

Eric Brown has published seven books so far, the most recent being his novel PENUMBRA from Millennium. The eagerly-awaited first volume of his 'Virex' trilogy, NEW YORK NIGHTS, will be published by Gollancz in May 2000.

DESTINY ON TARTARUS, while complete in itself, is the first story in his 'Fall of Tartarus' series. The other stories are: THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE (SPECTRUM SF, forthcoming), THE PEOPLE OF THE NOVA, THE ESCHATARIUM AT LYSSIA, A PRAYER FOR THE DEAD, VULPHEOUS and HUNTING THE SLARQUE (INTERZONE 150, 122, 96, 129 & 141) plus DARK CALVARY (SF AGE, January 1999).

DESTINY ON TARTARUS

ERIC BROWN

I'd heard many a tale about Tartarus Major: how certain continents were technological backwaters five hundred years behind the times; how the Church governed half the planet with a fist of iron, and yet how, in the other half, a thousand bizarre and heretic cults prospered too. I'd heard how a lone traveller was hardly safe upon the planet's surface, prey to wild animals and cut-throats alike. Most of all I'd heard that, in a hundred years, Tartarus would be annihilated when its sun exploded in the magnificent stellar suicide of a nova.

It was hardly the planet on which to spend a year of one's youth - and many friends had tried to warn me off the trip. But I was at that age when high adventure would provide an exciting contrast to the easy life I had lived so far. Besides, I had a valid reason for visiting Tartarus, a mission no degree of risk could forestall.

I made the journey from Earth aboard a hyperlight sailship like any other that plied the lanes between the Thousand Worlds. The spaceport at Baudelaire resembled the one I had left at Athens four days earlier: a forest of masts in which the sails of the ships were florid blooms in a hundred pastel shades, contrasting with the stark geometry of the monitoring towers and stabilising gantries. The port was the planet's only concession to the modern day, though. Beyond, a hurly-burly anarchy reigned, which to my pampered sensibilities seemed positively medieval. In my naivety I had expected a rustic atmosphere, sedate and unhurried.

The truth, when I stepped from the port and into the streets of the capital city, was a rude awakening. Without mechanised transport, the by-ways were thronged with hurrying pedestrians and carts drawn by the local bovine-equivalent; without baffles to dampen the noise, the city was a cacophony of clashing sounds: the constant din of shouted conversation, the cries of vendors, the lowing moans of the draft-animals. The streets were without the directional lasers in various colours to guide one's way, without sliding walkways, and even without airborne deodorants to combat the more noisome odours, in this case the miasma of unwashed bodies and animal excreta. My horror must have been evident as I stood transfixed before the gates of the

spaceport.

A stranger at my side, a tall man in Terran dress - seemingly he too had just arrived on Tartarus - caught my eye and smiled.

"My fifth time on this hell-hole," he said, "and still my first reaction to the place is shock." He mopped the sweat from his brow and turned to a street-vendor selling cooled juices from a cart. He signalled for one, then glanced at me. "Care to join me? I can recommend them - an antidote to this heat."

I decided that a cool refreshment would go down very well before I sought my hotel. The vendor set about blending the drinks in a shaker.

"First time on Tartarus?" the stranger asked.

"My very first," I said.

"You'll get used to it - you might even come to love the place. I'd advise you to get out of the city. The beauty of Tartarus is in the deserted wilds. The planet at sunset is something magical." He stared across the street, at the great swollen orb of the orange sun setting behind a skyline of three-storey wooden buildings.

The vendor passed us two tall mugs. "Three lek, three lek," he said, pointing to each of us.

"Allow me," the stranger said. With his free hand he patted the pockets of his coat, frowning. "My credit chip must be in my bag," he said, indicating the case at his feet. "I wonder if you could take...?"

"Of course," I said, accepting his mug while he bent and opened his case. From within he withdrew his credit chip and proffered it to the vendor.

The vendor was arguing. "No credit chip! Only coin!" He pointed to the money pouch on his belt. "Give coins!"

"But I have no coins, or for that matter notes, until I find a bank." The stranger looked embarrassed.

The vendor waved away the stranger's credit chip and transferred his attention to me. "You - coins. Six lek."

"Allow me to pay for these," I said. I looked around for somewhere to deposit the mugs while I found my money pouch.

"That's very kind of you," he said.

He saw the difficulty I was having and, before I could pass him the mugs, reached towards my pocket. "Do you mind? Please, allow me," he said. "This one?"

I nodded, turning so that he could take the pouch from my coat pocket. He opened the drawstrings and withdrew six lek, paid the vendor and then returned the pouch to my pocket.

The transaction accomplished, the vendor pushed his cart away.

I took a long draft of the delicious juice, like no concoction I had ever tasted. "Do you know the planet well?" I asked.

"I've spent a couple of years on Tartarus," he said. "Let's say that have a traveller's knowledge of the place. Buzatti, by the way."

"Sinclair," I said. "Sinclair Singer."

He drained his mug and dropped it into the gutter, and I did the same. "If you're dining tonight," Buzatti said, "perhaps I could return the compliment? I'm staying at the Rising Sun, along Bergamot Walk. How about dinner? Around nine?"

I told him I would be delighted, and took his proffered hand.

"Around nine it is," I said.

"Till then." He saluted, turned, and was soon lost to sight in the crowd flowing down the street.

I found a rickshaw - or rather a rickshaw driver found me - and I gave as my destination the Imperial Hotel. As I sat back in the padded seat and was ferried swiftly down the surging stream of packed humanity, I felt gladdened by my chance encounter. My major fear had been to be alone in the alien city; now I had an urbane dining companion, and one who was familiar with this strange world.

My optimism rose still further when the Imperial Hotel turned out to be an old, ivied building set back from the street in its own placid lawns. I paid the driver in the units I had used aboard the sailship, as he had no machine with which to take my chip. Then I dismounted, hauled my travelling bag up the wide steps, and entered the cool foyer.

I had had the foresight to book a room from Earth, via the shipping agency. I gave my name to the clerk. "Three nights, Mr Singer... That will be three hundred shellings, please."

I pulled my money bag from the pocket of my coat and withdrew a bundle of notes, which I proffered to the clerk. He frowned at the wad in my outstretched hand.

"Is there some problem?" I asked.

"Indeed there is," he said, taking the notes and laying them upon the counter. "Behold, they are worthless scraps of paper - not even competent forgeries!"

"But that's impossible!" I cried. "I exchanged my Terran notes for Tartarean currency at the bank in the port! They would never have robbed-"

"Then someone else has taken the liberty," he said.

I recalled that Buzatti had helped me with my money bag. Only he might have robbed me of my life savings! I very nearly collapsed, overcome with despair at what I might do now, and self-loathing that I had been such a fool.

Buzatti had given me the name of his hotel. "Do you know if there is a hotel on Bergamot Walk called the Rising Sun?" I asked.

The clerk frowned at me. "No hotel of that name exists," he replied. I felt rage towards Buzatti and his cohort the vendor for so cruelly robbing me.

I told the clerk that I would book a room for one night, and paid for it with the spare notes I had in my trouser pocket.

He completed various forms and handed me the key. "And I'd contact the police if I were you, sir."

In a daze I made my way to the elevator and rode to the third floor. Once in my room I dropped my bag, slammed the door and sat on the bed, disconsolate at the prospect of an early end to my quest.

The famous night lights of Tartarus were flickering in the southern sky, a writhing aurora that danced on the horizon like the flames of hell. I stared through the window, the beauty of the spectacle and the skyline of the city in silhouette serving to remind me of how little time I would now be spending here.

My mind in a limbo of uncertainty, I sorted through my bag and found the persona-cube. I carried it onto the balcony, placed it on the table, and sat with my feet lodged on the balcony rail. I was loath to activate the device; at this juncture my self-esteem was at a low ebb, without it being drained any further.

I pulled the cube towards me. On impulse my finger-tips found the press-panel. In truth, I was lonely and in need of company - even the dubious company provided by the persona contained within the cube.

A sylvan scene appeared in the heart of the crystal: a vista of trees a summer's day, the wind soughing through the foliage with a sound like the crashing of surf.

A figure strolled into view, emerging from between the rows of trees and approaching the front plane of the cube. The image magnified, so that the tall, broad-shouldered figure filled the scene. It had been a while since I had last sought his company. I felt a constriction in my throat at the sight of him, a strange anxiety that visited me whenever I was in his presence - compounded this time by what I had to tell him.

Was it a measure of my lack of self-confidence that I felt I had to ask his advice at the risk of earning his opprobrium?

"Father..."

Alerted to my presence, he smiled out at me. "Isn't it beautiful, Sinclair?" He gestured about him. "Big Sur, California. Where are you? How are you keeping?"

I swallowed. "On Tartarus," I replied. "I'm well."

"Tartarus Major?" he said.

I nodded. I had never been able to bring myself to tell him that Tartarus was where my flesh and blood father had met his end.

"Well?" he snapped, impatient.

"Yes," I said. I still made the mistake of not answering his question verbally: the verisimilitude of his likeness persuaded me that he could observe my every movement and gesture.

"What are you doing on Tartarus, Sinclair?" he asked.

I shrugged, then remembered myself and said, "I'm curious. I wanted to see the place. It's unique, after all..."

The persona of my father before me was just that, a memory-response programme loaded into the cube's computer banks ten years ago - a present from my father to my mother. I always considered it a measure of his cruelty - or his unthinking sentimentality - that he should have made a gift of such a thing shortly before he walked out on her.

She had given me the cube six years ago, on my tenth birthday, programmed to respond only to my voice. "Here - your father. It's all you'll ever see of him, Sinclair."

Not long after that, I found a letter from my father on my mother's bureau. I did not have the opportunity to read it before my mother entered her study and found me lurking suspiciously - but I did memorise his return address: that of a solicitor in Baudelaire. Over the next three nights, in the safety of my bedroom, I had written a long letter to my absent father - and added a postscript that upon my sixteenth birthday I would make the voyage to Tartarus and attempt to find him.

Then, when I was twelve, my mother told me that my father had died on Tartarus. It had been a measure of my confusion - a mixture of my own grief and an inability to assess the extent of hers - that I had refrained from asking her for details. In consequence I knew nothing of how he had died, where exactly on Tartarus he had perished,

or even what he had been doing on the planet in the first place.

Now my father stepped over a fallen log and sat down. He was a big man, ruggedly handsome, with blond hair greying at the temples, and blue eyes.

"Sinclair, how's your mother keeping?"

He always asked after mother, every time I activated the cube. Always he called her 'your mother,' and never her name, Susanna.

"Well, boy?" He seemed to stare straight out at me.

"Mother died a month ago," I whispered. I dared not look up into his eyes, for fear of seeing simulated grief there, a mirror image of the genuine emotion that filled me.

"Oh..." he said at last. "I'm sorry."

My mother had died peacefully at the villa I had shared with her. On her deathbed she had made me promise that I would cast away the persona-cube, forget about my father. And to please her I had given my promise, knowing full well that I would not do as she commanded.

"So," he said, buoyancy in his tone, as if to support me in the ocean of my mourning. "How goes it on Tartarus?"

Hesitantly, bit by bit, I recounted my mishap on the street outside the spaceport. Perhaps I sought his admonition as punishment for my stupidity.

He listened with increasing incredulity showing on his face. "He robbed you of ten thousand new credits - he took the notes before your very eyes?"

"But-" I began.

"How many times have I told you? Trust no-one, give nothing away. Look after yourself and let others look after themselves. The principal and basic tenets of existence, Sinclair, which you continually fail to comprehend."

"But I can't live like that - without trust, without charity..." I almost added, "...without love," a corollary of his base pragmatism - but restrained myself. It would have begun an argument we had had many times before.

"Manifestly," was his disgusted reply. "You live with trust, always feeling charitable to those who do not, and then you blubber when you find yourself cheated. Grow up, boy. You're supposed to be a man!"

I reached out quickly and, in anger, switched him off. The cube went opaque. I sat without moving in the flickering ruddy twilight, anger slowly abating within me. I tried to tell myself that the sentiments expressed by my father's persona were merely those of a lifeless puppet - but I knew that, had my father been alive today, he would have said the same things, endorsed the philosophy of self first, second, and last. The programme was, after all, a simulation of his personality.

I re-activated the cube. He was still in the forest, sitting on the log staring down at his clasped hands.

"Father..."

He looked up. "What is it, Sinclair?"

"Have you never made mistakes?"

"Of course I have, when I was young and callow. Like you."

"Tell me."

He shook his head. "You cannot learn from the mistakes of others,"

he said. "Only from your own."

I deactivated the cube.

My father - or rather this simulation of him - never spoke about his past. How many times had I heard him say, 'The past is a foreign country, to which it is wise never to return'? As a consequence I knew next to nothing of my father, of his background, his occupations, his hobbies. I knew only his opinions, his philosophies, which some might say constitute the man. But I was hungry to know what he had been, what had made him what he was.

Even my mother had told me nothing of his past. I had wanted to quiz her, but at the same time had no desire to stir the ghosts that might return to haunt her lonely later years.

I returned inside and calculated my assets: the units I had left over from the ship, the loose coins I had in various pockets, the stash of notes I had secreted in an inner pocket in case of emergencies. In all I possessed some ninety new credits - plus a return ticket to Earth. Enough, I estimated, to see me through perhaps ten days on Tartarus. I would remain here for that long, then, and see what little I might learn in that short time.

It was past midnight by the time I got to bed, and well into the early hours before I finally slept. I dreamed of the teeming streets of Baudelaire, down which my father must have passed, and I dreamed of my father himself, the man whom I knew better than anyone else - and yet did not really know at all.

On the morning of my first full day on Tartarus I woke early and descended to the foyer, where I consulted the map of Baudelaire hanging on one wall. The lawyer's office was a kilometre distant. To save precious credits I elected to walk, and ignored the rickshaws lined up in the driveway, their drivers importuning me with ringing bells and cries. Although the hour was early, the streets were full. My route took me into the commercial heart of the city, down wide avenues thronged with citizens and flanked by the characteristic three-storey buildings with red-brick facades and steep, timber-tiled roofs. As I walked I began to worry that, after all these years, the lawyer might have moved office - or, worse, retired or died. The address was my only link on the planet with my father, and without it I would be lost.

I turned down a comparatively quiet side-street and with relief came across a crooked, half-timber building, with a sign bearing the legend Greaves and Partners swinging above the low entrance. I entered and climbed three narrow flights of stairs which switchbacked from landing to landing, the air redolent of beeswax polish and sun-warmed timber.

I hesitated before a tiny door bearing the lawyer's name in gold leaf, found my identity card, knocked and entered.

I was in a small chamber that was without the slightest sign of plastics, either in panelling, furniture or fittings; instead, all was wood, dark timbers warped with age. Sunlight streamed in through a tiny window at the far end of the room, illuminating piles of papers, yellowed and brittle with age. Nowhere could I see a computer.

A mild voice enquired, "And how might I be of assistance?"

A grey-haired, sharp-featured old man was peering at me through a pair of spectacles - the first I had ever seen in real life. He sat behind a vast desk before the window, a pen poised above a pile of paper.

I introduced myself, proffering my identity card. "You worked on behalf of my father, a good number of years ago."

"Take a seat, young man. Sinclair Singer?" he said, peering at the card. "Your father was... don't tell me, it's coming back... Gregor-Gregor Singer." He nodded in evident satisfaction. "You're very much like your father."

I smiled, almost saying that I hoped my resemblance was only physical. "I came to Tartarus to find out more about him," I began.

Greaves constructed an obelisk of his long, thin fingers. "More than what?" he asked pedantically.

"More than what I know already, which is not much at all. I was six when my father left for Tartarus. My memories of him are vague."

Greaves nodded in a gesture I took to be one of genuine understanding. "One minute," he said, pushing himself from his desk. On a wheeled swivel-chair he rattled across the floorboards, came to a timber cabinet and hauled open a drawer. He walked his fingers down a wad of tattered folders, found the relevant one and plucked it out. A second later he was parking himself behind the desk.

He shuffled through the papers. "I would hand these documents over to you, Sinclair - but as they are in code I doubt you would find them of much use. But if you have any questions I might be able to answer, then I'll do my best."

I stared at the sheaf of yellow paper on the desk, the contents of which surely said more about my father than I had ever known. But where to begin? I was aware that I had broken into a prickling sweat.

At a loss, I shrugged. "Well... why did he leave Earth? What was he doing on Tartarus?"

Greaves peered at me over his spectacles. "You certainly do not know much about your father, do you?"

I made an embarrassed gesture, as if the blame for my ignorance lay with myself, and not my father.

Greaves stared down at the papers spread before him, then up at me. "Gregor Singer was a soldier," he said. "He came to Tartarus to fight."

I think I echoed his words in shock. A soldier? If there was one profession I abhorred above all others, it was that of a soldier. On Earth we lived in peaceful times; we settled disputes through diplomatic negotiations.

"I can see what you are thinking," Greaves said. "And, to answer your question - no, your father was not from Earth."

The old lawyer was one step ahead of me. I had not worked out that my father was not Terran.

"He was born on Marathon, and reared in the Spartan guild. He was ordained from birth to be a fighter. He went to Earth to complete his training, and there he met the woman who became your mother. I know this much because he told me."

I listened to his words in silence. From what I knew of my father through the persona-cube, his personal philosophy would suit a life-long soldier.

"What was he doing on Tartarus?" I asked, fearful of the answer.

Greaves peered at his papers. "He was a mercenary, hired to serve in the private army of a dictator who ruled the state of Zambria."

"And he died fighting for this dictator?"

"Not at all. Your father resigned his commission. That was when I last saw him, a little over six years ago. He... he was a changed man from the soldier I had first encountered years before. Not only had he resigned, but he told me that no longer would he sell his services."

"He would no longer serve as a soldier?" I said. "But why? What happened?"

Greaves leaned back in his chair and regarded me. "He did not tell me precisely, but I pieced together hints, read between the lines... I cannot be certain, but I received the impression that your father led an invasion of a neighbouring state, to kidnap the son of the monarch. Something went tragically wrong with the mission and the boy was shot dead - I do not know whether your father was himself responsible, or a man under his command, but at any rate he carried the burden of guilt. Consequently, he resigned."

Sunlight poured into the room through the cramped window. I sat in silence and tried to digest what Greaves had told me.

I came to my senses with the obvious question. "But you did write to my mother informing her of my father's death?" I asked.

Greaves frowned. "Not in so many words," he said at last. "I wrote to your mother to tell her that, as Gregor had not returned to reclaim certain possessions and monies left in my care, I therefore suspected that your father had passed on."

"But what proof did you have? Where did he go when he left here?"

"Let me try to explain," Greaves murmured. "It was my impression that your father was seeking a way of exorcising the guilt he felt, that he was in need of absolution - perhaps through some form of self-sacrifice or mortification. He told me that he was heading for Charybdis, on the river Laurent which feeds into the Sapphire sea, a thousand kilometres west of here. There he intended to sign on a racing ship in the annual Charybdis challenge."

I shook my head. "Which is?"

"An event famous on Tartarus, a galleon race down the treacherous Laurent river and into the Sapphire sea. Perhaps thirty boats take part every year, and maybe two or three survive. The majority are broken on the underwater corals, and their crews either cut to death, drowned, or devoured by ferocious river-dwelling creatures. Your father left Baudelaire to join a ship. Two years later he had not returned... I then wrote to your mother, stating as much as I've told you today."

I sat, dazed by the barrage of images the old man's words had conjured. From knowing so little about my father, I suddenly knew so much.

I heard myself saying, "I must go to Charybdis."

Greaves spread his hands. "There are vench-trains daily from Baudelaire to the Sapphire sea, leaving the central station at ten in the evening."

I recalled that he had said Charybdis was a thousand kilometres distant. "And how long does the journey take?"

"If all goes well, the journey can be made in three to four days."

"Four days..." I repeated. A week to make the round trip - and who knew how long I would need in Charybdis itself to learn my father's fate... I had just enough funds to last me a little over a week.

"How much is the train fare to Charybdis?" I asked.

"A return fare costs about a thousand shellings."

I frowned. A thousand shellings was roughly seventy new credits. That much would take a good chunk from what little funds I had. Then I recalled what Greaves had said earlier. "You mentioned certain monies my father left in your safe-keeping?"

He spread his hands in an apologetic gesture. "I had them transferred to your mother's account many years ago."

I nodded, and stood. "I think I will make the journey to Charybdis," I said.

"In that case I wish you bon voyage, Sinclair, and good luck."

That night, before I set off to the station, I activated my father's persona-cube. He was no longer in the forest. The cube showed the skyball court in the grounds of the house I recalled from my early years. He stood at the base line, hitting the puck against the far wall with his shield.

"Father."

He gave the puck a nonchalant swipe, then strolled towards the edge of the court. His brow was dotted with sweat. As ever, I noticed his size, the quiet power of his physique. But I saw him in a different light now that I knew of his past.

"How's Tartarus?" he asked, unbuckling his shield.

I ignored him. "I found out why you came here," I said. "I... I found out what you were."

He made a pretence of giving undue attention to a recalcitrant buckle on his shield. He looked up at last. "So?"

"So... why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you trust me enough to tell me who you were?"

"Sinclair... You were young. You'd never have understood. You belonged to a culture with different values."

Anger welled within me. "Why did you leave mother?"

He sighed. "Duty, Sinclair. I had to go. My company ordered me to Tartarus. I made the cube before I went, for your mother."

I had to laugh at this. "As if that compensated for your desertion! A programmed puppet in a glass box!" I stopped there, gathered my thoughts. "Did you love mother?" I asked at last.

He took a while to respond, then looked straight out at me. "Love? What's love, Sinclair? When you get to my age, you'll wonder if such a thing exists. Love is just biology's bluff to get what it wants-

"You don't know how... how mechanistic that sounds."

My father smiled. "And what do you know about love, then, Sinclair?"

I was speechless for a few seconds. Then: "I loved mother!"

He winked. "Touché, Sinclair. Like I said, Biology's-" He never finished. I reached out, deactivated the cube and in the same movement swept it from the table.

Later, I packed my bag and checked out of the hotel. The station was two kilometres away, and I decided to walk in a bid to work off my anger and frustration.

There is something about setting off from a big city on a long journey to the coast that fills the soul with joy and expectation. As I walked through the gas-lit streets - passing hostelries packed with drunken revellers, and a carnival of giant clockwork amusements in a cobbled square - I soon forgot the words of my father's persona

and concentrated instead on his deeds since arriving on Tartarus. It afforded me a measure of satisfaction that he had seen fit to turn his back on soldiering. I wondered if before he met his end he had also put behind him his reductionist philosophies.

The Central Station, despite its title, was situated to the north of the city, in a quiet district of narrow, cobbled streets and shuttered shops. I had memorised the route from the hotel map, and I judged that I was almost upon the station with a good hour to spare before the departure of the train.

The sun had set two hours ago, though not the light with it. It was a feature of the erratic primary that its radiation sent probing fingers of light around the globe and filled the night sky with flickering red and orange streamers. The heavens between the eaves of the buildings were like none I'd ever seen, as if the air itself was aflame. I had paused in wonder to appreciate the gaudy display when I heard, from a nearby side-street, the detonation of what might have been a blunderbuss. The report echoed in the narrow alley and, seconds later, I was amazed to hear a sudden cry directly overhead. I looked up in time to see a strange sight indeed.

Silhouetted against the tangerine light was a slight, winged figure - human in form - made miniature by its altitude. It seemed to be engaged in a struggle with an invisible assailant. I made out madly kicking legs and a circular blur of wings, fighting against whatever was inexorably drawing it to earth. Then, as the shrieking girl lost height - she was close enough now for me to make out that she was little more than a child with long, diaphanous wings - I saw that her right ankle was ensnared by a long rope, its diagonal vector crossing the rooftops and leading, presumably, to the poor girl's assailants.

I looked up and down the street, hoping that I was not alone in witnessing this crime - and so might have allies in attempting a rescue - but there was not a soul in sight.

As the seconds passed, the flying girl was drawn closer to the rooftops. Fearing that she would soon be lost to sight, I ran down the alley towards where I judged the rope would come to earth. When I came to a turn in the alley, I paused and peered cautiously around the corner. Perhaps ten yards down the darkened by-way stood two figures and a large chest, its lid standing upright ready to receive its captive. The men were hauling on a rope, a great rifle discarded at their feet. The girl had lost all will to fight. She was treading air, mewling in pathetic entreaty as her captors pulled her down. At last they grabbed her by the ankles and forced her into the trunk, crushing her wings in the process.

I was about to step forward with a shout - hoping that my sudden appearance might startle the pair into flight - when an iron grip fixed on my wrist. I feared I had been caught by another of their party, but the words hissed in my ear told me otherwise. "Don't be so impetuous! They would have no qualms about shooting you dead!"

"But we can't let them get away with it-" I began, not even turning to look at my counsellor. I tried to struggle from his hold.

"They won't get away with their crime, believe me. Now come, this way." So saying he tugged me back around the corner. I struggled no further, picked up my bag where I had dropped it and followed the tall, striding figure down the alley. Only when we emerged into the

cobbled main street, flushed with the roseate light from above, did I fully make out the man who had in all likelihood saved my life.

He towered over me, staring down impassively. I returned his gaze, in wonder and not a little revulsion. I think I might even have backed off a pace.

To begin with what is easy to describe: he wore a pair of thigh-high cavalier boots in jet-black leather, and a sleeveless jerkin of the same material. His head and arms were bare. His skin was also black - as jet black as his leathers - but not black in pigmentation. I peered more closely. His flesh was that of a charred corpse, burned and blistered, and - even more amazing - enmeshed in a grid of silver wires.

"We had better make a move if we wish to catch the vench-train," he said.

I stared at him. "How do you know?"

He smiled, the reticulation of wires shifting on either side of his mouth. "What else would you be doing this close to the station, with a travelling bag?"

"I'm leaving on the ten o'clock to Charybdis," I said.

He nodded. "The only train that leaves tonight," he said. "I too am heading for Charybdis."

He shouldered his bag and turned, and as he walked off I made out two vertical slits in the back of his jerkin. Through each slit could be seen a silver spar, indented with sockets.

I hurried to catch him up. "Who...?" I began, unsure. "What are you?"

He stared ahead, eating up the cobbles with his giant stride. "I belong to the Guild of Blackmen," he replied. "You may call me Blackman."

I introduced myself, my many questions silenced by his reserve and dominating presence.

As we turned the corner and approached the station - a long, low building on the far side of a square - he glanced down at me. "From Earth?"

"I arrived just yesterday."

"Alone?" He sounded surprised. "Alone on Tartarus?"

"Alone."

"You are either a fool, boy - or supremely confident. What brings you here?"

"Curiosity. Adventure. I've heard a lot about the planet. I want to see it for myself."

He strode along in quiet contemplation for a while, his leathers creaking. "Were you informed also of the dangers? Tartarus is hardly safe for a lone traveller."

"So people have told me," I said.

"I take it you go to Charybdis to watch the boat race?"

"It takes place soon?"

"In less than a week."

I considered the prospect of watching the race in which four years ago my father had met his end. "In that case I'll certainly be there," I said. "And you? Why do you go to Charybdis?"

He was a couple of seconds before replying, giving the impression that he did so with reluctance. "Work," he said at last, and would grant no more.

The covered concourse outside the station was full of waiting travellers. Families sat in circles around their possessions, bed-rolls, trunks, and bundles of anonymous oddments. Curled figures, covered from head to foot in blankets, slept despite the constant hubbub of conversation and the strident cries of food-vendors.

A melee of citizens jostled before the ticket counter. I did not relish the prospect of joining the fray. Blackman must have noticed my apprehension. "Wait here."

He strode off across the concourse. I was surprised to see that perhaps a dozen individuals scurried to intercept him. Some remained at a respectful distance, palms pressed together and raised to their foreheads; others diffidently reached out and touched him as he brushed past, then touched their fingers to their lips and scurried off. When he approached the counter, the crowd there parted to allow him through, individuals bowing and backing away. Within seconds he stood before the grille, a barred opening hardly reaching the height of his chest, and a minute later he returned with the tickets. "All the single berths were taken," he said. "I took the liberty of booking a stateroom. I hope you have no objection to sharing?"

"Not at all," I said, producing my credit chip. He waved it away, smiling. "One of the advantages of belonging to my guild is that one rarely pays for anything."

We passed through an arched entrance into the station. Baudelaire being the terminus, there were six platforms serving as many rail lines which branched out and crossed the continent in every direction. Only one platform was occupied by a train, its multiple carriages diminishing into the distance. Crowds promenaded up and down, preparatory to boarding the train for the long journey west.

I had expected to find steam-trains, but there was no chuntering of antique engines to be heard, and no great grey plumes filling the station. Nor were the rails as I had expected: they were arranged in a V formation, with one on the ground and two in the air, supported on a solid timber frame. If the rails were bizarre, then so were the carriages. Each coach, perhaps twenty metres long and five broad, was constructed of timber like a miniature galleon, with four central wheels where the keel would have been on an ocean-going vessel. A long beam, terminating in a wheel at each end, crossed the top of each carriage and ran upon the outer rails. I counted twenty such bulbous carriages before the perspective got the better of my eyesight.

"But what kind of engine can pull such a train?" I asked of my companion.

"No engine as such," he said. "Or rather engines of flesh and blood. Come."

We strode along the platform. The carriages closest to the entrance were the first-class staterooms and private berths; then came the second-class carriages - through barred openings I made out two-tier bunks on either side of a central passage. The six carriages at the very front of the train were third-class: each narrow compartment consisted of four-tier timber bunks, rude and unpadding. I was aware of a foul stench, and assumed that it issued from these lowly carriages - before Blackman touched my arm and pointed ahead.

"The vench," he said.

Perched upon the empty rails which emerged from the cover of

the station were perhaps two dozen huge birds - then I looked again and saw that they were not birds at all, but some scythe-beaked, sweep-winged creatures less avian than saurian. They stood perhaps three metres tall - and when one beast creakily unfolded its wings I judged their span to be of some ten metres - and they put me in mind of nothing so much as prehistoric pterodactyls. Each vench was chained by its right leg, and each chain was attached to the forward carriage of the train. The stench that attended these creatures came from the prodigious droppings piled beneath the makeshift perch.

"This team of vench will take us as far as the third station, some two hundred kilometres inland," Blackman informed me. "Then a fresh team will take over."

I stared at the creatures, which were stropping their bills on the tracks and giving vent to eerie, high-pitched caws of impatience.

"On Earth," I said, "We have fusion-powered trains. The journey would take but two or three hours."

Blackman smiled, tolerantly. "Tartarus is not Earth," he said. "The planet had been governed by the Church for nigh on a thousand years. Early on they proscribed all devices mechanical, deeming them unnecessary to the well-being of the people. The only machines on the planet are in the employ of the Church itself."

I considered mentioning the hypocrisy of this, but decided to hold my tongue. For all I knew, Blackman might have been a believer.

We walked back along the platform to our carriage. I was about to climb the steps which ascended to the stateroom when Blackman touched my arm. "Look who joins us."

I turned and followed his gaze. Crossing the platform towards the train were two men hauling a large chest between them. Something in the shape and demeanour of the taller of the two was familiar - and of course I recognised the chest from the alleyway.

I stared at Blackman. "You knew?"

"Simplicity itself. There is an illegal but growing trade in Messengers. Criminals from the next province along the track pay well for them as pets, and worse."

"Messengers?"

"The winged faerie creature you witnessed being captured by these two villains."

"Are they human?" I asked.

"Who? The villains or the Messengers?" Blackman laughed. "I suggest that the kidnapers are less than human - the Messengers more than. They are a race of beings genetically engineered many millennia ago. They serve as the carriers of messages, and have little truck with regular humans."

I wanted to ask Blackman if he belonged to a similar, engineered race - but at that moment my attention returned to the kidnapers. I had noted a familiarity in the taller figure, and now I realised it was not merely through seeing his silhouette in the alley one hour ago. As the two men passed us, staggering with their burden, I gave a strangled cry.

"Buzatti!" I murmured to myself, and then, "I know him. Or rather I've met him briefly."

As the two men bundled the trunk up the steps of the neighbouring

carriage, I told Blackman of my foolishness the day before.

"So as well as effecting the release of the hapless Messenger," he said, "we must also reimburse you to the tune of some ten thousand new credits."

Having stowed away their treasure, the two men emerged and stood on the platform. They shook hands, payment was exchanged, and the shorter villain took his leave. Buzatti returned to his carriage.

There was a bustle of activity along the platform as a uniformed official swung a lantern and yelled an incomprehensible cry. The passengers hurried to their respective carriages and doors slammed shut. I followed Blackman up the steps. Our chamber occupied half the carriage, with a lounge on one side and a room containing two beds on the other. Blackman indicated a flight of steps, and I followed him to a railed area on the roof of the carriage.

Ahead, the vench were relinquishing their perches on the rails and flapping with lazy grace into the air. The chains attached to their legs pulled taut, and a tremendous jolt passed through the carriages. Slowly at first, and then with increasing speed, the train left the station and trundled on raised tracks above the streets of Baudelaire. Silhouetted against the orange light of night, the vench presented a stirring sight. They flew in layered formations affected by the length of the chains that connected them to the train. The first arrow-head flight of eight was perhaps just thirty metres from, and level with, the forward carriage. Above them, and twenty metres in front, were yet eight more prehistoric creatures - and above and beyond them a further eight, their wings working in vast, slow-motion sweeps. From time to time one of their number called out a high, piercing cry.

We remained upon the upper deck for an hour, as the train left the outskirts of the city and plunged into the jungle. The vegetation was dark beneath the fiery sky, a wild, untamed region full of mystery.

Midnight arrived, and the events of the day caught up with me. I said good night to Blackman and made my way to the bed-chamber. I took a shower in a crude cubicle in the corner, and then retired. I was almost asleep when Blackman entered the room and sat on his bed. From a vial he took a pill and swallowed it dry, then lay down fully clothed. Within seconds he was asleep, his breathing even.

Despite the drumming of the wheels, I too soon fell asleep. I was awoken only once, by a red glow that emanated from across the room. I opened my eyes and blinked at what I saw. Blackman sat cross-legged on the floor next to his bed. Leads cascaded from the slits in the back of his jerkin, and were attached to a small black box he held on the palm of his right hand. Where before the wires that covered his body had been silver, now they glowed red like heating filaments and surrounded him with a roseate aura. He sat like this for a long time. At last I fell asleep again, and might have dreamed the episode.

Bright sunlight filled the chamber when I awoke the following morning. Blackman was not upon his bed, nor was there any sign of his black box or leads. I dressed and stepped into the empty lounge.

As I climbed the narrow flight of stairs leading to the top of the carriage, I was hit by the intense heat of the sun directly overhead. Evidently I had slept till midday. A railed walkway connected each carriage, and the fifth carriage along was covered by a large white

awning, in the shade of which travellers sat around a dozen tables. I noticed Blackman at a table by himself, a drink and a plate of food before him. At the sight of this I realised how hungry I was. I made my way along the swaying aisle, holding the rails with both hands. We were travelling at a fair speed along a section of track high above the surrounding tree-tops. For as far as the eye could see in every direction the jungle rolled away like a vast green ocean.

I entered the welcome shade of the dining carriage and joined my travelling companion. He was eating a plate of bread and sectioned fruit and drinking iced tea. "Sinclair, you're up at last. I trust you slept well?"

"Well, but too long. I feel heavy-headed."

Blackman laughed. "A meal will see you right. Waiter!" he called, and a red-jacketed steward hurried over with a menu. I indicated my friend's plate and ordered the same.

I sat back and scanned my fellow diners. They appeared well-dressed and dignified, with the privileged air of the upper classes. There were several couples taking lunch beneath the awning, and a group of men playing a board game at a corner table.

"I don't see any sign of Buzatti," I whispered, "or whatever his name might be."

"He breakfasted earlier. I exchanged pleasantries with him. His story is that he is a traveller in exotic merchandise, which I suppose is true enough. He is heading for San Sebastian, two days away, and is still using the nom de guerre of Buzatti."

My meal arrived, and I sampled the strange local fruits. As I did so I considered what I had seen in the early hours, and thought of questioning Blackman. I decided against it; although companionable enough, he seemed reluctant to discuss personal details, and I did not wish to say anything that might annoy him.

After the meal, he suggested a stroll to the front of the train, and despite the heat I agreed. Every fifth carriage was covered by an awning, and in these oases of shade I paused to regain my breath while Blackman, seeming to relish the heat, stood beyond the awning with his charred face tipped towards the sun.

We arrived at the very first carriage, which thankfully sported a canvas cover. Ahead, the three formations of vench were dark, leathery shapes against the blue sky. We were trundling along high above the jungle, our passage agitating flocks of birds which rose from their tree-top nests in whirlpools of multi-coloured plumage.

Blackman pointed across the jungle to our right. "Observe the towers protruding through the canopy - and there are more."

I made out tall, dark spires and minarets. "A city?" I asked.

"Once, a long time ago. Those are the remains of a temple complex built by the alien race native to Tartarus aeons past. The Slarque became extinct long before the first human exploration ship discovered the planet."

In silence we observed the passing scene for a further fifteen minutes. I marvelled at the miracle of finding myself here, on a strange world in a sector of galaxy so far from Earth. I considered the amazing fact that six years ago my father had passed this way, on a rendezvous with destiny.

Blackman laid a hand upon my arm, his touch as dry as embers.

"Don't look now, but our friend takes the air on the next shaded carriage. Excuse me while I further gain his confidence."

He stepped from the shade and strode along the jolting walkway, to where a white-suited Buzatti gazed out across the jungle. I made myself comfortable against the rail and turned my attention to the view ahead. Beyond the labouring vench, on the far horizon, I made out a hazy line of mountains, their snow-clad peaks appearing to float above the surrounding cloud like icebergs in an ocean. This range, I knew from studying the map at the hotel, overlooked the vast, inland Sapphire sea; Charybdis clung to the foothills on the far slope of these mountains, a sprawling town straddling the river Laurent.

Later, after Buzatti had departed, I joined my friend. He stood in the sunlight before the awning, while I sat on the rail in the shade.

"Did you learn any more?" I asked.

"I suspect that he told me nothing but lies. I'm meeting him for a drink on the dining carriage at sunset. I need to gain his trust before I make my move."

"To save the Messenger? What have you planned?"

"As yet... nothing. We have two days to act before Buzatti reaches his destination - time enough and more." He closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sun.

I left him to it, returned to the dining carriage and ordered iced tea. For the next hour or two I admired the view, observed my fellow passengers and read a news-sheet printed in Baudelaire - the novelty of actually reading news on paper spoilt by having to wrestle with the over-sized pages which flapped like sails in the breeze.

We took a late lunch together, consisting of black bread, ripe yellow cheese and a salad drenched in spiced oil, washed down with a strong red wine as thick as syrup. After two glasses of the stuff my head was spinning. I felt the urge to talk.

I gestured expansively at the passing jungle. "A little over a month ago I graduated from university, after two years studying 22nd Century Renaissance art. Just a week ago I set sail for Tartarus."

Blackman smiled indulgently, contemplating his glass. "What of your parents? What did they say when you announced your plans?"

"My mother is dead," I said.

"And your father?"

"He too." I sought to check my tongue with a long draft of wine. I wanted to explain my mission on Tartarus, but I found myself unable to do so without declaring my innermost emotions to someone who was, after all, no more than a stranger.

"Were you close?"

"To my mother, yes." I shrugged. "We were together until I was fourteen and left for university. To my father..." I hesitated. It seemed not quite right to admit to Blackman that I hated my father.

"My father left when I was six," I said, "and never came back. I remember very little of him - but what little I do recall, and what I've learned about him since... lead me to believe that we would never have seen eye to eye."

I changed the subject. "And you?" I asked. "Do you have a family?"

"The nature of my existence precludes attachment," he said, as if to discourage further enquiry.

I ventured, "You mentioned that you were going to Charybdis to

work?"

"That is correct," he said. "I will act as the eyes of a ship in the annual race."

"The eyes?"

"The underwater hazards of the river change from year to year. A ship needs a Blackman to plot a safe course."

I nodded to myself. I wanted to know how long the Guild of Blackmen had been serving as the eyes of the ships, and if my travelling companion might know anything about the fate of my father. I wondered, paradoxically, if the reason I did not question Blackman then was that I was secretly afraid to learn conclusively that my father was indeed dead.

I finished my wine. It was late afternoon; the sun hung above the jungle horizon, one hour from setting. As I did not want to be around when Buzatti returned for his rendezvous with Blackman, I excused myself, stumbled back to the stateroom and slept.

The sun had set by the time I awoke, and the orange glow of the night sky filled the chamber. I took the persona-cube from my travelling bag and activated it. An electric blue glow filled the room. The miniature representation of my father was in a gym, dealing swift jabs to a hovering punch-bag. I watched him, saying nothing, as he put all his strength into the punches and grunted with each thrust. Often, in my early years, I had watched him for hours in his world within the cube, almost content with this substitute father figure. When I was seven or eight, a part of me - that part which could not come to terms with his abandonment - began to confide in him, tell him my worries and problems, hopes and fears. In return, like a true father, he had given advice and encouragement, praise, and, naturally, criticism and reproof. Consequently, I had grown up with the fixation that the personality within the cube was a bona fide, independent intelligence, even though I knew in my heart that it was nothing more than a fake, a clever, programmed copy. The result was that even now I could not interface with my father's persona without feeling something for the ridiculous little figure locked within the cube; longing, resentment, a gut feeling that might have been love, and of course the burning pain of hatred.

I felt hatred now as I watched him pummel the punch-bag.

"Father."

He caught the swinging bag, winked at me. "Sinclair. Still on Tartarus?"

"Of course. Did you think I'd turn back, go home?"

"It's a tough planet. You're not exactly-"

I interrupted. "I found out what happened to you," I said.

He gave the bag one last, almost friendly punch and walked away from it, mopping the sweat from his face with a towel. "Yeah? So, what happened?"

"You died." I stared at him, wondering how he might react. Would the programme be concerned for the welfare of his real self, or did he consider his original as nothing more than a stranger?

He nodded. "In battle?" he asked at last.

"No..." I said, and told him about the Charybdis race. I added, "I also found out something else."

"Go on."

"Before the race, you renounced your life as a soldier. You wanted to make amends, gain absolution."

He just stared at me, as if suspicious. "Absolution?"

I told him what the old lawyer had told me, about the boy who was killed, my father's defection from the private army, his desire to take part in the Charybdis race.

I finished, "By your actions, you admitted that you'd been wrong all along, that your beliefs counted for nothing. You as good as admitted that your life had been a mistake-

His response enraged me. He laughed, as if unconcerned. "Hey, Sinclair - you've only got that lawyer's word on what happened. For that matter, I've only got your goddamned word!"

I stared at him as he returned to the punch-bag and resumed torturing it with swift, sharp jabs.

"Don't you feel anything?" I said, anger seething inside me. "Can't I hurt you?"

He chose to ignore me, concentrated on the hovering bag.

Then I whispered, "But I think I'd hurt you if I turned you off. I mean for good, wiped your cube clean."

He caught the bag. "You wouldn't dare switch me off," he said, grinning out at me, "because, Sinclair, I'm all you've got."

Quickly, unable to bear the look of triumph on his face for another second, I deactivated the cube. The glow died, leaving me alone in the burnt orange light of the Tartarean night. I lay in silence for a long, long time, considering what he had said.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs from the deck above. Blackman stepped into the room, stooping to avoid the low lintel.

I sat up. "How did it go?"

"He drank his fill and more, told me that it was an honour to drink with a Blackman. We'll see whether he still thinks the same tomorrow."

"We'll rescue the Messenger then?"

"Tomorrow evening at this time the Messenger will be free." He sat down on his bed and looked across at me. "Is something wrong?"

I gave a short laugh that contained no humour, just bitterness and self-pity. I activated the cube and threw it over to him. He caught it, turned it the right way up. He stared at the tiny, ridiculous figure boxing within the cube, then glanced across at me.

I surprised myself by saying, "I came to Tartarus to find out how my father died."

Then I told Blackman all about my father and his profession, his volte face and his decision to join the boat race.

Blackman was silent for a while, staring into the cube which he held in his hands between his knees. "If he took part in the race," he said, "then there will be records in the race museum of St Benedict's island, off Charybdis in the Sapphire sea. You should go there when we arrive."

He returned the cube to me.

"And in the meantime, if I were you I'd try not to hate your father so."

"That's easy for you to say!"

He shrugged. "You hate what your father was, very well. But you told me that he was brought up on Marathon, in a Spartan fighting college."

"So?" I said. "I don't see-"

"Your father was a product of his conditioning," he said, "and because of that he should be pitied."

I made no reply. Blackman lay on his bed, as unmoving in the orange twilight as the bas-relief of a knight on some sarcophagus.

That night I woke to find my travelling companion consumed in a familiar crimson glow. "Blackman," I whispered, sitting up in bed.

From his seated, cross-legged position, he said, "Do not be alarmed, Sinclair." He did not take his gaze off the black box he held before his face.

"What are you doing?"

It was a second before he replied. "I am charging myself for the task ahead. Now, sleep."

And as if I were under hypnosis, I lay down at his command and slept.

I awoke late again - something in the heat and the lulling motion of the train promoting sleep - and it was mid-afternoon by the time I took my place beneath the shade of the dining cart. I ordered a long, refreshing fruit juice and watched the ingenious means by which the train pulled into the station platform.

A hundred metres before the stop, a cart appeared on the tracks ahead, pedalled by six labourers and pulling a long trailer filled with grain for the vench. Sighting the cart, the creatures descended, alighted on the trailer and devoured the food. Robbed of motive power, the train rolled slowly to a halt before the station. Immediately the noisy business of boarding and alighting, and stocking the train with provisions, began.

The station served a small township situated in a clearing in the jungle, white-painted buildings set out along streets in a grid pattern. Down below, new passengers supervised the prolonged loading of their goods, trunks and boxes hauled aboard by toiling, bare-chested porters. A hundred vendors swarmed along the platform, selling goods through the barred windows of the carriages and shouting up to the passengers on the top deck. I ignored all offers of food, wooden carvings, and bangles.

One hour later the grain cart was shunted onto a tangential stretch of track. One by one the vench took to the air. The train, slowly at first and with much straining and creaking, rolled from the station. Ahead, the impressive range of the central mountains, still two days away, rose jagged against the clear blue sky.

Blackman appeared and joined me, slipping into the opposite seat. "Sinclair," he said. "Tonight we act."

"The Messenger?" I asked, my pulse racing.

He nodded. "At sunset, Buzatti and I will begin our grand binge."

"And then?"

He held out his hand, on the blackened palm of which was a small white pill. It rolled into his fingers, and I half expected to see it covered in soot. "The sedative I take nightly," he informed me. "Introduced into Buzatti's ale, it will induce a long, deep sleep."

"Then we enter his chamber and liberate the Messenger?" I said. "But what of Buzatti - he'll naturally suspect you when he finds her gone."

Blackman waved aside this trivial detail. "Leave that to me. What I

want you to do is simple: return here at midnight, and bring my travelling bag with you."

"What do you plan-?"

But my question was halted by the arrival, at the tables around us, of a dozen passengers come for their evening meal.

"I'll apprise you of my plans at midnight," Blackman said. "Now, how about dinner?"

We ordered boiled fish and salad, with a carafe of the wine we had enjoyed last night. The fish when it arrived was the length of my arm, included a ferocious-looking headpiece, and was sweet and succulent to the taste.

We ate and watched the sun drop towards the horizon. The sky turned red, then mellowed to orange. As the sun dipped finally over the jungle horizon, it flung back fiery bolts of illumination in a display that seemed contrived for our special benefit. Tropical birds gave vent to continuous song, left their nests and wheeled in silhouette against the sun's posthumous glory.

After the meal, Blackman excused himself and moved to an empty table. I was about to take my leave, so as to avoid Buzatti, when the man himself emerged from below. He was outfitted in an elegant, off-white suit and a pastel-pink cravat. He carried a swagger stick, and it was this, as he strolled into the dining area and took his place across from Blackman with a loud greeting, that emphasised his arrogance. He was revelling in the attention he was attracting as the guest of a Blackman, and so did not see me as I slipped away from the dining carriage and made for the stateroom.

I lay on my bed and thought about summoning the image of my father, wondering if this time I might initiate a dialogue that would be other than rancorous and mutually hostile, if I might detect in his simulated personality some scintilla of humanity. I told myself that I was drunk, and stared instead through the window at the passing jungle.

At a quarter to twelve I could wait no longer. Blackman's travelling bag stood at the end of his bed; although no larger than mine, it was three times as heavy. I had to use both hands to drag it from the bed-chamber and up the steps. The light in the sky had dimmed, though there was still sufficient illumination to make out the figures of Blackman and Buzatti seated at their table five coaches ahead. I proceeded carefully along the swaying walkway, sweating in the rank nighttime humidity. When I reached the dining carriage I saw that one other drinker was present, an old man staring morosely into his beer at a corner table. I seated myself at a table behind my friend and Buzatti, and prepared to wait for the other traveller to drink up and retire.

Buzatti was slumped against the enclosing rail of the carriage, silent and unmoving. If he was still conscious, he was giving a fine performance as a comatose drunkard. For the benefit of the third party, Blackman was speaking. I heard Buzatti reply, his words slurred past comprehension.

Just as I was beginning to think that the old man might remain seated all night, he drained his glass, nodded to Blackman and myself, and moved off down the walkway. I joined Blackman.

"I'd like to introduce you to someone, Buzatti," my friend said.

"Meet Sinclair Singer - though you might have met him before."

Buzatti tried to focus on me. His cravat was askew and he was drooping down his chin. At last his eyes registered something. He sat back with shock, the combination of ale and sedative giving the movement an aspect of pantomime alarm. "You..."

"So you recognise my friend," Blackman said. "Perhaps you recall the circumstances in which you first made his acquaintance?"

A flicker of fear showed in the con-man's eyes.

"Sinclair, I think you'll find Mr Buzatti's credit chip in his left jacket pocket."

I dipped my hand into the pocket and sure enough came out with the chip. I coupled it with mine and transferred ten thousand new credits, gladly restoring my finances. Watching me, the drug inhibiting stronger protest, Buzatti let out a strangled splutter.

"Sinclair, search him for the key to his cabin."

I returned his credit chip, then located a wooden key in an inside pocket. The con-man tried to resist my search, but he was hardly able to move in his seat.

"Open my bag," Blackman said. "You'll find two metal spars inside."

I did as instructed. The spars were heavy silver bars more like ingots, a dozen jacks projecting from each one. I passed them to Blackman, still without knowing what he intended.

My friend reached behind him and snapped the first spar, then the second, into the socket arrangement I had seen implanted in his back the night before. Instantly, a shimmering jet black membrane sprang up from each shoulder, like a sheet of oil in the shape of delta-wings. He flexed the wings experimentally, lifting himself a matter of centimetres above the deck.

"Now go and free the Messenger," Blackman instructed. "Take her to our quarters and see that she is rested."

He seized Buzatti under his arms, hefting the slumped con-man until satisfied that his grip was secure. Buzatti put up a feeble struggle and mouthed slurred protests.

"Where are you taking him?" I asked.

"Don't worry - a long way from here."

"But if he gets word to his accomplices that it was we who saved the Messenger-"

"Sinclair, stop your gibbering. He will get word to no-one. Trust me."

And so saying, he rose into the air, his midnight wings a blur behind him, Buzatti hanging from his grasp with a look of terror on his face. Blackman hovered away from the dining carriage, out over the darkened jungle. I rushed to the rail and leaned over. Against the orange light of the sky, my friend and the dependent con-man made a bizarre silhouette indeed. I watched them head out over the jungle and recede into the distance until they were no more than a tiny speck that might have been a bird.

I recalled that I had my own duties to perform. I picked up Blackman's bag, thankfully much lightened now, and quickly returned it to our cabin. Then I made my way to Buzatti's stateroom and fumbled in the semi-darkness of the stair-well until I located the keyhole. My heart pounding, I turned the key and pushed open the door. The lounge was illuminated by the orange light streaming in through the

low window; there was no sign of the Messenger in this room. I crossed to the bed-chamber and flung open the door. The room was in darkness. I opened the shutters on the window and turned, expecting to behold the diminutive Messenger revealed in the sudden wash of light. This room, too, was empty. I returned to the lounge in a quandary.

Then I saw the trunk.

"No!" I gasped. Surely he had not kept the girl incarcerated within the trunk all this time? I dropped to my knees before the trunk and knocked upon its polished timber lid. "Hello? Are you still..." Realising the foolishness of the question, I looked about for the key - as if Buzatti would keep it in view! I found no key, but I did see the long iron spar used to lodge open the window. I grabbed it and set to work prizing open the thick metal hasps. At last the final lock sprang open and, tentatively, I eased back the lid and peered inside, a little apprehensive as to the state of the Messenger. All I could make out was a grey mass of crumpled wings, and then, through this diaphanous membrane, the curled shape of the girl beneath.

Hardly knowing how to proceed, lest I inadvertently damage her wings still further, I eased my hands down the side of the trunk, coaxing out the dry, gossamer-light material. Soon they overflowed the trunk, limp and pathetic, and at last I revealed their owner. To my relief she was breathing, though unconscious, her tiny ribcage rising and falling. I slipped my arms beneath her neck and knees and lifted.

She came free of the chest as light as a bundle of clothes.

She gave a small, mewling cry, and began to struggle feebly. She hit out at me, beating my chest with tiny fists. I was forced to lower her to the floor, in case she damaged her wings. She stood weakly, dressed in leggings and a trim yellow jacket.

Tears streaked her pale, elfin face. "Leave me alone! What do you want!"

"I've come to save you - take you away from the man who kidnapped you in Baudelaire. I'm taking you to the cabin I share with a member of the Guild of Blackmen."

She was terribly weakened; even as I spoke, her knees gave way. I caught her again, lifted her into my arms.

"A Blackman?" she whispered up at me. "You travel with a Blackman?"

"Quiet now," I said.

Her eyes fluttered shut. Mindful of her trailing, crumpled wings, I carried her to the door and up the steps. I negotiated the walkway, thankful that the Messenger was as light as she was, and descended to the stateroom. Once inside I kicked open the door to the bed-chamber, crossed to my bed and laid the Messenger down on her stomach.

I fetched a cup of water from the lounge. Awkwardly, she lifted her head and I held the cup to her lips. She drank thirstily, paused to gasp for breath, then drained the cup. Her head collapsed onto the pillow and her eyes closed. I set about arranging her wings on either side of the bed, attempting gingerly to straighten out their kinks and folds. To my surprise they were not torn; the damage sustained was to the veins that threaded the membranes like the lead of a stained glass window, several sections bent and bruised. The wings rustled dryly at my touch like fine silk, and once or twice, when I was not as gentle as

I should have been, my clumsiness communicated pain and caused her to twitch in her sleep.

There was little else for me to do, then, but sit beside her and wait until she regained consciousness. In the light slanting through the window, she seemed like something from a fairytale, a slight and beautiful creature that did not belong in this coarse world. In the sky above the rooftops of Baudelaire, I had not truly appreciated her diminutive stature. She was little more than a metre tall, with a correspondingly tiny frame, short fair hair and a thin, pointed face. Her beauty had that strange alluring quality on the borderline of ugliness, a refinement of feature that was at first glance alien, and, only on closer inspection, human.

Twice during the next hour she stirred from sleep. The first time, disoriented, she thrashed her wings and tried to push herself onto all fours. I held her shoulders and eased her back to the bed. "Be calm," I soothed. "All is well. You're safe now. Try to sleep."

She calmed down, lay her head on the pillow and slept fitfully. Later she jerked awake again, as if frightened in a dream. Her eyes seemed to focus on me with difficulty. "Who are you?" she asked.

I knelt beside her and took her hand. "Don't be afraid. You're safe now. You're free."

She nodded, and then managed, "Thirsty."

She raised her head as I tipped the cup to her lips. She was asleep within seconds.

I was on the verge of sleep myself when I heard footsteps on the stairs. By the time I'd struggled into a sitting position, Blackman was ducking into the room. He held his wing-spars in his hand.

I rubbed my eyes. "Buzatti?" I asked.

"He won't be bothering us for quite some time," Blackman said. "I deposited him in the wilds, two days from the nearest township and sail-rail station." He leaned over the girl, his hands lodged on his knees. The contrast between the giant Blackman, whose dark figure seemed to fill the room, and the wraith-like Messenger on the bed, struck me as almost comic.

"How is she?"

"As well as can be expected," I said. "She was still in the trunk."

He inspected her wings. "There seems to be no lasting damage, no thanks to Buzatti. I'll let you get back to sleep. I'll be in the lounge if you need me."

He stepped from the room and closed the door behind him. I turned my attention to the girl on the bed, until I could stay awake no longer and joined her in sleep.

When I awoke the following morning - or rather at midday, as ever - it was some seconds before my brain reacquainted itself with the events of the night before. I turned over and beheld the Messenger with the shock of renewed appreciation.

She was watching me with an expression of timid gratitude.

I sat up. "Sleep well?"

She blew out her cheeks. "I suppose so - at least, better than the previous night. I ache in every bone of my body, and my wings..."

She moved herself onto all fours and tenderly tested her great dragonfly membranes: the left vane was upright and alert; the right one hung forlorn. She was frowning. "I should be thankful they weren't ripped

to shreds. He kept me in the box for hours." She looked suddenly afraid. "But where is my captor?"

"Kilometres away, and no danger to us any more," I reassured her.

"My name is Sinclair."

"I'm Loi, and thank you for saving my life." She winced in pain as, from all fours, she manoeuvred herself into a cross-legged sitting position, facing me with her wings arranged along the bed. Fully extended, her wing-span filled the length of the bed-chamber.

"I didn't do it alone," I admitted.

She paused in the process of massaging an arm, glanced up at me. "Was I dreaming last night, or did you say that you were in league with a Blackman?"

"You weren't dreaming. I am travelling with a Blackman. He took care of your abductor while I brought you here."

I stopped at the sight of her expression. She was staring at me with wide eyes. "You are honoured indeed. The Guild of Blackmen are even more insular than my own Guild. It is very rare that they mix."

I shrugged and told her how it was that we had come to meet in the back alley in Baudelaire. "I wanted to do something there and then to rescue you, but Blackman counselled patience. It is because of you that we met."

"Well, Sinclair," Loi pronounced with prim fastidiousness, "pleased that I am that you and Blackman became travelling companions, all in all I would rather have remained at liberty."

Our dialogue was interrupted by a knock on the door. Blackman stepped through, carrying a tray of food. "Breakfast," he announced.

His appearance had a sudden and startling effect on Loi. She fell forward on her face, arms outstretched as if in supplication.

"Blackman!" she intoned.

"Okay, little one - no need for such drama. Get up."

As if fearing his wrath, Loi resumed her cross-legged position.

He laid the tray on the bed before her. "Fruit, bread and cheese enough for you both. And a canteen of iced tea. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll take a stroll."

He ducked awkwardly from the room, the startled Messenger watching him all the way. As the door closed behind him, she turned to me. "But he's all in black," she whispered.

"I had noticed."

"But you have no idea what that means?"

"To be truthful, I know very little about him. He says nothing of his past, and very little of his plans for the future."

"So you know nothing of him individually, or his Guild in general?"

"I arrived on Tartarus from Earth four days ago," I said. "I confess that I find your planet full of mystery."

She was shaking her head. "Then where to begin?"

"First," I suggested, "how about breakfast?"

I fell to eating the bread and cheese, and Loi joined me. As she ate, she told me about the Guild of Blackmen.

"Unlike most of the Guilds, which are independent," she said, "the Guild of Blackmen work for the Church, even though for centuries the Church has proscribed the use of technology. They have one set of standards for themselves, and another for the rest of us."

I recalled something I had wondered earlier. "Are the Blackmen a

race, such as yourself, or are they... I can think of no other word... manufactured?"

"They are not a race - they date back a hundred years, no more. We Messengers are almost as old as the colonisation of the planet, thousands of years ago."

"So they are manufactured?"

She frowned. "Well, they are normal human beings to begin with, but then they are changed, augmented. They undergo neurological operations, numerous implants - they are wired to give them strength, and much more."

"Who are they? Who can become Blackmen?"

"Oh, all kinds of people. I don't know how they are selected, but I've heard that poets and scholars have been initiated, philosophers and great teachers, as well as criminals, murderers and madmen - but all this is conjecture. You see, they are programmed not to reveal their pasts. They find it impossible to talk of what they were in their previous lives. When they are initiated, what they were before ceases to have any relevance - only what they are now matters. A person without a past earns more respect. The Blackmen are often sent to arbitrate disputes in the outlying and inaccessible areas on Tartarus, broker peace deals, settle enmities and the like. Perhaps the Church in its wisdom thinks that people with no pasts will be seen as being without prejudice and preference. Another theory is that, if the Guild dragoons dangerous murderers and psychopaths, then they do not want them speaking of their past deeds and so frightening the populace."

"What kind of jobs do they do, other than enforce the law?"

"Many are surveyors. They can fly, and can reach altitudes where Messengers would burn up. Tartarus does not have satellites; it has Blackmen instead."

"Does this account for their appearance? They fly too close to the sun?"

Loi laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh, no! Of course not! They are made that way to protect them from the sun. Many surveyors must cross the vast deserts of the northern continent. They must withstand the withering heat of the day, and the intense cold of the night. Others are trouble-shooters, explorers, experts in a thousand fields. They are a hundred percent efficient at all times, and fail in their duties only when problematic factors weigh against them. Because of their excellence, therefore, their lifespans are short. It is as if they must pay for their supreme ability with the penance of burn-out."

I stared at her. "How short?" I whispered.

"Some last for three years, others five or six. But it is said that in that time they experience such heightened perception, are programmed with such knowledge beyond the understanding of us mere mortals, that the lack of longevity is no sacrifice at all."

I said, "I see why you revered Blackman just now."

The Messenger nodded, licking her fingers. "Him especially," she said.

I looked up. "Especially?"

She smiled and laid her head on her shoulder. "Because, as I said earlier, he is garbed in black. Others wear leathers of blue or green or red, denoting their specialisation. Black leathers denote a Blackman at the end of his lifespan, on a kind of pilgrimage to perform one last

task of his choice."

I laid down my teacup, a sensation like a ball of ice weighing heavy in my stomach. "My friend," I began. "...he is going to the race at Charybdis, to serve as the eyes of a ship."

The Messenger nodded. "A noble finale," she said. "In fact, none finer, to end one's life helping to save the lives of others."

"How... how will he die?" I managed at last.

"I cannot say. Only the Blackman himself knows that." Loi reached out and touched my hand. "This is the duty of the Blackmen. He knew his fate when he was initiated. He would have it no other way."

After the meal I left Loi to shower herself, and slipped from the stateroom. I found Blackman on the deck of a central carriage. He stood in the merciless light of the sun, his head tipped back and his eyes closed. There was an expression approaching rapture on his wire-graphed face. I remained in the shade of a nearby canopy.

I felt as though I were committing a profanation when I said, "Blackman."

"Sinclair." He did not move his head or open his eyes. "How is the Messenger?"

"She seems to be doing well," I said. I hesitated. "She told me about you... about the significance of your leathers."

He looked at me then, and smiled. "A carafe of red wine would go down very nicely," he said.

We returned along the walkway and sat at a table beside the rail. The waiter placed a carafe and two glasses between us.

"How can you?" I said. "How can you contemplate your death and still remain sane?"

Blackman carefully poured two measures of the thick red syrup. "Please believe me, the benefits of being a Blackman far outweigh the fact of my premature demise. For years I have had access to more knowledge than you would dream possible. I seem to have lived several times over. Now, my systems are failing. I can feel myself weakening. I must charge myself nightly, not every month as it once was. I am soon to die, but I have prepared for the eventuality. Don't be horrified. You are young - you cannot hope to understand what I have gone through."

I regarded him in silence as he stared off into the distance. We had left the jungle behind and were passing through cultivated fields, a bright patchwork of yellows and greens stretching as far as the eye could see beneath the glare of the sun. Ahead, the central mountains rose sheer and majestic from the rolling ramparts of the foothills.

"When?" I asked at last. "How will you... die?"

He nodded, as if he found my question perfectly acceptable. "When the race is over and I have discharged my obligations as the eyes of a ship, I will join others of my Guild in an aerial ceremony, a celebration for the winning Captain. During this flight I will expire, to make room for a new initiate to the Guild, which is how it should be."

"Couldn't you just..." I shrugged. "I don't know - retire? Have your systems stripped, become once more just... human?"

Blackman laughed at me, but gently. "Sinclair, I am my systems. Without them, there would be no human left. I'm sorry that this news had shocked you - but please be present when I fly with the

Guild at the ceremony. I think the beauty of it might assure you of my acceptance."

I wanted to tell him that I could not accept such assurances, that I would not stand by and calmly watch his expiration, but I realised - even as these thoughts were passing through my head - how selfish I was being. I was not mourning Blackman's loss of life, of course, but my loss of a friend.

I lifted my glass. "To the ceremony," I pronounced, a quaver in my voice.

That night we had dinner in the stateroom. After the meal, Loi knelt on the settee, radiant in the orange light of the setting sun. Her right wing, so desolate this morning, had gained animation during the day and was now as pert as its partner. She tested them, articulating the great diaphanous spans as best she could in the confines of the lounge. She turned them this way and that, swept them up and down, stirring the warm air.

"My wings are almost mended," Loi pronounced. "Tomorrow they shall be as good as new. At first light I will take my leave."

Coming as it did so soon after news of Blackman's more final exit, Loi's imminent departure saddened me. "Back to Baudelaire?" I asked.

She shook her head, frowning as she rotated her left wing. "To Charybdis. I am signed on as the Messenger for Shipmaster Sigmund Gastarian's boat, the Golden Swan."

"You'll take part in the race?" I asked.

"Yes and no. I will be flying above the Golden Swan. Should the ship run into trouble, it is my duty to report to race officials."

"Then I'll be cheering for you and Gastarian all the way."

"If I were you I'd place a wager on the Swan. Gastarian is a fine Shipmaster, and one of the favourites to take the race." She paused there, a sly look stealing over her features as her eyes slid from me to Blackman. "I don't suppose, Blackman, sir, that you would consider...?"

He smiled. "What is it, child?"

"Well, what a cheek I have. After all, you did save my life, and here I am asking favours."

"Out with it!"

"Very well! Could you possibly see your way to acting as the eyes for the Golden Swan?" And she hunched her shoulders and winced, as if expecting Blackman's negative reply to be as painful as a slap.

"Mmm," Blackman said, stretching out in his chair and lacing his fingers behind his head. "An interesting proposition. I don't see why I should favour the Swan-"

Loi pulled a face at me.

"But then again, I don't see why I shouldn't. I will make my decision when I've spoken to your master and inspected the boat."

"Magnifico!" She clapped her hands, then turned to me. "And you, Sinclair. Would you care to sign aboard as a member of the crew?"

"Me?" I spluttered. "But I know nothing about sailing!"

"You don't need to. The main work is done by the eyes and the Shipmaster. The crew are ballast, and hard to find at that."

"I'm not surprised! We lowly humans dislike being dashed to death

on rocks, ripped to shreds on coral, or even drowned."

"But the Swan's a fine ship, and Gastarian a fine master. There is no danger of an accident, especially if Blackman sights for us. And it would be so cosy, we three friends together."

"It will be cosier still on the bank of the river," I told her. "Where I intend to be."

Loi scowled. "I'll persuade you otherwise when we meet up in Charybdis, Sinclair. I'm staying with Gastarian and his crew at the Jasmine Hotel, on Mariners' Walk. He will treat you both like brothers when he learns you saved my life."

I refilled our glasses with wine. "Now," I said, "please tell me more about the race."

I was quite drunk by the time I staggered from the lounge and into bed. I was sound asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow, and did not awake until I became aware of a slight figure nestling beside me. Loi rested her head on my chest, and such was her size that her bare feet hardly reached my knees. Her wings covered us like a silken counterpane. Strangely content, I closed my eyes and slept.

In the morning she shook Blackman formally by the hand, then stood on tip-toe and kissed me quickly on the lips. "Until Charybdis," she whispered.

She joined her wings behind her so that they met like hands at prayer, then inserted them through the open window of the bed-chamber. She walked backwards, climbed up onto the sill, and looked behind her. Her wings became a blur of motion, lending her a buoyancy peculiar to witness.

Then, with a wave, she was gone.

Our last full day aboard the vench-train proceeded without incident.

We passed through the foothills and entered a great defile cut deep into the rock of the central mountain range. Such was the depth of the chasm that only a high, narrow strip of sunlit sky illuminated our way; the deep blue shadow was cold, the sheer granite flanks of the abyss on either side intimidating. Ahead, the vench were forced to fly in a tight formation, their caws of protest echoing eerily between the rock faces.

Blackman was quiet, whether through the influence of our surroundings, or in contemplation of what awaited him in Charybdis, I could not say. I ate alone at midday, while he stood to attention on a central, uncovered carriage, attempting to soak up what little sunlight fell this far.

He joined me for dinner, seating himself across the table from me with an abstracted nod. We ate bowls of broth - an appropriate dish considering this chill stretch of the journey. I was subdued, my thoughts consumed by the Messenger called Loi.

Overhead, the night sky was a dull orange gloaming; gaslights placed around the dining deck provided the illumination by which we ate.

Blackman mentioned that we were due to arrive at Charybdis at five the following afternoon, and we chatted desultorily about the trip so far. Towards the end of the meal, I said, "Can I ask you something?"

Alerted by my tone, he looked across at me warily. "Go on."

"Well..." I hesitated. "I was wondering if... if liaisons between Messengers and regular humans are accepted on Tartarus?"

He smiled to himself. "You are attracted to Loi?"

I blushed, which was answer enough.

"In general," Blackman said, "such unions are frowned on by other Messengers - but they are tolerated."

That night, as I lay in my bed in the abyssal darkness, I could hardly sleep for thinking of the tiny Messenger, and when I did finally fall asleep my dreams were full of her. I dreamed, also, of my father. "Love?" he spat at me. "You think yourself in love with an alien creature you hardly know? What folly!"

I awoke in a sweat around midday, some residue of his censure touching my emotions with guilt. Then I reminded myself that I was no longer in the thrall of my father - my arrival on Tartarus and subsequent events had given me a measure of independence and self-confidence I had never possessed before. I told myself that I should consider only my own feelings for the girl and dismiss as irrelevant the opprobrium of the long-dead tyrant.

Then something about the quality of the light which flooded the chamber made me sit up and peer through the window. At some point during the night we had left the dark chasm and emerged on the seaward side of the central mountains.

Hurriedly I threw my possessions into my travelling bag and barged up the stairs. I was not alone in my desire to catch an early glimpse of Charybdis: it seemed that every traveller was above decks. I pushed through the crowd and joined Blackman by the rail. The lofty peaks were far behind us, and we were free-wheeling down a steady gradient between verdant foothills. The vench, released from their labours, were passengers themselves now upon the first two carriages of the train.

Blackman touched my arm. "Look. The river St Genevieve. And keep in mind that this is but a minor tributary of the Laurent!" He pointed across the valley, to where a geometrically perfect arc of water tipped itself from the edge of an escarpment and tumbled fifty metres, all rainbow-spangled spume and thundering power. The river surged on between the pastures, boiling with visible rips and eddies where the treacherous corals tore it from beneath like razors through silk.

Soon, the torrent bisected the outskirts of the township: neat, white timber buildings, A-frames and Dutch-barn houses. For a kilometre the track paralleled the river, until the shining iron rails terminated at the station and the water surged and tumbled on its headlong race towards the river Laurent and eventual rendezvous with the Sapphire Sea. At last we had reached Charybdis.

After the medieval hustle and bustle of Baudelaire, Charybdis seemed a rural paradise. The avenues were wide and tree-lined, and the tall, timber buildings stood in their own grounds. Even the centre of town, where the station was situated, was spacious, and the pace of life unhurried.

We climbed from the train with our bags and strolled from the station, into a large cobbled courtyard surrounded by tall trees aflame with copper leaves.

"Sinclair!"

Loi jumped excitedly from a horse-drawn trap and ran across the cobbles. A giant of a man, whose smile seemed a mixture of tolerance towards the Messenger's impetuosity, and amicable welcome, climbed down more slowly and followed her.

Loi hugged me, and then made the introductions. "Gentlemen, Shipmaster Sigmund Gastarian of the Golden Swan - the finest master on Tartarus."

The big man, garbed in sailor's breeches, an armless vest and a tricorne, smiled modestly. He shook hands with Blackman and myself. "She exaggerates," he said in a quiet voice at odds with his appearance, "and from all I hear we have you to thank that she is still able to do so. Welcome to Charybdis. I've booked you into the Jasmine as my guests. When you've refreshed yourselves, we'll eat."

The Jasmine hotel was one of a dozen three-storey timber buildings that lined the Mariners' Walk, overlooking the wharves of the river. There was much activity along the Walk. "Sailors all," Gastarian explained, as the trap pulled up outside the hotel. "The race commences the day after tomorrow, and the teams are making last minute preparations."

The lavish meal that the Shipmaster threw in our honour lasted all evening and well into the early hours. Present were the crew of the Golden Swan - some twelve youths of my own age, and their escorts - a five-piece band playing shanties, and, later, a slew of masters and crews from competing ships. There was a strange air about the party that ensued, a mixture of apprehension at what the future might hold, and a devil-may-care determination to live for the minute. I recalled what Greaves had told me about the mortality statistics, and as I looked around at the drunken, happy faces I wondered how many of them might survive this year's race.

There were speeches and toasts, declarations and promises - I recall Gastarian telling a hushed crowd how we effected the rescue of the Messenger, and demanding from me a few words, but I cannot for the life of me remember what I said, except that it received a roar of approval and the reward of more drink. I recall seeing Loi once or twice, and smiling across at her. But it was as if we were both too shy to come together in company. At one point I saw Blackman and Gastarian deep in debate, and noted that though there were other Blackmen present, none wore black leathers.

I must have spoken to a hundred strangers that night, and downed a dozen measures of alcohol. I have no recollection of getting to my room - but I fancy that Loi must have had a hand in assisting me. When I awoke in the orange-hued early hours, the room spinning and my mouth as dry as sand, she was once again in my arms.

The following afternoon she took me to a cafe on the waterfront. More visitors had arrived in the town during the night, in preparation for the race; they promenaded up and down Mariners' Walk, inspecting the many colourful boats moored prow to stern at the river's edge. We were not alone in the cafe; two or three youths in sailors' attire caught my attention. They were wearing skullcaps with leads attached to persona-cubes before them on the table.

I whispered to Loi, "What are they doing?"

She frowned. "My guess is that they're programming the cubes - downloading their personalities into the devices. They will then give the cubes to loved ones and next of kin in case they don't survive the race."

I told Loi about my father. "Blackman said that I should visit the race museum on St Benedict's island. Do you know how I might get

there?"

"Well, I do," she said, her eyes downcast. "The only problem is that the island is the finishing point of the race - it stands three kilometres from the mouth of the Laurent river in the Sapphire sea itself."

"So? I don't see any problem."

"Sinclair - the only boats that visit the island at this time of year are those that complete the race. The straits between the mainland and the island are so treacherous..."

I sat back and digested the information.

At last I said, "Do you know if there's still a spare place aboard the Swan?"

"Gastarian was looking for crewmen this morning."

I hesitated. Then: "I think I'd better get myself a blank persona-cube, to leave some record of who I was."

Loi reached across the table and took my hand. "There's no need for that. You don't think that if the Swan went down I wouldn't save you, pluck you from the river just as you saved me?" She stood and pulled me from my seat. "Come, let's find Gastarian and tell him the good news."

We strolled along the river bank, admiring the line of ships, each one a-swarm with crew attending to the final preparations before tomorrow's early start.

"There it is," Loi announced, pointing. "The Golden Swan."

I might have guessed the vessel's identity, even without the help of the nameplate bolted to its timbers. The ship was the only golden one on the river; thirty metres long, two-decked and three masted, its figurehead a proud swan.

I saw Blackman and Gastarian standing together on the foredeck. The Shipmaster peered down at us and waved. "Climb aboard. Let me show you around."

We joined them on the higher deck. "Good news," Loi said. "Sinclair wishes to join the crew of the Golden Swan!"

Gastarian turned to Blackman. "Is prognostication another of your many talents?" He turned to me. "He told me last night that you would sign on before sunset."

I smiled at Blackman. "However did you know?" I asked.

"Let's say... intuition, shall we?"

"And what," Loi put in, "does your intuition say about the race?"

"I see the Golden Swan victorious," Blackman forecast. "Gastarian the recipient of the Grand Prize, Sinclair and Loi blithely happy..."

The Shipmaster cleared his throat. "And you, sir? I take it that you will join our crew?"

Blackman assented. "I would be honoured to serve as the eyes of the Swan."

"This calls for a celebration - but first let us show young Sinclair my ship."

The tour of inspection was perfunctory enough.

"Manoeuvrability is the key to our success," he said. "To dodge the corals we need shifting weights on the lower deck. My crew - yourself included, Sinclair - will provide this weight." He indicated a dozen timber constructions, like crucifixes, that projected at angles from the gunwales and overhung the water. "In unison, upon my command,

you will throw yourself from one to the other of these. I'm using more crew than any other ship, but I hope that our increased weight in that department will be offset by the fact that the Swan is lighter than most of the other vessels. You've seen enough? Let's join the others in the tavern." And thus was my crash-course in the mariner's art concluded.

We found the crew of the Golden Swan in a tavern done out like the cabin of a ship. Gastarian ordered drinks and we sat at a corner table. Blackman left after just one drink - the revelry did not accord with his pensive mood. I sat for the rest of the evening with the tiny Messenger on my lap, drunk less from the alcohol I consumed than from Loi's presence. We talked and talked, of everything and nothing, of ourselves, our pasts and futures, our hopes and fears...

Loi must have been reading my mind. "Come," she said, dragging me from my chair.

We sprinted down Mariners' Walk to the Jasmine hotel, ran hand in hand up the wide staircase. I stopped outside the bedroom and stared in shock at the door. "What..." I began.

The lock had been forced, the wood of the jamb splintered. The door stood ajar. I pushed it open and stepped into the room, Loi beside me. A few drawers hung open, and the mattress of my bed had been dislodged as if the intruders had expected to find valuables beneath it.

I checked my travelling bag.

"Did they take anything?" Loi asked.

"I don't think so. Fortunately I had my credit chip with me. Just a minute-"

"What's wrong?"

I emptied out my bag, but it was nowhere to be seen.

"My father's persona-cube," I whispered. I slumped amid my tumbled belongings. "But who could possibly have wanted my father's persona-cube?"

Loi stroked my cheek. "Some evil sailor," she said, "who'd wipe it clean and programme it with his own identity? Oh, Sinclair, I'm so sorry."

I hardly knew how to react appropriately. The cube had been so much a part of my life that I could not imagine being without it. And yet its loss seemed less important - and in some strange way symbolic - because of the feelings I had for the girl now kneeling before me.

We came together in a fierce embrace and stumbled towards the bed.

The hectic events of the following morning allowed me no time to brood over the loss of the cube, or to reflect upon the night spent with Loi.

At first light I was awoken by a knock upon the door. "Sinclair," Gastarian said. "It is the morning of the race."

The sun was just above the horizon and already Mariners' Walk was thronged with spectators gathered to watch the ships sail downriver to the starting point. We followed Gastarian and Blackman through the crowds towards the Golden Swan. All along the waterfront sailors were boarding their vessels, and race officials checked to ensure that no crews exceeded eighteen, the maximum allowed. We swarmed aboard the Swan and took our stations.

Gastarian stood tall and proud before the wheel on the upper deck, calling encouragement down to us. Loi sat cross-legged on the lower deck, smiling across at me from time to time. Blackman affixed his spars and rose aloft, his flickering wings lifting him high above the masts of the ship. While four of the crew set the sails, the rest of us buckled ourselves into the harnesses which were roped to wooden eyes in the centre of the deck. The length of my rope allowed me to reach the timber frames projecting from the gunwales. Once I was secure in my harness, I glanced up and down the river: the other ships were almost under way, their masters shouting their readiness to the officials on the shore. Other Blackmen, though none in sable leathers, patrolled above their boats, together with the Messengers. Sails and spinnakers bloomed as the ships, the Golden Swan among them, cast off and sailed down the river to starting point proper.

As soon as we had set off, a transformation overcame the quiet Gastarian. He shed his reserved persona and took control.

"Central, boys!" he called to us over his shoulder. We crouched amidships, grasping purpose-made hand-holds on the deck. Above us, silhouetted against the cerulean sky, Loi and Blackman flew side by side.

Soon all thirty ships were proceeding at a leisurely pace downriver, a colourful armada with airborne attendants. I noticed perhaps fifty Messengers, tiny, faerie creatures flying above each boat which could afford their services. Along every inch of the riverbank crowds waved and cheered; bunting and pennants lined the way. A ridiculous pride swelled within me, replacing for seconds at a time the bowel-wrenching fear at the thought of what I had embarked upon.

We approached the broad Laurent river, its half-kilometre width deceptively calm at this point. One by one we left the tributary behind, sailed onto the Laurent and passed beneath a high arching footbridge. From this bridge hung thirty thick ropes, and as each boat passed under the bridge a member of the crew assigned the task grasped the rope and made it fast to the ship. Our man made no mistake, and tied it securely to a beam of timber traversing the stern. We were tugged to a gentle halt along with the twenty-nine other ships. I looked along the starting line, at the ships waiting to be released, their eager crews, their hovering Messengers and Blackmen.

I glanced into the sky; Loi hovered low, her wings a blur of gossamer. Blackman flew fifty metres ahead of the Golden Swan, ready to scan the river and call back instructions to Gastarian.

I exchanged glances with the rest of the crew; on each face was an identical expression: the grim determination to succeed, belying the fear that each of us felt.

A profound silence settled over the phalanx of ships. My heart pounding, I looked up at Loi, who saw me and waved. The official starter counted down from twenty. At zero, the ropes were released from the bridge and the thirty ships surged forwards. It must have been a stirring sight - so many sailing ships abreast and hurtling downriver in search of an early advantage. I was aware only of our increasing speed, the sun hot on my back, and Gastarian's shouted instructions. "Okay, and here we go. Stay central, boys! Move only when I give the word. We've started well!"

After five minutes my hands were sore from gripping the holds, my

knees abraded by the wood of the deck. The muscles of my back ached already from holding so hunched a posture. I tried to relax; we had three or four hours of this to endure.

We had little to do for the next fifteen minutes. Gastarian adjusted our course with minimal turns of the wheel, and the crew in the rigging trimmed the sails from time to time, but we were not called upon to effect a swerve away from projecting coral. As the other crewmen relaxed and looked about them at how the other ships were faring, I did the same. I was surprised by how many vessels had fallen behind. I roughly estimated that we had outpaced twenty ships; another five or six were alongside us, and the three or four which had outstripped the Swan were no more than a boat's length in front.

"Hard to port!" The command was so sudden and unexpected that several of us delayed, before throwing ourselves frantically at the gunwale and swarming up the timber crucifixes. The ship yawed, spray soaked us in a cool shower. "Faster next time. The coral nearly bit us deep! Faster!" Gastarian called. "Now central, boys, and be ready for the next command."

I chanced a glance astern. Only a dark discoloration in the blue of the river, an elongated smudge, showed the position of the deadly coral.

As the minutes passed, so our speed increased as the river narrowed and the water surged ever faster. Our passage became turbulent, so that we had to grip the hand-holds to remain in position. We were flashing past cultivated farmland, with the occasional small figure of a farmer cheering us on. Perhaps twenty-five ships straggled in our wake. Two maintained positions alongside us, and another two were out in front.

"Remember this: relax and we're dead. This is the easy part. Another hour and you begin to earn your money! Steady, now. We're doing well." Gastarian manhandled the wheel, and in the rigging tiny figures adjusted the snapping sails.

My thoughts were interrupted by a cry from the sailor behind me. To port, the ship in fourth place surged towards us, the intentions of its master clear: three great beams projected from its foredeck, a crude and ugly method by which to scupper an opposition boat. Alerted by the cry, Gastarian turned. "Evasive action! Man your port frames!" As one we surged in response, and only as I flung myself upon the crucifix, legs wrapped around the timber, hands desperately gripping the cross-beam, did I realise the danger we were in. The bellicose boat was barely five metres from us, and bearing down remorselessly. The projecting beams raced towards us like battering rams, threatening to tear the very timbers upon which we twelve clung. A second after diving on our crucifixes, the manoeuvre had the desired effect. The Golden Swan yawed tremendously and we brave souls flew beneath the rams of the neighbouring ship. The Swan cut across its bows - our wide stern timbers ripping a great rent in the aggressor's flank. As we swept on triumphant, the other ship limped to shore, its Messenger and Blackman circling despondently. We cheered as we returned to our hand-holds.

Ever the vigilant shipmaster, Gastarian warned us against complacency. "Minds on the job!" he bellowed over his shoulder. "There's corals ahead! Ready, now... To starboard!" Like trained

monkeys we leapt as one to the frames, feeling the ship tip as the port side left the water, hopefully clearing the corals spotted by the signallin Blackman. The boat tipped, and I was doused with a cool slap of water. I gripped the cross-beam with all my strength, my ribs grating against the timbers. "And back! Well done. We're doing fine."

The ship in fourth position, however, was not so lucky. From upriver came the terrible, rending screech of torn timbers, and I glanced back to see a ship founder upon a projecting reef of rock. As we watched, horrified, the deck of the ship parted company with its hull and sheered off into the river where it sank in seconds. Those crewmen able to leap free did so, but the unfortunate hands buckled into the harnesses were not so lucky. I stared and stared at where they had gone down, willing them to surface, but to no avail. I was reminded of our own precarious safety, the danger should we go down: how nimble would our fingers be at unfastening our buckles then, with our lungs full of water and the dangers of carnivorous fish ever present? Then, miraculously, I saw two or three heads bob to the surface, and a Messenger and a Blackman swoop down and with difficulty drag the sodden bundles through the river, deposit them without ceremony on the shore, and return in a bid to save more lives.

We passed through a narrow stretch of water between two forested glades, a scene that might have been idyllic but for the speed of the river and the knowledge of what lay ahead. Behind me, a sailor muttered, "Ready yourselves, lads. Two minutes, that's all we've got. Then it's either nimble be or a watery grave. Hark Gastarian and be ready to leap like fleas!"

"The first two boats are still in sight," someone said, "which at this stage is welcome indeed. By God, if fate shines on us and keeps us dry, we can win this one!"

"Don't speak too soon. We're not even halfway there - more die between here and the sea than anywhere else."

Ahead, the two leading ships were weaving this way and that through a stretch of boiling rapids, their masts rocking to and fro like metronomes. At times they were almost on their sides as their deck-hands scurried from port to starboard and back again in a frantic effort to avoid the lethal corals.

I was struck by a sudden trembling panic - soon we would be in their position, fighting for our very lives! I was almost sick with apprehension. Glancing around at my team-mates, I saw my fear reflected in their faces, and I was torn between relief that I was not the only coward, and fright that these hardened sailors should so fear what awaited us.

"Be ready..." Gastarian growled at us. "This is it! We enter the rapids!"

"Nimble to it lads," said the sailor behind me.

"To starboard!" Gastarian yelled, and to starboard we leapt. I clung to the timbers, shaking in every limb. The ship tipped alarmingly and we were submerged. I gasped, drenched and breathless. It was fortunate that there was no coral on this side of the ship or we would have been ripped to death in seconds.

"To port!" came Gastarian's yell, muffled in my water-filled ears. I flung myself left, slipping on the wet timbers, and somehow, miraculously, found myself clutching the timber port frame as we

were doused again, for so long this time that I thought we had gone under for good. All was a chaotic maelstrom of silver bubbling water and filtered sunlight, a roaring of the churned river and a protracted creaking of straining timbers.

"And to starboard!"

"Starboard, lads," called the sailor behind me, for the benefit of those deafened by the dunking.

We charged across the deck, launched ourselves at the frames, and clung on for dear life as the ship tipped quickly like a spinning top, waltzing between the underwater hazards.

This set the pattern for what seemed like hours. Not once did we rest, not for more than fifteen seconds at any one time did we stay on our frames before we were ordered off again. I lost all track of time. I seemed to have been performing this manic dance for all my life; in minutes I had become experienced, my concentration honed. I no longer felt fear, but a kind of head-spinning, ecstatic excitement. No longer did I worry at what might become of me if we went under. I lived for the second, charged with an insane confidence in Blackman, in Gastarian, in my crewmates and myself. We worked as one, for each other and for the ship. I realised, after what seemed like an age, that each of us was shouting like a man possessed, echoing Gastarian's commands, a synchronised chant that bonded us into a well-drilled, efficient unit.

Each second, I realised in retrospect, brought ever more near-death experiences; every metre of water presented us with perils. I was hardly aware of individual incidents at the time - they were over so rapidly, and the next one upon us, that we had no time to dwell on what had been. Now I recall the highlights, and marvel that we ever survived.

At one point a crucifix with a sailor upon it struck an outcrop of coral and was instantly snapped. The crewman dropped over the gunwale, and then, thanks to his secure rope, was tossed back onto the deck, shaken and half-drowned but otherwise uninjured. From then on he doubled up on the timber frame of his neighbour. Repeatedly our projecting frames scraped the corals, shaving fragments from the living rocks that blasted us like shrapnel. Soon our arms and bodies were slick with our life-blood as well as water, and the deck would have been awash with blood but for the regular dousings that washed it clean. I recall, vividly, a fish flying towards us, its great mouth a thicket of barbed fangs, a lethal man-trap that would have severed a leg in seconds. One of our number fell upon it and clubbed it to death with his bare fists.

And, most remarkable of all, was the wreckage of the ship we overtook. We must have passed the stricken vessel in a matter of seconds, but so indelibly was the picture of carnage imprinted on my mind's eye that it seemed we dawdled by long enough to fill our eyes with the gruesome horror. I made out the remains of a dozen bodies impaled upon projecting spurs of coral as if for our inspection. I swear we were washed by water tinted crimson with the blood of the dead, its rusty iron taste filling my mouth and nose. Above the carnage, lodged precariously on the reef like some hopeless, makeshift memorial, was the deck of the forlorn ship with its upright masts and pathetically flapping sails.

Someone behind me cursed, and I fought not to be sick. Then

Gastarian yelled a command and we concentrated on the task at hand.

And then, incredibly, the sound of his voice did not come again, and the raging water no longer drenched us, and the Golden Swan kept an even keel. We knelt amidships like exhausted sprinters, our blood gathering and running down the cracks between the timbers. I managed to fill my lungs with air for the first time in what seemed like hours, and then I laughed in relief and joy, and this was taken up by the others. And what a sight we were! To a man we were blood-soaked and cut about, scrolls of skin hanging from our bodies, bruises beginning to bloom on arms and shoulders.

Only once more after that were we called to man our frames, something of an anticlimax after such hectic action. I realised then that in our fight to survive we had overlooked our position in the race.

"Are we ahead?" I cried.

Gastarian indicated forward. "Not quite. But look."

Perhaps three shiplengths ahead of us was the leading ship, a white-painted vessel with blood-red sails. A cry of triumph arose from my team-mates - and then I realised the reason for their joy. The leading ship was damaged. A hole gaped in its starboard flank and it was taking in water, listing badly though still maintaining speed.

"The open sea!" Gastarian called, and sure enough we were fast approaching the widening estuary that gave onto the ocean. Ahead, I made out the low landmass of St Benedict's island. I noticed for the first time the crowds on the headlands, cheering and waving flags in the bright sunlight.

The damaged ship hit the open sea ahead of us, and I judged that the island was only two kilometres away. It was now up to the crewmen in the rigging, as they trimmed the sails the best to catch the available wind.

We exhausted dozen could but sprawl across the deck and stare impotently. Bit by bit we seemed to be gaining on the limping ship, but the island, and the finishing line strung out across the facing bay, were drawing ever closer. Metre by metre we gained, and it came to me that all our good work would count for nothing, that we would come home in second place. With less than two hundred metres to the line of bunting that indicated the race's end, the Golden Swan surged alongside the opposing boat. I stared across at the hapless ship, its exhausted crewmen a mirror image of ourselves. Little by little we edged in front, and hit the line of bunting barely two metres ahead of the stricken vessel, and the cries that went up from the crew were deafening.

We unbuckled ourselves and embraced, crying tears of joy and triumph. It seemed that only now could I consider the danger we had passed through, and a kind of retroactive dread coursed through me. Shipmaster Gastarian came among us, returned to his quiet self now, and with tears in his eyes thanked each one of us in turn. Loi descended and embraced me, her kisses smothering my face. When she finally pulled away her tunic was imprinted with my blood.

The Golden Swan drew alongside the harbour wall, and we carried Gastarian ashore on our shoulders. I found my land-legs with difficulty. The quayside was crowded with islanders, a reception committee of local dignitaries and a clan of Blackmen beside them. The Mayor

approached Gastarian and escorted him across the cobbles, Blackman at his side. Gastarian was called upon to say a few words. I feared that soon I too would be forced to add my views. I whispered to Loi that I needed a few minutes to myself, then slipped from the crowd and up the hillside towards the township.

I asked directions to the Race Museum and found it on a high greensward overlooking the strait, a single-storey weatherboard building painted white. I climbed the steps and pushed open the door. There was no one else inside, and I was thankful for the privacy.

The single room was long and low, with a polished timber floor and a plate-glass window looking out to sea. The room had the hushed air and stillness of all museums, as if the events of the past which it exhibited were sacrosanct. On one side of the room were scale models of every ship that had won the race for the last fifty years. On the wall above each ship was a roll-call of their crews, and above them portraits of their victorious shipmasters. Below the lists of the triumphant crews were, in smaller print, the names of all the many sailors who had perished.

I walked slowly along the length of the room, counting off the years.

When I came to the model of the ship that had won the race six years ago, I read the names of the sailors who had succumbed to the many dangers of the river Laurent. I was aware of a constriction in my throat. I expected at any second to come across the name of my father - but, to my surprise, it was not among the two hundred names of the dead of that year. Very well... I moved on to the next year, and began the laborious process again, reading off the names of the dead. The more names I read without arriving at my father's, the more I considered the possibility that he might have survived.

If I located his name, and he was indeed dead, then all would be explained. But if he had survived - then what had become of him? Had he eluded me yet again, a cruel second time?

His name was not among those sailors who had died three and four years ago, so I tried the list from two years ago... to no avail.

Was it possible, then, that his ship had won?

I was moving back to the list from four years ago, when I happened to glance up... and what I saw stopped me in my tracks.

Staring down at me from the wall was a portrait of my father, the Shipmaster of the Flying Prince, the championship boat of the year 1105.

Beneath the portrait was a long caption outlining his achievement. My heart hammering in my ears, hardly able to believe what I was seeing, I read.

I came to the end of the caption, stunned, and looked up into the eyes of my father - not the jubilant eyes of a winning master, but eyes dark and haunted by past events.

For perhaps the fifth time I read the final paragraph of the caption. "Gregor Singer was a criminal captain, who faced the death penalty for deserting a private army if he refused a Shipmaster's commission. He accepted, won the race in true style and, as is the custom, applied to join the Guild of Blackmen. He was accepted, and taken..."

I read no more. I backed away from the photograph of my father and stood in the centre of the room as if paralysed.

He was accepted by the Guild of Blackmen...

Only slowly, by degrees, did awareness overcome me.

I sprinted from the museum and down the hill. The crowd was still gathered on the quayside, arranged to view some spectacle. Only as I joined them and pushed my way through the press, did I see the focus of their interest. A dozen Blackmen in coloured leathers were already rising into the air. To my despair I saw that among them was the Blackman in jet leathers, my father.

I stood mute, watching him ascend. The other Blackmen formed a circle around him as they climbed ever higher, towards the sun. I fancied that my father could see me, was watching me, a small figure in the crowd, standing mesmerised as he gained altitude.

The twelve Blackmen circled my father, moving faster, until they became a Catherine wheel blur about the tiny figure of the central Blackman. He raised his arms above his head in a gesture like a benediction. A tension communicated itself through the crowd, and I could hardly bring myself to watch.

Then he began to glow, at first orange, and then red, and the crowd around me murmured their appreciation of a sight so aesthetic. I wanted to cry out, to halt the process, but at the same time knew that this was his destiny.

His detonation, his explosion into a million golden fragments, drew from the observers as many gasps as exclamations, and from me only tears.

I slipped from the crowd. The concerns of the islanders, enjoying their banal routines, filled me with anger. How simple were other peoples' lives when compared to the complexity of one's own!

How youthful I was then...

I walked along the pebble beach and sat down before the sea. For perhaps an hour I remained there, reliving my time with the Blackman, wishing that somehow he could have overcome his programming and told me of his true identity.

A small voice drew me from my reverie.

I turned and watched Loi pick her way towards me across the sharp pebbles, her expression one of tortured determination. "So here you are! I wondered where you'd gone."

She had her hands behind her back, as if concealing something from me. "Sinclair, I tried to find you. Did you see Blackman's finale?"

I nodded that I had.

She smiled at me. "He gave me this, Sinclair - to give to you." From behind her back she produced my persona-cube and handed it to me.

She must have sensed that I needed to be alone. "See you later," she whispered. "I'll be in the quayside tavern. Gastarian and his crew are celebrating our victory, and mourning the dead and gone."

I watched her leave the beach, then turned my attention to the cube in my lap. With trembling fingers I turned it on. My father - the Blackman - stared out at me. He was seated in his hotel room, his dark presence dominating the scene.

"Father," I whispered.

"Sinclair," he said. "You must have many questions, and I have so much to explain..."

As the sun set, and the fiery light of night filled the sky, I sat on the beach and talked with my father. *

