

Bank Run

by Tom Purdom

Tom Purdom recently told us “I’m writing a literary memoir that tells how I wrote certain stories—how I got the idea, dealt with literary problems, editors, etc.—along with relevant glimpses of personal things like my marriage, and I’m posting it on my website, philart.net/tompurdom. The first three installments discuss my early stories, the fourth and fifth my *Asimov’s Casanova tales*.” His newest story for us is a fast-paced and exciting look at what the future may mean by a “Bank Run”.

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Sabor was sitting in the passenger shack with his concubine when his personal assistant spotted the other boat. Sabor was devoting half his attention to the concubine and half to the numbers on his information display—a form of multitasking that combined his two major interests.

Choytang rested his hand on Sabor’s shoulder. He pointed toward the rear window and Sabor immediately dimmed the numbers floating in front of his eyes.

The other boat was fueled by coal and propelled by a screw. It was moving approximately three times faster than the solar-powered paddlewheel transport that was carrying Sabor and his two companions up the lake. Eight soldiers were formed up on the right side. The six soldiers in the front row were lean hardbodies. The two soldiers standing behind them were massives who looked like they could have powered their boat with their own muscles. Their tan uniforms were accented with chocolate helmets and crossbelts—a no-nonsense, low contrast style that had become the trademark of one of the more expensive costumers on the planet.

Sabor’s wristband had been running his banking program, as usual. The display was presenting him with the current status of the twelve-hour loan market. Twelve-hour loans were routine transactions—accounting maneuvers that maintained reserves at an acceptable level—and he usually let his alter run his operations in the twelve-hour market. He always checked it at least twice a day, however, to make sure his competitors hadn’t developed an unpleasant surprise.

Sabor’s concubine had already activated her own display. “There’s a fishing commune called Galawar about four kilometers from here,” the concubine reported. “You financed a dam and a big breeding operation for them. Their militia setup gets its real-life practice pursuing poachers and running rescue patrols. They can probably have a small force here eight minutes after their watch master initiates assembly.”

Sabor returned the twelve-hour market to his alter and replaced it with the latest figures on the current status of the Galawar loan. “I’ll talk to our captain. See if you can exercise your charms on the appropriate officers of the commune.”

The captain had isolated herself in her control shack fifteen minutes after her boat had left the dock. She was sprawling in a recliner with her eyes fixed on the top of a window and her attention focused on the material her personal display was imprinting on her optic nerves.

“I’m afraid I may be about to cause you some trouble,” Sabor said. “I registered a counterfeit identity when I boarded your boat. My true name is Sabor Haveri. As you probably know, I’m the proprietor of the bank that furnishes your company its primary line of credit.”

The captain had looked tall when she had been stretched across her recliner but she looked even taller when she stood up. She had been operating lake boats for eighteen years, but the information in the public databanks had made it clear her boating work was primarily a money job. Most of the entries Sabor had collected from the databanks had highlighted her exploits as a member of one of the top aquatic hunting clubs on the lake. She would create an awesome vision standing on the back of a riding seal, in hot pursuit of a yellow-feathered swordbeak.

“I’ve been having a problem with one of my less reasonable customers,” Sabor said. “He requested a loan I consider unwise. He’s trying to force me to make the loan and I decided it might be best if I put some space between us. Unfortunately, he appears to be pursuing me on the steam propelled boat coming up behind us.”

The captain returned her attention to her display. Her uniform had been created by a designer who favored clean, uncluttered lines and she had arranged it with a flair that gave her an air of rangy competence. She jabbed her finger at the air and frowned at the response she received.

“I think I should ask you your customer’s name, Honored Sabor.”

“Possessor Kenzan Khan. The boat appears to have eight soldiers on it. I would appreciate it if you would help me resist if they try to board us.”

“With a crew of one?”

“I have good reason to believe I’m going to be receiving a little armed assistance from the militia maintained by a fishing commune called Galawar. My personal assistant has some useful skills and I can assure you I’m not totally helpless myself. If you’ll give us some help at this end, I believe we can hold off our assailants until our friends at Galawar can ride to our rescue.”

The captain braced her hand on the upper part of the bulkhead and stared out the window. It was a windy morning in the last days of autumn. The surface of the lake looked dark and rippling.

“I hate to sound melodramatic,” Sabor said, “but the entire financial system of our planet could be at risk. Kenzan tends to be impulsive. If his psych staff gets me

under his control ... and I make untenable loans in response to their manipulations...”

“Most of my ammunition stock consists of non-lethal ammunition. Will non-lethals be sufficient?”

“I’m just trying to stay out of their hands. Killing them isn’t necessary.”

Sabor’s concubine was standing in front of the rear window watching the other boat eliminate the last two hundred meters that separated them. “So how did your chat with the commune go?” Sabor asked her. “Are they feeling amenable?”

Purvali’s designers had started with a fleshy woman with a strong sex drive. Then they had stretched out the basic design, added an upper-percentile intelligence, and enhanced the aspects of her genome that influenced coordination and gracefulness. The result was a finely calculated combination of elegance and voluptuousness—a pairing that triggered all the erotic and emotional yearnings the designers had detected when they had given Sabor their standard customer profile tests.

The designers had also produced an exceptionally competent human being who could satisfy all Sabor’s yearnings for good support staff. Purvali doubled as his administrative assistant, in addition to her other functions. Purvali and Choytang constituted his entire permanent staff.

“I talked to the primary coordinator’s executive officer,” Purvali said. “She’s talking to the primary coordinator now.”

“Shall I give them a call?”

“I have a feeling they may want to bargain.”

Sabor stared at the oncoming steamboat. The Galawar commune had bargained down to the last hundredth of a percentage point on both the projects he had financed for them. If he called again, and let them know he was worried...

“The soldiers you’re looking at belong to Colonel Jina,” Purvali said. “I estimate we can hold them off for approximately seven minutes minimum, nine maximum, after they come into range.”

“Even if I bring you in as a surprise?”

“Yes.”

“It looks like I may have to exercise my talent for stalling. Tell the primary coordinator I want to have a chat. See if you can put me through to our friend the colonel.”

The most prominent feature in Colonel Jina’s publicity portraits was the smile that adorned his globular, well nourished face. He was sporting an especially cheerful version of his trademark when his image popped onto Sabor’s optic nerves seconds

after Purvali initiated the call.

“Good morning, Honored Sabor. It’s a pleasure to hear from you.”

“I understand I’m being pursued by soldiers who are affiliated with your enterprise, Colonel.”

“I’ve dispatched eight of my best. They have orders to board your boat and take you prisoner.”

“I’ve examined your rate schedule. I’m prepared to offer you 50 percent more than you’re being paid.”

The colonel frowned. Soulful regret replaced The Smile. “I’m afraid I have to inform you I can’t consider your offer. I appreciate your interest but I never entertain counter offers once I’ve committed my armed staff to an operation. My reputation for dependability is one of my primary business assets.”

“I understand that, Colonel. I should advise you, however, that the situation may not be as one-sided as it appears. I have some capacity for violence, too.”

Choy was bustling around the passenger shack overturning tables and chairs and lining them up in front of the windows. He and Purvali had wrapped themselves in defensive vests and planted hats with defensive units on their heads. Sabor had slipped into a vest but he had laid his hat on a windowsill.

Purvali pointed at the air in front of her eyes. Sabor nodded and his display split in half. A lean man in a recyclable work suit occupied the left section. A subtitle reminded Sabor he was looking at the primary coordinator of Galawar Commune.

“Good morning, Honored Sabor,” the primary coordinator said. “My executive officer says you’ve asked for assistance.”

“My principal advised me you would probably resist,” Colonel Jina said. “I took that into account when I assigned a completely equipped squad. You can surrender now or we can take you prisoner five minutes from now.”

Sabor’s attention started multi-tracking the two conversations. His communication implant had automatically initiated a switching program when it bifurcated the display. The implant transmitted a real time image to the appropriate person whenever Sabor spoke and the other person received a temporary simulation. The primary coordinator and Colonel Jina were probably using similar programs.

The conversation with the primary coordinator was essentially a standard business bargaining session. The coordinator recognized his obligation to resist anyone who attacked honest merchants as they plied their trade on the lake. He was even willing to let Sabor and his party make a short stop on the commune’s territory once they eliminated their difficulties with Colonel Jina’s representatives. But he also knew an opportunity when he saw one.

“We have several members who feel we should refinance our primary loan, Honored Sabor. You may have heard about the interesting line of crabs the Renwar Institute unveiled two tendays ago. We’re bidding for the exclusive reproduction rights. The numbers indicate we could draft an unbeatable offer if we could decrease the cost of our current debt servicing.”

With Colonel Jina, Sabor concentrated on more lofty matters—and the time-eating speeches that lofty matters tend to generate. “Your principal is endangering the entire financial system of our planet, Colonel. Kenzan Khan is one of the most fiscally irresponsible personalities I’ve worked with. If he gets my bank under his control, he’ll drain my resources until he triggers an uncontrollable financial chain reaction. You wouldn’t accept a contract to poison the lake. The collapse of my bank would be just as devastating.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Colonel Jina said. “But it’s my understanding there are three other banks with assets that are as extensive as yours.”

The steamboat had pulled abreast of the starboard windows. The soldiers were still grouped in their parade formation.

“And they’re all interlinked,” Sabor said. “If one of us fails, the others will all be affected. The relationships and interactions in a financial system can be just as complex as the relationships and interactions in an ecological system.”

The six hardbodies on the other boat trained their weapons.

“I appreciate your willingness to help us,” the coordinator said. “Our rescue force should reach you in about seven minutes.”

A crack slithered across the window directly in front of Sabor. More cracks appeared in the windows on either side. Clouds of particles replaced all three windows. Chilly autumn air flooded the passenger shack.

Sabor had thrown himself flat as soon as he had seen the first crack. He stretched out his right arm and started crawling toward the barricade Choy had assembled in front of the window.

Choy had assembled three guns. He and Purvali were lying on their backs with their weapons raised above the barricade and their eyes fixed on the aiming screen mounted on the rear of each barrel. Sabor picked up the third gun and tapped a symbol on the control screen built into the stock. The screen clicked off a ten second count. A line of boldface announced that the gun had linked with the short-range interface built into his wristband.

“They’re firing at the barricade,” Choy said. “They’ll have it dissolved in about two minutes.”

“What are you aiming at?”

“We’re concentrating on the hardbody on the left of the line. I’m assuming we should try to completely eliminate one gun.”

Sabor had already raised his gun above the barricade. He marked the hardbody on the left with a mental command and the barrel swiveled on its mount. The gun was an elegant piece of smoothly functioning machinery, emitting a well-mannered *slap ... slap ... slap* as its internal computer calculated the range, checked the position of the barrel, and transmitted a fire command once every four seconds. The anti-personnel loads contained molecular devices that temporarily disrupted the central nervous system. The defensive system built into the soldiers’ uniforms deployed defensive molecules that could neutralize the incoming moles. A concentrated attack could overwhelm the defensive moles and remove a hardbody from the firing line for several minutes. The gun wasn’t programmed to compensate for the rocking of the waves, but Sabor’s own brain could handle that aspect of the situation.

He rotated the gun to his right, to keep his target on the aiming screen, and realized the other boat was turning.

“They’re turning onto a possible interception course,” Choy said.

“I’ve checked the databanks for information on their jumping capacity,” Purvali said. “There’s nothing explicit but I estimate the hardbodies can probably hop across a two meter separation without making an extraordinary effort.”

“Can you do me a favor?” Sabor said. “Can you find out what kind of cargo this floating palace is carrying? Perhaps we can find something our captain will be willing to part with. And gain a small increment in our forward progress.”

Sabor’s cool, chinup élan was one of his trademarks. His mother had included it in his specifications and he considered it one of her better decisions. He had even ordered a biochemical reinforcement when he had reached legal maturity. He could put several million yuris in play and cheerfully sleep, eat, and dally with a concubine while he waited for the results. There were times, however, when he suspected some hidden segment of his personality was trembling in terror while it watched the rest of him treat major calamities as if they were trivial disruptions.

A list popped onto Sabor’s display—a complete catalog of the boat’s cargo, assembled from the contracts that had been posted in the databanks. Public posting couldn’t be enforced by law, but people who ignored the custom enjoyed short business careers. There was no central government on Fernheim. The business community enforced its rules by monitoring deals and invoking the ancient human customs of shunning and ostracism.

The bulkiest item on the list was a crate containing ten ceramic microwave receptors. The last starship to orbit Fernheim had included a passenger who had brought the program for producing the most advanced model available in the solar system. The receptors would capture 15 percent more energy than the most

competitive model available on the planet—a big increase for a world on which fossil fuels were still under-exploited and only five microwave generators had been placed in orbit.

The receptors took up most of the cargo space. The rest of the cargo consisted of small orders of luxuries. Meat taken from real animals. Organically grown wine. Nine golden swans.

“We could use the swans as harassers,” Choy said. “All I need is the activation codes.”

Sabor pipped the captain. “I would like to buy your cargo. My figure for the total retail value is three hundred and sixty thousand. I’ll add 10 percent to cover delays and aggravation.”

“To lighten ship?”

“Yes.”

“It won’t add more than a kilometer per hour to our speed. Given their current position...”

“We’re in an every-second-counts situation.”

“It’s yours.”

“I’ll need the activation and control codes for the ornamental swans. Please transmit them to my assistant, Choytang.”

The overturned table Sabor was using for cover metamorphosed into dust and fragments. Sabor rolled backward and huddled beside the hatch in the middle of the shack.

Lights turned on as soon as he dropped through the hatch. The crate containing the ceramic receptors took up almost half the floor space. The nine swans had been arranged on a pallet with a low guard rail. The rest of the cargo had been packed in neatly stacked boxes.

Choy stepped up to the swans and activated their implants with a command from his own communications implant. Their feathers were as glossy as pure gold leaf. Ripples of light ran along their bodies when they stretched their necks and rustled their wings.

The boat was a typical example of Fernheim’s betwixt-and-between economy. A big loading hatch on the left side of the boat responded to a direct signal from the captain’s brain and rolled upward on a wheeled track. The crate holding the receptors opened in response to another impulse from the captain’s cerebral cortex. And Sabor and Purvali picked up two of the receptors and lugged them across the hold with the chemical energy stored in their own muscles.

The hatch was so close to the water line they could have dipped their hands without bending over. Three hundred meters of dark water stretched between the boat and the shore. Two houses stood beside a creek that emptied into the lake. Terrestrial oaks and sycamores spread branches that were covered with autumn leaves. The entire shoreline had been completely terrestrialized for over two decades.

The captain had given them free access to the information integrator in her command interface. They could examine the entire composite picture the integrator assembled from the sensory moles embedded in every meter of the boat's structure. They trudged back and forth across the hold with most of their attention focused on the positions of the two boats.

Choy waited until the other boat was making its last maneuvers for boarding position. The swans lumbered across the hold in two ragged lines. Their huge wings pounded at the air. Choy guided them through the hatch and they turned as soon as they gained altitude and drove toward their adversary's deck.

The coal burner had overcome their captain's best efforts. It was lying almost parallel with the right side of their boat, with a three-meter gap separating the two hulls. The hardbodies were lined up with their guns at port arms. They were obviously primed to jump as soon as their boat's sidewise drift brought them close enough. The nine swans covered their helmets and torsos with a blanket of hammering wings.

The hardbodies reacted with the remorseless calm that had been built into their personalities. Their right hands dropped off their guns and gripped the swans around their necks. The two massives reached into the storm of writhing feathers and applied their oversized muscles to the necks the hardbodies had neglected.

"Have the captain open the right loading hatch," Purvali said. "Enough for us to shoot out."

Sabor started moving toward the hatch while he was still pipping the captain. The hatch creaked open and they each took a single hardbody and poured moles into his armor. They had to shoot upward at a steep angle, through the commotion created by the swans, but a hit anywhere on the armor would wear it down.

Dead swans dropped into the water in front of Sabor. The gap between the two hulls narrowed. The side of the other boat loomed over them. On Sabor's display, the omniscient eye of the electronic system presented him with a less pessimistic picture. Three hardbodies had dropped out of the line—presumably to recharge their armor. Two swans were still defying the pitiless hands closing around their necks.

Three hardbodies jumped across the gap. Boots pounded on the deck over Sabor's head. He scurried away from his firing position and aimed his gun at the hatch he had used to enter the hold.

A hardbody suddenly started firing his gun. The display responded to the shift in Sabor's attention and presented him with two figures in skintight wetsuits. Two more figures were crowding in behind them. In the water, just a few meters from the boat, three seal riders were standing on their mounts as they poured a stream of projectiles into the hardbodies.

* * * *

"I requested a son who was restless and adventurous," Sabor's mother had told him. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised when he tells me he wants to put twenty-two light years between himself and all the pleasures he's been enjoying since his eyes first registered the light."

"As far as I can tell," Sabor had responded, "the only pleasures I'm leaving behind are the pleasures that are irrevocably associated with my family. The only difference between the ship and the home I've been honored to share with you and my sisters is the fact that the ship will be moving away from the sun instead of traveling around it. I'll have almost every luxury I have here. We'll still have fabricators when we reach Fernheim. The first thing I'm going to fabricate after we make landfall is a bottle of Talini."

Sabor had been fifty-two when he had broken the news. His mother had been reigning over their family enterprises for almost a century. Billions of neils and yuris bounced around the cities of the asteroid belt during every twenty-four-hour day-period, and their economists estimated that 30 percent of the total visited their databanks during its rambles.

Rali Haveri was a placid woman, for all her power. She had produced him, Sabor believed, because she felt her life needed a dash of turbulence. Adventurous people stirred her. Most of her temporary consorts had been self-centered erratics.

Sabor had reached maturity in an environment that surrounded him with gentle music, decorous parties, and amiable personalities. Alajara had been one of the pleasantest cities in the asteroid belt—a mansion inhabited by ten thousand people who were all employees of his family's business. Sabor mastered three musical instruments, pursued his hobbies and enthusiasms with equipment that would have made most professionals groan with envy, and dallied with his choice of concubines when he reached the appropriate age. His mother and his older sisters took care of the details that generated the family income.

There had been a time when many visionaries thought the fabricator would make bankers obsolete. Press the right buttons and your magic box would generate a fully cooked roast on demand. Press another combination and it would extrude furniture for your dwelling place, clothes for your body, and toys for the idle hours it had bestowed on your life. Why would anyone need money?

Fortunately, it hadn't quite worked out that way. Fabricators had been universal household appliances for two centuries and Sabor's family was still

engaging in its traditional business. The introduction of the fabricator had disrupted Earth's economic system for approximately two decades. It had triggered a catastrophic massive deflation. Prices and wages had tumbled by 70 percent, by most calculations. But when the turbulence had subsided, Sabor's family had still been negotiating loans and pulling profits out of microscopic variations in interest rates.

Fabricators could provide you with the basics at a ridiculously low cost, but they still needed energy and raw materials. They needed programs that directed their operations and time to run the programs. And there were commodities that couldn't be manufactured by the best machines available. Fabricators couldn't manufacture social status. Fabricators couldn't engage in the genetic manipulations and the years of post-natal management that produced personalities like Purvali and Choytang. Above all, fabricators couldn't manufacture *expertise* and *imagination*. They couldn't design their own programs. They couldn't visualize the new products that would make consumers lust after the programs that would produce them.

Money, Rali Haveri liked to remind him, was essentially irrational. It had value because people agreed it had value. She had placed two million yuris in Sabor's account when he had established his residence on the *Carefree Villa* and everyone on the starship had agreed he could use it to buy goods and services and make loans. They had accepted it as money through three rests and four awakes and they had continued to accept it when he had landed on Fernheim. They even accepted the additional numbers his mother had radioed him since he had landed on the planet. The fact that every message had to travel for twenty-two years made no difference. Human societies needed some sort of monetary system and he was the son of a woman who could obviously bless him with any sum he could reasonably desire. The financial system in the solar system even recognized the numbers he transmitted when he paid his mother the interest she charged him.

"I would be avoiding my maternal responsibilities if I didn't demand interest," Rali had lectured him across the light years. "I'm only imposing the same discipline on you that I would try to impose on myself—the same discipline the solar financial system imposes on me."

Sabor reentered the boathouse and dropped into a corner two minutes after the captain returned their boat to the main channel. Purvali ran a test on the boathouse fabricator and ordered pharmaceutical drinks that would moderate their emotional stress. Colonel Jina's immobilized soldiers were being relieved of their armor and weapons and placed on the deck of the other boat. The boat itself would be turned around and sent back upstream under its own control.

The primary coordinator had already advised Colonel Jina he could pick up his soldiers' equipment in two days. There would be no request for ransom or damages.

"We try to maintain good business relations with Colonel Jina," the primary

coordinator had explained. “We usually use his services when we hire guards for our more valuable shipments.”

Purvali swayed toward Sabor with a drinking cup in her hand. He held up three fingers as she bent over him.

“We have three projects we have to advance simultaneously,” Sabor said. “We have to organize our fellow bankers into a united front, we have to find a weakness we can exploit, and we have to prepare for a sojourn in the splendors of the unterrestrialized wilderness. I’ll start work on number one. I want you to work on the others. Assume we’ll embark on our wilderness holiday as soon as we’re properly equipped.”

Purvali checked her display. “They only have eight widemounts in the whole commune.”

“Try to purchase four. I’d like to pack a *few* comforts.”

The effects of the drink flowed through Sabor’s muscles and nerves. His display projected his own image in front of him and he observed his delivery as he created his message to his three colleagues.

“I regret to tell you that I have just fended off an armed attack financed by Possessor Kenzan Khan. I believe we should immediately suspend all dealings with Kenzan Khan. I will be taking other actions shortly, but I believe an unequivocal display of unity is absolutely essential.”

He paused the recording and took another swallow of his drink. Purvali had flavored it with banana and coconut—an aroma he had treasured since he had first savored it sometime around his fifth birthday.

“Kenzan has become obsessed with his long term feud with Possessor Dobryani. He wants to mount an armed occupation of the land around the mouth of Winari Brook. Kenzan and Dobryani have both been eyeing that area and Kenzan has convinced himself Dobryani is preparing to seize it by force. He wants me to finance the purchase of one hundred soldiers. I have decided I have to refuse. I’ve been subsidizing his excesses since he first took control of his possession. I have reached my limit. Firm action is absolutely necessary.”

The attachments included a statement by the coordinator of Galawar, visuals of the encounter with Colonel Jina’s force, and a copy of the message from Kenzan Khan that had convinced Sabor he had to evacuate his primary apartment in Tale Harbor.

There was no room in Kenzan Khan’s worldview for a simple clash of desires. The heart of his message was a long flood of denunciations. Possessor Dobryani wasn’t opposing him merely because she wanted the same thing he wanted. She was a malevolent spirit with a compulsion to control every patch of

terrestrialized land on the planet.

“We all know what she is, Sabor,” Kenzan had proclaimed. “I’ve been defending myself against her attacks since the year I succeeded my uncle. The days when you can wiggle and sidestep and make your little jokes are over. Give me what I need or I’ll take it. And everything else you have with it. Money isn’t the only form of power.”

Kenzan had framed his message so his face would appear to be crowding against the person who received it—a juvenile trick, but it was Kenzan’s childishness that made him dangerous. Kenzan’s parents had apparently believed an imposing frame still had its advantages. Kenzan was over two heads taller than Sabor, with bone and muscle in proportion. Lately, he had been neglecting his physical maintenance. He had compensated by costuming himself in ornate belted robes that hid his paunch. A tangled black beard obscured his jowly cheeks.

The robes were a convenient wrapping for a sexual impulsive. Sabor had witnessed the advantages of Kenzan’s turnout during a tediously elaborate lunch. Kenzan could simply grab the nearest concubine who appealed to him, untie his robe, and indulge himself without any bothersome need to undress.

Kenzan’s uncle had been a methodical, patient man who drew his deepest satisfactions from the steady expansion of his wealth. If the uncle purchased the genome for a new type of fruit tree, he sold a hundred fruits for every bite he ate himself. He had been murdered by an heir who gorged according to his impulses, fed the leftovers to his animals and favorites, and borrowed to buy any novelty that caught his fancy. Kenzan’s banquet garden was bigger than most playing fields. His stables housed two hundred of the costliest riding animals the biodesigners had managed to generate.

Kenzan’s feud with Possessor Dobryani had begun when Dobryani had stolen the genome of one of his prized meat animals. Kenzan had purchased exclusive rights to the genome from an immigrant who had stored it in his auxiliary intelligence when he had left the solar system. Kenzan had been the only possessor on the planet who served the animal on his table. He retaliated by deliberately mining titanium from a low-concentration site that ruined the view from one of Dobryani’s favorite villas.

There was no central bank on Fernheim, but the four leading bankers all tried to abide by the rules a central bank would have enforced. Sabor maintained reserves that equaled 18 percent of his loans—a conservative choice that was based on his family’s most rigid traditions. The other three favored reserves of 12 to 15 percent. Sabor’s money management program borrowed from the others when his reserves dropped below his minimum and loaned to them when they were short. Money bounced between the four banks in a continuous, unending balancing act, at short-term interest rates their programs negotiated in thousandths of a percentage point. At the present moment, Sabor owed Heinrich Dobble approximately eight million yuris, at an average interest rate of 2.116 percent. The other two bankers

owed Sabor twelve million.

His display presented him with Heinrich's standard business image twelve minutes after he had dispatched his message. As usual, Heinrich was standing rigidly erect and wearing a black, high collared outfit that gave him a reassuringly formal air.

"I'd already seen a report on the attack," Heinrich said. "I would have thought your client was just ranting if I hadn't seen that."

"I have to confess Kenzan took me by surprise, too. I vacated my quarters as a precaution—to give him some time to calm down."

"How long can he last if we institute a freeze?"

Sabor dropped his social persona and slipped into his straight business mode. He and Heinrich never wasted words. "Two to four tendays with the freeze alone. But the freeze is only a first step. I'm hoping I can neutralize him in three or four days."

"Neutralize?"

"Permanently. He's a spendthrift. He won't recover if I hit him hard enough."

"If he doesn't get you under control first."

"I'm retreating to the wilderness. First he has to locate me. Then he has to catch me."

Heinrich frowned. "How much time have you spent in the wilderness, Sabor?"

"I've been funding expeditions for twenty standard years. I probably understand the survival requirements better than some of the gadabouts I've bankrolled."

"You can't hire fifty soldiers and surround yourself with a solid defense?"

"And where would I place my temporary fortress? The primary coordinator has given me permission to disembark in Galawar. He hasn't told me I can stay there. We're dealing with a random force, Heinrich. Kenzan could attack me even if he knew I had him outnumbered five to one. He could turn a place like Galawar into a disaster."

"Kenzan's irrationality is one of the factors I'm weighing. I could find myself in a very serious situation if I oppose him and he gets your resources under control."

"And you'll find yourself in a worse position if I give in to his demands. He isn't going to stop with one extortion. He doesn't know how to stop."

"I intend to look after myself, Sabor. I reserve the right to reappraise my options. At any time."

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They entered the wilderness five hours after they stepped onto the Galawar docks. A twelve-meter electric hedge separated the terrestrialized land from the native ecosystem. On the terrestrial side of the barrier, they were surrounded by rose bushes, vegetable gardens, and fields covered with high yield fuel vines. On the wilderness side, thick tree trunks towered over the hedge. Cold autumn sunlight spread across leaves that had become white and translucent as the season had advanced. The trees on Fernheim produced leaves that tended to be smaller and paler than the leaves of terrestrial trees—a response, presumably, to the dizzying pace of the planet’s year. Every organism on Fernheim had to speed through seasons that were only half as long as the seasons on Earth.

The gate in the bottom of the hedge had been designed with a grudgingly narrow aperture. Their widemounts passed through it in single file, with their carriers scraping the leaves. Choy led the way, with Sabor in the second position.

Widemounts had been created by reducing the size of the terrestrial elephant and modifying the chemical foundations of its temperament. Sabor’s widemount barely reached the top of his head, but its broad back and columnar legs could support a load that included Sabor and all the equipment that would keep a civilized human reasonably content with his lot. The fourth widemount carried an extra fabricator, extra prefabricated supplies, and twelve bottles of wine that Sabor had ordered from Galawar’s communal fabrication facility.

Sabor had linked his display to Purvali’s. He could monitor her survey of Kenzan Khan’s financial situation while he concentrated his attention on the normal complexities of his business. Half his display tracked the ebb and flow of the planetary high-yield market. The other half presented him with Purvali’s attempts to untangle the web of loans and expenditures that dominated Kenzan’s economic life.

“There are times when the speed of light limitation has its comforts,” Sabor said. “I can imagine what my mother would say if she knew I’d been loaning real money to someone with that kind of balance sheet.”

A cloud of birds had surrounded Sabor’s widemount as soon as he had passed through the barrier hedge. Fluttering bodies banged against the transparent upper half of the carrier. Flocks of ground birds scurried away from the relentless plod of his animal’s legs. The pale leaves created a subtly alien atmosphere that many humans found disturbing.

His auxiliary intelligence fed him data about the birds and the different species of trees—some of it information that had been collected by expeditions he had financed. Most of the settlers on the planet were primarily interested in making homes for themselves, but a small minority had been captivated by the opportunity to study a new biological system. Mankind had discovered four life-bearing worlds so far. Two were examples of parallel evolution—the life forms roughly resembled the life forms on Earth. Fernheim was one of the parallel worlds, but it had its share

of anomalies. Earth had never passed through an age dominated by birds. Fernheim had reached that stage without generating an age of giant reptiles—a finding that had set evolutionists twittering as soon as the first glimpses of the fossil record had filtered back to the solar system.

Purvali was linking every loan Kenzan had been given with the items he had spent it on. She had started with a thorough analysis of Kenzan's accounts with Sabor. From there she would move on to the public records. Kenzan liked to brag. The public databases contained detailed information on every animal, food, woman, or grandiose display that had sucked purchasing power out of his accounts.

Sabor activated a high-level search alter and put it to work. So far he had only heard from one other member of the four. Ar Badov had responded with a brief text message—*I will give your efforts my complete support. Don't let us down.* Ar Badov had been the first banker on the planet. He and Sabor had been locked in an intense, highly personal rivalry from the moment Ar had learned that a scion of the Haveri family had set up shop on *his* planet.

The fourth power center in the financial system was controlled by a remote, almost reclusive woman named Zara Nev. It had been three hours since Sabor had advised her that Heinrich and Ar had joined the fray—almost seven hours since Zara had received his first invitation.

The research alter presented him with a report twelve minutes after it started burrowing through the databanks. Zara had buried her machinations in a transaction network that included three other deals. It was a perfunctory attempt at camouflage by the standards maintained by Sabor and his colleagues.

“I would consider that an unequivocal negative response to my appeal for help,” Sabor said. “She hasn't sent me an outright rejection, but she's only made a token effort to hide her support for our respected opponent.”

“There's nothing unequivocal about the pool of capital she's placed at Possessor Khan's disposal,” Purvali said. “He can hire one hundred man-units at Colonel Jina's standard price—two full squads for over four days, with one fully loaded airship.”

They were riding into a broad, heavily forested area that stretched between two major rivers. Sabor had asked his display for a random course and it had angled them fifteen degrees southward, toward the hills that bordered the Ratagava River. The widemounts plodded through the forest undergrowth at a steady eight kilometers per hour. Once every hour they stopped for fifteen minutes and foraged. The widemounts had been equipped with intestinal add-ons that could convert the planetary vegetation into digestible molecules, but it was an inefficient process. They needed 40 percent more food, by weight, than they would have consumed if they had been processing terrestrial food stocks.

The humans stayed inside their carriers while the widemounts stuffed bushes

and leaves into their mouths. Eight guard cats patrolled the area that surrounded them. Choy received the transmissions from their implants and rotated part of his attention from cat to cat.

The forest had slipped into darkness by the time they made their second stop. The cats refueled on meat produced by the fabricators and Sabor took Choy's advice and let the animals rest for a full hour. He had already decided they would keep moving for another three hours.

They were assuming Colonel Jina would probably mount his pursuit force on an airship. The planetary helicopter population had slipped past the two hundred mark, but an airship was almost as fast and it could creep along under solar power if it slipped beyond its normal range and exhausted its batteries. According to Purvali's analysis, every hour they traveled could add thirty minutes to the time an airship would eat up looking for them if it used an optimum search pattern.

The exploration of the databanks was almost as tedious as their step-by-step progress through the night. Purvali couldn't hop on a promising lead and pursue it through a continuous give-and-take with the public information system. Her transmissions to the communications satellites had to be bundled into blips and randomly spaced several minutes apart.

"So far," Purvali said, "Possessor Khan's military expenditures look like they offer the most promise. He's taking on two opponents at once—you and Possessor Dobryani."

Her report hopped to a map marked with data labels. Kenzan was renting fifty soldiers that belonged to Possessor Makajida—the possessor who owned a tract on Kenzan's northern border. The fifty extra soldiers had been allocated to the force he had deployed against Dobryani.

"He needs those soldiers," Purvali said. "And Heinrich Dobble is the dominant figure in Possessor Makajida's financial affairs. Possessor Makajida has five active credit arrangements and he's restructured his debt six times in the last eleven years. Heinrich Dobble funded two thirds of the direct loans in four of the credit arrangements and he was a pivotal participant in five restructurings, once you do a little digging."

"So I say a few words to Heinrich, Heinrich says a few words to Makajida, and we both let my lady Dobryani know she can ravage Kenzan's holdings as soon as he loses control of Makajida's fifty warriors."

"It had occurred to me that might be one possibility...."

"I think I would prefer something a bit less obvious. I suspect my good friend Heinrich would, too. Is there any somewhat subtler method we can use to persuade Possessor Makajida he should reclaim his property?"

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“I’d like to leave it to your creative talents for the time being. I will then apply the all-important finishing touches, as usual.”

The security system woke them twice during the night. The first time a flock of nocturnal birds assumed a formation that bore a vague resemblance to a tree-skimming airship. The second time six flightless predators approached the northern perimeter and indicated they might not retreat when three of the guard cats converged on them.

Sabor had contemplated a visit to Purvali’s carrier while he had been savoring the after taste of the sauces he had chosen for his evening meal. He toyed with the idea as he stared into the darkness after both disruptions. And decided, each time, that he should accept the realities of his situation and activate his sleep control program. He was fighting a war. He would remain in warrior mode until he eliminated Kenzan Khan.

They started moving as soon as the morning sun glowed through the highest leaves. Sabor indulged in quick catnaps during their first legs, but he made Purvali sleep a full two hours extra. He received his reward ten minutes after she finished her morning rituals.

“Possessor Makajida has a border rival, too,” Purvali said. “Possessor Avaming. They’ve been feuding ever since Possessor Avaming occupied a slice of the lakefront that Possessor Makajida had planned to claim. Possessor Avaming has been a good customer, but he’s just as spendthrift as most of his peers. I suspect he might be induced to threaten Possessor Makajida if you offered him a satisfactory incentive.”

“And Makajida would then feel he had to recall his fifty soldiers. And there would be no indication Heinrich had anything to do with it.”

“The effect on Kenzan Khan could be devastating. I’ve been looking at his relationship with Possessor Dobryani. There is nothing shallow about their enmity.”

“Do you have any theories on the source of their acrimony?”

“Their attitudes toward the opposite sex appear to be mutually contradictory. They each seem to favor the total submission of their sexual partners.”

Sabor nodded. “I’ve had similar thoughts every time I’ve heard him attack her. There are times when he’s so rabid he sounds like he’s indulging in self-satire.”

“I think there’s a very high probability she would seize the opportunity to destroy him if it became available.”

Sabor’s widemount sloshed across a pebbly stream. On his right, one of the guard cats took the obstacle in a low, stretched-out leap, with its forepaws pulled

tight against its chest and its rear legs trailing behind it. Startled waterbirds surrounded the cat with an explosion of flapping wings.

“Possessor Avaming isn’t going to respond to a bribe,” Sabor said. “He takes great pride in his aristocratic indifference to material gain.”

“Shall I consider that a rigid limitation?”

“It would probably be wise.”

“I can see three possibilities. Possessor Avaming’s payments to architects and landscapers during the last ten years equal 62 percent of his total debt. They started declining about four years ago and he started buying musical instruments and hiring musicians. In the last year, he’s started spending money on water hunting.”

“He’s obviously a prime example of a serial enthusiast. I suspect you’ll find water hunting will present the most promising opportunities at this moment.”

Purvali cut the connection and Sabor turned part of his attention to the input from a camera that watched his rear. The steady fallout from the trees had degraded the transparency of Purvali’s carrier, in spite of the unbroken efforts of the cleaning moles, but he could still watch her work. He had never understood why men like Kenzan Khan preferred women with limited abilities. Purvali was a delight in every situation he normally shared with her, but she could seem achingly—*hauntingly*—beautiful when her face was shaped by the total concentration she focused on her work. Many people sank into slack-faced stupors when they stared at the displays their implants transmitted to their optic nerves. Purvali looked as taut as a hunting animal.

Choy was his usual loose-jointed self. Judging by the way his hands were moving, he was probably participating in a simulated unarmed combat spree while he monitored the security system. He had started chopping and blocking when they had finished the last feeding stop. He was still pummeling the air when they lumbered into the last kilometer that lay between them and the point the information system had chosen for their next stop.

“Twelve years ago,” Purvali said, “Possessor Avaming was loading the databanks with descriptions of his buildings and remodelings. Six years ago he had thirty musicians on his payroll and he was bombarding his friends with invitations to concerts. Now he’s started spending whole tendays racing up and down the lake pursuing the larger members of the yellow-feathered swordbeak population.”

This time Purvali had assembled a concise formal report. Option One revolved around a new prey animal—a faster, sleeker version of the yellow-feathered swordbeak. The hunting fanatics had placed a few samples of the upgrade in the lake and they wanted to triple the number. Most of the other people with an interest in the lake had registered their opposition—on the very solid grounds that the increase would tip the competitive balance in favor of the enhanced swordbeaks, with the

usual unpredictable consequences for the aquatic ecosystem. Avaming had joined the campaign to overcome the opposition, but he was still a novice. If Sabor could help him arrange a victory, his status would take a substantial leap.

Sabor shook his head. He could offer Avaming a financial subsidy that would overwhelm the opposition. It wouldn't be the first time he had financed a little opinion engineering. But it would plunge him into a political situation that was just as unpredictable as the ecological effects.

Option Two was another play on Avaming's appetite for social status. Killing was only a part of the sport. To win the full admiration of your colleagues, you had to ride and slaughter with impeccable style. Avaming had bought the most expensive performance implants on the market, but the programs he had planted in his nervous system could only take him so far. To reach the highest levels of the sport, he needed a coach—someone who could teach him all the accepted nuances of true deportment.

"He's demonstrated he has an above average drive for social status every time he's surrendered to a new enthusiasm," Purvali argued. "His music mania included a series of private concerts that became some of the most sought-after invitations on the planet. Now he's applied to the hunting coach everybody wants. And she's treated him just like any other novice and put him on the bottom of her waiting list."

Sabor scanned Purvali's profile of the coach. He tipped back his head and stared at the light at the top of the forest.

"I believe it's time we committed to a higher risk level," Sabor said. "There are certain kinds of communication that simply can't be compressed into blips."

"It will take Colonel Jina's technicians about seventeen minutes to locate us," Purvali said. "We're now about three hours by airship from Colonel Jina's hangars. I can't find any indication they've positioned an airship in a closer location."

The coach's welcomer had been costumed in the kind of understated, scrupulously draped shirts Sabor's mother had favored. It had been shaped by one of the best known designers on the planet—a hard working stylist with several hundred thousand high-earning yuris on deposit in Sabor's databanks. The coach would return Honored Sabor's call in approximately twenty minutes, the image informed him. The coach was Working with a Student.

The coach didn't list her fees in the databanks, but Purvali had researched her life style and produced a reasonable estimate of her income. Sabor had decided a hundred thousand yuris would probably win him a fast acceptance. He raised his estimate by fifty thousand when he saw the designer's logo floating in the lower left of the display—and reduced it by twenty-five when the coach returned his call fifteen seconds after his system reminded him the twenty minutes had come to an end.

"I'd like to offer one of my better customers an impressive gift," Sabor said.

“I’m prepared to pay a substantial fee.”

He switched his display to a forty-five second recording of Avaming on seal back. “I’m no connoisseur of these things, but it seems to me Possessor Avaming may have some natural talent, in addition to his obvious enthusiasm.”

The coach nodded and looked suitably thoughtful. “It’s hard to make a proper evaluation from recordings, of course. I always evaluate my prospective students in person.”

“I understand. I can offer you a hundred thousand yuris for your trouble. I’ll be happy to transfer the whole amount in advance of your evaluation.”

A familiar look flicked across the coach’s face. She restored her air of cool indifference with a speed that made Sabor feel grateful he hadn’t tried to offer her a few thousand less. “I should advise you Possessor Avaming has acquired several of the less obvious bad habits,” the coach said. “He will have to demonstrate he is willing to relearn the basics.”

An oversize text message from Purvali preempted the space next to the coach’s head. *Your transmission is being examined. I can’t defend it without interfering with your conversation.*

“I’m confident Possessor Avaming will welcome the opportunity to be evaluated by someone of your stature,” Sabor said.

“Then you have my permission to tell him I can schedule an evaluation within the next three or four days.”

Purvali replaced the coach the moment he terminated the call. “Colonel Jina seems to be making an all out effort,” Purvali said. “I think we should assume he has us located.”

“I wrapped that up in thirteen minutes!”

“They identified the call faster than I thought they would. They may have gotten lucky. But I’d feel better if we acted on the assumption they’re making an extra effort.”

“Do you have any information on Avaming’s whereabouts? Is there any danger I’ll be calling him while he’s indulging in a sybaritic lunch?”

“Possessor Avaming is currently riding with the Benjori Hunt. He’s been riding with them every fourth day since he first started hunting. The hunt left the dock about half an hour ago. I’m looking at the Recording Secretary’s log. The hound seals are tracking a swordbeak that just went below for the first time.”

Sabor added the secretary’s log to his display. He was looking at the same view the hunters were receiving—a real-time composite created from the sensors in

the hunters' water suits. A direct transmission from the hunters' optic nerves would have presented him with a useless image of murky lake water. The composite transformed the darkness into a vision of hunters and hound seals slipping through water that was so clear they could have been sailing across a cloudless sky.

"The average chase lasts about an hour," Purvali said.

"And then there's the traditional social rituals after the return to the dock. I should be able to call him in about three hours, right?"

"Yes. There's a hunt lunch followed by a ceremonial closure."

"Then I suppose I may as well tend to a few business matters."

"Can you limit your efforts to activities that don't require long transmissions?"

"I'll pull in one last download and settle for whatever distraction it can offer me."

The hunting seals sped through the waters in a portion of his display which he located on the upper left quarter of his vision field. On the upper right quarter, images and numbers updated the situation on the north shore power delivery project. The trees and the incessant movement of the bird life provided an odd, clashing backdrop for both halves.

Five hundred thousand human beings now lived on Fernheim. In theory, they didn't need any kind of centralized power system. In theory, they could have fulfilled all their needs with the solar power panels that roofed most of their homes. The panels would have powered their fabricators and their fabricators would have provided them with all the essentials a rational human could possibly need.

In practice, of course, very few people were satisfied with the basics. In the average Fernheim household, the fabricators were sucking up energy five times faster than the average solar installation could supply it. The champagne Sabor had stocked in his carrier would have used up several days of the average individual's solar consumption. A proper standard of living, by most people's standards, required a proper energy infrastructure, complete with large-scale hydrogen-fusion reactors, orbiting power satellites, and all the other sources of energy human ingenuity had developed.

And, of course, a network of cables and wires that would deliver the energy to all the needy individuals who would be reduced to champagne-deprived poverty without it. In some societies the network would have been constructed by a government. On Fernheim, so far, nobody seemed to be interested in the tedious bickering—or outright violence—that normally preceded the establishment of a central government. The North Shore Energy Matrix was an exercise in long term speculation. Ninety percent of the people in the lake community—45 percent of the population of the planet—lived on the south shore. The entrepreneurs behind the

north shore project were assuming a power network would pull new arrivals and restless current residents to the unterrestrialized wilderness on the other side of the lake. The profits would come tomorrow, the big expenditures had to be paid today. Obviously, a competent, upright scion of a famous banking family had to wave his wand and place the necessary numbers in the appropriate accounts. And watch every move the North Shore Development Association made. In exactly the same way his mother would have.

He had been nine when his mother's personal assistant had given him his first overview of the family business. We are a profit-making enterprise, BanarJar had intoned. But we fill a social role. Bankers are the functionaries who allocate the capital resources of society. A progressive society must invest some of its resources in enterprises that increase its future wealth. We are the people who decide which enterprises will be cultivated. Governments can do that, too, but we operate under a socially valuable restraint: we forfeit some of our own wealth when we make bad decisions.

The hunting seals cornered the yellow-feathered swordbeak in a shallow cove near the south end of the lake. The meals-and-recreation charts on the North Shore display produced two numbers that looked as if they warranted a request for more information—a request he would transmit primarily as a reminder he was performing his fiduciary duties. The monotonous tramp of the widemounts carried them from the trees and birds in one section of the forest to the almost-identical trees and birds in another section.

Sabor's information system pipped. "You have a message from Heinrich Doble."

"Display."

Heinrich's recorded image replaced the North Shore display. "I've been advised Colonel Jina has dispatched two helicopters in your direction, Sabor. They were one hundred kilometers southwest of his hangars about ten minutes ago."

"They could be close enough to start running a search pattern in about forty minutes," Purvali said. "They'll be operating at the limits of their range."

Sabor grimaced. "We are reminded once again of the hazards of assuming you can predict your adversary's intentions. Is there any possibility the second copter is carrying fuel?"

Purvali paused just long enough to let him know he had impressed her—a reaction that always evoked a spurt of ridiculously irrational masculine pleasure.

"It could be. Kenzan Khan could have hired one squad. And spent the savings on the copters."

She paused for another ten seconds. "The second copter can carry enough

fuel to keep both of them in the area for seventy-two minutes maximum. They could stay longer, of course, if the tanker could find a spot to put down.”

Sabor stared at the transmission from the scene of the hunt. Possibilities flooded through his brain. The helicopters couldn't hover above their location and drop Colonel Jina's staffers directly on top of them. The anti-material loads in their guns made that a foolhardy move. The ground troops would probably land a few hundred meters away and pursue them on foot. If one of the copters was a tanker, and it found a spot to set down, the copters could stay in the area and give the foot soldiers a mobility that could be decisive....

“I'm beginning to feel my training in military tactics hasn't been as extensive as it should have been,” Sabor said.

“They probably don't have our exact location,” Purvali said. “They probably know where we are to within about thirty kilometers.”

Sabor placed a small map on his right display area. The random movements dictated by the system had veered them closer to the Ratagava River. They were now about twenty-five kilometers from the river bank. Should they turn away from it? The widemounts could traverse the fords marked on the map, but they would be crossing a river that harbored some of the less pleasant representatives of the aboriginal fish and feather community.

He gave the system an order and it generated a course that took them almost due east—directly toward the river.

“We'll obey the fates one more time,” Sabor said. “Colonel Jina may assume we'll be avoiding the rivers—going where he can't corner us against the river bank.”

The security system picked up the two helicopters as the copters slipped across the forest from the northeast. Both machines seemed to be steering toward the center of the logical search area.

The widemounts had just begun their hourly rest period. Choy thought they should let the animals have a good feed and Sabor concurred. “They won't be widening the search this far for another hour,” Choy said. “It may be our last chance to give the animals a solid refueling.”

Choy was scanning in one second bursts at random intervals spaced four to eight minutes apart. The system didn't register another blip until he made two more scans. The copter was just about where it should have been if it had been executing the search pattern Choy had predicted.

“They have to be refueling,” Purvali said. “They couldn't be running that kind of pattern if they weren't refueling.”

On the hunt display, the hunters were riding toward their dock with a piece of the swordbeak's flesh speared on each lance. The hunters had conducted their final,

single-handed rushes at the swordbeak with a stately, ritualized formality, but the kill itself had been a blood-spattered fury of massed lance thrusts.

“It’s going to take them another half hour to reach the dock,” Purvali said. “Are you sure you can’t contact Possessor Avaming now? Don’t you think he may be very aware he was one of the people who didn’t receive any applause when he made his final attack? Isn’t it possible that might make him exceptionally receptive, Sabor?”

“It’s too risky,” Sabor said. “He could shut me off in a second if he decided he had to let me know I’m dealing with someone who truly understands style. I’d never get another chance.”

The info from Choy’s display appeared in front of Sabor. A helicopter symbol occupied the northeastern quadrant. A vector line indicated the copter was traveling in their direction.

“It’s abandoned the search pattern,” Choy said. “They’ve probably located us. Shall I keep the radar active?”

“We might as well stay informed.”

They heard the rattle of the copter’s engines when the display placed it about a kilometer behind them. It closed to a hundred meters and the symbol stopped advancing.

Choy had hung four cages on the side of his widemount. The top of one of the cages flipped up and a white bird flapped toward the treetops. Choy paused the bird just above the canopy, where its color would blend with the leaves, and copied its transmissions to Sabor’s display. Three of Colonel Jina’s hardbodies were executing a classic rope descent from the copter. A guard cat was being lowered in its harness.

“It looks like he’s opted for a quick-victory, low-personnel budget,” Purvali said. “Two copters. One eight man squad and six cats. Eight cats if you limit the squad to hardbodies—which would probably be the optimum configuration for a combat unit under these conditions.”

“It should take them about five minutes to lower the soldiers and their cats,” Choy said. “I’m placing five of our cats between them and us. The other three will watch our front and flanks.”

Purvali added her consultant’s edge to her voice. “I recommend we launch a counter attack. While they’re vulnerable. I can go back and try for the copter. Our cats can attack them while they’re unloading.”

Sabor frowned at the display. The three hardbodies had already slipped beneath the canopy. A second guard cat tumbled out of the door and he watched it start its descent.

Purvali was the logical person to try a ground to air shot. Choy was the security expert, but he was operating the cats. And the rest of the security system.

“The copters have to operate together,” Purvali said. “A hit on the troop hauler should drive both of them out of the area.”

“Attack with the cats, Choy. All five. Try to do as much damage to their cats as you can. Don’t waste effort on the humans.”

“You can always negotiate for me afterward if I get unlucky,” Purvali said. “You can’t do anything if they capture you.”

She had already picked up her weapon and raised the side of her carrier. Her feet were resting on the top step of the dismounting ladder.

“We won’t get another opportunity like this, Sabor. We can’t afford to waste it.”

A third cat dropped out of the copter door. “If my estimate is correct,” Purvali said, “they’re going to deploy eight hardbodies and eight cats against eight cats and one financier with two assistants.”

“Give them one burst,” Sabor said. “Just one. And get back here.”

Purvali dropped to the ground as if she had just been told she could run outside and play. The trees and the underbrush came between them before she had taken five steps.

Choy added an overhead map view to Sabor’s display. Five blue cats were racing toward the area under the copter. There would be no feed from Purvali. They had to assume someone was sitting in the helicopter monitoring their transmissions.

Three red cat heads appeared on the display. Four red circles marked the positions occupied by the hardbodies who had reached the forest floor. Choy disregarded his instructions—quite rightly, Sabor realized—and directed two of his cats at the red circles. The cats couldn’t attack the other team’s cats if they were paralyzed by moles from the enemy guns.

Three of Choy’s cats converged on one of the red cat heads. Slashing, snarling cartoon animals replaced the blue cat symbols.

Sabor had split the right side of his display top and bottom, with the map on the bottom and the image of the copter on top. The hardbodies on the ropes ripped their guns off their crossbelts as if they were conducting an exercise in simultaneous movement. They twisted around on their ropes and aimed their weapons one-handed. The muzzles were all pointed in the same general direction.

On the map view, a grinning cartoon cat clasped its hands over its head. The basic blue cat symbols replaced the cartoon and sped away from the landing site.

“We crippled one of their cats,” Choy said. “I figured that was good enough. Run in, do some damage, get out before we lose anybody.”

“Quite right. My sentiments exactly.”

Something glistened on the upper half of the copter. Choy zoomed in. The side of the copter filled the upper half of Sabor’s display. The metal seemed to be covered with a thin film.

“I think she hit a fuel tank,” Choy said.

Choy pulled back the view. Cats were rolling out the door of the copter. Two hardbodies leaned over the side and grabbed at the ropes that were already being used. The hardbodies who were already hanging on the ropes were still firing at the point they had selected.

Choy’s cats formed a defensive line thirty meters behind the widemounts. Sabor twisted around on his pillows and peered into the forest. Purvali’s carrier blocked a third of his view. Her widemount eyed him with bored indifference.

His mother had warned him. *Are you sure you should ask for a woman like that, Sabor? Remember—you are asking for someone who has all the qualities you find most attractive. You are asking for someone who will draw the maximum response from your own personality structure. You will be in control of the situation in one, very limited, sense. She will love you. She will want to please you. But can you control the emotions she will arouse?*

There had been times when his mother had contented herself with male concubines. For her, they had obviously been a respite from the masculine storm centers that normally diverted her. She would never have requisitioned a concubine who could engage her deepest hungers. Sabor’s sisters seemed to feel the same way.

The side of Purvali’s carrier swung up. She trotted around a tree with her gun held across her breasts and hopped onto the ladder.

“Did I do any damage? Could you see if I did any damage?”

Sabor’s widemount swayed underneath him. Choy had started them moving again without waiting for instructions.

“We think you hit a fuel tank,” Choy said. “They’re dumping people and cats like the copter crew is very anxious to get out of here.”

Sabor rose to his knees inside his carrier. “I told you one burst! You disobeyed me. You disobeyed a clear instruction.”

“They couldn’t see me. I had plenty of cover.”

“They knew where you were. I could see it. They had every gun trained on the

same position.”

“They had a general idea. Just a general idea. I was surrounded by leaves.”

“How many hits did your armor have to absorb?”

Purvali lowered her eyes.

“How many?”

“I quit when it told me it was approaching its limit.”

“Two more hits! *Two more*. That’s all it would have taken! *Two hits*. And you’d be in their power right now.”

“I hit their fuel tank, Sabor. They’re sending the copter back! We won’t have to worry about airlifts and air attacks. I evaluated the situation and balanced the risks—the danger they might capture me versus the danger we’d be in if they kept the copters in the area. I was the one who was there. I could see I was in a good position.”

Sabor returned his attention to his display. Purvali’s pleading face disappeared behind the three segments of his montage. The scout bird was fluttering through the upper reaches of the trees and picking up glimpses of the force gathering behind them. Choy’s map showed him the positions of their cats and the estimated positions of their adversaries.

The members of the Benjori Hunt were riding up to their home dock with their mounts pressed into a tight, two-file formation. Four servants were waiting for them behind a table crowded with glasses and champagne bottles.

“I suspect an analysis of our situation may be in order,” Sabor said. “How much time do we have before Colonel Jina’s bravos wear down our defenses with their unsporting superior numbers?”

Purvali focused on the images floating in front of her eyes. Concentration nullified the emotions that had been playing across her face.

“Our rest stops are our biggest problem,” Purvali said. “We can stay ahead of them indefinitely. But they can catch up at our rest stops. And whittle away our defenses. The big variable is Choy’s maneuvers with the cats. And the kind of luck he has.”

Sabor skimmed the report she had placed on his display. The widemounts were faster, but Colonel Jina’s hardbodies had more endurance, and the feedback from the sensors indicated they had ended up with six armed men supported by seven cats. They could stay on the trail indefinitely, close the gap at each rest stop, and concentrate their extra numbers on one or two cats at each stop. They could launch a final, irresistible onslaught as soon as they eliminated three or four of the

guard cats.

“Colonel Jina tends to be a thrifty tactician,” Purvali said. “I think we can be confident he won’t launch a direct attack on our moving fortresses until he’s thinned out our cats. We have to make sure he understands we’re willing to kill his cats, Choy. He has to know he’s going to lose some valuable assets if he attacks us too early.”

A new set of simulations raced across the display. A diamond representing a figure with a gun entered the fray. The diamond darted through the woods with all the speed a certain very familiar woman could muster. A note at the bottom of the display reported the results. In 527 simulations, the addition of the extra combatant had added three extra march periods, on average, to the length of time they could stave off the inevitable.

“And how many times did our little diamond get captured?” Sabor asked.

“Almost none. I can break off combat any time the odds get too rough.”

“But will you, my dear? Will the real life, vulnerable human being always have the good sense to retreat?”

“You’re fighting for your freedom, Sabor. For your control over your own mind.”

“And how free will I be if they take you hostage? You may not believe it, but if Kenzan Khan gets you in his unpleasant clutches, he’ll have all the influence over my actions he could possibly desire.”

The hunters of the Benjori Hunt chattered and gestured as they downed their champagne and bundled off the pier. They isolated themselves in private changing rooms and entered their dockside banquet hall in ceremonial costumes that draped them in white and red.

Colonel Jina’s hunters were much more businesslike. Choy was monitoring them electronically, with supplemental glimpses from his visual scouts. On the map on Sabor’s display, the hardbodies steadily fell behind, but their speed never slackened. When Choy called for the first halt, the hardbodies were a little over one kilometer behind—about ten minutes’ marching time at their current speed. Choy deployed the cats in a defensive formation and Sabor watched the hardbody symbols move relentlessly forward.

“They’re speeding up for the assault,” Purvali said. “They’re really driving themselves. Possessor Khan must be paying Colonel Jina something extra if the colonel’s willing to inflict that kind of stress on his cadre.”

The hardbodies and their cats followed the script predicted by Purvali’s simulations. They concentrated three cats and four hardbodies on the cat at the extreme left of Choy’s defensive line. Choy was faced with a classic dilemma. If the

outnumbered cat held its position, it could be eliminated. If Choy pulled it back, the assault force could sweep around the flank and strike directly at the widemounts and their passengers. Choy responded by ordering two cats to the defense of the animal under attack. His other cats extended their line and took up defensive positions.

Sabor resisted the temptation to damp his stress reactions as he watched the tactical exhibition on his display. He knew he needed all the alertness his brain could muster. Visuals from the aerial scouts offered him flashes of the real life violence hidden under the symbols moving across the map. Cats leaped on other cats from ambush and disengaged after a flurry of bites and slashes. Hardbodies slipped through the forest with their guns, searching for targets.

Sabor's widemount was demolishing a bush that was covered with thick leaves and dangling pods. The other widemounts were gorging on the local vegetation with the same concentration. Choy had thoughtfully placed a time strip on the map display, so Sabor could see how many minutes they had to wait before the rest stop ended.

Sabor decided to intervene when the countdown reached ninety seconds. "I think we should go now, Choy—if you feel you're in a position in which disengagement looks feasible."

Sabor's widemount raised its head from the bush. A huge snort jostled its frame. It turned away from its chosen collation and lumbered toward its place behind Choy's mount.

On the map display, Choy conducted a fighting disengagement that drew a flurry of claps from Sabor's hands. Colonel Jina's cats abandoned the fight and settled into their walking pace the instant it became obvious they had done all the harm they could for the moment.

"Those people know what they're doing," Choy said. "They didn't waste a calorie."

"You're doing a rather impressive job yourself, Choy."

"We've got two cats that took a mauling. I may have to sacrifice one of them at the next stop."

The hunters of the Benjori Hunt were sampling the fruits and dessert wines that had been arranged along the table. The camera drifted down the hall and Sabor saw Avaming busying himself with his food while the women on both sides of him chatted with other partners. The hunters rose from their chairs with their glasses raised and the Recording Secretary terminated the transmission with an image of a waving banner.

"So what does Avaming do now?" Sabor said. "Go home and recuperate from his endeavors?"

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” Purvali said. “He doesn’t seem to have a regular post-hunt schedule.”

“Then it obviously might be best if we assumed he’s in a receptive mood. Will you advise his welcomer I’ve been talking to one of the better-known hunting coaches and I have some information that he may find of interest? Phrase it in your own irresistible style, of course.”

Sabor’s time strip clicked off the minutes while he waited for Avaming’s reply to his call. The widemounts plodded through a complete, forty-five minute march segment. Purvali expressed her disgust at the “affectations” of an “outmoded class.”

“He’s taking about as long as I thought he would,” Sabor said. “Moneylenders have to be treated with a certain condescension. We belong, after all, to a coterie that devotes most of its conscious hours to the pursuit of mere wealth.”

Avaming’s welcomer was an off-the-shelf female figure. She was so undistinguished Sabor was confident Avaming had spent hours searching for a design that would impress his callers with his total indifference to trivial matters such as the way his welcomer impressed his callers.

“Possessor Avaming has advised me he is now available, if you’re still interested in talking to him.”

“Please advise Possessor Avaming I’m still interested.”

Sabor’s widemount had once again settled its bulk in front of a large bush and started grinding leaves and branches between its molars. On the map display, the hardbodies were making another run at the defensive line Choy had formed with the cats. They had split into two groups. The larger group—three cats and five hardbodies—was driving toward the left flank of Choy’s line. The other group was obviously supposed to harass the center and keep it occupied. It had been six minutes since Choy had called the rest stop.

Avaming had exchanged his ceremonial finery for a loosely belted lounging robe. He received Sabor’s gift with a superbly aristocratic response: he recovered his control of his facial muscles seconds after he heard the news and he immediately offered to return the favor.

“That’s a most generous gift,” Avaming said. “I must admit you’ve quite taken me by surprise, Honored Sabor.”

“It’s our pleasure, Possessor.”

“I hope there’s something I can do for you. I would be embarrassed if there wasn’t.”

“There’s no reason for you to be embarrassed. The opportunity happened to come to my attention and it seemed like the appropriate thing to do, given the fact

that your deposits have made such an important contribution to the capital formation that keeps our planetary economy functioning. You and your colleagues have created a tradition that sets a high standard of courtesy.”

“But there must be *some* way I can display my appreciation,” Avaming said. “I realize the theorists are undoubtedly right. We large landowners will eventually be supplanted by the masters of capital, just as our counterparts were on Earth. But that day hasn’t come yet. We still have some influence.”

The three enemy cats had located one of Choy’s mauled cats and ganged up on it. Choy inserted a transmission from the cat’s optic nerve in the upper left corner of the map display. The cat rose to all fours seconds before three furies leaped across the bushy fallen tree it had been using for cover. The glistening black skin of the cat’s assailants filled its visual field. Trees and sunlight rolled past its eyes as it tipped back its head in response to the wounds it was receiving.

Choy had placed another cat where it could act as a reserve. It popped out of its hiding place ten meters behind its doomed teammate and Choy switched to a direct transmission from its nervous system. Sabor peered through its eyes as it bored toward the heaving bodies in front of it. It lunged at the hindquarters of one of the enemy cats and apparently closed its jaws around part of a leg.

The display shifted to map-and-symbol mode. The symbol that represented the second cat broke contact and angled away from the fracas.

I think we should go, Choy transmitted.

Sabor’s fingers danced across an imaginary keyboard. *Go*.

“As a matter of fact,” Sabor said, “I have been thinking about a problem I have. I discovered your interest in the aquatic chase, in fact, when I was researching the problem.”

“Feel free to tell me what you need.”

“I believe you and Possessor Makajida have had some disagreements.”

“You could say that. I think most impartial observers would inform you we’re not on the most cordial of terms.”

“As you may be aware, his military forces are somewhat smaller than normal at this moment. He has rented about fifty of them to another Possessor. It would be very helpful to me if you could place some of your military personnel on your southern border—enough that he would feel he had to bolster his own defenses.”

Avaming smiled. “As I understand it, he’s rented his soldiers to Kenzan Khan.”

“That’s my understanding, too.”

“I can see how that could be of value to you, Honored Sabor. I’ve received two rather boastful messages from Kenzan.”

The widemounts had trudged away from their feast and settled into line. The cats that had attacked the left flank were sweeping toward the widemounts unopposed. Had Choy realized the cats would move that fast when he had made his tactical calculations? Did he really think the widemounts could pull away from the cats before the cats closed in ... ?

“As a matter of fact,” Avaming said, “I’ve been thinking about conducting an alert exercise. There’s no reason why it can’t take place on my border with Possessor Makajida.”

Avaming smiled again. “I would have to notify Possessor Makajida I was conducting an exercise, of course. I wouldn’t want him to misunderstand my intentions.”

Sabor smiled back. “That would certainly be the most prudent way to go about it. I hope you’ll be able to schedule it soon.”

“I’ll get onto it as soon as we terminate this call. I gather it would be most helpful to you if it were done promptly.”

“That could make a significant difference, Possessor.”

“Consider it done. I’m only sorry you didn’t ask for something that required more of my resources.”

The enemy cats had dropped back to marching speed. The tactician on the other side had earned another burst of applause from Choy. The cats had aborted their attack at the first sign the widemounts were pulling ahead.

“Our widemounts have now lost six minutes of refueling time,” Choy said. “Four this feeding period, almost two last period. I can’t keep them moving at their maximum pace if they don’t get a full feeding period soon.”

“We have no idea how long Possessor Avaming is going to dally,” Purvali said. “I can understand why you didn’t want to give him any sense of the time constraints we’re working with. But he could spend the next three hours wandering around his domains admiring his building projects.”

“He said he would get on it as soon he terminated the call, Purvali. I’m inclined to think he will—given his personality structure. I should also note that we aren’t the only combatants who are testing their limits. Our pursuers are driving themselves, too. As you yourself have advised me.”

Sabor turned his attention to the material he had downloaded from the databanks. Now that they were being pursued on the ground, he could assume their pursuers knew where they were. He could transmit and receive without worrying

about security. He could turn away from all the stresses and tensions of their situation—including the tensions Purvali was creating—and lose himself in profit projections, trading opportunities, brilliant-but-unworkable ideas for new projects, gossip that might tell him something about the character of possible customers, and all the other details that made his working life so endlessly fascinating. He had never understood people who thought “getting and spending” was an empty way to fill your days. The numbers and facts in his databanks absorbed him in the same way the interactions of individuals fascinated dramatists and the intricacies of natural systems fascinated ecologists.

He could probably claim, in fact, that he had a better understanding of human relationships than most of the creative minds who had tried to depict them. A dramatist’s errors might be overlooked by some segments of the audience. His cost him real purchasing power.

He kept on working after they stopped for the next fueling period. He didn’t call up Choy’s displays until the halt had reached the five minute point. This time Choy deliberately left one flank wide open. Choy’s opposite number committed his forces to an all out attack on that side and Choy responded with a precisely timed counterattack. Three of Choy’s remaining cats threw themselves into a melee in which they were hopelessly outnumbered. Choy lost one cat, but he achieved his immediate objective. The widemounts placidly completed a full fifteen minute feeding.

“Quite good, Choy,” Sabor said. “You had that timed to the second.”

He waited for a nag from Purvali, but she apparently decided to fume in silence.

Choy now had six cats left. He grouped four in a loose formation in the center the next time they stopped. The other two were positioned further out, one on each flank.

The opposition came in fast, in an attack that seemed to be spread across Choy’s entire front. Then, just when Sabor thought they were committed to a straightforward linear assault, they behaved like the kind of highly trained, purpose-shaped soldiers they were. Four hardbodies and four cats coalesced into a compact mass and started a wide swing around Choy’s right flank.

Choy responded by detaching two cats from his central formation. They joined forces with the cat he had placed on the right flank, and the three animals raced toward an intersection with the assault party.

“I need a decision,” Choy said. “I can put up a strong fight when they make contact, gain us three or four extra minutes of feeding time, and probably lose one cat. Or I can put up a weak fight, hold them off just long enough for us to get moving, and probably save all the cats.”

Sabor scowled. The widemounts had accumulated about eight minutes of browsing time.

“Recommendation?” Sabor said.

“I can’t make any,” Choy said.

“Light resistance.”

It was a random decision. He said the first thing that popped into his head and hoped he could live with it. Choy started the widemounts moving, Choy’s cats engaged in a brief flurry of action—and a shot from a hardbody reduced one of the cats to a set of rigid, totally paralyzed muscles. They had sacrificed several minutes of feeding time and lost a cat, too.

“Not my most brilliant decision,” Sabor said.

“I’m sorry,” Choy said. “I thought I could save the cats.”

“You’re working with percentages, Choy. You make your bet and accept the results.”

He returned his primary focus to the databanks, but it had become a pointless exercise. Information flowed across his brain like water washing across a stone floor. Nothing penetrated.

They were down to five cats. The next feeding period could be the last. Choy might be able to stave off a breakthrough one more time, but it was a fifty-fifty proposition—at best.

A blinking prompt advised him Purvali’s carrier had come open. He ordered it closed and received an immediate *not responding*.

“You seem to have a problem with your carrier, Purvali.”

“You have two options, Sabor. You can give Choy permission to integrate me into his tactical schemes or you can make me fight on my own.”

“Please remove the pillow or whatever it is you’re using to jam your carrier open. I’ve already given you my decision.”

“And how are you going to stop me? I can drop off this animal and be lost in the trees before you or Choy can touch the ground.”

He could give her an order, of course. But would she obey it? He had asked her designers for a concubine, not a robot. He had her loyalty and her devotion. For machine-like obedience he would have to console himself with the companionship of machines.

“Don’t do this to me, Purvali. Please.”

“You’re rolling the dice, Sabor. That isn’t good enough. Not when your survival is at stake.”

“I have been running simulations,” Choy said. “I have a suggestion you may find worthy of consideration, Sabor.”

“I would be a fool if I didn’t consider your suggestions, Choy.”

“The simulations indicate we could probably lethal two or three of their cats at the next rest stop if I employed Purvali as a surprise ambusher. The risk to her would be minimal. She would only have to expose herself for a few seconds—just long enough to fire at their cats when I told her to.”

“Look at the simulations,” Purvali said. “Just look at the simulations.”

“Show me the simulations, Choy.”

A summary popped onto Sabor’s display. Choy’s program had run five hundred simulations. They had killed one cat in 27 percent of the simulations, two in 54 percent, three in 13 percent, and none in 6 percent. There had been no simulation in which Purvali had been captured or injured.

The display zipped through a random selection of quick-play runs that included samples with all four outcomes. Choy had conscientiously included all the unknowns he and the program would have to work with during a real attack. There would be important blanks, for example, in Choy’s knowledge of the terrain. He wouldn’t know the location of every tree trunk and the sight lines it would interrupt.

“An impartial observer might note that you’ve left out one important factor,” Sabor said. “You’re assuming Purvali will obey your orders with scrupulous precision. If you included the possibility she might dally for a few seconds before she retreated—in the hope that she might be able to kill two of their cats instead of just one, for example—the outcomes of some of those simulations might have been less acceptable.”

“You are running out of time,” Purvali said. “You’d be running out of time even if Possessor Avaming called you right now and told you he’s kept his word. How long will it be before Possessor Makajida reacts to the news he has a hostile force threatening his borders? It could take him hours, Sabor.”

Sabor eliminated Purvali’s face from his display. He scowled at a block of text that summarized the current financial status of the second largest mobile submarine restaurant on the lake.

“Whatever happens,” Sabor said, “I’m obviously not going to have any peace until I let you prance around the forest. Take care of her, Choy.”

He watched her as she made her preparations. She fired her gun at a passing tree. She recharged her armored coat. She slipped into a relaxed meditation state and

gave herself a half hour nap.

She dropped to the ground as soon as Choy brought the widemounts to a halt. Choy positioned her on the left flank and removed her symbol from the map display. Choy would track her movements with his memory. There would be no possibility the opposition could pick up a stray transmission.

Sabor raised the side of his carrier. Cold air bit at his cheeks. He couldn't watch Purvali's movements on the display, but Choy furnished an explosion graphic when she shot the cat that was leading the assault on the left side. Another graphic announced a hit on a second cat. Choy transmitted a command and the widemounts backed away from their food sources.

Purvali raced out of the woods with her eyes focused on her goal. She leaped for her mounting ladder when she was a full stride away from her widemount. She pulled a pillow into position and lowered the side of the carrier as she rolled inside.

Sabor jumped away from the tree he had been using as a cover. He grabbed the pillow and threw it at the ground. A command shot out of his brain. The lock on the carrier returned the appropriate signal.

He ran to his own widemount without waiting for Purvali's response. On the display, the hardbodies called off their attack and let the widemounts widen the gap once again.

Sabor switched to the view from his rear camera. Purvali had folded her arms across her breasts. She was staring silently at the back of her widemount's head.

Sabor's system pipped. Possessor Avaming's stock welcomer replaced Sabor's pouting paramour.

"Possessor Avaming has asked me to inform you he has deployed thirty of his security personnel on the border he shares with Possessor Makajida. He has advised Possessor Makajida of his actions."

"Please convey my thanks to Possessor Avaming," Sabor said. "Please let him know I deeply appreciate his kindness."

He gave his system another order and it immediately put him in contact with a more ostentatious image—the muscular, thickly robed flesh-and-blood human male who served as Possessor Dobryani's welcomer.

"Good afternoon, Financier Sabor. May I ask your business?"

"I have some intelligence I would like you to convey to Possessor Dobryani. Please tell her I have reason to believe Possessor Kenzan Khan is about to lose the services of the fifty soldiers he is currently renting from Possessor Makajida."

Wrinkles creased the welcomer's square, manly forehead. "Is there any way

Possessor Dobryani can verify this information?”

“I could give her the names of other people she should query, but I think it would be best if I didn’t. I suggest that she prepare to act on this development—if she wishes to act on it—and watch for evidence it is taking place.”

The welcomer frowned again. Sabor could visualize the turmoil in his mind. This was not, obviously, a routine call from a routine caller.

The welcomer decided a terse nod would be the appropriate physical response. “I will advise her at once.”

“I suggest you give the message your highest priority.”

“I will include your request with my transmission, Financier.”

Purvali had removed a scarf from her luggage and wrapped it around her head. Her hidden face and her straight body communicated the same message kilometer after kilometer, without a single change in her position, every time Sabor popped her image onto his display.

“You have a realtime call from Colonel Jina,” Sabor’s system announced.

Sabor glanced at his time strip. It had been forty-one minutes since Avaming had announced he was deploying his troops. “That could be interesting. Put the good colonel on. Copy to Choy and Purvali.”

Colonel Jina flashed his unforgettable smile. “Good afternoon, Sabor. We’re having a busy day, aren’t we?”

“It’s always good to stay active, Colonel. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve been keeping track of the time you’ve devoted to rest stops. We will be resolving this situation the next time you’re forced to stop for a feeding session—in about twenty minutes, by my calculation. You don’t have enough cats to counter another assault and your widemounts don’t have enough energy to outrun us.”

“My assistant Choytang is in charge of our logistics. But I believe twenty minutes is a reasonable estimate.”

“Kenzan Khan is determined to take you prisoner and acquire total control of your assets. It seems to me there should be some room for compromise. If you were to forgive all his current debts, for example, he would be in a position to borrow more capital from you and maintain the forces he needs to pursue his conflict with Possessor Dobryani. I would be happy to convey such an offer to him.”

“Doesn’t that create some conflict with your professional ethics, Colonel?”

“I have several assets at risk. I would rather not lose them in an avoidable

assault.”

“They are all replaceable.”

“But replacement takes time. And time has a financial value. As you, of all people, should know. The proposal I am making would be in everyone’s interest, Honored Sabor.”

“I have to think about time, too—the long term consequences. I would still be surrendering to extortion. I would be encouraging all the other ruffians who would find such actions appealing.”

“It seems to me this wouldn’t be the first time you have yielded to the threat of violence. You and your colleagues have consistently bestowed large loans and special rates on the more powerful possessors.”

“No possessor has ever attempted anything this blatant. If we’re going to discuss our mutual interests, it seems to me it would be in your interest to advise Kenzan Khan you aren’t going to fulfill his contract. Your business, Colonel—like all businesses—depends on a system for an orderly transfer of payments. In most societies, that infrastructure normally rests on the rule of law. We have not established such a rule here and we are therefore dependent on other means. But that doesn’t mean you can live without the infrastructure.”

“You are going to be taken. You will be captured. Your concubine and your assistant will be captured. You will be taken to Possessor Khan. Your minds and all your assets will fall under his control.”

Sabor’s fingers tapped out a silent message to Choy. *What’s the maximum time you can keep the widemounts moving?*

Thirty-three minutes.

Do it. Postpone the next stop for as long as you can.

“Kenzan Khan is endangering a key social structure, Colonel. Do you really want to live on a planet in which the banking system can be corrupted by anyone who controls enough soldiers?”

“I can only interpret that statement as the plea of a desperate man, Honored Sabor. You may call me any time you wish to discuss my offer.”

The colonel’s image vanished. Purvali’s image leaped into the center of Sabor’s visual field.

“It’s settled,” Sabor said. “I will not give Kenzan some kind of compromise. There will be no end to his demands if I do that.”

He cut Purvali out of his display and started recording a message for Possessor Dobryani. “This is a follow up to the message I left with your welcomer,

Possessor Dobryani. If you launch an attack on Possessor Khan's forces within the next forty minutes, I will reimburse you for the cost of any losses you sustain. The reimbursement will be based on the cost of an accelerated replacement at the fastest possible tempo."

A blinking light on the edge of his display announced a text message from Purvali. *I presume we can at least drape our widemounts in their armored blankets?*

The armored blankets had been rolled into telescoping cylinders and attached to the carriers. The cylinders would extend fore and aft on command and the widemount would be sandwiched between two blankets that extended along its sides from head to tail. The blankets would interfere with the widemounts' side vision and general maneuverability, but their smiling adversary had made it clear they had to reorder their priorities.

"We'll lower the blankets when we make our rest stop," Sabor said. "Sooner if it looks like they're attacking the widemounts."

And how about me? I'm going to have a few problems shooting at our adversaries if you keep me locked inside my boudoir.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes."

You are being irrational, Sabor. Do you really think you'd be doing me a favor if you kept me alive just so I could spend the rest of my life as one of Possessor Khan's harem bodies?

"You have a real time call from Counselor Tarakelna."

"Put her on."

Counselor Tarakelna was the member of Dobryani's staff who handled most of her financial negotiations. She greeted him with her usual controlled, carefully measured smile, and Sabor responded with his best simulation of his normal business façade.

"Possessor Dobryani examined your last offer, Sabor. She feels you're offering her a minor return on a major risk. You are asking her to attack before she is certain Possessor Kenzan Khan has lost his extra forces."

"I can assure you those forces are going to be returned to their owner. It should happen at any minute. If Possessor Dobryani accepts my suggestion, she will have soldiers in position, in Kenzan Khan's territory, when it happens."

"Possessor Dobryani believes the risk/reward ratio is higher than it should be. She feels a complete cancellation of 20 percent of her debt load would be more logical."

“Possessor Dobryani has been granted a major opportunity, Counselor. We both know it would be to her advantage to seize it.”

“Possessor Dobryani fully understands the value of your information. But she feels she can take full advantage of it after she is certain Possessor Khan has lost control of his extra troops.”

Sabor nodded. “I’ve been looking at her account data while we talk. You can tell her I can offer her a nine tenday stretchout—ninety days, starting now, with no payments of interest or principal.”

Counselor Tarakelna frowned. She studied Sabor’s face and he looked back at her blandly.

“I will advise the Possessor of your offer,” Counselor Tarakelna said.

Sabor ordered the blankets dropped as soon as they settled into their next feeding stop. Choy formed the three passenger widemounts into a defensive triangle, with the cargo widemount positioned about thirty meters outside the triangle.

This time, Colonel Jina’s emissaries slipped into a dispersed formation. Three of the hardbodies and two of the cats disappeared from the display. Elongated ovals indicated their estimated positions.

A text message from Choy flickered across the map display. *I am releasing all my reconnaissance birds. I gather I should consider this our last stand.*

“Pull out all the stops,” Sabor said. “Maximum effort. Do or die.”

Birds whirred out of Choy’s cages. Symbols lit up on the map display. The hardbodies and their cats had formed a wide arc about seventy meters from Choy’s triangle.

“I am being attacked by anti-material molecular missiles,” Sabor’s carrier announced. “My armor is responding.”

“Our carriers’ shells will dissolve in about ten minutes,” Choy said. “We should counter-attack sometime before then. While our personal armor is still at maximum.”

“Can we attack on the widemounts?”

“For a few minutes. They still have some short-term energy reserves.”

“Hold off for as long as you can. Colonel Jina is obviously taking his time. The longer he takes, the better for us.”

The display monitored the effect of the invisible rain falling on the carrier shells. The widemounts munched on whatever nourishment they could scavenge from their immediate surroundings. Choy’s cats formed a tight formation between

the widemounts and the snipers in the trees. Sabor shifted his attention between the display and the real world and tried to spot the hardbodies when they broke cover and fired.

“We have to get very physical when we attack,” Choy said. “We have to break bones. We can’t possibly overwhelm their armor before they overwhelm ours.”

“I understand,” Sabor said. “Try to avoid killing and irreversible damage. We’ll leave that possibility in reserve—as a retaliatory threat if Colonel Jina starts thinking you and our female companion are expendable.”

“Get ready to move out. Our carrier shells will dissolve in about one minute.”

Sabor’s widemount shifted out of the triangle. The three passenger widemounts formed a rough line and lurched toward the left end of the hardbody line.

“I’m going to attack the two snipers on the far left,” Choy said. “The widemounts are our primary weapon. Concentrate on keeping low.”

Sabor’s carrier shell disappeared. A fog of fine particles blurred his image of the forest before the remains of the shell dispersed. Dishes and pillows slid off the platform that had formed the foundation of the shell. He stretched out flat on the platform, with a pillow between his head and the hardbodies, and noted that Purvali had acted like a sane human for once and engaged in the same maneuver.

Cats charged out of the trees. The three cats they had left screamed as they received the attack. A cat leaped at the head of Choy’s widemount. Claws ripped bloody gashes in the widemount’s skin. Choy raised his gun and fired into the animal’s mouth.

Purvali yelled. Sabor turned his head and saw another cat pulling itself onto the back of Choy’s mount. His hands reacted while his consciousness was still assimilating the situation. Four shots streamed into the cat. It reared on its hind legs, with its front claws reaching for Choy’s head, and slid off the platform.

A command flashed out of Sabor’s brain. His information system dispatched a message to Colonel Jina.

“We are avoiding inflicting irreversible damage on your expensive assets, Colonel. I would appreciate it you would render my assistants the same courtesy.”

He had been bargaining and haggling all his life. The process apparently continued when you switched to non-monetary situations.

Choy’s platform rose half a meter. Sabor turned his head and realized his own widemount was sinking. He checked his display and discovered the widemount’s armor had been overwhelmed. The hardbodies had apparently been concentrating

their fire on their ultimate objective.

“Get on my platform,” Choy said. “The extra widemount is right behind us. We’ll continue the attack.”

Sabor scrambled onto Choy’s platform. He checked his personal armor and discovered he had only absorbed two hits. He had kept his head and stayed low when he had fired at the cat attacking Choy.

“This *is* rather exhilarating,” Sabor said. “Isn’t there some saying about war being the continuation of diplomacy by other means? Should we assume the same maxim can be applied to financial activities?”

They were now about five paces from the point they had been driving toward. The two hardbodies in front of them were holding their position and pouring moles into the four-legged fortresses bearing down on their position. On the display, symbols marked the places where the other hardbodies were firing from Sabor’s right.

The fourth widemount pushed into the gap created by the loss of Sabor’s animal. Choy gestured at its back and Sabor slid off Choy’s widemount and flattened himself on top of the bin that hung from the cargo animal’s side. His right hand tightened around a braided cable.

“You have a message from Heinrich Dobble.”

“Run it.”

Heinrich’s image rose between Sabor and the action at the front of Sabor’s visual field. “Dobryani has crossed the border, Sabor. My sources advise me she has forty soldiers advancing through Kenzan’s possession.”

Sabor reacted without missing a breath. “Message for Financier Zara Nev. Apply simulation seven. Text: I believe it would be in your best interest to reconsider your position and join our common stand against Kenzan Khan’s attempt at extortion. Kenzan is doomed. Possessor Dobryani has taken advantage of Kenzan’s current weakness and invaded his possession. She is not in a negotiating frame of mind. The total destruction of Kenzan’s financial position is the most likely outcome.”

Simulation seven was Sabor’s cheeriest, brightest communications façade. He usually used it when he distributed invitations to informal gatherings.

Choy forced the three widemounts into a trot—a move that would probably drain any spare energy they still had left in their reservoirs. The two hardbodies started to fall back, but they had waited too long. Choy and Purvali edged ahead of Sabor. Their widemounts lowered their heads. Broad skulls shoved against the two hardbodies. Choy and Purvali slid to the ground and leaped like a pair of dancers. They pulled themselves back on their widemounts—they couldn’t have spent more

than ten seconds on the ground—and Sabor stared at the two figures writhing in the organic debris that covered the forest floor. Both hardbodies had legs that had acquired an extra joint. Their weapons had been tossed into the trees.

Sabor's widemount ripped a mass of leaves and blossoms from the lowest branch of a flowering tree. Sabor could feel its back trembling underneath him. The other widemounts had become as motionless as mounds of dirt.

Five symbols raced across the map display. Jina's human staffers had broken cover and initiated their final assault.

Purvali and Choy jumped off their widemounts. "Use everything you've got, Purvali," Sabor said. "There's little point in trying to conceal your potential now. But please abide by the rules of engagement. No permanent damage."

He crawled onto the back of his widemount and fired half a dozen moles at one of the oncoming hardbodies. Purvali and Choy had dropped into on-guard crouches below him. The hardbodies were veering around trees and sailing over obstacles with a controlled, absolute silence that was a thousand times more unnerving than a chorus of battle cries.

The hardbodies could have split their forces. Two could have gone after Sabor while the rest tried to keep Choy and Purvali occupied. Sabor could have held off his assailants for a few seconds while his dedicated staff demonstrated their ability to deal with three-to-two odds, and the three of them could then have joined forces and completed a final rout of Colonel Jina's minions. Instead, the hardbodies clumped into a line as they approached the widemount and the entire group converged on Choy and Purvali. Jina's tactician had apparently gained some respect for the abilities Sabor's assistants brought into the arena.

Purvali's upper body swayed. She stepped toward an oncoming hardbody and made a small movement to her left. The hardbody twisted to follow her, she made another small movement—and suddenly she was positioned *behind* the hardbody, with her body leaning backward and the bottom of her foot slamming into his kidney.

Sabor had seen her make moves like that during training sessions. In actual combat, the spectacle had a power that transcended the excitement evoked by the kind of speed and grace her hyped-up physiology could attain.

His awe turned into horror within seconds. Purvali hooked her foot around the stunned hardbody's ankle and pulled him to the ground. She leaped half her height straight up and came down on his back. She kicked downward as she landed and hit him with the maximum impact. It was a lethal blow—an attack that would drive splintered bones into the heart directly under her heel. The shock wave forced through the hardbody's chest would probably rupture the heart if the puncture wounds didn't do the job.

Choy was defending himself against two hardbodies. One of his attackers jumped back and disengaged. Three silent demons turned on Purvali.

Sabor didn't need a message from Colonel Jina to advise him the rules had changed. He could see it in the way the three hardbodies held their hands as they closed. Purvali was fast and she was stronger than the curves of her body and the silkiness of her skin indicated. But she couldn't survive an attack from three purpose-nurtured soldiers who had decided they could remove an obstacle without fretting about the damage they inflicted on it.

Sabor wedged his gun between a pair of cargo bins. He rose to a crouch and jumped, feet first, on the hardbody who was slipping behind Purvali's back.

It was an impulsive act, but his body knew what it had to do. His boots slammed into the hardbody's helmet. His target shied away from him as the blow hit and he threw out his arms and grabbed at anything he could get his hands on.

His fingers dug into the hardbody's uniform. His left heel pounded on the hardbody's foot. It was a weak effort, but it did the job. The odds against Purvali were reduced to two to one. It was only a momentary respite, but it could be all Purvali needed.

Unfortunately, the hardbodies immediately realized he had placed their true objective in reach. The hardbody facing Choy abandoned his opponent and danced toward Sabor. The other two hardbodies slipped around Purvali. A hardbody twisted Sabor's arm behind his back. Three hardbodies formed a wall in front of him.

Sabor jerked his head toward Choy. *"Stop her. Don't let her attack. They'll kill her."*

Choy stepped behind Purvali. He gripped her wrist and trapped her in the same kind of hold the hardbody was using on Sabor. Purvali tensed and then let herself relax.

"You'll just get yourself killed," Sabor said. "And I'll still be a prisoner."

"It's the only hope you have, Sabor. Why couldn't you stay out of it? We could have handled them."

The pain in Sabor's arm suddenly disappeared. The four hardbodies moved before his brain could adjust to the change in his situation. Choy tried to defend Purvali and a hardbody stepped behind him.

Colonel Jina smiled out of Sabor's display. "Good afternoon, Honored Sabor. We seem to have a change in the fortunes of war. Possessor Dobryani has occupied Possessor Khan's personal abode. It is now obvious Possessor Khan can no longer fulfill his contractual obligations."

“You’ve been a formidable opponent, Colonel. I’ll be certain to recommend your services in the future.”

“Your associate destroyed one of my most valuable capital assets. In spite of our agreement not to exceed certain limits.”

“I’m afraid she has a tendency to become overzealous.”

“I understand, Honored Sabor. Our relationships with the other sex can become difficult to control, in spite of our best efforts. But I think I’m entitled to some reasonable compensation.”

“How much did you have in mind?”

Purvali straightened up. “Don’t be a fool, Sabor! Pay him a ransom and you’ll have to defend me against every hoodlum on the planet.”

“We’re not discussing a ransom,” Sabor said. “He’s asking me for compensation for the soldier you killed.”

“He was trying to destroy you. They would have succeeded if I hadn’t done that.”

“She managed to destroy my asset because we were exercising restraint,” Colonel Jina said. “We would have killed her before that if we hadn’t accepted your bargain.”

Data flowed across Sabor’s vision. A hardbody could be replaced in approximately eleven standard years at a total cost of four hundred and sixty thousand Fernheim neils. Colonel Jina’s estimated cash flow indicated each hardbody generated approximately fifty-four thousand neils per standard year. The lifetime of the hardbody was, of course, unknown, but one could estimate the cost of the maintenance required over an eleven year period and that, obviously, should be subtracted from the total cash flow....

“I can offer you one million, four thousand neils,” Sabor said.

“I believe you are underestimating the loss of business I may suffer. Every contract requires a carefully calculated number of personnel. If I need five hardbodies for one assignment, for example, and three for another, and I only have seven, I may be forced to refuse one of the assignments. According to my figures, I should ask you for at least one million, two hundred and fifty thousand.”

Sabor studied the numbers the colonel presented him. “I really must point out that you’re overlooking the interest you’ll be earning each year on the unused portion. Your figure for lost employment seems a bit inflated, too, if you don’t mind my saying so. But I’ll offer you another hundred thousand anyway.”

The colonel frowned. Sabor concentrated on the colonel’s calculations and

carefully avoided looking at Purvali.

“One million, one hundred and seventy-five,” the colonel said.

Sabor hesitated. It was a large sum. His mother would have haggled for another hour just to keep a few more thousand.

“It’s getting late,” Sabor said. “If you’ll agree to keep the whole sum in your account with my institution until it’s paid out, I’ll consider the extra hundred and seventy-one thousand a small honorarium to a valued customer.”

The hardbodies released Purvali and stepped back. Sabor gave his system a signal and one million, one hundred and seventy-five thousand neils jumped into Colonel Jina’s account.

Colonel Jina beamed. “What other bank would I patronize?”

Sabor crossed the distance that separated him from his concubine. He put his arms around Purvali and felt her soften at his touch.

“You’re a fool, Sabor.”

She said the same thing again after they had struggled back to the guest quarters in the Galawar Commune and he had proved to his satisfaction (and hers, by all the signs) that he had successfully discarded his warrior mode.

“Is there any possibility,” Sabor responded, “just the slightest possibility, you will ever realize you mean just as much to me as I mean to you? That you ignite—in me—exactly the same kind of feelings I provoke in you?”

“But I was designed to feel that way, Sabor. You have choices.”

“Somehow, my dove, I never seem to feel I have a choice. And I am quite confident—annoyingly confident—I can offer you some assurance I never will feel I have a choice. *Never*. Not ever.”

She would never fully believe him, of course. He could glance at her face and see that. But she was there. She was alive. His hand was resting on her stomach. His display was running projections of the demand/profit curve for the line of crabs the Galawar Commune was bidding on, assuming the most plausible ranges of the six most relevant variables. Sabor Haveri was focusing his attention on his two major interests.