

Gunner Cade

C.M. Kornbluth & Judith Merril

CHAPTER 1

Far below the sleeping loft, in ancient cellars of reinforced concrete, a relay closed in perfect silent automaton adjustment; up through the Chapter House, the tiny noises multiplied and increased. The soft whirl of machinery in the walls; the gurgle of condensing fluid in conditioners; the thumping of cookers, where giant ladles stirred the breakfast mash; the beat of pistons pumping water to the top.

Gunner Cade, consecrate Brother in the Order of Armsmen, compliant student of the Klin Philosophy, and loyal citizen of the Realm of Man, stirred in his sleepbag on the scrubbed plastic floor. He half-heard the rising sounds of the machinery of the House, and recognized the almost imperceptible change in the rhythm of the air blowers. Not quite awake, he listened for the final sound of morning, the scraping noise of the bars at windows and gates, as they drew back reluctantly into the stone walls.

It is fitting that the Emperor rules.

It is fitting that the Armsmen serve the Emperor through the Power Master and our particular Stars.

While this is so, all will be well, to the end of time.

The words came to his mind without effort, before he opened his eyes. He had not fumbled for them since his sixth year, when, between his parents and himself, it had been somehow settled that he would

become a Brother of the Order. For at least the six thousandth time, his day began with the conscious affirmation of Klin.

The bars grated in their grooves, and at the instant, the first light struck through the slits of windows overhead. Cade shivered inside the scanty insulation of his bag and came fully awake, at once aware of the meaning of the chill. This was a Battle Morn.

The air blew steadily stronger and colder from the conditioners, tingling against his skin as Cade slipped from his sleepbag and folded it, deflated, into the precise small package that would fit the pocket of his cloak. Timing each action by the habits of thirteen years, he unbuckled his gunbelt, removed the gun, and closed away the belt and sleepbag in the locker that held his neatly folded uniform. It was by now reflexive action to open the gun and check the charge, then close the waterproof seal.

BattleMorn! With mounting elation, Cade performed each meticulous detail of the morning routine, his body operating like the smooth machine it was, while his mind woke gradually to the new day. He thought vaguely of commoners lolling late in bed, mumbling a morning thought of the Emperor, and breaking their fast at a grossly laden table. He thought vaguely of Klin teachers waking with subtle and elaborate propositions that proved what any Gunner feels in his bones. He thought vaguely of his own Star of France, doubtless haggard this morning after a night vigil of meditation on the fitting course.

He thought, too, of the Emperor—the Given Healer, the Given Teacher, the Given Ruler—but, like a gun’s blast came the thought: That is not fitting.

Guiltily he brought his attention back to the bare room, and saw with dismay that Gunner Harrow still lay in his bag, yawning and stretching.

The indecent gaping was infectious; Cade’s mouth opened first with amazement, then to say sharply: “Battle Morn, Brother!”

“How does it find you?” Harrow replied courteously, unashamed.

“Awake,” Cade answered coolly, “and ready for a good death if that is fitting—or a decorous life if I am spared today.”

The Marsman seemed to miss the reprimand entirely, but he climbed out of his bag and began to deflate it. What kind of Chapter House did they have on Mars?

“How long till shower?” he asked, unconcerned.

“Seconds,” was Cade’s contemptuous answer. “Perhaps twenty or thirty:”

The Marsman sprang to life with a speed that would have done him credit under other circumstances. Cade watched with disgust as the other Gunner rushed for the wall cabinet and stuffed away his sleepbag, still unfolded, not yet fully drained of last night’s air. The gunbelt was thrown in on top, and the cabinet door slammed shut, with only an instant left to seal the waterclosures of the gun. Then the ceiling vents opened, and the needle spray showered down and around the room. A cool invigorating stream of water splattered against the naked bodies of the men, cascaded down the three walls of the room, and drained out through the floor vent, leaving just enough dampness for the scouring by novices when the Gunners had left the room.

Cade took his eyes from the Marsman and tried to tear away his thoughts as well. He watched devoutly

while the swirling waters struck each wall in turn, touching his gun to his lips, For the Teacher, at the first impact; to his chest, For the Healer, at the next; and at the last, the long wall, to his brow, with awe, For the Ruler, the Emperor.

He tried not to think of Harrow in the room beside him, saluting the cleansing waters with an unchecked charge in his gun. It was true, then, what they said about conditions on Mars. Laxity at any time was bad enough, but to let the peril of sloth pass from the previous day through the purifying waters of a Battle Morn was more than Cade could understand. A novice might meet the shower unprepared; an armiger might fail to check his charge beforehand; but how did Harrow ever rise to the rank of Gunner? And why was such a one sent to Cade on the eve of battle? Even now, his own Battle Morn meditations were disturbed.

Anger is a peril at all times. And anger is acutely unfitting on Battle Morn before the Klin teacher's lesson. Cade refused to think of it further. The water vents closed, and he dressed without regard for the Marsman.

Each garment had its thought, soothing and enfolding: they brought peace.

UNDERSUIT: Like this the Order embraces the Realm.

SHIRT: The Order protects the Power Master, slave of the brain, loyal heart of the Realm.

HOSE: Armsmen are sturdy pillars; without them the

Realm cannot stand, but without the Realm the Order can not live.

BOOTS: Gunners march where the Emperor wills; that is their glory.

HELMET: The Order protects the Emperor—the Given Teacher, the Given Healer, the Given Ruler—the brain and life of the Realm.

CLOAK: Like this the Order wraps the Realm and shields it.

Again he touched his gun to his lips, For the Teacher; to his chest, For the Healer, to his brow, with awe, For the Ruler, the Emperor.

Briskly he released the water closures and dropped the gun into the belt on his hip. A gong sounded in the wall, and Cade went to a cabinet for two steaming bowls of concentrate, freshly prepared in the giant mash cookers far below. "Brother?" Harrow called across the open door.

Silence at this time was customary but not mandatory, Cade reminded himself—and Harrow was new to this Chapter.

"Yes, Brother," he said.

"Are there other Marsmen among us?"

"I know no others," Cade said, and congratulated himself on that fact. "How would it concern you?"

"It would please me," Harrow said formally. "A man likes to be among his own people in time of battle."

Cade could not answer him at first. What sort of talk was this? One didn't call himself a man in the Order. There were novices, armigers, Gunners, the Gunners Superior, and Arle himself, the Gunner Supreme. They were your brothers, elder or younger.

"You are among your own people," he said gently, refusing to allow himself to be tempted into the

peril of anger. “We are your brothers all.”

“But I am new among you,” the other said. “My brothers here are strangers to me.”

That was more reasonable. Cade could still remember his first battle for the Star of France, after he left the Denver Chapter, where he spent his youth. “Your brothers will soon be beside you in battle,” he reminded the newcomer. “An Armsman who has fought by your side is no stranger.”

“That will be tomorrow.” Harrow smiled. “And if I live through today, I shall not be here long after.”

“Where, then?”

“Back to Mars!”

“How can that be?” Cade demanded. “Mars-born Gunners fight for Earthly Stars. Earth-born Gunners fight for the Star of Mars. That’s fitting.”

“Perhaps so, Brother; perhaps so. But a letter from my father at home says our Star has petitioned the Emperor to allow him all Mars-born Armsmen, and I would be one of them.”

“Your Star is the Star of France,” said Cade sharply. He himself had received Harrow’s assignment yesterday, sealed by the Power Master, and counter sealed by the Gunner Supreme. He was silent a moment, then could contain himself no longer. “By all that’s fitting,” he asked, “what sort of talk is this? Why does an Armsman speak of himself as a man? And how can you think of your ‘own people,’ other than your brothers in arms?”

The Mars-born Gunner hesitated. “It’s newer on Mars. Six hundred years isn’t a long time. We have a proverb—‘Earth is changeless, but Mars is young.’ Families—I am descended from Erik Hogness and Mary Lara, who mapped the Northern Hemisphere long ago. I know my cousins because of that. We all are descended from Erik Hogness and Mary Lara, who mapped the Northern Hemisphere. I don’t suppose you know anything about your eight-times great-grandfather or what he may have done?”

“I presume,” said Cade stiffly, “that he did what was fitting to his station, as I will do what is fitting to mine.”

“Exactly,” said Harrow, and fell silent—disconcertingly resembling a man who had wrung an admission from an opponent and won an argument by it.

Cade went stiffly to the door and opened it, leaving the empty bowls for Harrow to return. The line of Armsmen came in sight down the corridor, and they waited at attention to take their place among the Gunners, marching in silence and with downcast eyes along the route of procession to the lectory.

Seated on the front row of benches, with twenty rows apiece of armigers and novices behind, Cade was grateful that the Klin teacher had not yet arrived. It left time for him to dispel the perilous mood of irritation and suspicion. By the time the man did appear, Cade’s troubled spirits had resolved into the proper quiet glow of appreciation.

It was fitting to be a Gunner; it was fitting to be a Klin teacher; they were almost brothers in their dedication. The glow nearly vanished when the man began to speak.

Cade had heard many teachers who’d been worse; it made not a particle of difference in the Klin

Philosophy whether it was expounded by a subtle, able teacher or a half-trained younger son of a Star, as this fellow appeared to be; what was fitting was fitting and would be until the end of time. But on a Battle Morn, Cade thought, a senior teacher might have been a reasonable tribute. The peril of pride, came a thought like a gun's blast, and he recoiled. In contrition he listened carefully, marking the youngster's words.

“Since the creation of the worlds ten thousand years ago the Order of Armsmen has existed and served the Emperor through the Power Master and the Stars. Klin says of armed men: They must be poor, because riches make men fear to lose them, and fear is unfitting in an Armsman. They must be chaste, because love of woman makes men love their rulers—the word rulers here means, as always, with Klin, the Emperor—less. They must be obedient, because the consequence of disobedience is to make men refuse even the most gloriously profitable death. These are the words of Klin, set down ten thousand years ago at the creation of the worlds.”

It was wonderful, thought Cade, wonderful how it had all occurred together: the creation of the worlds, the Emperor to rule them, the Order to serve him, and the Klin Philosophy to teach them how to serve. The fitness and beautiful economy of it never failed to awe him. He wondered if this creation was somehow The Fitness, the original of which all others were reflections.

The teacher leaned forward, speaking directly to those in the front row. “You Gunners are envied, but you do not envy. Klin says of you Gunners: ‘They must be always occupied with fiddling details’—I should perhaps explain that a fiddle was a musical instrument; fiddling hence means harmonious, or proper. Another possibility is that fiddling is an error for fitting, but our earliest copies fail to bear this out—‘with fiddling details so they will have no time to think. Let armed men think, and the fat’s in the fire.’ “

Good old Klin! thought Cade affectionately. He liked the occasional earthy metaphors met within the Reflections on Government. Stars and their courts sometimes diverted themselves for a day or two by playing at commoners’ life; the same playfulness appeared in Klin when he took an image from the kitchen or the factory. The teacher was explaining the way Klin’s usage of think as applied to anybody below the rank of a Star was equated with the peril of pride, and how the homely kitchen metaphor meant nothing less than universal ruin. “For Klin, as usual, softens the blow.”

Irresistibly Cade’s thoughts wandered to a subject he loved. As the young teacher earnestly expounded, the Gunner thought of the grandeur of the Klin Philosophy: how copies of the Reflections were cherished in all the Chapter Houses of the Order, in all the cities of all the Stars of Earth, on sparsely settled Venus, the cold moons of the monster outer planets, on three manmade planetoids, and on Mars. What could be wrong with Harrow? How could he have gone awry with the Klin Philosophy to guide him? Was it possible that the teachers on Mars failed to explain Klin adequately? Even commoners on Earth heard teachers expound the suitable portion of the Philosophy. But Cade was warmly aware that the Armsmen’s study of Klin was more profound and pure than the commoners’.

“...so I come to a subject which causes me some pain.” Cade brought his mind back sharply to the words of the teacher. This was the crucial part, the thing he had been waiting to hear. “It is not easy to contemplate willful wickedness, but I must tell you that unfit deeds fill the heart of the Star of Muscovy. Through certain sources our Star of France has learned that pride and greed possess his brother to the north. With sorrow he discovered that the Star of Muscovy intends to occupy Alsace-Lorraine with his Gunners. With sorrow he ordered your Superior to make ready for whatever countermeasures may be fit, and it has been done. As you know, this is Battle Morn.”

Cade’s heart thumped with rage at the proud and greedy Star of Muscovy.

“Klin says of such as the Star of Muscovy: “The wicked you have always with you. Make them your governors. Governors is used metaphorically, in the obsolete sense of a device to regulate the speed of a heat engine—hence, the passage means that when a wicked person is bent on unfit deeds, you should increase your efforts toward fit and glorious deeds to counter him. There are many interesting images in the Reflections drawn from the world of pre-electronic—but that is by the way. I was saying that this is Battle Morn, and that before the sun has set, many of you may have died. So I say to all of you, not knowing which will have the fortune: go on your fitting and glorious task without the peril of pride, and remember that there is nobody in the Realm of Man who would not eagerly change places with you.”

He stepped down, and Cade bowed his head for the thought: The Klin Philosophy in a Gunner is like the charge in his gun. It was a favorite of his, saying so much in so little if you had only a moment, but if you had more time, it went on and on, drawing beautifully precise parallels for every circuit and element of the gun. But there was no time for that; the Superior, the Gunner Superior to the Star of France, had appeared. He cast a worried glance at a window, through which the sun could be seen, and began at once:

“Brothers, our intelligence is that one hundred Gunners, more or less, are now flying from an unknown Muscovite base to occupy the Forbach-Sarralbe triangle on the border of our Star’s realm. Time of arrival—I can only say ‘this afternoon or evening’ and hope I am correct. The importance of the area is incalculable. It was a top secret until the information evidently got to Muscovy. There is iron ore in the district.”

A murmur swept the lectory, and Cade murmured with the rest in astonishment. Iron ore on Earth! Power metal still to be found on the ten-thousand-year-old planet after ten thousand years of mining for the stuff that drove engines and charged guns! All reserves were supposed to have been exhausted four hundred years ago; that was why rust-red Mars had been colonized, and from rust-red Mars for four hundred years had come Earth’s iron.

“Enough, Brothers! Enough! Our plan will be roughly the same as that employed in our raid last month on Aachen—two divisions to the front, one in reserve. The first company, under me, will be based at Dieuze, about forty kilometers south of the triangle. The second company, under Gunner Cade, will be based at Metz, fifty kilometers west of the triangle. The third company will be in reserve, based at Nancy, seventy kilometers southwest of the triangle. The companies will proceed to their bases in two-man fliers immediately after this briefing.

“After arrival and the establishment of communication, my company and Gunner Cade’s will send out air scouts to reconnoiter the triangle. If no enemy action is discovered from the air, scouts will parachute for recon on foot. The orders I will issue from that point on will depend on their reports. Man your fliers and take off at once, Brothers. May your deeds today be fitting and glorious.”

CHAPTER 2

Cade, icily calm, ran from the Chapter House two hundred meters to the flying field. He was not panting when he swung himself easily into his little craft. His fingers flew over the unlabeled switches and dials of the control panel. It had been many years since he’d relied on mnemonic jingles to recall the order and setting of the more than two hundred controls. As the red electronic warm-up fog misted from the tail of the flier, his passenger, Armiger Kemble, vaulted in and was immediately slammed back against his

uncushioned seat by a 3.25-G takeoff.

Paris was a blur beneath them, the Paris that Cade, Denver-born, had seen only from the air and the windows of the Chapter House. Minutes later Reims flashed past to their left. The braking and landing in the square at Metz were as cruel as the takeoff. Cade had never spared himself or anybody else on service, though he did not know that he was famous for it.

“Brother,” he said to the battered armiger, “line up the command set on Dieuze and Nancy.” To his disgust, Kemble juggled with the map, the compass, and the verniers of the aiming circle for two minutes, until he had laid beams on the fields at the reserve base and the other front-line command post. The peril of pride, he guiltily thought, choking down his annoyance. The twelve other ships of his company had landed by then.

“Brother Cade,” said the voice of the Superior. “Scouts out!”

“Scouts out, Brother,” he said, and waved two fliers aloft. From them a monotonous drone of “No enemy action” began over the command set.

The tune changed after five minutes: “Rendezvous with first company scouts over Forbach. No enemy action.”

“Brother Cade,” said the Superior, “order your scouts to jump. My fliers will provide cover.”

Cade ordered: “Second-company scouts—Gunner Orris, take over Gunner Meynall’s flier on slave circuit. Brother Meynall, parachute into Forbach for recon on foot. Armiger Raymond, recon Sarreguemines. Armiger Bonfils, recon Sarralbe.”

Brothers Meynall, Raymond, and Bonfils reported successful landings. The Gunner in Forbach said, “No commoners about at all. As usual. I’m in the village square headed for the phone exchange. No en—“ There was the sound of a gun and no further report.

Cade opened the Raymond-Bonfils circuit to the Superior and reserve company and snapped: “Take cover. Forbach is occupied. Gunner Orris, return to base with fliers immediately.”

The Superior’s voice said: “First-company fliers return to base immediately. Brothers Raymond and Bonfils, report!”

Armiger Raymond’s voice said: “Sarreguemines is empty of commoners. I’ve taken cover in the basement of a bakery whose windows command the square. I see movement at the windows of a building across the square—the town hall, phone exchange, water department, and I don’t know what else. It’s just a village.”

“Brother Bonfils, report!” There was no answer.

“Brother Raymond, stand fast. We shall mount an attack. Hold your fire until the enemy is engaged, and then select targets of opportunity. You will regard yourself as expendable.”

“Yes, Brother.”

“Third company at Nancy, you are alerted. Second company and third company, rendezvous with first company in ten minutes, at ten-thirty-six hours, two kilometers south of the Sarralbe town square. Align

your fliers for unloading to fight on foot; we shall conduct a frontal assault on Sarralbe and clear it of the enemy. The third company will be on the left wing, the second company will be our center, and the first company will be on the right wing. Gunner Cade, you will detail one flier to amuse the enemy with a parachute attack on the town hall as our skirmishers reach the square. Into action, Brothers.”

“Load!” yelled Cade to his company, and they tumbled into their craft. On the slave circuit he took the fliers up in dress-parade style, hurled them to the rendezvous, and released the ships for individual landings. The first company was aligned straight as a string to his right, and moments later the third company touched down.

His armiger Kemble had done a most unsatisfactory job lining up the communications, Cade reflected, but it was not fitting in a Gunner to hold a grievance. “Brother,” he said, “I’ve chosen you to conduct the diversion our Superior ordered.”

The youngster straightened proudly. “Yes, Brother,” he said, repressing a pleased grin.

Cade spoke into his command set: “Gunner Orris. You will remain here in your flier during the attack, with Armiger Kemble as a passenger. On my signal, you will take off and fly over the Sarralbe town hall, dropping Brother Kemble by parachute to create a diversion. After dropping him, return your flier to its present position and dismount to join the attack on foot.”

The armiger climbed out of Cade’s flier to head for Orris’ craft, but hesitated on the ground and turned to brag: “I’ll bet I get a dozen of them before they get me.”

“Well, perhaps, Brother,” said Cade, and this time the grin did break out as the armiger marched down the line. Cade hadn’t wanted to discourage him, but the only Muscovite gunman he had a chance of killing before he was picked off in midair was their roof spotter. But how could he be expected to understand? Thirty seconds of confusion among the enemy could be vastly more important than killing thirty of their best Gunners.

The clock said 1036; men boiled out of the fliers and formed a skirmish line carefully ragged. The raised right arm of the Superior, far on the right of the line, went down, and the Brothers began to trudge forward, all with the same solid, deliberate style....

Cade’s eyes were on anywhere but his boots; they were scanning bushes for untoward movements, the ground for new dirt cast up in the digging of a foxhole, trees for unnatural man-sized clumps of foliage among the branches. But somehow he felt his feet in his boots, not painfully but happily. Gunners march where the Emperor wills; that is their glory.

Off to the right a gun blasted. The Superior’s voice said in his Hemet: “Enemy observation post, one novice. We got him, but now they’re alerted in town.” He told the man flanking him: “Enemy O.P. spotted us. Pass the word, Brothers.” It murmured down the line. Brothers who had absently let themselves drift into a dress-parade rank noticed it and lagged or heel-and-toed until the line was properly irregular again.

It was done none too soon. Some thirty meters to the left of Cade the excellently camouflaged lid of a firing pit flipped up as the line passed. The Muscovite blasted two armigers with a single shot before he was killed. Defilading fire into a straight rank would have netted him twenty. The wood grew thicker, and direct flank contact was lost. “Scouts out,” said the Superior’s voice, and Cade waved two Gunners forward.

Their eloquent arms were the eyes of the company. One upraised, and the company saw possible danger; it halted. The upraised arm down and forward, and the company saw safety; it trudged on. Both arms moved forward in a gesture like clasping a great bundle of straw, and the company was alarmed by something inexplicable; it inched forward with guns drawn, faces tingling. Both arms beating down like vultures' wings, and the company was face-to-face with grinning death; it hurled its fifty bodies to the ground to dodge the whistling scythe.

Grinding himself into the ground while his eyes methodically scanned before him for the well-concealed Muscovite combat patrol that had been harassing them, Cade thought: It is fitting that we Gunmen serve. He saw the unnatural movement of a bush and incinerated it. In the heart of the blaze was a black thing that capered and gibbered like a large ape: one more of the enemy charred to nonexistence. His blast had given away his position; automatically he snap-rolled two meters and saw flame blaze from a tree's lower branches to the spot he'd fired from. Before the blast from the tree expired he had answered it.

He thought: While this is so, all will be well to the end of time.

The surviving scout's arm went up with an air of finality. The company halted, and the scout trotted back to Cade. "Ten meters of scrub and underbrush, and then the town. Three rows of four-story stone houses, and then the square, as I recall. The underbrush is clear. But those windows looking down on it!"

"Plunging fire," Cade muttered, and he heard a sharp intake of breath from beside him. He turned to look sternly on the young armiger with the stricken face, but before he could reprove the lad, he heard Harrow, the Marsman, intervene.

"I hate it too," the Gunner said, and the unexpected note of sympathy broke the youngster completely.

"I can't stand it," he babbled hysterically. "That feeling you get when it's coming at you from above, and all the ground cover in the world won't help—all you can do is run! I can't stand it!"

"Quiet him," Cade said with disgust, and someone led the armiger away, but not before Cade noted his name. He would deal with it later.

"Brother," Harrow spoke in his ear earnestly.

"What is it?" Cade snapped.

"Brother, I have an idea." He hesitated, but as Cade turned impatiently away, he rushed on: "Brother, let's give them plunging fire. No one would have to know."

"What are you talking about?" Cade asked blankly. "There aren't any trees high enough or near enough."

The Marsman said wildly: "Cade, don't pretend to me. I can't be the only Gunner who ever thought of it! Who's going to know the difference? I mean—" His throat sealed; he couldn't get the words out.

"I'm glad to see you have some shame left," Cade said disgustedly. "I know what you mean." He turned aside and called out: "Bring back the coward armiger! Now," he went on as soon as the youngster was with them, "I want you to learn for yourself the consequences of submitting to the peril of fear. Your outburst made Gunner Harrow propose that we—we fire on the houses from our fliers."

The armiger looked down at his feet for a long moment and then faced his commander. He said

hoarsely, “I didn’t know there were people like that, sir. Sir, I should like to request the honor of being permitted to draw fire for our men.”

“You have earned no honors,” Cade snapped. “Nor does your rank entitle you to privileged requests.” He looked meaningfully at the Mars-born Gunner.

Harrow wiped sweat from his face. “I would have got back to Mars,” he said bitterly, “back with my own people, if I’d lived through this one.”

“You deserve less than this, Gunner Harrow,” Cade pronounced sternly into a sudden listening silence. The firing was momentarily stilled; the enemy was awaiting their action. All the Armsmen of France within hearing distance of the episode had edged closer to be in on the final outcome. Cade seized the moment to impress an unforgettable lesson on his men. He said loudly:

“Klin wrote: ‘Always assume mankind is essentially merciful; nothing else explains why crooks are regularly returned to office.’ If you know as little of the Philosophy as you do of decency, Brother, I should explain that a crook is an implement formerly used by good shepherds and in this case stands, by a figure of speech, for the good shepherd himself. I shall obey Klin’s precept of mercy. We need a Gunner to draw fire from the house windows so we can spot those which are—are you listening to me?”

The Mars-born Gunner was mumbling to himself; he looked up and said clearly, “Yes, Brother, I’m listening.” But his lips kept moving as Cade went on: “We have to draw fire from the house windows so we can see which are manned, blast them with a volley, and take the house in a rush.”

“Yes, Brother, I’ll draw their fire,” said Harrow.

Cade wheeled suddenly and confronted the rest of his company. “Are you Armsmen,” he demanded fiercely, “or commoner kitchen gossips? Back to your posts before the enemy discovers your weakness! And may the fighting scourge your minds of this memory. Such things are better forgotten.”

He called the first and third companies on his helmet phone and filled them in—saying nothing of the disgraceful episode.

“Well done,” the Superior told him. “Rush the first row of houses immediately; we have your coordinates and will follow behind after you have secured a house or two.”

Harrow’s muttering had started again and became loud enough during the conversation to be a nuisance. He was repeating to himself:

“It is fitting that the Emperor rules.”

“It is fitting that the Power Master serves him.”

“It is fitting that we Gunmen serve the Emperor through the Power Master and our particular Stars.”

“While this is so, all will be well until the end of time.”

Cade could not very well rebuke him.

Harrow distinguished himself in drawing fire from the house windows. In such an operation there is the risk that—well, call him the target—that the target will walk out in a state of exaltation, thinking more of

the supreme service he is rendering than the actual job of rendering it. Cade was pleased and surprised at the desperate speed with which Harrow broke from the end of the wood and sped through the brush, his cloak flaring out behind him, displaying the two wide Gunner's bands at the hem: a new brown one above for France, an old red one below for Mars.

A bolt from one window missed him.

"Mark," snapped the first in a row of picked shots.

A bolt from another window blasted Harrow's left arm, and he kept running and even began to dodge.

"Mark," said the second of the sharpshooters.

A third window spat fire at the dodging Gunner and hit the same burned arm.

"Mark."

Another bolt from another window smashed his legs from under him.

"Mark."

There was a little surge forward in the line of waiting Stormers. Cade threw his arm up, hard and fast. "He's crawling," he said. "They'll finish him off."

From a small and innocent-looking stairwell window fire jetted.

"Mark."

"He's done," said Cade. "While this is so, all will be well...Marksmen ready; Stormers ready. Marksmen, fire. Stormers, charge." He led the way, crashing through the brush, with a torrent of flame gushing over his head: his marksmen, with the initiative of fire, pinning down the Muscovites at their windows—almost all of them. From two unsuspected windows fire blazed, chopping down two of the storming party. They were met with immediate counterfire from waiting marksmen in the wood. And by then there were ten Gunners in the dead ground against the house wall. With Cade in the lead, the Armsmen of France swarmed down a narrow alley that separated house from house and blasted down a side door.

Like coursing hounds they flowed through the house, burning down five Muscovite Armsmen already wounded by the neutralizing fire from the woods, finding two others dead at their windows. They lost one armiger of France to the desperate dying fire of a wounded Muscovite. The house was theirs.

The rest of the company, except for a pair of guards, trudged across the brush and entered.

Cade stationed men at the vital upper windows and sat, panting, on the floor of a bare second-story room. All the rooms were more or less bare. It was probably so through all three villages. He had seen commoners migrating.

Clots of them, oozing slowly along the roads. Their chief people in ground cars, cursing at the foot-sloggers who wouldn't get aside. The carts, piled high with household goods. The sniveling, shrieking children. And yet—and yet—there was a puzzle in it. Not always, but almost always, they knew in advance. The Muscovites, in possession of the great secret of the iron ore, had arrived to find

that at least part of the secret was known to the lowliest commoner—enough at least to send him out on the road.

They were into the afternoon now, with nothing to do but wait for the first and third companies. This would last a week, easily: three villages to clear. Perhaps the feint at the city hall—if it came off today—would crumple the Muscovites. And when they got to Sarreguemines, there would be Brother Raymond in the cellar...

He sat up with a guilty start. Nobody had checked the cellar in this very house, if it had one, probably because cellars didn't have windows. He got wearily to his feet and limped downstairs to the first floor. There seemed to be no further steps down, and then he saw a gap between the wall and an immense cherry-wood cabinet bare of its dishes and mementos. It creaked open when he tried it, and these were his cellar steps with a guttering light at the bottom.

An old, old face, brown and wrinkled and ugly, was peering at him by the flickering light.

"Come up, commoner," he said. "I wish to look at you."

"No, sir," the wrinkled face squeaked in the voice of a woman. "No, sir, I cannot, sir, to my shame. My daughter, the lazy slut, put me and my dear brother down here when the armed men were about to come, for she said she and her great fat husband couldn't be bothered with us. I cannot come up, sir, because my legs won't go, to my shame."

"Then send up your brother, commoner."

"No, sir," the hag squeaked. "My dear brother cannot come up, to my shame. My lazy slut of a daughter and her great fat husband did not leave the right food for him—he suffers from the wasting sickness, and he must have the livers of animals every day—and so he died. Are you an armed man, sir?"

"I am a Gunner of the Order of Armsmen, commoner. Did you say you had food down there?" Cade suddenly realized he was ravenous.

"I did, sir, but not the right kind for my dear brother. I have the bottled foods, and the foods in boxes, and sweet cakes; will you come down, armed man, sir?"

Cade prudently swung the great cherry-wood chest wide open and descended the stairs. The woman lighted his way to a corner with the candle; he expected to find a table or larder, but the light, to his disgust, flickered on the wasted body of a tall man propped against the cellar wall.

"That's no concern of mine, commoner," he said. "Where is the food? I'll take it and eat it upstairs."

"Armed man, sir, I must unlock three locks on this chest"—she gestured with the candle—"to get you that, and my hands are old and slow, sir. Let me pour you a bit for your thirst first, sir. You are truly an armed man, sir?"

He ignored her babble as she poured him cider from a jug. "So that on your hip is a gun, sir? Is it true, sir, that you only have to point it at a person and he is shriveled and black at once?"

Cade nodded, suppressing his irritation with effort. She was old and foolish—but she was feeding him.

"And is it true, sir," she asked eagerly, "that a shriveled and black commoner cannot be told from a

shriveled and black armed man?”

That it was impossible to let pass. He struck her mouth, wishing furiously that she would get the food and be done with it. And truly enough she did begin to fumble with the clanking old locks in the dark, but kept up her muttering: “I see it is true. I see it is true. That is what happens when something is true. I call my daughter a lazy slut, and she strikes me on the mouth. I call her husband a greedy hog, and he strikes me on the mouth. That is what happens...”

Rage is a peril, he told himself furiously. Rage is a peril. He gulped down the cider and repressed an impulse to throw the mug at the old fool’s head or smash it on the old fool’s floor while she fumbled endlessly with the clanking locks. He bent over to put it precisely on the floor, and toppled like a felled oak.

At once he knew what had happened and was appalled by the stupidity of it. He, a Gunner, was dying, poisoned by a babbling idiot of a commoner. Cade dragged feebly at his gun, and found the squeaking old woman had taken it first. Better to die that way, he thought in agony, though still a shameful horror. He hoped desperately as he felt consciousness slipping away that it would never become known. Some things were better forgotten.

The old woman was standing in front of him, making a sign, a detestable sign he half-remembered, like a parody of something you were dedicated to. And she skipped nimbly up and down the stairs with shrill, batlike laughter. “I tricked you!” she squealed. “I tricked them all! I tricked my slut of a daughter and her greedy fat husband. I didn’t want to go with them!” She stopped at last, grunting with animal effort as she tugged the body of her brother, an inch or less at a time, to the foot of the stairs. Cade’s gun was in the waistband of her skirt.

As the last light glimmered out, he thought he saw the deep-etched leather lines of her face close to his. “I wanted an armed man, sir, that’s what I wanted. And I have one!”

CHAPTER 3

Peril...peril...rage is a peril, and vanity, and love of ease...This death was fraught with perils. Cade groaned in the endless dark, and the still-living flesh shrank with revulsion as the evil vision persisted, and his limbs were logs of stone.

To come to this end, this useless end! He who had lived decorously, who had served fittingly, he, a sturdy pillar of the Emperor, Gunner Cade! This end is not fitting! He would have cried out bitterly, but his lips were icy barriers, frozen shut. He could not breathe a word of protest or command.

And still his heart beat pitilessly, pumping gall and fury through his veins.

Rage is a peril. Cade turned his anger inward, seeking to bludgeon his spirit into a fit frame of mind before death came. Armsmen march where the Emperor wills. Peril flees in the face of fitting service.

Two visions filled his inner eye. He turned from the ancient ugly face of evil to the fair countenance of service and found at last the fitness that he sought. This death was proper. If She appeared, then all was well and would be till the end of time, for She came only at the last to the Armsman who marched where the Emperor willed and died in the service of his Star.

Then this was a fitting end and the perils of rage and vanity had been only a trial. He looked again upon the ugly grinning face and found it had lost all power over him. The pure features of The Lady floated above and behind it, and exaltation coursed through him as his heart beat on.

The heart beat on, and it was fitting, but it was not the end. The serene countenance of The Lady bent over him, and yet he lived. All Armsmen knew She came only at the last, and only to those who were fitted, yet...

He lived. He was not dead. The frozen lips moved as he muttered, "Vanity is a peril." He was alive, and the lined old leather face was only a hag he had seen before; the lady was a flower-faced commoner girl, beautiful to look on, but soullessly mortal.

"Very well," the crimson lips said clearly, not to him, but across his recumbent body to the hag. "Leave us now. They will be waiting for you in the chamber."

"The armed man lives," the old voice rasped in reply. "I served the armed man well, and he still lives. My slut of a daughter would never believe I could do it. She left me behind for dead, she and her greedy..."

"Leave us now!" The younger woman was dressed in the gaudy rough cloth of a commoner, but her voice betrayed her habit of command. "Go to the chamber, and go quickly, or they may forget to wait."

Cade shuddered as the pincer fingers of the hag creased the flesh of his forearm. "He lives," she said again, and chuckled. "The armed man lives and his skin is warm." Her touch was a horror. Not as the touch of woman, for there was nothing womanish about her; she was past the age of peril. But his skin crawled, as with vermin, at the unclean fingering. He lashed out to strike her arm away, and discovered his hands were bound. The old woman shuffled slowly away toward a door, and while the young one watched her go, he pulled against the bonds, testing his strength.

Then the hag was gone, and he was alone with the young female commoner, who looked most unfittingly like a vision of glory and spoke most presumptuously like a man of power.

The bonds were not too tight. He stopped pulling before she could discover that he might free himself.

She was watching him, and perversely he refused to look at her. His eyes took in every detail of the featureless room: the unbroken elliptical curve of the ceiling and walls; the curved door, fitting into the shape of the wall, and almost indistinguishable from it; the bed on which he lay; a table beside him where the girl's long clean fingers played with a vial of colored fluid.

He watched, while she idly turned the cork in the vial to expose the needle end. He watched while she plucked a swab of cotton from a bowl and doused it in colorless fluid from the only other object in the room, a small bottle on the table. He kept watching, even when the girl began to speak, his gaze obstinately fastened on her hands, away from the perilous beauty of her face.

"Cade," she said urgently, "Can you hear me? Can you understand what I tell you?" There was no command in her voice now; it was low-pitched and melodious. It teased his memory, tugged at him till he stiffened with the remembrance. Only once before had a woman called him by his Armsman's given name. That was the day he entered the Order, before he took his vows. His mother had kissed him, he remembered now, kissed him, and whispered the new name softly, as this girl was saying it. Since that day, his eleventh birthday, no woman had dared to tempt him to peril with a familiar address.

He lay still, thrusting aside the memory, refusing to reply.

“Cade,” she said again. “There’s not much time. They’ll be coming soon. Can you understand me?”

The hands on the table moved, put down the needle and the swab, and floated toward him. She placed her palms on his cheeks, and turned his face up toward hers. Cade could not remember, even from childhood, the touch of hands like these. They were silken, but smooth—soft, resilient, unbelievably good to feel. They felt, he thought—and blushed as he thought—like the billowing stuff of the Emperor’s ceremonial robe, when it brushed his face as he knelt at devotions on Audience Day.

This was no Audience Day. The hands of a commoner were on him, and contact with any female was forbidden. The blood receded from his face, and he shook his head violently, releasing himself from the perilous touch.

“I’m sorry,” she said; “I’m sorry, Armsman, sir.” Then, incredibly, she laughed. “I’m sorry I failed to address you properly, sir, and profaned your chastity with my touch. Has it occurred to you that you are in trouble? What do you place first? The ritual of your Order, or your loyalty to the Emperor?”

“Armsmen march where the Emperor wills,” he intoned. “That is their glory. Armsmen are sturdy pillars; without them the Realm cannot stand, but without the Realm the Order cannot...”

Boots, he thought. Hose. They were gone. He lifted his head a little, and pain stabbed at the back of his neck as he did so, but before he dropped back, he saw it all: garish crimson-patterned pajamas of a commoner; soft-sole sandals of a city worker. No boots, no hose, no cloak, no gun!

“What unfit place is this?” he exploded. “In the name of the Order of which I am a member, I demand that I be released and my gun returned before...”

“Quiet, you fool!” There was something in the command that stopped him. “You’ll have them all here if you shout. Now, listen quickly, if there’s still time. You are the captive of a group that plots against the Emperor. I cannot tell you more now, but I am instructed to inject you with a substance which will...”

She stopped suddenly, and he too heard the steady footsteps coming nearer from—where? A corridor outside?

Something pressed against his lips, something smooth and slippery.

“Open your mouth, you idiot! Swallow it, quick! It will...”

The door opened smoothly from the wall, and the footsteps never lost a beat. They advanced to the center of the room and stopped precisely, while their maker stared about him with an odd bemusement.

“I seek my cousin,” he announced, to no one in particular.

“Your cousin is not here,” the girl answered smoothly. “I am the helper of your cousin, and I will take you to him.” Three steps took her to the rigidly erect figure, and she touched him lightly on the nape of the neck. “Follow me,” she commanded.

With no change of expression on his pale face, the man turned and went after her, his uncannily steady footsteps marking time toward the door. But before they got there, it opened again, and a

sharp-featured, worried face peered in. The newcomer was small and wiry, dressed in the gray uniform of the Klin Service, tunic belted properly over the creased trousers, domed hat set squarely on his head, bootwraps neatly wound around his calves; he was breathing hard, and he closed the door hastily behind him, leaning against it till he regained composure.

“Here is your cousin,” the girl said coldly. “He will take you in charge now.”

Lying still on the bed, Cade instinctively stopped struggling with the bonds on his wrists and let his eyelids drop closed, just as the man in gray looked toward him and asked: “How is he? Any trouble?”

“He’s no trouble.” The girl’s tone was contemptuous. “He’s just coming to.”

“Good.” Cade heard the sharp intake of breath, and then the nervous edginess went out of the man’s voice. “I am your cousin,” he said evenly. “You will come with me.”

“You are my cousin,” answered the toneless voice of the sleepwalker. “I am to report that my mission is accomplished. I have succeeded in killing...”

“Come with me now. You will make your report in...”

“...killing the Deskman in Charge of...”

“...in another room. You will report to me priv...”

“...of the third district of Klin Serv...”

“...privately. In another room.”

Cade let his eyelids flicker open enough to observe the agitation of the man in gray as the droning report went on unmindful of the efforts at control.

“...Service. Am I to destroy myself now? The mission is successfully accomplished.” It stopped at last.

And not a moment too soon. Cade’s hands, now free, were safely at rest again when the man in gray turned back to look at him.

“Seems to be all right still,” Cousin said stiffly, surveying him. Deliberately, Cade let his eyelids flutter. “He’s coming out of it, though. I better get this fellow out of the way.”

“Perhaps you’d better.” The girl’s voice now expressed infinite disgust. “Is he one of yours?”

“No, I’m just taking his report. Larter put him under.”

“Larter’s new,” she admitted, and fell silent.

“Well...” There was a moment’s embarrassed silence, and Cade let his eyes open all the way, to find Cousin standing, hesitant, in the doorway. “Maybe I better stay around. He’s a Gunman, you know. He might...”

“I said I can handle him,” she replied. “Suppose you take care of your man before he gets...watch out!”

The sleepwalker's eyes were large and brilliant, fascinated by the needle on the table. He saw Cade, stretched out on the bed, and sudden animation flooded his face.

"Don't let them do it to you!" he screamed. "Don't let them touch you! They'll make you like me."

While the other man stood ashen-faced and horrified, the girl acted so swiftly that Cade might almost have admired her, if it were possible to use the word in connection with a female commoner. She was across the small room, and back again with the needle in her hand even as the man screamed his warning to Cade. Before the commoner could lift his arm to brush it aside, she drove the needle home, and the plunger after it.

"S-s-s-s-t!"

The man in gray was ready when she hissed at him.

"You will come with me," he intoned. "You will come with me now. You will come with me."

Cade had seen hypnotists at work before, but never with the aid of a drug so swift as this. He felt the capsule the girl had given him getting warm and moist between his lips. Horror seized him, but he waited, as he knew he must, till the door was closed behind those inhumanly even footsteps.

He knew exactly how fast the girl could move. Gunners are sturdy pillars. It is fitting that we serve. His timing was perfection itself as he spat the dangerous pill from his mouth and leaped from the bed. She had hardly time to turn from the door before his fist caught her a round blow on the side of the head, and she crumpled silently to the floor.

CHAPTER 4

He had to get out of here.

He had to get back to the Chapter House. He looked at the girl, sprawled on her face on the floor, and was uncomfortably aware of the feel of the rough commoner clothes against his own skin, and then acutely conscious of a blank feeling on his right hip, where his gun should be.

The Klin Philosophy in a Gunner is like the charge in his gun.

He remembered, and shuddered as he remembered, the awful calmness with which she had admitted plotting against the Emperor. It is fitting that the Emperor rules. While this is so, a!! will be well till the end of time.

Cade took his eyes from the crumpled figure of the girl and examined the strangely featureless room once more. There was nothing new to be seen. He approached the inconspicuous door. Beyond it there was a way out. This place of horrors, whatever and wherever it was, would have to be burned from the face of the earth, and the sooner he escaped, the sooner it would happen. Without pride but with solid thankfulness he was glad that he, a full Gunner, was here instead of a novice of an armiger.

Beyond the door was an empty corridor whose only purpose seemed to be the connection of the featureless room with other rooms fifty meters away. He was suddenly sure that he was underground.

There were six doors at the end of the fifty-meter corridor, and he heard voices when he listened at five of them. Calmly he opened the sixth and walked into an empty room about ten by twenty meters, well lit, equipped with simple benches and a little elevated platform at one end. Along one wall were three curtained booths whose purpose he could not fathom. But he dived into one with desperate speed at the sound of approaching voices.

The booth was in two sections separated by a thin curtain. In the rear section, against the wall, you could look out and not be looked in on. It was an arrangement apparently as insane as the gray, egg-shaped room, but it was a perfect observation post. Through the gauzelike inside curtain and the half-drawn heavier outside curtain, he saw half a dozen commoners enter the place, chatting in low voices. Their clothes were of the usual cut, but a uniform drab brown instead of the ordinary gaudy particolor.

The drab-clad commoners fell silent and seated themselves on a front bench as others in more customary clothing began to straggle in. There were about fifty of them. One of the front-benches rose, and standing in front of the little stage, did something that Cade recognized; he made the same detestable sign with which the old poisoner had mocked him. Watching carefully, the Gunner saw that it was an X overlaid with a P. The right hand touched the left shoulder, right hipbone, right shoulder, left hipbone, and then traced a line up from the navel to end in a curlicue over the face. It was manifestly a mockery of the Gunner's ten-thousand-year-old ritual when donning his gun. Cade coldly thought: They'll pay for that.

All the seated commoners repeated the sign, and the standing man began to speak in a resonant, well-trained voice: "The first of the first of the good Cairo." He began making intricate signs involving much arm-waving. It went on for minutes, and Cade quickly lost interest, though the seated commoners were, as far as he could make out, following raptly. At last the commoner said: "That is how you shall be known. The first of the first."

Idiotically, twenty commoners from the back benches got up and filed out. Cade was astonished to see that some of them were silently weeping.

The speaker said when they had left: "The first of the first of the good Cairo in the second degree," and the lights went out, except for a blue spot on the platform. The speaker, standing a little to one side, went through the same signs as before, but much more slowly. The signs were coordinated with a playlet enacted on the stage by the other drab-clad commoners. It started with the speaker spreading his palms on his chest and an "actor" standing alone in the center of the platform. Both speaker and actor then made a sweeping gesture with the right hand waist-high and palm down, and a second actor crawled onto the platform...and so on until the first actor, who had never moved, laid his hand successively on the heads of six persons, two of them women, who seemed pleased by the gesture.

About midway through the rigmarole Cade suddenly realized where he was and what it was all about. He was in a Place of Mystery! He knew little about the Mystery Cults. There were, he recalled, four or five of them, all making ridiculous pretensions to antiquity. Above all, they were ridiculous when you thought of them: commoners' institutions where fools paid to learn the "esoteric meaning" of gibberish phrases, mystic gestures, and symbolic dramas. Presumably a few clever souls had made a good thing of it. They were always raiding each other for converts, and often with success. Frequenters of Mysteries were failures, stupid even for commoners, simply unable to grasp the propositions of the Klin Philosophy.

There were—let's see—the Joosh Mystery, which had invented a whole language called something like Hibber; the Scientific Mystery, which despised science and sometimes made a little trouble at the opening of new hospitals; and there were others, but he couldn't recall anything called the Cairo Mystery.

But it was frightening. If they could swallow the Mysteries, these weak-minded commoners could accept

anything else—even a plot against the Realm of Man.

The lights were on again, and the ridiculous proceedings outside apparently were drawing to a close, when two more commoners entered. One of them was the man in gray—Cousin.

He murmured something to the drab-clad speaker—Cade could guess what. The Gunner burst from the booth toward the door at a dead run.

“Stop him!”

“Sacrilege!”

“A spy!”

“Get him! Get him!”

But of course they didn't. They just milled and babbled while Cade plowed through them, made the door—and found it locked.

Cousin announced loudly as Cade turned his back to the wall, “Seize him, beloved. It is a spy trying to steal our most secret rituals.”

“He's lying,” yelled Cade. “I am Gunner Cade of the Order of Armsmen. My Star is the Star of France. Commoners, I command you to open the door and make way for me.”

“A ridiculous pose, spy,” said Cousin smoothly. “If you are a Gunner, where is your gun? If you are of the Star of France, what are you doing here in Baltimore?”

The commoners were impressed. Cade was confused. In Baltimore?

“Bear him down, my beloved!” shouted Cousin. “Bear down the spy and bring him to me!” The commoners muttered and surged, and Cade was buried beneath their numbers. He saw the keen face of Cousin close to him, felt the stab of a needle in his arm. For the first time, he wondered how long he had been drugged. Baltimore! Of course, the Mysteries were worldwide. He could as easily have been in Zanzibar by now, or his native Denver, instead of France...or Baltimore.

There was no doubt about it; the Mysteries would have to be suppressed. Up to now they had been tolerated, for every Mystery solemnly claimed it was merely a minor auxiliary of the Klin Philosophy and that all adherents were primarily followers of Klin. Nobody had ever been fooled—until now.

“He'll be all right now,” said Cousin. “Two of you pick him up and carry him. He won't struggle anymore.”

Gunners march where the Emperor wills; that is their glory. Cade struck out violently with arms and legs at once as the commoners attempted to lift him from the floor. Nothing happened—nothing except that they lifted him easily and carried him out of the big room. Vanity is a peril. An emotion flooded Cade, an unfamiliar feeling that identified itself with nothing since earliest childhood. He was frog-marched down the corridor, ignominiously helpless in the hands of two commoners, and understood that what he felt was shame.

They carried him into the featureless room again and strapped him to the bed on which he had

awakened—how long?-before. He heard Cousin say: “Thank you, my beloved, in the name of the good Cairo,” and the door closed. Rage drove out shame and vanity both as a woman’s voice said clearly: “You bloody fool!”

“He is, my dear,” said Cousin unctuously. “But quite clever enough for us. Or he will be shortly, when he understands how to use the limited intelligence his Order has left him.” Gleeful satisfaction trickled through the man’s voice. “He is quite clever enough—he knows how to kill. And he is strong—strong enough to kill. Let me see the bruise he gave you....”

“Take your busy little hands off me, Cousin. I’m all right. Where will you start him from?”

“He can come to in any park; it doesn’t matter.”

“If he fell off a bench, he might be arrested. Someplace with a table for him to lean on?...”

“You’re right. We could dump him at Mistress Cannon’s! How’s that? A chaste Gunner at Mistress Cannon’s!”

The girl’s laughter was silvery. “I must go now,” she said.

“Very well. Thank you, my beloved, in the name of the good Cairo.” The door closed.

Cade felt his shoulders being adjusted on the table where he lay. He looked at gray nothingness. There was a click, and he was looking at a black spot.

Cousin’s voice said: “You notice that this room has little to distract the attention. It has no proper corners, no angles, nothing in the range of your sight for your eye to wander to. Either you look at that black dot or you close your eyes. It doesn’t matter which to me. As you look at the black dot, you will notice after a while that it seems to swing toward you and away from you, toward you and away from you. This is no mechanical trickery; it is simply your eye muscles at work making the dot seem to swing toward you and away, first toward you and then away. You may close your eyes, but you will find it difficult to visualize anything but the dot swinging toward you and away, first toward you and then away. You can see nothing but the dot swinging toward you and away...”

It was true; it was true. Whether Cade’s eyes were open or closed, the black dot swung and melted at the edges, and seemed to grow and swallow the grayness and then melt again. He tried to cling to what was fitting—like this the Order wraps the Realm and shields it—but the diabolical hypnotist seemed to be reading his thoughts.

“Why fight me, master Cade? You have no boots. You have no hose. You have no shirt. You have no cloak. You have no gun. Only the dot swinging toward you and away; why fight me; why fight the dot swinging toward you and away? Why fight me? I’m your friend. I’ll tell you what to do. You have no boots. You have no hose. You have no cloak. You have no gun. Why fight your friend? You only have the dot swinging toward you and away. Why fight me? I’ll tell you what to do. Watch the dot swinging toward you and away...”

He had no boots. He had no hose. He had no cloak. He had no gun. Why fight his friend? That girl, that evil girl, had brought him to this. He hated her for making him, a Gunner—but he was not a gunner, he had no gun, he had nothing, he had nothing.

“You don’t know. You don’t know. You don’t know. You don’t know. You don’t know. You don’t

know. You don't know. You don't know."

The self-awareness of Cade was no longer a burning fire that filled him from his scalp to his toes. It was fading at his extremities, the lights going out in his toes and fingers and skin, retreating, retreating.

"You will go to the palace and kill the Power Master with your hands. You will go to the palace and kill the Power Master with your hands."

He would go...his self-awareness, a dim light in his mind, watched it happen and cried out too feebly. He would go to the palace and kill the Power Master with his hands. Who was he? He didn't know. He would go to the palace and kill the Power Master with his hands. Why would he? He didn't know. He would go to the palace and kill the Power Master with his hands. He didn't know. The spark of ego left to him watched it happen and was powerless to prevent it.

CHAPTER 5

Blackness and a bumping...rest and a sensation of acceleration...a passage of time and the emergence of sounds...a motor, and wind noise, and voices.

Laughter.

"Will he make it, do you think?"

"Who knows?"

"He's a Gunner. They can break your back in a second."

"I don't believe that stuff."

"Well, look at him! Muscles like iron."

"They pick 'em that way."

"Naw, it's the training they get. A Gunner can do it if anybody can."

"I don't know."

"Well, if he doesn't, the next one will. Or the next. Now we know we can do it. We'll take as many as we need."

"It's risky. It's too dangerous."

"Not the way we did it. The old lady came along with him."

A jolt.

"You've got to walk him to Cannon's."

“Two blocks! And he must weigh...”

“I know, but you’ve got to. I’m in my grays. What would a Klin Service officer be doing in Cannon’s?”

“But—oh, al! right. I wonder if he’ll make it?”

Lurching progress down a dark street, kept from falling by a panting, cursing blur. A dim place with clinking noises and bright-colored blurs moving in it.

“E-e-easy, boy. Steady there—here’s a nice corner table. You like this one? All righty, into the chair. Fold, curse you. Fold.” A dull blow in the stomach. “Tha-a-at’s better. Two whiskies, dear.”

“What’s the matter witcha friend?”

“A little drunkie. I’m gonna leave him here after I have my shot. He always straightens up after a little nap.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I don’t wanta see any change out of this, dear.”

“Thass different.”

“Back so quick, dear?”

“Here’s ya whisky.”

“Righto. Mud in your eye and dribbling down your left cheek, dear. You hear me, fella? I’m going bye-bye now. I’ll see you on the front page. Haw! I’ll see you on the front page!” The talking blur went away, and another, bright-colored one, came.

“Buy me a drink? You’re pretty stiff, ain’t you? Mind if I have yours? You look like you got enough. I’m Arlene. I’m from the south. You like girls from the south? What’s the matter with you, anyway? If you’re asleep, why don’t you close your eyes, big fella? Is this some kind of funny, funny joke? Oh, fall down dead. Comic!”

Another bright-colored blur: “Hello; you want company? I noticed you chased away Arlene, and for that I don’t blame you. All she knows is ‘Buy-me-a-drink’; I ain’t like that. I like a nice, quiet talk myself once in a while. What do you do for fun, big fella—follow the horses? Play cards? Follow the wars? I’m a fighting fan myself. I go for Zanzibar. That Gunner Golos—man! This year already he’s got seventeen raids and nine kills. That what you call a Gunner. Hey, big fella, wanna buy me a drink while we talk? Hey, what’s the matter with you anyway? Oh, cripe. Out with his eyes open.”

The blur went away. Vitality began to steal through sodden limbs, and urgent clarity flashed through the mind. Go to the palace and kill the Power Master. The hands on the table stirred faintly, and the mind inside whirred into motion, tabulating knowledge with easy familiarity.

You killed people with your hands by smashing them on the side of the neck with the side of the hand below the little finger—sudden but not positive. If you had time to work for thirty seconds without interruption, you took them by the throat and smashed the tracheal cartilage with your thumbs.

Go to the palace and kill the Power Master with your hands.

One hand crawled around the emptied whisky glass and crushed it to fragments and powder. If you come up from behind, you can break a back by locking one foot around the instep, putting your knee in the right place, and falling forward as you grasp the shoulders.

A gaudily dressed girl stood across the table. “I’m going to buy you a little drink, big fella. I won’t take no for an answer. I got it right here.”

His throat made a noise which was not speech, and his hands lifted off the table as she stood beside him with a small bottle. His arms would not lift more than an inch from the table. The drink in his mouth burned like fire.

“Listen to me, Cade,” said the girl into his ear. “No scenes. No noise. No trouble. As you come to, just sit still and listen to me.”

Like waking up. Automatically the morning thought began to go through his mind. It is fitting that the Emperor rules. It is fitting that the Power Master...

“The Power Master!” he said hoarsely.

“It’s all right,” said the girl. “I gave you an antidote. You’re not going to—do anything you don’t want to.”

Cade tried to stand but couldn’t.

“You’ll be all right in a couple of minutes,” she said.

He saw her more clearly now. She was heavily made up, and the thick waves of her hair reflected the bright purple of her gossamer-sheer pajamas. That didn’t make sense. Only the Star-born wore sheer; commoners’ clothes were of heavy stuffs. But only commoner females wore pajamas; Star-born ladies dressed in gowns and robes. He shook his head, trying to clear it, and tore his eyes from the perfection of her body, clearly visible through the bizarre clothing.

Following his eyes, she flushed a little. “That’s part of the act,” she said. “I’m not.”

Cade didn’t try to understand what she was talking about. Her face was incredibly beautiful. “You’re the same one,” he said. “You’re the commoner from that place.”

“Lower your voice,” she said coolly. “And this time, listen to me.”

“You were with them before,” he accused her. His speech was almost clear. His arms worked all right now.

“Not really. Don’t you understand? If you’d swallowed the capsule I gave you in the hypnosis room, you’d never have gone under. But you had to bash me and make it on your own. See how far you got?”

She was right about that. He hadn’t succeeded in getting out of the place.

“All right,” she went on when he didn’t reply. “Maybe you’re going to be reasonable after all. You’re feeling better, aren’t you? The—compulsion is gone? Try to remember that I came after you to give you

the release drug.”

Cade found he could move his legs. “Thank you for your assistance,” he said stiffly. “I’m all right now. I have to get to—to the nearest Chapter House, I suppose, and make my report. I...” It went against all training and was perhaps even disobedient, but she had helped him. “I will neglect to include your description in my report.”

“Still spouting high-and-mighty?” she said wearily. “Cade, you still don’t understand it all. There are things you don’t know. You can’t...”

“Give me any further information you may have,” he interrupted. “After that, may it please the Ruler we two shall never meet again.”

The words surprised him, even as he spoke them. Why should he be willing to protect this—creature—from her just punishment? Very well, she had helped him; that was only her duty as a common citizen of the Realm. He was a sworn Armsman. There was no reason to sit here listening to her insolence; the City Watch would deal with her.

“Cade...” She was giggling. That was intolerable. “Cade, have you ever had a drink before?”

“A drink? Certainly I have quenched my thirst many times.” She was unfitting, upsetting, and insolent as well.

“No, I mean a drink—a strong alcoholic beverage.”

“It is forbidden...” He stopped, appalled. Forbidden!...for love of woman makes men love their rulers less...

“See here, commoner!” he began in a rage.

“Oh, Cade! Now you’ve done it. We’ve got to get out of here.” Her voice changed to a nasal wheedle. “Let’s get out of this place, honey, and come on home with me. I’ll show you a real good time...”

She was cut off by the arrival of a massive woman. “I’m Mistress Cannon,” said the newcomer. “What’re you doing here, girlie? You ain’t one of mine.”

“We was just leaving, honest—wasn’t we, big fella?”

“I was,” said Cade; he swayed as he rose to his feet. The girl followed, sticking close to him.

Mistress Cannon saw them grimly to the door. “If you come back, girlie,” she said, “I may wrap a bar stool around your neck.”

Outside, Cade peered curiously down the narrow darkness of the city street. How did commoners get places? There was no way even to orient himself. How had they expected him to get to the palace?

He turned abruptly to the girl. “What city is this?” he demanded.

“Aberdeen.”

That made sense. The ancient Proving Grounds where he himself and all the Armsmen for ten thousands

of years had won their guns in trial and combat. The city of the palace, the awesome Capitol of the Emperor himself. And in the palace, the High Office of the Power Master, the grim executive.

“There is a Chapter House,” he remembered. “How do I get there?”

“Gunner, understand me. You aren’t going to any Chapter House. That’s the best and quickest way to get yourself killed.”

A typical commoner’s reaction, he thought, and found himself saddened to have had it from her. She had, after all, incurred some risk in defying the plotters.

“I assure you,” he said kindly, “that the prospect of my eventual death in battle does not frighten me. You commoners don’t understand it, but it is so. All I want to do is get this information into the proper hands and resume my fitting task as Gunner.”

She made a puzzling, strangled noise and said after a long pause: “That’s not what I meant. I’ll speak more plainly. You had an alcoholic drink tonight—two of them, in fact. You’re not accustomed to them. You are what is known, among us commoners...” She paused again, swallowing what seemed inexplicably like laughter. “...among us commoners as blasted, birdy, polluted, or drunk. I’ll be merciful and assume that your being blasted, birdy, polluted, or drunk accounts for your pompous stupidity. But you are not going anywhere by yourself. You’re going to come with me, because that’s the only safe place for you. Now, please stop being foolish.” Her face was turned up to his, pleading, and in the wandering rays of light from a distant street lamp, even under the thick coating of cosmetics, she seemed more than ever the perfect likeness of The Lady, the perfection of womanhood that could never be achieved by mortal females. Her hand slipped easily around his arm, and she clung to him, tugging at him, urging him to follow her.

Cade didn’t strike her. He had every reason to, and yet, for some reason, he could not bring himself to shake her off as he should have done, to throw her to the ground, and leave her and be rid of her peril forever. Instead he stood there, and the flesh of his arm crawled at the soft touch of her hand through the commoner’s cloth he wore.

“If you have nothing more to tell me,” he said coldly, “I’ll leave you now.” They were at a corner; he turned up the side street and noticed that there were brighter lights and taller buildings ahead.

The girl didn’t let go. She ran along at his side, holding on and talking in a furious undertone. “I’m trying to save your life, you bloody idiot. Will you stop this nonsense? You don’t know what you’re getting into!”

There was a watchman standing across the street on the opposite corner, a symbol of familiar security in immaculate Service gray. Cade hesitated only an instant, remembering where he had last seen that uniform desecrated. But surely, surely, that was not cause enough to lose all faith.

He turned to the girl at his side. The touch of her hand was like fire against his arm. “Leave me now,” he told her, “or I cannot promise for your safety.”

“Cade, you mustn’t!”

That was intolerable. Love of woman, he thought again, and shook off her arm as he would have brushed away an insect.

He strode out into the street. "Watchman!"

The man in grays lolled idly on his corner.

"Watchman!" Cade called again. "I desire to be directed to the Chapter House of the Order of Armsmen."

"Your desires are no concern of mine, citizen."

Cade remembered his commoner's clothing and swallowed his ire. "Can you direct me...sir?"

"If I see fit. And if your purpose is more fitting than your manner. What business have you there?"

"That is no concern..." He stopped himself. "I cannot tell you...sir. It is an affair of utmost privacy."

"Very well, then, citizen." The Serviceman laughed tolerantly. "Find your own way...privately." He was looking past Cade, over the Gunner's shoulder. "She with you?" he asked with alerted interest.

Cade turned, to find the girl right behind him again. "No," he said sharply.

"O.K., girlie," the watchman demanded. "What're you doing out of the district?"

"The district..." For the first time, Cade saw the girl fumble and falter. "What do you...?"

"You know what I mean. You're not wearing that garter for jewelry, are you, girlie? You know you can't solicit outside the district. If you was with this citizen, now..." He looked meaningfully at Cade.

"She is not with me," the Gunner said firmly. "She followed me here, but..."

"That's a dirty lie," the girl whined, suddenly voluble. "This fella picks me up in a bar, we was in Cannon's place, you can ask anybody there, and he kicks up such a rumpus, they tossed us out, and then he says we're goin' to his place, and then we get out here to the corner, and all of a sudden he remembers something else he wants to do, and leaves me flat. These guys that come in and get loaded and then don't know what they want...!" She wound up with a note of disgust.

"How about it, citizen? Was she with you?"

"She was not," Cade said emphatically. He was staring at the garter the Serviceman seemed to concerned about. It was a slender chain of silver links fastened high on the girl's thigh, pulling the thin folds of her pajamas tight against her flesh.

"Sorry, girlie," the watchman said, firmly but not unkindly. "You know the rules. We're going to the Watch House."

"There, you see?" She turned on Cade in a fury. "See what you did? Now they'll cage me for soliciting, and I can't pay, so it means sitting it out in a cell, all on account of you don't know what you want. Come on, now, admit it how you made me come with you. Just tell him, that's all I ask."

Cade shook her off with disgust. "You were following me," he said. "I told you I'd keep you out of trouble if I could, but if you're going to insist on..."

“All right now,” the Serviceman said, suddenly decisive. “That’ll be enough out of both of you. You both come along, and you can get it straightened out in the Watch House.”

“I see no reason...” Cade began, and stopped even before the watchman began to reach for the light club in his belt. He did see a reason, a good one: at a Watch House, he would be able to get transportation to the Chapter House. “Very well,” he said coldly. “I shall be glad to come along.”

“You bloody idiot,” said the girl.

CHAPTER 6

“Well, which one of you is making the complaint?” The bored officer behind the desk looked from the girl to Cade and back again.

Neither replied.

“She was out of her district,” the other watchman explained, “and they couldn’t get together on whether she was with him or not, so I took ‘em both along in case you wanted to hear it all.”

“Official infringement on the girl, huh?” the deskman muttered. “If she don’t want to make a complaint, we got nothing against the man. All right. Matron!” A stout, clean-looking woman in gray got off a bench along the wall and approached the desk. “Take her along and get her name and registration. Fine is ten greens...”

“Ten greens!” the girl broke in miserably. “I haven’t even got a blue on me. He was the first one tonight...”

“Ten greens,” he said implacably, “or five days’ detention. Tell your troubles to the matron. Take her away. Now...” He turned to Cade as the stout woman led the girl away. “We’ll take your name and address for the record, and you can go. Those girls are getting out of hand. They’d be all over town if we let ‘em get away with it.”

It was too much to attempt to unravel now. Cade dismissed the puzzle from his mind and said in a low voice: “May I speak to you alone?”

“You out of your head, man? Speak up, what do you want?”

The Gunner looked around. No one was too close. He kept his voice low. “It would be well if you speak more respectfully, watchman. I am not a commoner.”

Comprehension came over the man’s face. He stood up promptly, and led the Gunner into a small side room. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said hastily. “I had no idea. The gentlemen usually identify to the watchman on street duty when such incidents occur. You’re a young gentleman, sir, and perhaps this is your first...little visit to the other half? You understand, sir, you needn’t have been bothered by coming here at all. Next time, sir, if you’ll just identify to...”

“I don’t believe you quite understand.” Cade stopped the meaningless flow. “I desired to come here. There is a service you can do for me and for the Realm.”

“Yes, sir. I know my duty, sir, and I’ll be glad to assist you in any way you deem fitting. If you’ll just identify first, sir, you understand I have to ask it, we can’t chance ordinary citizens passing themselves off as...”

“Identify? How do I do that?”

“Your badge of rank, sir.” He hesitated, and saw confusion still on Cade’s face. “Surely, sir, you didn’t come out without it?”

The Gunner understood at last. “You misunderstand, watchman,” he said indignantly. “And you presume too much. I have heard of the degenerates among our nobility who indulge in the—kind of escapade you seem to have in mind. I am not one of them. I am a Gunner in the Order of Armsmen, and I require your immediate assistance to reach the nearest Chapter House.”

“You have no badge of rank?” the watchman said grimly.

“Armsmen carry no prideful badges.”

“Armsmen carry guns.”

Cade kept his temper. “All you have to do is get in touch with the Chapter House. They can check my fingerprints, or there might be a Gunner there who can identify me personally.”

The deskman made no answer; he walked to the door and pushed it open.

“Hey, Bruge!” The watchman of the street got to his feet and came toward them. “You want to put a drunk-and-disorderly on this fella? He’s either cockeyed drunk or out of his head. Was he acting up outside?”

“The girl said he was drinking,” the other man remembered.

“Well, you’re the one’ll have to register the complaint. I’m not letting him out of here tonight. He’s been telling me in deepest confidence that he’s really a Gunner in the Order...”

“Say, that’s how the whole thing started,” Bruge remembered. “He came up to me asking where was the Chapter House. I figured he was just a little crooked, and I wouldn’t of pulled him in at all except for the argument with the girl. You think he’s off his rocker?”

“I don’t know.” The deskman was silent for a moment, then made up his mind. “I’ll tell you what, you sign a d-and-d, and we’ll see how he talks in the morning.”

Cade could endure no more of it. He strode angrily between the two men. “I tell you,” he announced loudly, “that I am Gunner Cade of the Order of Armsmen, and my Star is the Star of France. If you do not do what is necessary to identify me immediately, you will pay dearly for it later.”

“Say, now...” Another watchman, who had listened idly from the bench, stood up and joined them. “I’m a fighting fan myself. It’s a real privilege to meet up with a real Gunner, first-hand.” He was short and stout, and there was an idiotic smile on his beaming moon face, but at least he seemed more alert than the others. “I hate to bother you, sir, at a time like this, but I was having a little argument just yesterday with Bruge here, and you could settle it for us. Could you tell me, sir, for instance, how many times you’ve

been in action this year? Or, say, your five-year total?"

"I really don't remember," said Cade impatiently. "This is hardly a fitting time for talk of past actions. I must report immediately to the nearest Chapter House. If your superior sees fit to do his duty now and call the House for identification, I shall endeavor to forget the inconvenience I have suffered so far."

"How about it, Chief?" the moon-faced one appealed to the deskman, turning his face away from Cade. "Why don't you let Bruge here make a call for the Gunner? It's only sporting, isn't it?"

There was an unexpected smile on the deskman's face when he replied. "O.K.—go on, Bruge, you go call up." He winked in a friendly fashion.

"All right," said Bruge disappointedly and left the room.

"I wonder, Gunner Cade," Moon-face said easily, "how many men you've killed since you became armiger? Say, in offensive actions compared with defensive actions?"

"Eh? Oh, I've never kept count, watchman. No Gunner would." This fellow at least was civil. There was no harm in answering the man's questions while he waited. "Numbers killed don't mean everything in war. I've been in engagements where we'd have given half of our men to get control of a swell in the ground so unnoticeable that you or you probably wouldn't see it if you were looking at it."

"Think of that!" marveled one of the watchmen. "Did you hear that? Just for a little swell in the ground that slobs like us wouldn't even notice. Hello, Jardin..." He hailed another man in gray who had just entered. "Here's the man you want," he told Moon-face. "Jardin can give you facts and figures on the Gunner."

"You mean Cade?" the new man said unhappily. "Yeah, I sure can. It's only eight kills for the second quarter. He would have hit twelve, sure, only..."

"Yeah, it's a shame all right," Moon-face broke in. "Jardin, I've got a real treat for you. A France fan like you, and Gunner Cade is your favorite, too. Well, here's the thrill of a lifetime, man. Gunner Cade, himself, in person. Jardin, meet the Gunner, Gunner Cade, sir, this is a long-standing fan of yours."

Two more men had come in, and another was at the door. They were all standing around listening. Cade regretted his earlier impulse to answer the man's question. A distasteful familiarity was developing in Moon-face's attitude.

"Quit your kidding," Jardin was saying almost angrily. "I don't see what's so funny when a good Gunner dies."

"I tell you, the man says he's Gunner Cade. Isn't that true?" Moon-face appealed to the Gunner.

"I am Gunner Cade," he replied with what dignity he could muster.

"Why, you...!"

The outburst from Jardin was stopped abruptly by the deskman.

"All right, that's enough now," he said sharply. "This farce is no longer fitting to our honored dead. Jardin is right. Fellow," he said to Cade, "you picked the wrong Gunner and the wrong watchman."

Gunner Cade is dead. I know, because Jardin here lost twenty greens to me on him. He was silly enough to bet on Cade for a better second-quarter total of kills than Golos of Zanzibar. Golos topped him with—but never mind that. Who are you, and what do you think you’re doing impersonating a Gunner?”

“But I am Gunner Cade,” he said, stupefied.

“Gunner Cade,” said the officer patiently, “was killed last week in the kitchen of a house in some French town his company was attacking. They found his body. Now, fellow, who are you? Impersonating a Gunner is a serious offense.”

For the first time, Cade realized that Bruge had left, not to call the Chapter House, but to collect the crowd of watchmen who had assembled while they talked. There were eleven of them in the room now—too many to overpower. He remained silent; insisting on the truth seemed hopeless.

“That’s no d-and-d,” the deskman said in the silence. “We’ll hold him for psych.”

“Want me to sign the complaint?” It was Bruge, grinning like an ape.

“Yeah. Put him in a cage until morning, and then to the psych.”

“Watchman,” said Cade steadily. “Will I be able to convince the psych, or is he just another commoner like you?”

“Hold him,” somebody said. Two of them expertly caught Cade’s arms. The questioner flicked a rubber truncheon across Cade’s face. “Maybe you’re crazy,” he said, “but you’ll show respect to officers of the Klin Service.”

Cade stood there, the side of his jaw growing numb. He knew he could break loose from the watchman holding him, or disable the man with the truncheon by one well-placed kick. But what would be the good of it? There were too many of them there. It is fitting that we Gunmen serve...But the thought trailed off into apathy.

“All right,” said the man with the truncheon. “Put him in with Fledwick.”

The Gunner let himself be led to a cell and locked in. He ignored his cellmate until the man said nervously: “Hello. What are you in for?”

“Never mind.”

“Oh. Oh. I’m in here by mistake. My name is Fledwick Zisz. I’m a Klin teacher...attached to the lectory at the Glory of the Realm ground-car works. There was some mix-up in the collections, and in the confusion they concluded I was responsible. I should be out of here in a day or two.”

Cade glanced uninterestedly at the man. “Thief” was written all over him. So Klin teachers could be thieves.

“What does a silver garter on a girl mean?” he suddenly demanded.

“Oh,” said Fledwick. “I wouldn’t know personally, of course.” He told him.

Curse her, thought Cade. He wondered what had happened to her. She’d said she couldn’t pay the fine.

Probably she was locked up with a real prostitute. Curse them, you'd think they could tell the difference!

"My real vocation, of course, was military," said Fledwick.

"What?" said Cade.

Fledwick hastily changed his story. "I should have said, 'the military teachership.' I was never really happy at the Glory shop. I'd rather serve humbly as a teacher in an obscure Chapter House of the Order." He raptly misquoted: "It is fitting for the Emperor to rule. It is fitting for the Power Master to serve the Emperor."

"Interested in the Order, eh? Do you know Gunner Cade?"

"Oh, everybody knows Gunner Cade. There wasn't a smile in the Glory shop the day we heard the news. The factory pool drew Cade in the stakes, and it's play or pay. Not that I know much about gambling, but I—uh—happened to have organized the pool. It was so good for the employee morale. When I get out of here, though, I think I'll stick to dog bets. You get nice odds in a play-or-pay deal, but there's a perfectly human tendency to think you've been swindled when your Gunner is—so to speak—scratched and you don't get your money back. I've always thought..."

"Shut up," said Cade. You'd think the fools could tell the difference between her and—oh, curse her. He had worries of his own. For one thing, he seemed to be dead. He grinned without mirth. He had to get to the Chapter House and report on the Cairo Mystery, but he was in effect a commoner without even a name. A Gunner had no wife or family, no one to notify, no one to identify him except his Brothers in the Order—and the watchmen were not going to bother the Order. They knew Cade was dead.

He wondered if this were happening for the first time in the ten thousand years since creation.

Everything was all wrong; he couldn't think straight. He stretched out on the jail cot and longed for his harder, narrower sleepbag. It is fitting that the Emperor rules...He hoped she wouldn't antagonize them with her disrespectful way of talking. Curse her! Why hadn't she stayed in her own district? But that went to prove that she didn't really know anything about the trade, didn't it?

"You!" he growled at Fledwick. "Did you ever hear of a prostitute wandering out of her district by mistake?"

"Oh. Oh, no. Certainly not. Everybody knows where to go when he wants one. Or so I'm told."

A crazy thought came to Cade that if he were dead, he was released from his vows. That was nonsense. He wished he could talk to a real Klin teacher, not this sniveling thief. A good Klin teacher could always explain your perplexities, or find you one who could. He wanted to know how it happened that he had done all the right things and everything had turned out all wrong.

"You," he said. "What's the penalty for impersonating a Gunner?"

Fledwick scratched his nose and mused: "You picked a bad one, sir. It's twenty years!" He was jolted out of his apathy. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but..."

"Shut up. I've got to think."

He thought—and realized with twisted amusement that one week ago he would have been equally

horrified, but for another reason. He would have thought the penalty all too light.

Fledwick turned his face to the wall and sighed comfortably. Going to sleep, was he?

“You,” said Cade. “Do you know who I am?”

“You didn’t say, sir.” The Klin teacher yawned.

“I’m Gunner Cade, of the Order of Gunmen; my Star is the Star of France.”

“But...” The teacher sat up on the bed and looked worriedly into Cade’s angry face. “Oh. Of course,” he said. “Of course you are, sir. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you.” Thereafter he sat on the edge of his bed, stealing an occasional nervous glance at his cellmate. It made Cade feel a little better, but not much.

It is fitting that the Emperor rules...He hoped that leaving the ‘district’ was not too serious an offense.

CHAPTER 7

Cade opened his eyes.

Dingy walls, locked door, and the little Klin teacher still sitting on the side of his bunk across the cage, fast asleep. At the thought of the man’s futile determination to hold an all-night vigil over the maniac who had claimed to be a dead Gunner, Cade grinned—and realized abruptly that a grin was no way for a Gunner of the Order to start his day. He hastily began his Morning Thoughts of the Order, but somewhere, far down inside him, there was a small wish that the Thoughts were not quite so long. He had a plan.

Seconds after completing the familiar meditation, he was leaning over the other bunk, shaking the Klin teacher’s shoulder. Fledwick almost toppled to the floor and then sprang to his feet in a terrified awakening. He was about to shriek when the Gunner’s big hand sealed his mouth.

“No noise,” Cade told him. “Listen to me.” He sat on Fledwick’s bunk and urged the little crook down beside him. “I’m going to get out of here, and I’ll need your help to do it. Are you going to make trouble?”

“Oh, no, sir,” the teacher answered too promptly and too heartily. “I’ll be glad to help, sir.”

“Good.” Cade glanced at the lock on the cage door—an ordinary two-way guarded radionic. “I’ll set the lock to open fifteen seconds after it is next opened from the outside. You’ll have to raise some sort of noise to get a watchman in here.”

“You can set the lock?” Fledwick broke in. “Where did you learn...?”

“I told you. I am a Gunner of the Order. I expect your full cooperation because of that. I have a message of great importance which must be delivered to the Chapter House at once. Your service to me, by the way, should win you a pardon.”

Cade read on the little man’s face the collapse of a brief hope. Fledwick said brightly: “The pardon is

immaterial. Whatever I can do to serve the Realm, I will do.”

“Very well, you don’t believe me. Then I will expect your full cooperation on the grounds that I must be a dangerous maniac who might tear you limb from limb for disobedience. Is that clear—and believable?”

“Yes,” said Fledwick miserably.

“Excellent. Now, listen: you will attract a guard’s attention. Say you’re ill or that I’m trying to murder you—anything to get him inside. He will come in, close the door, and look at you. I will overpower him, the door will open, and I will leave.”

“May I ask what I am to do then? The City Watch has been known to mistreat prisoners who aided in escapes.”

“Save your wit and call me sir! You may come along if you like. You would be useful, because I know nothing of the city, of course.”

He got up and went over to the lock.

Fledwick was next to him, peering over his shoulder. “You mean you’re really going to try it? Sir?” There was awe in his voice.

“Of course, fool. That’s what I’ve been saying.” Under the teacher’s dubious stare he got to work on the lock. The cage-side half of its casing was off in less than a minute. It took no longer for his trained eye to analyze the circuits inside. Fledwick nervously sucked in his breath as the Gunner’s sure fingers probed at tubes, relays, and printed “wires.” But it was child’s play to avoid the temper-triggers that would have set alarms ringing, and the more sinister contacts designed to send lethal charges of electricity through meddlers—child’s play for anybody who could rewire a flier’s control panel in a drizzly dawn.

Cade snapped the cover back on and told Fledwick: “Begin!”

The little man was near tears. “Sir, couldn’t we wait until after breakfast?”

“What would they give us?”

“Bread and fried sausage today,” said the teacher hopefully.

Cade pretended to consider, and decided: “No. I don’t eat meat until nightfall. Did you forget that I am a Gunner of the Realm?”

The little man pulled himself together and said evenly: “I am beginning to wonder. I had been thinking of warning the watchman when he came in.”

“Don’t! I can silence both of you, if I must.”

“Yes, of course. But you needn’t worry about me. Your work with the lock...If we get out, I know of a clothing warehouse and a certain person who’s interested in its contents—and to be frank, perhaps I was overoptimistic when I said the misunderstanding that brought me here was a minor one. There are certain complications.”

“Such as being guilty?” suggested Cade. “Never mind. You should have a pardon from the Gunner

Supreme for this morning's work. Meanwhile, think me burglar, lunatic, or what you please, but start howling. It will be daylight soon."

Fledwick practiced with a couple of embarrassed groans and then cut loose with a ten-decibel shriek for help on the grounds that he was dying in agony.

Two watchmen appeared, looking just waked up and annoyed. To Fledwick, writhing on his bunk, one demanded: "What's wrong with you now?"

"Cramps!" yelled Fledwick. "Unendurable pain! My belly is on fire; my limbs are breaking!"

"Yes, yes," said the watchman. He addressed Cade with exquisite politeness. "Oh, Star-born one, go sit on your bunk and put your hands on your knees. My mate's going to be watching you. One move, and sleep gas fills the block. We'll all have a little nap, but when you wake up the desk chief will pound you like a Gunner never was pounded before, O Star-born one."

He nodded to the other watchman, who took his stand by a handle that obviously controlled the gas. Cade rejoiced behind an impassive face; the outside watchman was a slow-moving, doltish-looking fellow.

Fingers played a clicking code on the lock's outside buttons, and the door sprang open in a satisfactorily lively manner. The watchman bent over Fledwick, now moaning faintly, as Cade counted seconds. As the door sprang open again, Cade was on his feet; before it had completed its arc, the Gunner's fist was tingling and the inside watchman lay crumpled half on Fledwick and half on the floor. Cade was through the open door and on the too solid fellow outside after the man realized there was something badly wrong, but before he could do anything about it.

Fledwick was in the corridor by then. "Follow me," Cade ordered. It was odd, he fleetingly thought, to have somebody under your command who couldn't half-read your mind through endless training, somebody whose skills were a guess and whose fighting heart was a gamble. They passed empty cells on their way to the guard room. Its door was stout, equipped with a peephole, and firmly locked in case of just such an emergency as this.

Through the peephole Cade saw three drowsy watchmen. The liveliest was at a facsimile machine reading the early-morning edition of a news sheet as it oozed out.

"Boyer," called the newshound. "Grey Dasher won the last at Baltimore. That's one green you owe—where's Boyer?"

"Cellblock. Fledwick was yelling again."

"How long ago?"

"Keep calm. Just a second before you came in. He went with Marshal; they haven't been more than a minute."

Cade ducked as the newshound strode to the door and put his own eye to the peephole. "A minute's too long," he heard him say. "Marshal's the biggest fool in the Klin Service, and that big maniac's in there with Fledwick....Put on your gas guns."

There were groans of protest. "Ah, can't we flood the block?"

“If we did, I’d have to fill out fifty pages of reports. Move, curse you!”

“Can you fire a gas gun?” whispered Cade. The Klin teacher, trembling, shook his head.

“Then stay out of the way,” Cade ordered. He was excited himself by the novelty and his unarmed state. They say we don’t know fear, he thought, but they’re wrong. Arle, Gunner Supreme, safely dwelling in a fearful place, I pledge that you’ll have no shame for me in this action. Tuned to battle pitch, he thought of the good old man, the Gunner of Gunners, who would accept even the coming scuffle as another fit deed by another of his fit sons in the Order.

The stout door unlocked and the newshound came through first. Like a machine that couldn’t help itself, Cade smashed him paralyzingly with his right arm where the ribs and sternum meet and a great ganglion is unguarded. Cade’s left hand took the watchman’s gun and fired two gas pellets through the half-opened door. One of the watchmen outside had time to shoot before he went down, but his pellet burst harmlessly against a wall.

Fledwick muttered something despairing about “up to our necks,” but Cade waved him along into the guard room. The Gunner reconnoitered the street, found it empty, and returned for the teacher.

“Come along,” he said, pitching the gas gun onto the chest of a prostrate watchman.

Fledwick promptly picked it up. “What did you do that for?” he demanded. Cade glared at him, and he hastily added: “Sir.”

“Put it back,” said Cade. “It’s no fit weapon for a Gunner. I used it only because I had to.”

There was a look on Fledwick’s face that the Gunner had seen before. It was partly puzzled resignation, partly kindness and affection, and—something else that was suspiciously like condescension. Cade had seen it from the Star-borns of the Courts, and especially the ladies. He had seen it often and was puzzled as always.

“Don’t you think, sir,” said the Klin teacher carefully, “that we might take the gas gun along in case another emergency arises? I can carry it for you if you find it too distasteful.”

“Suit yourself,” said Cade shortly, “but hurry.” Fledwick dropped the weapon inside his blouse, securing it underneath the waistband.

“Sir,” said the Klin teacher again, “don’t you think we should do something about these watchmen? Roll them behind a door and lock it?”

Cade shrugged irritably. “Nonsense,” he said. “We’ll be at the Chapter House with everything well again before they’re discovered.” Fledwick sighed and followed him down the steps and along the empty streets. There was a light mist and a hint of dawn in the sky; the two green lights of the Watch House cast the shadows of the Gunner and the Klin teacher before them on the pavement, long and thin.

“How far is the Chapter House?”

“Past the outskirts of Aberdeen, to the north. Five kilometers, say, on the Realm Highway—wide street two blocks west of here.”

“I’ll need a ground car.”

“Car theft too!”

“Requisition in the service of the Realm,” said Cade austerely. “You need have no part in it.” Theft—requisition. Requisition—theft. How odd things were outside the Order! And sometimes how oddly interesting! He felt a little shame at the thought, and hastily reminded himself: Gunners march where the Emperor wills—that is their glory. Yes; march in soft-soled commoners’ shoes, in a requisitioned ground car.

It would be easy—a pang went through him. How easy had it been for the girl? He would investigate with the greatest care. She might suffer from her association with him now that he had broken out. The Klin Servicemen would undoubtedly mistreat her unless they were made aware that his eye was on them. He had seen last night that they were not above petty personal vengeance. Not teachers, they were nevertheless supposed to be the Arm of Klin; as the teachers kept order in men’s minds, the watchmen kept order in the body politic. But what, after all, could you expect from commoners? He would have to let them know that his eye was on them in the matter of the girl.

“Here’s a good one,” said Fledwick. “From my own shop.” Cade surveyed a Glory of the Realm ground car, parked and empty. Fledwick was peering through the window and announced with satisfaction: “Gauge says full-charged. It will get us there.”

“Locked?” asked Cade. “I’ll take care of...”

Fledwick waved him back calmly. “I happen to be able to handle this myself, because of my, well, familiarity with the model.” The little man took off his belt, a regulation Klin uniform belt, to all appearances, until, surprisingly, it turned out to be of very thin leather, folded triple. From within the folds he took a flat metal object and applied it to the Glory car’s lock. There were clicks, and the door swung open.

Cade stared at the Klin teacher as he carefully replaced the object in his belt. Fledwick cleared his throat and explained: “I was planning to get one of the Glories out of savings from my meager stipend. There’s a clever fellow in the lock shop who makes these, uh, door openers, and I thought how convenient it would be to have one if I should ever mislay my combination.”

“For the car you hadn’t bought yet,” said Cade.

“Oh. Oh, yes. Prudence, eh, sir? Prudence.”

“That may be. I shall leave you now; there is no need for you to accompany me further, and you know, I suppose, that Gunners may consort with those outside the Order only if it is unavoidable. I thank you for your services. You may find pleasure in the knowledge that you have been of service to the Realm.” Cade prepared to enter the car.

“Sir,” said Fledwick urgently, “I’d find more pleasure in accompanying you. That pardon you mentioned...”

“It will be sent to you.”

“Sir, I ask you to think that it might be a little difficult to find me. All I desire is to see my humble lectory again, to serve fittingly in expounding the truth of Klin to the simple, honest working folk of the Glory

shop, but until I get the pardon I'll be—perforce inaccessible.”

“Get in,” said Cade. “No, I'll drive. You might absent mindedly pocket the steering panel.” He started the car and gunned it down the street toward the Realm Highway.

“Hold it at fifteen per,” Fledwick warned. “The radar meters kick up a barrier ahead if you speed.”

Cade kept the car at fifteen, with his eyes peeled for trouble—and open as well to a host of curious sights. The broad highway was lined with merchandising shops. Shops and shops selling foodstuffs in small quantities to individuals. Shops and shops selling commoners' garb, each only slightly different from the next. Shops and shops, selling furniture for homes. It seemed such folly!

Fledwick turned on the ground car's radio; through the corner of his eye Cade saw him tuning carefully to a particular frequency not automatically served by the tap plates.

Why, Cade wondered, couldn't they all be sensible like the Order? A single garb—not, he hastily told himself, resembling in any way the uniform of the Armsmen. Why not refectories where a thousand of them at a time could eat simple, standardized foods? His mental stereotype of a commoner returned to him: lax, flabby, gorging himself morning, noon, and night.

How good it would be to get into the Chapter House in time for a plain breakfast, and to let the beloved routine flow over him. He knew it would quench the disturbing thoughts he had suffered during the last days. It was all a wonderful proof that the Rule of the Order was wise. Nor shall any Brother be exposed to the perils of what lies without his Chapter House or the Field of Battle. Let Brothers be transported, by ground if need be, by air if possible, swiftly from Chapter House to Chapter House, and swiftly from Chapter House to the Field of Battle.

How right and fitting it was! The perils were many. Uncounted times he had let his mind be swayed from the Order and his duty in it. When he woke today he had almost willfully chafed at the morning meditation. He could feel the warmth of the Order that would soon enfold him....

“Cade!” shrilled Fledwick. “Listen!”

The radio was saying on what must be the official band: “...claiming to be the late Gunner Cade of France and the unbooked Klin teacher Fledwick Zisz. Use medium-range gas guns. The Cade impostor is known to be armed with a gas gun, and has the strength of a maniac. Zisz is unarmed and not dangerous. Repeat, all-watch alert: bring in two men escaped this morning from Seventh District Watch House. They are an unidentified man claiming to be the late Gunner Cade of France...” It droned through a repeat and fell silent.

“They haven't missed the car yet,” said Cade.

“They will,” Fledwick assured him mournfully. “Or they have missed it and haven't connected it with us yet.” He was gloomily silent for three blocks and then muttered angrily: “Unarmed and not dangerous!” He fingered the gas gun through his blouse. “Unarmed indeed! Sir, a little way more, and we're out of the city. If they haven't got the noose tight yet...”

“Noose?”

“Blocking of exits from the city by watchers. They'll have every gate covered soon enough, but if they don't know about the car, they'll cover the public transports first. We do have a chance.” It was the first

faint note of hope Fledwick had permitted himself.

Cade drove on at a steady fifteen per. The sun was up, and traffic moving in the opposite direction, toward the city, grew heavier by the minute. Once they passed a city-bound car trapped by speed bars that had risen, cagelike, from the paving to hold the speeder for the Watch.

“They stop at the city gates,” said Fledwick. “After that, you can speed up. The watchers have nothing faster than this.”

The noose was not yet tight. They rolled easily past a sleepy watchman at the gate. Either he hadn’t received the alert, or he assumed District Seven was no worry of his. Gunner’s instinct kept Cade from taking Fledwick’s advice and speeding. He rolled the car on at an inconspicuous twenty per, and the decision was sound. A green-topped Watch car from the city passed them, and Fledwick shriveled where he sat. But it kept going on its way, never noticing the fugitives.

The highway was now dotted with cars. Just ahead, and off to the left, was a gray crag. “Chapter House,” said Fledwick, pointing, and Cade sighed. The whole insanely unfitting episode at last was drawing to a close.

The radio spoke again: “To all Armsmen and watchmen.” The voice was vibrant and commanding. “To all watchmen and Armsmen,” said the voice again slowly. “This command supersedes the previous all-watch alert concerning the Cade impostor and the unbooked Klin teacher Fledwick Zisz. Both these men are heavily armed, and both are dangerous. They are to be shot on sight. Armsmen: shoot to kill. Watchmen: use long-range gas guns. New orders for watchmen and Armsmen both are: Shoot on sight! These men are both dangerous. There is to be no parleying, no calls to surrender, no offer or granting of quarter. Your orders are to shoot on sight. No explanation of any Armsman or watchman who fails to shoot on sight will be accepted.

“Description and records follow...”

Cade, in frozen shock, had slowed the car to a crawl, not daring to make a conspicuous stop. He listened to fair physical descriptions of both of them. His “record” was criminal insanity, homicidal mania. Fledwick’s was an interminable list of petty and not-so-petty offenses of the something-for-nothing kind. He too was described as a homicidal maniac.

“You’re armed and are dangerous now,” Cade said stupidly.

His answer was a volley of wild curses. “You got me into this!” raved the little man. “What a fool I was! I could have done my five years standing on one foot! I had friends who could have raised my fine. And you had to bully me into making a break!”

Cade shook his head dazedly. Fledwick’s flood of rage poured over him and drained away, powerless to affect him after the impact of the radio announcement.

“But I am Gunner Cade,” he said quietly, aloud, as much to himself as to the unbooked teacher.

CHAPTER 8

“It’s a mistake—that’s all,” Cade said numbly.

“Very well.” The little man’s voice was acid. “Before we are killed because of this curious mistake, will you decide on a course of action? We’re still approaching your Brothers’ House, and I want none of their hospitality.”

“You’re right,” said Cade. “The Brothers,” he said, feeling an unwarranted note of apology creeping into his voice, “the Brothers would obey the official-frequency command. It’s their duty. I would myself, though the command was most—unusual. I don’t think I’ve ever heard its like, not even for the worst criminal.”

Fledwick was past his first fury. He studied Cade’s bewilderment and said slowly: “Back in the cage, when I saw you fix the lock, I thought you were either a Gunner or a master burglar—the greatest master I ever heard of. And when you laid out five watchers without working up a sweat, I thought you were either a Gunner or a master burglar and the greatest strong-arm bucko I ever saw. But when you tossed away that gas gun because it wasn’t fitting, I knew you were a Gunner. Cade or not, you’re a Gunner. So it’s a mistake, but what can we do, and where can we go?”

Cade suddenly laughed. The Order was perfect after all; the answer was so easy. He sent the car swinging in a bumpy U-turn over the parkway strips. “To the Gunner Supreme!” he said.

“The Gunner Supreme,” echoed Fledwick blankly. “The chief of all the Gunners. Wouldn’t he shoot us twice as fast as an ordinary Gunner? I don’t understand.”

“No, you don’t,” said Cade. He tried to think of some way to make the wonderful presence clear, knowing he would fail. Of all things in the Order, the meaning and being of the Gunner Supreme had most of all to be felt. “We in the Order are Brothers,” he carefully began. “He is the father. The Power Master disposes of us to the several Stars, but the assignment is without force until it has been sealed with the seal that is in the gun hilt of the Gunner Supreme.

“He touches his gun to ours before we first put them on as armigers. If he didn’t touch them, we wouldn’t be actual members of the Order. The memory of him touching our guns steadies our hands and makes our eyes keen and our wits quick in battle.”

And there was more he could never tell to anybody. Those in the Order knew it without telling; those outside would never know. There were the times you didn’t like to remember, times when your knees trembled and you sweated advancing into fire. Then you thought of him, watching you with concern clouding his brow, and you stopped trembling and sweating. You felt warm and sure advancing into fire to play your fitting part.

“This paragon of Gunners...” began Fledwick ironically.

“Silence, thief! I will not tolerate disrespect.”

“I’m sorry...may I speak?”

“With decorum.”

“You were right to rebuke me.” His voice didn’t sound quite sincere, but he had, Cade reflected, been through a lot. And, being what he was, he didn’t realize that the problem was solved—that the Gunner Supreme would understand, and everything would be all right again. “Where,” Fledwick asked, “does

the Gunner Supreme live?”

From beloved ritual Cade quoted the answer: “Near by to the Caves of Washington, across the River Potomac to the south, in a mighty Cave that is not a Cave, it is called Alexandria.”

“The Caves of Washington!” squalled Fledwick. “I’ll take my chances with the watchers. Let me out! Stop the car and let me out!”

“Be still!” Cade yelled at him. “You ought to be ashamed. An educated man like you mouthing the follies of ignorant commoners. You were a teacher of Klin, weren’t you?”

Fledwick shuddered and subsided for a moment. Then he muttered: “I’m not such a fool. You know yourself it’s dangerous. And don’t forget, I was born ‘an ignorant commoner.’ You sprang it at me before I had time to think, that’s all. I felt as if I were a child again, with my mother telling me: ‘You be good or I’ll take you to the Caves.’ I can remember her very words.” He shuddered. “How could I forget them?”

“ ‘I’ll take you to the Caves.’ ”

“ ‘And the Beetu-Nine will come and tear your fingers and toes off with white-hot knives of metal.’ ”

“ ‘And the Beetu-Five will come and pepper you with white-hot balls of metal.’ ”

“ ‘And the Beefai-voh will come and grate your arms and legs with white-hot metal graters.’ ”

“ ‘And last, if you are not a good boy, the Beethrie-Six will come in the dark and will hunt you out though you run from Cave to Cave in the darkness, screaming. The Beethrie-Six, which lumbers and grumbles, will breathe on you with its poison breath, and that is the most horrible of all, for your bones will turn to water and you will burn forever.’ ”

Fledwick shuddered and said feebly: “The old bitch. I should have kicked her in the belly.” He was sweating greasily from his forehead. “I’m not a fool,” he said belligerently, “but you don’t deny there’s something about the Caves, do you?”

Cade said shortly: “I wouldn’t care to spend a night there, but we’re not going to.” Fledwick’s reminiscence of his mother’s threat had shocked him. No wonder, he thought, commoners were what they were. There was nothing in the Caves—he supposed. One simply, as a matter of course, calmly and rationally avoided the horrible things.

“Alert, all Armsmen and watchmen!” said the radio. It wasn’t the same vibrant, commanding voice that had issued the “Shoot-on-sight” order, but it was bad news—the bad news Cade had been expecting since then. “The Cade impostor and the unbooked Klin teacher Fledwick Zisz are now known to have stolen Glory of the Realm ground car AB-779. That is Glory of the Realm ground car AB-779. Watchmen are to shoot the occupants of this car on sight with long-range gas guns. When the occupants are paralyzed, watchmen are to take them with all possible speed to the nearest Chapter House of the Order for immediate execution by Armsmen. Armsmen’s orders are unchanged. Shoot to kill; destroy the ground car on sight; kill the occupants if seen outside the car. That is Glory of the Realm ground car AB-779.”

The broadcast cut off, and the only sound in Glory of the Realm ground car AB-779 was the soft whimpering of Fledwick.

“Keep your nerve, man,” Cade urged. “We’ll be out of here in a moment.” He stopped the car and rummaged through its map case for the Washington area sheet. Then he stepped out of the car and yanked Fledwick out bodily after him. Finally, Cade set the car’s panel on self-steering at twenty per and opaqued the windows before he started it cityward on the highway.

Standing in the roadside scrub, the little thief followed the vanishing car with his eyes. “Now what are we going to do?” he asked sympathically.

“Walk,” said Cade grimly. “That way we may live to reach the Supreme. And stop sniveling. There’s a good chance that an Armsman will spot the car and burn it without knowing it’s empty. And then they won’t have any easy time deciding that we got away.”

The little man wouldn’t stop sobbing.

“See here,” said Cade. “If you’re going to be like this all the way, it’ll be better for both of us if you dig in somewhere and take care of yourself for a few days while I make it alone.”

The unbooked teacher gave a last tremendous sniff and declared shakily: “No cursed chance of that, Gunner. Lead the way.”

Cade led the way across a stubbly field for a starter.

For the Gunner the five days of overland march were refreshing and reassuring. Here at last was something familiar, something his years of training had fitted him for, something he understood completely. And to his surprise, Fledwick was no burden.

On the first day, for instance, they crawled on their bellies up to the chicken yard of a food factory through its great outlying vegetable fields. Cade was suddenly chagrined to discover that he didn’t know what to do next. In action, if there was food, you demanded it or took it; if there was none, you went without. Here there was food—and it would be self-destruction to seize it in his usual fashion. But Fledwick’s unusual belt gave up another instrument that sheared easily through the aluminum wire. Fledwick’s pockets gave up peas he had picked and shelled along the way, and he scattered a few through the gap in the wire. A few repetitions, and there were clucking chickens on their side of the barrier. The little man pounced silently four times, and they crawled back through the vegetable field with a brace of fowl each at their belts.

After that Cade left the commissary to Fledwick, only reminding him that he wouldn’t look kindly on Fledwick devouring a chicken while he chewed carrots.

Once they thought they were in danger of discovery. At an isolated paper mill on the second day, they saw watchmen, a dozen of them, drive up and fan out to beat a field—the wrong one. If they had picked the right one, Cade could have slipped through them with laughable ease, and so perhaps could Fledwick. Cade guessed he would be expert enough at slipping across an unfamiliar room in the dark without betraying himself by squeaks and bumps. From that to a polished job of scouting and patrolling was not as far a cry as he would have thought a few days earlier.

After the incident at the paper mill Cade surrendered to the ex-teacher’s pleading that he be taught the use of the gas gun. Disdainfully, for he still disliked handling the weapon, Cade stripped it a few times, showed Fledwick the correct sight-picture, and told him that the rest was practice—necessarily dry runs, since the number of pellets was limited. Fledwick practiced faithfully for a day, which was enough for the

ignoble weapon in Cade's eyes. He went to some pains to explain to the ex-teacher that gas gun and Gun were two entirely different things—that there was a complex symbolism and ceremony about the Gun of the Order which the gas gun, weapon of commoners, could not claim.

Cade learned as well as taught. In five days, it seemed to him, the cheerful conversation of the little man told him more about the world outside the Order than he had learned in the past thirteen years. He knew it was none of his affair to listen as Fledwick told of the life in shops and factories or the uses of restaurants, theaters, entertainment, radio, and dives. He consoled himself with occasional self-reminders that he didn't ask—he just listened. And there was a good half that he didn't understand because of linguistic difficulty. Fledwick had a twinned vocabulary. Half of it was respectable, and the other half was a lively argot, richly anatomical, whose roots were in a shady world Cade had never known. Here and there a word was inescapably clear because of context.

Less articulate himself, Cade still tried to interpret to the ex-teacher the meaning that the Order and its life had for him, a Gunner. But he found that although Fledwick sincerely admired the Order, he did so for all the wrong reasons. He seemed incapable of understanding the interior life—the rich complexity of ritual, the appropriateness of each formal thought, the way each Armsman molded his life to Klin. Cade sadly suspected that the ex-teacher saw the Gunner Supreme as a sort of glorified Klin Service deskman. He could not seem to realize that, merely by being himself, the Gunner Supreme made the interior life of the Order tangible, that he was the personification of fitness and decorum. But Cade decided he could forgive Fledwick a lot after he had snared a plump turkey without a single gobble an hour before sundown.

The third afternoon Cade spent a full hour over his maps trying to avoid an inevitable decision. That night he insisted on a march of five kilometers by starlight alone. They woke at dawn, and Fledwick gasped at what he saw to the south.

“Is it...?” he asked hoarsely.

“It's the Caves of Washington. Skirting them fairly closely—three kilometers or so—is the only way we can avoid a huge detour around thickly populated areas. I was afraid you'd balk if you saw them first by daylight.” Cade did not add that he had feared he would have balked himself. He cheerily asked: “Did you ever think you'd spend a night this close to the Caves?”

“No.” Fledwick shuddered.

They breakfasted on stolen—or requisitioned—fruit while Cade, less calm than he appeared, studied the battered skyline to the south. It was a horrible thing: a rambling mound of gray stone, with black gapings in it like eyes and mouths. Toward the peak there was a thing like the vertebrae of a man's backbone outlined against the morning sky. It was as though some great, square shaft had toppled and shattered where it struck. It was a horrible thing, and Arle, the Gunner Supreme, lived in a mighty Cave that was not a Cave. In the shadow of Washington, not even the negative was reassuring. Washington was a horror. It made him think of obscenities like firing from a flier. Or the women at Mistress Cannon's.

Cade found himself unable to swallow the fruit pulp. “Let's march,” he growled at Fledwick, and the little man scrambled to his feet fast. They skirted the Caves with a generous margin, and Fledwick kept up a running stream of nervous chatter—about places like Mistress Cannon's, it happened.

For once, in his nervousness, Cade asked a direct question. Had Fledwick ever heard of a woman wearing the garter who spoke unlike a commoner and had such-and-such eyes, hair, and manner? The ex-teacher badly misunderstood. He assured Cade that after this mess was cleared up, any time the

Gunner was in Aberdeen he could fix him up with the nicest little piece who ever wore the garter, and he would personally guarantee that Cade would never notice if she spoke like a commoner or a Star-born...

Cade thundered at him, and there was total silence until they reached the shining Potomac.

Fledwick couldn't swim. Cade made him waterwings by tying his trouser cuffs, whipping them through the air until they ballooned, and drawing the belt tight. He had to push the half-naked little thief into the river and toss the wings to him before he'd believe that the elementary field expedient, trusted by Armsmen for ten thousand years, would work. Cade towed him across, and they dried out on the south bank as the Gunner oriented his map.

"That's it," he said, pointing to the east. And he felt covered with dirt for having given a thought to the commoner girl while he was this close to the Gunner Supreme.

Fledwick only grunted doubtfully. But when ten minutes of brisk walking brought them to a clearer view of the pile, he stopped and said flatly: "It's more Caves."

"Oh, you fool!" snapped Cade. "A mighty Cave that is no Cave are the words. And you used to be a Klin teacher! It obviously means that it looks like a Cave but isn't to be feared like one."

"Obvious to you, perhaps," Fledwick retorted. "But then so many things are perfectly clear to you."

"This is not one of them," the Gunner answered stiffly. "I intend to walk around it at a reasonable distance. Are you coming or aren't you?" Fledwick sat down obstinately, and Cade started off to circumnavigate the gloomy, dome-shaped mound that should be the residence of Arle. It looked like Caves, right enough...He heard Fledwick pattering after him and declined to notice the little man when he caught up.

They marched around the crumbling dome, about three hundred meters from its rim—and it began to assume a shape on its western front that exactly justified the traditional description. The Cave that was no Cave was a gigantic building from one side and a moldering ruin from the other.

"Fives," murmured Cade abstractedly, studying it.

"Eh?" asked Fledwick, and the Gunner forgave him for the sake of someone to tell his puzzling discovery to.

"Fives—five floors, five sides, a regular pentagon if it were not half-cave, and I think five rings of construction, of which we see only the outermost."

"Drop!" snapped Fledwick, and Cade dropped. "Guards," muttered the ex-teacher. "Armsmen? Watchmen?"

Cade studied the insignificantly small figures against the huge facade.

"Armsmen," he said, heavyhearted. "We must assume they have received the order to kill us. We will have to wait until night to slip in and bring this before the Gunner Supreme himself. I would trust no one below him."

CHAPTER 9

They settled themselves in good cover on a grassy mound half a kilometer from the Building of Fives. Fledwick turned face-down and dozed off. The five days had taken a lot out of the city-bred man, Cade thought, but he'd been a good companion through it all: clever and quick, though no Armsman, useless only when his sharp mind raced ahead of his courage and petrified him with expected terrors.

For Cade there was no sleep. With his eyes trained steadily on the Building of Fives, one part of his mind accumulated and stored the information he needed—the pattern of patrol, the number of guards, time between meetings at sentry posts, the structure of the building, and the flesh and bones of the terrain around it. And all the while he pondered the deeper problem he had to solve.

Their chances of getting in were good. Without pride—pride is a peril—Cade knew he was among the best of the Emperor's Armsmen, but the necessary feat savored of the impossible. It was too much to expect that he, practically alone, could outwit or overcome a company of sentries. If he failed to pass them and so did not come into the presence of Arle, the Supreme, there had to be a way of getting him the word, whether Cade lived or died.

He ripped off a square of his ragged shirt for writing paper—and there was a flexible little knife Fledwick had casually extracted from his belt and lent him to eat with. A tiny puncture in the middle of each fingertip of his left hand. Then carefully, painfully, one finger at a time, he squeezed the drops of blood out until the friction pads were smeared with red. He pressed each finger to a once-white diamond in the patterned fabric of the shirt.

With a few more drops on the knife point he could write, one letter to a diamond:

CADE DID
NOT DIE
AT
SARRALBE
CAIRO
MYSTERY
BALTIMORE

That was enough. They could identify the prints, and perhaps even the blood. They could go to the house of the hag who had poisoned him, raid the Mystery with its underground corridors, check on the Watch House's "impostor," piece together the story—a thing he might not live to do.

Cade wiped the blade and his fingers to leave no signs that would puzzle or frighten Fledwick. The ragged cloth from his shirt he knotted about a small stone and dropped in his pocket.

With the last light of the sun the guard was changed at the House of Fives. Cade breathed easier when he saw that the night guard was no heavier than the day. It was a guard of honor, nothing more. All around the side that was not ruins paced single sentries on lonely fifty-meter posts, meeting under arclights, turning to march through the dark until they met at the light marking the other end of the patrol. It was understandable. The staring Cave mouths were fearsome enough to need little guarding.

Cade nudged his partner awake with his bare toes, broken through the ruins of commoners' sandals.

"Is it time?" Fledwick asked.

The Gunner nodded and explained. In two more hours the first alertness of the guards would have worn off, and the lassitude of a ceremonial guard mount would be creeping on...not yet strong enough for them to fight against it. Every commander knew that time of night, the time to take green or lazy troops by surprise and teach them a lesson in alertness those who lived would never forget.

They would use their two hours until then to make the approach to the building. Fledwick chewed on a stolen turnip and finally asked: "And then? When we're there?"

Cade pointed to one particular arclight. Behind it, to the right, gaped the black emptiness of a Cave mouth, barely distinguishable from shadows the arclights cast of jagged rock on smoother rock. As they watched, two Gunners came in view, approaching with metrical precision from opposite sides, to meet exactly under the light, saluted—gun to brow—and wheeled and marched off like synchronized puppets.

"Watch him." Cade pointed. "The one with the red stripe." Together they watched while the Gunner disappeared again into the blackness and waited until he emerged again, thirty meters beyond, in the brightness of the next sentry post. Here the arclights showed not gaping ruins but the smooth surface of the building proper. Somewhere in between, invisible, was the junction of ruins and building.

"He's our man," said Cade simply.

"A friend of yours, sir?" asked Fledwick over politely.

"He's a Marsman," said Cade, ignoring the flippancy. "The Marsman has not been born who can meet an Earth Gunner in combat and win. Their training is lax, and their devotion is lacking. We will take him in the dark, halfway between posts, silently. If we work swiftly and all goes well, I will have time to take his cloak, boots, and helmet and make his next round to the sentry post. If there is no time for that, I am afraid we will have to use the—gas gun—to stun the approaching sentry. Then," he concluded with a shrug, "we have the full pacing time to make our entrance."

Fledwick spat out a fibrous bit of turnip and stared across the field at the sputtering lights. At last he looked up at the Gunner.

"The full pacing time? Almost a whole minute?"

"Fifty-three seconds. Even you can move that fast," Cade said scornfully.

"You noticed there were bars on the gates—sir?"

Cade was losing his temper. "I noticed," he growled. "I'm not a fool of a commoner."

"No, sir. I'm very much aware of that. Would you tell a fool of a commoner how we'll get through the barred gates in fifty-three seconds?"

"Serve you right if I didn't. But I can't expect you to show the courage of a Brother. We won't enter the barred gates at all. We'll go through the unbarred Cave. It's got to lead into the building." Cade's impassive face betrayed nothing—not that he was sure he lied; not that he knew death was minutes away for both of them. "We're starting now." He began to work his way down the hillock, ignoring frantic whispers from behind. At last rustling grass and heavy breathing told him that Fledwick was following. He smiled.

The noise, he suspected, was to worry him and make him angry. But he knew that when silent sneaking was needed, Fledwick would deliver.

Ten meters down he paused. “You may stay behind if you like,” he whispered. “I shall not think ill of you.”

He waited in the dark and grinned at a sound between a curse and a sob, followed by more of the rustling and heavy breathing.

“Quiet!” he whispered sternly, and they began the passage.

A full two hours later they crept up to the very edge of the patrol posts and separated. Cade, crouching, thrilled to the awareness of all his muscles tensing for the spring. It was almost disappointingly easy when the split-second came and the Marsman fell silently, perhaps forever, on the concrete path. The neck blow was never certain—either way. Cade had tried not to hit too hard. To kill a Brother in combat was fit and glorious, but never had he heard of any precedent for what he did.

He stripped the silent figure with desperate haste and threw the garments onto himself. Cloak and the Order wraps the Realm; Helmet and protects the Emperor; Boots and march where the Emperor wills.

But the cursed boots wouldn't fit. He look up and saw in the distance the opposite sentry approaching, almost in the circle of light. With infinite relief he heard the small hiss of the gas gun and saw the sentry drop, with only one arm in the pool of light beneath the arc. Now Cade no longer needed boots. He buckled on the Marsman's gunbelt and felt sudden wild optimism come with the familiar weight on his hip. He flipped the message-wrapped stone from the pocket of his commoner's shirt under the cloak and dropped it by the felled Marsman. From somewhere Fledwick crept up beside him, and together they raced for the yawning black hole in the ragged, moldering wall.

Cade leaped clear of the Cave mouth's jagged edge and found sure footing on the rubble inside. Fledwick couldn't make it. Cade hauled him in, shaking violently and gasping for breath. But Fledwick picked himself up and stumbled after Cade into the deepening darkness of the interior.

They heard voices and tramping boots, and a clear shout, “In here—loose rock—they went inside!”

There was anger in the voice, but something else too: awe.

Cade had not let himself think until now of the enormity of this campaign. He had attacked a Brother off the Field of Battle, and perhaps killed him. He had assisted a commoner, and worse, an unbooked teacher, into classified ground. If successful, he would invade without request or warning the private dwelling of the Supreme. But somehow overshadowing all this was the realization: You are in a Cave, and you are none the worse for it.

A blast of hot air rolled through the Cave, followed by pungent ozone. “They're shooting into the—the Cave,” he told Fledwick. “Stay down, and nothing will happen.”

For minutes afterward the air crackled above them, and Cade lay motionless, waiting and hoping to be spared to complete his mission. He thought again of the terrible roster of his crimes, but they had been the only possible answer to crimes worse than he knew could exist. That men should plot against the Emperor...

The firing stopped. The two or three bends they had rounded were ample protection from the direct

effects of the fire, it appeared. Voices echoed down the Cave again, and Cade had a mind's-eye picture of Gunners peering in cautiously, but never considering pursuit.

“...wasting fire. Get torches...”

“...we'll smoke them out—gone inside.”

Cade groped along the floor with one hand and then pulled himself cautiously over to Fledwick. “Get up,” he whispered. “We can't stay here.”

“I can't move,” a broken voice whimpered too noisily. “You go ahead.”

Wounded, Cade realized—or hurt when they hit the ground. He scooped up the little man and tossed him over his shoulder. He did not groan, Cade noted with surprise and respect. The Gunner started forward.

First, get away from the light. They had food in their pockets, a full-charged gun, a dozen gas-gun pellets, and a knife apiece. If they could find a spring for water, a place to put their backs against, they could hold out for a long time; and a flood of new energy came with the mounting excitement of the thought that they might yet come out of this alive!

They turned a corner of some sort that cut off the last light from the entrance. Cade's eyes adjusted to the gloom; he could make out a little of the shape and structure of the Cave. And his eyes confirmed what his feet and groping hands had told him...what he had known before, and told to Fledwick, but had not dared believe: the Cave was artificial, a disused corridor in a decayed old building.

Cave and Building were one!

What was Washington?

He wished he could tell Fledwick, and examine the idea in the light of his quick, acquisitive intelligence. But the little thief was taking his injury nobly; this was no time for explanations.

The Cave—he couldn't think of it as anything else yet—seemed endless; doors were on either side. Any one of the dust-choked rooms might do for a stand, but there was no need to choose one until the sounds of pursuit were heard.

On his shoulder the limp bundle wriggled and came alive.

“You can put me down now.”

“Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

Cade lowered the man to the ground and waited while Fledwick found his footing.

“You mean,” the Gunner demanded with as much outrage as he could pack into a whisper, “you're not hurt?”

“I don't think so.” Fledwick was unashamed. “No, not a scratch.”

Cade kept a contemptuous silence.

“Where do we go?” asked Fledwick.

“I think,” he said slowly, “if we keep on going we’ll find our way to the other part of the building.”

“The other part? You really meant it?” The little man darted from one side of the corridor to the other, feeling the regularity of the walls, clutching the door jamb. “It is part of the building! But it was a Cave?”

“I told you—a Cave that is not a Cave. But you chose to believe in your beasts and horrors and other commoners’ tales. Keep moving.” His brusqueness covered a churning confusion in his mind. If the Cave was simply a disused part of a building, why weren’t they being followed by the sentries.

They rounded an angle in the corridor—an angle of Fives—and saw at the end of the new corridor, far ahead, a dim, luminous rectangle, like the light around the edges of a closed door.

CHAPTER 10

Fledwick redeemed himself.

There was no radionic lock in existence, Cade was certain, that he could not open. But this door was locked in a manner the Gunner had never seen before, with an ancient mechanical device no longer in use anywhere—except among commoners.

The ex-Teacher seemed perfectly familiar with it. He removed from inside his surprising belt a bit of metal that he twisted in an opening in the lock.

Cade stepped up first, as was his due. The door opened easily an inch or two, and then, before the Gunner could adjust his eyes to the light, there was a voice.

“Who is it? Who’s there?”

Cade almost laughed aloud. He had been ready for a challenge, the blast of a gun, conquest or defeat or even emptiness. He had been ready for almost anything except a startled question in a feminine voice. He pushed the door open, and Fledwick followed him into the room.

Only two things were certain about her: she was Star-born, a Lady of the Court; and she was just as surprised as he.

She stood erect beside a couch on which, he guessed, she had been resting when the door opened. Her eyes were wide with surprise, fast turning to anger, and their brilliance was intensified by the color of her hair, expertly tinted to a subtly matching blue-green shade. Only the Star-born would or could wear that elaborate coif: soft coils of hair piled high on the crown of her head and scattered with seemingly random drifts of golden dust. As her anger grew, her eyes, too, seemed to flash with cold metallic glints.

The headdress marked her rank, and her clothes confirmed it. She wore the privileged sheer of the nobility, not fashioned into obscene pajamas as he had seen it once before, but a fluid draping of cobweb

stuff whose color echoed just a trace of hair and eyes...as seafoam carries the faintest vestige of the ocean hue. The same golden specks that dusted her hair were looped in fairy patterns through the fabric of the gown, and here and there, where the designer's scheme planned to attract the eye, the flowing robe was caught and held by artful encrustations of the dust.

Cade stood speechless. He had seen Ladies of the Court in such attire before, though not so close or so informally. But the vision itself was responsible for only part of his consternation. It was her presence here, in the private dwelling of the Gunner Supreme, that took his breath away.

The woman raised a delicately fashioned tube of gold to her lips and sucked on it. In a small bowl at the other end a coal seemed to glow, and when she dropped her hand again, a cloud of pale-blue smoke came from her lips and drifted lazily across the room to where Cade stood. Its heavy fragrance dizzied him.

"Well?" demanded the woman.

The Gunner formally began: "We come in Klin's service..." and could think of nothing more to say. Something was terribly wrong. Was it possible that he had mistaken the ritual description of the place? Had the slow afternoon of planning and the violence of the night gone for nothing? It seemed, from the furnishings and the woman, to be the palace of a foreign Star. And what could he tell the lady of such a one?

Fledwick leaped into the breach. Words began to pour from him with practiced ease: "Oh, Star-born Lady, if you have mercy to match even the smallest part of your beauty, hear me before you condemn us out of hand! We are your lowly servants! We throw ourselves at your feet..."

"Silence, fool!" the Gunner growled. "Lady! This commoner speaks only for himself. I am the servant of no woman but of my Emperor and my Star. Tell me who is the master of this house?"

She scanned him coldly, her eyes lingering on the discrepancies of his gear. "It is enough for you to know that I am its mistress," she said. "I see you wear stolen garments while you speak of loyalty."

There was no possibility at all that she would believe him, but Cade was suddenly and unspeakably weary of subterfuge. "I am no usurper," he said quietly. "I am Gunner Cade of the Order of Armsmen; my Star is the Star of France. They say I died in battle for my Star at Sarralbe, but I did not. I came here for audience with my father in the Order, Gunner Supreme Arle; if you are the mistress here, I must have come wrongly. Whatever place this is, I demand assistance in the name of the Order. You will earn the thanks of the Supreme himself if..."

She was laughing a low, throat chuckle of honest mirth. "So," she said at last, her voice catching to the tag ends of her laughter, "you are Gunner Cade. Then you..." She turned to the little thief. "You must be the unbooked Klin teacher. And to think that you two sorry creatures are the...the dangerous homicidal maniacs the whole world is searching for! How did you find your way in here? And where did you get those uniforms?" She was a Lady with commoners; unthinkable that they would not obey if her voice had the proper whipcrack in it.

"The cloak and helmet that I wear are stolen," Cade told her flatly. "I got them less than an hour ago from a sentry at your gate. I also stole..."

"Star-born, have mercy!" shrieked Fledwick suddenly. "I am frightened. I am only a poor thief, but they are right about him. Call your master! Quickly! Give us in his power, Star-born Lady, before he...oh,

Lady, he has a gun!”

“Stupid!” she chided him, still smiling. “If he has, he can’t use it. Do you suppose that an Armsman’s gun is such a simple affair that any madman can fire it?” She took a step backward.

“I don’t know,” Fledwick shrieked with fear. “I don’t know! But I beg you, Star-born, call your Lord! Call him now, before he kills us both!”

Cade listened to it all, incredulous and immobile: that this miserable, sniveling little creature, whose life he had saved more than once, should turn against him now...betray him after the danger was over! It was unbelievable.

The woman was watching him, he realized, out of the corner of her eye. She stepped back once more. Well, let her call her Lord, then, Cade thought angrily. That would serve his purpose; that was what he wanted...

The Lady took another backward step, as Fledwick went on pouring out his gibberish fright, and at last Cade understood what the little man was really up to.

He reached beneath his stolen cloak and drew the Marsman’s gun. He did not aim it at the woman, but pointed it instead at Fledwick’s quivering head. “Traitor!” he shouted. “For this you die!”

The woman’s nerve broke at last. She hurled herself across the room to a silk-hung wall and stabbed frantically at a rosette.

“Don’t shoot!” wailed Fledwick, finally permitting himself a broad wink. “Please don’t shoot! I’m only a poor thief...”

While he babbled, Cade made a menacing grimace or two and wondered who would turn up. Any Star at all would do. He’d have his gun on him, Fledwick could barricade the place, and a message would be sent at last to the Gunner Supreme, with the life of the Star, or whoever was this Lady’s master, as hostage for its delivery.

The woman took a hand. “Stop this brawling!” she screamed. Fledwick stopped. Her face was white but proud. “Hear me,” she said. “I’ve summoned—help. If there is bloodshed in my chambers, your death is certain. It will not be a pleasant one. But I have a powerful protector.” Good; good, thought Cade. The more powerful, the better. We’ll soon get this farce over with.

“If you surrender now,” the woman went on, fighting for calm, “you will get justice, whatever that may be in your case.” She stood composedly, waiting for a gunblast or a plea for mercy.

There was no need to continue play-acting. Cade holstered the gun, confident that he could outdraw whatever retainers the master of the place might appear with. Out of admiration for her he swallowed a smile of triumph before he said: “Thank you, Lady. And thank you, Fledwick. You know strategies that I have never been forced to practice.”

Mopping his brow, the little thief said from the soul: “I suppose you think I wasn’t afraid of that gun?”

“What nonsense is this...?” the woman began indignantly, but she went no further. The door opened, and someone strode into the room.

“Moia!” the man called, seeing only the woman against the silk-hung wall. “What is it? You called...”

He followed her eyes to the two strangers, and they stared back, Fledwick with curiosity and apprehension and Cade with astonishment and veneration. He had automatically drawn the gun. Just as automatically, when he saw the proud, straight head, the gold band on the swirling cloak, the gun with a great seal on its hilt, he performed the Grand Salute of the Order, which is rendered only to the Gunner Supreme.

Abased on the floor, Cade heard the sonorous voice ask with concern: “You are unharmed?”

“Up to now.” The Lady’s shaky reassurance ended with a forced laugh.

“Good. You may rise, Gunner. Show me your face.”

“He’s no Gunner!” the woman cried. “He’s the commoner posing as Cade! And he has a gun!”

Calmly, the Supreme said: “Do not fear. He is a Gunner, though the cloak he wears is not his own. Speak, Brother. What brings you here in this unseemly manner?”

Cade rose and holstered the gun he had proffered in the salute. With downcast eyes he said: “Sir, I am Gunner Cade of France. I come with an urgent message...”

“I have already received it. A most dramatic message, most effectively delivered. I was studying it when the Lady Moia’s signal reached me. It was your work?”

“Yes, sir. I was not sure I could reach your person alive. Sir, I must warn you that there is a conspiracy, perhaps a dangerously powerful one, against...”

“You will tell me of it shortly. Your...the cloak you wear. It seems familiar. Or have you become a Marsman?”

“It was the property of a Brother in your service, sir. I hope I did not kill him. I knew no other way to come to you.”

“He is dead. I owe you thanks for that. He guarded an important post and guarded it badly. I shall see to it that a better man replaces him, before others less friendly than you find their way to this room.” He turned from Cade and addressed the Lady Moia: “We shall leave you now to rest and recover from this upsetting incident. I promise you the guards will be taught an unforgettable lesson. I will be back when I have heard this Brother’s story.” Their eyes met, and Cade saw them smile as no Armsman should smile at a woman, and no woman should smile at an Armsman.

“Your story will be better told in my own quarters,” Arle spoke, without self-consciousness, to Cade. “The Lady Moia’s apartment is no place for gory tales.” He looked absently about the room until his eyes fell on the open corridor door. “Yes,” he muttered. “We must change that lock. You.” For the first time he seemed to notice Fledwick.

“Close the door and bolt it. There will be a new lock tomorrow, my dear,” he added to the Lady Moia. “Meanwhile, the bolt will serve. Will you be all right by yourself for a while?” His fingers dipped into a carved gold box on the table and took out a golden smoking pipe, like the one she herself held, and placed it absently between his lips.

"I'm all right now," she assured him with sudden nervousness. "You needn't worry, and the lock may be replaced whenever it's convenient. The pipe, sir!" The Gunner Supreme started. "It's a new plaything of mine," she said with self-deprecating humor. "I doubt that you would care for it."

Arle took the tube from his lips and studied it as though he had never seen it before. "A strange plaything," he said disapprovingly. "Come along, Gunner. And you too, I suppose." That was for Fledwick.

The room he took them to was the first reassuring thing Cade had seen in the place. It was a lesson room like those you could find in any Chapter House. The walls were bare, with standard storage space; there was a table in the center and Order benches all around. Cade sat down on Arle's permissive signal; Fledwick remained standing.

"Now," said the Supreme, "let me hear your story."

Cade started. The mad business had gone through his mind so often that it was like a verbatim recitation: doping and capture by a hag in Sarralbe; resurrection in Baltimore; the Cairo Mystery. He had waited so long to tell it and gone through so much for the opportunity that somehow now the whole business was a disappointment. And there was one final lunatic touch: the Gunner Supreme appeared little more interested in hearing the tale than Cade was in telling it. From time to time Arle asked a question or made a comment: "How many were there? Did they seem to be local people or from overseas? A wicked business, Brother! No recognizable Armsmen, of course?" But his eyes were glazed with boredom.

Could he lie to the incarnate Order? He stumbled in his story; the question burned in his mind, and then the fire went out. He was lying to Arle by omission. He was leaving out the girl of the Cairo Mystery, who had twice tried, the second time with success, to save him from hypnosis. He let the Gunner Supreme understand that he had automatically come to his senses on the street and then gone on to his arrest—"with some wearer of the garter who was following me"—for impersonating an Armsman. The rest was straightforward, including the attack on the guard and the long trip through the corridor. He told how Fledwick had forced the lock, and the Supreme examined the ex-teacher's curious key with more interest than he had shown up to that point.

"Very well," he said finally, tossing the key to the table. "And then?"

"Then we entered the...the Lady Moia's apartment." Cade choked on the words.

The Lady Moia's apartment. I am its mistress. The Lady Moia rang...and the Gunner Supreme, the incarnation of the Order of Armsmen, answered her call. And quickly! Cade raised his eyes to the fine, proud old face.

"You're troubled, Brother," said the Supreme. "If it will ease your mind, I should tell you that the Lady Moia is one of the graces of this place. Visiting Stars and their Courts are not exposed to the rigors of an Armsman's life in Chapter House. It is the Lady Moia's task to prepare fitting apartments for them and to treat them with the ceremony that I, of course, cannot extend."

To be sure. It was so sensible. But the smile he had seen was unexplained, and it was unexplained why the Lady Moia, hostess and social aide, could summon the personification of the Order by a push on a concealed button.

His mind a dazed whirl, Cade said hoarsely: "I thank you, sir. There is no more to tell. You know the rest." Then, at a nervous cough from Fledwick, he hastened to emphasize his virtual promise to the little

man of a pardon on grounds of service to the Realm.

“Quite right,” said the Supreme, and Fledwick relaxed with a sigh.

Three Gunners entered on a summons from Arle. He told them: “This is the former Klin teacher, Fledwick Zisz. You recall that there is an order out to kill him on sight as a homicidal maniac. I find that order was a gross error. He is a worthy member of the Realm who appears to have committed some trifling indiscretions. Bring me materials for writing him a pardon on grounds of Service.”

Cade stole a look at the unbooked teacher and felt inexplicable shame as Fledwick avoided his eyes. He could not forget Lady Moia’s apartment himself; how could Fledwick? He wished he could take the little man aside to tell him earnestly that it was still all right, that the Supreme’s outward forms didn’t count, that his inner life must be in complete harmony with Klin, that the relationship between the Supreme and the Lady Moia wasn’t—what it obviously was.

Cade sat silently as the Supreme wrote the pardon and signed it in the flowing script that had been on all his own assignments. One of the Gunners dripped a blob of clear thermoplastic on the signature, and Arle rapped it smartly with the hilt of his gun. The Seal.

The same seal Cade had sometimes, in secret excess of sentimental zeal, pressed ritually to his chest, mouth, and brow because it had been touched by the Gun of the Supreme. He felt himself flushing scarlet, and turned his eyes away. Abruptly he rose, without a permissive sign, and went to Fledwick. “You’re out of it,” he said. “I’ve kept my promise. You weren’t a bad companion.”

The little man managed to look directly at him. “It’s good of you to say so. And it’s been worth it. How I wish I could have a picture of your face when I got us those chickens!” It was insolence, but Cade didn’t mind. And Fledwick said gently, with that puzzling look Cade had got used to but could never understand: “I’m sorry.”

That was all. The Supreme handed him the pardon and waited impatiently through the little man’s lavish protestations of gratitude. “My Gunners here,” he said, “will take you in a ground car to Aberdeen. I think you’ll have no trouble with them for an escort. There you should present your pardon to the Watch House, and that absurd order will be withdrawn. Doubtless you wish to leave at once.

“And you, Gunner,” Arle continued, “it’s long since you’ve been in a sleeping loft.” He summoned a novice and ordered: “Take this Brother to the night guard’s sleeping loft. He will need a complete uniform in the morning.”

Cade performed the abject Grand Salute before he left; the Gunner Supreme acknowledged it with an absentminded nod.

CHAPTER 11

The empty sleeping loft at least was real and fitting. Cade took a sleepbag from the wall, undressed, belted on his gun, and inflated the bag. For weeks he had been thinking that this was the night he would sleep well. Now he knew it would not be so. What had he said to Fledwick? “You’re out of it.” A puzzling thing for him to say. Cade paced to the window. Five floors below was a courtyard formed by the outer ring of the Building of Fives, the next ring, and two connecting spokes. All the many windows

on the court were dark, but a thin sliver of new moon showed white concrete down below. It seemed to be an isolated wing. Cade stared down into the moonlit courtyard as though he could hypnotize himself into numbness.

All right, he told himself angrily. Think about it. Think about the look they exchanged. The bare pretense of interest on the Supreme's face. The absentminded, habitual air with which he picked up the smoking tube. What do you know about it? What do you know except that you're a Gunner, and how to be one?

Maybe that's the way a Gunner Supreme is supposed to be. Maybe they tell you the things they do for your own good, because you're too much of a fool to understand that it's got to be this way because...because of good reasons. Maybe there's a time when they do tell you in secret and show you how it all fits in the Klin Philosophy, like everything else. Maybe the whole thing, from the poisoned cider on down to this sleeping loft, was a great secret test of your conduct. What do you know about it?

It was too frightening. He recoiled from the brink of such thoughts. They had no business in his head, curse them! He was a Gunner, and he knew how to be a Gunner. He tried to think shop-talk, the best kind of talk there is. What kind of duty you had here, how long a tour they gave you, whether there was ever a chance of action or whether it was all ceremony and errands.

Think about the Cave that is not a Cave—a curious place.

It made you nervous to think that you had been in a Cave and that it had just been a corridor, without lumbering, grumbling beasts prowling its dark lengths. This Building of Fives—had it been created ten thousand years ago like the Caves of Washington, building half and all? Or had there first been the Caves and then the building constructed against it? A filthy thought crept into his mind. Half-formed, it said to him that if there was such a building and you were up in a flier and—no! What was wrong with him? He'd have to go to a corrective teacher if this went on! Was this churning confusion what lunacy was like?

He crawled into his sleepbag. That, at least, was good. Some six thousand daily repetitions had formed a powerful habit pattern. Gratefully he let some of the brief meditations drift soothingly into his mind and across it, ironing out the perplexities. And tomorrow he'd have a proper uniform again. Undersuit, shirt, hose, boots—where the Emperor wills—cape, helmet...Cade was asleep in the empty loft.

He dreamed of the Gunner Supreme threatening the Lady Moia with a gun, and the Lady Moia turned into the girl of the Cairo Mystery. He tried to explain respectfully to the Supreme that it wasn't the Lady Moia anymore and that he had no business shooting her. "Cade!" the girl called faintly. "Cade! Cade!"

The Gunner sat up abruptly. That call was no dream. He ripped open the quick release of his sleepbag and peered through the window into the courtyard. Four figures were dark against the concrete, one of them smaller than the others.

There was some sort of flurry down there, and he saw the smaller figure in full, no longer foreshortened. Somebody had fallen or been knocked down. Now he got up, expostulating and waving something white, and was knocked down again. He struggled to his feet and held out the white thing with a desperate, pleading gesture, not only in the arm but in every curve of his small, expressive body.

Fledwick!

Cade needed no more interpretation of the scene below. It was all there in the little thief's offer of the paper. Cade knew the white scrap was the pardon, written and sealed by the Gunner Supreme. And he

saw one of the three other men snatch it impatiently from Fledwick and tear it across.

As if he were remembering the scene instead of seeing it enacted, Cade stood helplessly at his window, waiting. He saw Fledwick shoved against a blank wall and saw the other three draw guns. He saw the partner of his five-day march burned, down by three guns of the Order, fired simultaneously at low aperture. And last he saw the three remaining figures separate, two to a door in the inner ring, one through a door directly below, into the building where he himself stood watching.

He was sick, then and there, and after the spasm passed he realized that he had seen murder: murder with guns of the Order, wielded by Armsmen at the command of the Gunner Supreme, after Arle himself had lyingly granted and sealed a pardon.

This was no secret into which he would someday be initiated; this was no test of courage or belief. This was no less than lies, treachery, and murder at the command of the Order, incarnate, the Gunner Supreme!

The door to the loft opened silently and a figure slipped without noise across the floor to Cade's inflated sleepbag.

"Were you looking for me, Brother?"

The assassin spun to face the harsh whisper, gun in hand. He was burned down before he fully realized that his intended victim was not helplessly asleep.

Cade's thoughts were crystal-clear and cold. His burned body had been found once before in Sarralbe; it would now be found again, to buy him precious time until the assassin-Armsman was found missing. He rolled the charred body into the sleepbag he had occupied and slowly burned the flimsy fabric to a cinder with a noiseless discharge at minimum aperture. Presumably anybody within earshot had been alerted for the crash of one lethal blast, but not two.

Cade donned his medley of commoner's garb and ill-fitting uniform and slipped out along the way he had been led, through empty corridors, down empty ramps. He knew only one way out. The wing seemed to be deserted, and he wondered if it was because it held the apartment of the Lady Moia or because it was where murder was done.

The lock on the inner door to the Lady's apartment was radionic. Cade solved it quickly and slipped through to the cushioned outer chamber. The room was dimly night-lit, still fragrant with the smoke of the golden pipes and the subtler scent that the Lady wore herself. He saw the glitter of golden trinkets on the table—boxes, pipes, things whose use he couldn't guess at—and realized that he had not yet plumbed the depths of the impossible. He was about to become a thief.

He did not know where he was going or how he would get there, but clearly the Houses of the Order were barred to him. For the first time in his life he would need money. Gold, he remembered from childhood, could be exchanged for money, or directly for goods. He reached for the glittering display and filled all the big pockets of the commoner's cloak. The sum of trifling metal objects made a surprising weight.

There was a third door to the room, and it stood ajar. He tiptoed across the floor and peered through to the Lady Moia's bedroom. She was asleep, alone, and Cade felt somehow relieved. The beautiful dark head stirred on the white pillow, and he drew back. Unskillfully, he worked the mechanical latch of the door to the Cave, nervous at each scratching clicking sound it made. But in the room beyond, the Lady

slept on, and at last the door swung open.

When he had come in with Fledwick, fleeing through dark corridors at midnight, his terrain-wise eyes had automatically measured and his brain recorded every turn and distance. He was able to retrace his steps and find the Cave opening in a matter of minutes.

The ceremonious patrol was not yet changed. He saw, crossing the Cave mouth at intervals, a new man instead of the Mars-born gunner whose cloak was now on Cade's back, but Arle's promise to the frightened Lady had otherwise not been acted on. Clearly, the Gunner Supreme had every confidence in his assassins. Cade stood within the shadow of the Cave mouth and watched the Gunners on their sentry-go, silhouetted by starlight and arlight as they met and marched and met again.

The fools! he thought, and then remembered what a prince of fools he was himself, and had been since the day of his decision in his sixth year—until less than an hour ago.

Leaving the Cave mouth was infinitely easier than entering. This time he knew what waited on the other side: nothing but acres of high grass in which a man could hide forever. A man. The thought had come that way, unbidden: a man. Not a Gunner.

Cade was only one more shadow between the sputtering lights, a streak of darkness that the routine-fuddled minds of the sentries never saw. Safe in the tall grass, he lay still for long minutes, until he was certain there had been no alarm. Then, cautiously, he began to inch along. At last, over a fair-sized rise of ground, he rose and walked, heading for the river.

Soon, very soon, he would have to decide where he was going and what he would do. For now, he knew that Aberdeen and Baltimore were to the north. He was at the Potomac River again in a matter of minutes, but he could not cross by swimming, or even with the aid of waterwings like the pair he had made for Fledwick only yesterday. The gold would have weighed him down, and he was stubbornly determined not to abandon it.

He trudged on along the southern bank of the river, looking for a log big enough to float him and small enough to steer, or for an unguarded bridge. The first dawn light was creeping into the sky when he heard angry voices over the brow of a knoll. Cade dropped and crawled through the rank grass to listen.

“Easy with it, curse you!”

“You can do better? Do it and shut your mouth!”

“You shut your own mouth. Yell like that, and we'll both wind up in the crock on a sump tap.”

“I can do a sump tap standing on one foot.”

“I hope you have to someday, curse you, if I'm not in on it. I got better things to do with my time than standing on one foot in the crock for two years.”

“Just go easy on the smokers is all I asked...”

Phrases were familiar. “Standing on one foot through a tap in a crock” meant “serving a short prison term with ease.” That much he had learned from Fledwick. The talkers were criminals—like him. Cade stood up and saw two commoners in the hollow below, loading a small raft with flat boxes.

It was a moment before they realized that they were not alone. They saw him on the knoll and stood paralyzed while he strode down on them.

“What’re you up to?” he demanded.

“Sir, we’re...we’re...” stammered one. The other had sharper eyes. “Hey!” he said coldly after studying Cade for a moment. “What is this—the shake? You’re no Armsman.”

“It’s not the shake,” Cade said. Another phrase from Fledwick.

“Well, what is it? A man doesn’t take a chance on twenty years for nothing. You’re in half a uniform, and even that doesn’t fit. And the gun’s a fake if ever I saw one,” the commoner pronounced proudly.

The other was disgusted. “Me falling for a phony uniform and a fake gun. On your way, big fellow. I don’t want to know you before you get crocked for twenty.”

“I want a ride on your raft. I can pay.” Cade took a gold smoking-pipe box from a pocket. He was about to ask: “Is that enough?” but he saw from their faces that it was, and more. “I also want some commoner’s clothes,” he added, and then cursed himself silently for the betraying “commoner’s”—but they didn’t notice.

“Sure,” said the man who couldn’t be taken in by a fake gun. “We can take you across. But I don’t know about clothes.”

“I can fix that,” the other man said hastily. “You’re about my size. I’ll be glad to sell what I’m wearing. Of course, I ought to get something extra for selling you the blouse off my back...?”

Cade hefted the box. There seemed to be a lot of gold in it, but how much gold was a suit of clothes?

The man took his silence as refusal. “All right,” he said “I tried,” and stripped down to his undersuit. He wasn’t, nearly as big as Cade, but his clothes were baggy enough to cover him. As Cade methodically transferred his plunder from one set of garments to the other, their eyes bulged.

“You’d better bury your toy,” one of them warned. “A fake gun’s the same as impersonating.”

“I’ll keep it,” said Cade, dropping the skirt of his tunic over the gun. “Now get me across.”

Watching the last gold ornament disappear, the unbluffable commoner said tentatively: “We have some more transportation.”

“Hey,” said the other.

“Oh, shut your mouth. Can’t you tell when a gaff’s on the scramble?”

So, Cade reflected, he was a gaff on the scramble, who needed transportation. “What have you got?” he asked.

“Well, my rog, we’re on the distribution end for a smoker works. To a gaff that won’t sound like much, but a sump tap is a tap same as for gaffing. We get them from...from the manufacturer and put them across the river. A ground car picks them up there. The driver could...”

“For two gaudies like that last one,” his partner interrupted determinedly, “we’ll take you to the driver, vouch for you, and tell him to drop you off anywhere along his route.”

“One gaudy,” Cade offered cautiously, wondering what a smoker was.

“Done,” the friendlier one said promptly. Cade fished for and handed over a box about like the last one. The commoner caressed it and said: “Let’s have a smoker on the bargain. They’ll never miss ‘em.” Without waiting for an answer, he opened one of the flat boxes on the raft and took three pellets from it. The two commoners dropped theirs into aluminum tubes, lit up, and puffed, and Cade realized at last that “smokers” went into smoking pipes like those fancied by the Lady Moia.

“Thanks,” he said, dropping his pellet into a pocket. “I’ll save mine.” They gave him a disgusted look and didn’t answer. He realized he had made a more-or-less serious blunder. There were fit and unfit things among commoners too, and he didn’t know how many more unfit things he could get away with.

The pellets lasted only a minute or so, leaving the men relaxed and gently talkative, while Cade strained his ears and wits for usable information.

“I smoker too much,” one of the men said regretfully. “I suppose it’s the temptation from handling the stuff.”

“It doesn’t do you any harm.”

“I don’t feel right about it. Shoving the stuff’s a living, but if the Emperor says we shouldn’t, we shouldn’t.”

“What’s the Emperor got to do with it?”

“Well, the first Emperor must have made the sump tables about what you can do and what you can’t do.”

“Oh, no. The first Emperor and the sump tables were made at the same time. Ask any teacher.”

“You better ask a teacher yourself...but even if the first Emperor and the sump tables did get made at the same time, I wouldn’t feel right about it.”

“That’s what I told my girl. With her it’s buy me this and buy me that, and now she wants a sheer dress from a sump shop, and I told her even if she got it she couldn’t wear it where anybody would see her, and even if she wore it in private she wouldn’t feel right about it.”

“Women,” said the other one, shaking his head. “The sump tables are a fine thing for them. Otherwise they’d all be going around like Star-borns, and you wouldn’t have a green in your nick...there’s the car. Let’s get across.”

Cade had seen the blink of lights across the bank. The raft shoved off, with Cade sitting on the cases, one man poling, and the other, in his underwear, hanging on to the edge. The car, on a highway that paralleled the river bank for a kilometer, was a large passenger car of nondescript color and peculiarly dirty identification numbers.

“Who’s that?” demanded the driver, joining them. He was a big man run to fat, and had a section of three-centimeter bronze pipe in his fist.

“Gaff on the scramble. A real rog. We said you might drop him along the route.”

“Would, not might,” Cade said.

“Got troubles enough,” said the driver. “Scramble on, duff.” Duff was obviously a ripe insult. The driver hefted his bronze pipe hopefully. Cade sighed and flattened him with a medium-hard left into his belly. To the others he said: “Look, you...you duffs. Give me back one of those boxes. And if you make any trouble, I’ll take them both back.”

They conferred by glances and handed one of the boxes over. Cade showed it to the driver, who was sitting up and shaking his head dazedly. “This is for you if you drop me off where I want.”

“Sure, rog,” the driver said agreeably. “But I can’t go off my route, you understand. I can’t lose my job for a little extra clink.”

“I’m going to Aberdeen,” said Cade with abrupt decision.

“Sure thing. Now, if you’ll wait while we load...”

The flat boxes of smokers went into a surprising variety of places in the car—under the seats, inside the cushions, behind removable panels.

Cade watched, and wondered why he had chosen Aberdeen. After a minute he stopped trying. He had to begin somewhere, and it might as well be with the girl. She knew something—more than he did, anyhow. And with Fledwick murdered, she remained the only person who had not betrayed him at any time since he plunged into the month-long nightmare of conspiracy and disillusion. Besides, he assured himself, it was sound doctrine. The last place they would expect him to go would be the one place he’d been caught before.

Still musing, he sat beside the driver. “Where in Aberdeen?” the man asked when they were on the road.

“You know Mistress Cannon’s?”

“Yuh. I deliver there,” said the driver, obviously disapproving.

Cade risked asking: “What’s the matter with the place?” It might be a nest of spies.

“Nothing. The old woman’s all right. I don’t care what kind of a dive you go to. I said I’d take you, and I will.”

Thirteen years of conditioning do not vanish overnight. Cade was guilty and defensive: “I’m looking for somebody. A girl.”

“What else? You don’t have to tell me about it. I’ll take you there, I said. Myself, I’m a family man. I don’t go to lectory every day like some people, but I know what’s fitting and what isn’t.”

“You’re running smokers,” Cade said indignantly.

“I don’t have to feel good about it, and maybe I don’t. I don’t smoker myself. It’s not my fault if a lot of ignorant duffs that got born common can’t rest without smoking like a Star and his court. Say, ‘The

Emperor wouldn't like it,' and they pull a long face and say, 'Oh, it can't matter much, and I'll give twice as much to the lectory, and the Emperor'll like that, won't he?' Fools!"

Cade feebly agreed, and the conversation died. As the moralistic evader of the sumptuary laws covered his route, Cade let himself doze off. He knew a man who would keep a bargain once it was made.

CHAPTER 12

At each start and stop Cade half-opened an eye and went back to sleep again. But finally the driver shook his shoulder. Cade woke with a start. Through the window, across three feet of sun-splashed, dirty paving he could see stone steps leading down to a heavy door. Ahead, another set of steps apparently led up to another door that remained out of his vision.

They were in a narrow alley, barely wide enough for the slightly oversized car. On either side, continuous walls of soot-dusted cement rose to a height of three or four stories above the ground. There were no windows, no clearly marked building lines, nothing to mark the one spot from another but dirt and scars on the aging concrete, and the indentations of steps at regular intervals along both sides.

The driver took three neatly packaged bundles from inside the armrest of the front seat, closed it, and held them expectantly.

"Well?" he demanded. "Sitting there all day? Open it."

Cade stiffened, and then made himself relax. He was among commoners now and would be treated as one himself. It was a lesson he would have to learn as thoroughly as any back in Novice School. His life depended on these lessons too. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Cannon's?"

"Don't you know it?"

Cade opened the door and muttered: "Looks different by daylight." He followed the driver down the stone steps. The man knocked rhythmically, and the door opened a little. Cade knew the beefy face at once.

Elaborately ignoring the driver, Mistress Cannon said hoarsely: "The drinking room doesn't open until nightfall, stranger. Glad to see you then."

The driver said, with interest: "I thought he was a friend of yours. Gaff on the scramble. Some people I know said he's a rog."

Her faded blue eyes swung slowly from Cade's face down his multistriped clothes to the ragged sandals he still wore, and returned as slowly to his face.

"Might have seen him before," she admitted at last grudgingly.

"Me, and my...clinks too," Cade said quickly. The rest was inspired: "Last time I was here one of your girls took everything you left."

The woman placed him at last. "She was no girl of mine," she insisted defensively.

The driver had had enough. “That’ll do,” he said. “Fix it up any way you want to between you. I’m behind time now.”

The door creaked farther open.

“You wait here,” the woman told Cade, and led the driver out of the room. It was the kitchen of the establishment. Cade wandered about, touching nothing, but examining with intense curiosity the unfamiliar miscellany of supplies and equipment.

The big food rooms of Chapter Houses where Cade had spent hundreds of hours as a novice were no more like this place than...than an Armsman’s sleepbag was like the Lady Moia’s couch. The single thing he could identify was a giant infrabroiler in one wall; it was identical with those used in the preparation of the evening meat meal in the Houses. But there the similarity ended. Through the transparent doors of the cooler he saw not an orderly procession of joints and roasts but a wild assortment of poultry, fish, meat, and seafood, jammed in helter-skelter. Along the opposite wall were more fruits and vegetables than he had known existed—pulpy luxuries, he thought, for degenerate tastes.

There was to be recognized, at last, a cooker designed to mix and warm in one operation the nutritious basic mash on which Armsmen mainly subsisted. But here, instead of being a gleaming, giant structure, it was a battered old machine perched on a high shelf almost out of reach. For some reason, Cade concluded, mash wasn’t popular at Cannon’s.

On other shelves around the room there were hundreds of bright-faced packages containing unknown ingredients for use in a dozen or more specialized mixers and heaters whose equal Cade had never seen before. Over it all was an air of cheerful disorder, jumbled but purposeful comfort that struck for Cade a haunting note of reminiscence.

So many things these last few days had stirred old memories: memories of a childhood he had dismissed forever when he took his vows. Already, he realized, he was unfitted for the Order. The ritual and routine that had been as much a part of life as breathing had proved itself dispensable. At times it had even seemed like folly. A corrective teacher, he thought, and then wondered whether he wanted to be corrected. Of course he wanted to get back into the Order. But the Gunner Supreme...

He coldly dismissed his personal tangle of loyalties. The first thing he needed was information, and that meant the girl.

“No girl of mine,” Mistress Cannon had said. And long ago: “If you come back, girlie, I may wrap a bar stool around your neck.” That didn’t matter. He needed a starting point, one well down into the criminal half-world in which the girl had moved with such assurance. You went from one person to the next in that world: from the smugglers to the driver to Mistress Cannon’s. A smile spread over his face. What would he have said not long ago if someone had told him he’d need the goodwill of a minor crook to gain admission to a—what did he call it—a dive? He, a Gunner among the best?

“Man,” said the hoarse voice, “don’t smile like that: I’m not as young as I used to be, and my figure ain’t all it once was, but I’m not so old either I don’t get butterflies in the belly once in a while.” Mistress Cannon stood in the doorway, eyeing him with an absurd mixture of good fellowship and flirtatiousness. “And by the Power,” she chortled, “he can blush too! Big as a house, and built like an armed man, and a smile to give you goosebumps, and he can blush yet! Well, we got some girls that like ‘em that way. Me, I like ‘em loaded.” There was an abrupt change in her manner. “Lazar says you’re on the scramble. What’re you carrying?”

He opened his mouth to answer but didn't have a chance.

"Big fellow, there's plenty of rogs before you who spent a day or a month upstairs and no questions asked or answered. No safer place in East Coast until—trouble—blows over. But I can't do it cheap. Lazar brought you in, and I like your face myself, or I wouldn't do it for all the clink in Aberdeen. Protection comes high anyplace. Here you get it with a nice room, three meals, and all the..."

The woman liked to talk, Cade thought weakly, and let her go on. What she was saying amounted to good luck. He could stay here—and the driver had assumed that this was just what he'd wanted.

The woman stopped for breath, wheezing a little, and Cade seized the chance: "You don't have to worry about money. I'm...I'm loaded. I can pay whatever you ask." In all the colorful flow of words, that much had been clear.

"What with?"

He pulled out the first thing his fingers touched in an outer pocket. It was a tiny, glittering piece of jeweled uselessness, five tiny bells hung on a thin wire loop. It tinkled distantly with almost inaudible music as he put it on a table. The woman's eyes were glued on the golden bauble.

"Practically valueless," she said composedly when she looked up. "Too hard to get rid of."

"I didn't know," Cade said apologetically, reaching for it. "Maybe something else..."

"Al! right!" she exploded, shaken again by heaves of flabby laughter. "Outbluffed on the first try. You have the other one, of course?" Cade, searching his pockets for a mate to the bauble, realized vaguely that he was supposed to have done something clever. He turned out on the table all he had and poked through it.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "It doesn't seem to be here."

The woman looked up dazedly from the array. "You're sorry," she echoed. "It doesn't seem to be here." She looked at him again, searchingly and for a long minute. "What made you come here?" she asked quietly.

"First place I thought of," he said. Something was wrong. What commoner notion of fitness and unfitness had he violated now?

"Or the only place," she said musingly. "And don't tell me it was liquor you were out on that other night. Maybe the tart you were with couldn't tell the difference, but I've been around for a lot of years. I know drunk when I see it, and I know dope too. A youngster like you...well, now I know you're good for your room. But wandering around loaded with gaudies you don't half know the value of...didn't anybody ever tell you not to jab up until the job was through? And that means selling it after the pick, too."

Cade could make nothing of it. "If you have a room for me," he said patiently, "you'll be well paid. That's all I'm asking of you."

For some reason she was angry. "Then that's all you'll get! And when you start to yell for the stuff, don't expect me to run it for you. Come on!" She jerked open a door and led the way up dark stairs. To herself she was grumbling: "You can't make a man talk if he doesn't want to, not even to somebody who

wants to help. Think they'd have more sense!"

At the stair head she produced a ring of keys like the one Fledwick had used. She opened a door with one and handed it to Cade.

"That's the only one there is," she said. "You're safe up here. If you get hungry or if you get off your darby perch and want some fun, you can try the drinking room.."

He closed the door on her and studied his quarters. The room was not light or clean. The shelves in the storage wall were stuck. It didn't matter; there was nothing to store. The bed was an ancient foldable such as he had seen only in commoners' houses entered during action.

It was hard to remember: he was in a commoner's house now, and living as one. He turned the key, locking himself in. Then he dumped his treasure trove on the cot, fingering the pieces thoughtfully. He hadn't made much of her talk, but her face had shown she was immensely excited over the...the gaudies. Or did that just mean boxes? Why had she been excited? They could be exchanged for money, or food. Money could be exchanged for clothes, food, shelter, entertainment. Fledwick, too, had been that way about money, if he had understood correctly. The little man had habitually run great risk of imprisonment and shame for its sake. And the men on the raft—they had tried to get extra gaudies from him. It all meant that he had something commoners wanted badly, and a lot of it.

He lay down on the bed and found its pulpy lumps unbearable. The floor was better than the mattress. To find the girl he would have to face the drinking room. Recalling the night he had been there, he remembered the noise, the smells, the drink he had been given, the close air, the foolish women. But the bar was his reason for being there. The girl of the Cairo Mystery had found him there before; there he might find her now. He thought about clothes—he would need some. And boots—slippers, rather. As a commoner he could not wear boots. And clean clothes. Even a commoner would not wear the same things all the time, he supposed.

Mistress Cannon had anticipated him. She was waiting in the drinking room below with news.

"Wish you'd come down a little sooner. I had old man Carlin hanging around, then he said he had to hit. But he'll be around first thing in the morning. I would've sent him up, only I figured you were sleeping the jab off."

Was he supposed to know who old man Carlin was? He asked.

"Carlin? He runs the shop around here: sells court clothes on the side. Why those tramps are willing to pay such crazy prices for it, I never knew. To give the boyfriends a thrill behind locked doors, I guess. Back when I had it, I would've beat a man's ears off if he couldn't get a thrill out of me without fancy-pantsy court sheers on. You aren't from the District, are you?"

He hesitated, startled by the gunblast suddenness of the question.

"That's what I figured," she said soberly, lowering her voice. "Listen." She bent across the table toward him, and a too musky, too strong scent issued from the deep cleft between her breasts. "You want some good advice, I can give it to you. Even if you don't want it. You're on the scramble, and you jab—a bad combination—and you don't want to get pumped, not by me or any other old bat. All right, that's smart enough, and you got sense enough not to try to lie when you're jabbed up. But you don't have to get up on the darby perch either, like you did with me. Listen..."

She stopped to wheeze, and went on earnestly: “I come into my kitchen this afternoon, and found you standing there grinning at yourself, and you could of had the whole house with a gold ribbon tied around it. Ten minutes later, you’re giving me your high-and-mighty Star-born act, and you come damn near not having any room here at all. A fella with a face like yours, and that build, he’s a fool not to make some use of it. You don’t want to talk man...smile!” She straightened up and waved to a newcomer farther down the bar. “I got to tend to customers,” she said. “You got a handle I can call you by, in case they ask?”

Cade smiled inwardly at the absurd advice—and at the question that came fast after it. For the first time since he’d met the Mistress, he looked her fully in the eye. She was hardly a perilous female, after all, in spite of her loose talk. He remained silent, but slowly and deliberately he let the inner smile spread on his face.

“That’s it!” she crowed delightedly. “You’re no fool! Hey, Jana!”

A willowy brunette detached herself from a group of girls talking in a corner while they waited for the place to fill. She walked with studied languor toward them; the silvery garter on her thigh pulled the filmy stuff of her trousers tight against her at each step.

“Jana, I want you to meet a friend of mine,” Mistress Cannon said. “Nothing’s too good for my friend, Smiley!” She winked at him, a lewd and terrifying wink as massive as a shrug, and bustled off.

“That’s some send-off you got, Smiley,” said the girl. Her voice was husky, and quite automatically she assumed the same position Mistress Cannon had, leaning far forward and compressing her shoulders. Some commoner notion, he thought uneasily, as he observed that it exposed quite a lot of her to a tablemate.

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “She’s been very good to me.”

“Say, I remember you!” Jana said abruptly. “You were in here last week. And were you troubled, brother! Were you troubled!”

Suddenly she frowned. “What’s the matter, Smiley?”

He couldn’t help it. The shock of being addressed as brother in this place by this woman showed on him.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” she asked wisely. “Listen, I see you’re not drinking...” Cade followed her glance and noticed there was a small glass of vile-smelling stuff on the table. He pushed it away. “...and I’ve been arguing with Arlene about it ever since—you remember her? The little blond over there in the corner?” Hope flared wildly and vanished as he saw the girl she meant. “Anyhow, she says it wasn’t liquor, and I say I never saw a man your size and age out where he sat like you were. Not on liquor. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but...?”

She let it linger on a questioning note.

Cade, profiting by instruction, smiled directly at her, and held the smile until he felt foolish.

The results were unexpected and dramatic. She whistled, a long, low whistle that made half a dozen

heads turn their way inquiringly. And she looked at him with such adoration as he had seen only a few times before, from new armigers on the Field of Battle.

“Bro-ther!” she sighed.

“Excuse me,” said Cade in a strangled voice. He ran from the enemy, leaving her in complete and bewildered possession of the field.

CHAPTER 13

Cade learned fast at Cannon’s. He had to. His eyes and ears, trained for life-or-death differences in action, picked up words, glances, and gestures; his battle-sharpened wits evaluated them. He survived.

And Cannon’s learned about Cade, as much as was necessary. He was Smiley, and Cannon’s etiquette permitted no further prying into his name or rank. He was talked about. Some said he was Star-born, but no one asked. His full pockets and Jana’s wagging tongue gave him the introduction and reputation he needed.

His build? He was obviously a strong-arm bucko. His rumored golden trinkets? He was obviously a master gaff—a burglar. His occasional lapses of memory and manners? He was obviously addicted to the most powerful narcotics. That too explained his otherwise inexplicable lack of interest in alcohol and women.

As a bucko and gaff he outranked most other habitués of the place: the ratty little pickpockets, the jumpy gamblers, the thoroughly detestable pimps. As a jabber of unknown drugs, he even outranked the friendly, interesting, neatly dressed confidence men who occasionally passed through. Drugs were a romantic, desperate slap in the face of things as they were. Mistress Cannon disapproved—there had been a man of hers; she wouldn’t talk about it. But to her hostesses it was the ultimate attraction.

Nightly Cade sat in the barroom at a corner table near the stairs with an untasted drink before him. Carlin, who dressed commoner girls and tramps secretly in court gowns, had taken his measure and provided him with blues and greens for as much of his plunder as he had chosen to display. The old man had dickered endlessly over each item, but with Mistress Cannon loudly supervising the transaction, Cade emerged with two full sets of clothes made to order for him, two weeks of exorbitant “board” paid, and a surplus of clink. In his room, behind one of the storage shelves, he had found a hiding place for his remaining gaudies: one last golden box containing half a dozen smaller trifles.

With this much security—a place to live, new clothes, good food, clink in his pocket, an enviable reputation, and a hidden reserve—he could turn his full attention to his quest for the girl of the Cairo Mystery. He asked few questions, but he listened always for a word that might lead to her. Every night he sat at his table, his chair turned to the door, watching every new arrival, buying drink for anyone who would talk—and that was everyone.

First there were Mistress Cannon and her girls. Then he could ask openly after he learned that it was not strange to seek renewal of acquaintance with a girl who had struck one’s fancy. But none of them knew her, none remembered seeing her except that night when he had met her there.

It was a setback, but there was no other place to look except Baltimore—and they’d had no trouble

handling him there once. If nothing at Cannon's led him to the girl he would act without her, and gradually an alternative plan formed. While it was growing, over the course of his two weeks' stay, he drank in everything he heard from the endless procession of people willing to talk while Smiley bought.

There was a Martian who had jumped ship and taken to liquor and petty thievery. For two nights Cade listened to him curse the misstep: he babbled monotonously about his family and their little iron refinery; how there had been a girl back home and how he might have married and had children to grow up with the planet. The Marsman didn't come back the third night, or ever.

He wasted one night. This was on a quiet, well-spoken, gray-haired man, himself a former gaff who had retired on his "earnings." He came for the first time on Smiley's fourth night in the bar, and for almost a week he came again every night. He was a mine of information on criminal ways and means, nicknames, jargon, Watch corruption, organized prostitution, disposal of gaffed goods. On the last night, the wasted night, after chatting and drinking for an hour, he confided without warning that he was in possession of a secret truth unknown to other men. Leaning across the table in excitement, he whispered clearly: "Things have not always been as they are now!"

Cade remembered the rites of the Mystery and leaned forward himself to listen. But the hope was illusory; the gentle old man was a lunatic.

He'd found a book, he said, while still gaffing years ago. It was called Sixth Grade Reader. He thought it was incredibly old, and whispered, almost in Cade's ear: "More than ten thousand years!"

Cade leaned back in disgust while the madman rattled on. The book was full of stories, verses, anecdotes, many of them supposed to be based on fact and not fiction. But one thing they had in common: not one of them mentioned the Emperor, Klin, the Order, or the Realm of Man. "Don't you see what that means? Can't you see it for yourself? There was a time once when there was no Emperor."

In the face of Smiley's bored disinterest he lost his caution and spoke loudly enough for Mistress Cannon, at the bar, to catch a few words. She stormed to the table in a loyal rage and threw him out. She later regretted it. Word got around, and the incident brought on the only Watch raid during Smiley's stay at Cannon's.

The whole district was minutely sifted, and Cade too had to submit to questioning. But the watchers were looking for just one man, and Smiley's origins did not concern them. Later, word got to Cannon's that they had found the madman in the very act of airing his mania to jeering children on the street. He did not survive his first night in the Watch House. Those rubber truncheons, Cade remembered, and wondered whether it had been necessary to cope with the poor fool so drastically.

There were others who came to the table and talked. There was a pastel-clad young man who misunderstood Cade's lack of interest in the girls and immediately had the matter made crystal-clear to him. Mistress Cannon pitched him limply out with the usual hoarse injunction: "And don't you ever come back in here again!" But he probably didn't hear her.

One night there was a fat-faced, sententious fellow, a con man who had hit the skids because of liquor. Smiley bought many drinks for him because he had been in the Cairo Mystery—and several others. He explained that the Mysteries were a good place to meet your johns, and was otherwise defensive. Cade dared to question him closely after the con man had poured down enough liquor to blur his brain and probably leave the incident a blank next morning. But he knew little enough. He'd never heard of hypnosis in connection with a Mystery. A featureless, egg-shaped room had nothing to do with the Cairo rites. Mysteries were strictly for the johns; the revenue from them was strictly for the blades, like him and

Smiley. He proposed vaguely that they start a new Mystery with a new twist and take over all the other blades' Johns. With his experience and Smiley's looks it'd be easy. Then he fell asleep across the table.

There were many others; but she never came, and he never heard a word about her or anyone like her.

When the two weeks he allowed himself were past, he knew vastly more than he had known before, but none of it led to the girl. It was time for the other plan.

Mistress Cannon protested hoarsely when he told her he was leaving. "I never saw a man go through a load like that so fast," she complained. "You didn't have to buy for everybody that said he was a rog. Listen—I made enough on that liquor to cover another week easy. You don't tell anybody about it, and I'll let you stay. Two weeks won't do it in this town, but three weeks might. What about it?"

"It's not the money," he tried to explain. She was right about his blues and greens being gone, but she didn't know about the box of loot he still had in his room. "There's a job I've got to do. Something I promised before I came here."

"A promise doesn't count when you're hot!" she shouted. "What good will it do to try and keep your promise if you get picked up by the watchers as soon as you step out of the door?"

He wasn't worried about that one. The Cannon grapevine was efficient, and he knew the search for the "impostor" Cade had bogged down, at least locally. Two pedestrians had been incinerated by a young armiger ten days ago. Though a strong order had been put out that identification of the two as the Cade impostor and ex-teacher Zisz was not confirmed as yet, the local Watch had naturally slacked off its effort almost to zero. If Arle was making any search, it was undercover.

All Cade wanted was a place to leave everything he had except his gaudies and the better suit of commoners' garb. Reluctantly Mistress Cannon provided him with one of a pile of metal boxes in her kitchen: private vaults with self-set radionic locks, hidden under layers of foodstuffs.

Cade dressed in his room for the last time in the sober, dignified suit he had specified. Old Carlin had grumbled at the requirements: "Think you're going to Audience?" and Cade had smiled...but that, as a matter of fact, was exactly it: the alternative. The only one.

He could have tried to plunge into the Cairo Mystery and been hypnotized again for his troubles. He could have gone to a Chapter House and been burned down. But there was still, and always, the Emperor. This was the morning of the monthly Audience Day; he had timed it so.

Even here at Cannon's this much remained sure: the rogs and blades, the whores and hostesses were unfit people, but they were loyal to the Emperor, every one. There had been no trace of the conspiracy he sought. The insane burglar with his imaginary book had been an object of horror to them all.

The Realm is wide, thought Cade, but not so wide that the Emperor will turn a deaf ear to any plea.

His only fear was that he would not be believed when he told his complex and terrible story. The Emperor's benevolence would be sorely tried to comprehend a plot against him in an innocent Mystery; and to add to that the defection from fitness of the Gunner Supreme. Cade wondered what he himself would have thought of such a tale a few weeks ago.

But it would get to persons less full of loving kindness than the Emperor. He had seen the iron-faced Power Master at ceremonies—a grim tower of a man; the gentle Emperor's mailed fist. Which was as it

always had been, which was as it should be. It wasn't hard to visualize the Power Master believing enough of the story to investigate, and that was all that would be needed.

Cade had in his pockets as he left only half the remaining smaller gaudies and a handful of clink: three blues and a few greens. The gold box and the Gun of the Order were in the kitchen behind hardened bronze under a layer of meal. There was something like a tear in Mistress Cannon's bloodshot eye when she said: "Don't forget you're coming back. There's always a place for you here."

He promised to remember, and the promise was true. He hoped he would never have to see the place again, but he knew he wouldn't forget it to his dying day. Such...irregularity! No order in their lives or thoughts, no proportion, no object, no fitness. And yet there was a curious warmth, an unexpected sense of comradeship strangely like that he had felt for his Brothers in the Order, but somehow stronger. He wondered if all commoners had it or if it was the property of only the criminals and near-criminals.

When he closed the door behind him and started down the street, he felt strangely alone. It was the same street down which he had walked in the lamplight with the elusive girl following behind. He rounded the corner, where another watchman now stood, and trudged to the palace in bitter solitude. What would happen would happen, he gloomily thought, and cursed himself for his gloom. He should have been full of honorable pride and exultation over the service he was about to render to the Emperor, but he was not. Instead he was worried about the commoner girl.

The girl, the girl, the girl! He had lied to the Gunner Supreme by not mentioning her—but only after he already had suspected that the Supreme was an unfit voluptuary, false to the Order. Hopefully he tried to persuade himself that she would come to no harm; realistically he knew that, harm or not, he could not lie to the Emperor and that she might well be caught and crushed in the wheels of justice he was about to set in motion.

CHAPTER 14

As a respectable-looking commoner of the middle class, Cade was admitted without questioning through the Audience Gate, a towering arch in the great wall that enclosed the nerve-center of the Realm. The palace proper, a graciously proportioned rose-marble building, lay a hundred meters inside. A Klin Serviceman—the gold braid on his gray meant Palace Detail—led the newcomer to a crowd already waiting in the plaza.

"Wait here," he said brusquely and strode off.

Cade waited as further commoners arrived and the crowd began to fill the open square. He noticed, however, that from time to time one of the throng—usually well dressed—would approach a loitering guard for a few words. Something would seem to change hands, and the man or woman would be led off toward the palace itself.

The Gunner managed to be nearby next time it happened; he smiled bitterly as his suspicions were confirmed. Even here in the palace, under the very eyes of the Emperor, there was corruption almost in the open.

The next Serviceman to approach the crowd with a new-comer took him inside for the modest price of one green. And he gave Cade what the Gunner took to be complete instructions: "When you enter the

Audience Hall, wait for the appearance of the Emperor. After he appears, face him at all times, standing. Keep silent until you're announced. Then, with your eyes lowered, not stepping over the white line, state your case in ten words or so."

"Ten words!"

"Have you no brief, commoner?" The guard was amazed.

A brief would be a written version of his case. Cade shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Ten words will be ample."

He turned down the Serviceman's friendly offer to locate a briefsman who would, of course, require something extra for a rush job. Ten words would be ample; the ones he had in mind would create enough furore to give him all the time he'd need to state his case.

The guard left him finally outside the ornate door of the hall with a last stern order: "Stand right here until they let you in."

"And when is that supposed to be?" a fussily dressed man at Cade's elbow asked as the Serviceman walked away. "How long a wait this time?"

Before Cade could say he didn't know, a white-haired granny scolded: "It doesn't make any difference. It's a real treat, every minute of it. I've been promising myself this trip—I live in Northumberland, that's in England—for many a year, and it's a fine thing I finally got the greens for it saved, because I surely won't be here next year!"

"Perhaps not," said the man distantly. And then curiously: "What's your complaint for the Emperor?"

"Complaint? Complaint? Dear me, I have no complaint! I just want to see his kind face close up and say 'Greetings and love from a loyal old lady of Northumberland, England.' Don't you think he'll be pleased?"

Cade melted at her innocence. "I'm sure he will," he said warmly, and she beamed with pleasure.

"I dare say," said the fussily dressed man. "What I have to lay before the Emperor's justice and wisdom is a sound grievance..." He whipped out and began to unfold a manuscript of many pages. "...a sound grievance against my cursed neighbor Flyte, his slatternly wife, and their four destructive brats. I've asked them politely, I've demanded firmly, I've..."

"Pardon." Cade shouldered past the man and seized the old lady from Northumberland by the arm. He had been watching again the ones who got beyond the gate, and how they did it. To an expectant Serviceman he said: "Sir, my old mother here is worn from travel. We've been waiting since sun-up. When can we get into the hall?"

"Why, it might be arranged very soon," the Serviceman said noncommittally.

Cade abandoned the effort; apparently there was nothing to do but pay. Bitterly he pulled another green from his pocket. He had just one more after that, and a few blues.

"It's only your old mother you want admitted?" the guard asked kindly. "You yourself wish to wait outside for her?"

Cade understood, wavered a moment, and then handed him the last green he owned. It didn't matter. Once in the hall, in the Emperor's own presence, there could be no more of this.

And he was in the hall, with the puzzled, grateful old lady from Northumberland beside him, her arm tucked under his.

"Over there." The guard pointed. "And keep your voices low if you must speak."

There were two groups waiting, clearly distinguished from each other. One was composed of commoners, about fifty of them, nervously congregated behind a white-marble line in the oval hall's mosaic flooring. There were perhaps as many persons of rank chatting and strolling relaxedly at a little distance from the commoners. At the end of the hall was a raised dais where, he supposed, the Emperor would sit in state. By the dais was a thick pedestal a meter high. Klin guards stood stiffly here and there, with gas guns at their belts. The nearest of them gestured abruptly at Cade, and he hastily moved into the commoners' enclosure.

Granny was clutching his arm and pouring out twittery thanks. But Cade, already regretting the impulse, turned his back on her and worked his way through to the other side of the group. He was joined a minute later by the over-dressed fellow who had talked to him outside the hall.

"I saw you couldn't persuade the guard," the man said, "so I paid without quibbling. I wonder how many more times the grays will expect us to pay?"

"That had better be the last," Cade said grimly.

"Such a pity!" someone said from his other side.

"Eh?" Cade turned to see a sour-looking middle-aged woman, staring with pursed lips across the hall at a space near the dais that had been empty only a few minutes ago. It was filling now with Star-borns—Ladies, high dignitaries in the Klin Service, and a few Brothers of the Order, their cloaks banded with the Silver of Superiors below colored stripes that designated their Stars. Cade silently studied the stripes: Congo, Pacific Isles, California, and of course East Coast. He had served under none of them; they would not be able to identify him on the spot. But at the same time, they would not half-recognize him, assume he was the Cade impostor, and blast him where he stood.

"Such a trial to the Court!" the woman insisted, again pursing her lips and shaking her head with enjoyment.

"What?" asked Cade. She pointed, and he realized he had asked the wrong question. "Who?" he amended it, and then he saw...

"Who's that?" he demanded, clutching the sleeve of the man next to him.

"What'd you say? Would you mind—this cloth crushes." He picked Cade's hand from his sleeve indignantly, but the Gunner never noticed. It was she: he was certain of it. Her back was turned to him, and her hair was a brilliant, foolish shade of orange-red to match her gown, but somehow he was certain.

He turned to the woman beside him: "What about her? Who is she?"

"Don't you know?" She eyed him significantly. "The Lady Jocelyn," she whispered. "The peculiar one."

You'd never think to look at her that she's a niece of the Emperor himself..."

The fussily dressed man interrupted with a snickering question to show that he was up on the latest palace gossip: "The one that writes poems?"

"Yes. And I have a friend who works in the kitchens, not a cook but a dietitian, of course, and she says the Lady Jocelyn reads them to everybody—whether they want to listen or not. Once she even began reciting to some commoners waiting just like us..."

But Cade was not listening. The Lady Jocelyn had turned to face them, and her resemblance to the girl of the Mystery collapsed. The bright red hair, of course, was dyed. But even Cade, as little competent to judge women's clothes as any man alive, could see that it was a bad match to a wretchedly cut gown. She was round-shouldered and evidently near-sighted, for she stood with her head thrust forward like a crane. When she walked off a moment later after surveying the commoners indifferently, her gait was a foolish sham. The only resemblance between this awkward misfit of the Court and the vivid, commanding creature who had saved his life was in the nature of a caricature.

All around him there was a sighing and a straightening. The Emperor had entered and was seating himself on the dais. Two Klin guards moved to the commoners' area, and there was a subdued jockeying for position. Before Cade understood what was going on, one of the guards had relieved him of his last few blues, examined the small sum with disgust, and stationed him well to the end of the line. Curse it, how much more was he supposed to know that he didn't? He realized that the guard's instructions had not been instructions at all but a last-minute warning which hit only the things he wasn't supposed to do: not talk, not turn his back, not overstep the line, not be long-winded—a mere recapitulation of things he was supposed to know. What else was involved? The commoners he had known at Cannon's were loyal, but shied from the idea of an Audience. He saw plainly from the people he was with that it was a middle-class affair. What else was involved? He was glad he wasn't at the head of the line—and hastily fell into step as the line moved off to stop at the enigmatic pedestal before the dais. Cade saw the fussily dressed man at the head of the line; he dropped currency—greens!--on it and murmured to one of the guards.

Thank offering, love offering, something like that, he vaguely remembered now, much too late to do anything about it. He glowered at the white-haired granny halfway down the line and berated himself for the impulse that had made him pay her way in. She, canny, middle-class, had saved her money for the offering.

"Commoner Bolwen," the guard was saying, and the fussily dressed man said to the Emperor, with his eyes lowered: "I present a complaint against a rude and unfit person to my Emperor." He handed his bulky brief to the guard and backed away from the dais.

Not a blue on him, Cade thought, and the line was shortening with amazing efficiency. "Offering," they called it. Did that mean it was voluntary? Nobody was omitting it.

"I ask my Emperor to consider my brilliant son for the Klin Service."

"Loyal greetings to our Emperor from the city of Buena Vista."

"I ask my Emperor's intercession in the bankruptcy case of my husband."

Cade looked up fleetingly at the Emperor's face for possible inspiration, and lost more time. The face was arrestingly different from what he had expected. It was not rapt and unworldly but thoughtful, keen,

penetrating—the face of a senior teacher, a scholar.

There was a guard at Cade's side, muttering: "Offering in your left hand,"

Cade opened his mouth to speak, and the guard said: "Silence."

"But..." said Cade. Instantly the guard's gas gun was out, ready to fire. The guard jerked his head at the door. He was no moon-faced, sluggish, run-of-the-mill watchman, Cade saw, but a picked member of the Service: no fighting man, but a most efficient guard who could drop him at the hint of a false move. And there were other guards looking their way...Cade silently stepped out of the line and backed to the great door, with the guard's eyes never leaving him.

Outside the hall the guard delivered a short, withering lecture on commoners who didn't know their duties and would consume the Emperor's invaluable time as though it were the time of a shop attendant. Cade gathered that the offering was another of the commoners' inviolable laws—even stronger than the one that made you use a smoker pellet when it was offered to you. Something as trivial as that, and it had barred him for a month from bringing his case to the Emperor!

The ridiculous injustice of it was suddenly more than he could take. Like an untested Brother suddenly thrust into battle, Cade choked on panic and despair. But for him, now, there was no faith in the Gunner Supreme to carry him through the moment of ordeal. There was no one, no reason for him to carry this burden at all. He who had dedicated his life and every deed in it to the Emperor was turned away because he didn't have greens to drop into a platter!

The guard was snarling that he had showed disgusting disrespect for the Emperor...

"Respect for the Emperor?" he burst out wildly. "What do you know about it, gray-suited fool? I'm risking my life to be here. There's a conspiracy against the Emperor! I was trying to warn..." His self-pity was cooled by a dash of cold fear. Next he'd be telling his name. Next the gas gun would go off in his face. And then there would be no awakening.

But the gray-clad guard had backed away, his weapon firmly trained on Cade's face and his finger white on the trigger. "Conspiracy, is it?" said the guard. "You're mad. Or...whatever you are, this is a matter for Armsmen. Walk."

Cade trudged emptily down the corridor. He had said it, and he would pay for it. There was an Auxiliary Chapter House in the palace, and every Gunner worthy of his Gun would have a description of the Cade impostor firmly planted in his memory.

"In there." It was an elevator that soared to the top of the palace and let them out at an anteroom where an armiger stood guard.

"Sir," said the Serviceman, "please call the Gunner of the Day." The armiger stared at Cade, and there was no recognition in the stare; he spoke into a wall panel, and the door opened. They marched through the Ready Room into the Charge Room, where the Gunner of the Day waited. Cade stared downward at the familiar plastic flooring of a Chapter House as he approached the desk. He could brace himself against the inevitable tearing blast of flame; he could not bring himself to look his executioner in the eye.

There was no blast. Instead there came a voice—dry, precise, familiar, and astonished: "Why, we thought you were...!"

“Silence!” said Cade swiftly. The Gunner was Kendall of Denver, a companion for years before his assignment to France. After the first show of surprise, Kendall’s long face was impassive. Cade knew his former Brother’s mind: form a theory and act on it. By now he would have decided that Cade had been on one of the Order’s infrequent secret assignments. And he would never mistake Cade for the hunted Cade impostor.

“Guard, is there a charge?” Gunner Kendall asked.

“Sir, this cursed fellow failed to make the voluntary offering in Audience, he talked in the Emperor’s presence, and when I pulled him out of line he yelled about a conspiracy. I suppose he’s mad, but if there’s anything to it, I...”

“Quite right. I’ll take charge. Return to your post.”

When they were alone, Kendall grinned hugely. “We all thought you were dead, Brother. There’s even an order out to kill someone impersonating you. You took a fine chance coming here. We have Brothers Rosso and Banker in the palace detail besides me; they’ll be glad to hear the news. How may I help you?”

Escort to the Emperor? No; now the Emperor need not be troubled with it. The Emperor’s right arm would set this crazy muddle right. “Take me to the Power Master, Brother. At once.”

Kendall led the way without question. Through corridors, down ramps, through antechambers, Cade saw doors open and salutes snap to the trim uniform of the Gunner.

They passed through a great apartment at last that was far from ornate. There was an antechamber where men and women sat and waited. There was a brightly lit, vast communications room in the back, where hundreds of youngsters tended solid banks of sending and receiving signal units. There was a great room behind that, where men at long tables elaborated outgoing messages and brief incoming ones. There were many, many smaller rooms farther behind, where older men could be seen talking into dictating machines or writing, and consulting lists and folders as they worked. Endlessly, messengers went to and fro. It was Cade’s first glimpse of the complex machinery of administration.

In a final anteroom, alone, they sat and waited. Cade felt the eerie sensation of being spy-rayed, but the orifice was too cunningly concealed for him to spot it.

“Gunner Kendall, come in and bring the commoner,” said a voice at length—and Cade stiffened. It was the vibrant, commanding voice he could never forget; the voice that had broadcast the “kill-on-sight” command.

He followed Kendall from the anteroom into a place whose like he had never seen before. It had every comfort of the Lady Moia’s bedchamber, but was sternly masculine in its simplicity. The whole room pointed to a table where the iron-visaged Power Master sat, and Cade rejoiced. This was the man who would crush the conspiracy and root out the decadent Gunner Supreme...

“Sir,” said Kendall in his precise way, “this is Gunner Cade, mistakenly supposed dead. He asked me to bring him to you.”

“My spy ray showed me that he is unarmed,” said the Power Master. “See to it that he does not seize your weapon.” He got up from the table as Kendall backed away from Cade, with confusion on his face. Cade saw that the Power Master wore a gun of the Order—a gun he deliberately unbuckled and flung

on the table with a crash. Slowly he approached Cade.

The man was fully as tall as Cade, and heavier. His muscles were rock-hard knots where Cade's were sliding steel bands. Cade was a boxer, the Power Master—a strangler. With his face half a meter from Cade's, he said, in the voice that once had ordered his death: "Are you going to kill me, Gunner? This is your chance."

Cade told him steadily: "I am not here to kill you, sir. I'm here to give you information vital to the Realm."

The Power Master stared into his eyes for a long, silent minute, and then suddenly grinned. He returned to the table to buckle on his gun. "You're sure he's Cade?" he asked, with his back turned.

"No possible doubt, sir," said Kendall. "We were novices together."

"Cade, who else knows about this?"

"Nobody, sir. Only Brother Kendall."

"Good." The Power Master swung around with the gun in his hand. A stab of flame from it blasted the life out of Gunner Kendall. Cade saw the muzzle of the gun turn to train steadily on him as Kendall toppled to the floor.

CHAPTER 15

"Sit down," said the Power Master. He laid his gun on the polished table as Cade collapsed into a capacious chair. Numbly he thought: it wasn't murder like Fledwick; Kendall is—was—a Gunner under arms. He could have drawn...but why?

"I can use you," said the Power Master. "I can always use a first-rate Armsman who's had a look below the surface and kept his head. You could be especially useful to me, because, as far as the world knows, you are dead—now that Kendall has been silenced. Also, you seem to have an unusual, useful immunity to hypnosis."

"You know about it," said Cade stupidly.

The Power Master grinned and said, rolling the words: "The Great Conspiracy. Yes; I have my representatives in the Great Conspiracy. I was alarmed when they advised me that a most able Gunner had been turned loose with a compulsion to take my life, and even more alarmed when I found you had slipped through the fingers of the fools of the City Watch."

The girl—was she his spy in the Mystery?

"Now," said the Power Master briskly, "tell me about your recovery from their hypnosis."

"I was left in a drinking room to come to my senses," Cade said slowly, uncertain of what to tell. If she was his spy—but he risked it. He might be shot down like Kendall, but he would know. "I felt the compulsion mounting," he said evenly, "and then it went away for no apparent reason. It has not returned. I left the place looking for a Chapter House. One of the women followed me, and we were

both arrested by the Watch.”

The Power Master looked up sharply, and Cade was certain that there was surprise in the glance. “You don’t know who the woman was?”

“No,” said Cade. That much, at least, was true.

“You’re sure?”

“I’ve been trying to find out,” he admitted shamelessly, and the Power Master did not bother to repress a cynical smile. Cade didn’t care: the girl was no spy of the Power Master’s. His claim that the hypnotic compulsion had vanished by itself stood unchallenged. In spite of his bullying show of omniscience, the man did not really know everything.

“Tell me the rest,” said the Power Master. “What happened to your partner in criminal insanity—the unbooked teacher?”

Cade told him of their cross-country journey, the shattering discoveries at the Building of Fives that climaxed in the treacherous murder of Fledwick. The Power Master smiled again at the involuntary pain in Cade’s voice as he mentioned the presence of the Lady Moia. And he nodded approvingly as Cade told him of his two weeks at Cannon’s—“waiting for the hue and cry to die down”—and of his failure to reach the Emperor.

“You’ve done well,” he pronounced judiciously at last. “Now I want to know whether you’ve profited by it all.

“Since your novitiate, Cade, you’ve been filled full of brotherhood and misinformation. You’ve been doing all the right things, but for the wrong reasons. If you can learn the right reasons...Tell me first: why did you Gunners of France fight the Gunners of Muscovy?”

“Because they tried to seize an iron deposit belonging to our Star,” Cade said simply. Where was the man leading?

“There was no iron deposit. One of my people faked a geological survey report for the Star of France and seeded a little Mars iron at the site. I held it in reserve as a bone of contention. When the French Star was making overtures to the Muscovite Star concerning a combination of forces, I let the news of the “iron deposit” leak to Muscovy, with the results that you know. There will be no combination between France and Muscovy now, or for many years to come.”

It was an elaborate joke, Cade decided, and in very bad taste.

“All your wars are like that,” said the Power Master grimly. “They are useful things to keep the Stars diverted and divided. That is the purpose of the Great Conspiracy as well—though the Stars who think they are behind it do not know this. It requires immense funds to keep a vast underground organization going; the half-dozen or so Stars now supporting the Cairo Mystery conspiracy will soon be bled white and drop off, while others will take their place. My agents will keep anything serious from ever coming of the Cairo affair, of course. I confess it almost got out of hand, but that is a risk one must run.”

This was no joke, Cade numbly realized. It was the end of this world. “What do the Stars who...think...they are behind the conspiracy want?” he asked, fighting for calm.

“They want to kill me, of course, and go their own wild way. They want more, and more, and more Armsmen. They want to fight bigger and bigger wars, and destroy more and more villages.... You’ve been taught that the Stars are loyal to the Realm, the way commoners are loyal to the Stars. The truth is that the Stars are the worst enemy the Realm has. Without a Power Master to keep them out of harm, they’d have the Realm a wreck in one man’s lifetime.

“And your precious Gunner Supreme. Cade, I suppose you think he’s the first one like that in ten thousand years and will be the last one like that until the end of time?”

“That was my hope,” Cade said wearily.

“Disabuse yourself. Most of them have been like that; most of them will be...must be, if you can understand. Arle is plotting, if you please, to supplant me, merging the two offices. It is only to be expected. A Gunner such as yourself may survive years of combat because he has brains. He becomes a Gunner Superior, in intimate contact with a Star. He figures in the Star’s plottings. The women of the Court, fascinated by the novelty of a man they can’t have, bend every effort to seducing him, and usually succeed. His vows are broken, he misses the active life of battle, he intrigues for election to the office of the Supreme. By the time he wins it, he is a very ordinary voluptuary with a taste for power, like our friend Arle.

“But, Cade, this is the key; don’t forget it: There must be a Gunner Supreme. As a fighting man you know that. Many a time the fact that the Supreme lived somewhere and embodied your notion of the Order has saved your life or saved the day for your command. The fact that the Supreme in the flesh is not what you think doesn’t matter at all.”

Cade leaned forward. The abominable thing he was about to say was a ball in his throat, choking him, so he had to get rid of it: “The Emperor?” he asked. “The Emperor? Why does he allow it? Why?”

“The Emperor is another lie,” the Power Master said calmly. “The Emperor can’t stop it. He’s just a man—an ordinary one. If he attempted to make suggestions about my task of running the Realm, I would very properly ignore them. Emperors who have offered too many such suggestions in the past, Cade, have died young. Their Power Masters killed them. It will happen again.

“And that’s as it should be. As you know, the line of the Power Master descends by adoption, and the line of the Emperor by male primogeniture. The Power Master chooses a tried man to succeed himself. The Emperor gets what chance sends him. Of course, the line of the Power Master is stronger, so of course it must rule.”

His voice rose almost to a roar. “But there must be an Emperor. The Power Master is unloved: he sends people to death; he collects taxes; he sets speed limits. The Emperor does none of this; he simply exists and is loved because everybody is told to love him. People do it—again, the right thing for the wrong reason. If they didn’t love him, what would happen to the Realm? Think of such a thing as all the commoners becoming criminals. What would we do when the Watch Houses were all filled? What would we do if they kept attacking the Watch Houses until all the gasgun charges were used up? But they don’t all become criminals. They love the Emperor and don’t want to sadden him with unfit deeds.”

The Power Master rose, holstering his gun, and began to pace the room restlessly. “I am asking you to think, Cade,” he said with blazing intensity. “I don’t want to throw away a fine tool like you. I am asking you to think. Things are not what they seem, not what you thought they were.

“For many years you did your best work because you didn’t know the right reasons. Now it’s different.

There are other jobs for you, and you won't be able to do them if you're blinded by the lies you used to believe. Remember always that the Realm as it is works. It's been kept working for ten thousand years by things being as they are and not as they seem. It can be kept working to the end of time as long as there are resolute men to shove the structure back into balance when it shows signs of toppling."

Stopping for a moment at the feet of the slain Gunner Kendall, he said simply: "That was for the happiness of millions. They are happy, almost all of them. Gunners are contented, the Klin Service is contented, the Courts are contented, the commoners are contented. Let things change, let the structure crash, and where would they be? Give each commoner the power I hold, and what would he make of it? Would he be contented, or would he run amuck?"

"Cade, I don't want to...lose you. Think straight. Is there anything really unfit about the work I do, the work I want you to do for me? You made a trade of killing because the trade was called the Order of Armsmen. My trade is conserving the stability and contentment of every subject of the Realm of Man."

The passionately sincere voice pounded on, battering at Cade's will. The Power Master spoke of the vows Cade had taken, and he destroyed their logic completely. Cade had dedicated himself to the service of the Emperor—who was no more than the powerless, ceremonial excuse for the Power Master. With ruthless obscenity of detail he told Cade what he had given up in life in exchange for a sterile athleticism.

He spoke of food and drunkenness and drugs; of dancing and music and love: the whole sensual world Cade had thought well lost. He wooed the Gunner with two intermingling siren songs—the fitness of his new service under the Power Master and the indulgence of himself that was possible in it.

It would have been easy to tumble into the trap. Cade had been drained empty of the certainties of a lifetime. The Power Master said there was only one other set of certainties, and that if Cade would only let himself be filled with them, there would be the most wonderful consequences any powerful man of normal appetites would want.

It was easy to listen, it would have been easy to accept, but...Cade knew there was even more than he'd been told. There was one thing that did not fit in the new world, and that was the girl. The girl who had not wanted the Power Master killed, or the Gunner either. The girl who had warned Cade—rightly—that he would be going to his death if he tried to reaffiliate with the Order.

There was no all-powerful, all-loving Emperor anymore; there were no loyal Stars; there was only the Power Master—and the girl. So, thought Cade, treachery is the order of the day and has been for ten thousand years. He knew what answer he would give the Power Master, the answer he had to give to stay alive, but he was not ready to give it yet. A lifetime of training in strategy made him sharply aware that a quick surrender would be wrong.

"I must ask for time, sir," he said painfully. "You realize this is...very new to me. My vows have been part of me for many years, and it's less than a month since I...died...in battle. May I have leave to spend a day in meditation?"

The Power Master's lips quirked with inner amusement. "One day? You may have it, and welcome. And you may spend it in my own apartment. I have a room you should find comfortable."

CHAPTER 16

The room was comfortable by any standards Cade had known; it was second in luxury only to the smothering softness of the Lady Moia's apartment. Compared to Mistress Cannon's mean quarters or the sleeping lofts of a Chapter House, it offered every comfort a dog-tired man could ask. And it was also, unmistakably, a prison.

There were no bars to guard the windows, and presumably the "shoot-on-sight" order had lost its force. Yet Cade was certain he could not leave the place alive without the express permission of its master. If there had been any doubt about the answer he must give tomorrow, this room would have resolved it.

And it went deeper. If he'd had any tendency to give that answer in good faith, or any hesitation at the thought of falsely declaring his allegiance, the room dispelled it. Given freedom, he might have found it hard to return and commit himself to treachery and deceit with a lying promise to the Power Master. As a prisoner he owed no honesty to anyone but himself. And perhaps to the girl—if he could find her.

The Gunner slept well that night. After breakfast had been brought him, his host appeared.

Cade did not wait to be asked. Saluting, he said: "My decision is made; it was not a hard one. I am in your service. What is my first assignment?"

The Power Master smiled. "One that has been awaiting you. The Realm is threatened—has been threatened increasingly—by the unbounded egotism and short-sightedness of one Star against whom I cannot operate in the usual way. Until now...until now I have been searching for a man who could do what was necessary. You are the man."

He paused, and the silence in the room was explosive.

"You will go to Mars," he said finally, "and arrange the death of the Star of Mars. You will return alive. The details are your own concern. I can supply you with a flier and with money—whether to buy men or machines, I do not care."

Cade's mind accepted the job as a tactical problem, putting off for the time being the vital decision as to whether the commission would be fulfilled. For now, it would be necessary to act...even to think...in terms of fulfillment.

"I will need an identity."

"Choose it. I said the details were your own concern. I can offer, merely as a suggestion, that you would do well to adopt the identity of a lapsed armiger—you have known such cases—who took to the district. You might as well put the time you spent in that brothel to some use. And I can assure you that under such an identity you'll find yourself welcome in the Court of Mars. Yes," he said in answer to Cade's look of shocked inquiry, "things are that bad. Did you suppose I'd send you to kill a Star for anything less serious? Now, when you've decided on your course of action and prepared a list of your needs, call me..." He indicated a red button on the wall communicator. "Either I or a trusted servant will be there."

As he pointed, the set chimed. The Power Master depressed the button.

"Here."

"Message, sir. Shall I bring it?"

“To the outer room.” And to Cade: “Call when you’re ready.”

The Gunner lost no time. He seated himself at a desk at one end of the room and was already listing the funds, transport, and identification he would need, when the door opened again.

“You are going to have a visitor,” the Power Master said coldly. “I am very interested in knowing just how she discovered...”

“She? Who?” Cade was on his feet, the list forgotten.

“Whom do you suppose? How many Ladies of the palace do you know?”

It was the Lady Moia, then. And the memory of her still hurt. It would take time to recover from the shocks of that night. “One, sir, as I told you,” he said formally. “And I would prefer not to see her, if that is possible.”

“It is not possible. She knows you are here, and I have no grounds for refusing her admission without revealing your identity. How did she know you were here?” the vibrant voice demanded.

“Sir, I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since the Building of Fives...”

“The Building of Fives? You spoke only of the Lady Moia there.” He peered closely into Cade’s puzzled face and suddenly burst into a wide, wolfish grin. “You don’t know!” he exploded. “My virtuous Gunner, this is the girl for whom you waited two weeks at Cannon’s—I had a report from there last night, an hour after you went to sleep—a mysterious girl, a girl whom you had met just once.” He was dragging it out, enjoying himself hugely. “Oh, Cade, you were so upright yesterday, so true to your vows. How could you have...neglected...a little thing like telling your master about the girl?”

Cade felt the blood rush to his face, but it was not the reflex of shame. It was she; she had found him after his futile, stupid hunt for her. And she was no commoner or wearer of the garter, but a Lady of the Court!

“No.” The Power Master laughed. “I won’t spoil the joke. You’ll learn who she is shortly from her own—shall I say, delicate?—lips.” The facade of grimness relaxed; the Power Master sat comfortably on the couch, chuckling. “If it’s any satisfaction to you, Cade, I will admit that my respect for you, my hopes for you, have risen. I can use a man who knows how to keep his mouth shut. So she Saw Life after all?” His intonation was heavily satirical, amused. “Proof again that the simplest answer may sometimes be right. The whole palace has been buzzing about it for three weeks, and I thought I knew better!”

Cade tried to concentrate on what he was hearing and make sense of it. “The whole palace?” he asked uncertainly. “You mean you knew about her? The whole palace knew?” Then why, he wondered, all the secrecy now? Why was he a prisoner here? None of it fitted with the Power Master’s attitude of yesterday.

“Yes, of course. But they all thought it was the daring impostor Cade she met...and only I knew it was the real Gunner, chaste and pure. Or so I thought. Now it seems I had the right information, but they have the right interpretation of it all. And to think of the horror on your face yesterday when I talked of these wicked matters! Cade, you impress me; you’ll be a good man to have in my service.” He broke out chuckling again. “I keep wondering...she must have made a peculiar-looking tart. What did she look like? She’s so—you know.”

“So beautiful?” asked Cade.

The Power Master stared at him wonderingly. “We’d better get you off to Mars,” he said dryly, and glanced at a paper he held in his hand. “She says she recognized you yesterday in Court but didn’t want to ‘betray you.’ Now that I’ve ‘captured’ you, she wants to see you before you die.”

Abruptly he ceased to be a man enjoying himself. “Cade,” he said grimly, “I can understand and excuse your lie by omission of yesterday if it was prompted by mistaken loyalty to your little friend. You are, after all, unsophisticated. But if I find there’s anything more to it, your little friend’s visit will be quite literally the last you will enjoy before you die.”

The door closed behind him, and Cade sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands. Had he gone mad? Had everybody?

“Traitor, face me! They said you lied, and I did not believe them, but I know now. Look me in the eye if you dare!”

Cade jumped up. He hadn’t heard the door open; the first thing to reach his ears was the unpleasant whine of her voice, contrasting ludicrously with the melodramatic words. He looked at her, heartsick as he realized the monstrous joke somebody was perpetrating. It was the Lady Jocelyn. He had noticed the resemblance himself yesterday—but who else could know about it?

“Traitor,” she said, “look on my face and see how you erred when you thought to victimize a foolish and ignorant commoner girl. Look on my face.”

He looked, and something impossible was happening. The Lady Jocelyn’s squint-stooped head moved back to sit proudly on her slim throat. Her round-shouldered stance straightened for a moment and settled to a supple, erect figure. The nearsighted, peering eyes flashed with humor and arrogance. She still wore an ill-fitting robe of lurid orange, and her stringy hair still missed matching the color of her robe, but none of these things mattered. It was she.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself in your shame?” she demanded in a voice that was also a caricature.

“A thousand pardons, Lady,” he said hoarsely, his heart thudding. “If I had known, if you had permitted some word of your rank to cross your lips, I could not have lied to you.” If Fledwick could hear me now! The girl winked and nodded “go on.”

“Surely your warm heart will understand and forgive when I say that only your beauty drove me to my crime.” The story seemed to be that the Lady Jocelyn, the palace butt, had gone out on the town incognito and been arrested, to the hilarity of the palace wits. She was pretending to assume that he was under death sentence for daring to insult her by taking her at her face value.

“Forgive?” she declaimed. “Forgive? Justice will be done; there is nothing to forgive. A life for an insult to the blood imperial. I have come to console you, fellow. Bring a chair for me. You may sit at my feet.”

Cade did as he was told, by now far beyond any effort to take control of the situation. He knelt as she sat down and pulled a sheaf of manuscript from a sagging pocket in her voluminous robe.

“I shall console you for an hour by reading from my works.” She launched into what he supposed was

a poem: There is no whisper uttered in the Realm
That goes unheard. By night, by day, no voice
Is raised involuntarily or by choice
Unheard by him who holds the palace helm.

She cleared her throat, and Cade nodded, jerking his head a little at the wall communicator. He understood.

The doors are many in the Realm of Man;
This door unguarded, that door triply sealed;
Each loyal subject wearing like a shield
The key: to live as fitly as he can.

Her knee pressed sharply against Cade's shoulder during the three words "this door unguarded." He managed to concentrate on the message.

Star-born or common, we must take and use
The lives that we are handed for our lot.
Great Klin can tell us what to do or not;
Not now or ever is it ours to choose.

The words were take and use—now...

She rattled her sheaf of manuscript, and from its bulky folds a flat case slid; he caught it before it struck the floor. Take and use—now. It was the smallest size of caster. He had it open in an instant and saw a half-hour reel of recorded tape ready to roll. All dials were at zero.

My voice is small; I do not know the way
To reach all of the willing hands that serve,
Setting at ease the flesh and bone and nerve.
But if I spoke like thunder, I would say:
Good people, follow Klin by night and day.

My voice—I do not know—setting. Swiftly he mixed bass and treble volumes to match her voice-and hoped the spymike system was anything but high-fidelity. He started the tape on a quick nod from the girl and was relieved to find that he'd done well. In a very fair approximation of her adenoidal whine the 'caster immediately began to drone out:

What beauty lies in loyalty! What joy!
Is there a heart that throbs with lesser thrill...

He placed the box carefully on her chair as she rose, and followed her silently from the room. The Power Master, on the other end of the mike, was welcome to his share of the Lady Jocelyn's verses.

CHAPTER 17

She led Cade through endless twisting dark passageways and stairs. Doors opened at a touch from her hand where no doors seemed to be, and never once did they encounter another person in their flight.

There was more to the palace than met the eye, Cade realized....

When they emerged at last, it was into a narrow alley like those of the district where Cade had spent two weeks. A ground car whisked them away from the alley door. Cade never saw who was driving. He followed the girl into the back seat and turned to her promptly with the thanks and questions uppermost in his mind, but she put one finger to her crookedly painted mouth and shook her head.

Cade sat back, forcing his body to relax, but his mind was busy, fascinated by the puzzle of her constantly shifting personality. She had been a commoner at their first meeting, but one with an air of command, an important person in the Cairo Mystery. Then she had been a wearer of the garter, openly seductive—and vulgar. And now a Lady of the Court, a niece of the Emperor himself!

He knew now that the first time she had been a spy; he did not know for whom.

The second time she was in masquerade. The palace thought it was on holiday—he knew it was not.

This time he could not doubt her true identity; but the awkward, graceless, shambling fool of the Audience Hall was not the same Lady Jocelyn who sat beside him now, erect and confident.

All he had learned so far was what she was not—except two things: that she was still, and always, even under the makeup of her palace role, exquisitely beautiful, and that she had rescued him again...for what?

The car came to a discreet stop at the edge of a field, and the girl gestured him to open the door. She led him briskly across the field to an ancient, unpainted structure; Cade had no chance to look at the vanishing car.

“Open it,” she said at the door of the building, and her voice was the commanding voice of the egg-shaped room. Cade heaved a wooden bar out of double sockets and pushed the double door open.

There was a space flier inside—twelve meters of polished alloy.

“You can fly this, Gunner,” she said. It was a statement, not a question.

“I’ve taken fliers to the Moon and back,” he told her.

She looked worried. “Not Mars?”

“I can take it to Mars,” he said—and he or any Gunner could.

“I hope so. This flier is loaded and fueled, with food aboard.” She pressed a folded paper into his hands. “These are the coordinates of your landing point on Mars. There will be friends waiting there, or they will arrive shortly after your landing. If you take off immediately, you will probably be out of radar range before they can pursue.”

“They?” he demanded. “The Power Master’s fliers?” As far as he knew, the Power Master disposed only of freighters and ferries, without a ram in his space fleet.

“Cade,” she said steadily, “we have no time. I’ve helped you before, against your will. Now I ask you to take off immediately—without questions or argument. First you must strike me—knock me unconscious.”

“What?”

“You’ve done it before,” she said angrily. “I must have a cover story to delay them with while you get clear.”

Cade looked down at her, at the brilliant eyes and lovely face beneath the grotesque makeup. It was strangely pleasant, this warmth he felt...strangely unlike the peril he had been taught to expect from such nearness to a woman. It felt much as the touch of the Gunner Supreme’s seal to his lips had felt in another life. Even as the thought came, his lips tingled.

“Cade!” she said furiously. “I tell you, there’s no time to waste. The tape gave us a half-hour at the most, even if they didn’t get suspicious before then. Do as I say!”

A palace ground car roared down the highway across the field, braked screechingly, and began to back up.

“They’re here,” she said bitterly.

With only a momentary hesitation Cade struck her as she had said he must—but he did not leave her lying there to cover his escape. He picked her up and raced into the building and up the ramp to the control-compartment lock standing open and waiting. He buckled her limp body into an acceleration couch and clanged the lock shut as a shouted challenge to surrender echoed in the building.

He slipped into the pilot’s seat, and reflex took over. Straps, buckles, neck brace, grid-one temperature and voltage, grid-two temperature and voltage, first-stage discharge buildup and fire.

His blackout lasted only a few seconds. He turned in his straps, craning his neck to see the couch. She was still unconscious. Indicators flashed on the panel, and his hands worked efficiently, as if with a life of their own, even though he had not flown out of atmosphere for three years. For ten minutes he was necessarily a part of the ship, his nerve system joined with its circuits by his swift-moving fingers on the controls. Last of all he cut in the flier’s radars and unbuckled himself.

He kicked himself over to the couch, frightened, to feel the girl’s neck. She shouldn’t be out that long, he worried. But she was, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Distractedly he began to search the ship for medical equipment. He braced himself in toeholds, spun open the air port of the control compartment, and floated into a cargo room perhaps three meters deep. In there, except for the space filled by an oversized loading lock, the bulkheads were lined with locked cabinets. Floating free in the compartment were four sealed crates. It was cargo, not medicine, here.

Aft of the cargo compartment was a bunk-lined cabin with a tiny galley and a vapor cabinet—the living quarters. She would want water. He filled a valve bag from the tap and gummed it to his thigh with a scoop of paste from one of the ship’s omnipresent pots. When he kicked his way back into the control compartment, he found that the girl had freed herself from the couch and was swaying against a bulkhead with an uncertain hold on a grabiron.

“You fool,” she said in a deadly voice.

“You told me to take the ship to Mars,” he said flatly. “That’s what I’m doing.”

“Give me that water,” she said, and drank inexpertly from the valve. “Cade,” she said at last, “I suppose

you meant well, but this means death for us both. Did you suppose they'd let you chase off into space with a member of the Emperor's family on board? They'll destroy us, and I will be reported killed—'unfortunately'—in the action. If you'd listened to me, I could have given you time for a safe escape."

Cade pointed to the stern-chase radar. "Look," he said. "There's nothing in sight—one pip."

"Where?" She pushed off from the grabiron and landed, clutching, by the screen.

"See?" He showed her. "A meteorite, most likely. Or even another ship. But not after us. They couldn't get into the air in less than two hours. Not unless they have fliers fueled and ready to go. By then we'll..."

"Suppose they have?" she blazed. "Wasn't this ship ready to go? Have you learned nothing? Do you still think the Realm's what it seems to be? This ship has been waiting six years for a Gunner to fly it, and now it's to be destroyed because of your folly!"

Cade floated before the screen, watching the green point on the gray ground. It was just becoming recognizable as three bunched points. Each second that passed made them more distinct. "Fliers," he said. "What are they—cargoes, ferries, recons, rams?"

"I don't know," she said venomously. "I'm no Gunner. Rams, most likely."

"With you on board?" Rams were designed for annihilative action. They matched velocities with their quarry and crushed it with their armored prows. It meant death to all aboard the victim.

"I see you're still living in your ethical dream world," she said. "I'm just a good excuse for the attack, Cade. If only you'd listened to me. What are you going to do now?"

"Outrun them if I can." He floated into his seat again. "I can try an evasive course and accelerate all the ship will take." It wouldn't be enough, and he knew it. "If the other pilots are inferior..."

"They won't be!" she snapped. He wondered whether she knew that rams had relays of pilots, always fresh, always solving for the difference while the quarry took evasive action, always waiting for the moment when the victim's single pilot tired after hours of dodging and began to repeat his tactics.

He reset the stern radar for maximum magnification and got a silhouette of three ugly fliers, smaller than his own, with anvillike beaks. They were rams.

"Cade, listen to me." Her voice compelled attention. It was more than a tone of command, more than the urgency of the words. It carried a desperate seriousness that made him pause.

"I'm listening."

"You'll have to fight them, Cade. There's no other way."

He looked at her unbelievably.

"There are guns aboard," she said, not meeting his eye.

"What are you talking about?"

“You know what.” She looked squarely at him, without shame. “Fire on them!” she said.

CHAPTER 18

It had been a rotten thing to hear from the lips of the lax and dissolute Mars-born gunner who had died in France. To hear her speak the unspeakable tore his heart.

“It’s for our lives,” Cade!” she pleaded shamelessly.

“Our lives!” He was passionately scornful. “What kind of lives would they be with a memory like that?”

“For the Realm of Man, then! The mission we are on!”

“What mission?” He laughed bitterly. “For a lie, a farce, a bad joke on the lips of the Power Master? What is the Realm of Man to me? A weakling Emperor, a murderous Power Master, a lying lecher of a Gunner Supreme! I have nothing left, Lady, except determination not to soil myself.”

“Jetters and bombles!” she exploded, pleading no longer. “That’s the way you’re thinking—precisely like a commoner’s brat terrified on the Beetu-five and the Beefai-voh!”

“I have no fear of the Beefai-Voh, and I don’t believe in bombles,” he said coldly. “I believe there are things one knows are wrong, detestably wrong, and I refuse to do them. I wish...I wish you hadn’t said it.”

She was fighting for calm. “I see I’ll have to tell you some things. I won’t try to pledge you to secrecy; your promise would be meaningless. But I hope that if the time comes, you’ll let them torture you to death without revealing what I say, or that it was I who said it.”

He kept silence.

“You’ve never heard the word ‘history,’ Cade.”

He looked up in surprise. He had—used by the mad little burglar who’d been beaten to death in the Watch House.

She went on, frowning with concentration: “History is the true story of changes in man’s social organization over periods of time.”

“But...” he began with an incredulous laugh.

“Never mind! You’ll say it’s meaningless. That ‘changes’ and ‘social organization’ are words that just can’t be used together—that ‘changed social organization’ is a senseless noise. But you’re wrong.

“I cannot tell you my sources, but I assure you that there have been many forms of social organization—and that the world was not created ten thousand years ago.”

Her burning conviction amazed him. Was she mad too? As mad as the little burglar?

“Try to understand this: thousands of years ago there was a social organization without Emperor or Stars. It was destroyed by people firing from fliers. That was a terrible way to fight. It killed the innocent—mother and child, armed man and unarmed. It poisoned food so that people died in agony. It destroyed sewer and water systems so that homes became stinking places of corruption.

“The social organization was destroyed. Homes and cities were abandoned—yes, these people had cities; ours still bear their names. They lived like talking, suffering animals who only knew that things had once been better. Every year they forgot more of what that something better had been like, but they never forgot the supreme horror of death from the skies. Every year the details of it grew more cloudy and the thing itself grew more terrible.”

Cade nodded involuntarily. Like a night attack, he thought; the less you saw, the worse it was.

“There were centers of recovery—but that’s no part of my story. You said you didn’t believe in jettors and bombles? Cade, the jettors and bombles were real. The Beefai-voh and the rest of them are the names of the fliers that brought the supreme horror to that social organization.”

“The Caves!” said Cade. The place called Washington, the rumbled ruinous blocks of stone with staring black eyes in them, haunted by the bombles...

“Yes, the Caves! The Caves everybody is afraid of and nobody can explain.” She paused, almost breathless, then went on tensely: “Cade, you must fight. If you don’t, you’re throwing our lives away on folly.”

Cade didn’t believe it. The vague appeal to sketchy evidence—it was as if a patrol leader came back and reported: “Sir, I didn’t see it, but I think there’s a two-company enemy group somewhere up there in some direction or other.” He gripped a grabiron in his fist until his knuckles went white. Ten thousand years of Emperor, Klin, Power Master, the Order, and the Stars, and the commoners...that was the world.

“They’re coming up fast,” she said emotionlessly, staring at the screen.

“Where are the guns?” he said hoarsely, not meeting her eye. And he knew he was only pretending to believe her story, pretending it was true so he could save her and himself at any cost in self-loathing.

“In the chart locker. Ten, I believe.”

Ten guns. He would be able to fire at unheard-of aperture, until coils fused, and toss one aside for another. Ten guns—like that. As though a gun were not an individual thing, one to an Armsman, touched by the Gunner Supreme...

“We must get spacesuits on,” he said. He opened the locker and began to select his own units. Even after three years, he remembered his sizes. He dogged a pair of Number Seven legs against the bulkhead and tugged himself into them, donned Number Five arm pieces, and sealed a torso unit around his body and to the limb units. He selected units for the girl and helped her into them; she didn’t know how.

“Helmets now?” she asked calmly.

“Better carry the...the guns to the cargo room first.” They made two armloads. Cade wiped a palmful of paste against a cargo-room bulkhead and stuck his load to it in a near row. The girl ranged hers beside them.

“Helmets now,” he said. “Then you go back to the control room. I’ll airtight this section and open the cargo lock. You watch the screens—do you know the alarms?” She shook her head. “The proximity alarm is a loud buzzer. I won’t hear it in vacuum; you call me on the suit intercom when it goes off. Just talk into the helmet. If I succeed in driving them off, you’ll have to bleed air out of the control room until pressure is low enough for me to open the door against it. You hold down the switch on the upper left of the control array that’s labeled ‘Spacecock.’ Can you do that?”

She nodded; they clamped on the plastic domes and sealed them. “Testing intercom. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” sounded tinnily inside his helmet. “Can you turn your volume down?”

He did. “Is that better?”

“Thank you.” That was all. A casual thanks for lowering his volume, and not a word about his decision. Didn’t she realize what he was doing for her? Was she fool enough to think he believed her wild “history”?

He sealed the fore and aft doors and plucked one of the guns from the bulkhead. Full-charged. No number. What did a gun without a number mean? A gun without an Armsman matching it was unthinkable—but here were ten of them. Cade set each gun for maximum aperture and tight band, bled the air out of the compartment by a manual valve, and spun open the big cargo lock.

After that there was nothing to do. He floated and waited and tried not to think. But in that he failed.

What did he know—and how did he know it?

He knew Armsmen were Armsmen: fighters, masters of the Guns’ complexity, masters of fighting, the only masters of fighting there were. That was an essential datum. He knew they were in the service of the Emperor—but that datum had crumbled under the ruthless words of the Power Master. He had known the Gunner Supreme was the embodied perfections of the Order, and that datum was a lie. He had known that it was abomination to fire from a flier—and found himself about to commit the abomination. He had known that for Armsmen there was only one woman, and not a woman of flesh: She who came fleetingly to those who died in battle, and in her fleeting passage rewarded Armsmen for their lives of abstinence. But he knew that for him there was another woman now—sometime mystagogue, traitress, whore, weak-minded noblewoman, expounder of insane “history.” What did he know, and how did he know it? He knew that, false to the Order and to She who came, he wanted this woman and did not know her secret.

“Proximity alarm,” said the voice in his helmet.

“Message received,” he said automatically in Armsman style and smiled bitterly at himself.

Cade kicked his way to the array of guns. Two he gummed to his thighs, and two he clasped in his gauntlets. It was a grotesque situation. One man, one gun, it was supposed to be. But why? he demanded. Why not one man, two guns; one man, four guns; one man, as many guns as he needs and can lay his hands on? He shoved off to a port and began a hand-over-hand, spiderlike crawl from one quartz disk to the next, peering into the star-powdered blackness. The sun was astern of the flier; it would throw the rams into glaring relief. They wouldn’t be able to stalk the victim in its own shadow.

There was a triple wink of light that became a blaze ripping past the ports. The rams had overshot in

their first try at becoming part of the same physical system as their prey. They would return....

Cade wondered whether there could be peace in the Mysteries from the confusions that plagued him, and recoiled from the thought. He knew them, at least, for what they were: traps for the johns and clink for the blades. Peace? Perhaps there was peace at Mistress Cannon's, where a man could wallow deep, until not one ray of sunlight found him. At Cannon's you could drink and drug and couple while you had the greens, and then it was a simple matter to haunt dark streets until you found your nervous, late-going commoner. And then you could drink and drug and couple again where no ray of sunlight could find you. If firing from a flier was right, could a life at Cannon's be wrong?

The rams appeared ahead again, and the flier seemed to gain and overtake them. Cade knew it was an illusory triumph; he was being bracketed. They were far astern now.

What did he know, and how did he know it? He knew the Order and the Klin Philosophy and the Realm of Man had been created ten thousand years ago. He knew it because he had been told it by everyone. How did they know it? Because they had been told it by everyone. Cade's mind floated, anchorless, like his body. He didn't believe in jettors and bombles. That was for children. But he did believe in not firing from fliers. That was for Armsmen. Children and Armsmen had been told all about it.

"I'll take you to the Caves.

"And the Beetu-nine will come to tear your fingers and toes off with white-hot knives of metal.

"And the Beetu-five will come to pepper you with white-hot balls of metal.

"And the Beefai-voh will come and grate your arms and legs with white-hot metal graters.

"And last, if you are not a good boy, the Beethrie-six will come in the dark and will hunt you out though you run from Cave to Cave, screaming in the darkness. The Beethrie-six, which lumbers and grumbles, will breathe on you with its poison breath, and that is the most horrible of all, for your bones will turn to water and you will burn forever."

The three rams blazed past the open port again and seemed to hang in space far ahead of the flier. Their next "short" might do it.

"Clennie's filthy. He told me he made a nail hole in the wall and peeks at his sister every morning when she gets dressed. Anybody who'd do that would fire from a flier."

"...embarrassing but necessary questions have to be put by the entrance board. Candidate Cade, with love of the Emperor in your heart, can you truthfully say that at night you have only normal and healthy dreams, free from such degrading fantasies as demonstrations of affection for other boys and firing a gun while flying?"

"...but, oh, my pupils, there is worse yet to tell. This unfortunate young man who began by neglecting his Klin lessons did not end merely as a coward and thief. On reconnaissance flight he lost altitude and came under the fire of ground troops. I need not name the Thing he did; you can guess. Smitten by remorse after his unspeakable deed, he properly took his life, but conceive if you can the shame of his Brothers..."

"...heartbroken, but it had to be done. I never knew he had a rotten spot in him, but I saw the paper myself. He 'solved' Tactics VII, if you please, with a smoke screen—sending a flier over the enemy left flank and having the Gunner set fire to the trees with a low-aperture blast of his gun, uh...from the, uh,

from the air. It just shows you can't be too careful..."

"I receive this gun to use in such a way that my Emperor, my Gunner Supreme, and my Brothers in the Order will never have cause to sorrow..."

"They're bunched in the square; we'll have to blast them out with a frontal smash. Cade, take your flier over for an estimate of their strength. Leave your gun here; we know they're low on charges, and it wouldn't do to have yours fall into their hands if you're shot down."

The flier seemed to shoot past the rams again. The next time, velocities would match...

No; it would never do for him to take his gun. He remembered soaring over the plaza, tacking and veering as flame squirted from the densely massed troops below, busy with his counting. He dropped an imaginary grid over them, counted the number of men in one imaginary square and multiplied by the total number of imaginary squares as he shot back to the command post on the outskirts of the Rhineland village with his estimate and joined in the costly advance on foot.

He had been told, and he believed. How much else, he thought—as though a harsh light had suddenly been turned on—had he been told and believed against all common sense and reason?

Bring on your rams!

This time it was neither a short nor an over. Suddenly the three rams stood, less than a kilometer off, as though frozen in space.

They were smaller than Cade's freighter and boasted a wealth of propulsion units, as against the freighter's central main thrust tube and concentric ring of smaller steering tubes. He rejoiced as he saw conning bubbles rise simultaneously on the three craft just behind their ugly, solid anvil beaks.

A propulsion unit came into play on the outermost of the rams—the reserve. Red haze jetted from a midships tube precisely perpendicular to the main thrust, and the ram drifted outward to double its distance from the flier. Its forward component remained unchanged; it neither fell behind nor drifted ahead.

Aboard the two rams in action there must be relief at the flier's failure to take evasive action; they would now be plotting the simplest of symmetrical double-collision courses. Presently one of the rams would jet "over" or "under" its quarry, to stand out on the other side the same distance as its mate; simultaneously the rams would add equal and opposite lateral thrust in amount proportional to their distance from the flier, and the victim would be crushed between the two ugly anvil beaks.

Cade didn't know what the standard doctrine was for ramming distance, but he was content to improvise.

Both rams showed red exhaust mist. One was standing in closer; the other was moving "up" to hem the quarry in. Cade anchored himself at the lip of the open cargo lock; the conning bubble of the oncoming ram was sun-bright in his sights.

The gun gushed energy for three seconds before it failed. Cade hurled it through the lock into space and snatched another from his right thigh. It was not needed. The conning blister was still there, but blackened and discolored. He couldn't tell whether it had been pierced, but the ram issued uncertain gushes of red mist from one tube and then another, tacking and veering, and then flashed off at full thrust in what

seemed to be the start of a turn-around curve.

The other ram was still working itself painstakingly around the flier with conservative jets of exhaust. Cade, half through the lock, emptied the full charge of the second gun and a third at his hull, and saw sunlit diamond flashes spraying through space—debris from exploding ports! The ram didn't wait for more, and when Cade looked for the reserve craft, it was gone.

A good engagement, thought Cade. Presumably they wore spacesuits aboard the rams in action, so he could claim no kills. The conning blister hadn't shattered like the ports—perhaps because it had been extruded into space cold for only a few seconds and the gun hadn't tickled it hard enough to set up destructive strain. And the psychology of it was important too. The terrifying novelty of a ship-to-ship firefight, of a gun being used from a flier—Cade laughed thunderously inside the helmet at himself, at Clennie, at the embarrassed entrance-board examiner, at the Klin teacher with his moral lesson, at Novice Lorca's smoke screen, at the Oath of the Gun, at the Gunner Superior of France and his frontal smash.

A small, tinny voice in his ears yelled: "Turn your volume down! Turn it down!"

"I'm sorry, Lady," he said, chuckling. "Did you see how I routed them? Now, if you can find the spacecock, I'll be able to open the door."

She found it and bled control-compartment air into space until he could shove the door open, airtight it again, and start the control-compartment pressure building.

CHAPTER 19

He helped her take her helmet off, and then she helped him. They stood looking at each other, waiting for adequate words. Her eyes dropped first, and Cade momentarily felt she was ashamed of the thing she had made him do, the faith she had shaken and then destroyed.

But it made no difference now: the faith was destroyed—and for what? Cade stared long and hard at the Lady Jocelyn, and a fresh torrent of laughter burst from him, the sound echoing and reechoing in the vaulted compartment.

It was so ludicrous. There she stood, feet hooked under a toehold, a squat and misshapen figure no more womanly than the radars or the hulking compression pump. On top of the bulky mass of padding and metal and fabric the flaming, orange-red hair of the Lady of the Court was tangled and matted. Her face paint, never designed for beauty, was smudged and rubbed until she seemed a mocking distortion of the woman to whose beauty he had awakened a month ago in an underground center of intrigue.

He did not answer the mute question in her eyes, and she did not choose to put it into words. Instead she said quietly: "Help me with my suit, please."

Cade, suddenly sobered, showed her how to unseal the members and stow them in the locker. And then, though he had thought himself past being shocked by the woman, she took him by surprise again. As though she were a commoner domestic she said: "I'll fix us something to eat. Is pressure up in the cargo room?"

He checked the gauge and spun the door open for her. “Don’t come in for a few minutes,” she said. “I’ll be changing my clothes and washing up.”

How many was a few? Cade spent half an hour getting out of his own suit, minutely inspecting it, and stowing it away, and performed as many other jobs as he could find. There were not many. At last, cautiously, he hauled himself through the cargo room to the third compartment aft, the living quarters. Its door stood open, and he went in.

“Oh, there you are. I was going to call you.” She was at the tiny cooker, and two valved bottles of mash were beginning to gush steam. “There’s a table and benches,” she said, and he clicked them out of the wall, staring.

She had washed up. The soiled Court mask was scrubbed away and the perfection of her face was a renewed surprise. Her hair was bound with a cloth as if it were still damp from washing—he hoped the hair dye had washed out. And instead of her sagging orange robe she wore a fresh set of mechanic’s coveralls. The sleeves and legs were rolled, and the belt pulled tight to her waist. She looked trim...and tempting. How did a man—a man not in the Order—go about telling a woman that she was beautiful?

“You’ve time to wash,” she said pointedly.

“Of course, thanks,” he said, and kicked over to the vapor chamber and thrust his head and hands in to be scrubbed by the swirling, warm mist and dried by the air blast. Turning to the table, he realized with sudden alarm that he was expected to sit across it from her.

“Excuse me,” he said, found a coverall for himself, and fled to the control room to change and pull himself together. To sit across the table from her and look at her while he ate! He told himself it was a first step. The sooner he unlearned his role of Gunner, the simpler life would be. The mash would help. There was no sundown in space, but his stomach knew the time—mid-afternoon—and he was sure it wouldn’t accept meat food for two hours. The coveralls helped too. He was glad to rid himself at last of the commoner’s best suit he had bought at Cannon’s with stolen money. Coveralls were a far cry from boots and cloak, but he had worn them in his Novice years.

Eating was easier than he had expected. There were thigh straps on the benches, and the table had a gummy top. It was an illusion of gravity at a time when the digestive system could use such assistance. The girl didn’t speak as they solemnly chewed their mash, sucked water from their bottles, and fished carefully through the trap of the jar for chunks of fruit that had carefully dehydrated crusts but were juicy inside.

At last Cade said: “Tell me more.”

“More about what?” she asked coolly. He knew she understood what he meant.

“You know what. ‘History,’ for instance. Or, more to the point, what cargo are we carrying, and to whom?” He had not forgotten, even while fighting off the rams, the locked cabinets and sealed crates.

“There’s nothing more to tell.”

“You said before takeoff that the ship had been waiting six years.”

“It was nothing. Forget about it.”

“So you’re a liar too?” he asked hotly. Anger is a peril. The thought came unsummoned, and he pushed it away; the direful warnings of Armsmen’s training no longer bound him. “What other accomplishments does the Emperor’s niece have?” he demanded. “I’ve seen you as traitor, whore, and spy. Thief too? Is the flier yours? Or is it just something you decided to make use of—like me?”

“Get out of here!” Her face was white and tense with rage. “Get...out...of here,” she repeated through clenched teeth.

Cade unbuckled the thigh straps and rose slowly, holding the table. He had been used long enough, by Stars and the Order and by her, at the risk of his life. Things were going to go his way for a change. “Do you really think you can get out of answering like this?” he said coldly. Coldly he looked down at the girl’s trembling shoulders and, thinking of Mistress Cannon, who had taught him how, he forced a smile.

She was silent, lips compressed to choke back the words she might regret, eyes flashing the fury she was trying to control.

“It’s not that easy,” he said. “Even a Gunner can learn the facts of life eventually. “You’ve done everything you could to destroy the meaning of my vows. What makes you think you can still count on the behavior they imposed?” She was rigidly holding onto herself, but he knew she couldn’t keep it up.

“Have you forgotten that I spent three weeks out in the world without you—learning things you never taught me? I saw another woman like you, too. You don’t imagine you’re the only one being used by an ambitious traitor? I don’t know who your master is, but I know hers. The Lady Moia...”

“Get out of here!” she screamed. “Get out! Now!” Tears streamed down her face as she freed herself and stood, but she was not sobbing.

“No.” He pulled himself one “step” toward her around the small table. “Not until you answer me. You may be content to serve your own master, but I tell you that I am tired of being used. For thirteen years the Order used me as it pleased, and I was willing. Then I ‘died,’ and the Cairo people tried to use me as their murderer. Their chosen victim, your friend the Power Master, tried to use me the same way against the Star of Mars. By the Realm! Even a drunken con man at Cannon’s thought he could use me for his ends. I’ve had enough! Do you understand that?”

He stopped, realizing that his tirade had given her a chance to gather her own control. “You saved me twice,” he added more quietly, “when others tried to use me. Why? Why, to use me yourself, of course. To fly this ship. What for? For whom? This time I’m going to know!”

He let the last words ring a moment in the air, and then he snapped at her: “Whose cargo are we carrying? What’s in it? Whose woman are you?”

“My own!”

He hadn’t been watching for it; he had looked for collapse.

Her hand stung as it whipped across his cheek. He seized her arms as she floundered from the floor; they drifted together against a bulkhead. “Answer me!” he said sharply. She was crying now, sobbing in an agony of frustration and defeat. He felt her tense body relax, helpless and beaten.

She would fight no more. He knew he could release her and she would tell him what he wanted to know. He meant to release her; he started to. But in some way he did not understand, his hands refused

to obey him. Her body was close to his, and her face turned up, suddenly startled and questioning.

He had never done it before; he didn't know how to do it. But his face bent down, and for a long time, a timeless moment, his lips were on hers.

She pulled away at last, and he held fast to a grabiron, oblivious to everything except the surging new sensations in him. This was how a man, an ordinary man, felt about a woman. This was what had been denied him all his life. This was what the Power Master had ruthlessly described in words. This was what brought the Gunner Supreme scurrying from planetary and Realm affairs to the side of the Lady Moia. This was what Jana had offered him at Cannon's. And none of them had quite understood that it was a thing without meaning to him—until now.

He looked up at her, standing across the room from him now, and made another discovery. She was quite helpless against him; he could take her when he liked. And that wasn't what he wanted.

He had kissed her, but that was not all. She had kissed him, and a whole new world had been in it.

"Jocelyn," he said quietly. He could taste the word in his mouth. It was a plea and a caress.

She said coldly, "I thought that this at least I would be spared from you. I will tell you as much as I can and then ask you to leave me alone."

"Jocelyn," he said again. She ignored it.

"I served as spy in the Cairo Mystery, yes. You should be glad I did. And you may believe me or not as you like, but I am neither whore nor thief. I serve the Realm of Man. As for the cargo, it does not concern you, and I would be a traitor for the first time if I told you more than that. Now, will you go?"

"If you wish." There was nothing more to learn, and much that he had learned unsought needed thinking over.

He left the room without looking at her again, and did not try to speak to her again that day. She slept in the cabin aft, and he tried to sleep on the acceleration couch in the control room, while thoughts tormented him.

Thinking was no help. He was bound to her, whatever she was, whosever game she played. But no matter how he turned and twisted each new fact, he saw nothing but a reasonless and chaotic conflict. She served the Realm of Man? So claimed the Power Master, offhand killer and father of lies that he was. So doubtless claimed the weakling Emperor, the rebellious Stars, the treacherous Gunner Supreme.

He had no reason to suppose there was sense to it at all. Always before, things had had meaning: each ritual gesture, each emphasis of wording, each studied maneuver in battle had had a meaning and a place in the fitting world of Klin. But now it seemed instead that there was just a world of random forces, clashing because of this man's lust or that man's pride. How could he demand more of her than the world offered?

In the morning he was hungry, and it was not unreasonable to go to the galley for food. She was distant and polite, and for the better part of a week she remained so. Then he tried once more to question her.

He asked again about History. She bit her lip and told him she never should have spoken as she did and never would have told what she had except to save their lives. "You would do best to forget you ever

heard the word.”

“Can I forget that I have fired from a flier?” he asked gravely, and she looked away.

About the cargo she would not speak at all, and his bitterness grew daily at the galling thought that he was expected to be a pawn in some game and be content with the role—he who had led companies and would surely have risen to the rank of Superior.

There were four days left to the voyage when he decided to force the cargo. He could have done it openly; she was powerless to prevent him. But he ensured his privacy by noisily rattling the handle of the door to the cabin at midnight by the chronometer. She must have been sleeping lightly. In less time that it would have taken him to actually open the door, he heard the dogs on the other side thud to. He rattled again, noisily, and then went off, grumbling as loudly as was reasonable. He smiled grimly, wondering when she would find the courage to come out—and more grimly still when he recalled that all the flier’s food was on the other side of the dogged-down door. Well, he has fasted three days before. And now he would find out who was playing with his life.

The metal sheathing on the free-floating crates yielded easily to the lowest aperture of a gun. The contents of the crate nearest the breakthrough point were also metallic, but were undamaged by the blast of the gun. It was guns that were in the crate—at least a thousand of them. Guns of the Order, or replicas, full-charged and without numbers. He was not really surprised.

Methodically Cade opened the three other crates—all the same. And the lockers? The locks were radionic and not simple, but he solved them, each quicker than the last, and sampled the contents.

At the end he went back to the control room, making no effort to cover up his work.

Ten thousand guns of the Order, bound for Mars. He knew now for whom the Lady Jocelyn worked.

He slept, and in the morning tried the cabin door: It was still dogged down, and he called on the ship’s interphone.

“What do you want?” she asked coldly.

“First, to apologize for disturbing your sleep.”

“Very well.”

“And something to eat.”

“I can’t see how to get it to you,” she said indifferently.

“You can’t afford to starve me. I still have to land the ship, you know.”

“I have no intention of starving you.” There was a hint of humor in her voice. “I was thinking it might be a good idea to weaken you a little.”

“I’ve weakened already,” he said. “I did some hard work last night, and I need food.”

“What kind of work?”

“I’ll show you when you come out.” He didn’t have to wait long. There was a scant ten minutes of silence before she called back:

“If I bring you some food, will you give me your word not to make a fool of yourself?”

“Certainly,” he said cheerfully, “if you feel there is any value in the word of a lapsed Armsman. By what shall I swear?”

Silence.

Then, almost timidly: “By yourself.”

And it was thoughtfully he answered: “By myself, I swear that I will do nothing to distress you.”

“Al! right. Five minutes,” she said, and cut off.

Cade waited. He heard the dogs thud back and the door open. Silence then, and he made himself sit still and wait. Ludicrously, a valved bottle of mash floated through the open door from the cargo room. It must have drifted from her hand when she saw the ripped-open cargo. Cade watched the bottle bump to a gentle stop, and rebound from the bulkhead, to drift within his reach. He was hungry; he wanted the food; but he let it go slowly past him. Jocelyn floated in a moment later, pale but self-possessed.

“All right,” she said. “Now you know. Don’t ask me to explain, because I won’t. I can’t. Not if you tried to get it out of me by torture. I have some loyalties I do not violate.”

“I have not,” he said briefly. “What was left of them, you violated for me. And I’m not going to ask you to explain. You keep forgetting that I’ve talked to others besides you these last few weeks. The Power Master, for instance. And a miserable little Marsman who came to Cannon’s to forget his loneliness. And...” He thought of the Mars-born Gunner, Harrow, who had died for a terrible sin. “...and others,” he finished shortly.

Cade picked the bottle of mash from the air and tasted it.

“All right,” she said, and dropped all pretense of indifference. “Just what is it that you imagine you understand?” He let the bottle go; the mash was cold, and he was no longer hungry.

“To start with, I know what loyalty you hold.”

He waited, but she said nothing. “I won’t pretend to understand why an Imperial Lady should serve as spy for the Star of Mars, but...” He paused with satisfaction. Her face was impassive, but one sharp indrawn breath had given her away. “Do you deny it?”

“No. No, I don’t deny it.”

“Then perhaps you will want to explain it?”

She was thoughtful, and she spoke reluctantly: “No. I can’t. What else do you know?”

“Why should I tell you?” He was bargaining forthrightly now. “Why should I answer your questions?”

“Because I know more than you do. Because there are some things it’s dangerous to know. Besides,”

she added, "I can't possibly tell you more until I find out just how much you do know."

"All right." He had nothing to lose...and he wanted to talk about it. "I'll tell you what I know and what I think:

"First, I have known for some time that the Star of Mars is petitioning the Emperor for the assignment of Mars-born Armsmen to his Court. Till now, of course, they have always been dispersed among the Earth Stars. But a month or more ago, requests were being made for the return of seasoned Mars-born Gunners, and for the retention of native novices on Mars when they reached the rank of armiger.

"Second, I know the Power Master is determined that this petition shall not be granted. I think I know why..."

She leaned forward, just a little eager for what he might say next.

He went on, deliberately shifting his ground.

"...why Mars wants its Armsmen at home, and why the Power Master will not allow it. The reason is so obvious it would never occur to anyone outside the little clique of schemers and tricksters and...History students in which you live! It's Mars iron, nothing more."

She sat back again and seemed almost bored; this was nothing new to her. Then he was on the right track.

"All of Earth's machinery needs Mars iron. If the Star of Mars had an Order of his own, composed entirely of Marsmen, with their peculiar devotion to their homes and families—I've talked with them, and I know how they feel—then he would hold more real power than the Emper...than the Power Master himself."

He laughed out loud, remembering the waking formula that had prepared him for the day each morning for six thousand days of his life.

"It is fitting that Armsmen serve the Emperor through the Power Master and our particular Stars. While this is so, all will be well to the end of time," he quoted aloud. "I said that many times each day for many years," he told her.

"I think the Star of Mars knows his request will never be granted, and I think he is now preparing to train an outlaw Order of his own to serve the same purpose."

A fleeting smile crossed her lips; in spite of everything, Cade realized, she still thought of him as a Gunner, with a Gunner's attitudes. She could not possibly have realized how much she was revealing with that small smile of satisfaction.

He had half-guessed before, but he was certain now, that the training of outlaw Armsmen had already begun. It took three years of novitiate drill before a Brother was given a practice gun in the Order proper. How many of them were there? How many half-trained, wholehearted Marsmen waiting right now for the guns he was bringing on this ship?

For the first time in ten thousand years, guns would be fired that had never been touched by the Gunner Supreme.

Then he remembered: not in ten thousand years. In History...how long was that?

“What purpose?” she asked.

Cade snapped to attention.

“Oh, a private armed force of his own. A force powerful enough to make a stand against the Earth-born Armsmen. It wouldn’t have to equal the combined strength of all Earth forces. Nothing near that. He must know the Power Master will never let Earth Stars combine to that extent. These guns, the guns you would have had me carry unawares if you could, will make him strong enough to become Power Master—or Emperor in your uncle’s place.”

He stopped talking and waited. She said nothing.

“Well,” he asked impatiently. “Can you deny it? Any of it?”

“No,” she said slowly. “None of it. Except one thing. I am—you must understand, Cade—I am no man’s paid spy!” She said the words with such unmistakable contempt that for the moment Cade found them hard to disbelieve.

“Then, why?” he asked intently. “What are you working for?”

She smiled. “I told you once: for the Realm of Man.” And her earnestness lost all meaning, because once more she had refused an answer. But she went on: “Cade, you found me first in the Cairo Mystery. You didn’t trust me then, and you discovered later that you should have trusted. Do you know what I was doing there?”

“The Great Conspiracy!” he sneered. “Every Star a Power Master! Add chaos and confusion to cruelty and unreason! Yes, I know what you were doing there!”

“If you’d think with your brain instead of your anger,” she snapped, “you’d realize how wrong that is. No, wait a minute,” she said quickly as he opened his mouth to protest, and went on, talking fast: “I wasn’t working for the conspiracy; you must know that by now. Why should I have tried to save you from the drug? I have no special fondness for the Power Master.” She paused for breath, and Cade had to admit that that made sense. It was the single paradox that kept the rest of what he knew from forming a clear picture.

She resolved it. “Cade,” she said steadily, “much of what you’ve said today is true—most of it. There are some facts you still don’t know, facts I don’t dare tell you. They’re dangerous even for me to know; for you, they would be fatal. The lives of other people are involved, and of one more important than you or—that doesn’t matter now. But you can surely see, with what you do know, why I was working in the conspiracy?”

“Why, yes, of course—because your master ordered it!”

Her hands balled into furious fists, shaking in impotent anger at his refusal to be swayed. “Because...I...needed...you!” She spaced the words evenly in a last effort at control. “You or any Armsman I could get, someone to fly this ship. I told you it’s been waiting for six years. Waiting for a pilot, nothing more. And I got the pilot. Now do you see? I couldn’t let you kill the Power Master. I couldn’t let him kill you either. I needed you for this.”

Well, he thought bitterly, now it fitted. It all hung together. She'd had a job to do, and she had done it, calmly betraying one group after another to accomplish it. And he himself...he was a pilot for the Star of Mars. And nothing more.

She took stunned silence for surrender. "You do understand?" she asked more quietly. "Cade, later perhaps, I can tell you more, but now..."

"Now you've said enough. Unless, of course, you want to tell me—being no man's paid spy—just why you chose to act against the Great Conspiracy in favor of another one just like it? What makes you favor Mars' conspiracy?"

"Not conspiracy! Healing!" The dam broke at last; words and dreams held back too long began to flow out now in passionate floods. "Healing the life of man," she said proudly. "Saving it from the dead grip of the Power Master and the Klin Philosophy! How can I make you understand?" Her face passed from earnest pleading to the rapines of a visionary. "I've told you about History, but it's still just a word to you. You haven't studied..."

"You don't know what 'science' means, do you? Of course not; the word is half-forbidden and half-forgotten, because science means change, and change means threat to the Klin stasis and to the Power Master.

"Mankind is dying, Cade, because men are chained to their machines and forbidden to make new ones. Don't you see that one by one the machines will wear out and..."

"No," he said warily. "I don't see. The Brothers of the Order build new machines. When old ones are gone, new ones are always ready. Klin teachers study and build machines."

"But no new ones," she said. "Science means new things, Cade; searching for the truth with no roads closed, no directions forbidden. Cade, there was a time—I know from History—when men powered their machines with the metal uranium. It's gone now. Thorium was used next, and now it's gone too. And now the iron. Earth's iron is gone. When the Mars iron is gone too, what next? There should be ten million men working day and night to find a new power source, but there are none.

"There are other ways to destroy civilization besides firing from fliers! They'll have to stop making fliers and ground cars. The cities will become great sewers when the pumps stop turning. Inlanders will get sick, with ugly lumps of wild tissue growing from their necks, because there won't be anybody to bring them fish and salt from the oceans. Babies will grow up crooked because there won't be power for the milking machines in the food factories or for the boats that catch the cod and shark. Animals will overrun the growing food because there won't be wire for fences or power to charge them. Diseases will rot mankind, because there won't be power for the birddog factories." She stopped, worn out with her own intensity, and watched him silently. "Does it mean anything to you?" she asked with a touch of bitterness.

"I don't know," he said, bemused. He was thinking of what the Power Master had said to him that day, with Kendall dead on the floor. It made this much sense at least: that here were two honestly opposing forces. The Power Master's view of the world made more sense, from what he had seen of it, than Jocelyn's, but...if he could believe her instead, a man could have something to fight for again.

"All that," she said quietly, "can be cured by science. And there are other things—'art' is one. Another word, Cade. It means exploring this universe and making new universes with language and sound and light. It makes you laugh and weep and wonder; no man alive today can understand the joy of making and giving art, or the joy of receiving it from the maker.

“You don’t know what ‘freedom’ is. But perhaps you’ll learn—soon. I hope...” She hesitated and looked up at him defiantly. “I hope when we reach Mars you will accept service under the Star of Mars. He is the man to follow at this time. But for now, I cannot tell you more.”

“Then I won’t ask,” he said. There was too much to think about already. And he knew all he really needed: he had learned the meaning of at least one new word, and that was “love.”

CHAPTER 20

They had three days more of space: days in which Cade found it less and less difficult to remember that the Order was behind him. The old life was finished, the old certainties gone. There was just one certainty now—a woman. The only possible woman for Cade in the new life, just as the Lady of the Order had been the only possible woman for Cade the Armsman. Until they landed he could share a growing friendship and...something more. What might come later he did not know, except for one thing: if they lived through the landing on Mars, he would find some way to stay at her side. The Star of Mars could be no worse a master than the Star of France. Surely he was a worthier one than the Power Master.

Knowing this much and no more, Cade used the time he had to win the liking and strengthen the confidence of the Lady Jocelyn. Never had he known himself capable of such fluent conversation or such avid listening.

Too quickly, Mars filled the heavens, and Jocelyn’s gentle friendliness disappeared behind a barrage of preparations and crisp instructions.

The coordinates she designated took them to a craggy basin in the Southern Hemisphere, less than a hundred kilometers from the capital city of Mars.

The spot had obviously been chosen to afford a combination of convenience and secrecy. From the air it was one of those blank patches that showed neither red nor green, but only featureless gray. No red meant no iron: none of the characteristic family-operated strip-mine refinery complexes of Mars. No green meant no water: no farms and farm families raising vegetables and goat meat for the miners and city dwellers of the planet. Featureless gray meant unobserved isolation.

Cade braked the big flier to a stop on level ground as though it were a ground car. He unbuckled himself from the control seat and looked out of a port at a desolate valley surrounded by gnarled old hills as high as any on sandstorm-lashed Mars. Jocelyn, at his side, surveyed the emptiness impatiently. She was already swathed in bulky synthetic furs.

Cade found a suit for himself and donned it. He came back to find her pacing the small area of cabin floor.

“Can your lungs take Mars air?” she demanded.

He nodded. “I’ve fought in the Alps and the Taurus.” With Brothers crumpling about him, he remembered—brave men, tireless men who happened to lack the body machinery for battle on half-rations of air. “How about you? There’s a respirator in the locker.”

“I’ve been here before.” She stopped him with a nervous gesture at the airlock.

Cade set the mechanism in motion, and there was an equalizing outreach of air. Momentarily his sight dimmed, and he had to cling to an iron for support. The girl, lighter and with bigger lungs, recovered before he did and was through the lock before he could walk certainly. Her eyes swept the horizon anxiously. “Your butcherwork on the crates isn’t going to make things easier,” she said. “We’d better start unloading and have the...the cargo ready to go.”

“To go to the Star of Mars?”

“Yes.”

He followed her back into the ship and opened the cargo port amidships. While she emptied locker after locker, Cade moved the bulkier crates outside. Fifty meters from the flier the pile of guns grew tall. But at every trip the girl’s impatient scanning of the horizon was repeated.

“I assume your friends are late?” he asked uneasily.

“The less you assume, the better,” she said. And then she uttered a gasp of relief. There was a black dot topping a hill, and then another—dozens, hundreds at last.

“The Armsmen of Mars?” He was torn between surprise at their unexpected numbers and contempt for their ragged approach.

“Far from Armsmen, Cade. The word is ‘patriots.’ You’ve heard it before.” There was an unreadable quality in her voice. Cade could not tell whether she despised these people or admired them. “It means that they love their homeland. They are devoted more to Mars and its ruler than to the Emperor.”

He couldn’t help it; a shudder went through him at the thought—and a moment later he was smiling at the shudder.

“They’re just porters, then.”

She started to shake her head and then said: “In effect, yes. Just porters.”

The crowd was drawing nearer. Patriots or porters, whatever they were, Cade saw clearly that there were no Armsmen among them. They were farmers, miners, clerks from the city. They walked easily, as you’d expect Mars-born people to, and clearly had no difficulty with Mars air. Their clothes were lighter than the furs he and Jocelyn wore against the chill. And they all carried uncouth sacks over their shoulders. Cade thought of the guns jostled and scraping together in the sacks and set his teeth obstinately: a gun now was just a killing tool, the way a saw was just a cutting tool.

There were boys in their teens and not a few women among the mob; it numbered some nine hundred, to carry about fifty thousand guns.

How, he wondered, could this rabble keep a secret? And then he thought of Harrow, the dead Gunner: “...a man likes to be among his own people...it’s newer on Mars...I don’t suppose you know anything about your eight-times great-grandfather...” If all these people shared that feeling!

With the crowd came noise, the undisciplined chatter of nine hundred excited people. A tall, lean-faced fellow in his middle years turned to the rest and yelled sharply through the thin air: “Just shut up, all of

you! Shut up and stand where you are!” A few lieutenants repeated the crude command. After a minute the shipward drift of the crowd halted, and there was silence.

The man said to Cade: “I’m Tucker. There wasn’t anything said about a woman. Who’s she?”

The Lady Jocelyn said dramatically: “A daughter of Mars.” If there was the faintest tinge of mockery in her voice, only Cade thought he heard it.

The lean-faced man said feelingly: “Mars blesses you, sister.”

“Mars blesses us all, from the highest to the lowest.” It seemed to be password and countersign.

Tucker said: “We’re glad to have a high-born Lady among us, sister. I was told the flier of the ship wouldn’t be a brother?”

“Not yet. He will be. He is an Earth-born Gunner who will train Marsmen for the day of liberty.”

“It’s growing,” said Tucker rapturously. “Nothing can stop it!” It was beginning to sound more like the mystic nonsense of the Cairo gang than businesslike military identification procedure.

The mob was getting noisy again, and military procedure took another body blow. Tucker turned and bawled at them: “You all shut up now! Get into some kind of a line and get your sacks open. And don’t take all day!” Cade watched them milling and groaned at the thought of turning such a mob into Armsmen. But he swallowed his disgust; what she wanted of him, he would do.

They did get whipped into line eventually by roaring noncoms. Cade couldn’t make out whether these were merely temporary, self-appointed leaders, or whether there was any organization in this gang. But somehow a dozen Marsmen got busy sorting out sixty-gun piles from the heap and dumping them into waiting sacks. The guns couldn’t have been carried under Earth gravity, but their weight on Mars constituted no more than a good working load. Cade was very glad that the guns of the Order had two centimeters of six-kilogram trigger pull before you hit a five-gram pull and firing contact. There were no accidents.

Jocelyn told him busily: “We won’t need the ship, and I don’t want to leave it here for a monument. Shoot it off to somewhere on automatic takeoff.”

It was sound doctrine. By the time the empty flier roared off, its ultimate destination an aimless orbit in space, the tail end of the line of porters was snaking past a melting pile of guns. Tucker, the lean-faced “patriot” leader, was yelling again, trying to make himself heard over the combined noise of rockets and rabble, to get them to form a new line of march heading out of the valley.

As the noise of the vanishing flier was lost in the distant sky, the man’s shouts were drowned out again by the terrifying crescendo of jets. Not one ship this time, but a fleet. An instant later a hundred or more space-recon fliers roared low over the hill-rimmed basin.

They fanned out beautifully, to land beyond the crags in a perfectly executed envelopment on the largest scale Cade had ever seen. He wondered numbly whether the brilliant maneuver had been performed on individual piloting or slave-circuit control.

The Martian rabble broke its uneven ranks. Nine hundred of them milled pointlessly about, asking each other frightened, stupid questions; the total effect was a thought-shattering roar. The Lady Jocelyn’s hand

gripped Cade's arm through the wadded sleeve of his furs. Her face was deathly pale. He must have radar stations on Deimos and Phobos, Cade thought, to pinpoint us like that...

Then there was a voice, the kind of voice nine-year-old Cade, Gunner-to-be, had thought the Emperor spoke with. It roared like thunder through the basin of rock, breaking against the rim and rebounding in echoes—the voice of the Power Master, the voice Cade would never fail to know, whether it spoke cynically across a room, commandingly over the radio, or majestically into the thin air of Mars.

“Marsmen, my Gunners are taking up positions surrounding you. You will drop your bags of weapons and walk to the foot of the hills to surrender. I want only the two persons who landed by flier. They must be held, but the rest of you will be released after a search. You have fifteen minutes to do this. If you do not, my Gunners will advance, firing.”

Silence from the hills, and a growing mutter from the crowd.

“Who are they?”

“Who's the man from the flier?”

“They said he's no brother!”

“Get rid of the guns!”

“They'll burn us down where we stand.”

“What will we do?”

“What will we do?”

Cade shook his head dazedly; Tucker was glaring at him.

“He's lying!” shrieked a clear voice—Jocelyn's. “He's lying! Do you think he'll let you go when you're helpless? He'll kill you all!”

Her warning was lost in the roar, except to Tucker and Cade. The lean-faced Marsman said to her slowly: “When we're helpless? We're helpless now. We've drilled some, but we don't know guns.”

With the brutal mob noise for a background, Jocelyn spoke again, softly and almost to herself. “Two hundred years,” she said emotionlessly. “Two hundred years of planning, two hundred years of waiting, two hundred years of terror: waiting for a traitor or a fool to talk, but nobody did. One gun, two guns, a dozen guns a year at last, waiting...”

She was swaying as she stood; Cade braced her with his arm.

“What a dream it was...and we came so close. Mars in rebellion, the Klin Philosophy shaken, Armsmen split, the Power Master defied! Men on Mars—men everywhere—thinking for themselves, challenging the traditions that tied them down. Thinking and challenging!” A blaze that had kindled briefly in her eyes seemed to die.

“We underestimated,” she said flatly. Now she was talking to Cade. “We didn't allow for the dead weight of things as they are. Two hundred years...I hope my uncle will not suffer when he dies.”

Her uncle. Cade hung on to that, and comprehension came at last. “The Emperor,” he said slowly, “your uncle—the Emperor; he knows of this?”

“Yes, of course.” There were tears behind her voice. Cade marveled at his blindness, not to have understood before. It was so obvious; this way it all made sense.

“The Emperor—the last five Emperors, powerless in everything except knowledge. They and a few others in the family, a handful of men and women. Three generations ago the reigning Emperor saw that Mars was the key, that the rulers of Mars would rebel, and the Mars populace would be with them. The Emperor-Mars pact was concluded fifty-five years ago. My uncle wrote the petition for Marsborn Armsmen. What a great dream it was! But what difference does it make now?”

I hope my uncle will not suffer when he dies. But he would; the Emperor would suffer, and so would she. The Power Master would not let them die until he had wrung from them every bit of information that they held.

Abruptly the voice of thunder said: “Eight minutes!” and the Mars rabble flowed around them, scared, angry, and confused, demanding to be told what to do and what it meant.

Tucker had been listening, dazed. “If we could fight,” he said hoarsely, working his hands. “If we could only fight!”

“Thinking and challenging,” echoed Cade. “Thinking and challenging.” Five years to make a novice. Ten for an armiger. Fifteen for a Gunner. To face Gunners with anything less than Gunners was like opposing guns of the Order with wooden Clubs. Tucker knew that, and still dared to think: If we could fight.

They were patriots, Cade thought; now he knew what it meant. They were frightened now, with reason, but still they held their sacks of guns. They weren’t ready to give in.

Cade said the impossible: “We can fight them.”

“Armsmen?” said the girl.

But there was wild hope on Tucker’s lean face,

“They’re trained,” he said foolishly. “They’ve had three years.”

“There’s no other way,” Cade said to Jocelyn, ignoring the Marsman. “It’s a cleaner death, and—you taught me to challenge the rules.”

He fired his own gun straight up in a three-second burst at full aperture, and a stunned silence fell on the crowd.

“I am Gunner Cade of the Order of Armsmen,” he shouted into the thin air. “You have guns—more guns than the Armsmen in the hills. I will show you how to use them.”

Thoughts blazed through his mind. The complex gun; the thing no commoner could master: First Study of the Primary Circuits of the Gun, Ceremonial of the Gun, Order of Recharging, After-charging Checklist, Malfunctions of the Booster Circuit, the Sighting Picture. The Gun's Inner Meaning in Klin, Aperture and Band Settings for Various Actions. In studied sequence they flashed across his mind, and one by one he threw them out.

"The way to use your gun," he shouted, "is to point it and pull the trigger. If it stops firing, throw it away and grab another." To Tucker he said swiftly: "Have you a dozen men the others will listen to?"

The lean-faced man nodded.

"Get them here," Cade said. While the names were being shouted, he turned to scan the encircling hills. Against the sky he could see the slender rods of radionic grids faintly discernible—ten or so, spaced around the rim of hills. What contempt they must hold him in to expose command posts like that!

Where to attack with his rabble? Straight ahead there was a nice little pass in the hills. Standard doctrine was for the defenders to command such a pass by plunging fire. Standard doctrine in the attack was to draw fire from the defenders, pin down the defenders exposed by their fire, and storm the pass. The Marsmen had no training to prepare themselves for such an encounter. But off to the right was an ugly little cliff—a cliff nobody in his right mind would bother to attack or defend. It would be covered by a Gunner or so, no matter how unlikely it was. But was it so unlikely to be scaled by Marsmen to whom the air and gravity were normal?

"Here are the men." Cade looked over the dozen lieutenants Tucker had called up and proceeded to instruct them. A long line of his teachers would have cringed at his instruction. He showed them only the triggers, the band and aperture sets, and the charge gauges. They didn't need to know how to recharge; there were guns to spare. They didn't need to know the care of guns, the circuits, the ritual, the inner meanings—all they needed was to know how to shoot. As he showed them, his wonder almost equaled theirs at the simplicity of it all.

"We will head for that cliff," he said, pointing. "Try to show your men what I showed you before we get there. Don't try to keep order on the march. The worse it looks, the better. That's all."

He gave them a minute and then stepped off for the rim of hills. He yelled a command which he dimly realized was more ancient than the Order itself, and exactly as old as History:

"Follow me!"

"For Mars! For the Star of Mars!" someone shrieked insanely, and others took up the howl. Cade didn't look behind him. If he had them all, good. If he didn't, there was nothing to be done about it. Perhaps some would start with him and others hesitate and then follow—so much the better. To the ring of steady-eyed Armsmen watching from the hills, this charge across the plain would seem a panic flight. Even if they had picked up the gist of his orders to the mob with a three-meter directional mike trained on him, or seen the scattered efforts of lieutenants to instruct their groups it would seem inconceivable to them that the commoners would fight.

Not that they would; Cade knew it well enough. They'd balk at the first blast of well-aimed fire. They'd shriek and run like...commoners. Mars or Earth, a commoner's a commoner—sluggish, overstuffed, stupid, soft. Point your guns and pull the trigger. Fine words, he mocked himself, fine words! They were supposed to have had three years of "training"—form-fours on the village square, no doubt, an hour a

week. Even that didn't show. None of them had seen a gun before.

Thinking and challenging, he mocked. Thinking indeed, that challenged the one bedrock truth he knew: that Armsmen were Armsmen, fighters, gun handlers, the only fighters there were.

It was insanity; that truth he knew, and the other truth that made insanity his only course. If the fight was lost, he was already dead, and so was she.

She was running alongside, keeping pace with his strides. "Do you think...?" she asked wildly. "Cade, it's the Power Master's Guard! They can defeat any force of Armsmen in the Realm."

"We're not Armsmen," he growled. "We're a rabble of crazy patriots. We don't know how to fight, but we seem to have something to fight for. Now fall back. Get into the middle of this gang and leave yourself room to run when they stampede."

"I won't!"

"You...will!"

Meekly she fell back, and Cade strode on. Admit it, fool! he raged. Admit it! You're playing a game, a child's farce—the way you used to play Superior and novice back in Denver. They've forged a ring of fire around you, and you're charging into death: solitary death, because that mob will break and run, and well you know it.

A farce? Very well; play it out as best you can, he told himself, Gunner Cade, trained Armsman, master of fighting that you are—fight!

He swung on grimly, and the worn, ancient cliffs loomed ahead, grotesque engravings of wind and sand and centuries on deathless stone. If the Armsmen opened fire now, he was lost with his half-trained rabble. They'd never know enough to spread; they'd bunch like sheep and die in a crushed mob. If they reached the dead area under the cliff, there might be a momentary postponement of the butchery.

The Armsmen would have fired before now if they expected trouble. They must be looking for a desperate attempt to push through the nice little pass and escape.

The attack of the Marsmen would have to be swift and deadly. They might take the hill! It was a thing that would rock the foundation of the Order.

"For the Star! For the Star of Mars!" he heard them howling behind him, and grinned coldly. Patriots! Perhaps patriots were what you needed for a murderous, suicidal assault.

His feet slipped once on rubble, and the shadow of a crag was on his face. "Give me two of your guns, brother," he said to a boy with bulging eyes and a fixed grin on his face. "Up the cliff!" he shouted over his shoulder at the rabble. "Follow me...charge!" He broke into a run and noted coldly that the thin air roughly canceled the advantage of the lesser Mars gravity. The youth at his side, still breathing easily, pushed ahead—and fell a moment later with the fixed grin still on his face and both legs charred away by a long-range blast.

Automatically Cade blasted the crag from which the fire had come. The fire fight had been joined.

Make it or break it now, he thought. Face your death, fire a counterblast or two to let them know you

were there, to make them pause a bit and wonder a bit and perhaps fear a bit before your commoners broke and ran.

“Follow me! Up!”

The lean-faced Tucker raced past Cade screaming: “For the Star of Mars!” His sack of guns flapped and bobbed as he began to scabble up the cliff. There were others—wildeyed men, a panting youth, a leathery woman—who passed Cade.

Behind him there were yells and the blast of guns. He hoped he wouldn’t be burned in the back by one of the Marsmen’s ill-aimed guns after coming this far...

The fire fight grew severe as he pantingly climbed the cliff. From the hills it was rapid and deadly. From the Marsmen it was a torrent whose effect he couldn’t guess at. The noise the guns made was a senseless blend of small-aperture buzz and wide-aperture roar. Cade scrambled grimly up and hoisted himself over the jagged cliff edge into the racket of a first-class battle. A rudimentary squad of Marsmen was blasting Armsmen across a windrow of fallen comrades. They had learned about aperture by now, Cade saw with bleak satisfaction, and they were learning how to rush from crag to crag, to take isolated Armsmen in pockets of the eroded rock by flanking fire. Incredibly, in spite of the numbers of their dead, they were gaining ground. Armsmen were falling.

They didn’t need his gun. Cade turned from the shooting and stationed himself at the cliff head, splitting the steady stream of Marsmen as they gained the peak, sending half to the right and half into the fighting to the left.

“Tucker!” he yelled.

The lean-faced Marsman who had led the assault up the cliff was still alive. “Tucker, take this gang on the right and work them through the hills. Keep them moving, keep them firing, keep them yelling. I’ll work the rest around the left. If you see any sign of the Armsmen’s withdrawing to regroup, keep your men moving, but come and check with me. That’s all.”

“Yes, brother.” Like old times, thought Cade—except that he was fighting now to overthrow all he had once fought for...and for Jocelyn.

He dared not think of that. He had not seen her once since the beginning. Now he had a job to do and was doing well. It had occurred to him at last that they might win.

The cliff-top fighters’ insanely extravagant fire had done its work. This immediate arc of the hills was cleared of Armsmen. He saw that the Marsmen were sorted out into elementary squads and platoons—a lesson of battle, or fruit of their crude training? Whichever it was, it gave him leaders.

“Follow me!”

And they followed eagerly as he led them left, well down on the reverse slope of the hills. They worked the ragged terrain with style, arranging themselves into units of three—the useful skirmisher’s triangle, from which any fighter can rush to take ground under the covering fire of the other two. Was this, Cade wondered wearily, what he had given his life to? This bag of tricks that a crowd of fanatical farmers discovered for themselves at the cost of a few lives. He dropped beneath the blast of an Armsman from a shadowing crag, and did no more philosophizing. When the crag had been undercut and toppled on the Brother, there was a new blast to face, and another, and still another.

Then they were back on the ridge of the hills and found they had taken a command post and its equipment. Some of the Marsmen paused to marvel at the radionic mast and mappers and communicator.

“Keep moving, blast you!” Cade raved at them. “Keep moving and keep firing!”

He lashed them on over the mound of dead Armsmen and into a blazing linked fire from a dozen wind-carved pockets in the rock. They had learned well. The Marsmen rushed from one eroded spire to the next...at the cost of a dozen lives they secured flanking positions, and withering enfilade fire wiped out the defending Armsmen in seconds.

He cursed them forward, and the next fire they met was scattered, rear-guard stuff—three men trying to fire like thirty. It was the retreat he had, half-crazily, hoped for: not a flight, but a consolidation of forces. The Armsmen would be regrouped soon in one mass capable of putting out an interlaced ring of fire. In spite of his green troops’ astonishing performance so far, Cade bitterly knew he could not pit them against any such formation.

The mast of another command post was in their newly won territory by the time they had mopped up the rear guard. He shouted a cease-fire and led his men straight over the rim of the hills instead of working along the reverse slope for cover. He wanted to waste no precious time while there were Armsmen to be killed. They shot down a communications man, still sending; otherwise the command post had been abandoned. Cade eagerly took his binoculars and studied the work of Tucker’s men to the right. They were strung out more than they ought to be, but one post had fallen to them and another was under attack. Signs of retreat were clear on Tucker’s front also.

A sudden ferocious flurry of blasts ten meters from him sent Cade sprawling to the ground.

“What kind of cursed scouts do you call your cursed selves?” he raved at his men. “When I said kill them, I meant kill them! Let’s clean up this cursed ground!”

They grinned at him like wolves, and followed in a wild surge that broke through the thin rear-guard screen, and clawed with fire into a regrouped main guard. “Feint at us, will they?” he yelled, only half-hearing himself in the roar of blasters at full aperture. Before the butchery was over, his Marsmen had lost heavily, and still another command post was in their hands. The Armsmen’s retreat this time was no feint....

He sent scouts forward to harry the Armsmen. From the captured post, he studied neatly ranked recon fliers, two hundred meters from the reverse slopes of the circling hills. And something incredible was happening. The antlike figures of Armsmen were making for the fliers. They weren’t going to stand and fight. They were racing for their fliers, doubling and swerving, boiling out in panic from behind the rocks.

“Fire on them!” yelled Cade. “Pass the word to fire!” There would be no hits except an occasional accident, but it would let the Armsmen know he was there....

A few of the antlike figures knelt and returned blasts, fearing a rush.

Tucker was there. “You told me,” the lean-faced man panted, “you told me to report, but I couldn’t get away...”

Cade didn’t rebuke him, and Tucker ventured a note of triumph: “Gunner, we got their headquarters!”

That stopped them, didn't it?"

"It shouldn't," Cade said—and then realized the full extent of what had happened. Laughter, burst from his lips. "Yes," he said, "that stopped them." Even with his words they heard the first of the fliers blast off at maximum. A moment later there was another.

Cade followed his second in command across the now secure inner plain to inspect the headquarters post for himself. The roar of his snipers' guns, mingled with jets on takeoff, was sweet to his ears.

Eagerly he examined the remains of the command post the Marsman had taken, and there was no mistake possible. It was a well-selected position, as good a headquarters as the terrain could offer. It commanded a good escape route down the reverse slope to the fliers and a good 360-degree field of fire and observation. But the fury of five hundred Marsmen had overwhelmed the strategic knowledge of ten thousand years. The place was a shambles of ruined radios and maps, telescopes, bullhorns, all the heavy equipment of command. And over the rubble were strewn the bodies of Armsmen.

Cade let out a long halloo: "Hold your fire. Pass the word!" The command rang victoriously along the hills.

He walked to the central control panel of the communicator set and looked down at the crooked corpse that lay over it, a corpse half-charred and without a cloak. He rolled the body over and stared into the granite countenance of the Power Master.

Dead! Dead because he would not give his power to a subordinate. Because he had to witness the victory himself. He hadn't expected battle; none of them had.

The cease-fire had been luckily timed. Earlier it might not have been obeyed. Later it might have occurred without an order. Even so, there were irreconcilables who could not bear the helpless retreat of Armsmen by the hundreds to their fliers. Several continued to fire for a minute, and one woman ran shrieking down the rocks until she was picked off.

Cade watched the cloaked and helmeted figures swarming into the slender spaceships, blasting off northward, lifting on slave control the empty crafts whose complements would never fly again. They would take news of this day with them and spread it through the Realm of Man.

It was incredible that they should have won, thought Cade—but no more incredible than that commoners should have fought at all.

Patriotism?

Wearily he studied the Marsmen sprawled on the ground nearby. One little knot was singing some song or other about Mars. Others were talking loudly, with exaggerated laughter. One man was sobbing hysterically; he seemed to be unwounded. Many sat in silence with furrowed brows, or in near-silence, exchanging halting words.

"Yes," Cade heard, "but what if more of them come back?"

"There will be more of us. I have five brothers..."

"Yes! My boys are big for their age...yes..."

“They killed Manley. I don’t know what I’ll say to his wife.”

“They’ll take care of us. Her too.”

“They better take care of us...”

Cade walked restlessly along the ridge, looking for something he dared not think about, through the territory that had been held until minutes ago by Power Master and Order and all the other trappings of the past.

Patriotism! The Brothers would be more wary the next time they were sent to fight against it. It was easy to imagine the bored confidence with which the five hundred-odd Armsmen had left their fliers and climbed the hills. They had thought themselves out on an elaborate policing job; they had found themselves well-placed observation posts with good fields of fire out of sheer habit. Then they had found their line broken by an impossible frontal assault and one command post destroyed in a matter of minutes. The loss of two or more posts had made it necessary to regroup, to retreat from commoners. And when the headquarters post was lost...

Ordinarily it wouldn’t matter. Next-in-command-takes over, quite automatically, in less time than it takes to say. But to these stunned Armsmen, it must have been a last straw in a nightmarish overload of their capacity to adjust.

It was the very impossibility of the attack the inability of trained men, tradition-steeped, to believe it could happen, that had done it. When the Marsmen had scaled that cliff, the Brothers of the Order had lost their initiative of fire and that was fatal.

They had all lost their initiative of fire now—Stars. Klin teachers, the Order, the next Power Master. They would never win it back as long as battle-worn Marsmen could sit on a hilltop saying: “I have five brothers...my boys are big for their age...”

What had the Power Master said? “If they kept attacking the Watch Houses until all the gas guns were used up... We must have an Emperor for the commoners to love...”

But there was no Power Master now, and the Emperor...The Emperor himself had made this battle possible. The Emperor and...

Until this moment he had not let himself think about her: not in the battle, for fear of doing less than his utmost; not afterward, for fear of what he might learn. But now it was all right.

She came stumbling across the scarred rock, her face sober, her body drooping with fatigue, but her head held regally high.

“Thank you, Gunner Cade, for my uncle and for me.”

She spoke formally, but he understood. There were no words with which he could have voiced his own joy. She was alive, unharmed. His arms could have told her, and his lips, but not with words.

“You owe no thanks to me,” he said, “but to yourself and to our brothers here.”

Then their eyes met, and even ceremonious language was impossible.

“Ho, Gunner!” It was Tucker, coming from below. “I’m getting them together down below. Should we leave a guard here?”

“What for...?” With difficulty, Cade brought himself back to the moment and its realities. “Can your men carry more? Some of the equipment is worth salvaging.”

Tucker turned over some of the headquarters rubble with his toe. “Any of this?”

“I’ll look it over,” he said, and turned to Jocelyn. “May I see you first? A few words...”

“Of course.” She took his arm, and he helped her down eroded steps to a sheltered place.

“What now?” he asked simply.

“Now? To the Star of Mars, to the Court. Then—well, perhaps we could go back. The Power Master had no heir designated; it might be safe to return to Earth. There will be endless confusion there, and probably safety. But the Star of Mars would surely give you command of all fighting.”

The words hung in the air.

“And you?” Cade asked.

“I don’t know. There will be things to do. I’m not used to being idle.”

“I wouldn’t like to be his Gunner Superior,” Cade said slowly. “I think I might like to marry someday.”

“Oh, Cade!” There was laughter in her eyes. “This isn’t Earth. It wouldn’t be the Order again. Most of your Armsmen, if you call them that, would be married.”

“That’s true,” he said. “I didn’t think of that. The old habits—Jocelyn, I...” How could he say it? “You’re the blood of the Emperor!” he cried out.

“The Emperor,” she said softly, “is a man too. A wise man. And married.”

Now he knew there was no way to say it; words were not enough. As once before in anger, but now with tenderness, he seized her in his arms pulled her to him. As once before in surprise, but now with full knowledge, she kissed him back.

For minutes they sat together, until a shadow began to lengthen across them. Cade stood and pulled her to her feet.

“There’s work to do,” he said.

“Work for both of us, my darling.”

“My darling.” He said the new word wonderingly and then smiled. He had so much to learn.