dry by yellow pills called lollipops.

He thought: What have I accomplished with my life? Washed out of the Guard after two years of pushing papers and punching computer keys on a hellhole planet in upstream Omega. Two more years wandering through the planets of the stream looking for God-knows-what, with the specter of his parents haunting him . . .

Paul made an effort to concentrate on what was happening in the chamber. Brill's chants grew in intensity. The elders repeated each chant in droning voices. The shadows above the chauka moved faster and faster—

The chanting stopped with unnerving abruptness, and something began to emerge above the chauka—a more solid substance writhing from the haze. A long, tubelike torso took shape. Spindly arms emerged like the limbs of a dead tree. An elongated head formed, and the creature was nearly complete. It was horribly inhuman, its sharp-edged face more reptilian than anything else. The eyes were black, multifaceted, bulging from under a

bony shelf of brow.

High Elder Brill began to chant again, softly this time. The creature gained substance until it stood as a solid horror in the dish of the chauka. Paul stared, aware of a painful constriction across his chest and of the shadows still huddled inside his mind.

Brill spoke again in the strange, wavering language. The creature answered in high-pitched squeals. It moved constantly above the chauka, gesturing with its spindly arms, its head swaying back and forth.

Paul's hands came up to press on each side of his head in an effort to contain the growing pressure. The sense of loathing was an overpowering stench inside him. He opened his eyes, gasping, and forced

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himself to look at the creature. Something like a vest covered the creature's upper body; a gray breechclout hung below its waist. The bulbous head came around in short, jerky movements, and the glittering eyes fastened on the cabinet. Paul had time for a panicky thought: It knows we're in here\

He pressed his knuckles against the rough wood of the cabinet wall and tried to keep reality from slipping away. He was aware of Dorland's shallow breathing behind him, and of the hand that still gripped his shoulder. The creature was motionless above the chauka now, and its eyes were still turned toward the cabinet. From its mouth came the strange sounds.

It knows we're in here! It'll come—

Easy, came a soothing voice inside him.

Brill spoke to the creature, and Paul expected at any moment that the deacons would rush to the cabinet and drag out him and Dorland. But the minutes wore on and nothing like that happened. The creature still looked from time to time toward the cabinet, and each time Paul felt the pressure building inside his head. But the creature showed no inclination to leave the chauka.

Then he felt something else stirring in his mind.

Shari was only six years old. She was a gentle child who would not think of hurting anyone. What did she do to deserve such a bloody death?

Rage and nausea boiled up, and the sour taste of terror. The terror was primitive, from that deep, reptile part of his brain that was untouched by higher logic centers that fought to control it.

Daddy, Daddy...

Paul opened his eyes again and saw the creature's head sway toward him, the black eyes gleaming. He felt it again in his mind, and a new wave of panic crept over him. The walls of the cabinet were too close. He felt Dorland's hand on his shoulder.

Steady.

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He pushed against the alien presence and felt Dorland pushing with him. The creature above the chauka continued to stare at the cabinet while Brill and the elders chanted. The presence inside Paul grew. It was alien, unlike anything he had ever felt. The only thing familiar about it was the hatred, and that emotion was stronger than Paul would have believed possible. It was a focus of his existence.

Together he and Dorland created a fragile barrier. A young girl appeared in his mind—golden curls framing an angel face. Shari . . .

He felt a silent prayer emerge from the darkness:

Shari, give me the courage and wisdom to fight this horror.

Sudden warmth washed through him, bringing a sensation of strength and confidence. He felt small, strong arms around him, comforting.

The people of Clarion may have their god, but I have mine as well. The strength of the child.

A soft hue took shape inside him, and a sound built up like a two-toned hum. Its meaning was vague and unreachable, but he grasped the comfort it offered and pulled it close. He turned his head. Was that a soft strain of music he heard? He listened, brought it back and moved it around and into the glow of color. He felt Dorland with him and knew that nothing could touch them with that shield in place. He felt the power of Shari, her youth—a godlike quality . . .

Then something Selmer had said came back to him:

The young were special to the Tal Tahir.

Chapter Ten

TIME CREPT IMMEASURABLY PAST.

The pressure eased inside Paul's head. Reality returned slowly. He realized that the chamber was silent. He became aware of a cramp in his leg, and his hand pressed against the wood of the cabinet wall.

Silence.

He opened his eyes. High Elder Brill and the others had left the chamber. Mercifully, the creature above the chauka also had gone. Paul stared at the chauka and forced himself to remain still for a few minutes longer. Behind him he could hear Dorland's breathing. Another moment passed.

"Are you all right?" Dorland asked quietly.

Paul slowly straightened the cramp out of his leg. "I think so. We have to get out of here."

"Yes."

He was there, too, Paul thought. We were connected—

Dorland reached past him to push open the wooden door. Paul stepped out of the cabinet, feeling rubbery in the legs.

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Daddy, Daddy . . .

He stumbled slightly over the doorframe and felt Borland's hand on his shoulder.

"We're out of it," Dorland said.

Cleve saw something that made him lose his mind.

Paul felt again the doubts and insecurities, the dark memories of his past—and the sensation of warmth and reassurance that had washed them away. He felt the alien cold flushing through his veins, and Doriand's reassuring touch. We are hopeful that Doriand's training will protect him.

A battle had been silently waged inside that chamber, but High Elder Brill and the other elders and deacons had been completely unaware of it.

Diana and Shari—

But that didn't make sense, either. Diana and Shari were dead, and whatever else Dorland and Lord Tern had done, Paul was sure they had not contacted the dead.

He shook his head. Later, he could analyze what had happened. For now, he wanted only to get out of this place.

Keeping his eyes averted from the chauka, Paul followed Dorland past the odd pedestals and out through the wide doorway. There they stopped to listen.

Paul signaled Dorland to stay where he was, then moved cautiously to the open archway. He drew in a breath of cool air to steady his nerves. There was no sound except the bleating of insects from the darkened courtyard. He moved close enough to the archway to give himself a view outside. As far as he could see, the courtyard was empty.

He slipped outside to the blessed cover of darkness. A moment later Dorland stood beside him. Crouching low, they made their way to the low wall. Paul lifted his head just far enough to see over

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it. There was no sign of the sentries. He motioned to Dorland, and they silently climbed over the wall and started across the roadway.

The sentry must have been standing in the deep shadows down by the corner. Paul was unaware of his presence until he heard the shout. Then he and Dorland were running across the roadway. Shadowy figures loomed suddenly in front of them. Paul fumbled for his knife, and a hand grasped his arm.

"This way!" Karyn hissed.

Several hundred meters down David's Tube they stopped to rest. They had lost the pursuers in the maze of roadways before they went up the access port to the tube.

"Are you okay?" Selmer asked.

Dorland kept silent. Paul nodded, but he didn't feel okay, and he was sure it showed. He felt as if he had been . . . raped. Something slimy had entered his mind. It had pulled open his private thoughts and memories and pawed through them. He wasn't sure he would ever feel totally safe again.

Karyn and Selmer were full of questions, but Dorland was withdrawn and uncommunicative. In a few halting sentences Paul described the ceremony he and Dorland had witnessed. Without even considering why he did so, he kept silent about the other experiences—the shadows that had reached out to his mind, the visit from Shari. That part was private between him and Dorland.

"You actually saw Lord Tern in there?" Karyn asked when he had finished.

"We saw something. It came out of the chauka."

"High Elder Brill . . . called it?"

Paul hesitated. Somehow it was hard to remem-

ber exactly how that had happened. "I think so. He was chanting and making motions with his hands. Then it came."

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"Came from where?" Selmer asked, making no effort to hide his skepticism. "You said the chauka was shaped like a shallow bowl. That's the same way Cleve described it. You also said Lord Tern was almost as big as a man. How could he come out of a shallow bowl?"

"Well. . ." Paul thought back to what had happened when High Elder Brill waved his hands over the chauka, and the appearance of the creature above the chauka like a spindly insect. "We saw something." But Selmer was right. There was no way Lord Tern's body could have been concealed inside that shallow dish. And there was something else—

He looked up at Dorland. "But I'm beginning to wonder if what we saw was really Lord Tern."

"High Elder Brill called him," Dorland said. "He came. How can you doubt it was Lord Tern? We saw him."

"I know." It was clear that Dorland's statement carried a deeper meaning. We felt his black heart. That was the bothersome part. "But he didn't look . . . solid. I could see through him."

K-aryn's brow pulled down. "Lord Tern was . . . transparent?"

Paul shook his head. "Not exactly transparent. But he didn't look completely solid. He moved around a lot. A couple of times, when he turned at the right angle, I could see the light globes shining through his body."

Karyn was watching him with interest. "I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do, either. I guess—" We felt Lord

Tern in the room with us. He could come up with theories about Lord Tern's appearance, but how could he explain what he and Dorland had felt inside that room? "Maybe the Tal Tahir transmitted the image from somewhere else."

"Transmitted?" Selmer asked.

"Like fartalk, but with pictures as well as words." That would explain why Lord Tern hadn't left the chauka, even though Paul was sure the creature had sensed their presence in the cabinet. If he was only a projected image . . .

But if he was only an image, how could he detect our presence^

Karyn shook her head. "I don't get it."

"Paul's suggesting that the picture of Lord Tern was sent from someplace else," Selmer said. His eyes returned to Paul. "There would have to be a receiver." He hesitated. "The chaukaT"

Paul shrugged. "Could be."

Karyn's brow furrowed. "If the picture was transmitted, where did it come from?"

That was the obvious question. "There's no way to know," Paul admitted. "If the transmitter's powerful enough, it could send the image from anywhere on the planet. Most of Clarion hasn't even been charted. There might be a Tal Tahir city that hasn't been found yet. Or the Tal Tahir may not even be on Clarion anymore. The chauka may be capable of communicating over a long distance."

"Well . . . maybe," she said doubtfully. "But that would mean they've been communicating with elders of the Holy Order for two hundred years. Why wouldn't they come here?"

Paul shrugged. "There are a lot of questions. We may never know all the answers."

"We know one thing for sure," she said. "The chauka is the link between High Elder Brill and Lord Tern. There's no doubt of that. That means we have to get back to the temple and destroy it."

"No."

Everyone turned to look at Dorland.

"We can't do that," he said. His eyes were clear now, and filled with a certainty of purpose that Paul had never seen before. "The chauka is our

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only way to contact Lord Tern. We have to keep it open."

Paul issued a harsh bark of laughter. "You can talk to Lord Tern if you want to. I never want to see him again."

"We have to."

"No, we don't. Maybe arkies will someday, but not us. Besides, you're forgetting something. We can't reach Lord Tern or anyone else with the chauka because we don't know how to operate it."

"Let's go back and break it," said Selmer.

"Nobody wants to do that more than me," Paul said. "But I don't think we'll be able to get back into the temple so easily. There were more sentries than you expected tonight. Brill has obviously pumped up security around the temple. Now that he knows we got inside, he's likely to take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"They haven't had time to get organized," Karyn argued. "They won't expect us to hit them again so soon."

"I think there's someplace else we should go," Dorland said.

Karyn opened her mouth, then looked at Dorland and kept silent.

"The pedestals we saw inside the chamber—I've seen them before."

"Where?" Karyn asked.

"A place my father took me to," Dorland said.

"We were exploring. My father was Second Speaker. He could move freely through Chalcharuzzi. We had gone to the other side of the city, close to the river, when we came across a building that caught my father's interest." He looked up as if suddenly remembering that the others were there with him. "There was little damage."

"Why was your father so interested in it?" Karyn asked.

"The building was not a dome. It had a square shape, like that of the temple. And it had a spire. Part of one, anyway—most of it had fallen into the river."

"A spire?" Karyn repeated. "Like the one above the temple?"

Dorland nodded. "Vines had nearly covered the building, but we searched until we found a way inside. That's where I saw the pedestals. Father went inside, but I was afraid. I only looked through the doorway. When my father came out, he was even more excited. I'm sure he intended to go back, but he was killed not long after."

A brief silence was broken by Karyn. "Do you think it was another temple building?"

"I don't know," Dorland said. "If so, it had not been used in a long time."

"Even if we can find the building," Selmer said, "how could it help us?"

"I didn't go inside," Dorland said, "and my father did not say what he saw in there. But I know he was very excited. I think he may have seen another chauka."

"A chauka?"

"Possibly."

"Well . . ." Selmer fell silent.

"Could you find the building again?" Karyn asked.

Dorland hesitated. "It happened a long time ago. I remember only that it was close to the river."

Paul's mind had gone to something Selmer Ogram had said the day before as they sat watching the sun set over the valley. The Tal Tahir used the spire in a lot of their architecture. And: The Holy Order had the others torn down. He thought about the symmetry of design that had been preferred by the Tal Tahir, and remembered his confusion about the position of the temple and the lack of similar buildings in the same area of other quadrants.

"There were hundreds of them," he said.

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The others looked at him, and he realized they were waiting for him to go on. He licked his lips, thinking it through.

"The tubeways may have been the main source of transportation for the Tal Tahir," he said. "But they served another purpose. They effectively broke the city up into small sections. I noticed the pattern yesterday."

"Pattern?" Karyn asked.

"The city's divided into squares by the tubeways. Each square also has a pattern, and I'm willing to bet that each square was a functioning unit on its own. In each section the domes are arranged in concentric circles that radiate out from an open area in the middle."

"The Tal Tahir lived in the domes," Karyn said. She still didn't see what he was getting at. "Maybe they left the open areas as parks, or communal meeting places."

"Think about the temple's location. It's set back about two hundred meters from the intersection of two of the tubes."

"David's Tube and Tube Four," Selmer said.

"Right. The Holy Order has cleared the area around it. But there are enough roadways and domes left so that the temple's location would put it just about in the same position as the open areas in the other sections."

Karyn thought about that. "You're right."

"Have you seen any of the original arkie photos of the city?"

She shook her head. "The Holy Order destroyed them a long time ago."

"I think I know why," Paul said. "The Holy Order says the Tal Tahir built the temple as a special building for them. The elders didn't want anyone to know there used to be many buildings just like it. They had them all destroyed, except the

one they use for their temple. But they missed the one Dorland and his father found."

"I still don't see what that does for us," Karyn said. "How can it help us even if we find another temple building?"

"It might give us a clue about what the Tal Tahir used the building for," Paul said. "And if there's another chauka in there—"

"We can poke around it without worrying about the Holy Order busting in on us!" Selmer exclaimed. "Let's go!"

Karyn was already opening her fartalker. "First we'll find out what Sabastian thinks."

THE WEAPONS HANGING FROM JONNY IRONFIST'S

belt bumped against his legs as he strode down the pathway toward the large square building that was home to High Elder Alban Brill. Jonny held his cap in his left hand so his knife hand was free; even in this holy place his training shaped his behavior. Strapped to his belt were a dart gun, a heavy wooden battle club and a long-bladed knife. The weapons gave him a sense of self-confidence he had never felt before he became a member of the Sons of God. He was especially proud of the knife, which had been formed out of steel from Vanguard stock—dating it back to High Elder Anson himself.

The stern-faced deacon who had come for Jonny at the dormitory behind the temple wouldn't tell him why he had been asked to come here. But Jonny had heard that the heretics had once again entered the sacred chamber, and escaped under cover of darkness. He couldn't help but wonder if the summons to the High Elder's office was somehow related to that. Rumors were flying among the

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brothers that Lord Tern had issued a new proclamation that could help them find and destroy the

heretic band.

Jonny stopped for a moment on the pathway to take a deep breath of the cool morning air. He felt a high exhilaration bursting through him, almost the same feeling he'd had when he first learned that he had been chosen to become a Son of God. His fingers unconsciously went to his cheek, touching the deep scar that slanted across his face—a reminder of an admonition from Elder Jacowicz when Jonny had failed to carry out an order precisely as Elder Jacowicz had given it.

But that had happened a long time ago. Jonny had been one of Lord Tern's Sons for three years, and he felt certain that Lord Tern was pleased with his work. He had earned the name Ironfist only

three months ago, after he had been personally responsible for bringing four heretics to justice. Elder Jacowicz had hinted that before long Jonny would be promoted to squad leader. He knew that all the brothers looked up to him.

Standing there on the pathway with the sun on his face and a wondrous singing in his blood, Jonny found himself thinking about his friends in Fairhope, and how dull his life would be if he had not been selected for the Sons. His friends would grow up working in the fields or sewing clothes or repairing machinery.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. After all, Fairhope had been established by the Tal Tahir gods to support the Holy Order in its worship of them. That was the only reason the town was there, and its people. But Jonny felt drawn to a much higher mission. Anybody could work the fields or sew cloth, but it required a special kind of person to protect the fundamental precepts of the Holy Order. Fewer than one in fifty were selected for the honor; only those who displayed the special

qualities sought by the Holy Order and Lord Tern were selected.

Now he was only a few meters away from the steps that led to the front porch of High Elder Brill's house. Jonny had never before been allowed to come here. As far as he knew, none of the brothers had ever been invited to this place.

"It must be something really big" Wayne Light-foot had said when Jonny left the dormitory.

Really big, Jonny agreed silently as he went up the walkway to the wide steps. The porch was bordered by trimmed hedges and blooming flowers—delicate blue and yellow jewel tips. His mother had planted jewel tips around the front door of the little house in Fairhope ...

Jonny felt a slight pang and immediately pushed it away. This was his life now.

A robed deacon stood at each side of the door. Jonny recognized both of them—Deacon Francks and Deacon Bray—but somehow he knew that in this place he could not be so familiar as to call them

by name. He went up the steps and strode across the porch to the large wooden door. Keeping his voice strong, he said, "I'm Jonny Ironfist."

"This way," said Deacon Bray, motioning Jonny to follow. He stepped off the porch onto a walkway that led down the side of the building. He stopped at a side entrance, tapped twice, then opened the door and gestured Jonny inside.

Jonny found himself in a large reception room with couches and chairs that he recognized as Vanguard furnishings. A few highly polished sculptures were made from native wood. Jonny had never before been in the presence of such opulence. A pair of large double doors led into another room. Deacon Bray motioned Jonny through with a hint of impatience.

Jonny stopped just inside the room. The doors closed softly behind him. He turned and saw that

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Deacon Bray had gone. He turned back with his heart pounding. The room was vast and simple, with polished wood furniture—a desk, a low table, a few finely carved chairs. Dim light came from ancient globes that hung from the ceiling.

High Elder Brill was sitting behind the desk, studying a punch-tube that he held delicately between the forefingers of each hand. Jonny was disappointed to see that the High Elder wore only common clothing—a drably dark shirt and dark trousers. Jonny had seen the High Elder only during the Godsdays services, when he wore the bright flaring robe and the high, elaborately decorated crown.

The High Elder seemed not to have noticed Jonny's arrival. His lips moved silently as he rotated the tube between his fingers and squinted at markings that Jonny could see only faintly. His eyes were pale gray, not too different from his skin.

Jonny drew a breath in an attempt to calm his thumping heart and advanced as bravely as he could to the desk. The High Elder looked up, and the stern set of his features softened instantly into a friendly smile. He rose quickly and held out both hands. Overcome with awe, Jonny took them in his

own.

"The ancient wisdom of the Tal Tahir," said

High Elder Brill.

The High Elder's hands were soft and warm. For a moment Jonny was so overwhelmed he forgot the prescribed reply. Then, stumbling slightly over the words: "Is given to the faithful through the great

Lord Tern."

"Jonny, my son. I'm glad you could come to see me." The High Elder's parchment face crinkled as his smile broadened. "It makes my old heart swell with pride to see my Sons in their uniforms."

Jonny felt the hot blood of pleasure rush to his face. High Elder Brill released his hands and sat

down, then waved Jonny to a chair. He lifted a gnarled hand to the shiny metal disk that hung around his neck. Jonny's eyes followed. The Godstone . . .

"We were delivered here long ago," said High Elder Brill. "It was no accident that High Elder Anson brought us to our beloved Clarion. The gods called us here from the great starship Vanguard to be with them, and we must carry out their wishes." His fingers touched the Godstone, setting it in gentle motion. "You know that, don't you, Jonny?"

It took Jonny a moment to realize an answer was expected. Somehow he found his voice. "Of course, High Elder Brill. I know of Lord Tern's purpose."

"We are only human, weak and frail. But we must not disappoint Lord Tern." High Elder Brill looked directly at Jonny. Jonny heard the rush of blood in his ears. "Lord Tern and I have been watching you for some time, Jonny. We have recognized your spirit and selfless dedication. Elder Jacowicz tells me that you have a natural ability

with the weapons Lord Tern has given us for battle against the heretics, and that even at your young age you have a good understanding of human nature. He has asked permission to promote you to the rank of squadron leader. I have gladly approved."

// was true\

"Thank you. High Elder—"

"But that isn't the only reason I called you here. We all have a mission. You and I and Lord Tern. Clarion is waiting for us to fulfill our destiny. The great Lord Tern has selected you for a special task, Jonny. You have earned the privilege to serve him."

Jonny felt the pressure of the High Elder's eyes on him, but he couldn't take his own eyes off the Godstone. Jonny had never been this close to it before, and he felt its power enfolding him. There was something on the face of it—an engraved

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picture he couldn't make out. The Godstone swung freely, aided now and then by a light touch from the

High Elder's fingertips.

"This special task will be dangerous," the High Elder went on. "But the rewards will be great. We must cleanse our great Clarion, and purge those who abominate Lord Tern. Lord Tern has ordered it." The High Elder paused, and when he spoke again his voice was deadly calm. "The intruders, Jonny—the ones who came from the purgatory beyond the Far Peaks. They have defiled the temple. Lord Tern has given special permission for my Sons to search for the heretics in the Holy City, and even to enter the tubes if necessary."

Jonny felt an icy chill run through him.

"You are not to fear the Holy City, Jonny. Lord

Tern will protect you."

"Yes, High Elder," Jonny said.

"The heretics have taken refuge in a cave beyond the outer edge of the Holy City. They live there like the vermin they are. I want you to take a group of your brothers and go after them, Jonny. Before our sun rises thrice more, I want to see all of the heretics from the cave lined up on the God Wall. Do you understand?"

"Yes, High Elder."

High Elder Brill abruptly released the Godstone. "You will report to Elder Jacowicz. He will help you form your squad to go after the heretics." The High Elder waved a frail white hand. "Lord Tern's blessing on you, Jonny. Now go."

Chapter Twelve

"WE STUDIED THE TAL TAHIR IN SCHOOL," THE girl said. "But nobody there remembers them the way you do. What were they really like?"

"They were a lot different from us," the old man said. "In the sciences, they were well beyond us in many ways. But they didn't put as much emphasis on technology as we did. They knew a lot about medicine, for example, and they had nuclear fission for energy. But they didn't have stream drive, or even space drive, from what we could see. No air transportation at all, for that matter."

"Maybe they didn't want to leave their planet." The old man nodded. "I think you're right. They didn't feel the same urge as humans to extend their reach so far. Everything they needed was on Clarion."

The fartalker rattled with static. The discussion between Karyn and Sabastian was brief. She told him what Paul and Dorland had seen inside the temple, and of Dorland's recollection of the building near the river. Sabastian agreed immediately

that they should alter their plans to search for that building.

After putting away the fartalker, Karyn led them back the way they had come to the intersection of David and Tube Four. Karyn admitted that she had never gone out that far, but she was fairly certain Tube Four was intact nearly all the way to the river. They traveled along the tube for an hour before they reached the access port at the intersection of Tube Four and Fara's Tube.

"This is as close as we'll get," Karyn said. "Let's spend the night here. We'll start looking for the building at dawn."

They hadn't brought sleeping mats, so they were forced to clear away an area on the tube floor and use their packs as pillows. Paul knew he wouldn't be able to sleep right away, so he volunteered for the first watch. He stationed himself fifty meters from where the others had bedded down and got as comfortable as he could. From there he could see far down the tube in both directions. If unwanted visitors came up through an access port, he should be able to see their lights in plenty of time to get out a warning to the others.

He needed time to think, and he was grateful for the silence. Somehow, he and Dorland had been linked into a single consciousness inside the chamber. Paul had tried without success to convince himself that he'd imagined it all. Diana and Shari had been there in the chamber, too, and that made even less sense. Whatever had happened, Paul was convinced that the creature High Elder Brill called forth as Lord Tern was responsible.

His eyes went to the others, who lay sleeping on the floor of the tube, and he thought about the larger group that made up the population of this strange planet; To Paul, it was a nameless and faceless group consisting of those who were with

him now and a few figures he'd seen through Selmer Ogram's binoculars. Selmer had told him the people of Fairhope feared the Holy Order—and Paul could understand that well enough. But Selmer had also said they were enchanted by High

Elder Brill and the power he shared with Lord Tern. Whether that power was real or imagined was a question that remained to be answered—but it had held this planet in its grip for two hundred years. There were other problems to be faced as well. How will Clarion ever fit into UNSA7 With both Parke Sabre and Hans Maiar of the Fringe Alliance looking for the planet, Paul knew this issue would have to be dealt with sooner or later. Besides the Holy Order and the Sons of God and the other obstacles that would interfere with outside relationships, the fact was that Clarion was even more backward than Giant Forest. It had no modern industrial base for trade, and the people of Clarion would not have the slightest notion of how to function within the UNSA environment. And if Hans Maiar found the planet first. . . Paul didn't even want to think about that. The questions were still whirling around in his brain when Karyn came to relieve him two hours later.

"You'd better get some sleep," she suggested. "We'll have a big day tomorrow."

He started to push himself to his feet, then changed his mind and sat back down on the hard metal floor. Maybe she could help him sort out some of the questions he had about the Tal Tahir.

"Selmer spoke of Lord Tern as the High Elder's personal god," he said. "I assumed Lord Tern was the only Tal Tahir god."

She settled down beside him and slung her pouch at her feet. "There's only one at a time, but each High Elder chooses his own god. Lord Tern was

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Brill's choice when he accepted the position of High Elder."

"His . . . choice?"

She nodded. "When a High Elder dies, his personal god dies with him—something about the Tal Tahir god and the human merging as one being in death. Then the other elders elect a new High Elder. They have a big ceremony in the temple, and that's when the new High Elder selects his god."

Something about that didn't fit basic logic. "High Elder Brill chose Lord Tern, but Lord Tern is the one who knows all and sees all. Doesn't that strike you as self-contradictory?"

She shrugged. "Debate it with High Elder Brill. I'm just telling you how it works."

Paul remembered something Selmer had said earlier. "The rules you live under change each time you get a new High Elder and a new Tal Tahir god."

"Yes, and never for the better. The Tal Tahir god sets the rules, and the High Elder brings them to the people—and that sets the tone for the way of life for everyone on Clarion." She moved the pack and stretched out her legs. "Based on what I've read, things weren't so bad for a hundred years or so after Captain Anson died. The Holy Order tried to offer the people some hope and security. But it's clear that over time the Holy Order changed. The High Elders became dictators, and the deacons turned into executioners and assassins. Alban Brill was elected ten years ago, and he chose Lord Tern to be the ruling Tal Tahir god. None of the others were as

bad as those two."

It was a grim concept: Alban Brill and the High Elders that had come before him piously carrying out the orders of alien gods while their people lived in fear and the ancient city slowly crumbled into

dust around, them.

"Now it's your turn," Karyn said.

He looked up in surprise.

"Selmer told me about Dorland's show," she said. "Has he been a psi-player ever since he left Clarion?"

Paul shook his head. "He was a storyteller out on the Fringe when I met him."

"A storyteller?"

"There aren't many around anymore. A storyteller is like a player in a lot of ways, but he doesn't use lights and music. Instead, he simply tells a story."

"People pay to hear someone tell a story?"

"Well . . . it's a little more complicated than that." He settled into a more comfortable position and pulled his jacket around him. "The storyteller starts out with a general idea—maybe a love story, or a story about somebody overcoming obstacles to win a personal victory. He creates a few characters and starts telling his story around them. Then he begins to blend in people from the audience."

"He—" She stopped, thought about it. "How does he blend them in?"

"I'll give you an example. If there's a man in the audience who's having money problems, the storyteller might give the same problem to one of the characters in his story. That may not be the main point of the story—usually isn't, in fact. But the problem will be part of the story, and the story will unfold and reach a conclusion in a way that helps the man in the audience see how to solve his own problem."

"This would be someone the storyteller has never met before?"

"Most likely."

"How can he tell a story about somebody he doesn't even know?" Then she looked thoughtful. "Actually, it sounds almost like High Elder Brill's Godsdays service."

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The same thing had occurred to Paul.
 "Does the storyteller have spies who get the
 information for him?" she asked.

"Maybe some of them do," Paul answered. "But Dorland didn't. The fact is, in any audience larger than twenty people, there are always a few who have gotten themselves into financial trouble, or a few who are having problems with their marriages or their job. As a storyteller, Dorland watched for reactions from people in the audience as he started out. Usually he could spot two or three who were taking a personal interest in what he was saying. While he added more details, he would keep his eye on those two or three people. He could see from the responses who he was hitting, and eventually the visible reactions would be narrowed down to one person. To that person, it seemed that Dorland's story had been told about him. In fact, the story had been molded around him." He paused. "At least that's how Dorland described the process." "You sound skeptical. Don't you believe him?" Paul hesitated. He'd wrestled with questions like that ever since he'd met Dorland. "I'm convinced that's how Dorland thinks he did it. But I find it remarkable that a person can read enough clues from the expression on a person's face to carry off

something like that."

She nodded thoughtfully. "How is a psi-player

different from a storyteller?"

"A player communicates with his body, amplified by lights and music. He doesn't tell a story—at least not in words. Instead, he creates a mood, and the people in the audience fit themselves into it." He paused, trying to think of a better way to get his explanation across. It was hard to describe a psi-play to someone who'd never experienced one. "Dorland has a way of viewing an audience as a single entity rather than as many individuals. He says that whenever you get a group of people together—especially if they've come together to focus their attention on something specific, like an

entertainer—there's always a potential mood lying under the surface."

"A potential mood?"

He nodded. It had taken him a long time to understand exactly what Dorland meant by that. "Certain people have always been able to take advantage of that potential. Religious leaders, for example. You've lived here on Clarion all your life, so you don't know about the wide variety of religious beliefs out there along the occupied stream. Most of them began with a single individual who had certain characteristics people wanted to believe in. The most successful religious leaders are very charismatic. They have a power of personality, and they use a real show-business hype to strengthen their popularity and steer their followers. People come to see them because they want to believe, and the preacher or evangelist or faith healer or whatever he happens to be brings them all together in a believing group. Political leaders can do the same thing."

"You're saying that's what Dorland does as a psi-player?"

"Not the same, but the principle is there." He paused, thinking. "A few weeks ago Dorland gave a performance in a big city on Lisaland. Lisaland has a pseudodemocratic government, which means officials are elected. I decided to take a stroll around the area of our hotel and came across a political rally."

"What's that?"

"That's where a man running for office gets a big crowd together and tells them why they should vote for him. The man I saw was named Sykes. I forget what he was running for, but he was a master at working the crowd."

"Working the crowd?"

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Paul nodded. "I saw it for what it was because of

my experience with storytellers. Sykes started talking, and he watched the reactions of the crowd. He knew what the crowd wanted to believe, and he knew what he wanted them to believe. He worked up a lot of distractions—waving arms, booming voice, dramatic facial expressions—and he got his message across in such a powerful way that he made the people want to believe what he was telling them."

Karyn nodded slowly. "They want to believe because . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"There's security in believing what a powerful man tells you is truth," Paul said. "And there's security in believing what the group believes. Sykes was taking advantage of the group potential."

"But you said Dorland doesn't speak during his show."

"That's right. But Dorland can read an audience as a group. He can see the underlying potential and bring it out with lights and music and poses and facial expressions. These are only distractions. They make the audience believe Dorland is powerful, and they want to feel secure in his power. While they're in that mood of persuasion, he uses the patterns of lights and music to make them feel the way he wants them to feel. They follow his lead willingly because that's what they've come for—to grasp a bit of security and hold on tight."

She was quiet for a long time after he had finished speaking. He had no way of knowing if she understood any of it.

"How did you meet him?" she asked at last.

Paul had never told the full story to anyone but Trisha. Somehow, with the pale moonlight filtering through the high oval ports and the breeze sighing against the tube's metal skin, he felt like talking about it.

"It happened five years ago," he said. "I was

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business manager for several storytellers. None of

them were big time, but I was getting enough from fees to see me through. I was on a booking trip—"

"Booking trip?"

"I was trying to line up performance engagements for a client who was sinking fast. I had stopped at a little club on a godforsaken planet in the Fringe to talk to the manager about my client. Unfortunately, he already had a top-notch storyteller."

"Dorland?"

Paul nodded. "I'd never heard of him. I decided to visit the bar on my way out."

"To see Dorland?"

Paul grinned wryly. "To drown my sorrows. Dorland was on stage, and before I knew what was happening, I got wrapped up in his story."

His mind went back to that night as he told Karyn about it, and he wondered suddenly how different his life might have been if he hadn't decided to stop for a drink in that dingy club. The timing was right; he'd just been dropped by a girl who meant a lot to him, and he was at the lowest emotional point he could ever remember. It hadn't been so much that she'd broken off the relationship, but how casually she'd done it. Paul sat alone at a small table downing one drink after another, annoyed that his reflection on misery was being interrupted by the storyteller. He turned his back to the stage and kept drinking. The soft voice of the storyteller droned on behind him. After a while parts of the story began to filter through the haze of self-pity—and Paul realized that the story was about himself.

He turned around then and got his first good look at Dorland Avery—and felt his scalp prickling. Dorland looked directly at him as he told a story of a man who was driving himself down into a deep pit of despair, a man riddled by self-doubts who was sure that he had been born to fail and was

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doing everything he could to live out that self-

ordained destiny.

Paul couldn't remember the details of the story, but he had recognized himself clearly enough. As the character in the story began to see his own self-worth and overcame his doubts and insecurities, Paul felt himself gradually accepting some hope that he might be successful after all, both in love and in his work. He had never been quite the same since.

And he had known without a doubt that he had run into something more than a Fringe storyteller in that little club.

Karyn hadn't interrupted him, but she had a puzzled look on her face when he finished. "You said your back was to the stage when Dorland began the story?"

Paul nodded. She hadn't missed it.

"Then how could Dorland read the visual clues from your face?"

"Good question. I asked him the same thing and I never got a direct answer."

She leaned back against the curved wall and was silent for a moment. Then her eyes came back to him and she said, "What happened next?"

"I knew Dorland could be the greatest player the stream had ever seen. And I wanted to be his manager worse than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. At first he resisted the idea of expanding his show, but I kept at him." Ironically, it was the new self-confidence instilled by Dorland himself that had made Paul approach him and had given Paul the drive to see that Dorland became the most famous psi-player in the Omega Sector.

"Why is he so good?"

"There are a lot of reasons," Paul said. News service reporters often asked the same question. "Natural talent, for one. His timing and creative technique with the lights and music are perfect.

There's never a distracting glitch. And he has a real sense of drama in his facial expressions and body

movements. Dorland's show is like a symphony of sight and sound, and all the time he's measuring responses, watching for reactions, molding his performance around what he can see in the audience. He can bring them to whatever mood he wants. He—" Paul stopped suddenly as something struck him: the image of High Elder Brill in the sacred chamber, moving his arms and swaying as he called Lord Tern, and in the background the odd music of the deacons' tubelike instruments. The image had seemed familiar to Paul at the time, but he hadn't fitted it together. Now he realized that in calling Lord Tern, High Elder Brill had gone through much the same sequence of actions that Dorland used during his performance.

Coincidence?

Selmer Ogram had said something, too: It's too bad High Elder Brill couldn't see your show. Actually, it's not too different from his own Godsdag service.

Paul felt a slight chill, looked up and found Karyn's eyes on him. He cleared his throat and went on. "Anyway, I'm convinced Dorland didn't believe that he would become so popular; otherwise he wouldn't have gone along with me. I've had to talk him out of quitting more than once."

"Maybe you should have let him."

He didn't reply to that because it struck too close to doubts that had surfaced in his own mind. Dorland was vulnerable to the needs of others and would do almost anything to avoid hurting someone. Paul often suspected that Dorland had agreed to become a psi-player only because he knew Paul needed it so badly.

"Do you think he'll stay here when this is over?" Karyn asked.

Paul looked at her in surprise. He hadn't even

considered the possibility. "Why should he? He has a life outside now."

"Is it a life he wants?"

"You'll have to ask him about that." Paul pushed himself to his feet, suddenly weary of the conversation. "Guess I'll try to get some sleep now."

The next morning they ate a breakfast of dried poca and water, then bundled the gear back into their packs.

The tube still held the chill of the night, and Paul fastened the jacket tight around him. He felt distanced from his surroundings. Karyn's question kept surfacing in his mind: Do you think he'll stay here when this is over? He had slept little. When he did fall asleep he'd had bad dreams. Some were about Lord Tern. Others were like bittersweet memories of a woman and a young girl he'd never met.

They walked the short distance to the access port where Tube Four intersected with Fara's Tube. Jacque got out his rope ladder and they pulled themselves up, one by one, to the platform. When they descended the spiral tube, they found themselves in an area of vegetation that was so heavy it all but obliterated the ruins. The sound of rushing water was close. The air was crisp. Dorland stood beside Paul, looking around. "See anything familiar?" Paul asked. Dorland shook his head. "It was a long time

ago."

"Let's move down closer to the river," Karyn

suggested.

They spent a few minutes looking for an opening in the dense growth, and it took them another half hour to hack their way through to the river. The water ran fast enough to form little frosted crests as it rushed over hidden boulders. Paul looked closer and realized that not all the obstructions under the water were boulders—he could see a large curved

section of pink wall, and piles of pink rubble. The river had changed its course after the city was abandoned, and had driven a channel through an area that had once been populated.

"The edge of the city is down that way," Karyn said, pointing to the left. "It's in pretty bad shape."

"There were quite a few domes still standing in the area my father and I explored," Dorland said. "We had gone into several of them before we found the square building."

"We'll go this way, then," Karyn said, inclining her head to the right. "We'll run into it eventually."

Luck was on their side. They had worked their way along the riverbank for barely half an hour when Dorland stopped so abruptly Paul almost bumped into him.

"There it is," he said, pointing.

Paul could barely discern the building through tangled vines and underbrush. The spire had toppled into the river, and twenty meters of it lay underwater. Even though heavy vines covered the structure, its shape was outlined clearly enough to reveal that it was not a dome. It was a large square building like the temple.

Karyn led the way down the mossy bank and stopped several meters from the building.

"Let's look around," she said. "No need to rush into this."

She sounded edgy, and Paul couldn't blame her. He felt the tension, too.

As far as Paul could see, the building was designed and constructed exactly like the temple. It looked to be in remarkably good shape except for the side near the river, where the crumbling bank had undermined the building's foundation. The resultant settling had opened a gaping crack in one wall, and the roof sagged. A walking path or narrow roadway had once come up to the building but was now all but obliterated by trees and underbrush

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that had grown up through the broken surface. Vines covered the open archway, obstructing their

view inside.

"Is it safe to go in?" Paul asked.

Beside him, Jacque was already using his knife to cut away the heavy, clinging vines. He grinned at Paul and said, "Guess we'll find out."

They hacked their way through and stepped cautiously into a room that smelled of damp stone and fungus. Rubble from a fallen section of the ceiling was strewn across the floor. Vines had crept in through the archway and the crack in the far wall to spread across the floor and up the walls, clinging to broken stones and chunks of debris. One interior wall had collapsed, and the high ceiling sagged.

"In here," Karyn said. She had gone to a low archway and was looking into another room. Jacque remained in the outer corridor as a sentry while Paul and the others followed Karyn through the archway. If the interior layout of this building was the same as that of the Holy Order's temple—and Paul knew it would be—then this room would be equivalent to the sacred chamber in the temple.

Inside, they found the same pattern of clustered pedestals that Paul and Dorland had seen in the sacred chamber. Vines had crept over them to create eerie hummocks of vegetation. Light filtered through a jagged crack in the wall.

Paul turned to say something to Dorland, then realized that Dorland's attention had gone to something in the center of the room. Following his gaze, Paul saw an outline of something that was nearly buried under crumbled debris, clinging vines and

centuries of accumulated dust.

"It's another chauka" Dorland said in a strained

voice.

The general shape was right, and the object's

position 'would put it in the same place as the
chauka's in the sacred chamber.

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Paul began clearing away the vines and debris.
Selmer and Karyn came to help, and it took them
only a few minutes to get enough cleared away to be
sure Dorland was right. The object was another
chauka.

Selmer stepped back and used the sleeve of his
coveralls to wipe the dust and sweat out of his eyes.
"Looks like it's in fairly good shape."

In fact, when the surface of the dish itself became
visible, Paul could see no damage at all. He used his
pack to brush out the last of the thick dust and dead
leaves. Then he saw something gleaming faintly
near one edge of the dish.

"What's that?" Selmer reached past him and
picked up a round disk. He brought it up closer to
catch a ray of light coming through the door. Then
he took in a quick, sharp breath. Paul looked closer.
The face of the disk in Selmer's hand was engraved
with an image of Lord Tern.

Chapter Thirteen

SABASTIAN SQUINTED AT THE RAGGED LINE OF

figures that was making its way up the rocky slope.
There was little doubt that he and Olaf Blackburn
had been spotted where they crouched behind the
rock barrier. The boys were coming directly toward
the barrier, their heads down as they picked their
way through the vegetation and loose stones. They
wore the gold-and-scarlet uniforms of the Sons of
God, and even at this distance Sabastian could see
the dart guns and other weapons that hung from
their belts.

There was little Sabastian and Olaf could do but
wait. Sabastian with his wooden leg and Olaf with
his lung ailment could not possibly hope to escape

over the mountain. The boys would run them down before they'd gone a hundred meters. Retreating into the cave would only trap them, and delay the inevitable.

The line of boys disappeared into a ravine that blocked Sabastian's view. He touched the thick strand of braided ropes that lay coiled beside him on the ground. When the boys reached the rocky

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ledge twenty meters downslope, he would pull the ropes and release the first row of boulders. Another set of ropes lay on his left side. That would release the second rock barrier.

Sabastian shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. The stump of his leg had begun to throb, and now and then blades of pain stabbed up from the knee, where the peg was attached. He didn't have to look to know that his knee was red and swollen.

Three of the boys appeared suddenly on the ledge below the barrier. One of them raised a slender tube and released a dart that fell short by a half-dozen meters. The boy ducked out of sight, then showed himself again as he moved forward to the cover offered by another large boulder. Sabastian felt for the knotted ropes and waited. More boys appeared briefly at the lip of the ledge and moved forward to take cover. Most of the ledge was hidden from the barrier; it offered a perfect opportunity for the Sons to regroup just before their assault directly up the slope.

But Sabastian and Jacque had been careful in their design of the rock barrier. When the ropes were pulled and the wooden braces collapsed, the formation of the slope above the ledge would funnel the boulders directly down over the boys who were crouched there. In his mind Sabastian could picture the boulders rumbling downhill, crashing together as they tumbled onto the ledge and the boys in their gold-and-scarlet uniforms. Some of the boys would probably survive, and

hopefully they would retreat down the mountain. If not, there was the second set of ropes, and the second barrier of boulders . . .

If only we could have had a few more days, Sabastian thought bitterly. Maybe Borland could have helped us sort this out.

For a moment he felt hatred well up in him so strong that it nearly paralyzed him—hatred for Brill, for Jacowicz, for the Holy Order that had turned this planet into a battleground with young boys as soldiers.

His attention snapped back to the ledge as another slender figure rose up into view with his dart gun. For an instant Sabastian stared directly at the boy's face. A deep scar slanted across it from just below the boy's chin to above his left eyebrow. The boy looked to be about sixteen.

Then he lifted the tube quickly and Sabastian saw a tiny object coming at him. He ducked, and the feathered dart sliced through the air inches above his head to rattle against the rocks behind him.

He was sure that all the boys had taken cover on the ledge by now. They would rush the barrier at any moment. He gripped the ropes and looked over at Olaf. His friend offered a shrug and a bleak smile.

Sabastian shook his head and let the ropes fall to the ground. We've been waiting for years to fight Brill and Jacowicz and the devil god. And when the fighting comes, they send young boys to attack us. We cannot kill young boys.

Sabastian heard a sigh from beside him. He looked over and saw Olaf pull a feathered dart from his arm. A thin trickle of blood ran from it. Olaf looked up and met Sabastian's eyes and gave a slight, weary smile. He opened his mouth to say something, but his strength left him and he fell heavily.

Sabastian started toward his old friend, then heard a shout and spun back around. Something inside his knee pulled loose, and the pain was a bright hot flare that brought a metallic taste to his

mouth. He swam back through a red mist of

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consciousness in time to see a group of boys come around the first barrier of stones and run toward him.

Chapter Fourteen

"THE GODSTONE," SELMER SAID IN A HOARSE

whisper.

Paul couldn't take his eyes off the metal disk in Selmer's hand and the engraved image of the insectoid creature.

"There must be dozens of 'em," Selmer said wonderingly. He reached out toward the other disks that were scattered along the edge of the chauka, then drew his hand back without touching them.

"They're Tal Tahir artifacts," Karyn said slowly. Paul knew she was trying hard to keep her voice steady. "That's all they are—just artifacts."

"Not quite," Selmer said. "Paul said High Elder Brill used the Godstone to activate the chauka."

"Leave them where they are," Karyn said. "Let's see what else we can find."

Selmer placed the disk back on the chauka.

"Check the roof," Karyn said to Jacque. He nodded and turned to go through the narrow doorway that led to the stairs.

While the others were poking through the vegeta-

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tion that covered the floor and exploring the outer corridor, Paul decided to take a closer look at the chauka. The large dish wasn't exactly flat, he realized. It rose slightly at the outer edges to form a shallow bowl about two meters across, and was attached to a solid base that was flared at each end to give it a slight hourglass shape. He walked slowly around it. Tiny oval designs were spaced closely together around the perimeter. Protruding from under the lip on one side was a slender rod.

Paul stared at the rod, his mind going back to the sacred chamber. High Elder Brill had touched the end of the rod with the Godstone ...

He turned at the sound of boots clumping down the stairs. Jacque appeared in the archway.

"The roof is in pretty good shape," he said. "Gives a view all the way to the temple. There's a road out there." He waved a hand through the archway. "Comes to within about twenty meters. Broke up in places, but passable."

"Can we get to it?" Karyn asked.

"Sure. Brush ain't too thick on that side. Anyway, it'd be easier than going back along the river."

"We'll go out that way, then," she said. "Go back to the roof for now and keep an eye out."

"Sure." Jacque turned and went along the corridor to the stairway.

"Looks like the place is empty," Karyn said. Then her eyes went to the chauka. "Except for that."

Dorland had returned to the chauka to pick up one of the metal disks. Now he spoke for the first time since they had entered the building. The words were soft, barely audible:

"We were always told that only one Godstone existed."

"Obviously not true," Karyn said. "That isn't the first time the Holy Order lied to us."

"High Elder Brill used his Godstone to summon Lord Tern."

She looked thoughtfully at the disk in Dorland's hand; then her eyes returned to the chauka. "You think we should try it?"

Paul's head jerked around to her. "Try what?"

Karyn nodded toward the chauka. "We have that, and we have some Godstones. Maybe we could use them to call Lord Tern." She must have read the expression on Paul's face, because she went on quickly. "We came here to find out as much as we could about the Tal Tahir."

Paul found his voice at last. He forced himself to speak calmly and reasonably, and tried to ease the rapid beating of his heart. "You can't learn anything from Lord Tern. He doesn't even speak Basic. There wouldn't be any way to communicate with him."

"Look at this," Selmer said. He had gathered up several of the silver disks. Now he held out a few for the others to see. "They're all different."

Paul took one of the disks and looked more closely at it, then at the others Selmer held. He realized Selmer was right. Although the disks were all the same size and faded silvery color, each had a different image engraved on its face. The image on the one Paul held was similar to that of Lord Tern—an insectoid creature with a face that belonged in a nightmare. But another one depicted a cone-shaped object. Only when he saw the facial features grouped in the upper tapered end did Paul realize this was a living creature. Small appendages that might have been arms hung at the sides. The creature was positioned so that it seemed to be looking directly out at the viewer.

"Maybe we should try that one," Karyn said. "It

doesn't look anything like Lord Tern."

That sounded better to Paul, but he still had

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reservations. "For all we know, that one might be worse than Lord Tern. It's too risky—"

"We're accustomed to taking risks."

"Besides, we don't know how the chauka

works—"

"Sure we do," Selmer said. He took one of the

disks over to the protruding rod. "You saw High Elder Brill do it. You touch the Godstone to the end of the rod like this, and—"

Snap\

Selmer jerked back, looking at the disk in his

hand, then at the rod.

"Are you all right?" Karyn asked.

"Yeah," Selmer said. He sounded shaken.

"Didn't expect that, is all."

Paul's eyes had gone to the dish of the chauka. He realized he was holding his breath and released it, then drew another. Nothing was happening.

"This one doesn't work," Karyn said. "Or maybe there's more to it than the Godstone." She looked up at Paul. "You said High Elder Brill chanted and waved his arms. Do you think he really accomplished anything with that?"

"I doubt it," Paul answered without taking his eyes off the chauka. Brill's actions had held more than a hint of ceremony, and probably were meant to impress the deacons and the other elders with his power. Logic said that the silver disk was the key.

"But I didn't—"

Then his breath caught in his throat. A glow was beginning to form above the chauka. A sharp intake of air came from someone behind him. Shadowy forms gathered amid the haze and distortion. Paul felt something touch him inside.

Suddenly the shadows above the chauka came together and a creature emerged. Paul watched, unable to move. The creature swayed gently back and forth- above the chauka. It wasn't at all like Lord Tern, but instead had the appearance of the

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cone that was engraved on the silver disk. An appendage on the bottom resembled a giant, flattened starfish. The entire body was covered with light brown fur.

Then something in the room changed. Paul took an involuntary step backward. Pressure was building inside him.

Daddy ...

The pressure heightened and became a strong sensation of awareness inside his head. He covered his ears with his hands, but the voice penetrated deep into him.

Daddy . . .

Through the darkness he felt a calming touch. He reached out to pull it close.

The strength of the child.

Time passed. Shadows flitted through him, and he was aware of exterior sounds and movement, but he couldn't bring the presence in. He didn't want to bring it in.

Reality lurched.

He became aware of light filtering through his closed eyelids, of cool air on his face and of something solid behind his back.

He drew in a shuddering breath and opened his eyes. At first nothing made sense: the circular room littered with rubble, thick vines creeping across the

floor and up the broken walls, the oddly shaped pedestals. Then his eyes found Selmer and Karyn where they stood against the wall, blinking around as if roused from a deep sleep. Seeing them brought back a sense of reality.

With a feeling of dread, Paul forced himself to look toward the middle of the room. The air above the chauka was still.

"She's gone," Doriand said quietly.

Paul tried to speak, and instead coughed to clear the drying raspiness of his throat. "She?" He was having trouble concentrating on Dorland's words.

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"Female, yes," Dorland said. "She gave me her name, but I couldn't get it right. She was here only a few minutes, then she . . . faded away. I don't know why. She talked to me. I couldn't understand much of what she said, but there's no doubt she's

Tal Tahir."

Paul tried again to get his thoughts in order. She's Tal Tahir. That made no sense. Lord Tern certainly did not resemble a man, but at least he had two legs and two functioning arms and a head that looked somewhat humanoid. The creature that had stood swaying above the chauka had none of those things.

One part of what Dorland had said somehow struck him as even more implausible than the rest.

"You talked to her?"

Dorland nodded.

"I didn't—"

"You and the others blacked out. She tried to communicate, but it was too strong for you. She knew something was wrong, and was trying to overcome it. I think she had determined a way to lessen the effect of her presence on you before she

went away."

"But you ..."

"My training helped, somehow. The technique Elder Jamis taught me—I was able to close off those parts of my mind that were affected by her communication. I've never done it before, but it seemed natural."

"How long were we out?" Karyn asked.

"About ten minutes." Dorland's eyes moved

restlessly around the room, returned to the chauka.

"That's how long she stayed."

Paul focused his eyes on Dorland. "How do you

know she was Tal Tahir?"

"She told me."

"But—" Paul drew a steadying breath. "If she's

Tal Tahir, then Lord Tern—"

"That's a problem." Dorland didn't seem too

concerned. He looked down at his hand, and Paul realized he held the Godstone. The silver disk had been the key after all. // 's like a public commset: you put in your udit card and make your call.

"We'll have to ask her about Lord Tern,"

Dorland went on. "I'm sure she can help us find a way to stop High Elder Brill and Lord Tern."

"She's gone," Paul pointed out.

"We can bring her back with the Godstone,"

Dorland said. He held up the disk in his hand. "Her Godstone."

Paul stared at him. "How can you be so sure she can help us after a ten-minute chat?"

"It's just a ... feeling I got." Dorland turned back to the chauka. "She isn't dangerous. She doesn't want to hurt anybody. Surely you could feel that."

The creature hadn't looked dangerous, Paul had

to admit. While Lord Tern's appearance suggested that he was built for speed and strength, this creature looked almost planted in place. Those thin, dangling upper limbs and the cone-shaped body made it look anything but aggressive. And this creature had . . . felt different inside. The alien sensation that had crawled through Paul from Lord Tern had been icy cold. This time the feeling had not been exactly comfortable, but neither had it been terribly unpleasant.

"You really think she can help us?" Karyn asked.

"I'm sure of it."

Karyn's eyes went again to the chauka. "Then I think we should call her back if we can."

"Me, too," Selmer agreed.

Paul knew it would be pointless to argue. "We'll let Dorland do it alone this time. It doesn't bother him. The rest of us can wait outside."

"I think you should stay," Dorland said. "She wants to speak to you, too."

"After what happened? I don't—"

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"She understands now that you're vulnerable.

She'll be more careful."

Paul laughed harshly. "I suppose she told you

that, too."

"Yes."

Paul gave up. He braced himself against the wall

and said, "Go ahead."

Dorland eagerly turned back to the chauka and touched the disk to the rod. The snap\ came again,

and the haze formed above the dish. Shadows twisted. Then the creature began to take shape, and a moment later stood facing them. Paul realized that the conelike body had depressions and bulges all over it, and cavities he didn't want to look at too closely. There was no clothing that he could discern, nor ornamentation of any kind.

He winced as he felt a tentative tingle in his mind, then a drawing away.

She's being careful this time, he thought.

A flap near the top of the cone drew open. Something came out of it on two flexible tendons

and wavered toward Paul.

"She wants you to step closer," Dorland said

quietly.

The tingle was back, but this time Paul felt an odd sensation with it. A sense of beckoning. He resisted, and felt a warm rush of... affection?

He did not feel danger. He drew a steadying breath and forced himself to step forward until his shins were touching the edge of the dish. He saw now that the creature's extended tendons flared slightly at the ends into small round nubs of tissue. He stood rigid while the two nubs hovered around his face. They passed by his eyes, then withdrew to perch together under the closed flap.

The pressure began to grow again in his mind. He flinched, and the feeling instantly withdrew to hover at the, edge of awareness like a barely heard sound. It was alien, but nothing like the caged

hatred he'd felt from Lord Tern. This was calmer, almost soothing.

"She's trying to communicate," Dorland said.

"She's . . . asking—" He shook his head and looked up at the creature. "I lost it."

Paul thought: We've rubbed the magic lantern, and we have our genie. Now if we could only talk to it. ..

Something touched his mind again. He felt an

unmistakable sense of gender. There was nothing about the creature's physical appearance to suggest that Dorland was right, but somehow Paul knew he was. The creature was female.

He felt another wavering impression:

(?)

Then something else came—almost a sound, but very vague. He cocked his head, listening.

Kra'ith

It was a sound, but it registered in Paul's mind even though he knew his ears had not picked it up. The single word was accompanied by a feeling of—Paul frowned. Acceptance? He glanced at Dorland, and could see that Dorland had felt it, too. Something familiar, like meeting a close friend after a long separation.

Kra'ith (?)

Dorland and Paul looked at each other.

"Her name?" Paul suggested.

"I'm not sure," Dorland said. "I think she's asking a question."

Paul realized he'd felt it, too. A query. "Maybe she wants to know who we are."

Kra'ith (7)

"I don't think so," Karyn said, speaking for the first time. Her voice was steady but strained. She did not step closer to the chauka. "It feels . . . different from a question about a name."

"I wonder—" Dorland began. Then something else came through:

Eh-hli-seph-eh

A feeling of belonging came with that.

"•That's her name," Karyn said.

Paul knew instinctively that she was right. How did I /enow? An impression, but solid enough to make him certain. He realized then that what came to his mind was more than sounds.

Eh-hli-seph-eh

Paul tried to repeat the word aloud but found that he couldn't get his human tongue around it.

"Elli," Dorland said.

The creature's sensor nubs moved back and forth. Dorland pointed at the creature. "Elli."

"•Eh-hli•"

"Close enough," Dorland said. He hitched himself up onto one of the pedestals. "Let's get to work."

Chapter Fifteen

THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION WASN'T EASY.

At first Elli's thoughts came in fragments that didn't always fit together. Sorting the fragments mentally and fitting them back together sometimes led to a rough understanding of what she was trying to get across. For Paul, the experience was almost like a dream that skipped randomly from scene to scene, and the reward for finally getting it right was always the same: an immediate rush of warmth and affection.

After an hour of trial and error, Elli's thoughts began to come through more clearly, as if she had learned how to focus them more effectively on the humans. By that time she was adding Basic words and phrases to the concepts. Paul wasn't sure whether she had actually learned the language that quickly from speaking with them, or if instead his own mind was somehow dealing with her thought projections by doing its own translation. The mingling of Basic and conceptual thought made under-

standing come more easily, but it was not entirely comfortable. It was as if the words reached one part

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of Paul's brain and the projected concepts reached another. Pulling the two together required an effort that made his nerves stand on end. In addition to that, the concepts still were not always sequenced or ordered in a way that made sense in human

terms.

During that first hour they discovered two fundamental principles of Elli's communicative process. First, they learned that she could understand them only if they spoke aloud. They could not project their thoughts directly to her as she projected to them. Second, they found that Elli's communication reached exactly to the outer ring of pedestals. One step beyond that point and her thoughts were abruptly cut off. There was no way for them to know if that was by design or coincidence.

But even though Paul and Dorland learned how to communicate more effectively with Elli, they hadn't made any real progress in getting useful information from her, and after three hours, Paul was beginning to feel the tingle of anxiety.

Now Dorland had come back to a subject they had touched on several times. The question he asked was simple enough:

"Where are you?"

Elli's reply was a variation of the one she'd given each time he asked the question:

Eh-hli (negative)——(?)

As far as Dorland and Paul had been able to determine, she was simply saying that she didn't

understand the question. Paul wasn't even sure if the question was important. They had tested his observation about Lord Tern by placing one of the light globes behind Elli. Paul wasn't surprised to find that the globe was faintly visible through her body. That reinforced his belief that her image was being transmitted from someplace else, but it didn't answer the question of where.

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Dorland asked the question again and got the same vague response. Then he gave up and tried another major question they had tossed back and forth several times:

"Tell us what you know about Lord Tern."
^Recognition) (Nontouch/nonyouth) Eh-hli (unpleasantness)*

Again, a variation of the response she had given each time Lord Tern's name was mentioned. It was clear that Elli knew of him, or of others like him—but she didn't want to talk about him.

"This is important," Paul said, leaning forward closer to Elli. "We have to know about Lord Tern—"

The sensation of an enormous sigh swept out from Elli and over Paul.

It can——Eh-hli struggles with the limitation of your (speak/think) emotional breath— (Confusion)

"You can say that again," Paul muttered.

You know (share) many——in the group (home)——. Eh-hli (?) young (group/touch)

"Group/touch," Dorland repeated thoughtfully. She had used the term often, but never in a way that made it clear what she meant.

"(Group/touch) kra'ith (Youth) Eh-hli (?)
Kra'ith. It came through as a sound that was clearly the Tal Tahir word for what she was trying to get across. It came to Paul as an unmistakable

feeling of warmth and acceptance from a group of friends. More than acceptance—protection, much the way a secure child would feel toward a nurturing parent. Paul felt the entire sensation in the space of an instant, fitted in among the other concepts that were just as clear and as brief. "Elli is kra'ithT Dorland asked.

(Confusion) kra'ith (group/touch)

Suddenly Elli blurred and disappeared, and from the chauka came a crackling sound like the dis-

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charge of electricity. Dorland slipped the disk out of his pocket and touched it to the end of the rod. The device snapped, then began the process of resurrecting Elli. They had gone through this procedure several times before it occurred to Paul to time the length of her stay. The interval was always the same—just over twelve minutes before she would disappear. But the silver disk always brought her back, and she and Dorland continued with their conversation as if there had been no interruption.

Paul found himself wondering: Why is she so willing to come every time Dorland calls her? Motives—first Lord Tern's and now Elli's. What were they getting out of this relationship with

humans?

He turned and walked among the pedestals to the doorway for some fresh air. The sounds of voices from the roof filtered down the stairway behind him. Karyn had gone up to the roof to join Jacques two hours ago. Paul was sure that she would be pressing to return to the cave before long. She had lost contact with Sebastian and wasn't sure if they had gone outside the range of the fartalker or if something had happened at the camp.

He turned back to the chamber.

(Youth) Kra'ith

Paul caught a fleeting impression other meaning.

Dorland had felt it, too.

"You want to know about our . . . children?" he

asked.

(!) (Acceptance) (Group/touch)

"They aren't here," Dorland answered, watching her intently. He waved a hand out toward the village of Fairhope. "There are children out there.

None here."

(?) Kra'ith (Youth, group/touch) (Acceptance)

"What is the importance of the children?"

Dorland asked.

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That didn't get through; the feeling of confusion came back, tickling Paul's mind.

"The youth you speak of," Dorland said patiently. "The children—who are they?"

(Youth) kra'ith (Group/touch) Eh-hli (confusion)

Paul shook his head. "We aren't getting anywhere."

"We have to keep trying," Dorland said. "The key is here. The young are special to the Tal Tahir. She keeps coming back to that."

"We already knew the young were important. Even the arkies had learned that much. But how can we use that against Lord Tern and High Elder Brill?"

"I don't know," Dorland admitted.

Eh-hli (query) why (Dorland/Paul) not feel kra'ith (group) home

Dorland/Paul. That was another concept Elli had started using, and it was the strangest for Paul. The feeling came through as a brief mental image that clearly encompassed both men. Paul wasn't sure if

she was confused about their individuality or if she somehow grouped them together as she became more familiar with them. He was reminded uncomfortably of the way he and Dorland had been joined in the temple.

"We got trouble."

Paul turned around to find Jacque standing in the doorway.

["Something's happening over by the temple," he | said. "Looks like they've brought somebody to the wall."

Paul followed him out the door and up the narrow stairway. Selmer and Karyn crouched at the edge of the crumbling roof. Karyn stared through the binoculars, her mouth set in a hard line. She handed the binoculars to Paul.

"They've got Sabastian," she said tersely.

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"They're putting him on the wall. Looks like they're getting ready for a public execution."

Paul could see people streaming along the roadways toward the temple. He focused the binoculars on the raised section of wall behind the temple. The bodies from the day before had been removed. Two white-robed deacons held a man up against the wall while another bound his wrists to protruding pegs.

"Are you sure it's Sabastian?"

"Yes. We'll have to go after him." She had already begun cinching up her pouch.

"That's exactly what High Elder Brill wants us to

do."

"Then we'll give him what he wants," Karyn said

savagely.

Ten minutes later they were moving at a fast jog through the tubeway. Jacque and Karyn were in the lead, and Paul and Selmer struggled to keep up. Paul had convinced Dorland to stay in the building at the river and continue his efforts to get useful information from Elli.

Karyn was adamant that they reach Sabastian as quickly as possible, and they hadn't taken the time to work out a plan. According to her, the execution would probably take place at sunset, barely an hour away. They would have to assess the situation and figure out what to do after they reached the temple.

Karyn called a halt at one of the tubeway intersections.

"This is as close as we can get to the temple," she said. "Once we're on the ground, we'll follow what's left of Tube Three till it runs into one of the roads from Fairhope. I have an idea of how to work it." She tilted her head toward Jacque. "You and I will mingle with the crowd and get as close as we can to Sabastian." She turned to Selmer. "You and Paul stay back by one of the gates so you can get out fast. When we're in position, create a diversion.

Jacque and I will cut Sabastian down and take him over the wall behind the temple."

"What kind of diversion?"

She waved a hand. "Think of something. We'll only need a few minutes."

"Will that be enough?" Paul asked. "The deacons will be waiting for us to try something like that."

"Of course they will. So you'll have to create a very good diversion." Her eyes went back to Selmer. "There's a big crowd out there and only a few deacons and Sons. The rest must be in a prayer meeting or something. Try to keep your eyes on them, and put as much distance as you can between yourself and them when you make your move. Leave yourself enough time to get away. When it's over, head back to the river. Don't try to find us, just get back whatever way seems best."

Selmer nodded, but Karyn was already on her way up the rope ladder to the platform.

They descended from the spiral tube into an area of rubble and heavy vegetation. Off to the right Paul could see the curved spire of the temple.

Within a few minutes they had worked their way through the vegetation under the tube until they reached a roadway that was crowded with people. They crouched in the brush, then, one by one, merged into the crowd.

Paul was the last to leave the cover of vegetation, and as he stepped up onto the roadway he suddenly became aware of a weight in his pocket. He checked with his hand and felt a round disk. A Godstone? He remembered the disk he had taken from Selmer when they'd first found them in the building by the river. At some point he must have unconsciously dropped it into his pocket.

If they catch me and find that disk. . .

He refused to let that thought go any farther. Trying to keep his jangling nerves under control, he

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followed Selmer when Jacque and Karyn angled off toward the God Wall.

Paul and Selmer worked their way along the perimeter of the courtyard. The people from Fairhope were strangely quiet—Paul could hear only a few low murmurs among the sounds of shuffling feet. None of them looked particularly happy to be here. Paul caught a glimpse of a young boy in a gold-and-scarlet uniform a few meters away. He averted his face and hurried past.

He realized Selmer was edging over toward an

open gate. Past the gate Paul could see a narrow roadway and crumbled ruins. With luck, he and Selmer should be able to carry out their task, then lose themselves in the ruins long enough to reach the access port to David's Tube.

He stopped beside a low stone bench and turned to look toward the wall. After a moment he spotted Jacque and Karyn in the crowd near the place where Sabastian hung in the straps.

Paul felt something touch his arm and jerked

around.

"Easy," Selmer said softly. "Do you have an idea

for a diversion?"

Paul stared at him. "Don't you?"

The blank look on Selmer's face was answer

enough.

Paul looked again at the God Wall. They had rushed into this, and now his worst fears were realized. They had to do something, but they didn't have a plan. He knew they didn't have much time; a row of deacons was already beginning to form in

front of the temple.

As he turned back to Selmer, he bumped into a woman in a gray shawl. He murmured an apology. She gave him a wary look, then another. She was tall and thin, with a beaked nose punctuating a suspicious-looking face.

Then Paul suddenly realized how he could create a diversion. A very good diversion, Karyn had said.

He touched Selmer's elbow and whispered, "Back me up."

Selmer nodded. Paul thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out the round disk. The woman in the gray shawl stood only a short distance away, still eyeing him warily. He opened his hand to show her the disk.

The reaction was immediate. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. The blood drained

from her face. She took a stumbling step backward, her lips working soundlessly. Then she got her breath and released a piercing scream.

A surprised murmur broke out around them.

"It's the Godstone!" a man yelled. It took Paul a moment to realize the voice belonged to Selmer Ogram. He thrust the silver disk high up for others to see. A space widened around him. Another man shouted. Paul glanced back at the God Wall and saw that Karyn and Jacque had moved into position in front of Sabastian. Several boys in gold and scarlet were close to them, craning their necks toward the commotion at the gate.

But Paul could see that he would have to buy Karyn and Jacque more time. The low stone bench beside the path gave him what he needed. While the woman in the gray shawl was still trying to collect her breath, Paul stepped up on the bench and held up the disk.

"People of Clarion!" He had to shout to be heard above the increasing murmurs of the crowd.

"There's a new way coming. A new way!" He consciously tried to put power and authority into his voice, speaking the first words that came to his mind. More heads turned. Several of the uniformed boys near the wall began pushing their way through the crowd. Just a few more minutes. "Lord Tern

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came to me last night! He gave me the holy Godstone, and a message to pass along to his children!" He turned the disk back and forth so the silver face would catch and reflect the sun. The murmurs died away as the people around him stared at the disk. The uniformed boys were closer. He knew he couldn't let them get within dart-gun

range.

"The message means freedom from tyranny and fear! The freedom is for you!" He cast another frantic glance toward the wall. Jacque and Karyn were working at the straps that held Sabastian's ankles. The deacons in front of the temple remained where they were, but their eyes were on Paul. He thrust the disk out toward them.

"Lord Tern told me the old ways are gone\ He wants a new era to begin! An era of peaceF The ankle straps were free now. Jacque supported Sabastian while Karyn cut at the wrist straps. "Lord Tern wants all his children to know that High Elder Brill has twisted the sacred revelations to his own advantage—" A dart sang past his right ear. Selmer yanked on his arm and he half fell from the bench.

"The gate\'" Selmer hissed.

Paul risked a final glance toward the God Wall. Sabastian was on the ground now, his arm around Jacque's shoulders. The three of them were pushing their way toward the back wall.

Then Paul became aware of a new commotion surfacing above the general confusion. Shouts, screams—and above those human sounds he heard the roar of a powerful engine. Selmer was beside him, pulling desperately at his arm.

"It's a floater!"

A large vehicle swept around the corner of the temple, carried on a cushion of air with its fans roaring. Paul stared at it for a moment before he realized it was an ancient Guard combat car. The

crowd scattered as the car bore down on Karyn and Jacque. Paul realized in a flash that this was what High Elder Brill had planned all along. Brill knew they would try to free Sabastian, so he'd purposely kept his deacons and Sons out of the way long enough for them to get into the courtyard. He had kept the car concealed until he knew they were trapped. This would be his triumph. He could get rid of the heretics with such a show of power that the people of Fairhope would see the futility of ever going against him.

As the car neared the wall, it began firing streams

of pellets from guns just above the skirts. Even from this distance Paul could see a spray of blood as several men and women screamed and went down. The car careened wildly as people scattered. Karyn and Jacque huddled against the wall with Sabastian between them. Paul watched helplessly.

Then another sound broke through the screams and the roar of the car's fans. Paul's head jerked up as the high-pitched whine intensified, and a sleek black craft swept over the temple. Paul caught a glimpse of fore and aft drive webs. A streamship\ Before he had time to absorb the significance of that, another flash followed from the distant mountain peaks. It resolved quickly into another streamer that was silver, and smaller than the first. It looped back to follow the black craft with green lightning snapping from its nose. Across its fuselage was a crosshatch design in bold blue—the emblem of the Fringe Alliance.

The combat car ground to a stop, and activity on the ground ceased as the two streamers flitted about in the air like lethal butterflies. They screamed upward in a vertical climb with the gun still blazing from the nose of the Alliance streamship. The black craft had been dodging the energy bolts with uncanny precision. Now it suddenly flipped wing-for-wing and dropped toward the ground. The Alliance

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craft shot past it with stasis jets screaming in protest. The pilot must have realized his mistake instantly. He began a desperate loop to the left, but by that time the black craft was directly behind him. A single bolt of energy snapped from its nose cannon, and the silver craft exploded in a white flash. Debris began to settle down into the far side of the city.

It had all happened in the space of a minute. The people around Paul stared upward, stunned into silence.

The black craft looped back and dropped toward the temple. It hovered erratically, its stasis engines stuttering. Then Paul saw something that gave him

another jolt: the five-circle UNSA logo was emblazoned behind its stubby wings.

"It must have taken a hit," Selmer said.

Suddenly the combat car churned back into motion and roared down the side of the temple building. The big gun on the top lifted. Something streaked toward the black streamship. Part of a stubby wing sheared free, and the craft's stasis engines roared. A narrow beam lanced down into the cockpit of the combat car. The front of the car lifted momentarily; then it crashed to the ground and the engine roar died.

The streamship slid sideways and dropped another few meters. Someone in the crowd yelled, and a new panic set in as people pushed back to clear a place for the craft. It came down on its struts with a hard thump, bringing up a pall of dust. The canopy swung open and a man in black fatigues jumped to the ground, followed by a faint wisp of smoke. He barely had time to regain his balance before one of the deacons near the wall fired a dart that narrowly missed him. The man stopped and stared at the white-robed deacon, then had to duck as two more darts flew toward him. He dived for cover behind one of his craft's landing struts.

Paul craned his neck to look over the crowd and saw Jacque and Karyn still huddled against the back wall with Sabastian.

"Let's get out of here!" Selmer hissed in his ear, tugging at his arm.

"Wait." Paul looked toward the grounded streamship. The deacons and several uniformed boys were converging on the man behind the landing strut.

"C'mon," Paul said, and began pushing his way through the crowd.

"•Wait!" Selmer caught up with him. "What are you doing?"

"He saved our lives. We can't leave him there."

He and Selmer had nearly passed the grounded combat car when one of the deacons saw them. He

yelled, and several of them began running toward Paul and Selmer. Paul pulled Selmer around behind the combat car. The idling engine rumbled faintly.

"Now what?" Selmer yelled. "Lord, we've had it—"

With the deacons' attention on Paul and Selmer, the man behind the landing strut broke from cover and zigzagged across the courtyard toward them. The deacons and Sons were having trouble pushing their way through the panicky crowd, and Paul knew they would reach the car a few paces behind the man in the black fatigues.

The man was yelling something as he approached, and when he got closer, Paul recognized him. Erich Frakes.

"Get in!" Frakes yelled, already pulling himself up over the car's fan skirts. Paul followed and fell into the cockpit beside Frakes. The driver was a husk of carbon. Frakes grasped the charred body and threw it over the side, then slid into the driver's seat. Paul managed to pull himself into the seat beside him, gagging at the stink of blood and hot

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metal. Selmer crowded onto the narrow rear bench, cursing loudly.

Frakes worked the hand controls and the fans roared. The car vibrated, then lifted with a jerk. A corner touched down with a shrill grinding and rocks flew out from under the skirts. Frakes gunned the engine and the fans roared again. The car shuddered, then slammed unexpectedly sideways into the temple, ripping off a corner of the building.

"Back there!" Paul yelled, pointing. "The three people at the wall—"

The car's vidscreens were out. Frakes half lifted himself to see through the hatchway. Fighting the controls, he brought the car around and headed it toward the back wall. He slammed through the corner of a dormitory, then grounded the car beside the wall. Jacque climbed up over the skirts, half carrying Sabastian. Paul stood and reached out to take Sabastian's arms and helped him into the back. Jacque climbed inside, and Karyn fell into the seat beside him, breathing hard, eyes flaring. "Get us out of here!" she rasped.

The fans screamed again as the car lifted and swung around. It plowed into the wall and wallowed briefly as Frakes fed more power to the forward fans, lifting the front of the car up over the debris. Then the car was careening wildly across the wide expanse of lawn behind the temple.

Chapter Sixteen

"WATCH OUT!" PAUL YELLED.

Frakes jammed a foot on the fan control pedals. The car snapped off a tree as thick as a man's waist, then rammed sideways into a half-fallen domed structure. Pink debris rained through the open hatchway as the car tore through, fans screaming.

"I can't see!" Frakes roared. "Get the damned screens on!"

"I'm trying!" Paul yelled back, punching frantically at the console's vidscreen controls. Frakes couldn't control the car at the same time he was trying to see through the hatchway. Besides the vidscreens, the only other view to the outside was through a single narrow slit that was positioned in front of Paul's seat. It was obviously meant to give a view around the skirts for the antipersonnel gunner, but was of no use when it came to steering the massive vehicle.

"To the left!" Paul yelled. Frakes stomped on the pedal and the car veered ponderously, skidding sideways through a pile of brownish-red rubble.

The fans shrieked as they chewed through stone, and Paul was nearly thrown from his seat. He had spotted a roadway over there. If they could reach

that-

Then he hit upon the right combination of keys, and the central screen flickered into life.

"Ah," Frakes said with relief.

"Over there." Paul pointed to the starboard screen. "I saw—"

"I got it spotted," Frakes said. They crashed through heavy vegetation, then shot across the roadway and plowed into a grove of slender trees. Frakes muttered under his breath, then got the fans swiveled around and the car turned back to the road. He brought the car to a stop and hovered, staring at the vidscreens. "Which way?"

"Left," Paul said.

The car jerked forward, shuddering over the low ridge that bordered the road. The fans churned rocks and dust. Then the car swung around and headed down the road, weaving unsteadily from

side to side.

Paul got the rest of the vidscreens on at last so the bank above the weapons board gave a full three-sixty view. As far as he could see, there was no pursuit. But the stemview screen gave evidence of the cloud of dust boiling up behind them. That would be more than enough to give the deacons and Sons at the temple their general direction.

"What was that all about?" Frakes asked, jerking a thumb back toward the temple. "Quite a free-for-all."

"We'll talk about it later," Paul said. Frakes had a few answers to give, too. But for now Paul wanted to concentrate on reaching the building at the river.

They slid over the roadway, blasting through the rubble from collapsed domes and vegetation that grew up through the pavement. Twice Frakes had to

steer the car off the road and pick his way around sections of tube that blocked it.

The road began sloping downhill a few minutes before they saw the glimmer of water on the forward screen. The car passed over a small stream that had branched off from the river. The road ended abruptly at a solid wall of trees and brush, and the car shuddered to a stop.

"Turn right," Karyn called from the back. "Stay as close to the river as you can."

Frakes turned the car and began easing it through the heavy growth of trees and underbrush. Paul watched the vidscreens, and within a few minutes he saw the broken spire thrusting up above the trees. He pointed it out, and Frakes guided the car toward the building. The fans got bogged down in heavy growth when they were still fifty meters away.

"Close enough," Paul yelled above the roaring engine. "Shut it off."

Frakes experimented briefly with the controls;

then the engine wound down abruptly and the car crashed to the ground.

"Oy!" Jacque muttered from the back.

Paul let out his breath and turned around in his seat. "Everyone okay?"

Karyn and Sabastian had been thrown together into one corner of the back seat. Sabastian's face was gray, but his eyes were open and clear.

"Where's Olaf?" Karyn asked.

"Dead," Sabastian answered.

She drew a quick breath and started to say something, then changed her mind. Her eyes went to Erich Frakes. "Is he with the Fringe Alliance?"

Paul shook his head. "UNSA."

"Does that mean we can trust him?"

"I doubt it."

Frakes began to make a sound of protest, but

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Karyn ignored him. "Then we'll keep an eye on him. Let's get inside."

Jacque was picking himself up off the floor. "Look what I found!" He held up a long-barreled carbine in one hand. "More goodies down here, too. Let's get 'em out, Selmer."

By the time Paul and Erich Frakes had helped Sabastian out of the car, Selmer and Jacque each had armfuls of weapons they'd found in the car's rear storage compartment.

"So there really is a city," Frakes said with a trace of awe.

"Let's get inside," Paul said. He waited for Frakes to go first, then ducked through the arched entrance. The scene in the inner chamber was exactly as they had left it: Dorland sat on the pedestal, and Elli stood above the chauka. Sabastian and Karyn had stopped just beyond the door.

Dorland heard them and looked around.

"What the hell?" said Erich Frakes. He was staring at Elli.

"Tal Tahir," Paul supplied. While Karyn filled Dorland in on what had happened at the temple,

Paul pulled Frakes back through the archway. Now that he knew Dorland was safe, he wanted to get some answers from Frakes. "How did you find us?"

"I followed him here." Frakes couldn't take his eyes off the figure of Elli swaying above the chauka. If she noticed that others had come into the room, she gave no sign of it.

"Followed who here?" Paul prompted.

"One of Maiar's agents."

Paul felt a chill along his spine. Was the Fringe Alliance that close to finding Clarion? "Come on, Frakes, tell me what happened."

Frakes looked at him, then cleared his throat. "Yeah, I guess I should. I got word about that Fringe agent." Paul recalled their discussion on the

hotel's rooftop parking pad on Fynnland—something about a courier's message. "We finally got the message decoded. It wasn't as useful as we'd hoped, but it gave us the name of one of Maiar's agents who I knew had to be involved. I've been following him the last couple of days. When he took his streamer out and skipped, I had to track him. I couldn't risk calling for help—that would've given me away."

"He led you here?"

Frakes nodded. "He had the coordinates, no doubt of that. He must have spotted me on his scope when I broke out of the stream behind him. We took potshots at each other all the way down. It was clear he was following a beacon. It brought him straight to this place."

"Sabre doesn't know where you are?"

Frakes shook his head. "Like I said, I didn't get a chance to call back."

"Damn!" That meant they couldn't expect help from UNSA. And if Hans Maiar had the coordinates, it wouldn't be long before he sent someone else to Clarion.

Through the archway Paul could see that

Dorland had returned to the chauka and was again talking to Elli. He stepped past Frakes and picked his way through the pedestals. As he neared Dorland, he felt the buzz in his mind and heard Elli speaking:

Kra'ith (group/touch) Dorland can see——best youth kra'ith

"We have to get out of here," Paul said to Dorland. "The deacons and Sons will be here in a few minutes."

Dorland's eyes left Elli with a visible effort and focused on Paul. "We can't leave the chauka. If High Elder Brill finds it, he'll destroy it."

"We don't have any choice," Paul said. "We're running out of time——"

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"We already have," said Karyn, behind him. Paul turned around. Karyn and Jacque stood in the doorway. "They're coming. Jacque saw them about halfway from the temple. They'd spot us before we ever reached the tubes."

Tem kra'ith (unpleasant)——(?)
Dorland turned back to Elli. "Yes, unpleasant. What do you know about the Tern kra'ithT"

Tem kra'ith (group/touch) nevermore——dark edge

"Let's move back," Paul said. He couldn't think

with the constant intrusion of Elli's thoughts.

"Was that——?" Frakes rubbed his head. "It

seemed like . . ."

"She's telepathic," Paul said. "Or close to it." He turned to Karyn. "If we can't reach the tubes, we'll have to find another way out of here."

"There isn't another way out," Karyn said.

"Anyway, we have a bigger problem."

"They're bringing another floater," Jacque said.

"It'll get here first. With that big gun, it'll pound this old building to pieces."

"And knives and a single burp gun won't stop it,"

Karyn pointed out.

"What's a floater?" Frakes wanted to know.

"Combat car," Paul answered.

"Like the one we commandeered?"

Paul nodded.

"I was afraid of that." Frakes chewed his lower lip. Then: "Maybe another combat car can stop it." Paul knew immediately what he was suggesting.

"Can you do it?"

"I can give it a try," Frakes said. "But there's no way I'll be able to drive and shoot at the same time."

It took Frakes a few minutes to get the combat car's engines started, then a few more to maneuver it a hundred meters down the narrow road to the

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intersection of the broader roadway that led from the temple. From the building's roof they had verified that this was the most likely route the other car would take.

Paul gripped the arms of his seat as the car bucked and roared. Frakes was positioning it in a way that would allow him to turn quickly if he had to and head down the other roadway on a parallel course with the river. He was hoping to get the first strike and disable the other car before they were spotted, but if that didn't work they might need a fast way out.

After the roar of the fans had died down to an idle, Frakes looked over at the weapons board and said, "Got it figured out?"

"I think so." Paul had taken a few minutes to sort out the panel as well as he could. His early Guard training was enough to give him some idea of how the car's weapons system had been designed. The primary armament consisted of a heavy, swivel-mounted cannon to fire forward over the hatchway, and similar guns, also swivel-mounted, on each side to cover the flanks and rear. The antipersonnel nozzles were lower down near the skirts. The controls for the weapons seemed straightforward enough, although Paul wouldn't be sure he'd gotten them clear in his mind until the time came to use them.

"Now that we're here," Frakes said, "maybe you can give me an idea of who we're up against."

"Deacpns," Paul answered. "And Sons of God."

Frakes hunched down into a more comfortable position in the driver's seat. "They're part of the Holy Order?"

Paul hesitated, then decided Frakes had earned a right to know whom he was fighting. He kept his sentences brief and to the point, and got through his explanation in a few minutes.

When he finished, Frakes jerked a thumb toward

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the building on the riverbank. "That thing I saw was a Tal Tahir?"

"We haven't been able to find out for sure. Communicating with her is a little difficult—" Then Paul's attention went to the forward vidscreen, where he could see a cloud of dust rising out along the roadway. Frakes saw it, too, and fell silent. A few minutes later Paul heard a distant roar, and the combat car came swaying down the narrow road. It passed over the small stream, fans blasting its surface into a fine mist.

"Get the big one ready," Frakes said.

The cannon had no automatic aiming mechanism. Paul sighted the other car in the cross hairs, then pressed the orange bar. The car bucked, and a missile exploded in front of the other car, throwing up rocks and dirt.

"Damn!" Frakes muttered.

The combat car came to an abrupt halt, and the cannon swiveled around. The muzzle blossomed orange light. The building beside Paul and Frakes exploded into pink fragments. Paul used the double handgrips to steady the gun while he watched the targeting cross hairs. He hit the orange bar again. Dust and reddish-brown stone erupted a few meters behind the other car.

"I take it you didn't get too many ribbons on the gunnery range," Frakes observed.

The other car wallowed as if the driver were trying to decide what to do. Then it came straight on down the road. Paul adjusted the range and pressed the bar again. A tone sounded from the weapons board. A telltale glowed red.

"Any idea what that means?" he yelled.

"No, but I don't like it—"

The car shuddered from a glancing blow. The vidscreens blanked, then came back on. Paul lined up the cannon and pressed the bar again, but nothing happened. It was clear now that the cannon

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had either jammed or was out of ammunition. There was no time to figure out what to do about it.

Frakes had already reached the same conclusion. The fans screamed to life as he backed the car around behind a collapsed domed structure, then roared off along the road on a course following the river. On the aft vidscreen, Paul could see the other car turning sluggishly to come after them. Light flashed from the nose cannon. Frakes slid around a corner onto another road, pulverizing a domed

structure. Debris flew all around them. The car took a hit and skidded around in a half circle. When Frakes jammed his foot on the pedals, a heavy shudder ran through the car.

"Portside fans are out!" he yelled. "She won't go." The domed structure in front of them exploded in fragments, and part of it rained down over the car. The car lurched again as the fans revved. Then it slammed to the ground. Frakes cursed, already unbuckling his harness.

"We'll have to run for it!" he yelled.

Paul knew Frakes was right, but he also knew they didn't have much chance of escaping that combat car on foot.

They waited for the next blast. As the ground behind the car churned into dust, Paul scrambled through the hatchway and down over the skirts. Frakes was close on his heels. A missile blossomed against the side of the car, and the concussion slammed Frakes to the ground. He was up and running an instant later. He ducked around the pile of rubble behind which Paul had taken cover.

They waited, watching the approaching car. It skimmed over the road, throwing up thick clouds of dust.

"They don't know where we are," Frakes said, breathing hard. The car slid closer. Frakes withdrew a handgun from his belt holster and handed it to Paul.

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"Cover me," he said. "If anyone sticks his head out of that hatchway, blow it off." He had taken out another gun, which he gripped in his bloody hands.

"What are you—"

But Frakes was already scrambling up onto the roadway. He jumped for the combat car as it slid past and pulled himself up over the skirts. The car jerked to a stop and the antipersonnel nozzle sputtered. But it was too late. Frakes reached

forward, grasped the hatchcover and yanked it open. He fired his gun directly into the cockpit. The sputtering sound of the weapon was punctuated by a hoarse scream.

Chapter Seventeen

THE BUILDING'S ROOF WAS FLAT AND SQUARE AND

had the appearance of a sheet of reddish-brown stone. The crumbled edges curved down to vertical walls that dropped ten meters to the ground. The spire was a thick white column curving upward from the center of the roof to reach a height of twenty meters before it ended in a jagged break.

Paul was on his knees near the edge of the roof, looking out toward the roadway. By the time he and Erich Frakes had reached the shelter of the building, the deacons and Sons of God who had followed the combat car on foot were close behind them. Even though he couldn't see them from the roof, Paul knew they were out there now, probably putting their plans together. Sabastran was sure the boys would be the first wave of attack.

Paul shifted his gaze farther along the broad roadway that led from the temple. A large crowd had gathered there. Hundreds of them had followed the Sons of God from the temple. They were milling about, talking among themselves and look-

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ing up at the building and the broken spire. Paul could see more people coming down the roadway.

"Can we expect help from them?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Karyn said. "They'd cut their own throats before they would act against Lord Tern and High Elder Brill."

"Haven't they already done that by coming out here?"

She shrugged. "Guess so. But I wouldn't count on them to bail us out."

"Why do you think they came?" .

"Curious, probably."

Karyn and Jacque lay on their stomachs at the crumbled edge with the long-barreled carbines they had taken from the combat car. Selmer Ogram and Erich Frakes were crouched farther down toward the corner of the building. Frakes held something Paul didn't recognize—a short, wide-mouthed tube with a shoulder saddle and an oddly shaped firing device. A brown canvas pouch lay at his feet.

"Grenade launcher," Karyn explained when Paul asked about it.

Paul felt the blood drain from his face. We've never had to hurt any of them, Selmer had said. But it's only a matter of time.

"We think they're sonic grenades," Karyn went on. "With luck, they'll only knock the kids out for a while."

"But you aren't sure?"

Karyn shook her head. "We'll find out when we use one."

Feeling slightly sick, Paul turned and went down the stairs to the inner chamber. Dorland paced back and forth in front of the chauka with his hands clasped behind him. Elli was in her usual position above the chauka, swaying gently as if to music that none of the others could hear.

"The kra'ith," Dorland said, "is made up of youth as well as older individuals." He spoke

slowly, as if he'd just now grasped a point Elli was trying to get across.

* (Group/touch) kra'ith Dorland is (acceptance)*

Paul hitched himself up onto the pedestal in front of the chauka. He felt a twitchy urgency. "Getting anywhere?"

"She still won't say much about Lord Tern," Dorland said. "But I found out one thing about him. He's Tal Tahir."

"He is? Then Elli—"

"She's Tal Tahir, too. The males are a lot different from the females. I couldn't get it all—it came in a flash, and she wouldn't repeat it. But my guess is the males evolved as the workers and the food gatherers, while the females were more sedentary. They probably cared for the young." , "That's all you've been able to find out about Lord Tern?"

Dorland nodded. "All she wants to talk about is the kra'ith."

"That doesn't help us. We don't even know what it is."

"I'm getting an idea about it," Dorland said. He spoke carefully, his eyes thoughtful. "It's obvious the kra'ith is a basic part of the Tal Tahir social structure. I think the closest human word for it is family"

"The kra'ith consists of parents and their young?"

"Maybe. But I get the impression there are levels of kra'ith. One level is the family group that lives in the domes. Another level may be a group of domes—"

"A quadrant sector?"

"That's my guess. I don't know how many levels there are, but I know they're all connected."

"One big happy family."

"Something like that. Everything the Tal Tahir do is for the common good. They never think of the

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individual." Dorland paused, and his eyes returned to Elli, who stood silently above the chauka. She watched them intently with the sensor nubs pulled back against the flap. "Working for the common good is why the kra'ith exists. For the Tal Tahir, that means dedicating every action toward the well-being of the youth."

Youth. So much of what they learned from Elli

came back to that.

"We think of the family relationship in terms of parents raising children until they're old enough to care for themselves," Dorland went on. "But at the same time, the parents have jobs and other interests outside the family. Raising the children is handled rather casually. To the Tal Tahir, nothing is as important as caring for the young." He looked up at Paul. "In fact, the closest thing to a Tal Tahir religion is the worship of the young."

"They . . . worship the young?"

Dorland nodded. "They don't have external gods like humans do. Our fear of the unknown is basic to us, and we created deities to give us answers and make us feel safe in our confusing environment. But the Tal Tahir don't need that kind of security. They know their security lies in their young. Everything their race will be depends on the youth. That's why the kra'ith is so sacred to them. It is where the young are reared and worshipped."

"Did the heretics really have a Godstone?"

Wayne Lightfoot asked. "There's talk that—"

"Never mind the talk," Jonny Ironfist said sternly. He and Wayne were crouched behind the partial remains of a curved dome wall. Jonny had just come from the temple, where he had received his orders from Elder Jacowicz. Confusing orders, but Jonny was prepared to carry them out. Jonny was

nervous and—yes, he had to admit—afraid. Not of the heretics who waited in the strange building

by the river or of the crowd that had gathered behind them, but of the Holy City. The city seemed to engulf him, and the pulse of its life beat with the pulse of Jonny's blood. "Some people thought they saw the Godstone. They spread the word and caused much confusion. Elder Jacowicz says we have to calm them before they get out of control."

"Calm them? How?"

"Select half of the brothers and go out to talk to the people. Try to get them to return to Fairhope. Under no circumstances are you to let them get closer to the heretic stronghold." Jonny could hear the muttering of the crowd behind him. It seemed to be getting louder. "Tell them that when this is over. High Elder Brill will call a special service at the temple and explain everything."

Wayne nodded and moved away to make his selection.

Jonny turned his mind back to the problem at hand. The building in which the heretics had taken cover was on the riverbank. The vegetation and rubble were heavy along each side of the building. He would have to lead his brothers straight in, and he knew there would be casualties.

It would be much easier if they could simply use a powder bomb, but Elder Jacowicz had warned him against that. The heretic named Dorland Avery had to be brought back alive, and Elder Jacowicz had asked that he be captured as quietly as possible. The others were not to be harmed unless absolutely necessary.

Jonny didn't know why Elder Jacowicz had changed his mind so abruptly. Earlier, Elder Jacowicz had ordered that Jonny use all necessary force to capture the heretics. Any survivors were to be brought directly to the God Wall.

But that had changed. Jonny didn't question Elder Jacowicz's judgment. Lord Tern would keep Jonny and his brothers from harm during the

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attack. And if Lord Tern decided to let some of them join him beyond the Far Peaks, then he would welcome them into his arms with gratitude and they would live forever in glory with him.

Jonny turned to his squadron commanders and began issuing his instructions.

Kra'ith. (Group/touch)

Paul felt acceptance emanating from Elli. Then, tentatively:

Dorland kra'ith (?)

Dorland's face tensed. "She keeps asking about my kra'ith—"

A memory of Diana and Shari came to Paul, shadowed by the dark concept of death. He knew they were not images from his own mind, but from Dorland's. The images were flavored with alien perception, and it took Paul a moment to realize why: they weren't coming directly from Dorland, but were instead being filtered through Elli.

Kra'ith (pain!)

"Yes," Dorland murmured. "Pain." His mind was obviously on the past, and he seemed unaware of the mental bridge Elli had set up. Paul and Dorland had been linked in the sacred chamber, too, but in a much different way. That link was black and ominous, bringing out the doubts both of them felt. Elli's link was sympathetic and supportive.

Shari kra'ith (worship) (Youth/touch) (acceptance) (!)

"Yes," Paul murmured. "The Dorland kra'ith is ... separated."

Again came the feeling of warmth and acceptance—and a glimmer of comprehension. Paul's eyes went to Dorland, then returned to Elli. He was sure Dorland had felt it, too. Elli was trying to help Dorland cope with the trauma of his broken kra'ith.

There are levels of kra'ith, Dorland had said. One level is the family group . . .

If Elli was willing to help Dorland with his kra'ith at the family level, maybe she would help with the next level. Was it possible she hadn't been able to help them against Lord Tern simply because they hadn't asked the right questions?

Paul formed his statement carefully:

"Doriand/Paul kra'ith is also separated."

Kra'ith (separation) (!)

"Yes," Paul said. He thought for a moment, then added: "Youth has been taken from our kra 'ith by Lord Tern. Can Elli help return the youth to Dorland/Paul's kra'ith?"

Something changed on Elli's face an instant before Paul had completed the sentence. He winced under the backlash of horror. The flap on Elli's face snapped shut, then opened again.

(Dorland/Paul) attempt to stop kra 'ith (separation!)

"That's right," Paul said. "We want to prevent Lord Tern from separating our kra'ith. We need your help."

Lord Tern (destruction) kra'ith

The thought was accompanied by a feeling of such revulsion that Paul took an involuntary step backward.

Lord Tern (negative)

Paul nodded. "Will Elli help us?"

Eh-hli (comprehension) Lord Tern (!) That is why Eh-hli exist

That is why Elli exist.

A sound like a small thunderclap came from the roof of the building.

Chapter Eighteen

PAUL CROUCHED AT THE EDGE OF THE ROOF. AFTER

an aborted rush at the building's arched entrance, the boys had spread out and taken cover behind clumps of vegetation and crumbled domed structures. Several lay sprawled on the ground. As far as Paul could see, all of them wore the gold-and-scarlet uniforms. The deacons had apparently decided not to put themselves in the front line of attack.

"We used a grenade," Frakes said. "It knocked 'em out cold."

Farther out on the roadway, the crowd from the temple had grown to at least two thousand people. They milled about uneasily, as if they were trying to find a purpose. Paul could see many faces turned up toward the broken spire. Uniformed boys mingled with them. From what Paul could see, the boys weren't using force, although he was sure they were armed. They had probably gone out there to keep the crowd from boiling over.

"Is Dorland making any progress?" Karyn asked.

"A little," Paul replied. "Elli understands why we

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need help, but I don't know if she'll be able to give us any."

"The Sons won't give up." She looked down at the bodies on the ground below. "We'll have to kill them to stop them for good."

Paul turned and went back down the steps. Selmer and Jacque had positioned themselves in the outer corridor so they could watch the open archway. They were armed with one grenade launcher and a carbine. So far, none of the Sons had come close enough for them to use either.

Inside the chamber, Doriand was perched on the pedestal in front of the chauka. Sabastian had cleared a place to sit near the back, from which he watched and listened without comment.

Elli's communication came to Paul as he sank down beside Doriand:

Kra 'ith (leader) Tern (negative)

Paul felt a vague, dreamlike weariness. He made an effort to concentrate on what Elli was saying, and tried not to think about how tired he was and what was happening outside.

"She keeps talking about Lord Tern as if he is the kra'ith leader," Doriand said.

"A lousy one," Paul commented.

Doriand ignored him. "I think she's trying to tell us that Lord Tern is leader of the Clarion kra'ith"

"A kra'ith can be an entire planet?"

"That's the highest level. But I'm not sure about her definition of leader."

Tem (negative) kra'ith (nonacceptance) (leader)

"We think of a leader as a governor, or a manager," Doriand went on. "The leader of a planet—whether he's a president or an emperor—oversees planetary trade, the internal economy, military functions—things like that. But I don't think the kra'ith leader is responsible for any of that."

"What does he do, then?"

"He imparts his emotional insights to the others in the kra'ith"

"Emotional insights?"

Doriand nodded. Then he nodded again as if he'd thought of something else. "That would go along with the social orientation of the kra'ith. The members support one another emotionally."

Lord Tern (negative) kra'ith. Kra'ith (members) follow him as (leader)

Paul fidgeted. The sensation that he heard the words without hearing was beginning to grate on him.

"She's saying the only way to stop Lord Tern is to produce a new kra'ith leader," Doriand said. "But I still don't know how to do that."

Dorland kra'ith (acceptance) leader

Warmth flooded over Paul.

"That was clear enough," Paul said. "She just nominated you to be the kra'ith leader." He heard the pop-pop-pop of the grenade launcher from the roof, followed by the crackle of a carbine.

"They're moving in!" Selmer yelled from the corridor.

Doriand got up to stand directly in front of Elli. Something about his stance struck Paul as familiar. His mind conjured up a vision of Doriand on the stage, feet slightly apart, looking out at the audience . . .

"Kra'ith leader," Paul murmured.

Doriand looked at him. "What?"

"That's what you are." He met Dorland's eyes. "If Elli says you should be the new kra'ith leader, she probably knows what she's talking about. You're a psi-player."

"A psi-player is not a kra'ith leader."

"But it's close. Your psi-player skills came from

your training for the Holy Order." The concept cleared in his mind as he talked. "Training that was aimed at enabling you to become a kra'ith leader."

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Dorland shook his head. "My training was for leadership in the Holy Order."

"It's the same thing," Paul insisted. "Haven't you noticed the similarities between what you do as a psi-player and High Elder Brill's Godsdays service? Karyn told me that Brill helps people solve their problems. He does that to build up his own credibility, but he was still using Tal Tahir training. You do the same thing during your shows—you build up a self-confidence and make people feel better emotionally about problems they face, and with emotional strength they're able to solve their problems. That's what Elli was trying to do for us. She couldn't understand what we wanted from her, because her job is to heal emotional wounds in her own kra'ith."

"Her . . . job?"

Paul nodded. "She said that's why she exists. She wanted to help us all along, but she wasn't equipped to understand our problem. When we broadened the level of the kra'ith to include the entire planet, then she could help. She's part of that kra'ith."¹

Eh-hli (Dorland/Paul) kra'ith leader

Dorland looked at Elli for a long moment. Then:

"How can I become leader of the Clarion kra'ith?"

*(Dorland/Paul) is (group/touch) of kra'ith.
(Dorland/Paul) influence kra'ith (members) with
(strength) as kra'ith leader*

"Strength?" Paul repeated.

"Emotional strength," Dorland said. "But how can I get it to the people?" He turned back toward the open archway. "The kra'ith is ... outside." The last word was spoken softly, as if the answer

had come to Dorland as the question left his mouth.

The grenade launcher barked again from the outer corridor.

"Come with me," Dorland said to Paul.

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"What—"

Dorland moved quickly to the archway. Selmer looked up in surprise as he stepped past. Before Paul could stop him, Dorland had ducked through the low opening and started down the narrow path. Paul started to follow, then jerked back as a hail of darts pelted the wall. Selmer was beside him, firing the carbine.

"Get back!" Selmer yelled.

"They'll kill him!" Paul tried again to get out through the archway. A dart plucked at his sleeve;

then Selmer and Erich Frakes were pulling him inside.

Chapter Nineteen

"COULDN'T YOU STOP HIM?" KARYN DEMANDED.

She was red-faced and angry.

"No, we couldn't," Paul said evenly. "It happened too fast." His eyes went to Sebastian. "Dorland wanted to go."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

She turned away with disgust. "Come on," she muttered to Jacque. They went upstairs to the roof.

Paul had caught only a glimpse of what happened after Dorland went outside. As Dorland approached the half-dozen Sons of God who had worked their way in close to the building, a young boy with a scarred face began issuing rapid orders. Paul had expected to see Dorland fall, but instead

several of the boys surrounded him, and together they disappeared down the path toward the roadway. Others had stayed behind; Paul could see them where they had taken cover behind piles of rubble and clumps of vegetation. They made no further attempt to attack the building, but it was clear they weren't going to let anyone else outside.

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"Where are they taking him?" Frakes asked.

"Back to the temple," Paul answered.

Come with me.

Dorland obviously hadn't meant for Paul to literally join him as he went out to give himself up to the Sons of God. He hadn't given Paul a chance to do that.

What was he telling met

Elli had created a link between Paul and Dorland while they were communicating with her. Maybe that was what Dorland had been talking about. Could Elli provide a link over a longer distance?

"Keep an eye out here," he said to Selmer and Erich Frakes. Then he went into the inner chamber and explained to Sabastian what he was going to do. The silver disk was on the pedestal Dorland had been using. Paul had touched it to the protruding rod, then handed it to Sabastian. "Use this to bring Elli back when she fades out."

Sabastian nodded. Elli stood swaying above the chauka.

(?)

"Elli," Paul said, "can you link Dorland and me as you did before?"

""(Confusion)*

Her sensor nubs waved back and forth.

Paul sat down on the pedestal in front of the chauka. "When we spoke to you, Dorland and I were ..." He searched for a word. "Joined. Can you do that again?"

(Dorland/Paul) one kra'ith (?)

Again, the problem of the concept of the individual. Paul tried again.

"I am here. Dorland is someplace else. Dorland/Paul not kra'ith"

^Understanding/acceptance)*

The chauka and the room faded. Paul felt himself being stretched out. There was an immediate contact—Dorland?—then a drawing away. For a

moment he could feel the chamber's walls around him; then he was stretched again.

Contact!

He remained that way for a moment, touching Dorland and at the same time aware of the hard pedestal beneath him and Sabastian's slow, steady breathing.

Then he snapped like a rubber band, and all at once he was with Dorland. Shock rushed through him—Dorland's realization that he was there. Nerves tangled. Then he felt acceptance and understanding, and he knew he wouldn't have to explain to Dorland what he'd done.

He was vaguely aware of a sense of movement, and of many people around him.

Borland?

Time passed. Through Dorland's eyes he glimpsed the boy with the deep scar across his cheek.

Dorland? Are you . . .

I'm here.

More time shifted; images formed and dissolved as if in a dream. He felt the soothing calm of Dorland, and he could also feel Elli. That part was warm and comfortable, somehow . . . fluid, as if she were constantly molding herself around Paul and Dorland.

^Group/touch)*

Outside sensations were becoming more solid to Paul. He felt a chair under him. His wrists were bound tightly. On each side of him stood an armed boy, and in front of him sat High Elder Brill at a large wooden desk. Paul was surprised to see that Brill's eyes were only the eyes of an old man. But when Brill spoke, the power of his personality flowed with his words:

"I brought you here so I could explain what we are trying to do. With Lord Tern, I am shaping Clarion into a strong world. We must all unite

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together to defend ourselves against outsiders." Brill paused, and his eyes bore into Dorland's. "I need your help."

He needs our help

Silence.

Borland, he wants something. Otherwise we'd be on the God Wall by now. That's why they didn't attack us—Brill wanted you alive. Then: Why

"Why did you murder my parents?" Dorland asked.

"I am so sorry that happened," Brill said. His features changed to express intense sorrow. Selmer Ogram's words came back to Paul. He can make you want to believe him. "Our purpose was in danger from your father's influence—"

"My father threatened the stranglehold you have on the people of Clarion," Dorland said.

Why are you trying to provoke him? Paul asked. Find out what he wants. Maybe we can still get out of here alive.

Dorland's reply was a soft sound inside Paul's head: I don't care what he wants.

"I regret even more what happened to Diana and Shari," High Elder Brill said. His eyes did not waver from Dorland's. "That was needless, an overreaction. I spoke harshly to Elder Jacowicz about it."

"Why did you bring me here?" Paul felt himself ask the question, even though he borrowed the tissue of Dorland's lungs and tongue and mouth to ask it.

"I wanted to say that I am sorry for what happened. I beg your forgiveness and ask for your help in holding our great Clarion together."

"Why do you need my help?" Paul asked.

"The heretics in your group have stirred up trouble," Brill said. "A false Godstone was displayed, and how my children are confused." He paused. "Perhaps even doubting. You and I must

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reach a compromise, or there will be needless violence."

He's afraid to kill us! Paul said with sudden realization. The people from the temple—they followed us out there because they saw the Godstone. Paul remembered some of the words he'd spoken from that bench in the courtyard. They had been trite and meaningless to him, but to people in awe of the silver Godstone in his hand, they must have been very real. He knows his position has been weakened. He's afraid he'll create a martyr!

"It doesn't matter," Dorland said aloud.

What do you mean, it doesn't matter? He'll kill us if he thinks we won't go along. Say whatever it takes to get us out of here. We'll sort it out later. Fear was a hard knot inside Paul.

"They're looking for you," Dorland said. "Both UNSA and the Fringe Alliance."

"The Fringe Alliance?" The puzzled look on Brill's face was not contrived.

"The Alliance is a group of planets under the control of a man named Hans Maiar. He wants the secrets of the Tal Tahir, and he'll destroy Clarion to get them."

"You have brought this trouble!" Brill snarled, his supplicating tone turning instantly to fury. He pointed an accusing finger at Dorland. His hand doubled into a fist. "Clarion is free, and Lord Tern will see that it remains that way. We will tolerate no interference from outsiders."

"You won't have a choice," Dorland told him.

"They're coming. Knives and dart guns won't stop them. They have warships that can destroy Fairhope and Chalcharuzzi with one blow."

What are you trying to prove by antagonizing him? Paul asked. He's an old man. Tell him what he wants to hear.

I can't. I am a kra'ith leader.

"Our strength and faith in Lord Tern will give us

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victory." Brill opened his glistening eyes to stare at Doriand. "You can share the victory by joining us. If you refuse, we can accomplish the same end by taking you to the God Wall. When the people of Fairhope see that you have no personal god to protect you, they will return to Lord Tern."

"Your time has ended," Doriand said. "Why can't you accept that gracefully?"

Brill made a sound that was something between a laugh and a death rattle. He waved a hand, and the two boys grasped Dorland's arms and lifted him from the chair.

Doriand, you can't let him take us to the God Wall—

Doriand did not resist when the boys forced him around and walked him down the long carpet to the door. A moment later, they stepped into bright sunlight.

Desperation made Paul try something he wouldn't have believed possible. He reached out for the tenuous sensations he felt around him—the muscles of Dorland's legs under him, his shoulders in the grip of the boys—

We're getting out of here!

—and forced his own orders to Dorland's legs. They responded sluggishly, and Doriand pulled free of the boys and began a shambling run across the lawn. Paul felt resistance from Doriand and stumbled, caught himself and kept running.

Paul, no—

He heard a shout behind him; then something exploded against the back of his neck, knocking him forward onto his knees. He tried to get to his feet, but his muscles disobeyed. Something hit him again and he sank into nightmare oblivion.

He opened his eyes, squinted against the sun that was full in his face. His arms hurt; he tried to move them—

We've been strapped to the wall.

Paul jerked at the voice, then froze as pain stabbed upward from his neck through his skull.

Don't try to move, Doriand said. Everything will be all right.

Paul resisted an irrational urge to laugh. Five of the Sons of God had formed a line a few meters away, facing the wall. The boy with the slanting scar stood in the center. He met Dorland's eyes and

held them. His face was expressionless. Paul strained against the bindings at wrists and ankles. He felt Dorland's muscles relax and almost sobbed with frustration.

Don't worry.

Time passed. The sun warmed his face. His wrists throbbed, and he tried to ease the pressure by pushing down with his feet. The bindings cut into his ankles. Every muscle in his body began to cramp. The boys stood motionless in front of him.

Paul didn't know how long he had been hanging there before he heard approaching footsteps. He looked up and saw Elder Jacowicz limping down the pathway, leaning on a wooden staff. His white robe swirled at his ankles. Paul felt tension grip him.

Jacowicz stepped through the line of boys and thrust his white face up close to Doriand. "I knew you would come back." His voice was sharp and high-pitched. "You couldn't stay away."

Doriand locked eyes with Jacowicz. The other returned Dorland's stare in a measuring, predatory manner.

"Why did you have to kill Diana and Shari?" Doriand asked.

"Oh, I didn't really have to," Jacowicz said.

"I suppose it was ordered by Lord Tern."

Jacowicz issued a short bark of nasal laughter. "Hardly. Lord Tern gives his orders to High Elder Brill, not to me."

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"Whose orders do you obey. Elder Jacowicz?"

"My own." Jacowicz used the tip of his staff to prod Dorland under the chin. "We really need your cooperation, Dorland. Our children have become quite upset and it's all your fault. You'll have to talk

to them and straighten it out."

Dorland kept silent.

"The people of Fairhope are confused, and confusion often breeds violence. Many people will be killed if you don't help us. Do you want that on your conscience?"

"Some will surely die," Dorland agreed. "But if they rid Clarion of the Holy Order—"

Jacowicz pressed hard with the staff, and a bolt of pain lanced up through Dorland's jaw.

"All you have to do is talk to them," Jacowicz snarled. "High Elder Brill will call a service at the temple. You will tell the people the Godstone they saw was false. High Elder Brill will do some of his tricks, and all will be forgotten. It's all so simple!"

Dorland's eyes shifted from Jacowicz's leering face to the young boys who stood behind him. The boy with the scarred face stared back.

Suddenly Paul was aware of another presence—the link. Elli.

""(Acceptance)*

The feeling of warmth rushed over him—Elli's strength flowing out to him and Dorland. He felt another presence as well.

-(Youth/touch) kra'ith*

"I want an answer." Jacowicz's voice came faintly through the soft veil of Elli's presence.

Dorland's eyes were on the boy's scarred face. The boy stared back.

Kra'ith

It came in an instant. The boy's name was Jonny. He was trying hard not to be concerned about his parents. They were in the group near the river.

Jonny knew they had violated one of Lord Tern's strictest rules by going into a forbidden part of the city.

"(Youth/touch) kra'ith*

Elli's presence folded over all of them. Dorland, Paul, Jonny and Elli. Kra'ith—an alien touch reaching out to soothe an array of human feelings:

Dorland's guilt over the deaths of Diana and Shari;

Paul's doubts and insecurities; Jonny's blasphemous concern for his parents. They were all together—

"What's going on—?" Jacowicz's voice rose, then faded.

Kra'ith

"—Jonny, I want you to come up here and . . .
JonnyV

For a moment Paul was back in that depressing bar with Dorland behind him on the stage. Paul had felt that he was a failure at everything when he'd sat down at that table, and when he'd left, it was with renewed faith in himself.

Dorland was a kra'ith leader.

Jonny's parents: his mother planted jewel tips around the porch of their little house in Fairhope in an effort to make the squalid place a nicer home for her family; his father worked the fields even when his back felt as if it would break as he reached for the next fluff of cotton. But he went to the fields every day because the deacons kept a record of those who missed, and the fear was great enough to overcome the pain.

The link expanded to cover the other boys waiting behind Jacowicz. Affection, hatred, fear, happiness—all the range of human emotions washed out from them. Dorland brought Diana and Shari close to him. He projected their warmth and acceptance.

•"(Group/touch)*

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The semarch ceremony initiated the boys into

the Sons of God. It was a distorted version of the Tal Tahir ceremony.

The youth are transformed from those who are worshipped to those who worship.

Dorland blinked, and for a moment Elder Jacowicz's skull-like face cleared in front of him. Jacowicz raised the staff high and brought it slashing down toward Dorland's head—

Dorland felt the shades of music in the background. He imagined his hands inside the robe of his player's garb, fingered the buttons, arranged the music, swept the auditorium with color. The music and the flashing colors combined into a magical salve, swaying in and out of the pain in Jonny's eyes, sweeping over Jacowicz's upturned face.

Kra'ith—the strength of the child.

"Jonnyr

The shrill scream pierced through the haze that surrounded Paul. Through Dorland's eyes he saw the staff raised high above Jacowicz's head, and Jacowicz's arm held tight in the grip of Jonny and another boy. The staff fell to the ground. Elder Jacowicz stumbled back, staring . . .

Then Paul felt himself fading. Again came the stretching of identity, and the surroundings changed. Abruptly, he was sitting on a hard stone pedestal with Sabastian beside him.

"Are you all right?" Sabastian asked. His face was strangely pale. "You've been mumbling and muttering the whole time, jerking around like you were having a bad dream."

Paul's eyes focused with some effort on the old man. "I was with Dorland."

Sabastian didn't question the statement. "Where is he?"

"Coming back, I think."

Chapter Twenty

"SOMETHING'S HAPPENING!" SELMER EXCLAIMED.

Paul stepped across to the archway. The crowd had moved closer during the past hour, and now he could hear a low murmur. He couldn't see what was happening through the trees, but it was clear that a commotion had broken out.

Jacque yelled down the stairs behind them:

"Someone's coming through."

Then Paul saw the ripple of motion. A moment later several uniformed boys appeared on the pathway. He stiffened, then saw Dorland among them. The crowd made way, and a moment later Dorland stepped through the archway. His wrists were bloody, his hair tangled in a wild mop. With him came the boy Paul recognized as Jonny.

"Jonny's friends are speaking to the people outside," Dorland said. "They're asking them to return to Fairhope. They are letting the people know that the Holy Order doesn't exist anymore."

Paul took Dorland's arm and pulled him farther into the corridor. Except for his wrists, Dorland

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seemed to be unhurt. "What happened back there?"

"Elder Jacowicz returned to the temple after Jonny freed me," Dorland said. "He and High Elder Brill are there now, along with the rest of the elders and deacons. I think they're seeking advice from Lord Tern."

"Let's go after 'em!" Jacque exclaimed. "We've got the Sons on our side now—"

"That would only result in violence," Dorland said. "The deacons and elders are well armed." He turned to look back through the archway. "After the people have returned to Fairhope with their sons, I'll go to the temple and talk to High Elder

Brill."

Selmer laughed without humor. "What makes you think he'll listen? You're the one that caused all this. He'll have your head for a temple decoration."

"I think he'll listen to me," Dorland said.

Dusk was falling over the city by the time the last of the people from Fairhope had started the trek back to the village. Sabastian and Selmer Ogram had gone with them. Jacque was stationed on the roof of the building, where he could watch the temple with Karyn's binoculars.

Dorland had gone alone to the temple two hours ago. Through the binoculars Paul had watched him go inside, and as far as Paul could tell, he had been in there with the elders and deacons ever since.

Paul stood outside the building in the falling light, listening to the rushing river and the sounds of countless insects in the woods all around.

"He must be making progress," Erich Frakes said. "They haven't dumped his body out the door yet."

"I think he knows what he's doing," Paul said. Strangely, he felt confident that he was right.

"I hope so," Karyn said. She turned to look

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through the archway at the chauka. It was dark now; Elli had vanished shortly after Dorland returned, and nobody had reactivated the chauka to bring her back. The silver disk lay on the pedestal in front of the chauka. "I wonder if we'll ever see Elli—I mean, really her, not just an image."

"I don't think so," Paul said.

Something in his voice made her turn back. "Why not?"

"We've assumed that the chauka was a long-range communicator," Paul said. "Maybe even a transportation device. I don't think it's either of those."

"Then what is it?" Frakes asked.

Paul looked out toward the temple. Had Dorland guessed the truth?

"Has it occurred to you that the main room in this building and the sacred chamber in the temple are set up like an auditorium?"

"An auditorium?"

"Elli can be heard only as far as the outer ring of pedestals. The pedestals were obviously meant to be the Tal Tahir equivalent of chairs. With those long arms and legs of his, I'd guess Lord Tern would find one of them to be a comfortable place to sit for a while. I think those pedestals were seats for the males."

"You're saying the Tal Tahir males came to this place to watch a show?" Frakes sounded skeptical.

"I think they came here for all kinds of reasons. They called on Elli when they needed a counseling session."

"A what?" Karyn exclaimed.

"I kept wondering what Lord Tern and Elli were getting out of this exchange with humans," Paul went on. "Then Elli said that helping us was the reason for her existence. That made me wonder about how the disks work. You touch the rod with the disk and Elli appears."

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"If you use the disk with her picture on it," Karyn added.

"Exactly. You mentioned that earlier, but I didn't see the significance. You said the personal Tal Tahir god changes each time a new High Elder is elected. You told me the new High Elder selects his own personal god."

"That's the way it's always been," Karyn said.

"Right. Which means Captain Anson from the starship Vanguard was probably the man who discovered the disks and the chauka. That's probably what made him go off the deep end in the first place. But I wondered how the High Elder could simply select a Tal Tahir god. Now I think it was simple—he merely chose a new disk. That means the elders had a supply of the disks."

Karyn nodded. "That makes sense. But I don't see—"

"If you use the disk with Elli's picture, you get Elli. If you use the one with Lord Tern's picture, you get him instead. There are dozens of disks, each with a different picture." He paused to let them absorb that. "Doesn't that remind you of something?"

"Sure," Frakes said. "It's like a tridee cube. You pop it in your player and sit back in your favorite easy chair and watch the show."

"Right. The show is recorded in the cube. You can get any kind of show you want, from a murder mystery to a horror film to a nature documentary."

"Are you saying . . ." Karyn let the words trail off.

Paul nodded. "I think the Tal Tahir disks are the human equivalent of tridee cubes."

Silence descended over them while they absorbed what Paul had told them. Karyn broke it:

"Lord Tern was an actor?"

"Not an actor as such," Paul corrected. "I don't think the Tal Tahir disks were recorded with the

same kind of shows we're accustomed to. I've learned a lot from Elli. The social orientation of the Tal Tahir—you can see it in everything they had, even the way their city was designed. They felt each other's emotions—and it would only be natural that their entertainment would be angled toward emotional experiences. If I'm right, some of those

disks depict humor, and some depict the Tal Tahir equivalent of love stories, and some are Tal Tahir horror stories."

"Stories don't talk back to you," Frakes pointed out.

"These do," Paul said. "The technology of the Tal Tahir was also oriented toward emotional fulfillment. The disks were all designed to interact with the viewer."

Karyn looked at him sharply. "The disk of Lord Tern . . ."

"The disk Brill selected happened to be a horror story. Lord Tern portrayed a Tal Tahir with something inherently wrong. He hated youth rather than worshipping them. The role he played was that of a kra'ith leader who turned against his members."

"But Lord Tern wasn't dealing with a kra'ith," Karyn pointed out.

"Lord Tern thought he was dealing with a kra'ith. He fitted the structure of his story around Fairhope, the Holy Order and the human inhabitants of Clarion. And the mission he had to play out was to destroy his kra'ith. That was why he issued proclamations to establish the Sons of God and the God Wall."

"And Brill followed his orders to the letter," Karyn said bitterly.

Paul nodded. "Brill's interpretation of what Lord Tern did to his kra'ith members led to what Brill did to his own kra'ith, which was in effect the entire population of Clarion."

"If Lord Tern was a horror disk," Karyn said, "what was Elli?"

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"I think she was a psychiatrist."

Frakes issued an involuntary bark of laughter.

"A ... shrink?"

"It took me a long time to figure out why Dorland and I were having such a hard time communicating with her," Paul went on. "Then I realized we weren't talking about the same thing. We were trying to get Elli to help us defeat Lord Tern and High Elder Brill. But Elli was designed to help members of a kra'ith overcome their problems and fit in better with their kra'ith brothers and sisters. Her job was to make kra'ith members feel better about themselves. That's all she could understand, so she naturally assumed we'd called on her because we needed emotional help. She thought Dorland was a kra'ith leader seeking advice."

"No wonder you were confused," Karyn said.

"We were," Paul said. "Until we convinced her the entire planet of Clarion was our kra'ith. Then she understood, and she knew Lord Tern wasn't a good leader. So she offered the only advice she could. A new leader. Dorland."

Another silence intervened.

"If the disks are recordings," Karyn said at last, "That means . . ." She turned to look at the chauka.

"It means," Paul said, "that the chauka and the disks are thousands of years old." He took the silver disk out of his pocket and looked down at it. "We'll never get to meet the Tal Tahir. But I have a feeling they've left us something we'll find to be useful—"

A hoarse shout interrupted him, and Jacques came clattering down the stairs. His words were drowned out by a sudden roar overhead. Paul looked up and saw a dozen silver warships hovering over the temple. The fuselage of each was emblazoned with a bright blue crosshatch.

The Fringe Alliance had arrived in force.

Epilogue

DANITA WAS SILENT FOR A LONG MOMENT AFTER

her grandfather had finished the story. Finally she

looked up at him, her dark eyes reflecting the flame from the fire.

"That was when the Treaty of Clarion was signed?"

The old man nodded. "The treaty was negotiated and signed during the next three days. Dorland called in the UNSA triumvirate members, as well as Hans Maiar and his top lieutenants. It wasn't hard to convince them to come. They all wanted to get their hands on Clarion."

"But Dorland Avery didn't know he would be able to persuade them to sign the treaty. Wasn't that risky, bringing them all together like that?"

The old man smiled. "Dorland and the others were accustomed to taking risks." His hand lifted unconsciously to his cheek and touched the deep scar that slanted across his face. "Dorland knew that all he had to do was show them the kra'ith of humankind."

"It was that simple?"

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"Well. . . no," the old man admitted. "They hadn't come to hear about the kra'ith. But they had come to find the secrets of the Tal Tahir. Dorland showed them the kra'ith and enabled them to realize for themselves the importance of a lasting peace. The rest of it grew from that."

In truth, there had been many who hadn't believed the Treaty of Clarion would last a week, and it had certainly gone through some shaky trials. But the treaty had in fact lasted eighty years, and was stronger today than ever. During that time the Fringe Alliance and UNSA had grown together in mutual strength.

"What happened to High Elder Brill and the rest of the elders?" Danita asked.

"Alban Brill was old. Losing his hold over Clarion was too much for him. He died a few months after the treaty was signed. Elder Jacowicz died shortly after, but by his own hand. The rest of them

moved back to Fairhope. Some became good friends of mine over time."

"When was the university built?"

"After the treaty was signed. Dorland Avery's first students graduated a year later."

"You were in that class, weren't you?"

"Yes." The old man had graduated in Clarion University's first class along with all the other original Sons of God. Most of them were dead by now, but during their lifetimes they had formed a strong kra'ith and had succeeded in negotiating peaceful ends to thousands of conflicts along the stream. Others, like the old man, had instructed countless more at the university to take their places.

Dorland Avery and Paul Jurick both had lived long enough to see their plans succeed. All along the vastness- of the stream, humankind had not experienced the horrors of war in over sixty

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standard years. That was Elli's legacy—lasting peace for the first time in humankind's history.

Danita sighed a young girl's long, deep sigh. "I wish I could have known them like you did. Dorland Avery, Paul Jurick, Jacque Hakim, Karyn DiMemmo. They were special people."

"Yes," he said. "They were." He and Paul Jurick had become the best of friends during their long careers at the university. *

"What happened to the Elli disk and the chauka?"

"They were turned over to UNSA archaeologists," the old man answered. "We learned more from the Tal Tahir than how to live in peace. As far as I know, the chauka is still working, although I haven't heard anything of it in years." He paused, thinking. "We didn't need it here. As Elli had said, it was time for a new order on the planet, and Dorland was able to find it in his own way."

"With Elli's help," Danita pointed out.

"Yes," he admitted with a smile. "But in the end, the human kra'ith worked out the Treaty of Clarion. Humans have to solve human problems. Gods can't do that for us. Elli was smart enough to know that was the way it would have to be."