

Terry Dowling

COLOURING THE CAPTAINS

In the Great Passage Book there are seven Coloured Captains. Their names have become famous: Golden Afervarro, Red Lucas, White Massen, Green Glaive, Yellow Traven, Black Doloroso, and the last to be chosen – the Madman, Blue Tyson, known to many as Tom Rynosseros.

There are other National captains who have colours in their names – Rust Morganus is one, and Gray Ridley, and the legendary Black Jack Temenos, to name a few – just as there are other great captains, high and low, who are permitted to cross most of the tribal territories. But there are only seven Nationals who are allowed to use all Roads, to cross all the Ab'O States in their fine sand-ships, whose names and Colours have been entered in the Great Passage Book.

Is this what you wanted to hear? You who sleep there in Cold People storage, in your long safe cryogenic sleeves, waiting in your hundreds to be grafted out on to constructs and surrogate bodies, to make the Grand Tour, hungry for sensate life again.

I tell you, there would be none of it, no hope for you at all were it not for the seven. This circuit is shielded; the link is still open, one of the few I have left, so I can tell you. The world out here has changed since first you slept. The abiding spirit of an age can be rooted to many things: a preoccupation with identity, with new lands and frontiers, with sexuality, morality or repression, nostalgia for the past, with luxury and sacrifice. Then know that not since Pharaonic Egypt, not since the Mexican and Madagascan festivals of the dead, not since the Pre-Columbian civilizations of America has such a preoccupation with death marked an age. Or rather, seen another way, a preoccupation with making, understanding and holding onto life – all part of the same Zeitgeist, the same Weltanschauung.

If I sound the apologist for the Ab'O Princes, the Clever Men and their AI and genetic planning, bear with me. Some of you, the recent ones, will remember the belltree program, how it was meant to nibble at the concepts of life and death, how it reflected the crucial and vibrant spirit of an age. So then, let me tell you. Let me answer the questions the sample minds have put to generations of Coldmasters without success, while waiting and longing for life again.

I am a belltree. It is true. Though it shocks many of you and puzzles others, the more ancient personalities among you, I am a half-life creation, a lowly machine to some, with a plasmatic intelligence crafted around a crystalline lattice. Though I murmur to you in your dreams, I stand here beside a rarely-used desert Road, with paint peeling from the lower totemic eight feet of my fourteen-foot shaft, and half my sensors damaged by wind and sun and time.

My crystalline core comes from the great I-D tribal belltrees at Tell, and they, in turn, from the Iseult-Darrian prototypes at Seth-Ammon Photemos. My essence was decanted from the life-bottle of one of those marvellous structures; my identity shares some memories from the host-core.

And, as I say, I am well-acquainted with the seven Captains. In a sense, I am an oracle to them, no less than to the Ab'O tribes who caused me to be made. If the truth be told, and I cannot prove this to you yet, though you will know the truth in time, I am the one who gave them their Colours. It is true and it means everything to me.

My core was originally scheduled for the Tell Sculptury. I was to have become a prime Aulus or a Twilister, fashioned by the greatest organic-sculptors we have in Australia, but there were debts to pay in those early days of no patrons and huge research costs, and my inception was first delayed, then made forfeit. It was a bad year, and my core was sublet to the

Immortality factors at Tell. They bonded me to two fading cryogenic personalities like yourselves, James and Bymer, two old Cold People whose bodies were spoiling and who had paid handsomely to have their matrices grafted out into biotectic life, their final chance (apart from the charling injections) for any kind of life considering.

So I lost my pedigree, my pure link with the great Iseult-Darrians. I became an ordinary junk-post, a humble road-sculpture out on the desert, spoiling, piggybacking two ghosts, neglected, with dwindling subtlety in my receptors and limited function.

But a strange and wonderful thing happened, the first of many in this story I am telling you.

James and Bymer's bonding – for all the wealth the factors got from their estates, and despite the guarantees – was only partially successful. My spliced and re-routed I-D core was simply too strong for a true graft, despite the careful dampening and the repressors. Instead of losing my ownTerry Dowling

identity, it went the other way: my passengers lost theirs in the rallying identity matrix. As a host-post I failed, and quietly out here on the desert, James and Bymer, your friends, Cold People veterans like yourselves, became more and more dim, the thing you all fear.

Now see how the Ab'O's trap themselves (and note it, for you will wake into a world built on this).

Once the Iseult-Darrian prototypes were ratified by the Princes as true life, as an integral part of the Dreamtime fabric, they immediately had the Tell authorities do a genealogy on all the I-D cores. The lattices were codified; the disposition of every drop from the life-bottles registered and traced.

They found me standing by my forgotten Road, faltering and in poor repair, with the ghosts of two dead humans whispering through my frame, coming and going like the lonely night winds which had kept me company for so many years. The biotects were vastly relieved to find the hosting hadn't taken, but they discovered that James and Bymer – what was left of them – nested deeply in my plasmatic soul. The recovery team did an immediate search on my two passengers, to find if my life – they called it that, even then – was tainted at all. That search took them back many years, a long way indeed, but Immortality produced the mandatory records as readily as the Tell staff had mine.

James had been a semiologist, a specialist in signs; Bymer was the colour symbologist who had once advised the Ab'O biotects on the inlay designs for the Living Towers at Fosti. Even by tribal standards, they were great men, worthy men. Had been.

The problem wasn't so great then, after all. The technicians restored and adjusted my sensors, honed my dim-recall rods, added valuable new laminations to my diligent, bounty-box and shaft. Artists touched up the totemic panels on the lower eight feet; Clever Men consecrated them anew.

But they couldn't move me. Their own rulings about the ritual placement of road-trees, arrived at more than a century before, back when the belltree program became the definitive artform of the tribes, the focal point and repository for all their life-science endeavours, meant that I had to stay out in the desert, measuring my length of Road for passing ships, precious and refurbished, belonging to no tribe, a rogue Iseult-Darrian. A rogue, do you see?

They kept the secret of my value well and made the refurbishing subtle so no passersby would tell. And without knowing it, they gave me the Captains. The story of Tom, my last Captain, resolving even now, today, as I speak, is the story of them all. Let me tell you of it and of him.

once proud, once cruel, once young and, then, achingly beautiful, the subject of more legends and longings than you would believe to see her now, had you the eyes, found Tom on the Sand Quay at Twilight Beach that day. She moved among the great sand-ship hulls under a hot morning sun, with three robed Kurdaitcha assassins, and stopped by the mooring where Tom and his old kitemaster, Scarbo, were discussing their charvolant, Rynosseros, so recently won in the ship-lotteries at Cyrimiri. The rest of Tom's crew – Rim, Tremba and Kylas, were still on shore leave.

"We must talk," she said with characteristic directness, startling both men with her strong distinctive voice and with her fearsome entourage of avengers. When she introduced herself, the looks of astonishment on their faces remained. Because of the implants in Sajanna and her silent companions, I know what took place.

Ab'Os on the Sand Quay. Tom and his kitemaster were no doubt wondering why. Kurdaitcha and this one, the ancient Ab'O biotect, this famous, worn, haggard scientist away from her labs and testing-chambers. I saw it on their faces. Around them, other sand-sailors watched with awe and amused curiosity, then turned away, not wanting to antagonize Kurdaitcha.

The small group boarded Rynosseros then, and below-deck in the main cabin, with Scarbo posted on the docks to warn off intruders, she announced her purpose. She told Tom about the Captains and about me, a little of the account I have just given you, and, typical of Sajanna, she was amazingly frank.

And understand! Here were two people who came to love one another in their short time together, who might have been lovers, dear friends, life companions. Here they were, separated by more than a hundred and seventy years, by too much time, each of them trapped in the years which I know is the constant, charming, despair-ridden tragedy of human life the source of the strange longing looks men and women sometimes show, the incommunicable sadness in the eyes of the old regarding the oblivious young. The might-have-beens. Sajanna showed nothing of this, though telemetry revealed the warmth of her response to him, and gave what she saw: the tanned, blue-eyed face of a man barely thirty, with a full mustache, strong browline and brown hair swept back in the style of so many National sailors; a man of medium height and build, wearing plain buff-coloured mission fatigues adorned only by the bright new charvi insignia below the right shoulder. She did not mention that she had watched his dreams in the Madhouse, that she had sought him for reasons she would never divulge to another living thing apart from me – her child. She spoke briefly of the six Captains in the Great Passage Book, then concluded in her calm unhurried way.

"Since I am the last of the Tell biotects responsible for the graftings which produced this rouge tree, it has been decided that I am responsible for it now. These stoney-faced avengi you see about me here are both my servants and, in a sense, my executioners. Their leader has yet again made me an honorary Pan-Tribal Kurdaitcha. He has Clever Men who will hunt me, sing me, for failing my mission, or dispose of me some other way unless I can account for why the names of National captains are appearing in the Book."

"This is Dreamtime business," Tom said.

"Absolutely. You know what the oracle trees mean to us, I think. Are supposed to mean. The belltree program was part of a sacred quest in the truest possible sense. We esteemed that Artificial Life then more than we do now, with proper reverence for what we had done. Think of it! Nonhuman life conferring with us, counselling us, made by us but never owned, sharing life-views we had nurtured but could never have ourselves. They became privileged and wise counsellors – the best, the most sophisticated of them. It was considered fitting, and there is a powerful tradition still, despite the years of cynicism and uncertainty. Technically, they remain oracles, though mostly they are cherished as quaint and fascinating relics. Their status was never revoked, you see, probably because it was never used this way. This rogue is giving out Colours to non-Ab'O captains of its own choosing, then

entering those names in our Records beside those of our greatest battle-captains."

"How did it start?" Tom asked. "What made the rogue give its first Colour and cause all this?"

Sajanna shook her head, unable to risk more, forced to hide so much from this man she needed more than she could say, if indeed he was the right choice.

"Persecution, Captain, though, admittedly, we were slow in reading the signs for what they were: the budget cut-backs, the political disfavour, the increasingly strict security measures – allegedly because of threats from True-Lifer groups. Fewer projects were sanctioned; fewer AIs cleared for release. We discussed the trends and where they could lead; we were aware of True-Lifer factions gaining power. And, ironically, this tree saw it all and understood something had to be done. Perhaps it monitored strategy discussions or com messages, who can say? – it was always inquisitive and surprisingly resourceful. It took a chance; made sure our expertise was needed. It went straight to our most prized honour system and entered National names."

As Tom listened, I think he sensed the old woman's dilemma, suspected that she was being made to serve her enemies, and had to play a part, both revealing and concealing. The intent looks of her silent companions must have confirmed it.

"Is there method here?" he said. "Were they the first Nationals to happen along?"

"Oh no. These men were carefully selected. They passed some test, were chosen, then completed some service for the tree. We need to know what these duties were. We need to control this, you understand. Nothing like it has ever happened before. This rogue is an I-D oracle after all. We must accept its rulings unilaterally the moment they appear in our comp systems. So we must stop it."

"Tribal investigators would . . ."

Sajanna laughed, a sharp bark of amusement.

"Do you know what it said to our tribal investigators, to our senior biotects, to me? Not a word! Not to me, not even to the ones who restored the thing. Six Nationals are its only audience now. Each one Coloured and named in the Great Passage Book. We suspect it will talk to another National captain."

"And will probably give a Colour and a mandate. Do you want that?"

"That is our gamble, Captain Tyson. And our deal. You are newly out of the Madhouse, with reasons to seek Ab'O support. You have just won your ship; now you need licences, accreditation, funds."

"Yes," Tom said. "I do."

"But more to the point, you know the machines in the Madhouse. I've seen your records. You will not be swayed or wooed by Artificial Life as others might. We will give you a permit and the details of where this road-post is located. Yes, it will probably Colour you and give you the same liberties as the rest, but this time the captain we send will have made a blood oath with us first, to serve us and use those same perquisites for the tribes once he has put an end to the rouge's mischief. The only National captain the tree gets now will be our man. Working on our terms. The tree can have you as its seventh, briefly, while we solve the mystery, solve the problem. And you will solve the mystery!"

"If I can."

"You will," Sajanna said, and some of the old Kurdaitcha ruthlessness returned to her eyes, fed by bitterness and disillusionment, by the fast-fading hopes and longings this woman had that the tribes might someday accept the very life alternatives they sought so relentlessly.

"You have been turning back other National ships approaching the area?"

"True."

"Destroying any?"

"Only two. Satellites found them first. Laser strikes from orbit. The rest have been turned back. All ships are barred from the region indefinitely. The other Coloured Captains could get through, but they know how provocative

that would be right now. We need only worry about strays and pirates, the reckless or the curious, bold Nationals on a dare, freight or mercenary captains who think running any blockade is fun."

"You mean to use the tree's own system against it."

"That is the plan," Sajanna said, and I believe Tom did understand –was sure that she spoke now for someone else, someone who had only lately decided to use this approach to the problem.

There was a pause while he considered the situation.

"Well?" the old woman said when a silent minute had elapsed. "I have no choice here," Tom answered.

Sajanna gave another bitter laugh. "No. Nor have I."

Tom did research that afternoon. He sat in the stern cabin at his ship's comp systems and used Sajanna's private codes to access the data he needed, while two Kurdaitcha waited on deck and the third went off about some errand.

Sajanna came in at 1450 and sat to one side in a hand-carved chair, her frail lined-velvet hands pressed over her dark-velvet face as she meditated, probably reflecting on the weave of chance which had brought her to this.

First, Tom confirmed all that the old biotect had told him, that across nearly ten years the rogue belltree had chosen six National captains to be its champions, and that for the performance of some unknown task – and in order to do it – each had been assigned a Colour and given an all-lander mandate, a gift beyond price for any National limited to the coastal territories.

The Colours were easy to fathom: my ghost, Bymer, had been a colour symbologist after all. To any observers, he had apparently supplied me with my colour symbols, just as James' ghost would have provided the mind-sets elevating those colours into special meanings, my private mysteries.

For Tom, however, translating the colour-symbols was Task Number Three. The first was to discover what secret missions had prompted the action, the second was to stop the process.

Towards evening, while he was reviewing the Tell material on personality bonding, Sajanna left her chair and came to stand by him. Tom did not hear her. He pushed back from the display to find her there, then asked the question that let her reveal more of her true position. He had already deduced she would be monitored. Now he entered into the conspiracy, and spoke for the benefit of her unseen superiors.

"Dr Best . . . Sajanna" – she did not correct him – "if this tree is serving the Dreamtime for you all, why not let it give out its Colours, do what it likes?"

And his eyes explored the flawed velvet of her face. Perhaps he sought further confirmation. Perhaps he found it in the barest suggestion of a smile.

"I mentioned politics," Sajanna said softly. "Expedience. The last thing the tribes want are non-Ab'O heroes acquiring status, usurping the Dream-time privileges, bringing other Nationals into our deserts."

"But if this Iseult-Darrian is an oracle tree, as you say, then its rulings remain sacred. Unless, of course, the tribes proclaim it mad, say it was tainted by James and Bymer. That would void its rulings wouldn't it?"

"They tried that," Sajanna said. "But other Iseult-Darrians endorsed its decisions, said the rogue was sane and whole. National interest increased, as you can imagine."

"Then you must accept the Captains too, accept that there is some worthwhile reason behind it all." I think Tom spoke to show he was her ally.

"Exactly what I have told the tribes," Sajanna said, acknowledging his place in this, confirming hers. Then she moved to the large stern-windows to watch dusk settle on the desert beyond. "They do accept – grudgingly, secretly, many of the Princes. But in view of so little information about a dangerous trend, it is expedient for them that the trend be controlled."

Tom frowned. "And how many other 'honorary' Kurdaitcha like yourself have forfeited their lives already because of this? Six?"

The Ab'O woman turned to him and nodded. "Yes."

"And they were your colleagues at Tell, weren't they?"

"Yes," she said, and I knew she admired his quickness. "It is as you saw in my files. The first captain was Phaon Afervarro, the famous songsmith himself. When the tree gave him Gold, Satra Amanty was in charge of the Tell life-houses, the wise leader of our team, a great man, an innovative man, my teacher. The head of the Pan-Tribals appointed him honorary Kurdaitcha as I am now, his life held forfeit, and gave him a month – no more – to discover why the tree had done it. At the end of that time, the singers began. His body was found at his desk shortly afterwards."

"That is madness!" Tom said.

"It is. A useful and expedient tradition also," the old biotect said, always concealing her heartbreak because the assassins were listening and there were things she had to do. "And a way for worried Princes and tribal factions to limit the power of the life-houses, to make up for the more disturbing excesses of ambitious predecessors. When the tree gave Lucas Red a year later, Amanty's successor suffered the same fate. This time, however, realizing the difficulty of the problem, and noting National media interest, they allowed Chen Colla two months."

"But no luck?"

"Again, no. They sang him too, hunted him down his mind-line. He was found lying dead in the desert. You see ..."

But Tom indicated the screen, to save her the sudden rush of distress he read in her voice. "There were seven biotects on the original Iseult-Darrian project. They mean to halt the opposition from that quarter by eliminating the whole team."

Sajanna nodded, and I noted her relief, her gratitude again, though it barely reached her ancient face. The same relief, the same gratitude Amanty, Colla and the rest had felt when their appointed Captains were proven to be worthy. "Yes. That is what they intend. The head of the Pan-Tribal Kurdaitcha is Bolo May." (At last she named him!) "He has used these alarming dispensations from the rogue to justify doing what he has wanted to do for years: the dismantling of all Artificial Life programs." And the old scientist smiled. "He is our Matthew Hopkins – our Witchfinder General."

"What of the rest?" Tom asked, saying what he already knew from comp, speaking it to give what reassurance he could. "Four other Captains means . . ."

"The same. Eventually the same. Alliga, Mitroy, Lang, my old friend Taber, all forfeit. The rogue refused to speak to any of them. The chosen Captains said nothing; most went on voyages to distant States, using their special status to evade Kurdaitcha and Clever Men. It was as if the tree was taunting us. Each time we lost a chief investigator, the tree created a new Captain, and so caused Bolo May to select yet another of us. Now, finally, after ten years, it is my turn. Bolo May kept me for last, I'm certain, and –for reasons approved by the tribes – I have been given far less time than Amanty had. Less than a week."

"But why so little time?" Tom demanded. "If the tribes want this solved, surely they would give a more realistic time-frame."

Sajanna seemed distracted as she answered him. "No. It has already taken too long. Now they want this business finalized as soon as possible." Listening to them talk, to what Tom said and how, made me sure of it then, that I had made a good choice. He had clearly grasped the reason behind Sajanna's sudden detachment. The biotect was monitored and so would need to show open support for Bolo May's commission from the tribes. But she had lost her dearest, longest, only friends, and now her life – rendered useless in nearly every way – was at stake as well, the only counter she had left in the game. That's what well-chosen, life-sensitive Tom must have realized, must have read in the tired ancient eyes.

"My answer is you, Captain Tyson," Sajanna said. "Tomorrow you go out to the tree." Then, regardless of the listening assassins, she said the damning words. "May believes I chose you because of your reactions to the AI machines in the Madhouse. What he will now learn is that I chose you in spite of those reactions as well, for the dreams and images you had which showed such a

natural affinity for life, any life, and for our evolving and yet unchanging Dreamtime."

And moving with surprising swiftness, she went to the cabin door and locked it.

"Quickly now!" she said, drawing a small-bladed knife from her robe. "Let me have your oath before the others come. Whatever happens, I'll have that, and May might just have one more National name to contend with."

And Tom watched as the narrow blade drew blood from his wrist and from her own, then repeated the words, concentrating on the dialect, not knowing what it was he said, concentrating even when fists pounded on the door, and the door burst open, and the armed avengi were upon them.

3

Tom stood by the quiet desert Road looking up at me, shading his eyes from the glare of late morning sunlight reflected off the hot sand. All about us was desolation, just the Road stretching off in one direction to lose itself in some low hills, in the other gradually dropping down to an ancient watercourse where it could be seen winding a few times before it too vanished from sight. Apart from those few hills and that dry river bed, we were the only features in the hot unmoving terrain.

Tom was studying me, no doubt wondering how an ordinary junk-post could hold such power over the tribes.

"I'm Tom Tyson," he said finally, calling out across the dry air. His words echoed down the Road, resounded in the dry river bed, came back to us from the quiet hills. His voice was lower when he spoke next. "I've walked six k's in from their perimeter to see you.-

I did not answer him, letting the silence of my place touch his soul, testing him too.

"No more Nationals will be coming unless we reach an understanding," he told me.

Still I was silent, though I used the small monitor mote Sajanna had pasted on his forehead to do a fascinating thing, to scan myself as he saw me: the narrow shaft rising six feet above the eight-foot totemic trunk, the sensor spines thrusting out, the diligent canister at the top of the main stem. Rather than use the portable comlink he wore at one ear, I activated the old voice circuit I have used when playing out the role of oracle to wandering nomads.

"Ten years ago," I said, "the Ab'O's discovered they could not close down the belltree program at Tell and Seth-Ammon Photemos. Once made public and celebrated throughout the world, they could not demean their own amazing achievement so easily."

Tom looked about him, once, twice, then moved in closer.

"The Princes and Clever Men met the crisis in a fitting manner. I had just been restored; I had excellent data and function resources. I learned that the first part of their plan was to eliminate gradually, steadily, the entire research team responsible for the Iseult-Darrian strain, to remove the respected resistance from that quarter over a period of years - a lab accident, or an assassination attempt by angry National True-Lifers.

"Bolo May was appointed by pan-tribal dispensation and selected a strategy group. I found the means to delay them, to make them cautious. I acted in a provocative way, in a manner which I knew would make them need those very Tell specialists they meant to discredit and then discreetly destroy."

"You gave a Colour," Tom said. "Your oracle-post function."

"True. Dreamtime function. I appointed a National to all-lander status. Phaon Afervarro. And I gave out an undisclosed mission - not to an Ab'O who deserved such a privilege, but to my own first Captain.- "They got around that-

"Yes. One by one they made the Tell biotects responsible for discovering how and why the aberration occurred."

"They would have been killed anyway," Tom said, standing quite close now,

reacting to the ion flux from my bounty-box, affected by the mood-bending emissions.

"Yes. But at least the Kurdaitcha did not return to their original intention. It was a delaying tactic only. It bought ten years in which they needed those specialists. But they were shrewd, those avengi. They would not let the Tell biotects communicate with me directly, no comlink, no transmissions of any kind. Bolo May made sure of this."

"He must have had other trees, other comp systems probe you. Then and now." Which was another astute observation from Tom Tyson.

"Yes. Constantly. But there is the randomizing element of James and Bymer," I told him. "My own strategy is filtered through mysteries devised by identity matrices they cannot access, rendered in code. Bolo May can yet harm the things I love, but he cannot decide how to undo the harm I have done in adding to the Great Passage Book, and he cannot understand what it is I am doing."

"What of the missions you gave the Captains?" Tom asked, serving Sajanna, honouring the small wound on the inside of his right wrist where the blood-bond had been drawn. I was grateful to him for that though it put us at odds for this first meeting. "Could May not find ways of invalidating whatever they were?"

"You are still new to the Roads, Tom," I said. "A mandate is binding on all or none. Either the Great Passage Book exists and is valid with its liberties and honours or it doesn't and isn't. The Kurdaitcha tried, but the missions were carried out. There is that much consolation – knowing how furious May must be."

Tom nodded, but absentmindedly, considering things I had no way of discovering. He turned and looked along the Road in each direction, at the dry river bed and the low silent hills, glanced up at a single wisp of cloud half a mile overhead. For a moment I used his forehead mote again to scan the world rather than use my own sensors. It let me see myself beside my Road. It let my ghosts behold their lonely home. I felt them stir in me at the sight. This is what we are, what you cold hearts may one day become.

"Why did you choose those captains in particular?" Tom asked.

"They passed a test."

"Which is?"

I did not answer so he tried again.

"Will I be Coloured?"

"You are a sworn tribal man."

"You heard Sajanna Marron Best speak of expedience. Like her I am a slave to the Kurdaitcha. It is a price I pay for the small favours any National needs. I recently won . . ."

"Rynosseros. A fine ship."

"You know that, of course," Tom said.

"I am tied in to Tell, Seth-Ammon Photemos, Cyrimiri, other places. I know how the lotteries go. I minded you in the Madhouse."

Tom frowned, piecing it together, but working with the little he understood. I could not tell him then how effectively May had limited me, how a hundred powerful comp systems burdened me with questions and demands, how sapper units constantly worried at me, how I was cut off from all but Tell and a handful of locales. With the Kurdaitcha monitor fitted to him, I could not show my limitations, tell him that the Book was the only real solution left to me, that I now depended on my Captains and my final creator to do what I could not, passing on my account to Cold People like yourselves through the few other connections left to me, so that if I fail at least someone will know what was tried here.

The empty Road, the solitude of this lonely place, were deceptive, though still a blessing. But Tom, remembering the cunning dream machines in the Madhouse, perceived it in his way, though no doubt I seemed aloof and arrogant, a cool dispassionate thing.

"There'll be no more Captains," he said, returning to his assignment. "No more names in the Book. Please, help me now. Help Sajanna. Why did you choose those

Captains? What were their missions?"

"I will not tell you."

"Dr Best will be sung! One of your own makers!"

"I cannot save her. May will eliminate her one way or another. Let the Ab'Os bear the consequences of what they have made."

"Artificial Life!" Tom said, resorting to scorn, out of a sense of futility perhaps. "A clever imitation!"

"Possibly. But I don't know that. I feel as if I live."

"That's the personality grafting. James and Bymer have accelerated your sensitivity."

"Tom, can we forget this? It is not an issue for me."

"Sajanna will die!" he cried. The low hills, the dry river bed echoed the words, distorting them, sending them back as accusations.

"That's a terrible, unnecessary thing. It is partly why I refuse however. I will not have them create what I am, lock me into a purpose over the lives and dreams of so many, then revoke it all when it suits them. Sajanna deserves this vindication. Ask her. It is more important than her life."

"You make it sound very wrong of them."

I tried to calm him, to ease the hard feelings in him. "Petulant, punitive, unhuman. Their responsibility, just as I am, whatever I am."

I could see Tom agreed, that much as he resisted Artificial Intelligence, he knew I was doing no less than the Ab'Os themselves were doing. "Understand, Tom," I said, aware of my dear Sajanna, of the spiteful Bolo May, listening, watching. "I must not change on this. You are a captain with a good fast ship. Protect Sajanna if you can. If they will let you." Tom turned and began to walk down the Road. I could not help calling to him.

"What will you do?"

He did not turn, but kept walking towards the dry hills.

"Find the six Captains!" he called back.

"They will not tell you."

But he did not answer.

4

When he was back at the Twilight Beach moorings close on sunset, even as he made preparations for the following day to leave the Sand Quay and seek out the scattered Captains, Tom met Bolo May at last.

Once again Sajanna came to the Quay, but this time she had with her six robed Kurdaitcha, five carrying power batons, as if anyone would dare attack them, and the sixth, a short heavily-built man with severely cropped hair, wearing a pair of exquisite Japano swords, a striking red and gold set in contrast to the dark red-black Pan-Tribal djellaba he wore. Bands of colour, the same red-black of old blood, divided his already dusky face into panels, thwarting an easy grasp of the man's features, but he was one to be seen only at a glance for his power to be evident.

Tom did not know it, few Princes were even aware of it, but Bolo May was at that time probably the most powerful man in Australia, the only Ab'O to be allowed a personal satellite for the duration of the crisis.

Sajanna knew it; all the Tell biotects had realized it early on. May had manipulated affairs in a unique way. And like so many powerful, privileged servants of the common good before him, the clergy, the generals, the bureau chiefs of history, Bolo May had used his office quietly, cunningly, to build an invisible empire about himself.

But Tom dealt with more immediate things than that single terrifying truth. More disturbing than the knowledge of the sixth Kurdaitcha's identity, of who it was that painted face belonged to, was May's silence.

When Sajanna had introduced him, she then asked the questions he had obviously put to her earlier, leaving May to stand watching, his eyes like petals of black glass.

"Where will you go first?" she said.

Tom tried to meet the Kurdaitcha's dark gaze, but finally turned to the old woman and made his answer to her.

"I have the last-known port registrations for the six. Afervarro is at Jarrajurra, at the Spoiler sites. Massen and Glaive are bound for Angel Bay. Traven is north of Adelaide; Doloroso is taking Clever Men to Port Tarsis; and Lucas is on a layover at Inlansay."

"You prefer this course of action to dealing with the tree?" Sajanna asked, another question from May. "It will take time."

Tom made himself face the forbidding form standing off to one side.

"The tree does not care if Dr Best dies. It knows your intentions, Lord. It knows many things I do not. That probably you do not. I sensed purpose in what it was doing – careful, patient purpose."

Bolo May chuckled, a single short sound of derision.

"Do you also know it Coloured you?" he said. "Blue."

Tom stared in surprise. "Did it? But I thought . . . Why?"

Again Bolo May chuckled, turning so his back was to them both.

Sajanna answered. "The tree could not do otherwise. Once your name is registered at Tell, you no longer have to wear that." She pointed to the sensor mote on Tom's forehead. "You serve yourself Or, more to the point, because of your oath," – and she looked across at May – "you serve me."

Bolo May swung about. "And you are damned for that, Sajanna," he said softly, poisonously, but with a curious touch of amusement, as if an old rival he had suddenly proven unpredictable again and somehow worthy. "Whatever second thoughts I may have had are gone."

Then he explained what he meant to Tom, before Sajanna could. "The oath you gave before you left for the tree was meant to be to the tribes. Dr Best was careful to have you repeat words in a quite obscure dialect originated at Tell, to make it an oath to her exclusively. We have finally deciphered it. So if she dies . . . "You are a free agent, Tom!" Sajanna said. "Within hours of my death, possibly less – minutes, your name and Colour will be confirmed in Records . . ."

"Unless you are dead also," Bolo May added.

"But I have no mission!" Tom cried. "None was given."

"There will be one," the old biotect told him.

"Really, Sajanna!" May said, controlling his anger. "Enough!" But Sajanna did not heed the command.

"Tom, the tree treated you differently because you were being monitored too heavily. It understood the oath you had made, but we were playing for time. The Kurdaitcha might not have checked. Lord May should have been more careful about leaving us alone together, letting me arrange your oath. You will not fully appreciate what calm obedience preceded your involvement in this. I am obliged to honour certain injunctions and life-debts placed on me by my tribal heritage and now – against my wishes – by Kurdaitcha authority. My surface acceptance of those same strictures flattered and deceived him – we go back many years together. I was carefully tame before this. Now he knows better. He is here because of it – to warn you in person."

"To simply meet Captain Tyson, Sajanna, that is all. His oath might be to you, yes, but your sworn obligations are to us. It changes nothing."

"It does," Tom said suddenly. "Only the tree can cancel the names. Until then, we are your heroes. There are tribal obligations here too that you must honour."

"Until the tree removes them, yes," May agreed. "Which may be sooner than you think. But as I say, it changes nothing."

"And as I say, it does," Tom said again. "Please get off my ship!"

5

It must have been somewhere between Twilight Beach and Inlansay that Tom realized that no-one – not Sajanna, not Bolo May, not the Captains or myself, could afford to tell him what was really happening. The implants in Sajanna,

the prospect of comsat scans, gain-monitors and Kurdaitcha agents put limits on all that.

In a sense, Tom was as solitary as he had ever been shut away in the Madhouse gloom for all those subjective years, 50 years in 3 I knew from the records. But he found comfort in that in a way, most assuredly. No man could altogether come to grips with what it meant to be given an all-lander mandate, not in the small space of time Tom had had. But since Rynosseros itself was so new, and the simple freedom of being outside the dark chambers of Cape Bedlam, this strange good fortune was simply one more incredible factor in a reality which was itself totally new again and totally precious.

Tom accepted it as readily and as necessarily as he had Sajanna and Bolo May. And to stave off the absurd dreamlike quality of it all, he lost himself in pragmatic things, in the running of his ship, in the immediate crisis of Sajanna's fate. He did not worry unduly about comsat scans; he knew that the sounds of a vessel in transit would hide all ship-talk not using outside com transmissions. The scanner unit bought in Twilight Beach located the half-dozen sensor motes hidden aboard by Sajanna's companions earlier; remote sensors trained on his ship would make nothing of the softly-spoken conversations carried on below-deck. Sajanna's implants - her own signs of great rank and privilege now used against her - were the only constant worry, but they were consciousness-aligned and no use at all when Sajanna was sleeping.

So Tom enjoyed this first real voyage. He took Rynosseros through Wadi Horn to the burning stony expanse of the Barrabarran, on to the archaeological beds at Jarrajurra where my first Captain, Phaon Afervarro, had moored his charvi, Songwing, close to the Adda-Spoiler excavations.

When Rynosseros stood beside the dig on the hot silent approach road, Tom went alone to the trenches and exposed middens, found his way among the twenty or so Ab'O men and women hard at work to where Afervarro stood talking with two site supervisors.

"Captain Afervarro," Tom called.

"Captain Tyson," Afervarro replied, his long grey hair brushed back and shining around his weathered handsome face. "Step over. But watch the pegged-out areas. We are after Spoiler mummies, and many are buried upright and fitted with biter-hoods and proximity charges. I'd hate to have you lose a foot-

-Honest tribal work," Tom said, carefully avoiding a marked-off section.

"It is that. But it lets me see the sacred Adda-Spoiler sites with their blessing. We bring out the Spoiler traitors and neutralize them. It helps us all."

They walked away from the trenches and precious funerary strata until they were amid some broken rock-forms and quite alone.

"I've been to the tree," Tom said. "I was given Blue. Now I need . . ."

"Tom," Afervarro interrupted. "At least one, probably more, of those diggers back there are Kurdaitcha. We are no doubt monitored at this moment. May will have us scanned."

"But I need to speak to the other Captains. I have to . . ."

"No. You don't. Don't seek out the rest of us. You'll learn nothing. Just go hi lied Lucas at Inlansay. He has spoken with the tree since you did, used status to make the voyage and cross the perimeter. The avengi will monitor what is said but we have devised codes. Seek him out. He may e something to tell you. And look here! Read carefully and quickly!" He opened out a small scrap of flag-foil, shading it from long-reach sensors with one hand cupping the other so Tom had to peer at it through a cage of own callused fingers.

He will tell you how to Shield your House from harm.

"Now back to my mummies," Afervarro said, and rubbed the flag-foil against itself until it burst into flame. "You have a long journey." Then he turned to

confront a site supervisor and two diggers who had hurried over Hill stood waiting with troubled looks on their faces.

"An order from the Adda Prince," the supervisor said. He now wore a kurdaitcha blazon pinned to his djellaba. "You must declare the words shown to Captain Tyson.

"Say them, Tom, if you wish," Afervarro said.

"I have forgotten them already."

Afervarro smiled. "So have I."

"You must say them!" the Kurdaitcha said.

But my Captains smiled at each other, shook hands and parted, with not another word said between them.

6

At mid-afternoon on the following day, Rynosseros drew close to the Inland Sin. It was eerie weather to be sailing in, one of those days unique to Australia that can only be called silver days, when there is a sheet of shining white cloud from horizon to horizon and a warm blustery wind from the west bringing dust and restlessness and an odd melancholy.

'limn commented on it to Sajanna as they approached the windswept university town, with the Inland Sea on their right, a vast shield of water the colour of polished pewter, flashing dully at them as they neared the sand and water quays of Inlansay.

Rynosseros found anchorage at the Sea Yards; Tom received directions from the portmaster, then from the registrar's office, and finally located Red Lucas on the Concourse at a cafe terrace called Arms of the Sea. The captain of the Serventy already knew that Tom was due, and that he was my latest champion, the only one allowed near Sajanna. They greeted one another, and took drinks out to one of the tables sheltered from the full brunt of the wind. The cloud had thinned in places; now the water gleamed before them.

"I was told you would be coming," Sam Lucas said, and fingered the small comlink worn high on the throat, my comlink, effective at only a few places.

"It all feels futile when I hear this," Tom said. "It's like I'm not needed at all.

"You're the only one of us Sajanna is permitted to talk to," Lucas said. "We can try to go to her but Bolo May would block us, possibly take extreme action. Because of our unusual status, we have to walk very carefully, observe a host of tribal rituals. You don't wear his mote any more, Tom, but he reads almost everything through Sajanna's implants. Your ship is secure?"

"I believe so. We have a scanner. The crew is constantly checking. Tell me what I can do, Sam."

Sam Lucas smiled. "Do you know that right now there are five Kurdaitcha watching us, probably listening in?"

"There's no mote on me!" Tom said, then followed Red Lucas' eyeline. Several tables away, two young male students sat talking softly. To the right, on the high wall of the Arms of the Sea where it rose to form a roof-garden, another leant on the balustrade looking out at the silvery expanse of water. Near him stood a girl, also considering the Sea and the funerary islands scattered there like spikes of anthracite in their harsh chrome setting. And closer by far was the waiter, a young Ab'O quadroon clearing tables, but working too slowly, lingering, so obvious now.

Sam smiled. "While Bolo May leads the Kurdaitcha, we are under constant surveillance. You cannot conceive of what a threat, an insult, an affrontery we are to them." Then he spoke for the listeners as much as for Tom. "But we take comfort and reassurance from the knowledge that we have been chosen by the greatest of the oracle trees, that our missions and our naming are for a purpose all tribes respect, for the Dreamtime. Bolo May must honour us."

The young waiter glanced over once, a brief telling flicker of response, and Sam Lucas smiled again.

"Thank you," Tom said. "I won't seek out the others; Afervarro told me not to.

But there is so little time. The mistakes . . ."

"Good mistakes," Lucas said. "We all made them. But there's only one solution. Just remember, like us, Bolo May must know when to be delicate, when to be bold. The Princes and the Clever Men have given him enormous power. They are watching him more closely than ever; they know they are setting precedents. Most Captains in the Book were named posthumously. We are living, non-Ab'O and here now, Dreamtime champions. They hate that. The tribes reacted excessively to the belltree problem. Our rogue tree responded with an equally unusual and excessive solution; the tribes then had to revise and expand their strategy. Now it's down to eight of us - seven Captains and one brilliant old Ab'O woman who is the last of those the Iseult-Darriars identify as their creators."

"Killing Dr Best won't eliminate the names in the Book!"

"You're right. So Bolo May must be going for something more. Something to discredit or harm the tree and us. Perhaps he'll try to take it over. He has sappers constantly at work on the tree, feeding in false codes, stressing the feeder lines. Perhaps there'll be assassins waiting. We may find ourselves facing Pan-Tribal ships or laser strike, disappearing without trace. Anything is possible. Now you see why we do not discuss our missions." Lucas pushed his empty glass away from him. "But what did Afervarro say?"

"It was a note," Tom said. "He destroyed it."

"You recall the words? Don't say them!"

"Of course."

Lucas nodded. "Good. You will find it a capital idea."

"A what?" But Tom understood. He saw how Lucas was alert to everything about them.

"Nowhere is really safe anymore," Lucas continued, now that he knew Tom did understand, good fine Lucas, my second Captain. "Only out there on our ships. I thought that here would be safer in a way, but no. The only advantage we have is surprise, the element of time, the scant minutes or hours we remain ahead of the avengi at this crucial point, outguessing them. When you met Afervarro on the desert, May's comsat had gain-monitors on you, listening from a hundred miles up. But it could not be in two places. While it scanned Songwing and Rynosseros together, I went to the tree."

"A strategy," Tom said.

"A desperate one, Tom. But let's speak of other things. Have you ever seen the sunsets they have here - when the sky is clear, not like this? Memorable sunsets, never to be forgotten."

Tom went to speak but stopped, momentarily perplexed by the oddly-rhapsodic turn the big man's conversation had taken, then aware that nothing Lucas said would be idle talk now.

"Ah, the colours! Do you know Bymer's work at Fosti? The colour inlays at the foot of the South Tower? No? No matter. All these colours are there, and more. The sunset gold that is such new hope for us, so brilliant and pure. The trusty reds you see out there; the tinge of green you sometimes get at the skyline, so bountiful; the palest, softest, most compassionate yellow, can you see it there, Tom?"

"Yes," Tom said, and the initial puzzlement at Lucas' words changed to fascinated understanding. "I do."

"And over there!" Lucas said, ignoring the flurry of movement behind them on the promenade. "Can you see it amid this silver and white that is the only truth now? On clear days at sunset you can even see a hint of blackness already, the promise of the peaceful dark. But still up there, look, there will be some of the blue which brings all the others into a whole, that gives unity and purpose to the whole thing . . ."

"You!"

Both men turned in their chairs and saw four armed Ab'O's approaching, young grim-faced men moving through the tables towards them. They wore fighting leathers and Japano swords under their djellabas, and their faces were newly-decorated in the totemic bands and ciphers of vendetta.

Lucas laid a hand on Tom's arm. "Be ready. This is a strike from Bolo May."

"You!" the foremost of the Ab'Os cried again. "Nationals! My grandfather was Bay Moss Tanneran. Clever Man of the Burgenin. You shame him!" Swords flashed out, four then eight.

It was to be a lowly seaside brawl, a misunderstanding, an act by young hotheads who should have known better.

Sam Lucas heaved with his mighty arms, sent the table spinning across at them, giving Tom and himself room to get free of the chairs. Before the youths could react, Lucas had caught the waiter by the sleeve.

"You, Kurdaitcha!" he said. "Clever Man! Tell them!"

"Hold!" the waiter cried in astonishment.

"Or be damned and sung!" Lucas added in a loud voice. A crowd of passersby had gathered, tourists and students pausing to stare in wonder at what was happening. The young men stopped, angry and confused.

"Think carefully about what you say next," Lucas told the waiter. "Think very carefully."

The Clever Man did not need to do so. "Withdraw!" he said. The leader of the young men looked uneasy. "But . . ."

"Break off! Go! I won't be blamed for this. Go!"

The youths sheathed their weapons and moved away, muttering among themselves.

When they had gone, Lucas released the waiter, then led Tom along the Concourse, smiling for the unseen cameras.

"You see how sensitive they are to my ramblings about sunset. Such weather disturbs them."

And as they crossed the lawns and terraces of the university, heading towards the Sea Yards, they talked of nothing else but ships, kites and the young women they saw.

7

Forty minutes later, Rynosseros ran at 80 k's into the southwest under a brace of display kites: two Demis, a Sode Star and six racing-footmen. For a while Lucas' Serventy paced her on the 732 Lateral, but finally swung off onto the Great Bell Road heading due south.

Tom called a crew meeting on the poop and gave new orders. There was a course change, but Sajanna was below-deck napping in her cabin, her consciousness-aligned implants closed to me, and I could not be sure what it was. Tom had not yet learned to leave his ship-comp open so I could get input. He did not know of how I had managed the ship-lotteries at Cyrimiri – of the part I had played in selecting his ship for its shielded systems, did not know how carefully chosen he was.

But an hour later, he told Sajanna their destination.

"We're going to Fosti," he said. "May knows."

Sajanna nodded. Of course he did. She knew that most of his resources were directed at either the tree or Rynosseros.

"What can I do?" the old biotect asked. "There must be something."

Tom shook his head. "It's hard for you to be idle, I know, but please leave me to myself during the voyage. I need to work at comp. Do you know Fosti?"

"Yes," Sajanna said. "I know Fosti well."

All the rest of that day, Tom sat at comp down in the comparative quiet of his cabin, away from the roar of transit, the constant rhythm of ship-sounds.

Using the guide programs, he finally discovered and interpreted the Protected codes, and knew that May had no link to his ship – just Sajanna.

He pressed on, studying the displays and speaking to me, aware that I was listening but – beset by sappers – could tell him nothing myself. First he accessed the material on Bymer, reviewing all that was known about my colour symbologist – the work he had done on the Towers at Fosti.

"Why a colour expert there?" he enquired aloud, murmuring the words softly in the light through the stern windows.

He called up the Fosti records, saw the sealed menu, the Unavailable responses, and abandoned that for what he did have. Then he brought out his

pocket recorder, keyed the pass-code, and replayed Lucas' words from Inlansay, his reflections on weather, all the while noting the Protected cipher flashing in the corner of the screen. At the words: 'sunset gold that is such new hope', he wrote 'Gold - Hope' on the pad before him. At 'trusty reds', he wrote 'Red - Trust' below the first entry. For a 'tinge of green . . . so bountiful', he added 'Green - Bounty', and beside 'Yellow' - 'the softest, most compassionate yellow' - he wrote 'Compassion'. For 'White' it was 'Truth', he decided, no doubt remembering that strange silver day; then it was 'Black' - 'the promise of the peaceful dark' - and he wrote 'Peace' beside that. Alongside 'Blue', his own Colour, he wrote 'Unity', though Lucas had said 'Purpose' as well.

Once he had the correspondences, he arranged them in Book order, as an increment pattern, then keyed them in instead of speaking them - still not trusting voice links.

Gold - Hope (Golden) Red - Trust
White - Truth
Green - Bounty (Bountiful) Yellow - Compassion
Black - Peace
Blue - Unity (Purpose)

There was nothing, not for the main array, not for the variants. The screen showed: No File.

Tom tried again, different combinations of the names and symbolical attributes.

"It has to be a cumulative password," he said aloud, then tried the next approach, using the message from Afervarro: 'He will tell you how to Shield your House from harm', with Lucas' 'You will find it a capital idea'. The capitalized words.

Shield House.

Tom keyed that in and got a waiting signal. He added the increment pattern again and received the seven-word display left for him - for Blue, whoever it was to be - so long ago.

Shield House - South Tower - Blue

Tom cleared the screen, pushed back from comp and went up on deck, to receive a double surprise. First, he found that it was dusk, something he had known from the fading light through the stern casements but had not really noticed. Then, incredibly, he found Sajanna, not Scarbo or Rim, at the helm. He stared in wonder, not having known that the old biotect was a duly licenced captain too.

"I had to do something," she said, and added unnecessarily: "Your men have been working hard, and I know the way to Fosti. They didn't mind." "Should you rest?"

"I barely sleep these days, Tom. Just naps. One of the few gifts of age. And I couldn't; not in this, not now."

Tom looked about them, watched the darkening overcast sky, the sad deepening gun-metal blue of it, chill in spite of the warm tailwind, and for a time gave his attention to a long narrow opening in the cloud close to the horizon - a gash, a vent, a slash of light, an utterly forlorn thing for him to behold, to judge by his silence.

"It's so still," he said finally, a trivial remark in view of where his thoughts had been.

Sajanna smiled, a line of white silk in the dark and age-patterned velvet of her face. "Is it? Can't you feel the pressure? Above us is May's comsat. It moves as we do. Or perhaps it already sits above Fosti, waiting for us with all that power, waiting to destroy what we have built. And about us, out there, behind, somewhere, are Kurdaitcha ships, May's private fleet. We will not see them, they will not register on scan, but they are there. You have

discovered what he needs to know, haven't you?"

"What?" Tom said distractedly, watching the gash in the cloud fill up with darkness. "Yes. How do you know?"

"You are up here with me. You found Afervarro; you found Lucas. There are no Captains at Fosti but we go there now. The tree has told you something . . . no, you've found something, something left by the tree in Rynosseros' comp."

"I could always write what . . ."

"No! Optical, remember!" Sajanna said. "My implants are fully optical as well. And I would be violating oaths to the tribes. For all my dreams and beliefs, I'm not completely one of you in this."

"All right, woman!" Tom said, smiling. "Then you suffer!"

"Yes," she said, laughing. "I do."

It was so good to hear Sajanna laugh, to know that she could still do that, that sailing Rynosseros was a healing positive thing for her, a way of forgetting for a while, of reaching back and cancelling out the years – the loss those years represented, a way of bringing some of those scattered pieces together.

They stood side by side, almost touching in the night wind, growing closer and amazingly closer despite the years and in spite of the ships and the watching eyes of Bolo May.

8

The next day was brilliantly fine. All mornin great lions of cloud lazed by overhead, dividing the sky into vast corridors of air and light, making every kilometre too vivid to be wearying.

At 1420, Tom stood with Sajanna in the boys and scanned the shoreline of the dry desert sea ahead, watching the handful of lonely Towers grow larger.

"Fosti," Sajanna murmured softly, almost to herself, obviously recalling this abandoned life-project and the strange dutch of artefacts it had produced.

The first of the Living Towers – the only partly-successful North Tower – was in poor repair. Stones had fallen away, exposing the pump system and part of the CNS-Vitan stem, showing whee robbers had looted the life-chambers and storage rooms, and breached the feeder tanks. Then came Sun Tower East and Sun Tower West, the fanous Mad Tower, the Lonely Hatter, the Bent Tower, the White Tower. all bleached sandstone and sephalay, still dazzling with its limestone facings, and further along the desert shore, the South Tower.

Out on the desert sea itself, a sad ruin n the afternoon light, stood Summer House, the only serious attempt the Towers had ever made to create one of their own kind, a deformed and deranged creation abandoned long ago. Beside it, the first tiers and foundation conduits of Little Brother rose a few pathetic feet above the red sand. And that is what Fosti had remained – a brave attempt to bridge the gap between architectural form and organic life. Few people visited them now, and at night there was only the keening of the diligent chambers and the mournful chattering of the Sun Towers to one another across the cold dry air. Still, the monitors registered life-fields about their hulks, distinct if faint auras, whatever they meant.

Tom had never seen the Towers first-hand; Sajanna had studied them exhaustively more than a hundred and eighty years before, and, bridging the epochs of her life, had even led a routine Tell expedition into Lonely Hatter one hundred and seventy years later, allowing the deaths of Amanty and Colla. Now, as Rynosseros rolled down the acces road, they watched in silence as one after another of the distinctive shags moved across their line of sight.

"Bolo May has to be close by," Tom said, as the access road dwindled to an apron of stones before the last structure in the group.

"Yes," Sajanna said. "Very near."

The rest of the crew, Scarbo, Rimmon, Kylas and Tremba, saw to the turning and anchoring of the ship while Tom put a sensor mote on his forehead, tied in to ship's comp and so to me. Then he took his captain's sword, a Japano-style blade made in Spain under the guidance of Tensumi, and set out for the South

Tower, heading towards the small enrichment door at the base.

He found Bolo May waiting for him there, sitting alone at the foot of the Tower on some discarded and semi-bonding blocks of chindlian trisephalay, his own splendid sworn across his lap, his red-black djellaba hanging open over old black fighting-leathers, his banded face expressionless.

There were only the two of them. The occasional noises Tom heard, the tiny spills of gravel, the creaking and ticking sounds, were caused by the Tower itself, by the sephalay block expanding and shifting in the heat, by the pumps working away deep within, not by hidden Kurdaitcha waiting in ambush.

Again I observed the paradox of this land: the ancient unrelieved emptiness, and the sure knowledge of what filled it now – of the constant scanning, of May's comsat focusing exactly, precisely, on where they met. No Prince had ever used his tribal satellite as relentlessly as May used the special unit assigned to him. Though the life-fields of the Towers interfered, the sensors probed regardless, taking whatever they could.

"Close to the sephalay like this, May said suddenly, leaning in close to the stones, "you can feel the life of the Towers. We are in their fields. They shield us; play tricks with our monitors. But sitting here I can almost understand the compulsion, see why he biotects return to it – to this single-minded quest of theirs."

"Why here then?" Tom asked. "If the readings are difficult?"

May looked along the desolate sand-shore, strangely serene in his power but plainly distracted as well.

"I have advice to give," he said turning his eyes back to Tom, coming back in from the desert again. "Sometimes I want no records kept--And this advice is?" Which was an unfortunate question for Tom to press with just then, for Bolo May was at his most disarmed, his most reflective and human and exposed. He was possibly recalling things which none of my Captains knew: how once a young initiate rimed Bolo May had applied to the Tell directors for an apprenticeship at one of their regional life-houses, many years ago, too many hardening spoling years, so that the life quest of the man became the measure of a crucial rejection, a truth long since put out of mind. Tom should have asked: "Why?", but he did not. He already thought he knew why.

"Sajanna has so little time," May said. "I almost have the tree. There is so much contamination, so many sappers and seedings that I doubt it can protect itself much longer."

"Go on," Tom answered, still relentless, missing the inclination to reverie and sharing, the reaching out in the man, not seeing it for what it was.

"If you fail and Dr Best dies, the crisis changes and my power necessarily ends. Why do you think Sajanna was allowed just the week? One week? It was not wholly my doing. Different tribal factions pressed for it, more worried by me than the tree, wanting this whole business with the biotects settled. Who can predict how the Princes are reacting – what they will now do to be free of me; at what point they will count their losses and revert to the conditions of ten years ago? I may very well lose everything: my rank, my orbiting comsat with all its weapons, but worse, do you see? I am shamed. I have left the tribes with their problem still, which . . ."

"Which was never a major problem," Tom said. "Not really. Not until you saw room for personal advantage, the pursuit of some private vendetta, convinced the Princes and persecuted the biotects at Tell. That made the tree react, which then justified your precipitate action."

Bolo May nodded once. "What does this tell you?"

Tom blinked in the glare of the afternoon sunlight, intently watching that register of the Ab'O's banded face which held the eyes. "You will do anything rather than face that shame."

"Hah!" The Kurdaitcha's laugh echoed around the stones. He smiled, the first smile of three in the exchange. "Sajanna did choose an innocent to save her! Rather than lose my power, Captain Tyson! My power, do you see? The control and privilege which only crisis brings, which no Prince can ever truly have, a crisis condition I need to see endure. This tree and I share an understanding,

but it has forgotten something. If you do not succeed now with your original mission on my behalf, providing me with the means by which I can unlock this abomination's mysteries, then even as Sajanna dies, before I forfeit my powers, I destroy you, the Captains and the tree. So at least part of my mission will have been accomplished: the biotects eliminated. All the tribes need to do then is live with the insult of seven National names in the Book – a certain but small insult considering."

Tom understood May's preferred scheme now. "You would take over the tree," he said. "You would have it continue to make Captains, aggravate this problem for the tribes! At least until a more lasting power-base exists for you."

But May was looking at the desert once more, and Tom soon did so as well, watching the ruins of Summer House and Little Brother out on the sand-sea, shimmering in the heat. In the silence, he lifted his gaze to the mass of South Tower looming above them. He heard the gravel spills and the ticking of hot stones and the sudden eddies of wind which often sang about the structures.

"The tree knew you would do this," Tom said at last. "It knew ten years ago when it first named Afervarro and gave him Gold, when it still had Satra Amanty and Chen Colla and the others to work with, to make plans with. It even arranged for me to have a ship with shielded systems. Yes," –he said when May looked back – "I discovered that yesterday. Probably arranged it ten years ago. It will have taken other precautions."

Bolo May allowed himself a second smile, more shrewd and knowing than the first. "I am closing down all its resources. I am building walls, driving in spikes of unreason, saturating it. You cannot imagine what stresses are present now. There are so few links open to it: one to Records and the Book and the Sculptury at Tell; one to your comlink, though that is intermittent now and monitored; one to some place at Immortality, very few."

"It will have taken other precautions," Tom said again, feeling little of the confidence he tried to show on his face.

"Then be careful, Captain Tyson. For the moment I believe that is so, my proud little leveller up there will burn your precious tree, your Captains, the life-houses, everything, all over in seconds."

"You have an answer," Tom reminded him. "Do not let them kill Sajanna. Work to spare her and let the status quo remain! Accept what your people have made – there has to be some purpose!"

A third smile, hard against the stones, sharp and deadly between the bandings on Bolo May's face.

"And still I lose my privileged position. No, Captain. There is no going back for me. And it would do no good. The tribes know Sajanna's mission. At midnight tonight, the appointed Clever Men begin to sing her. By midnight tomorrow she will be dead. Nothing can be done unless you solve the mystery of the tree before that time. Then and only then can I make a claim for continued special status. I only pray for all our sakes that you do not fail."

Bolo May rose and set off down the red beach to the sand-sea. From behind Summer House and Little Brother, as if by magic, appeared the low armoured hull of a ninety-foot charvolant, May's lean flagship, Ingrin, summoned by implant from its hiding place. May was several metres out on the sand when he turned and called back.

"And don't bother to seek out some message in Bymer's colour inlays, Captain Tyson. It is regrettable, but those inlays no longer exist."

Tom watched the figure dwindle in size till it reached Ingrin and blended, with it, black on black, and the sleek deadly vessel moved off into the north, its thirty black kites filling the sky.

Tom searched all the same, and found the seared remains of Bymer's totemic work – the fused wounded sephalay making an almost stylized melt-band around the bottom twelve tiers on the northern face. May had been thorough.

But Tom was not dismayed. He knew that Red Lucas would not have mentioned the inlays if they were so important, and knew therefore that Fosti's South Tower had some other part to play, a legacy from a time when the tree knew it would someday have this added ruthlessness of Bolo May to contend with. The wonder of it was that May had bothered to burn the precious facings – spite as much as thoroughness had to be his motive, for like Tom he would have assumed Lucas' remarks rendered them unimportant. And then assumed, for that reason, that they did have a part to play, and then assumed on and on until it became expedient to act, just in case.

On Rynosseros once more, down in his cabin, Tom began to suspect what the Tower's other key role could be. Yet again he accessed the Coloured Captains' program on comp, though now he smiled to see the final words displayed there before him.

Shield House – South Tower – Blue

For this time Tom saw that line as a password in itself, and keyed those same five words back into comp.

And obtained a new display:

Repeat – Transmit at 98236FJN – Repeat

Tom adjusted the settings for that frequency, not yet aware of what his ship's com systems could do. That password sent a coherent amplified pulse into South Tower's dim quasi-organic core, into the receiver wave that surrounded the structure and formed its life-aura – a wave newly-replenished by May's own laser-strikes at the colour inlays: power sucked off by drone accumulators hidden behind the decorated sephalay, snatched and stored in the living stone – though even without Amanty's modifications to Bymer's inlays, the signal may well have carried: South Tower had the strongest life-flow readings of them all. That signal triggered, in turn, amid spills of gravel, a similar pulse back from Lonely Hatter half a kilometre away, from an installation Sajanna had left there during her expedition eight years before, working with the very colour responses Bymer had unwittingly created, following on with a plan Amanty and Colla had devised.

The signal brought four words to Tom's screen:

Shield House – Tell – Blue

"Tell!" Tom cried. "Tell!" And when he keyed in that line as a password, he was given maps, building plans and detailed schematics.

He saw too what his mission was in that flood of data, and he studied it, learning every detail, checking them over and over until night had settled along the quiet Fosti shore. He became aware that the Kurdaitcha watchers would have monitored the increased broadcast activity around the Towers, and no doubt he wondered what technology was now turned their way, what extra allocations May might have received from nervous Princes because of it.

At 1945, Tom called a meeting with Sajanna, Scarbo and Rimmon in the starlit darkness at the foot of South Tower, having them stand as close to the cooling sephalay blocks and ruined still-warm inlays as they could so the Tower's power field masked them. Kylas and Tremba remained on Rynosseros, searching the horizons with their deck-scans, now and then being startled by sudden cracklings of interference, by odd plays of light spilling across their screens, by biolumine ghost-light flickering high in the crowns of the otherwise dark quiet shapes.

"I know the tree's mission," Tom said, and when Sajanna went to stop him, he shook his head sharply, glancing up beyond the looming mass above them, beyond the occasional twinkle of bioluminescence in the diligent chamber, up to where May's comsat listened – in spite of what May had said about dampening.

The old woman understood. This was for May. She did not speak, but she moved in closer to the stones and to Tom.

"Sajanna, I need to know for certain. Your implants are consciousness-aligned

not autonomous?"

"I need to be conscious," she affirmed.

"Good. We will drug you so that when they start singing you tonight you will not suffer. Also May will have no input. There is a Living Tower project at Tell. Shield House." He spoke as if Sajanna had not known of it, keeping his voice low and showing just the right amount of excitement. "The tree has been protecting it. A true viable Tower right there where the biotects have worked all these years, making their belltrees and mankins. It may even house the Book and

Records, who can say? We will go there, verify this using the information I now have. We'll get the rest of the answer then." "May will be there first," Sajanna said. "He could well destroy it." "Not till he finds out what part the Captains play in the scheme. He know that too, otherwise he has only half of it. Ultimately, he cannot change anything or justify what he does unless he knows how the pieces he – cannot know what transgressions he might commit. It will be a hard on Ben," he said to Scarbo. "We set out in thirty minutes –once Sajanna drugged and stowed safely in the ship's lazaret. I will be at comp tonight and tomorrow; you and Rim will have the deck. Tremba and Kylas can alternate on sending a corn transmission out to all the Captains and tribes to meet us at Tell, a manual message-repeat, you understand, so no remote misdirections can interfere. I'll tell them the exact wording when we're underway."

Forty minutes later, Rynosseros began her run for the coast, a desperate rush back to Tell and the life-houses there. At midnight, when the Clever Men began singing out Sajanna's life in the old way, she did not know of it except in the deepest tidal bottoms of her soul, in the darkest most seem places that a person is.

All that night the run proceeded. Tom worked and slept, worked and slept, while Scarbo and Rim swapped helm watches and Tremba and alternated at com, supervising the message-repeats:

From Blue Tyson: All tribes – protect Tell –
protect the tree – Shield House – Shield House –
From Blue Tyson: All tribes – protect Tell –

Tom could not be sure what was happening, whether that lonely call was heard or a futile thing – what the tribes thought hearing it, and what they would do – but he kept the crew at it, gambling that Bolo May would not strike at Rynosseros, not yet, not while a tribal summons was going out, without knowing the part the Captains played.

At sunrise, they were at the 874 Lateral at last. Scarbo sent up the sins snares to replenish the power cells, and filled the sky around them with it display of kites that was wondrous to see: huge red Sodes and Stars, Demis and racing-footmen, turning Rynosseros into a 'god-ship'.

At noon, Tremba received transmissions from a National captain who had been near Tell.

"The place is burning!" the voice said, piped through com. "Two out buildings were hit from space. A Kurdaitcha fleet has cordoned off the area."

"The outbuildings!" Tom cried into the com mesh. "What about the Sculptury itself? The core and Immortality? The Records section?" "Intact," the reply came. "But there's an avengi search going on. That's all I know."

Rynosseros ran on, averaging 110 k's, past Ankra and Guranjabi, along the Line Road to Tank Aran and Tank Feti, out onto the Great Arunta And towards the coast.

"Forget Tell," Tom told Scarbo at last, when the time came to make choices, in case that added deception had mattered. "Head for the tree."

"What about Sajanna?" Scarbo cried above the roar of wheels on sand. "As safe as she can be," Tom said, so that he still wasn't sure just what he knew. "Bolo May has Tell. He'll go for the tree."

And as they reached the lonely desert Road that is my home, the weary crew saw the low crown of hills at the horizon, and above them clustered I of colour that meant the sailing canopies, parafoils and death-lamps of gathered ships. Ten minutes later, Rynosseros reached the spot, and Tom and his crew found a Kurdaitcha fleet, twenty vessels drawn up in a battle perimeter, one of them May's Ingrin. There was another smaller circle inside that larger three ships grouped about me, facing outwards: Afervarro's Songwing, Massen's Evelyn and Lucas' Serventy – as many of the Captains who had able to reach me in time. Drawn by sun-snares now, Rynosseros rolled through the Kurdaitcha and on without incident, still privileged, and joined the smaller group near where I stood.

It was a silent confrontation for the most part, no-one speaking or movint, the

quiet disturbed only by the message sounding from Rynosseros through its hailer, the words modified now, precisely as comp had given to Tom at Fosti, and more alarming in its steady calm refrain.

All tribes – Shield House – Shield House –
All tribes – Shield House – Shield House –

As Tome cut the message and the final words echoed off across the desert, Bolo May climbed down from his ship and walked towards me.

When Tom saw the Kurdaitcha, he left Rynosseros and met him halfway, though none of my other Captains did; they stayed on their ships and waited.

There is no Living Tower at Tell," May said. "No sephalay at all."

"No," Tom admitted.

"And Sajanna?"

"Drugged. Safe. On Rynosseros."

"No," the Ab'O said. "I know that too now. Her implants may yield no sensory information, but we do have status and proximity data. We know she is not your ship or even near here. Where is she?"

"At Fosti."

"So," May said, having suspected it already. "You used the Tower field as I did, as I expected you would. But you thought to trick me further."

"I knew you'd be listening."

May ignored that remark. "We noticed the life-fields become stronger he said."

"You caused that, I think; made the Towers draw on power reserves. We thought them moribund. And Sajanna, she is alive?"

"She has until midnight," Tom said, and I could see that May's disclosures about the Towers had surprised him.

"What is the tree's purpose?" May pressed.

Tom did not reply.

"Shield House was a code word," the Ab'O persisted. "A signal."

"Yes," Tom agreed, striving to soften the anger in the man. "But I don't know for what. I really don't."

"I don't believe you. It was powered by the Fosti Towers. They gave up their poor excuse for lives to enhance the Shield House cipher."

"What!" Tom cried, and for the first time Bolo May knew that Tom understood less of what was happening than the Kurdaitcha had believed. The Ab'O's eyes unfocused momentarily between the dark bands on his face. I saw that too using my sensors.

Then he turned and strode off to his ship, more deadly in his bafflement I knew, than in his earlier resolve.

Tom watched him go, no doubt wondering about Sajanna, about what would happen now, about what Shield House was and the precise part he himself had played in the work of the Captains.

risked his only proven life, who, without ever really deciding to, had been willing to give his life for me.

And there had been enough time, do you see it now, you cold hearts there? Enough time for Tom to cross the sand to Summer House carrying my ancient frail Sajanna in his arms, following comp directions he had no way of knowing would still be valid. Time enough to open the hidden door in the sephalay and locate the narrow grafting chamber, to place Sajanna within it just as the schematics had described – a place readied by Tom's saying of 'Shield House' into the living stones of South Tower. Time to place the bonding casque over her head and face, to make the connections and activate the relays. Just enough time to return to Rynosseros and begin that long run back towards Tell, following instructions, carrying out the message that the Towers then made their final song together, building Shield House among them even as they drew Sajanna's personality forth.

Now that Tom has departed with the others, I take time to reflect on the quiet desert once more, on the hot empty Road beside which I stand. There is so little in this desolation – only the hills and the Road and dead Ingrin two hundred metres out, a smouldering black flower, its petals closing in the dying light of day.

Bymer and James sigh through me as ever, briefly, a fond faded double-ghost in the false silence: one who gave me the Colours, who gave me Fosti itself, the other the secrets and mysteries and signs to use them.

I feel Sajanna very real inside too, safe now, murmuring in her sanctuary, sharing with the others, with Amanty and Colla and Taber and the rest, and deeper down, strange house guests, with Lonely Hatter and South Tower and as many of the others as I could save – all bonded irrevocably to my soul for whatever may come of it.

Blue is unity, after all, my cold cold listeners, so Bymer tells me; and soon, soon now, you will be able to come to me as well should you wish it.

But now I cannot listen to the others. Bymer's final Colour is too strong, too sweet, and I must savour what it has come to mean after all this time.

Comforted by the voices within, by the discourse of life deep down, sharing, planning life, affirming it over and over for what it is and can yet be, I signal Records to confirm the last name in the Great Passage Book. I tell them that Blue is the way of it, that Blue is all there is, and that for me everything, everything, will be that Colour from now.